Frequently Asked Questions About Thrive Rural Wisconsin

This document provides answers to questions raised during the informational webinar and through calls and emails from communities. To view eligibility criteria or submit a community interest form, please reference the information on the Thrive Rural Wisconsin website.

1. **Can a municipality apply?**

   We ask that municipalities collaborate with a county economic development organization, nonprofit, or tribal organization to identify specific projects and priorities for the work plan and grant funding, then work with that entity to submit an application.

2. **What if my county does not have an economic development organization?**

   In that case, you should contact your county administrator (or the equivalent position/function, if your county does not have a administrator per se) to discuss your application and get a letter of support. Any department or organization at the county level that serves an economic development function is eligible to submit an interest form. Municipalities can also apply with a nonprofit that advances one of the Thrive Rural priority areas, if the focus of the projects and partners are local and are not meant to serve an entire region.

3. **What if we do not want to partner with our county?**

   Nonprofit organizations (with official designation as such from the Internal Revenue Service) and tribal organizations do not need to partner with a county; however, applications that involve a partnership are considered stronger. Thrive Rural Wisconsin values partnerships and recognizes that partnerships greatly increase the capacity of rural groups to oversee economic development projects. While a partnership is not required, we strongly encourage multifaceted and dynamic leadership teams.

4. **What if there are multiple interest forms from the same county?**

   Thrive Rural Wisconsin will accept interest forms from multiple entities within the same county. However, we encourage collaboration within a county, since this is a competitive program with a goal of allocating resources broadly across the state's rural areas. We encourage groups in the same county to apply jointly, as a cohort or in some other partnership arrangement.

5. **What if we are a rural community but a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) touches another part of our county?**

   Applicants in a county that contains an MSA may not be considered rural; this will need to be determined on a case-by-case basis. If your county population is under 50,000 but touches an MSA, you will be eligible as long as your grant project is not serving the MSA. In the "Request for Technical Assistance" portion of the community interest form, indicate your service area, potential project sites, and any other information that demonstrates your rural focus.

6. **What makes a strong local leadership team?**

   A strong leadership team will have at least one person who can focus on the project and work with WEDC's rural development specialists. The team lead will be responsible for ensuring good communication with the rest of the team and should be able to work directly on project tasks. Other team members should add knowledge, expertise, or skills that are relevant to the projects. While all team sizes will be considered, the ideal team size is generally between three and eight people.

7. **What if we have limited staff to dedicate to the program?**

   Communities should have at least one person on their team to work with WEDC's rural development specialists on project tasks. We anticipate at least two hours a week in meetings with rural development specialists and additional time needed from the team to work on project tasks like grant preparation, planning, procurement, etc. If staff limitations are the greatest challenge, then we encourage applicants to select "Organizational and Financial Management" as their key priority area and focus their project on developing greater capacity.

8. **How many projects can we work on?**

   A community can work on multiple projects if there is capacity within the organization to manage them. Generally, we anticipate that each awardee will develop between one and three projects, depending on the capacity of the leadership team and the rural development specialist they are matched with.

9. **How many applicants will be selected?**

   A total of 10 local leadership teams will be selected.

10. **What is the time commitment for a community selected to participate in the Thrive Rural Wisconsin program?**

    Team leads should plan to spend at least two hours a week in work meetings with rural development specialists, and should also anticipate spending time working on project tasks (work packages) throughout the project. The amount of time required from the team lead and other team members will largely depend on the nature of the project, and the specific time requirements will be clear once project work plans are complete. Work plans are one of the first deliverables in this program, and we expect them to be completed by March in preparation for the pre-development grant application.

11. **Can you review the amount of financial aid that will be available to each applicant that is chosen? How is this determined?**

    A total of $250,000 per year is available for Thrive Rural Wisconsin grants, with each participant eligible to apply for approximately $25,000 a year for two years. Actual support amounts may vary depending on the project and financial request from each participant.

12. **What can the Thrive Rural Wisconsin grants be used for?**

    Eligible uses include but are not limited to feasibility studies, architectural renderings, engineering studies, mapping, business plans, curriculum design, and consultant fees. Rural development specialists from WEDC's Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) will work with each leadership team to develop projects and determine the best use of grant funding. Ineligible uses include construction costs, past costs, and in-kind staffing.

13. Who can apply for the Thrive Rural Wisconsin grants if invited to do so?

Although the lead organization for a local team must be a county, nonprofit, or tribal organization, for the grant portion specifically, a municipality or local economic development organization can be the applicant. Communities selected to participate in the program will work with their rural development specialist to develop a work plan and make decisions about priority projects that are well positioned for funding.

14. Does increasing child care slots or developing child care count as small business development?

Yes, child care is considered small business development and is an eligible project focus.

15. How many letters of support are needed?

Letters of support should come from those impacted by the project (if possible) and from existing and potential partners. There is no minimum or maximum number of letters of support; however, letters of support strengthen an application and should be included to demonstrate commitment from partners and others involved in the project(s).

16. Can a regional economic development organization (REDO) be the lead applicant on behalf of a qualifying community?

No. A REDO generally serves a large area, and the intent of Thrive Rural Wisconsin is to provide support to small rural communities. A REDO might provide a letter of support for the applicant but should not be the lead applicant.

17. Can a community in a county that is not listed as "distressed" still apply?

The intent of Thrive Rural Wisconsin is to provide assistance (both technical and financial) to rural communities with projects they want to develop that will have a positive economic impact. Leadership teams in distressed counties will get additional points in the selection process but all applicants that meet eligibility criteria will be considered.

18. Are you following the U.S. Economic Development Administration's definition of distressed counties?

No. This program uses WEDC's distressed counties map, available here:
https://wedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FY24-Distressed-County-Map.png

19. If a project is in the very early formative stage, will it be considered competitive?

Yes. Project ideas and concepts at any stage are acceptable. Successful applicants will be ready to identify what actions and information are needed to move their projects forward quickly. If internal capacity is an issue, we encourage applicants to select "organizational and financial management" as a focus area.

The most competitive applicants will describe in the community interest form where their project ideas come from and what economic development challenge they wish to address. Sharing the background of how a project was identified, what community input was received, and what assets exist to support the project demonstrate the preparedness of a community to move a project forward. Sharing what work has already been done to determine the feasibility and what information is needed to further explore the feasibility of projects in the community interest form is also helpful. Answering the questions "Why this project?" and "Why is this project ready to be explored now?" can help identify that context.