

The Spark

Rekindling Freeport's Legacy of Innovation

The Midwest's manufacturing economy was built around a culture of innovation and adaptation—but much of that risk taking, bootstrapping culture is a thing of the past while the world continues to evolve at a blazing pace.

The City of Freeport, Illinois is working to rekindle its legacy of innovation. Through the *Freeport Riverfront Enterprise Initiative* the City is lighting this flame in the historical heart of the City in an icon of its industrial past—the historic Rawleigh Complex.

This paper shines a light on an opportunity to create a supportive culture for idea generation, and help seed new economic growth in the Freeport region.

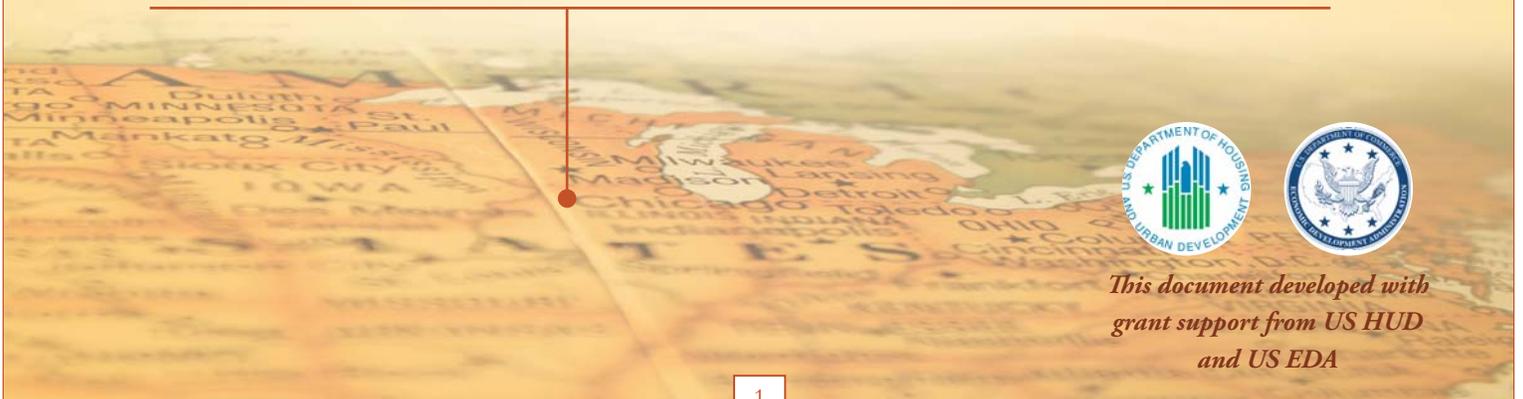


The Challenge:

Freeport is a prime example of a “Caught in the Middle” Midwest community:¹

- Population in the City is slowly and steadily declining, down 3% between 2000 – 2010.²
- Manufacturing jobs have been declining, year after year. Over 3,300 jobs have been lost in Stephenson County in the last fifteen years—a major hit for a community where nearly one-third of workers are employed in manufacturing to this day.³
- With a manufacturing base of mostly second- and third-tier suppliers, the companies that are here are highly dependent on decisions made by OEMs elsewhere in the region, the country, or on the other side of the world.

The very recent loss of 144 high-skilled manufacturing jobs at the Freeport Sensata plant brought Freeport into the national spotlight, drawing attention to these systemic problems. However, Freeport does not face these challenges alone—it mirrors small- and mid-sized communities all across the Midwest.



Economic Building Blocks

The Assets that Freeport was built around are still the key for future economic growth. Through the power of these assets:

- **Freeport is a good place to call home** with quality schools, affordable housing, and committed citizens restoring vibrancy to the heart of the City
- **Freeport-based companies** like Tri-Star Metals, HB Plastics, and Hooker Harness are innovating technologies and processes
- **The historic Blackhawk passenger rail connection** between Freeport and Chicago will soon be restored—connecting Freeport with the Midwest’s global city
- **Freeport’s legacy of “making things”** has produced a base of talent who can build things and solve mechanical, operational, and process challenges



Why Nurture Innovation?

With the continued loss of living-wage, high-skill manufacturing jobs and patterns of an aging and shrinking population, it's clear that Freeport has to change its economic path to create opportunities for future generations. As the Freeport area's pool of top research and development talent has shrunk, there are fewer visible examples of private sector innovation. The area has lost much of the entrepreneurial spirit upon which it was founded.



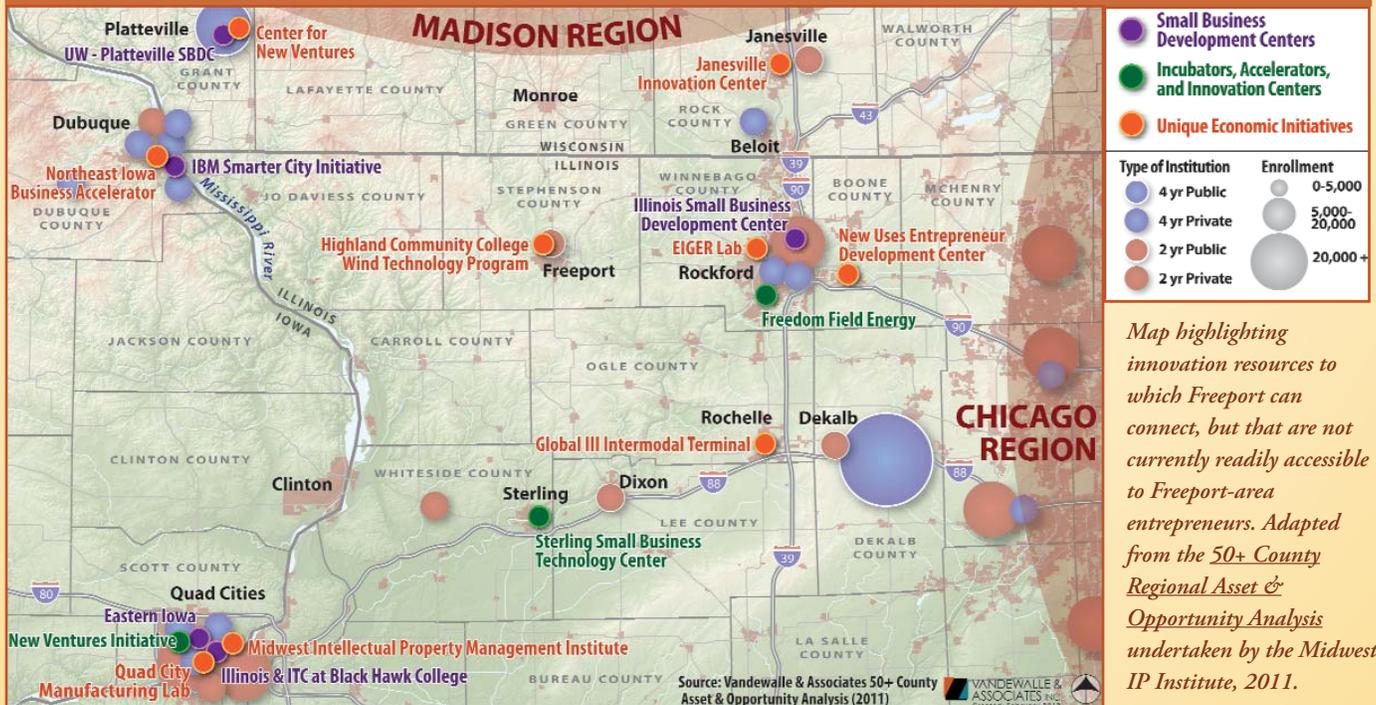
Where do New Ideas Grow?

As a small community, Freeport's economic challenges are **compounded** by its relative isolation and limited resources for supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. When someone has a new idea for a business or a technology—where do they go? Several organizations provide support, including the Northwest Illinois Development Alliance (NIDA), the Chamber of Commerce, the City's Community Development Department, and the Freeport Downtown Development Foundation. However, none of these groups have adequate resources to provide the kind of sustained support and mentorship entrepreneurs need.

In addition to a lack of ongoing business planning and development support, Freeport also lacks a network of people and a physical space for “tinkerers” to test out new ideas. Without these pieces in place, there's little choice but for innovators to gravitate to other parts of the region with more resources.

Yet Freeport's economic development leaders are eager to grow the support structure for entrepreneurs. With several organizations willing to partner with them and abundant affordable space available, they can chart a new course for supporting innovation and growing businesses.

Regional Innovation Infrastructure



A New Approach

Supporting entrepreneurship in today's economic context

calls for a new approach. Freeport needs:

- **a place for people to share new ideas** and spark creativity
- **to renew its creative culture, entrepreneurial energy, and shape a mindset**
that Freeport is a place to try new things, and to fail and keep trying as a critical part of the innovation process
- **a vibrant City and downtown riverfront** where young talent wants to live and stimulates community pride in this historic community
- **support** to help transform ideas into businesses



***What if** Freeport had a visible place for people to go to work and collaborate on new products and projects, explore creative interests, and test ideas?*

An Economic Replacement Strategy



A reuse study for the Rawleigh Complex was commissioned by the City in 2004, identifying opportunities for economic replacement of the jobs lost when Rawleigh closed its doors, as well as identifying uses to bring new activity and residents to the riverfront. The strategy included a food business incubator and public market, a restaurant/brew-pub, arts and cultural uses including arts live-work, and flexible space for start-up businesses. The City is advancing several of these opportunities and is also aggressively working to establish a multi-modal station for the passenger rail service that will connect Freeport with Chicago and Dubuque. Until now, the City and its partners have not yet further defined the entrepreneurship / business start-up space. This paper investigates that opportunity and identifies next steps.

Opportunity: The Spark

Collaborative Space

“The Spark” is envisioned as a collaborative space for:

- **Tinkering** – testing, inventing, and improving technologies
- **Co-working** – providing a shared work space to bring people out of their basements or home offices to work around other creative people through a monthly membership
- **Collaboration** – to get help from others to grow, share, and test ideas
- **Creation and Inspiration** – welcoming creative projects along the spectrum from artistic to commercial
- **Empowerment and Inclusion** – including support for low-income and minority entrepreneurs as well as youth
- **Support** – connecting entrepreneurs with needed resources including business mentors and venture capital



Intriguing Place

The space offered at Rawleigh is well suited for The Spark, offering:

- **Historic industrial architecture** where ideas were launched and products were made
- **Wide open spaces** with unique architectural features that require a low level of finish
- **A mixed-use reuse plan** for the Complex including a coffee shop and brewpub as well as walkability to many other downtown restaurants where conversations can continue over a beer or a coffee.
- **Walkability to downtown** restaurants, retail, and upper-floor housing



Examples



The Mill, Minneapolis, MN

www.mnmill.org

- Arts / maker space
- Encourages technical, scientific, and artistic skills through projects, collaboration, and education
- Celebrates “do it yourself” culture
- Programming: Classes, workshops, coaching



Sector 67, Madison, WI

www.sector67.org

- Community space / Hackerspace / Makerspace / Collaboration Environment
- Industrial arts equipment
- 6,600 square feet and expanding
- Office space, phone, wireless, mailing address, whiteboards
- Wide quantity and variety of equipment



Milwaukee Makerspace, Milwaukee WI

<http://milwaukeeemakerspace.org/>

- Milwaukee’s Hacker Space and Fabrication Lab
- “A hacker/builder community where ideas are shared, innovation is fostered and the maker experience is hands-on.”
- People, equipment and space that supports the creative process
- People working on electronics, robots, wood working, embedded software, metal working, music, art, video, photography, electric cars and more

Testing the Concept

Next Steps

The next step is to test the concept for The Spark locally, especially with local entrepreneurs and community leaders. This will help with the tasks to follow:

- **identifying a potential champion** of the idea who can take it to the next level.
- **developing an operations model** and space design,
- **identifying start-up and operating costs**
- **recruiting local and regional partners** to support planning and start-up [Can call out IPI and other regional partners here if we want]

Start Small and Build on Success

While the concept for The Spark is a big idea for a small community, it does not need a grand start-up to make an impact. To be manageable, the “bootstrapped” space should start small and build its base of users and partners over time.

To really succeed, The Spark will need a champion—an entrepreneur or small business person who needs the space to grow his/her own ideas and who can inspire others to do the same.



Advancing a New Idea to Adapt to a New Economy

There are countless reasons not to advance a new idea like The Spark. Over time, the culture of communities across the Midwest, like Freeport, has become more averse to risk and less adaptable to change.

But without significant changes in its economic strategy, places like Freeport risk further economic isolation. The Spark could be one of these changes that could lead to:

- **Retaining and attracting talent** seeking out this type of a collaboration space and support in the region
- **Building a supportive culture** of innovation and risk-taking
- **Creating a buzz** bringing renewed energy to downtown
- **Creating a reminder of the heritage of innovation** that Freeport was built around, providing inspiration for building its future
- **Changing the image of Freeport** as a community with a vision for its future
- **Starting up new businesses** over the longer-term

¹ Longworth, Richard. *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism*. Bloomsbury USA: New York, 2009.

² U.S. Decennial Census, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

³ Illinois Department of Employment Security, <http://www.ideas.illinois.gov/>