



THE BIG TABLE[®]

GREATER PEORIA

THE BIG TABLE: GREATER PEORIA



20 25

REPORT
Event
Summary

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Executive Summary

In **2025**, more than 480 community members from across Greater Peoria gathered for The Big Table and a series of Rural Big Table events to engage in conversations aimed at strengthening regional collaboration and advancing economic competitiveness. The 2025 cycle included:

- Main Event – Peoria | October 17, 2025
- Rural Big Table – Woodford County (El Paso) | October 28, 2025
- Rural Big Table – Mason County (Havana) | November 13, 2025
- Rural Big Table – Tazewell County (Tremont) | December 10, 2025
- Rural Big Table – Logan County (Lincoln) | February 19, 2026

Participants engaged in structured dialogue across four core themes: Access to Opportunity, Workforce & Talent Pipeline, Innovation & Entrepreneurship, and Livability & Quality of Place. The ideas generated through these conversations are intended to inform regional strategies, strengthen cross-county alignment, and support implementation priorities tied to economic growth, talent retention, and community vitality.

What This Report Contains

This Event Summary documents what was heard, what it means, and what it points toward. This Event Summary documents what was heard, what it means, and what it points toward. It includes theme findings from all five events, a regional synthesis, a comparative look at what has shifted since the 2022 Big Table cycle, and an assessment of the region's overall trajectory, and, for the first time, a Strategy Framework with five strategic pillars and suggested Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The KPIs in this report are benchmarks, not mandates. They are a shared language that communities and municipalities can use to set local goals and measure progress. Responsibility for owning specific outcomes will be addressed through the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which this report is designed to inform and support. More explicit action planning, goals, and implementation strategies will be explored in depth through the CEDS process.

What the Conversations Revealed

Across all five counties, one message was consistent: Greater Peoria lacks neither effort, resources, nor vision. What it needs is alignment. Transportation, childcare, housing, and communication barriers were identified as foundational obstacles to economic participation across all counties. The workforce conversation has matured from identifying skills gaps to framing workforce development as a full lifecycle challenge. Entrepreneurial energy is strong, but ecosystem friction remains high. Livability, including housing diversity, downtown vibrancy, and accessible infrastructure, is now consistently framed not as a quality-of-life amenity, but as an economic development priority.

Perhaps most significantly, one phrase echoed across all five events: "The resources exist. People can't find them." Communication redesign is not a secondary concern. It is a strategic imperative.

The Road Ahead

The **2025** Big Table is designed to bridge directly to the CEDS, and through the CEDS, to the strategic plans of municipalities, institutions, and partner organizations across Greater Peoria. The goal is that by the time the CEDS is released, meaningful groundwork will already have been laid: community voices embedded, partners aligned, and the region ready to move from strategy to implementation with momentum already built.

If **2022** was diagnostic, **2025** is directional. The opportunity now is disciplined implementation, aligned around shared priorities, measured against shared benchmarks, and carried forward through genuine regional collaboration.

THE BIG TABLE: Greater Peoria 2025

Event Summary

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- Access to Opportunity
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2025 THEME FINDINGS

Access to Opportunity

Common Regional Views

Across all five counties, participants consistently identified structural barriers that limit residents' access to employment, services, education, and economic opportunity. Transportation, childcare, housing, and communication systems emerged as the foundational access challenges. Participants emphasized that these issues are interconnected and mutually reinforcing rather than isolated.

Core Barriers Identified

Transportation



Participants described transportation as a universal constraint. Challenges include limited routes, long travel times, reliability concerns, insufficient options for nontraditional hours, and infrastructure gaps, such as sidewalks, lighting, and ADA accessibility. In rural areas, distance amplifies the challenge. In urban areas, connectivity and reliability remain central concerns.

Childcare



Childcare shortages emerged as one of the strongest cross-county themes. Availability, cost, waitlists, and lack of flexible-hour care directly affect workforce participation and economic mobility. Employers, families, and training providers all identified childcare as a limiting factor.

Housing



Housing inventory constraints, aging infrastructure, affordability challenges, and limited “missing middle” options are affecting retention and recruitment efforts across the region. Downtown vacancy and underutilized buildings were frequently linked to both entrepreneurship and livability concerns.

Information & Navigation



Perhaps the most repeated theme across all counties was difficulty navigating existing resources.

Participants consistently reported:

- Unclear starting points
- Low visibility of workforce and business programs
- Fragmented communication
- Confusion about regulations and funding processes

The resources exist. The pathway to access them is unclear.

Strategic Direction

Participants emphasized that improving access requires systems redesign. Transportation modernization, childcare expansion models, housing strategy alignment, and centralized navigation platforms must be viewed as economic development priorities. Improving access is foundational to workforce stability and business growth.

Workforce & Talent Pipeline

Regional Conditions

The workforce conversation across all counties revealed two simultaneous realities:

1. Employers struggle to find skilled, reliable workers.
2. Residents struggle to access clear, attainable pathways into stable careers.

The workforce challenge is both skills-based and system-based.

Core Barriers Identified



Soft Skills & Workplace Readiness

Reliability, professionalism, communication, and work ethic were cited repeatedly across counties and industries.



Limited Career Exposure

Participants emphasized that youth and adults lack visibility into the variety of local career pathways. Apprenticeships, trades, and alternative pathways are often misunderstood or under-promoted.



Structural Participation Barriers

Transportation and childcare directly affect training completion and job retention.



Demographic Pressures

Aging populations and youth outmigration create additional strain in several counties. Succession planning and talent replacement are emerging priorities.

Strategic Direction

Participants strongly supported:

- Earlier and more continuous career exposure
- Apprenticeships and experiential learning
- Employer-school alignment
- Regional coordination of workforce initiatives
- Clear communication of job expectations and credential requirements



The **2025** conversations reflect broad agreement that workforce solutions must integrate exposure, access, and system alignment simultaneously.





Innovation & Entrepreneurship

Regional Conditions

Entrepreneurial interest remains strong across Greater Peoria. However, ecosystem infrastructure gaps continue to limit business formation and scaling.

Participants described entrepreneurship not as an isolated activity, but as a pillar of economic resilience.

Core Barriers Identified

- Access to capital challenges
- Lending barriers and match requirements
- Regulatory complexity and permitting friction
- Lack of affordable commercial space
- Underutilized downtown properties
- Limited mentoring networks
- Fragmented support systems



In several communities, participants noted the absence or weakening of centralized support structures such as Chambers, incubators, or clearly branded resource hubs.

Strategic Direction

Across counties, participants supported:

- One-stop business resource models
- Strengthened mentorship networks
- Simplified regulatory processes
- Alternative financing mechanisms
- Shared entrepreneurial spaces
- Youth entrepreneurship expansion



The **2025** dialogue suggests the region's next phase of entrepreneurship development must focus on simplification, visibility, and coordinated support rather than creating entirely new programs.



Livability and Quality of Place

Regional Conditions

The livability conversation across counties revealed two connected realities:

- Communities want to retain and attract residents, but many feel they lack the housing options, amenities, and everyday conveniences that influence where people choose to live.
- Residents recognize that quality of place is not just about recreation. It shapes workforce stability, local spending, and long-term community confidence.

Across rural and urban perspectives, participants consistently linked livability to the region's ability to compete for talent and to sustain small-business growth.

Housing Availability and Choice

Participants cited limited housing supply and variety, including missing middle options, as barriers to retention and recruitment. Housing constraints were connected to workforce access, family stability, and aging-in-place needs.

Community Amenities and Third Places

Residents identified a lack of social spaces, after-hours activities, and youth programming in many communities. This included limited arts and culture offerings, limited community gathering places, and fewer recurring events that build connection.

Downtown and Corridor Activation Challenges

Vacant buildings, rehabilitation costs, ADA upgrades, and code requirements were described as barriers to revitalizing main streets and downtown areas. Several communities emphasized the need to activate spaces through programming and redevelopment.

Infrastructure, Walkability, and Accessibility

Practical infrastructure issues were raised repeatedly, including sidewalks, lighting, crosswalks, ADA accessibility, and general upkeep. These were framed as quality-of-life needs that also affect mobility, safety, and participation.

Perception, Narrative, and Regional Identity

Participants described a need to strengthen local and regional storytelling. Negative perceptions were seen as a drag on investment, pride, and talent attraction. Communities expressed interest in more consistent messaging that highlights strengths and opportunities.

Rural Service and Convenience Gaps

Rural participants emphasized the erosion of essentials, such as access to groceries and basic retail, as well as the distance required to reach amenities and services. Natural assets were seen as a major strength, but often under-programmed or under-promoted.

Strategic Direction

Participants strongly supported:

- Expanding housing options that support multiple life stages and workforce needs
- Investing in walkability, accessibility, and public realm basics that improve daily life
- Activating downtowns and community spaces through events, arts, and recurring programming
- Leveraging natural assets through recreation, trails, tourism, and place-based promotion
- Strengthening regional and local storytelling to build confidence, pride, and attraction

The **2025** conversations reflect broad agreement that livability improvements are economic development strategies. When communities offer housing choice, accessible infrastructure, and activated places to gather, they strengthen retention, attract talent, and support local business growth.



Regional Synthesis

Across all five counties, the **2025** Big Table conversations point to a unified strategic direction.

The region's priorities are clear:

1. Remove structural barriers to participation.
2. Align workforce exposure, training, and employer demand.
3. Simplify and strengthen entrepreneurial support systems.
4. Treat livability as core economic infrastructure.
5. Redesign communication and navigation systems.
6. Increase cross-county collaboration and reduce duplication.

The region does not lack effort or initiative. It lacks alignment and clarity.



Strategic Imperative

The **2025** Big Table confirms that Greater Peoria's next phase of growth depends on coordination. Transportation, childcare, housing, workforce exposure, entrepreneurship support, and community activation are interconnected systems. Progress in one area strengthens the others.

The opportunity before the region is not to create entirely new ideas, but to:

- Simplify
- Align
- Communicate clearly
- Scale what works
- Collaborate intentionally

The conversations in **2025** demonstrate a strong regional commitment to moving from dialogue to coordinated action.



I. 2025 Strategy Framework

From Conversation to Coordinated Action

The 2025 Big Table cycle clarified that the region’s priorities are not unclear. The challenge is coordination, alignment, and measurable progress.

The following Strategy Framework translates Big Table insights into five measurable pillars with example KPIs. These are not mandates, but a shared structure communities can align around.



Pillar 1: Remove Structural Barriers to Participation

Focus Areas

- Transportation access and reliability
- Childcare availability and flexibility
- Housing inventory and affordability
- Clear navigation of services and opportunities

Strategic Objective

Increase residents' access to employment, training, and entrepreneurship by reducing barriers to participation.

Potential KPIs

- Increase regional childcare capacity by X percent within 3–5 years
- Reduce average commute or transit gaps in identified service deserts
- Increase “missing middle” housing units permitted or rehabilitated
- Launch and track usage of a centralized regional navigation platform
- Increase awareness metrics of workforce and small business programs



I. 2025 Strategy Framework Cont.



Pillar 2: Align and Strengthen the Talent Pipeline

Focus Areas

- Early career exposure
- Apprenticeships and experiential learning
- Employer–education alignment
- Workforce re-entry and justice-served pathways
- Succession planning and aging workforce strategies

Strategic Objective

Create visible, attainable career pathways that align employer demand with resident opportunity.

Potential KPIs

- Increase number of students participating in career exploration before 10th grade
- Increase registered apprenticeships and internship placements
- Improve employer satisfaction with job readiness indicators
- Increase regional credential completion tied to in-demand industries
- Reduce youth outmigration indicators where measurable



I. 2025 Strategy Framework Cont.



Pillar 3: Strengthen the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Focus Areas

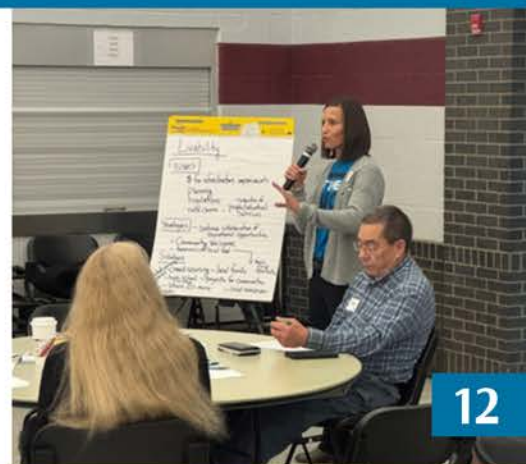
- Access to capital
- Simplified regulatory processes
- Mentorship networks
- Incubator and shared space models
- Youth entrepreneurship engagement

Strategic Objective

Build a visible, coordinated, and accessible support system that reduces friction for startup and growth-stage businesses.

Potential KPIs

- Increase new business formations regionally
- Increase utilization of entrepreneurial support programs
- Reduce average time to permit or license new small businesses
- Increase alternative financing participation
- Increase business survival rates at 3 and 5 years



I. 2025 Strategy Framework Cont.



Pillar 4: Invest in Livability as Economic Strategy

Focus Areas

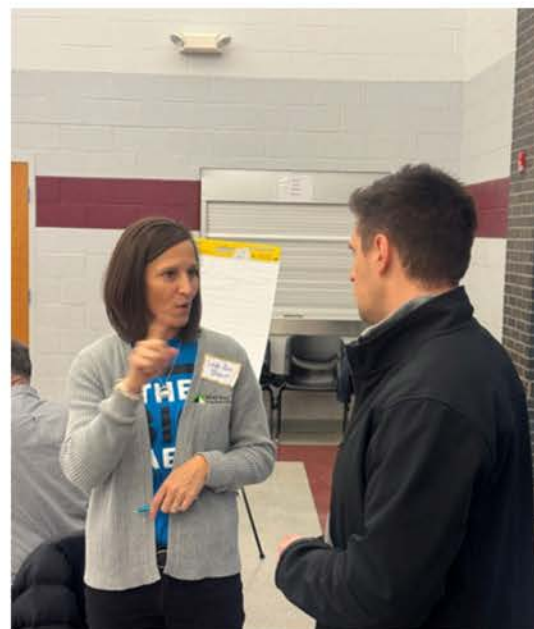
- Downtown activation
- Housing diversity
- Youth programming
- Arts, events, and recreation
- Natural asset activation and tourism

Strategic Objective

Strengthen community vibrancy to retain residents and attract talent.

Potential KPIs

- Increase downtown occupancy and adaptive reuse projects
- Increase event participation and public programming
- Track in-migration and retention trends
- Increase tourism visitation metrics tied to natural and cultural assets
- Increase infrastructure investments tied to walkability and accessibility



“The future of Greater Peoria is built together—through collaboration, innovation, and shared vision.”



I. 2025 Strategy Framework Cont.



Pillar 5: Redesign Communication and Regional Alignment

Focus Areas

- Centralized resource navigation
- Shared regional calendars and job boards
- Cross-county collaboration
- Reduced duplication of effort
- Clear public storytelling

Strategic Objective

Make it easier for residents, entrepreneurs, and employers to understand and engage with the region's assets.

Potential KPIs

- Expand and connect existing regional resource hubs
- Increase cross-county program participation
- Increase public awareness of economic development initiatives
- Establish recurring inter-county strategic coordination meetings
- Measure reduction in duplicated initiatives



The **2025** Big Table conversations suggest that progress will not come from isolated initiatives, but from measurable alignment around shared pillars.



Progress Since 2022

What Has Shifted, What Has Intensified, and What Remains Unresolved

The **2022** Big Table Report identified transportation, childcare, workforce alignment, entrepreneurship support, and quality-of-place investment as central regional priorities.

The **2025** conversations confirm strong continuity in these themes, while also revealing meaningful shifts in urgency, clarity, and regional alignment.

This section summarizes what has progressed, what has intensified, and where gaps remain.

1. Greater Clarity Around Structural Barriers

2022 Insight:

Transportation and childcare were identified as significant workforce constraints.

2025 Update:

These are no longer described as isolated issues. Participants now consistently frame transportation, childcare, housing, and communication breakdowns as structural barriers to economic participation.

Across all five counties, these systems challenges are seen as foundational infrastructure – not secondary quality-of-life concerns.

Shift:

The region has moved from identifying symptoms to recognizing interconnected systems.



2. Workforce Conversation Has Matured

2022 Insight:

Soft skills gaps and employer–education misalignment were widely noted.

2025 Update:

The workforce dialogue now includes:

- Clear emphasis on early career exposure
- Stronger support for apprenticeships and experiential learning
- Recognition of justice-served and re-entry workforce pathways
- Increased urgency around aging workforce and succession planning
- Acknowledgment that exposure, transportation, childcare, and housing all affect workforce participation

Shift:

The region is increasingly framing workforce development as a lifecycle pipeline, not just a training issue.



3. Entrepreneurship: From Interest to Ecosystem Design

2022 Insight:

Access to capital, regulatory complexity, and lack of mentorship were major barriers.

2025 Update:

Those barriers remain. However, the conversation has evolved toward ecosystem simplification:

- Desire for one-stop navigation models
- Clearer communication about startup steps
- Shared space or incubator concepts
- Alternative financing awareness
- Streamlining regulatory processes

Participants are less focused on creating new programs and more focused on reducing friction within existing systems.

Shift:

The conversation has moved from “more programs” to “simpler systems.”

4. Livability Is Now an Explicit Economic Strategy

2022 Insight:

Quality of place influenced retention and attraction.

2025 Update:

In 2025, livability is consistently described as economic infrastructure.

Residents link:

- Downtown vibrancy
- Housing diversity
- Youth activities
- Recreation and natural assets
- Arts and community events

directly to competitiveness.

Rural communities added urgency around:

- Loss of essential services
- Aging populations
- Downtown vacancy
- Underutilized historic and tourism assets



Shift:

Livability is no longer seen as optional enhancement – it is framed as a retention and recruitment necessity.



5. Communication Gaps Remain a Central Weakness

2022 Insight:

Residents reported difficulty navigating resources.

2025 Update:

This remains one of the most consistent cross-county themes.

Participants across all events reported:

- Unclear starting points
- Confusion around processes
- Fragmented calendars and program visibility
- Overlap and duplication

The phrase repeated throughout **2025** conversations:

“The resources exist. People can’t find them.”



Shift:

Awareness of the communication challenge has intensified, with broader agreement that redesign is required.



6. Rural Alignment Is Stronger and Clearer

The **2022** report emphasized regional collaboration.

The **2025** rural sessions demonstrate:

- Strong thematic alignment with the main event
- Similar identification of transportation, childcare, workforce, and entrepreneurship barriers
- Greater articulation of rural-specific pressures including service erosion, aging populations, and geographic distance.



Shift:

Rural and urban priorities are not competing narratives – they are variations of the same structural themes.

Overall Regional Trajectory Since 2022

Across all five counties, the region appears to be moving toward:

- Stronger consensus on shared barriers
- Clearer recognition of system interdependence
- Greater openness to regional alignment
- Increased urgency around workforce exposure and demographic trends

However, several persistent challenges remain:

- Transportation modernization
- Childcare capacity expansion
- Housing inventory growth
- Simplified entrepreneurial navigation
- Unified communication systems



The **2025** Big Table confirms that the region understands its challenges more clearly than in 2022. The opportunity now is disciplined implementation aligned to shared priorities.

Strategic Reflection

If **2022** was diagnostic, **2025** is directional.



The conversations suggest the region is ready to move from awareness to alignment – and from alignment to measurable progress.



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The Big Table Greater Peoria Is Supported By:

Logos include: GP Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, DISTILLERY LABS, Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, EAST PEORIA Chamber of Commerce, MORTON Economic Development Council, GREATER PEORIA HISPANIC Chamber of Commerce, PEKIN AREA Chamber of Commerce, DISCOVER PEORIA, Ameren ILLINOIS, BRADLEY University, CHOOSE GREATER PEORIA, FOUR POINTS, EIPaso, HAVANA, CHAMPAIGN SHIRENS, MASON COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL, Mason County Illinois, Mason District Hospital, DEMOCRAT, HAVANA, DEMOCRAT, HAVANA, The Nature Conservancy, SPOON RIVER, CORE, EAST PEORIA Chamber of Commerce, MORTON Chamber of Commerce, RENEWAL by ANDERSEN, Farm Bureau, LINCOLN Park District, LEAD.



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