



Lee County

ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
GROUP

Connecting People, Business, and Quality of Life.

2025

**ANNUAL
REPORT**

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MISSION

Lee County Economic Development Group helps shape policies and programs explicitly directed at improving the countywide business climate through specific efforts in business retention and expansion, workforce development, marketing, and new business attraction.



Connect Lee County is a countywide, five-year initiative designed to strengthen Lee County's economy and overall quality of life through collaboration, strategic investment, and long-term planning. The initiative is built around three core pillars: **people**, **business**, and **quality of life**.

Through the **people** pillar, Connect Lee County focuses on workforce development, talent attraction, and leadership initiatives that support a strong and skilled workforce. The **business** pillar centers on business retention and expansion, entrepreneurship, and creating a competitive environment for existing and new employers. The **quality of life pillar** emphasizes community vitality, placemaking, and amenities that make Lee County an attractive place to live, work, and raise a family. These pillars are as interconnected as the communities and the residents which are the fabric of Lee County.

By aligning efforts across these three pillars, Connect Lee County fosters regional cooperation, directs resources where they are most impactful, and builds a resilient foundation for long-term growth and prosperity throughout Lee County.

CONNECT LEE COUNTY



A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO

As we reflect on 2025, it is clear this was a year defined by collaboration, resilience, and forward momentum for Lee County. Amid leadership transition, the integration of the county's three economic development organizations, evolving workforce needs, and ambitious goals, our community came together to build a strong foundation for the future.

2025 was a building year for the Lee County Economic Development Group. We strengthened internal capacity, secured long-term resources, expanded partnerships, and deepened relationships across Lee County, Southeast Iowa, and the state. This Annual Report highlights the collective impact of those efforts and our progress toward the Connect Lee County vision.

A major milestone was the successful completion of our capital campaign, which exceeded its goal. This achievement reflects the confidence our investors and partners place in LCEDG and a shared belief that coordinated, strategic economic development matters.

Throughout the year, we advanced business retention, expansion, and attraction efforts, supporting local manufacturers, responding to competitive projects, strengthening infrastructure conversations, and positioning Lee County with site selectors and state partners. We also continued to grow regional collaboration, recognizing that strong partnerships are essential to long-term success.

We took meaningful steps to address one of the most pressing challenges facing our workforce: access to quality childcare. In 2025, LCEDG made the deliberate decision to pivot the Career Advantage Center toward an Early Childhood Education Center, reflecting our commitment to adapt and pursue solutions that support working families and employers.

Looking ahead, LCEDG remains focused on connection and impact. The work captured in this report reflects not only what we accomplished, but the momentum we carry into 2026 and beyond.

Thank you for your trust, partnership, and shared commitment to Lee County. Together, we are building a stronger, more resilient future.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily Benjamin".

Emily Benjamin
President and CEO
Lee County Economic Development

LCEDG Executive Committee - Leadership Through Transition

Throughout leadership changes, organizational integration, and the successful completion of a multi-year capital campaign, LCEDG benefited from steady governance and thoughtful guidance from its Board of Directors.



Charles Ireland
Chairman



Kerry Klepfer
Vice-Chair



Justin Pieper
Treasurer



Jason Hutcheson
Immediate Past
Chair



Bob Huffman Jr.
Former Past Chair

LCEDG Executive Committee

As LCEDG Board terms transition on July 1, the organization was supported by two Executive Committees during 2025, each providing leadership at key points in LCEDG's evolution.

January–June 2025 Executive Committee - Provided continuity and strategic oversight during a period of organizational integration and internal alignment. Chair - Jason Hutcheson, Vice Chair - Charles Ireland, Treasurer - Kerry Klepfer and Immediate Past Chair - Bob Huffman.

July–December 2025 Executive Committee - Carried that momentum forward, supporting strategic priorities and positioning the organization for continued impact. Chair - Charles Ireland, Vice Chair - Kerry Klepfer, Treasurer -Justin Pieper and Immediate Past Chair - Jason Hutcheson



Matt Morris
Capital Campaign Chair

LCEDG also extends sincere gratitude to the Capital Campaign Chair, Matt Morris and campaign leadership team, whose dedication and advocacy were instrumental in exceeding the campaign goal and securing long-term resources for the organization.

We are deeply grateful for the Board's leadership, commitment, and guidance throughout 2025.

LCEDG Board of Directors - Broad Representation, Shared Responsibility

LCEDG's full Board of Directors represents a cross-section of industries, communities, and perspectives from across Lee County and the surrounding region. Together, board members provide strategic insight, local knowledge, and accountability that strengthen decision-making and ensure the organization remains aligned with its mission and investors.

Throughout 2025, board members actively supported LCEDG's work by engaging in committee leadership, investor outreach, strategic planning, and advocacy efforts. Their collective commitment helped guide the organization through integration, growth, and the successful completion of a multi-year capital campaign.

The strength of LCEDG's governance lies not only in its executive leadership, but in the shared responsibility and collaboration of its full Board of Directors. We are grateful for the time, expertise, and trust each board member contributes in service to Lee County's long-term economic success.



Amy Conlee



Bryan Langerud



Corby Hawkins



Corey Jonas



Dan Culp



Dave Bogner



Gary Hoyer



Jennie Rose



Matt Morrison



Michael Mohrfeld



Pat McCrabb



Scott Smith



Acacia Hagan
Ex Officio



Gary Seyb Jr.
Ex Officio



Heather Huebner
Ex Officio



Kay Sackville
Ex Officio



Michael Norris
Ex Officio



Dr. Tim Wondra
Ex Officio

PEOPLE: BUILDING A WORKFORCE PIPELINE THAT WORKS

2025 was a foundational year for strengthening Lee County's workforce ecosystem.

Rather than operating programs in isolation, LCEDG focused on building a connected pipeline that introduces students to careers early, supports emerging and established leaders, and helps employers attract and retain talent in a competitive labor market.

Leadership Development

The 2024–2025 Lee County Leadership program convened leaders from across the county to deepen their understanding of local systems, governance, and economic drivers. The completion of Leadership 2.0 marked the successful conclusion of an advanced cohort designed to strengthen individual capacity, peer networks, and long-term civic engagement, helping build the leadership bench needed for sustained community and economic growth.

Talent Pipeline & Career Awareness

LCEDG expanded career awareness to reach students at multiple stages of their education. During Manufacturing Month, even 1st-grade students were introduced to careers in Lee County through a fun coloring contest. Through Made in Lee County, younger students explored local industries and career pathways through hands-on experiences and storytelling that connect learning to real-world opportunities. At the secondary level, 8th, 11th, and 12th grade Career Expos connected students with employers, training providers, and post-secondary options, helping them better understand the careers available close to home.

Internship & Employer Engagement

The Intern Connect program continued to grow as a bridge between employers and emerging talent. By combining on-the-job experience with peer networking, community connections, and exposure to Lee County amenities, the program helps interns envision Lee County as a place to begin their careers while supporting employers in building long-term talent pipelines.

Talent Attraction & Retention

To support talent beyond the workplace, LCEDG launched the Community Concierge program to help new and prospective residents navigate housing, employment, childcare, and community resources, reducing barriers for those considering Lee County as home.

Entrepreneurship & Youth Engagement

LCEDG supported Lee County CEO (Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities) through the inaugural class of high school students and in launching the next cohort. Through immersive, real-world learning and direct engagement with local business leaders, the program builds leadership, confidence, and community connection among Lee County's next generation.

Looking Ahead

Together, these efforts represent a comprehensive approach to workforce development that connects education, leadership, talent attraction, and family support. The momentum built in 2025 positions Lee County to strengthen its workforce pipeline and compete more effectively for talent in the years ahead.



BUSINESS: SUPPORTING GROWTH, COMPETITIVENESS, AND OPPORTUNITY

In 2025, LCEDG focused on strengthening the conditions that allow local businesses to grow, reinvest, and remain competitive.

Through business retention and expansion, site redevelopment, infrastructure coordination, and regional partnerships, LCEDG supported existing employers while positioning Lee County for future investment.

Business Retention & Expansion (BRE)

LCEDG maintained regular outreach with local employers to understand workforce, infrastructure, and operational needs, strengthening relationships and informing retention and growth strategies. Industry leaders were also convened through the Manufacturer's Reception and Connect Lee County Business Roundtables, including an HR Leaders Roundtable, creating space for peer collaboration and shared problem-solving.

Site Readiness & Competitive Projects

The sale of the Independent Can building supported the redevelopment of a key industrial asset, reinforcing LCEDG's role in site readiness and business growth. LCEDG also responded to competitive project opportunities in partnership with regional and state organizations to position Lee County for new investment.

Infrastructure & Capacity Planning

LCEDG advanced coordinated conversations around natural gas capacity and utility needs to support business expansion and future projects. LCEDG also continued its partnership with SIREPA and the Lee County Board of Supervisors to advance a transformative broadband initiative aimed at closing connectivity gaps in rural areas.

Broadband Expansion Impact

- 4,400 previously unserved or underserved addresses, nearly all in rural areas, will receive Tier 1 broadband service
- \$51 million in external funding leveraged through NOFO 8 and NOFO 9 via a competitive ITQ process
- A new fiber optic transmission loop providing increased capacity and system redundancy countywide
- A new public-private partnership model to support future infrastructure expansion

Manufacturing Month & Workforce Alignment

Manufacturing Week activities highlighted the importance of the manufacturing sector while reinforcing career pathways and workforce alignment between employers, students, and educators.

Looking Ahead

These efforts strengthened relationships with existing employers, supported reinvestment, and laid the groundwork for future attraction and expansion, positioning Lee County to compete for new opportunities while supporting the long-term success of local businesses.



QUALITY OF LIFE: BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR GROWTH

Quality of life is a critical driver of workforce attraction, retention, and long-term economic vitality.

In 2025, LCEDG focused on addressing foundational community needs—particularly housing and childcare—while building the data, partnerships, and planning necessary to support sustainable growth across Lee County.

Housing Planning & Data Development

LCEDG advanced early-stage planning and coordination efforts to better understand housing supply, demand, and gaps across the county. By laying the groundwork for a comprehensive housing study in 2026, LCEDG began aligning local, regional, and state partners around shared housing priorities tied to workforce and population growth.

Childcare as Economic Infrastructure

Access to quality childcare remains one of the most pressing barriers facing working families and employers. In 2025, LCEDG supported childcare initiatives by working alongside providers, partners, and stakeholders to explore solutions that expand capacity and improve access. A key milestone was the strategic decision to pivot the Career Advantage Center concept toward an Early Childhood Education Center, reflecting a commitment to adaptive solutions that directly support workforce participation and family stability.

Community Capacity & Long-Term Readiness

By coordinating conversations around housing, childcare, and workforce needs, LCEDG helped communities better prepare for growth and investment. These efforts emphasize the importance of planning, collaboration, and long-term readiness as Lee County continues to evolve.

Looking Ahead

The work completed in 2025 established a strong foundation for future action. As planning efforts move into implementation, LCEDG remains focused on strengthening quality-of-life assets that support residents, employers, and communities across Lee County.

COMMUNICATIONS & ENGAGEMENT: CONNECTING STRATEGY, STAKEHOLDERS, AND STORY

Clear, consistent communication is essential to building trust, alignment, and momentum.

In 2025, LCEDG strengthened its communications efforts to better connect investors, partners, employers, and the broader community to the organization's work and impact.

Investor & Partner Communications

Bi-monthly newsletters provided regular updates on initiatives, partnerships, and progress, helping keep investors and stakeholders informed during a year of transition and growth. These communications reinforced transparency and accountability while highlighting the collective impact of coordinated economic development.

Digital Presence & Outreach

LCEDG expanded its digital footprint through the launch of Facebook and LinkedIn pages, increasing visibility and engagement with community members, employers, and regional partners. These platforms support workforce storytelling, event promotion, and real-time sharing of economic development activity.

Community Convening & Dialogue

The launch of Connect Lee County Forums created opportunities for community leaders and partners to come together for updates, collaboration, and discussion around shared priorities. These forums reinforced LCEDG's role as a convener and connector across sectors and communities.

Storytelling & Workforce Awareness

Communications efforts supported broader workforce initiatives by highlighting local industries.



BY THE NUMBERS



2025 Impact at a Glance

Lee County's economic momentum in 2025 was driven by coordinated investment, strong employer engagement, regional collaboration, and expanded workforce capacity. The highlights below reflect the scale, reach, and long-term impact of LCEDG's work.



Justin Pieper- Board Treasurer

"In addition to a successful leadership transition, 2025 was highlighted by the completion of a very productive 5 year capital campaign. Our investors continue to display confidence in the organization's ability to deliver positive returns through meaningful programing and strategic initiatives. We are incredibly grateful for the local businesses that continue to show their faith in our team and look forward to sharing mutual success in the years to come."

2025 Impact Snapshot

Capital Investment & Incentives

- \$50+ million in local capital investment through expansions, construction, and equipment upgrades
- \$700,000+ in workforce and business incentives leveraged, including \$116,000 for workforce training and \$610,000 supporting construction, expansion, and site development

Business & Workforce Engagement

- 65+ Business Retention & Expansion visits with local employers
- 50 manufacturers and 20 HR leaders engaged through industry events and roundtables
- 600+ students participated in career expos
- 400+ first graders countywide introduced to local careers through Manufacturing Month

Broadband & Infrastructure

- \$3.5 million invested locally and \$51 million leveraged in external funding through NOFO 8 and NOFO 9 via a competitive ITQ process
- 4,400 rural addresses will receive Tier 1 broadband service

Regional Advocacy

- 150+ leaders engaged in coordinated advocacy in Des Moines and Washington, D.C., advancing priorities in workforce, housing, infrastructure, healthcare, and energy

Programs & Capacity

- Leadership, Intern Connect, Community Concierge, Manufacturing Month, and career awareness programs delivered
- \$1.7 million secured through the 2025–2029 Connect Lee County capital campaign to support long-term growth

REGIONAL ADVOCACY



2025 Legislative Priorities

Southeast Iowa Days | Shared Regional Advocacy Agenda

LCEDG participated in coordinated state and federal advocacy efforts to advance policy priorities critical to Southeast Iowa's long-term growth, competitiveness, and quality of life. These priorities were developed collaboratively by regional leaders representing the public, private, nonprofit, education, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors.

Housing: Addressing Workforce Housing Shortages

Southeast Iowa's ability to attract and retain talent depends on access to diverse, attainable housing options.

Key Priorities

- Expand housing options to support workforce recruitment and population growth
- Increase the Workforce Housing Tax Credit allocation to \$50 million to meet growing statewide demand
- Support incentives and tax credit programs that offset the costs of:
 - New housing construction
 - Redevelopment of aging housing stock
 - Adaptive reuse of vacant or underutilized properties

Infrastructure: Building the Foundations for Growth

Modern infrastructure is critical to economic competitiveness, industrial growth, and community resilience.

Key Priorities

- Complete Highway 61 and Highway 34 as four-lane corridors to improve safety and connectivity
- Expand state and federal investment in broadband, roads and bridges, and rail, river, waterway, and sewer systems
- Support innovative funding models, including public-private partnerships and regional collaboration
- Advance regional natural gas transmission infrastructure to connect Southeast Iowa to interstate systems and support industrial expansion

Workforce: Building and Attracting Talent

A strong workforce depends on aligned investment in education, training, and talent attraction.

Key Priorities

- Strengthen collaboration between schools, higher education, and employers to align skills with workforce needs
- Invest in lifelong learning from early childhood through adult upskilling and reskilling
- Support population growth and workforce attraction through relocation incentives, talent marketing, and employer partnerships
- Advocate for practical immigration policies that address workforce shortages and support community integration

CONNECT LEE COUNTY 2025-2029 Investors

Titanium



Platinum

Amsted Rail Company Inc.
Climax Molybdenum Company
Connection Bank
Jet Gas
J.J. Nichting Company
The Keokuk Area Community Foundation

Keokuk Municipal Waterworks
Menke & Company, C.P.A.s
Mohrfeld Electric, Inc.
Pilot Grove Savings Bank
SIlgan Container, LLC
Two Rivers Bank & Trust

Gold

Conagra Brands, Inc.
Cryotech Deicing Technology
Frank Millard & Company, Inc

Jim Baier, Inc.
Seither & Cherry Co.
Wemiga Waste, Inc

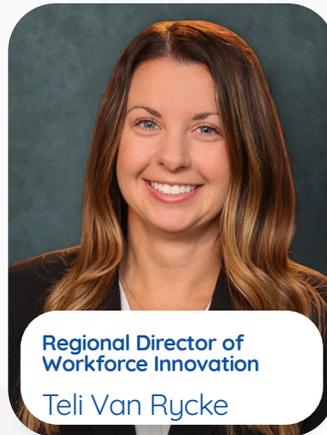
Silver

Access Energy Cooperative
Allen Blasting and Coating Inc.
Ameriprise Financial, Inc. - Josh Denning
Birkwood Village of Fort Madison
Carl A. Nelson & Company
Caston Holdings
DuPont
Farmers Savings Bank
Great River Entertainment, LLC.

Hickey Contracting
Huffman Welding & Machine, Inc.
ITC Midwest
Jess Sutcliffe- State Farm
JJD Contracting Company
Justin & Melissa Pieper
Kerry & Judy Klepfer
Klinger & Associates, P.C.
Liberty Utilities Co.

Mann's Enterprise
MidAmerican Energy Company
Radio Keokuk
Schickedanz Construction Inc.
Southeastern Community College
Taske Force Inc.
Weichert Realtors- The Massimo Group
World Insurance

Meet the Staff



Building strong communities starts with showing up. The LCEDG staff serves on boards, committees, and working groups across Lee County and the Southeast Iowa region.

Emily Benjamin President & CEO

- Professional Developers of Iowa Board of Directors
- University of Northern Iowa Institute for Decision Makers Advisory Council
- University of Iowa College of Public Health Business Leaders Network
- Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission Board of Directors
- Great River Housing Trust Fund Board of Directors
- Lee County Conservation Board of Directors
- Three River's Conservation Foundation Board of Directors
- Lee County CEO Board of Directors
- Central Lee Foundation Board of Directors
- Mid-America Port Commission Board of Directors
- Friends of Lee County Childcare Board of Directors

Becky Vogel Workforce and Community Specialist

- United Way Board of Directors
- Fort Madison Tourism Board of Directors
- Keokuk Area Chamber of Commerce Ambassador

Tim Gobble Director of Economic Development

Board Representation:

- North Lee County Foundation, Secretary
- Fort Madison Beautification Foundation, Treasurer
- Southeast Iowa Regional Housing Authority
- Three Rivers Conservation Board of Directors
- Fort Madison P.O.R.T.
- Fort Madison Rotary Board of Directors, Fundraising Co-Chair
- Sheaffer Pen Museum, Treasurer
- North Lee County Foundation, Secretary

Administrative Services to:

- Fort Madison SIRRC
- Fort Madison Marina

Teli Van Rycke Regional Director of Workforce Innovation

- Burlington Rotary Club
- Des Moines County CEO Board Secretary
- Mississippi Valley Workforce Development Board's Business Committee
- Professional Developers of Iowa Member

In Loving Memory of
MARTIN GRABER



Lee County and the Southeast Iowa region lost a dedicated public servant and respected leader with the passing of Representative Martin L. Graber in 2025.

Born in Donnellson, Iowa, Martin was a graduate of Central Lee High School and devoted his life to service. He served more than 30 years in the Iowa Army National Guard, retiring as a Brigadier General. His distinguished military career included service in Operation Desert Storm, leadership during the Floods of 1993, and numerous command roles. He was recognized with honors including the Legion of Merit and the Bronze and Silver Order of the de Fleury Medals.

Beyond his military service, Martin was deeply engaged in his community as a respected financial advisor, committed volunteer, and supporter of organizations such as the Old Fort Madison Replica, North Lee County Historical Society, Rotary Club, United Way, and area chambers of commerce. His faith guided his life, and he was a devoted member of the Fort Madison Christian Church.

Elected to the Iowa House of Representatives in 2020, Martin served Lee County with integrity and professionalism. He was a trusted voice on economic development, veterans' issues, and local government matters, and a steadfast advocate for rural Iowa, small businesses, and families.

Martin is remembered not only for his accomplishments, but for his character—a leader who made time for others and led with respect and conviction. He is survived by his wife, Coni, their daughters Sarah and Rachel, and two grandchildren.

As LCEDG reflects on 2025, we honor Representative Graber's lasting impact on Lee County and the State of Iowa. His legacy of service and leadership will continue to inspire future generations.

Rest in peace, General Graber. Your service will not be forgotten.



Connecting People, Business, and Quality of Life.

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