

STELLAR PATHWAYS PROGRAM



STELLAR PATHWAYS

AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Application Guidance & Evaluation Framework



STELLAR PATHWAYS PROGRAM

Application Guidance & Evaluation Framework

Roughly 40% of Indiana's population lives across 76 rural counties, and these rural counties are filled with natural beauty, alluring small towns, historic structures and quality natural resources that need to be preserved, developed and enhanced. Rural communities face unique challenges regarding building organizational capacity and identifying financial capital for projects.

The Office of Community and Rural Affairs has been leading the way in rural Indiana to improve local leadership capacity and create sustainable progress through the principles cultivated through the Stellar Pathways program, and previously the Stellar Communities program which was recognized as a premier community development program and has achieved the following outcomes.

- The State dedicated approximately \$193 million to 19 designees to date.
- Local governments allocated around \$154 million towards local investment in the Stellar projects and complementary projects.
- Designees leveraged \$831 million in private investment to support their economic development efforts to create safe, sustainable and thriving communities.



Objective

Opening in the summer of 2026, the Stellar Pathways program is a multi-agency, multi-million-dollar investment initiative led by the Office of Community and Rural Affairs.

The program works with communities on a shared vision for community and economic development, promotes local and regional partnerships, and assists in implementing sustainable solutions to challenges facing Indiana's rural communities. Through annual designation, Stellar Pathways will provide resources for transformative quality of place, community and local improvements by:

Enhanced Local Planning

Stellar Pathways, built on OCRA's extensive experience with Stellar Communities and the Hoosier Enduring Legacy Program, is focused on accelerating local planning. It's designed to scale up local capacity while teams create holistic, collaborative plans for community and economic development.

A Collaborative Approach

The Stellar Pathways program embodies a spirit of collaboration, mirrored by our partners: the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority, Indiana Destination Development Corporation, Indiana Department of Transportation, Indiana Department of Health, Indiana Arts Commission and Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Resource-Rich Partnerships

Through these strategic partnerships, Stellar Pathways is poised to offer the necessary resources for transformative quality-of-place improvements. The program taps into time-tested community development strategies by leveraging existing assets to stimulate increased investment through state and local partnerships.



Eligible Communities

The lead applicant can be any county government, city, municipality, town, township, or a non-profit that serves the entire community, such as a community foundation or economic development entity. Communities are welcome to partner together but should not include any CDBG entitlement communities, due to funding barriers.

All participating communities must commit at least five years to the program, which may also include capacity building training, community engagement strategies, asset identification and project prioritization and implementation. This collaborative effort brings together mentorships and partnerships to advance comprehensive solutions to local challenges throughout rural Indiana.

Partnerships & Resources

The Stellar Pathways Program partners with a variety of state agencies to assist communities in creating transformative place capital improvement projects.

Each of the two Stellar designees will be able to apply for up to half of the following funding allocations, provided all other match and program requirements are met.

OCRA

- \$8 million in Community Development Block Grants
- \$50,000 to each finalist to go toward their Strategic Development Plan

IHCDA

- \$3 million in HOME Investment Partnership Program

IAC

- Up to \$10,000 available in grant opportunities and a spot in the Creative Convergence Workshop

IDDC

- Marketing & Promotional Assistance

INDOT

- \$3 million in Rural Federal Aid Program

IDOH

- \$75,000 in Rural Health Funding

DNR

- Eligible bonus points for annual rounds of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (5%) and the Historic Preservation Fund (20 points).

Eligible Projects

Stellar projects are a result of the community's ability to create a vision through the building of a Strategic Development Plan. These plans should be transformational and innovative to their rural development.

Communities should identify priority projects based on three comprehensive pathways:

Enhancing Quality of Place

- Examples include housing, streetscapes, facades, trails, sidewalks, roads, bridges, stormwater, drinking water and wastewater improvements, gateway beautification, etc.

Promoting Community Wellness

- Examples include mental health initiatives, health and wellness, healthy food markets, substance use and abuse initiatives, physical activities.

Strengthening Local Economies

- Examples include business retention and expansion, economic gardening, small business revolving loan fund development, entrepreneurial ecosystem development, skills for success, work-ready youth program, etc.

Program Structure

Announcement | Letter of Intent

The program will be announced in the summer of 2026. Following the program announcement, OCRA and the Stellar partners will host two one day workshops in Indianapolis, which will include presentations from state partners, letter-of-intent training and capacity building training.

These workshops are required to continue in the Stellar Pathways program. Additionally, they will be valuable to communities that wish to learn more about state funding and current topics and trends in community development.

Program Structure (cont.)

Interested communities will submit a letter of intent with all corresponding attachments and documents through the electronic Grants Management System by Dec. 15, 2026.

The Stellar Pathways Committee will then review the letter of intent submissions and determine up to four communities that will move forward in the Stellar Pathways process.

Each of the Stellar Pathways finalist chosen is granted \$50,000 towards the development of their Strategic Development Plan.

Stellar Pathways Process

Stellar Pathways finalists will participate in Agency Days on March 4 and 5, 2027. During this two-day period, each finalist will receive a designated appointment time to join open office hours hosted by state agency partners.

Finalists may meet with any or all participating agencies during their assigned window to ask questions, explore resources and refine their Strategic Development Plans.

Finalists will be provided with the minimum requirements that should be included in their Strategic Development Plans.

Each Stellar Pathways finalist will submit their Strategic Development Plan to the Stellar Pathways Committee by April 15, 2027.

Stellar Pathways Designees Chosen

The Stellar Pathways Committee will travel to each community for a site visit and a presentation held by the finalist between May 3 through May 21, 2027.

Stellar Pathways designees will have five years to complete projects and programs in the Strategic Development Plan. The designees will be required to attend quarterly calls and submit quarterly reports.

Stellar Pathways designees will have access to the Stellar Pathways set-aside amounts. Stellar Pathways communities must apply for the funding individually and work with state agencies to acquire the prerequisite requirements.

Proposed Timeline

Aug. 6, 2026

Program Announcement and Launch

Fall 2026

Capacity building workshops and question period to take place in the fall of 2026. Attendance at a workshop is required to submit a Letter of Intent. Questions can be submitted to stellarcommunities@ocra.in.gov.

Dec. 15, 2026

Letter of Intent due by 11:59 p.m. ET through the eGMS portal.

Jan. 13, 2027

Announcement of Stellar Pathways finalists. These finalists will receive \$50,000 to assist with the creation of their Strategic Development Plan.

March 4 & 5, 2027

Agency days to discuss funding/participation.

April 15, 2027

Strategic Development Plans due to the State Team.

May 3-21, 2027

Site visit window for finalists.

June 16, 2027

Two designees announced as Stellar Communities and will be eligible for set-aside Stellar funding.

Scoring Criteria

Multiple state agencies are included in the scoring process to ensure input across disciplines and expertise.

Scoring criteria to be considered include:

- Project eligibility
- Plan comprehensiveness
- Proposed projects’ impact
- Maximizing local and private leverage
- Investment need
- Capacity to administer and deliver
- Long-term viability and sustainability of the interventions
- Financial capacity to manage the project

Learn more at in.gov/ocra/stellar or reach out to stellarcommunities@ocra.in.gov.





STELLAR PATHWAYS

AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



Learn more at in.gov/ocra/stellar or reach out to stellarcommunities@ocra.in.gov.