

2026-2031 STRATEGIC PLAN

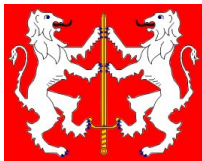
CARROLL COUNTY, IL



Table of Contents



Who We Are	Page 3
County Overview	Page 4
Why a Strategic Plan	Page 5
Plan at a Glance	Page 6
Strategic Goals	Page 7
SWOT Analysis	Page 12
Implementation Strategy	Page 13
Addendum - Future Priorities	Page 14



Prepared for the residents, businesses, and communities of Carroll County, IL
by the Carroll County Board and the Planning and Development Committee
Adopted: 01/15/2026

Who We Are



Our Mission

To provide essential public services in Carroll County driven by fiscal stewardship and civic safety that enhance the quality of life for all residents and support efforts to create jobs and economic opportunities while preserving the unique characteristics of our rural community.

Our Vision

Rooted in our rural heritage and agricultural strength, we uphold the values of friendliness, morality, resourcefulness, and prudent oversight. We believe in preserving the character of our community while promoting integrity, accountability, and growth within all county operations.

Our Values

Integrity: We are honest, ethical and we honor our commitments.

Innovation: We seek creative thinking, problem solving and expansion of services to the residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

Accountability: We take responsibility for our actions, and are transparent in the use of funds and delivery of services.

Community: We believe in collaboration, communication, and partnerships in all aspects of county operations.

County Overview

Carroll County, Illinois, is a small rural county in northwestern Illinois along the Mississippi River, bordered by Jo Daviess, Stephenson, Ogle, and Whiteside Counties, and by Clinton and Jackson Counties in Iowa. The county seat is Mount Carroll. Established in 1839 and named after Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the county spans about 466 square miles, with key features including Mississippi Palisades State Park, the Savanna Industrial Park (former Army Depot), and part of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Home to roughly 15,400 residents, Carroll County's population has remained stable but skews older, with a median age of about 45 and a population density of 35 people per square mile. Median household income is around \$60,800, with a poverty rate near 13.6% and median property values around \$113,500 ([based on 2023 estimates from census.gov/quickfacts/carrollcountyl](#)). The area's historic courthouse in Mount Carroll and scenic Mississippi River setting highlights the county's blend of heritage and natural beauty.

Carroll County is defined by its strong sense of community, where friendliness, mutual support, and close social ties shape daily life. Residents value the county's natural beauty—its rivers, parks, hills, and lakes—which provide both scenic appeal and recreational opportunities. Above all, a shared appreciation for small-town charm, rural character, and a peaceful, relaxed living environment unites the community's identity. Carroll County offers a safe, affordable, and family-oriented lifestyle, which helps create a welcoming and desirable place to live.

Carroll County's history traces back to the Sauk and Meskwaki tribes, who first inhabited the region along the Mississippi River. In the early 1800s, settlers arrived, attracted by fertile farmland, the river, and nearby lead mining. Established in 1839 from Jo Daviess County, Carroll County chose Mount Carroll as its seat in 1843, honoring Charles Carroll of Carrollton in its name.

Through the mid-1800s, Mount Carroll grew as an educational and civic center—home to the Mount Carroll Seminary (later Shimer College)—while Savanna thrived as a river and rail hub. Agriculture flourished in the late 19th century, and tourism developed along the Mississippi bluffs. The 20th century brought military and industrial growth with the establishment of the Savanna Army Depot in 1917, a key employer until its closure in the 1990s. In recent decades, redevelopment of the former depot, revitalization of historic downtowns, and continued investment in infrastructure have shaped a resilient local economy rooted in agriculture, tourism, small business, and conservation. Today, Carroll County blends its rich heritage, natural beauty, and small-town character into a vibrant rural community.

Why a Strategic Plan?

Blueprint that Charts the Course

The Strategic Plan's five-year timeline allows for thoughtful sequencing of initiatives. The alignment with the county's annual budget process creates a stronger connection between finances and operations. With the Strategic Plan as a guide, other county plans and initiatives will be built to align. In addition to priorities, goals and objectives, this plan includes performance measures for government transparency, accountability, and ongoing improvement.

Results for the Community

We know our community has high standards and aspirations for Carroll County. We enjoy a high quality of life here, and want to remain an excellent place to raise a family and retire. The county's Strategic Plan lays a foundation for progress, defines a shared vision for the future, and focuses county resources on set of strategic priorities. These priorities, and their supporting goals and objectives, came from considerable community input and feedback. These goals drive us toward meaningful outcomes and measurable steps forward on the road to reaching our collective long-term vision.



Plan at a Glance



Strategic Goals

Economic Development

Our Goal... Foster a resilient economic environment by promoting the retention and reinvestment of existing businesses, attracting new industries, expanding employment opportunities, leveraging tax incentives, promoting tourism and ag-tourism, and strengthening public-private and non-profit partnerships.

Objectives

1. Create an economic plan that expands access to information on available economic incentive zones throughout the county.
2. Enhance and align workforce development strategies with projected local industry needs.
3. Collaborate and partner with Northwest Illinois Economic Development (NWILED), Blackhawk Hills Regional Council, and related entities, to support new and existing business growth and strengthen and diversify the county's economy.
4. Promote the region's high quality of life to attract and retain new-age workforce, including remote workers, through marketing and network building.
5. Elevate the visibility of Carroll County as an attractive tourism destination by promoting innovative programs and partnerships aimed at enhancing the visitor economy.

Diversify Revenue Sources

Our Goal... Strengthen fiscal stability by actively pursuing grants, expanding traditional tax base through property, sales, and excise/special taxes, and implementing fair user fees, service charges, licenses, and permit fees to ensure sustainable revenue for essential services and future growth.

Objectives

1. Implement a revenue strategies plan (e.g., specific taxes or fees related to new industries, tourism promotion) that align with and encourage local economic growth, thereby broadening the tax base and creating new jobs.
2. Create a more reliable and steady income stream by blending a mix of stable (e.g., property taxes) and high-growth revenue sources (e.g., sales taxes, user fees, certain local income taxes).
3. Retain a grant writing professional to gain specialized expertise and ensure strategic high-level proposals to develop a diversified long-term grant funding strategy and obtain increased funding approvals.
4. Generate \$200,000 of new non-traditional revenue each year.

Strategic Goals Cont.

Land Use Planning and Ordinance Updates

Our Goal... Create a land use plan to guide growth to specific areas, protecting natural resources and agricultural land and ensuring adequate public services and infrastructure and conduct a comprehensive review of ordinances and implementing a multi-year internal overhaul and development plan, ensuring all regulations are clear, updated, and accessible through searchable online codification services.

Objectives

1. Develop a comprehensive land use plan to forecast future population and development needs and allocate growth to specific sub-areas within the county in 2027.
2. Focus to conserve and preserve natural assets like open spaces and water resources, reduce population exposure, and maintain the “rural character” of the county.
3. Promote healthy attractive neighborhoods and communities, provide a diverse range of housing, business, and redevelopment options, and enhance recreational opportunities like trails and parks.
4. Perform an internal review of all county ordinances in 2026.
5. Complete the County Ordinances codification process and host on new website in 2027.

Youth Engagement and Retention

Our Goal... Strengthen youth engagement and retention by promoting the expansion of new employment, training, and opportunity pathways, while promoting the development of affordable, community-style housing that supports young residents in building their futures locally.

Objectives

1. Engage employers to promote career exploration and work-based learning opportunities for youth and young adults. Promote designing relevant and valuable experiences for young participants including career fairs and expos.
2. Support program development that helps youth understand local community issues and their role in addressing them and create opportunities for youth to contribute to decisions that affect their community, such as youth advisory boards or community projects.
3. Expose young people to public service careers to encourage them to consider government and community service as future paths.
4. Work with the county stakeholder community to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Strategic Goals Cont.

Public Safety and Emergency Services

Our Goal... Preserve and enhance safety and security for community members through programs that elevate education and prevention, law enforcement, emergency services, and health services while promoting an accessible and equitable justice system.

Objectives

1. In partnership with the public safety agencies operating within the county, work to reduce crime and enhance the safety of residents and visitors in the community by supporting strong public safety policies, funding, and initiatives.
2. Promote emergency preparedness, all hazards planning, and community engagement to make the population more resilient in the face of all hazards, natural and otherwise.
3. Identify and invest in health programs that address substance abuse, mental health, suicide prevention, and trauma.
4. Enhance comprehensive training to ensure a well-prepared and effective response to community needs.
5. Perform annual assessment to determine appropriate human and technology resources needed to maintain critical IT infrastructure that supports public safety, citizens engagement, and emergency management programs in the county.
6. Operate with integrity, accountability, and professionalism in all aspects of service delivery.

Highway Infrastructure and Maintenance

Our Goal... Strengthen transportation infrastructure by implementing a smart road assessment and asset management plan, pursuing new revenue sources to help address funding shortfalls, and exploring project bundling strategies to reduce costs and improve contract efficiency.

Objectives

1. Develop a Comprehensive 5-year Highway Transportation Plan in 2026.
2. Ensure state of good repair for county roadways and bridges.
3. Invest in existing infrastructure, explore innovations, and enhance usage of data, and deploy emerging technologies for ongoing operations and maintenance.
4. Increase funding opportunities of federal and state grants for road and bridge projects.
5. Reduce crashes by maintaining clear pavement markings, fixing edge-drops, and clearing obstructions from roadways. Improve intersection safety by ensuring adequate sight distance and proper signage.
6. Provide staff training on grant compliance, incorporate best practices, and safety procedures.

Strategic Goals Cont.

Technology Modernization and Security

Our Goal... Modernize digital infrastructure by upgrading the county website, promoting the deployment of digital tools that improve efficiency, expand public-facing services, and increase transparency. The county will also implement a case management system for the State's Attorney's Office and proactively assess cybersecurity risks, applying best-practice safeguards to ensure secure and reliable operations.

Objectives

1. Create a secure, resilient, and efficient infrastructure that supports both internal government functions and the delivery of services to residents.
2. Upgrade and modernize county website in 2026 to improve public-facing services and public engagement, and to optimize internal operations through automation and better data management.
3. Manage cybersecurity risks, protect against cyberattacks, and develop employees' knowledge and skills to collectively safeguard county's IT infrastructure to protect data and ensure service delivery.
4. Implement a case management system for the State's Attorney Office.
5. Develop an IT needs assessment to create policies and procedures for acquiring, managing and adopting new technologies to ensure consistency and best practices.
6. Determine long-term solution of in-house, outsourced, or hybrid model for county's IT infrastructure.

Capital Improvement Plan

Our Goal... Establish and maintain a comprehensive five-year capital improvement budgeting plan that identifies and prioritizes capital expenses across all county departments, ensuring long-term fiscal responsibility and strategic investment in public infrastructure and services.

Objectives

1. Create a 5-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) that aligns with the strategic plan, ensuring the timely and economical maintenance or replacement of infrastructure, coordinating with the annual budget, and providing transparency and public engagement in 2026.
2. Identify funding sources and financing options for all proposed projects.
3. Implement the capital budgeting module in to create a roadmap for long-term resource planning and impact of capital projects on the operating budget.

Strategic Goals Cont.

Courthouse and Inmate Housing

Our Goal... Advance courthouse and related facility upgrades by ensuring ADA compliance, improving space planning and storage solutions, and pursuing jail modernization to meet current and future public safety and judicial needs.

Objectives

1. Develop a Comprehensive Space Planning Needs Assessment Plan in 2026.
2. Identify funding sources and financing options for Courthouse and related County building improvements.
3. Determine the feasibility to pursue the jail modernization initiative and associated funding options.

Public Transit

Our Goal... Improve public transportation by actively marketing and promoting available services, expanding fundraising opportunities, and continuing to elevate and advocate for a system that operates with excellence to meet community needs.

Objectives

1. Perform a transit program analysis to evaluate cost-benefit and life cycle cost of the program in 2026.
2. Expand access to essential destinations such as jobs, healthcare and education.
3. Seek sustainable, non-traditional long-term funding to ensure service continuity.
4. Increase transit fundraising by 5% annually.
5. Collaborate with regional transit entities on a reimagined, more accessible public transit system.

S

Strengths

- Natural assets & recreation. Mississippi River frontage, Mississippi Palisades State Park, bluffs, and scenic byways that draw outdoor tourism and regional visitors.
- Strategic location & transportation. Access to river, rail, and highway networks within the broader Northwest Illinois region, supporting ag, logistics, and tourism.
- Agriculture & agribusiness base. High-quality soils and established farm operations with supporting fertilizer, grain, and ag-service businesses.
- Small-town rural character & quality of life. Tight-knit communities, low congestion, low crime relative to urban areas.
- Growing broadband footprint. Continued expansion of broadband, enabling remote work and entrepreneurship where available.

W

Weaknesses

- Small, aging, and slowly declining population. ~15.6k with median age ~45—significantly older than Illinois and U.S. averages, limiting labor force and school enrollment.
- Limited economic diversification and job opportunities. Heavy reliance on agriculture and a relatively small industrial/commercial base compared to larger counties in the state and Upper Mississippi corridor.
- Constrained local tax base. Small population spread over 445+ square miles means fewer taxpayers to support roads, facilities, and services.
- Service gaps & perceptions of remoteness. Limited public transit, and longer travel times to major hospitals, higher education, and large retail centers.
- Housing & infrastructure age. Older housing and infrastructure typical of historic rural counties, often needing modernization and reinvestment.

O

Opportunities

- Outdoor recreation & tourism growth. Capitalize on Palisades, river access, trails, camping, and scenic drives; align with regional tourism marketing. Support for riverfront revitalizations.
- Remote work & business attraction. Market “work from here” lifestyle: scenic rural setting plus improving broadband can attract remote professionals and small digital businesses.
- Value-added agriculture & local foods. Niche crops, farm-to-table, agritourism, on-farm events, and processing that build on the existing ag base.
- New Industry and Economic Development. County is well positioned to grow in logistics, renewable energy, river-based industry, advanced agriculture, value-added manufacturing, tourism, and remote-worker-driven entrepreneurship
- Grants & regional partnerships. Federal and state funding for broadband, transportation, and resilience projects; collaboration with NWLED, Blackhawk Hills, tourism bureaus, and neighboring counties.

T

Threats

- Continued population decline & young residents leaving for education and jobs elsewhere; risk of shrinking workforce and tax base over time.
- Volatile farm economy & commodity prices. Heavy dependence on agriculture exposes the tax base and local jobs to swings in farm income and input costs.
- Local Competition. Nearby metro and micropolitan areas can out-compete Carroll County for retail, industry, and talent if incentives and amenities lag.
- Infrastructure age & stress. Aging roads, bridges, and other assets combined with heavier rain events, flooding, and erosion are cause for concern.
- Funding & Revenue. County faces increasing pressure on its long-term financial stability due to several emerging and persistent revenue challenges.
- Information Technology Security. County treats Information Technology Security as a core operational responsibility essential to protecting public data, maintaining continuity of government services, and meeting state and federal compliance standards.

Implementation Strategy

The 2026 – 2031 Carroll County Strategic Plan is designed as a dynamic document that encompasses the foundational operating blueprint for the County, as well as the expectations of its constituents and the Carroll County Board. The plan will be updated annually, allowing the County to be more agile and responsive based on the changing environment and realigning strategic priorities. Upon the plan's approval by the County Board, the County leadership will:

- Communicate the plan to employees and constituents
- Develop annual departmental and operational strategies and performance metrics so they are aligned with the Strategic Plan
- Deploy resources to most effectively meet the plan's identified goals and objectives
- Execute the strategies and objectives identified in this plan
- Conduct semi-annual performance reviews to measure progress and results against the plan's stated goals and objectives
- Provide semi-annual results to the Carroll County Board



Addendum: Future Priorities

The following areas have been identified as critical issues that will shape future updates of the Strategic Plan. These priorities require ongoing study, collaboration, and investment to ensure the county remains vibrant, resilient, and prepared for long-term success.

Declining Population

- Strategies to stabilize and grow the population through new resident attraction, and quality-of-life improvements.

Housing Shortage and Affordability

- Addressing housing gaps with affordable, workforce, and senior-friendly options while encouraging sustainable development.

Dilapidated Properties

- Redevelopment, rehabilitation, or removal of unsafe and blighted structures to enhance community safety and aesthetics.

Health Care & Human Services

- Expanding access to local healthcare, mental health resources, and supportive services to meet community needs.

Intergovernmental Collaborations

- Strengthening partnerships among municipalities, the county, and regional organizations to align priorities and leverage resources.

Workforce Development

- Building pathways for training, employment, and skill advancement in alignment with local business and industry needs.

Municipal Revitalization

- Supporting downtown renewal, infrastructure upgrades, and economic development in local communities to foster vitality and growth.