



# **Engaging Heartland Residents**

## **Rebuilding Pride, Ownership, and a Brighter Future**

Transforming Industrial Heartland Regions of North America and Europe  
U.S Midwest Convening and Learning Exchange

**NOVEMBER 11, 2022**

March 2023  
Summary Report  
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## CONTEXT

Given the clear links between community economic conditions and receptivity to political messages of anger and resentment, the work within and between western democracies to nurture economic regeneration in industrial heartlands has never been more urgent. Where this has been done successfully, [it returns community pride and optimism about the future](#), and also diminishes the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist and ethno-nationalist political movements. This, in turn, strengthens our economies, democracies, alliances, and our collective capacity to counter threats to the international order from authoritarian powers such as China and Russia.

This work is gaining steam. The United States (US) is now making [unprecedented investments in place-based industrial policy](#)—much of it focused on the US heartland, with last year’s [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) (IIJA), [CHIPS and Science Act](#), and [Inflation Reduction Act](#) (IRA). In the United Kingdom (UK), both the in-power conservative government and opposition Labour Party share an agenda to “[level-up](#)” the country’s declining regions. The European Commission, its member states’ governments, universities, civic organizations, and policy partners are focused—in the face of rising right-wing nationalist groups—on enhancing and improving regional structural adjustment and cohesion policies to diminish the political damage and the political threat to member countries.

This was the backdrop last fall for a [hybrid convening](#) of international economic development practitioners and policy experts at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Under the banner of [Engaging Heartland Residents: Rebuilding Pride, Ownership, and a Better Future](#), the discussion was designed to help leaders, practitioners of economic change, and the public alike get positively engaged with heartland residents, make effective investments in these people and places, and learn from each other practical approaches for closing regional geographic economic divides.

The event was the latest in a series of transatlantic learning exchanges convened as part of the [Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative](#). It was organized by the [Michigan Economic Center](#), the [Weiser Diplomacy Center](#), and the [International Policy Center](#) at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. The day-long event explored approaches and best practices for engaging residents of industrial heartland regions to address one of the root causes of polarizing politics undermining western democracies and transatlantic relationships.

The convening in Ann Arbor was but one stop on a ten-day study tour of US Midwest communities by American and European leaders to study effective, place-focused strategies for preventing antidemocratic movements from gaining a foothold. Study tour participants included policy professionals, economic development practitioners, and cross-sector experts from the US, UK, Belgium, Italy, France, and Germany. The convening included discussion on meeting the attitudes, needs, and unique priorities of heartland residents; supporting and catalyzing effective community change; and reflecting on how to manage economic structural change and its impacts on domestic politics and polities. Participants in these conversations and the voices quoted in this report include:

- National security expert **Fiona Hill**, whose book “There is Nothing For You Here” tells her own story of growing up in one of England’s “left-behind” places;
- **Thomas Kralinski**, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labor & Transport, Saxony, East Germany;

- **Rachel Wolf**, Founding Partner of Public First and former Advisor to the British Prime Minister;
- **Sandra Hannig**, Policy Analyst and Project Manager with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Center for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities (CFE);
- **Bob King**, former President of United Auto Workers International and representative of IG METALL on the Opel Corporation Board of Directors;
- **Florian Ranft**, Head of Economic and Social Transformation with Das Progressive Zentrum;
- **Robin Johnson**, Professor at Monmouth College, Illinois, and Host of the Midwest Public Radio's Heartland Politics;
- **Birgit Hassig**, Chief of Staff at the Visible Hands Collective;
- **George Morosz**, Special Assistant to the President, The Henry Ford;
- **Jorg Kemna**, Head of Structural Politics & Subsidies, Growth Markets, Business Metropole Ruhr;
- **Robert Leonard**, Special News Editor for KNIA KRLS radio in Iowa, and occasional columnist for the New York Times, Time Magazine, USA Today, and the Hill;
- **Michael Schwarze-Rodrian**, Former European Union (EU) Representative of the Ruhr Regional Association;
- **Andy Westwood**, Professor of Government Practice, University of Manchester;
- **Tracie Potts**, Executive Director of the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College, and students: **Tom Cassara**, **Mason Clark**, **Kat Manchester**, and **Nick Silvis**, who toured and interviewed Western Pennsylvania steel towns and their residents; and
- **Chelsea Gaylord** and **Lukas Hagen**, candidates for master degrees in Public Policy at the University of Michigan, who staffed the University of Michigan convening, supported the Midwest study tour, and interviewed Michigan union members.

## KEYS TO INDUSTRIAL HEARTLAND TRANSFORMATION

The discussion offered keen insights into the outlook of heartland residents, the language and engagement strategies that work to aid them in building a brighter future, and recommendations for actions and approaches leaders and residents at all levels can take to engage and empower communities and support them in charting their own brighter economic future.

### CONNECTION

Fiona Hill framed the challenges facing residents of regions that had experienced long-term job and population loss as one of disconnection—a disconnection that takes many forms, from the physical distance to jobs and economic opportunity, to the psychological distance residents experience from decision-making and influence.

***Fiona Hill:** The problem was that all of the other industries in the region were intertwined with coal—shipbuilding, shipping, the railways, the transport links to the outside, you name it. Once it all falls apart, the region gets disconnected ... the contacts, and the connections within the regions disappear because a lot of them are based on industrial flows; the main experience of growing up in a place like this is one of disconnection.*

Transportation links can disappear:



**Fiona Hill:** Even here in places like Western Pennsylvania, I heard complaints about public infrastructure, public transportation, cutting parts of the city off from amenities elsewhere. For example, young people not being able to connect with other young people because there isn't any public transportation, and it is too expensive.

The distances separating people in industrial heartlands can be vast and hard to bridge:

**Fiona Hill:** One of the barriers in the US Midwest, the barriers to entry to the economy is distance. It's one hundred miles to get anywhere ... a lot of people can't afford gasoline for their cars, and the public transportation links are completely missing.

When the economy with its interconnections of people, trade, and communication disappears, the social networks fray:

**Fiona Hill:** When industry goes and the economy goes, political interaction disappears, and international connections also disappear. I grew up in the north of England. The local authorities tried to maintain some of the connectivity and the cultural networks and in the educational field. They were still looking for ways to keep the school children connected through cultural and educational exchanges. But the larger economic super structure had disappeared.

Even the telephone and internet connections become sketchy:

**Fiona Hill:** We often didn't have telephones or other kind of basic means of connectivity which actually put everybody at a massive disadvantage. How do we start to re-establish basic connections for people in the heartlands, like those in the former industrial areas in the north of England? Multiple generations of people have been cut off from the world ... from basic public transportation. The experience of growing up in one of those forgotten, left-behind places ... you end up experiencing what one might call endless technical difficulties, and having to have a creative workaround.

The predictable fruits of this multi-faceted "disconnection" is the anger and alienation that colors our political environment:

**Robin Johnson:** We've seen this transformation in our politics occur; people are angry and alienated and I think it's because people feel left behind ... [in the rural midwest] the Democratic brand is just seen as out of touch with people and not relating to their concerns.

## INFORMATION

Economic decline, population loss, and "disconnection" contribute to the loss of many local institutions including news outlets and other sources of shared information and communication, eliminating shared sources of information that allow a community to come together and act together.

**Robin Johnson:** Mainstream media in small towns has just been decimated. You don't have local newspapers anymore. You don't have unions. You don't have organizations that act as ... filters and kind of explain to things to people locally.

Not feeling as though they are part of a broader national conversation contributes to the sense of isolation and alienation among heartland residents.

**Chelsea Gaylord:** Over and over we heard that people want to feel valued. They need to feel seen. Residents in heartland areas have a great desire to be included in broader social dialogues and discussions.

**Florian Ranft:** There's also an immaterial dimension to it. They're not part of the conversation, the political discussions. They have the feeling that the political parties don't really care about them, and that the ... policies and the big politics is kind of passing them and their own kind by.

Which compounds the anti-government, anti-establishment sentiments:

**Florian Ranft:** *Residents of economically distressed regions talk of political leaders often in quite derogatory kind of terms. They find them corrupt, useless ... that they don't really care about what they think. So there's a real issue with the actual representativeness of democracies.*

## PRIDE

**Cat Manchester:** *Heartland residents are deeply proud of the communities in which they live.*

Wounded pride is one of the principal drivers of anger and resentments felt by many residents of ignored and declining communities, which compounds as people feel ignored, patronized, or looked down upon. Rebuilding this pride is one the most powerful boosters of industrial heartland regeneration.

“We are not victims ... the first thing that I want to say is that with all of the world's problems, most of them will be solved by people in the hinterlands.”  
~Robert Leonard

**Fiona Hill:** *There's just this sort of feeling that nobody's listening, because the means of representation have broken down ... The question is to amplify the voice of heartland residents.*

Michael Schwarze-Rodrian, a former leader of the economic transformation in Germany's Ruhr Region from the 1990s to the 2010s, spoke about how to rebuild pride by tapping strengths that heartland regions still have. As the longtime industrial heart of Germany, the Ruhr economy was for years defined by steel production and coal mining. These industries began declining in the 1950s, with the last coal mine closing in 2017. However, connections to the mining and steel industry were used to help re-define the region's identity. The Ruhr built on these legacies of the past by celebrating them as a UNESCO world heritage site. When awarded the title of Cultural Capital of Europe in 2010 (RUHR.2010), this also helped residents shift from a deficit mindset to an asset mindset.

Psychological and physical health and well-being is also a critical foundation for economic renewal; Birgit Hassig, Chief of Staff at the Visible Hands Collective, a global non-governmental organization (NGO) specializing in

community healing, argued that economic development must be about the whole person. The mental and physical health of people affects the economy, so community revitalization needs a holistic focus.

**Birgit Hassig:** *It's easier to put a tangible investment value on "place" oriented investments like brownfields or jobs than it is "people." However, people, how they feel, and multigenerational experiences should be considered when investing in communities. In taking stock of a community's assets, people are central, and economic development must also consider the mental, physical, and biological well-being of their "people" assets.*

While heartland communities face real challenges, residents are deeply proud of where they live and have a strong connection to their communities. People want to be seen and acknowledged for their hard work. Conversations must shift from a deficit mindset to one that highlights the assets, resiliency, and vibrancy that outlasts economic and industrial cycles in these areas.

**Cat Manchester:** *In this economically hard time, with all the disheartening things happening around you we asked: "How does the community keep going?" And he looked at me, and he told me: It's because we are unwilling to die. We are unwilling to give up!*

## PLACE

**Fiona Hill:** *I think it is when we're listening to communities about that sense of well-being, that sense of the kind of place in their community, that sense of what their jobs and the job security will give them; they are looking for a future in their place.*

The attitudes and outlook of heartland residents is intertwined with their attachment to and condition of the place they call home. Dwindling populations, bleaker economic prospects, degraded buildings, and infrastructure nurture the loop of anxiety and despair. Remaking and refurbishing the community, creating new jobs, reboots both residents' pride and their optimism about the future.

**Fiona Hill:** *The effects of de-industrialization are cyclical and there are key moments. But then there's also a kind of chronic condition that sets in. I was born in one of the acute phases of industrial decline in the northeast of England. The coal industry was beginning to close down. My own father lost his job repeatedly as one mine after another closed down.*

The economic decline begins to visibly manifest as a community in decline:

**Rachel Wolf:** *The thing you hear time and time again in these is this sense of civic degradation. It's the high streets that are feeling more tatty with every year that passes, more low level crime. You hear stories of graffiti on the cenotaph, which is often a sort of monument in the middle of these towns that commemorates people who died in the war. There is a sense that even if by some measures these places are absolutely richer than they were fifty or sixty years ago, residents feel in many ways a general kind of lack of economic and educational opportunity, and simply that it's not as nice a place to live.*

The pride people feel about themselves and their identity extends to the nature and future of their particular community:



**Florian Ranft:** We found in Germany residents of structurally weak regions weren't worried as much about their personal future, but are worried about their region, the places where they live being left behind, and concern that they will be left behind in future.

**Cat Manchester:** Residents we talked to were just unwilling to give up on their community, there was a big sense of how important these regions and areas are to the people who live in them.

The identification with and attachment to the particulars of their own community and their perception of its relative decline can compound the disconnect in perceptions and priorities between heartland residents and the national discourse, which often focuses on big global issues such as climate change:

**Florian Ranft:** Heartland residents said the climate crisis is a problem. But our social problems are more urgent: inequalities, living standards, a decent wage, and so on.

Even so, heartland residents, with their pride in their work and their place, would like to be looked to in solving the big problems of society:

**Robert Leonard:** If we focus on revitalization of our communities; if we focus on climate, smart agriculture, and think about all our big problems ... global warming, ... deforestation, ... ethnic tensions, habitat loss and species loss, warfare and strife—all have to do with how we relate to the land. We need to invest in our farmers and our ranchers and our foresters to use the land to sequester carbon. This is the climate change work, smart agriculture.

## POWER

“

**“Talking about  
policy won't change  
if you don't go to the  
core issue of power.”  
~Bob King**

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The loss of agency and influence, the sense that they are not in control of their own lives, underlies the feelings of resentment and anger at others that find an outlet in the populist politics, to which many residents of economically struggling communities respond. Reclaiming power, reestablishing influence, fighting and organizing to be seen and heard, and influencing decisions that affect their lives is an important foundation for positive economic change and optimism about the future.

**Tom Cassara:** Communities in Pennsylvania experiencing industrial decline are vulnerable to extremism and misinformation; disenfranchisement is a powerful motivator to embrace hatred, especially in communities facing the issues these communities face.

Sometimes the “disempowerment” is a direct result of government policy:

**Fiona Hill:** We had in England a whole categorization of towns and villages according to whether they'd lost their industry. If so, they were labeled “category D” —in other words, “without promise,” without perspective, with no reason for further investment. My grandparents lived in one of those villages category D, and it led to the complete rupture of all of the basic services to the village.

**Lukas Hagen:** Residents are concerned that economic changes taking place around them were happening to them rather than for them.

Cut-off from decision-making and the ability to influence their own future fuels residents' anger and alienation:

**Mason Clark:** ... [These] attitudes are linked to residents' abilities as individuals at the local level to influence, to push back on, or to ride economic trends. Which is why it's extremely important for them to be able to cooperate with other larger government bodies and business entities.

Redistribution of power and ownership can provide essential paths to economic mobility, resilience, and displacement mitigation. Providing opportunities for people to invest in their communities fosters a sense of ownership. Bob King, former president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), spoke at the University of Michigan event about the power differential between industrial workers and corporations, and the role of unions in helping address systems of power and protecting democracy. He pointed out that CEOs on both sides of the Atlantic are equally focused on profits, but European workers are better supported through unions and a more robust welfare system.

**Bob King:** In Europe, workers stand to lose less when they confront their employers' leadership or management.

Heartland regeneration demands economic development to be conducted from the bottom up (flipping the language and the script too often used) with informed involvement and buy-in of the local population. Residents believe they have the solutions to help us solve our challenges, and need support structures that help residents to emerge as leaders.

**Robert Leonard:** We don't like being treated like victims. What we have to do is give the permission structure ... give the support, to let rural leaders emerge. Let them tell us how to solve our problems, and they're not just their problems. It's not just rural people's problems. It's all of our problems.

Tracie Potts, Executive Director of the Eisenhower Institute, emphasized that the communities at the center of this conversation need to be in the room. It's not only important to bring them to the table but to also ensure they are part of the decision-making process.

**Chelsea Gaylord:** Engagement with heartland residents is about face-to-face connection. It's really important that we're not engaging for them, in order to do things for community, but to do them with them.

## COMMUNITY

One of the attributes most missed by residents of communities that are hollowed out by population and job loss is the sense of being part of a real community—living and working with others that you know, who share a common identity and purpose. Effective community renewal pays attention to restitching the fabric of

“Communities frequently feel that when there is a regeneration of a place, they get replaced. They get pushed out rather than revitalized.”  
~Fiona Hill”

connection, a feeling of a true community, of a shared identity.

Communities frequently feel that when there is a regeneration of place, they get replaced and pushed out rather than revitalized. Interviews of residents of former steel towns around Pittsburgh by Eisenhower Institute students discovered that many of the communities they visited have changed over the past several decades, but long-time residents have been displaced and disconnected from the revitalization that their towns have experienced. New economic development taking place in their hometowns tended to benefit others—either those living outside of the community and commuting in for work, or neighborhoods for newcomers, effectively pushing out former steel industry residents into the surrounding area. This left holes in the social fabric, as no one spent both their free time and workdays there.

Sometimes the displacement is felt through the lack of a shared work life and culture:

**Mason Clark:** *While there is still a mill with some people employed in Braddock [a Pittsburgh suburb], the people employed there are drawn less and less from there, drawn from areas around the community rather than from the community. Very few people in Braddock who live there, who live next to the mill to see the mill every day, very few of them actually work in the mill or are employed there.*

Sometimes it's a sense that the new economic activity and redevelopment is not for them, but others:

**Mason Clark:** *The Homestead [PA] waterfront is largely driven by retail operations. It was pretty lively, it's a nice area. But when we spoke to folks on the ground, it seemed, it does not translate well towards true community development. The effect of the new developments is minimal mostly because it pulls in people from Pittsburgh, but it's not really helping the individuals who already live in that community. So you're seeing sort of a replacement therapy rather than a revitalization.*

Sometimes people are literally displaced in their community by very different newcomers:

**Fiona Hill:** *There is this thing communities feel that when there's a regeneration of the place. They get replaced. They don't get revitalized, they get replaced by others, they get pushed out. In my hometown of Bishop Parkland in County Durham, that's happened a lot. There's been new development, but it's housing developments. People work somewhere else. They don't actually feel engaged to the community itself.*

**Mason Clark:** *There's no community. It's simply a place people come back to at the end of the day simply to live, sleep, eat, but it's not a place to work or to enjoy community, so the infrastructure there is essentially ineffective at building back that community. It's simply becoming this area.*

Sometimes residents feel disconnected from the decision-making about what businesses and industries to attract to help revitalize community. Residents of former industrial areas on both sides of the Atlantic looking for new industries feel passionately that their involvement in economic planning over the last several decades has been insufficient and not reflective of their needs.

**Cat Manchester:** *"Are we revitalizing simply a place or an area, or are we actually attempting to revitalize a community?" A sentiment that we all share, and that is that community leaders are essential to revitalizing these communities.*



**Fiona Hill:** What is important is really having a collective voice. The Durham miners have a very interesting history that could be applicable here. The Durham miners in the late nineteenth century and early 1900s pulled their own resources, pulled the dues that they paid to their association, to build themselves a community parliament—a place to have discussion about the future of their communities. They had social welfare initiatives creating a sense of well-being, there were football soccer teams, lectures, and educational programs. [Now there's an effort to revitalize the Pitman's Parliament](#) at Redhills in Durham to create a hub for the community to talk about their issues.

Finally, community building goes back to that person-to-person interaction, the acts of care, kindness, and concern—person-to-parson:

**Chelsea Gaylord:** We heard examples of using social media to acknowledge anniversaries or to acknowledge small things for each other, such as people posting photos of their pets. It creates a sense of community that's virtual as well as on the ground.

## TRAJECTORY

“What people want to feel is just some sense of trajectory and being heard.”  
~Rachel Wolf

Heartland community residents attitudes are linked to the trajectory of their own lives and the life of their community. Are they on the way up, or on the way down? An economic and community spiral downward feeds the feelings of despair, helplessness, and resentment. Finding and feeling a new story of positive change and hope, seeing small steps up in the right direction, builds momentum and can propel community renewal.

**Florian Ranft:** When they look at their own region, they see the kind of material dimension of it, the decay and this downward spiral when it comes to the physical and social infrastructure.

**Fiona Hill:** When the economy unravels it leads to the chronic phase in which you've got under-investment. You've got a very low tax base. The infrastructure of opportunity which is based around long established industry starts to fade away as well. The schools were geared towards putting people on a pipeline into the local industries which have disappeared, and the connections with the rest of the country disappear as well, because their main base was the economic interaction. Political interaction disappears, and international connections also fade.

The Eisenhower Institute students also noticed that the news sources people typically pay attention to in these communities focus largely on the bad news, the violence in the community, and not on the redevelopment or other positive efforts. So there's a constant negative feedback loop.

And having experienced decline and a reinforcing downward spiral, heartland residents can be anxious about the impact big efforts at economic transformation—such as building a green economy—may have on them:

**Florian Ranft:** *What we noticed in conversations in these regions was that people do really feel that tackling challenges like the great transformation to clean energy, and coming to terms with the climate crisis in terms of policy, might further exacerbate the existing inequalities in the region. There's a clear fear that, looking forward, they may see a bleak and negative picture ... that they will be left behind more in the future. So there's a strong sense of a kind of resignation and pessimism.*

There is evidence, however, that by building on assets the community does have, by taking steps forward, a new narrative of hope and change can take shape.

**Tom Cassara:** *When we talk about heartlands, we talk about stories of destitution and neglect and decline. We don't often focus on what they do have. What we need to do is shift the frame to talk about the assets and the resiliency and the vibrancy of culture that's outlasted economic cycles in these areas.*

**Rachel Wolf:** *What is most effective is to identify the small things that make people's lives definitely feel better next year as well as trying to tackle these huge economic trends. If you can, when you build confidence in those things that might seem relatively small, you have much more permission to try things that are big—so do stuff yourself, even if it feels small.*

A sense of optimism and purpose that can snowball:

**Florian Ranft:** *Not in all of the places, but in some left behind regions these are extremely exciting times. We're seeing as a response to the energy and climate crisis, and the need to create a renewable future for our countries, that investments are beginning to come into left behind regions. Firstly, because there's some space to build solar energy, wind parks, and so forth. And secondly, residents see our governments beginning investment in infrastructure and new factories in Ohio and the like ... investment in our regional and national economies in Europe and North America. So this is a starting point to build a new kind of narrative.*

## MOVING FORWARD: AVENUES FOR ACTION

The discussion around what shapes the attitudes and understandings, and ultimately political actions of industrial heartland residents, offered some guidance for actions that could help these residents to reclaim ownership and agency, and to fashion and effectively advance community redevelopment and regeneration strategies.

It pointed to a new paradigm for economic development: internationally collaborative and ground-up—sharing ideas and strategies around how to spur and manage economic structural change and development that is inclusive, locally owned and operated. A shift in the thinking and doing of economic development to one of empowerment of the local people—and away from the focus on bringing in outside business—instead cultivating and empowering existing businesses and entrepreneurs. Rather than viewing one's job as bringing in outside expertise, economic development 'helpmates' can view their role as providing these regions and residents with tools and resources to take advantage of their own knowledge and expertise.

Not all industrial heartlands are the same. They each have their own unique assets, challenges, culture, and experiences. England, the United States, Germany, and other European culture are different culturally, politically, and economically. Yet "heartlands" is a single term for communities that share a rich history, that have followed a

somewhat similar arc of economic and social development, including leadership in the industrial era. But each is unique, and solutions that work in one place are not guaranteed to work in another. Each region needs tailor-made solutions.

However, based on a growing number of discussions among leaders, practitioners of economic change, and citizens of industrial heartland regions—including the ones held in the fall of 2022—there are some shared principles and common strategies that can guide regeneration efforts across cultures and countries.

These include:

## SUPPORT “DEMOCRATIC” DECISION-MAKING INSTITUTIONS

To move forward, community leaders and residents need to chart and control their own destinies. In the Ann Arbor convening there were a number of good examples and suggestions for how heartland residents could essentially “organize for power.”

“  
Nothing about us without us.”  
~Tracie Potts  
”

**Florian Ranft:** *We are seeing in Germany and some of the United States that as new investments are being made there are new kinds of democratic institutions created which bring together different stakeholders, to use some of this public money, some of these public investments, to create a better future. In these regions this is a big improvement of the conversation.*

Others remarked on the new activity and unionization in the US, and unions now mobilizing to get involved in the new battery plants and other projects being developed in the Midwest, binding together to uplift each other's voices and help midwestern workers stand up for each other across sectors.

**Fiona Hill:** *How we help revitalize the community revolves around how residents can be tied into new worker's commissions or committees, or some kind of new form of unionism to give people influence and agency again. Participation seems critical.*

There are other models and approaches for new democratic institutions:

**Rachel Wolf:** *One of the things that I've been very involved in here in the last few years is an attempt to revive the civic university tradition, because we have a lot of universities in these former industrialized areas that have become the major employers that have grown as industrial areas have shrunk, and they have been enormously value. (But too often) they have been international institutions that happen to sit somewhere versus genuinely embedded in their community.*

These structures and meeting grounds can also serve as a safety valve, a touchstone to deal with angers, fears, and resentments:

**Tom Cassara:** *Rally communities together, and when looking to combat hatred and polarized community, the best way to do that is to provide a group or figure to combat that hatred. Something a little bit more than just a group, but [at least] having someone that you can feel comfortable going to when you are facing hatred and unease.*



## LEAN INTO THE GREEN TRANSFORMATION

While there was some concern expressed about whether the Green Transformation (termed the “Great” Transformation in Europe) might serve to leave heartland residents further behind, on balance there was relative enthusiasm and broadly-shared optimism expressed about the economic and quality of life benefits of making the green economic and environmental transformation in industrial heartlands.

The opportunities that green technology and growth offer for industrial revitalization were highlighted by both Rachel Wolf and Fiona Hill as means to regenerate workforce opportunities while also satisfying community environmental concerns.

**Rachel Wolf:** *Wherever you are people are keen for action on the environment. There's a place called Tayside [Scotland] not far from where Fiona is from; there's been a real sense of industrial renewal, and it has mostly come from promises of investment in green technology and green growth, and the attempt to use the environmental aims of the government, which is a right to center governments, to marry that to industrial aims, and this has been to date very, very effective. The reason it works is because the people in these areas want good jobs, and to feel that there's a point in their children staying.*

Even small shoots of “green” can provide an encouraging vector for community renewal:

**Nick Silvis:** *We saw some examples of the promise of green space in the steel community revitalization. There's a dog park and little amphitheater. There's a bit of nature that kind of winds through the condominium developments that give both the benefits of green space, of connecting people with a space to escape the city, while also engaging residents in the area in economic development.*

And there are even more powerful and tangible developments—that of new, good paying, green jobs in industrial heartland communities, to replace the lost jobs of yesteryear:

**Nick Silvis:** *There is massive potential for clean energy or climate-driven innovation in these communities. A woman in Braddock told us green businesses are the future for these small communities. There's already Eos, which is a clean energy battery manufacturer, and Fifth Season, a vertical indoor agriculture operation. Both are bringing high-paying jobs to these communities—jobs that are much like the steel jobs of old, and that bring a lot of job security ... and they serve the community, without displacing the people who live there.*

And the possibilities for rural communities to really lead the attack on climate change, as Iowa's Robert Leonard noted, appear enormous—if nations rally to make sufficient investments in farmers, ranchers, and foresters to sequester carbon and promote climate-smart agriculture.

## LEVERAGE ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS

As industries rapidly evolve to meet climate demands and other emerging needs, industrial heartland communities can leverage and build out their existing assets and networks among foundations, businesses, and particularly research and learning institutions such as universities. Jörg Kemna, with Business Metropole Ruhr, highlighted how the Ruhr region in Germany began investing in universities and research when

deindustrialization started in the 1950s, as fulcrums for innovation, new economic opportunities, retraining, and talent creation.

**Andy Westwood:** *It's been fascinating on this study tour to learn so much about the role of universities, to go to Pittsburgh and see what University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon are doing to drive new innovation and business growth, and to solve what we in Europe call the innovation paradox—new innovation doesn't always translate to new jobs. We've got big universities too like University of Manchester where I am from. And it is a lot easier for a community to do stuff when you've got them (universities) than when you haven't got them. But how do you really deploy them? What with the wealth, the expertise, the strength, the knowledge, and their location in the communities, we have lot to learn from each other.*

For communities without large, established universities, the OECD's Sandra Hannig discussed the role of agriculture and life sciences programs, entrepreneurship and innovation centers, and extension offices to provide educational opportunities for more remote places.

George Moroz of the Henry Ford Museum emphasized the importance of nurturing young talent. Through the museum's innovation conventions program, youth are provided opportunities to identify problems they want to solve, create and pitch a solution, and write about their innovation journey. Ensuring access to capital and resources for business ideas were essential elements to leveraging the creative power of young people and innovation programs.

## INVEST IN LEADERSHIP

With effective economic development and community renewal needing to be driven from the bottom up, nurturing home grown community leadership is essential:

**Robert Leonard:** *We need to start at city council meetings and empowering people. We need to start at board of supervisors meetings, to do the work of empowering people, and look for solutions from rural people. Answers aren't going to be found in think tanks or people like us discussing these kinds of things. But what we can do is see how to build power, and how to give power. Teach people to take power, hear their voices, listen to what they say. Help them lead. We need rural leaders, and we need to build them from the ground up.*

**Robin Johnson:** *It's going to be bottom up. It isn't going to be a Washington based solution. There's a lot of money wasted on consultants and think tanks with their ideas. It has to start locally, and I think people are slowly beginning to realize that, and it's going to take time. But I do think it'll happen.*

## INCREASE INFORMATION FLOWS

Heartland residents need to have the information they need to make their own decisions—trusted and shared information sources and localized institutions. Local news can provide community with the means to support one another and to stay abreast of local politics. Regional and national news does not cover the granular local issues that can help communities seize their fortunes.

**Fiona Hill:** *The nationalization in the US of news that has occurred, it isn't quite the same in the UK and Germany. In the north of England, The Northern Echo, which is one of the oldest local newspapers, is still going really strong and is able to have a lot of local content, alongside national and international content. It's trusted. There's lots of local chronicles, and similar local newspapers. So figuring this out in the United States is pretty critical.*

In the US the disappearance of local newspapers in heartland communities have left them without a collective voice. Civic institutions, such as local news and unions, can also serve as filters for misinformation by providing local communities with a shared source of information.

**Chelsea Gaylord:** *One lesson from our conversations with union members in Michigan is of the importance of connection that's both physical and social, and you can't replace the human-to-human connection. It's required where they are in establishing the trust; they have to be on the ground. The importance of those face-to-face interactions is how communities build coalitions, build power, and build relationships that are stronger than a single person.*

**Robert Leonard:** *The more that we work to build good local journalism, the better off we will be and the better off democracy will be.*

## RECONNECT

**Fiona Hill:** It's about people wanting to be seen, and in having connections and contact.

Investing in communications and transportation infrastructure. Building or rebuilding democratic institutions for decision-making. National leaders making tangible and demonstrable investments in transforming communities and creating new jobs. All serve to reestablish the connections that bind both economy and society together.

As does the continued broader transatlantic discussion detailed in this report: bringing people and perspectives together across countries and continents, affording access to resources and connectivity to the larger economy.

**Fiona Hill:** *In Erie there is this Jefferson Educational Society which creates a Chautauqua-like environment—sponsoring town hall series for people of Erie and elsewhere in Pennsylvania, run by local people and bringing people in from all over the country and the world to talk to people, to focus on local issues, but bringing in the national and international perspective. This kind of activity enables you to tap into people in their place and give them a sense that they can do things as well.*

## ACT WHERE YOU ARE

Finally, the discussion encouraged all actors, at whatever level, to not wait or worry so much about how to get our “leaders” to take the right action, but to take action themselves, directly, with whatever means or tools one has:

**Rachel Wolf:** I think anyone who is in these [regions] or has an ability to affect them should consider themselves to be part of them and take whatever actions they can.

**Robin Johnson:** It's about starting at the bottom using local media to get your message out. In doing old fashioned door knocking. Believe it or not, that's the key.



# ENGAGING HEARTLAND RESIDENTS: REBUILDING PRIDE, OWNERSHIP, AND A BRIGHTER FUTURE

## ABOUT THE TRANSFORMING INDUSTRIAL REGIONS INITIATIVE

The Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative is a network of policy practitioners, academics, and political leaders focused on the economic revival of industrial regions in North America and Europe. The initiative is a partnership of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Georgetown University's BMW Center for German and European Studies, the Michigan Economic Center, Policy@Manchester at the University of Manchester, the Ruhr-Konferenz, the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Chicago, and the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission.

To learn more about the initiative and to participate in the network and its convenings, newsletters, and updates on coming events, visit the initiative [website](#) hosted at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, or contact John Austin directly at [jcaustin@umich.edu](mailto:jcaustin@umich.edu). You may also reach out to any of the project partners directly using the [contact information here](#).

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**Chelsea Gaylord** is a second year Master in Public Policy candidate at the University of Michigan with a focus on community and economic development policy and comparative international models. Prior to working with the Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative, she served as Senior Economic Development Specialist for the City of Colorado Springs where she led COVID-19 response and recovery, equitable redevelopment, and community investment initiatives. She has also worked with various stage startups across the U.S. and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Uganda (2015-2017) where she founded a nation-wide program to support young Ugandan entrepreneurs.

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