

**From Local Investment to Lasting Impact: Leveraging Assets, Philanthropy, and
Community Capital for Economic Development and Tourism in Obion County**

Rachael McKinney

Community Relations Director

Obion County Chamber of Commerce

Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Capstone Project

September 17, 2025

Rural Tier IV communities across the United States face persistent and complex challenges that threaten long-term sustainability. From population decline and limited economic diversity to the outmigration of both workforce and capital, these communities must find innovative solutions to remain viable. Obion County, Tennessee is no exception. Located in the northwestern corner of the state, this rural county is both deeply rooted in agricultural traditions and uniquely positioned to leverage its natural, cultural, and civic assets for economic growth.

Obion County's strengths lie in its abundant natural resources, strong civic leadership, and a growing sense of local engagement. The Reelfoot Lake region offers unmatched ecological and recreational value, while institutions such as Discovery Park of America and projects such as the Nailing Building restoration showcase the area's cultural richness and growing spirit. By adopting asset-based planning, nurturing local philanthropy, and strategically mobilizing community capital, Obion County can not only stimulate tourism but also drive sustainable economic development that benefits residents for generations to come.

The goal of this capstone is to demonstrate how small, rural communities can turn inward to build lasting impact by aligning local investment, philanthropy, and place-based assets. Rather than relying solely on external investment or recruitment of outside industries, this approach emphasizes identifying and enhancing what already exists within a community: its people, places, history, and potential. Asset-based planning strengthens ownership and pride, builds local capacity, and encourages long-term stewardship of economic and

cultural resources. Philanthropy serves as a flexible tool to support these efforts, funding initiatives that align with community priorities. Meanwhile, community capital rooted in trust, collaboration, and locally generated financial support can amplify the impact of both public and private sector efforts. Together, these forces can reshape a rural community's trajectory, creating resilient economies and tourism ecosystems rooted in place.

Obion County has a population of approximately 30,000 residents, characterized by small towns, agricultural landscapes, and a tight-knit community culture. Over the past several decades, the county has experienced modest population decline, mirroring trends seen in many rural areas across the United States. Economic activity is heavily influenced by agriculture, manufacturing, and small business enterprises. While median household income and employment rates lag behind state and national averages, the county's cost of living remains low, making it an attractive place for both residents and businesses seeking affordable operating conditions.

Tourism plays an increasingly important role in the local economy. Reelfoot Lake, formed by the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811–1812, is a natural wonder attracting thousands of visitors annually for fishing, birdwatching, and eco-tourism. The lake's unique cypress-lined shorelines and abundant wildlife offer opportunities for both outdoor recreation and environmental education. Discovery Park of America, a premier museum and cultural center, draws over 250,000 visitors each year, while the downtown revitalization of Union City and the redevelopment of historic sites like the Nailling Building and Capitol Theatre are adding to the county's tourism appeal.

Asset-Based Community Development / Local Philanthropy

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model shifts the focus from community needs to community strengths, encouraging residents to recognize and leverage their natural, cultural, social, and economic assets. This approach emphasizes empowerment, planning, and partnerships that position residents as active contributors rather than passive recipients.

In practice, ABCD begins with identifying and mapping assets such as individual skills, local organizations, institutions, and informal networks. By engaging these resources, communities can design initiatives that reflect their unique strengths. Partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations not only reinforce this process but also cultivate emerging civic leaders who drive long-term impact.

As part of the Three Star program with the Tennessee Department of Community Development, Obion County recently facilitated a meeting led by the Community Development Director with the community members to help identify assets throughout the area. The focus was based on the following categories: agriculture/ag business, community development, infrastructure/broadband/industry development, education/workforce development, downtown development, small business/entrepreneurship development, and tourism/recreation development.

Philanthropy amplifies these efforts when aligned with community assets. Instead of relying solely on external interventions, local philanthropic support can enhance existing

initiatives, promote skill-building, and strengthen volunteerism and civic engagement. This integration builds social capital and fosters a culture of shared responsibility where residents, organizations, and donors collectively invest in growth and resilience.

Leadership development is a vital component of this framework. By equipping community members with the skills and confidence to lead, ABCD initiatives become more sustainable and inclusive. Strong local leadership creates trust, accountability, and collaborative energy that ties directly to successful outcomes.

In rural settings especially, connecting diverse stakeholders across sectors often determines whether projects succeed. Beyond financial resources, community capital includes human relationships, trust, and shared values. By combining ABCD principles with philanthropic investment and leadership development, communities achieve higher participation, stronger networks, and results that reflect local ownership. Ultimately, this asset-centered approach ensures that progress arises from within the community itself building sustainable development, resilience, and lasting civic pride.

Case Study 1: Discovery Park of America

Discovery Park of America started as a way for Robert and Jenny Kirkland to give back to Union City, their small West Tennessee Hometown. Their vision to provide a one-of-a-kind experience began with Robert Kirkland publishing an ad in the Union City Messenger in late 2007 requesting the presence of anyone interested in exploring the creation of a museum in Union City. More than 250 members of the community showed

up to declare their desire to be part of his mission to create a center of culture and education in West Tennessee. The multi-million dollar gift with three strings attached by the local donors: Discovery Park of America must educate the children and youth in particular who come to explore it, must entertain everyone who steps on to the 50-acre site to see whether it lives up to its name, and must be marketed and managed so as to attract a booming tourist base that would otherwise have no reason to exit the new I-69 superhighway from Canada to Mexico for a mid-point stop in Union City. The combined efforts of many volunteers and employees came to light in November 2013 when Robert and Jenny Kirkland cut the red ribbon to commemorate their \$100 million investment. During his speech, Robert Kirkland said, “We never dreamed it would get this big. It just got out of control”.

Since opening its doors, Discovery Park of America has become the single largest tourism driver in the region. In addition to the economic benefit through tourism, Discovery Park contributes \$3.6 million annually through payroll and \$2 million through operational spending, directly reinvesting in the local economy. The 100,000-square-foot museum features highlights like Cooper Tower, a 20,000-gallon aquarium, life-size dinosaur displays, and the immersive Ducks Unlimited Conservation Experience. Outdoors, guests enjoy a beautifully landscaped park complete with a flowing river, waterfalls, bridges, and interactive spaces like the Simmons Bank Ag Center and Farm Credit Mid-America Education Pavilion. These experiences aren’t just visually impressive—they actively contribute to learning and community engagement. Each day, the museum and 50-acre heritage park offer engaging indoor and outdoor experiences designed to spark curiosity and inspire exploration. With permanent exhibits

spanning history, science, energy, transportation, military, dinosaurs, art, music, agriculture, and wildlife, the institution fuels tourism while creating inspiration for visitors of all ages.

Discovery Park also strengthens the cultural and social fabric of the region through signature annual events designed to educate, inspire, and celebrate community. These include: Military Expo, Rhythm on the Rails, Juneteenth Celebration, Independence Day Celebration, Native American Powwow, and Antique Tractor Show among others.

Discovery Park has also made an impact as serving as the regional hub for meetings, events, and conferences. Each year, they host hundreds of gatherings both professional and fun. In October 2024, the Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Rural Tourism Conference welcomed more than 250 tourism professionals, elected officials, and economic leaders from across the tri-state region. The three-day event took participants on excursions to White Squirrel Winery and Reelfoot Lake State Park. There was also a guest appearance by Governor Bill Lee, Tourism Commissioner Mark Ezell, and country music artist Darryl Worley.

Discovery Park also is committed to workforce development by partnering with the University of Tennessee at Martin, Lake County School's hospitality program, and Tennessee College of Applied Technology for internships, mentoring, and training. These collaborations not only provide a talent pipeline for the region but also reinforce the organization's commitment to raising the profile of rural tourism as a viable and rewarding career path.

Discovery Park of America takes bold, proactive steps to significantly impact both its destination and the broader community by serving as a cultural anchor, economic engine, and educational leader in Tennessee. Their investment in all of these aspects shows that Discovery Park is more than a destination. It is a catalyst for growth, opportunity, and enduring influence within Tennessee's tourism industry.

The Kirkland's not only had the vision for Discovery Park, but they also established a non-profit named the Promethean Foundation also known as Pro-Kids. Thanks to the generosity of the Robert E. and Jenny D. Kirkland Foundation, the Promethean Foundation has been steadfast in its mission to support "at-risk" preschool-aged children in Obion County since its establishment in 2004. Governed by a Board of Directors under the oversight of the Union City Rotary Club, the foundation serves children from birth through age five, providing scholarships that cover the full cost of childcare.

Their belief is that all children in Obion County should have an opportunity to reach their learning potential from birth. Due to ninety percent of a child's brain growth happening by the age of five, the goal of leveling the playing field is accomplished by placing the children in centers with enriched environments for the chance to have a positive impact during the most important years in the child's life.

The requirement for parents of having their children in childcare daily unless they are sick helps to establish routine and schedules that provide them with a caring, safe environment. By doing so, the parents also have the chance to improve themselves knowing their child is cared for during the day.

To maintain high standards, Pro-Kids implements rigorous oversight through a combination of unannounced classroom evaluations conducted by its staff and state-led observations. This ensures that participating childcare centers not only adhere to curricular alignment but also model the character virtues integral to the Pro-Kids philosophy.

Case Study 2: The Nailling/Ring Building Redevelopment

Another example of local investment sits in downtown Union City. The vision for The Nailling began its new chapter with Dr. Nailling's great-grandson, David Ring. Although raised in Massachusetts, Ring's strong ties to Union City that was shaped by family visits and his grandmother's roots in the area fueled a deep admiration for its history. After a successful career in medical device manufacturing with his father, Ring redirected his energy toward honoring his great-grandfather's legacy by restoring the Nailling Building in downtown Union City. At the time, the building was owned by a 23-member family trust and in need of significant repair. Determined to preserve its place in the community, Ring bought out the other stakeholders and assumed full ownership.

Working closely with Windermere Management, Ring embarked on a careful restoration. While preserving the building's historic brickwork and masonry, he reinforced deteriorating sections with steel framing and reused salvaged bricks wherever possible. Decorative elements such as stone lintels, structural storefronts, and original window patterns were reconstructed with historical accuracy, ensuring the building retained its early 20th-century charm. Adjacent to the Nailling, the neighboring Wosley Building was

redeveloped into what is now called the Ring Building, designed with complementary but contemporary features such as aluminum storefronts and modern solar shading.

Today, The Nailling features 27 luxury apartments, three executive suites, and vibrant commercial spaces including a café and marketplace. With features such as restored stained-glass and enhanced architectural details, the project represents more than a real estate investment; it's a reinvention of Union City's downtown. Ring's vision was to combine historical reverence with modern vitality, creating a dynamic hub where heritage and community can thrive side by side.

The story of The Nailling reaches back to 1913, when Dr. William A. Nailling, a pharmacist turned physician, established the Nailling Hospital. A visionary entrepreneur, Nailling overcame financial barriers by impressing Vanderbilt University's pharmacy leadership and completing his medical degree in 1900. He returned to Union City with a passion for serving the community's health needs, particularly in a rural region where agricultural work often led to serious injuries.

In 1910, Dr. Nailling purchased the future hospital site for \$6,000 (equivalent to over \$186,000 today) and constructed a 10,000-square-foot building with pressed brick exteriors, tile interiors, beam ceilings, and decorative frescoes. Beyond its medical purpose, the building also became an economic hub, housing banks, dental and insurance offices, grain companies, and even sewing machine businesses. Centrally located near Union City's civic center, the Nailling Building emerged as a cornerstone of the community's business and cultural life.

Though Dr. Nailling passed in 1952 and the building eventually declined from underuse, his pioneering spirit never left the community's memory. The building has remained a symbol of Union City's resilience and entrepreneurial history, awaiting a revival that would honor its legacy. That revival came decades later through David Ring's efforts, ensuring that Dr. Nailling's original vision of service and innovation continues to shape the future of downtown Union City.

Next Steps Toward Lasting Impact

While Discovery Park of America and the Nailling Building highlight the power of asset-based, philanthropic, and capital-driven development, several gaps and challenges remain for Obion County. One persistent issue is infrastructure. Limited public transportation and broadband access constrain the county's ability to fully capitalize on tourism growth and to attract outside investment. Visitors may enjoy destinations like Discovery Park or Reelfoot Lake, but the lack of connectivity and supporting infrastructure can hinder repeat tourism and broader regional appeal.

Workforce availability also poses a challenge. Like many rural Tier IV communities, Obion County struggles with outmigration of young professionals and a limited pool of skilled workers. This creates difficulties not only for sustaining local businesses but also for meeting the service and hospitality demands that accompany tourism growth. Without intentional workforce development strategies, long-term economic expansion may be limited.

Finally, sustaining momentum requires ongoing leadership and investment. Philanthropic efforts have provided the initial spark for transformative projects, but reliance on

individual donors carries risks if future community buy-in or funding streams weaken. Continued collaboration between public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders is essential to ensure these projects remain resilient and adaptive to changing economic conditions.

What Matters: Seen and Unseen

The economic impacts of these projects extend far beyond direct investment. Discovery Park draws over 250,000 visitors annually, stimulating local hospitality, retail, and restaurant sectors. The Nailling Building's redevelopment created commercial spaces, luxury housing, and vibrant streetscapes, driving property values upward and attracting new businesses to downtown Union City. Both projects have created jobs, diversified the local economy, and generated new tax revenues.

Equally important are the intangible benefits. Residents take pride in seeing their community's assets showcased in ways that attract regional and even national attention. Discovery Park has become a cultural beacon for northwest Tennessee, while the Nailling has symbolized resilience and renewal in Union City's historic core. These projects not only anchor tourism but also build community identity, helping residents see their hometown as a place worth investing in, celebrating, and sharing.

Closing Thoughts, Opening Opportunities

The redevelopment of the Nailling Building and the creation of Discovery Park of America both demonstrate how communities can strategically align assets, philanthropy, and capital to achieve transformational outcomes. Each project began by identifying and leveraging existing strengths: Discovery Park harnessed the cultural and educational vision of philanthropist Robert Kirkland, while the Nailling restoration drew upon the

historical significance and architectural value of a downtown landmark. By treating these assets as cornerstones for development, both initiatives framed growth around local identity and heritage rather than external templates.

Philanthropy played a decisive role in making each initiative possible. Kirkland's private investment in Discovery Park seeded a world-class attraction that likely could not have been realized solely through public funds. Similarly, David Ring's personal and financial commitment to preserving his great-grandfather's building reflects a philanthropic vision tied to family legacy and civic pride. In both cases, personal generosity translated into community-wide benefits.

Community capital, both financial and social, was equally essential. Public-private partnerships, civic engagement, and collaborative governance ensured that these projects were not isolated ventures but part of a broader economic strategy. Local stakeholders provided the support and buy-in needed to sustain momentum, ensuring that the benefits extended beyond the walls of the institutions themselves.

Obion County's story demonstrates that sustainable growth in rural communities is possible when local assets, philanthropy, and community capital are strategically aligned. Projects like Discovery Park of America and the Nailling Building have shown how visionary investment can ignite economic spin-offs, revitalize historic spaces, and strengthen civic pride, all while elevating the county's tourism appeal. At the same time, the county must address ongoing gaps in infrastructure, workforce development, and long-term funding to sustain this momentum. By building on its natural resources, cultural heritage, and strong tradition of community engagement, Obion County can

continue transforming local investment into lasting impact, serving as both a model and an inspiration for rural communities across Tennessee and beyond.

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