

Construction is in progress for the new *Simply Nourished* MC store in the former Rieman Music building in Downtown Mason City

# NIACOG NEWS

VOLUME 32 ISSUE 2

MARCH-APRIL 2021

## RLF Loan Awarded



REVOLVING  
LOAN FUND

NIACOG awarded a \$109,920 RLF loan to Foxtrot Foods LLC in January. The funding will go toward opening a new Organic, Specialty, and Local Food Market called *Simply Nourished* in Downtown Mason City, which is modeled after the current *Simply Nourished* store in Clear Lake. The store will sell local and organic produce, meats, and cheeses, as well as On-Tap Olive Oil and Vinegar.

"We are excited to partner with Melissa to promote small business creation and increase access to healthy food options in the region," said Lauren Dietz, Economic Recovery Planner at NIACOG.

The loan funds come from NIACOG's legacy RLF program, which was established more than 10 years ago to enhance access to capital for businesses in the NIACOG region.

For a limited time, loans of \$10,000 to \$125,000 are available at low-to-no interest, with up to 24 months of deferred payments. Restrictions apply. Inquiries may be directed to Amber Andersen at [aandersen@niacog.org](mailto:aandersen@niacog.org).

*Simply*  
nourished

wellness within reach

## CALENDAR

### March

- **3rd** – RLF Loan Review Committee  
11:30am @ NIACOG
- **4th** – Transportation Advisory Group  
9:00am @ NIACOG
- **8th** – Executive Committee  
5:45pm via Zoom  
NIACOG Board  
7:00pm via Zoom
- **18th** – TAP Committee  
10:30am @ NIACOG
- **19th** – City Clerk's Association  
9:30am @ NIACOG

### April

- **1st** – Technical Committee  
10:00am @ NIACOG
- **7th** – RLF Loan Review Committee  
11:30am @ NIACOG
- **8th** – NIACOG Executive Committee  
12:00pm @ NIACOG
- **14th** – HAZMAT  
1:00pm @ NIACOG  
Transportation Policy Board  
2:30pm @ NIACOG



## Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) News

Congratulations to Cerro Gordo County on behalf of YSS Francis Lauer for the recent CDBG Community Facilities and Services Award of \$600,000 to assist on completing a major renovation project to further increase and enhance the service offerings of the agency to area families.

YSS Francis Lauer is currently in a five-phase renovation—totalling more than 10,400 square feet of renovated space. Two of the five phases have been started or completed. The \$2.3 million cost for these phases was paid for by YSS Francis Lauer, which was awarded funding for the following:

1. Constructing a new Crisis Intake Center, by renovating 3,945 square feet to create five (5) semi-private and one (1) completely private intake spaces; installing a reception desk for incoming program participants; and creating a large group room for programming and community space. This space will be transformed from a dilapidated gym to a best in class crisis intake center. The Center will provide direct access to every wing of the building and provide a comfortable area for youth and families to wait for their appointments while ensuring their privacy.
2. Updating the 2,220 square feet of the Outpatient Behavioral Health Clinic to include more office space and add additional providers of play therapy, parent child interaction therapy, mental health counseling, and medication management. Soundproofing insulation will also be added to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and additional meeting spaces will be created for community partners.

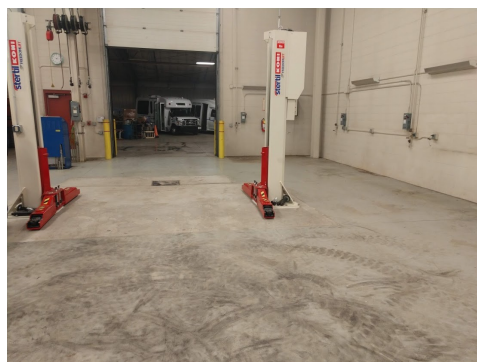
This financial award is a critical piece of funding to complete the project.

## Region 2 Report

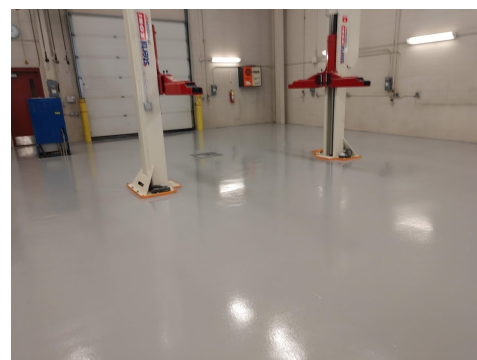
The two-post hoist project is near completion. One of the last remaining steps was to reseal the floor in the shop with an epoxy coating.

The existing coating was removed and a new coating was installed by Marsh Painting and Floor Coatings of Grafton, Iowa.

The project is a joint project with Mason City Transit, and was funded by a grant from the Iowa Department of Transportation's Bureau of Public Transit.



Before



After

## AARP Community Challenge Grant

The AARP Community Challenge grant program helps communities become great places to live for residents of all ages. The program is intended to help communities make immediate improvements and jump-start long-term progress in support of residents of all ages.

Applications are due April 14. More information can be found at [AARP.org](http://AARP.org).

## NIACOG STAFF

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## COVID-19 Funding Impact Update

*(From Stu Anderson, IDOT—edited for clarity)*

Reduced fuel tax revenue due to reduced passenger vehicle travel remains the only negative impact on state RUTF revenue. This has been partially offset by sustained and increased freight traffic as well as sustained and, in some cases, increased revenue from new and annual vehicle registration. Increases in vehicle sales and higher vehicle prices have provided unexpected increases in new registration fee revenue—which is the five percent fee paid when a vehicle is purchased.

### December/January/February Allocation of RUTF

In IDOT's last update, we forecasted that the RUTF allocations for December and January would be stable but a little lower than the August allocation. The actual allocations for December and January were significantly better than forecasted and exceeded the August allocation by about 10 to 15 percent. Some of that was due to revenue coming in better than expected and some of that was due to fuel tax deposit timing. With the February allocation, you will see a significantly lower amount—which is most likely due to fuel tax deposit timing. The February allocation will be down about 25 percent from the January allocation.

### March/April/May/June Allocations of RUTF - Forecast

IDOT continues to expect relatively stable monthly allocations of RUTF but likely at levels more like the allocation received in February. However, we may continue to see fluctuations from month-to-month due to timing of RUTF deposits.

### Overall Estimated COVID-19 Impacts on RUTF

At this time, IDOT continues to report our estimate of COVID-19 impacts on RUTF from June 2020 through June 2021 as being a \$50 million reduction in RUTF from our forecast. We begin with June 2020

as a starting point for tracking COVID-19 impacts due to a lag in timing from revenue collection to allocation.

However, based on current trends, the impact may be closer to a \$25 million reduction in RUTF due to COVID-19.

## Welcome, Amber Andersen!



NIACOG is pleased to welcome Amber Andersen to their staff. As a new Community Development Planner. Her work is focused in the areas of NIACOG's Revolving Loan Fund and housing programs.

Amber was born and raised in Mason City. She graduated from Mason City High School, North Iowa Area Community College, Iowa State University, and Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science.

Before coming to NIACOG, Amber worked for US Bank in Mason City, and with clients of Cerro Gordo County Relief.

She enjoys spending time with her family and friends. She also loves traveling—especially to the beach!

Amber lives in Mason City with her husband Matt (who is employed with Pepsi in Mason City), their two daughters Olivia and Paislee, and two dogs Girk and Sprinkles.

Please join us in welcoming Amber to the community of Iowa COGs!

## USDA Rural Development Funding Opportunities



### Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program

**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
USDA Rural Development provides funding to construct, enlarge, or improve essential community facilities which includes qualified equipment.

**Application Deadline: Ongoing**

### Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) Program

**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
USDA Rural Development offers funding to help agricultural producers and small rural businesses develop new products from raw agricultural products or to promote new markets for established products. **Electronic Application Deadline: March 16, 2021 | Paper Application Deadline: March 22, 2021**

### Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Grant

**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
USDA Rural Development offers grants to rural communities with limited staff and resources to build the capacity needed to access USDA funding to support essential community facilities. Funds may be used to help rural communities identify financial resources, improve the management of community facilities, and prepare reports, surveys and applications.

**Electronic Application Deadline: March 22, 2021 on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov)**  
**Paper Application Deadline: March 29, 2021**

## Transportation Happenings

The **Regional Planning Affiliation 2 (RPA 2)**, which is made up of the same counties as NIACOG, is accepting applications for STBG/SWAP and TAP funds for the Federal Fiscal Years 2022-2025. STBG/SWAP and TAP funds are federal funds offered through the Federal transportation program, **Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act)**.

**STBG/SWAP funds** are federal or state swapped funds used for typical road and bridge projects. The funds can also be used for planning and transit projects, but those funds remain STBG. SWAP projects have less stringent requirements than STBG, however they are still handled in a very similar manner in RPA 2. If you think your City may have a project eligible for this funding, please contact your county engineer or Chris at the NIACOG office for more information.

**Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) Funds** include the former **Enhancement, Safe Routes to School (SRTS)** and **Scenic Byway Programs**. These programs have not been eliminated, but will now compete with each other at the Regional level. **If you have an SRTS question, feel free to contact Chris to further discuss potential projects.** As **Enhancements** have been the more commonly funded programs, I will explain further. Under the TAP funding, projects in the following categories are what were most commonly funded in RPA 2:

- **Construction, planning, and design of on-road and off-road trail facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized forms of transportation**, including sidewalks, bicycle infrastructure, pedestrian and bicycle signals, traffic calming techniques, lighting and other safety-related infrastructure, and transportation projects to achieve compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.
- **Construction, planning, and design of infrastructure-related projects and systems** that will provide safe routes for non-drivers, including children, older adults, and individuals with disabilities to access daily needs.
- **Conversion and use of abandoned railroad corridors** for trails for pedestrians, bicyclists, or other non-motorized transportation users.
- **Construction of turnouts, overlooks, and viewing areas.**
- **Inventory, control, or removal of outdoor advertising.**
- **Historic preservation and rehabilitation of historic transportation facilities.**

To see if a potential project may be eligible in the additional categories please contact Chris in the NIACOG office. The eligibility list is exclusive in that a project **MUST** fall into at least one of the categories, and **MUST** be transportation related. Projects must be sponsored by a local government entity, which will make a twenty-year commitment to maintain the project and provide, at least, the necessary 20% minimum local match for the project in addition to all engineering or architect costs. Projects must be constructed to federal specification. Approval of the project from RPA 2 is conditional upon approval from the Iowa Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration. In addition to the above, specific criteria to help determine application funding recommendations has also been developed and will be available with the applications when they are available. These criteria are important, but are not the only factors in determining funding recommendations.

RPA 2 TAP applications are due in the NIACOG office by Friday, March 5, 2021. Questions about a potential project should also be addressed to Chris at 641-423-0491 Ext. 15 or by e-mail at [cdiggins@niacog.org](mailto:cdiggins@niacog.org).

## IEDA Rural Funding Opportunities



GOVERNOR'S  
**EMPOWER RURAL IOWA**  
INITIATIVE

In February, Governor Reynolds and the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) announced two competitive funding opportunities for communities with a population under 20,000.

The Rural Innovation Grant Program provides up to \$300,000 in small grants supporting “creative, non-traditional ideas that focus on current issues and challenges faced by rural communities associated with the themes of community investment, growth, and connection.”

The Rural Housing Assessment Grant Program provides up to \$100,000 in small grants to “support the use of publicly available online information through the Profile of Iowa tool and rural community efforts to interpret [the] data... as well as to implement changes to development codes, local ordinances, and housing incentives” specific to community needs in partnership with ISU Extension and Outreach.

For additional information, visit the [IEDA Empower Rural Iowa](https://www.iowaeda.com) website, or contact Liesl Seabert at [rural@iowaeda.com](mailto:rural@iowaeda.com).



## Housing Updates

### 2020 CDBG HOUSING PROGRAM AWARDS IN THE NIACOG REGION



Beginning in Program Year 2020, the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) expanded the eligible housing activities in Iowa's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.

The eligible housing activities now include:

- Owner-occupied housing rehabilitation – exterior home improvements
- Owner-occupied housing rehabilitation – energy efficiency improvements
- Owner-occupied housing rehabilitation – architectural barrier removal
- Homebuyer assistance
- Upper story housing conversion

All of the above activities must primarily benefit low and moderate income individuals.

For the 3 owner-occupied rehabilitation activities shown above, the maximum award amount is \$24,999 per home plus lead hazard reduction & technical services.

The Homebuyer Assistance program provides down payment and closing cost assistance to low and moderate income homebuyers. The maximum award amount is \$24,999 per unit plus lead hazard reduction & technical services.

The Upper Story Housing Conversion program provides assistance for the conversion of existing downtown building space into new residential units. The maximum award under this program is \$500,000. In 2020, Osage was awarded an upper story housing grant, and the 4-apartment development project is now under construction.

In 2020, four cities in the NIACOG region were awarded CDBG grants under the Owner-Occupied Exterior Home Improvements Program, which assists low and moderate income households in improving the outside envelope of their homes. These were the Cities of Corwith, Forest City, Garner, and Hampton.

NIACOG staff is providing assistance to all four cities in administering their programs. Eligible work activities under the Exterior Home Improvement Program include: gutters and downspouts; roof decks, roof coverings, and roof ventilation systems; fascia and soffits; windows, exterior doors, and exterior siding; foundation repair; and replacement of outside stairways. Also included in the program are the reduction of lead-based paint hazards (interior and exterior), and the installation of radon mitigation systems. NIACOG congratulates these four cities in their efforts to make a portion of their housing stock more, safe, sound, and affordable under the CDBG Exterior Home Improvement Program.

## CONTRACTORS NEEDED FOR HOUSING PROJECTS!



Over the past twenty years, NIACOG has been the conduit for repairing roughly 400 CDBG housing projects in addition to 350 Housing Trust Fund homes.

The success of our housing rehabilitation programs are dependent upon being able to hire qualified and experienced contractors. We have been fortunate to work with many talented local contractors over the years; however, with the large growth in the number of houses that we are repairing each year, we are in considerable need of more contractors to continue to improve the housing stock in north Iowa communities.

Our program offers some pretty significant benefits to contractors including a large supply of work, reliable payment, and a predefined scope of work. We are asking for your help to spread the word.

If you know of any contractors, please reach out to them and put in a good word for us so that we can continue to improve housing in your community.

Please contact Heidi Nielsen at [hnielsen@niacog.org](mailto:hnielsen@niacog.org), or 641-423-0491 ext. 16 with leads or for more information.

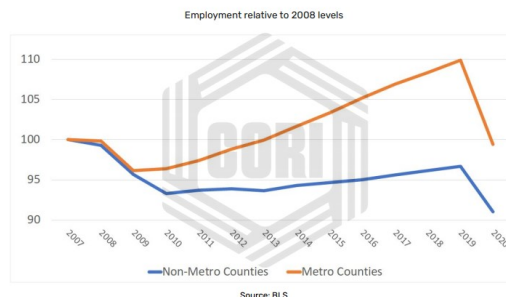
## CARES Act Grant Update: Digital Economy Ecosystem

The coalition of organizations working with the Center on Rural Innovation is nearing completion of its strategic planning activities to foster a Digital Economy Ecosystem in the North Iowa region, and are beginning the process of grant writing to make the plan a reality. The North Iowa Corridor, NIACC Pappajohn Center, the City of Mason City and NIACOG have been hard at work for the past two months developing strategies to broaden the local tech economy through remote work, adult and child skills education, a local advisory committee, and a future coworking space that will provide technical and space resources to a diverse array of businesses and entrepreneurs.

The purpose of this project is to help close the gap between rural and urban job growth by fostering the creation of scalable entrepreneurial ventures.

The next phase of the project is applying for state, federal, and private grants and seed funding to make this plan a reality for North Iowa. The team is hard at work preparing a Build to Scale (B2S) grant application through the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

### Rural vs. Metro area job growth 2008-2015



## Shop Iowa

NIACOG staff recently attended Region XII's online informational session on Shop Iowa—which is “a statewide online marketplace selling products from hundreds of Iowa’s small businesses to customers throughout the United States. Shop Iowa is a free resource for Iowa’s small businesses to start or expand their sales online.” The service is provided by IEDA. Visit [Shopiowa.com](https://shopiowa.com) for more information.



## What is coworking?

Coworking is a type of flexible workspace where employees and entrepreneurs share office and technology infrastructure. It's more than just renting office space. The space can be programmed and re-programmed to meet current and future needs such as shared open office space, rented or shared private offices, and meeting rooms. Costs are shared across users through membership fees—making budgeting easier on startups by locking in costs for office space and technology. There is also the option for further location flexibility through potential satellite locations in smaller communities or remote desktop login to access resources.

Coworking spaces can provide additional tangible and intangible resources to small businesses and entrepreneurs, including (but certainly not limited to):

- Flexible hours of availability and secure access,
- Access to a “project shop” where professional developers offer affordable software and app development services,
- Shared costs for expensive software licenses, office furniture, and office technology like computers and printers,
- Stable monthly expenses for office space and technology,
- Access to tech skills education,
- Online space and resource booking, and
- A sense of place and space for socializing, comradery, and collaborating with other businesses/entrepreneurs.

Successful examples abound, include: [Gravitate Coworking](#) (Des Moines & Jefferson), [100State](#) (Madison, WI), [Codefi](#) (Cape Girardeau, MO), and [20Fathoms](#) (Traverse City, MI)

## FEMA'S BRIC & Building Codes

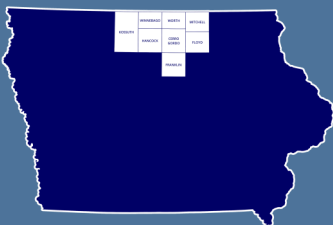


BRIC is FEMA's new mitigation grant program, replacing the pre-disaster mitigation (PDM) grant program. BRIC stands for "Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities". Under BRIC, funds are allowed to be used for building code activities. Local governments are "subapplicants," meaning they need to apply to Iowa Homeland Security for funds. In order to be eligible, local governments need to have participated in their County's non-expired Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Below is a list of potential building code adoption and enforcement activities funded under BRIC:

- **Evaluate** which code adoption and enforcement activities are best suited for the jurisdiction. Evaluation activities include staff time or external labor consultants necessary for evaluations and expenses for code review committees. BRIC may also allow a community the option to decide to enter a Memorandum of Agreement or Intergovernmental Agreement with an adjacent jurisdiction or third-party provider to permit and enforce appropriate building codes.
- **Adopt** building codes or develop building code requirements, including publication of those requirements, related to land use, zoning, floodplain management, infrastructure, urban-wildland defensible space (e.g., building, stormwater management regulations), or other area, that help make the community more resilient.
- **Improve** or modify current or existing building code requirements to reflect the latest code edition, exceed the latest code edition, or develop or modify building code-coordinated requirements, including publication of those requirements, related to land use, zoning, floodplain management, infrastructure, urban-wildland defensible space (e.g., stormwater management regulations), or other area, that help make the community more resilient.
- **Enhance** existing adopted codes and enforcement to incorporate more current requirements, higher standards, electronic permitting, online model code access, virtual inspection technology, and remote building codes administration.
- **Provide** or pursue training, including individual certification courses (inspector, plans reviewer, certified floodplain manager, etc.) and training for both the public and private sectors.
- **Develop** planning, training, and exercises for post-disaster building code enforcement through the International Code Council's When Disaster Strike's Institute training course.
- **Develop** activities related to improving code enforcement (evaluate processes, implement an inspection program, improve Building Code Effectiveness Grading Schedule [BCEGS] score, improve Community Rating System [CRS] rating, etc.).
- **Develop** or acquire software and hardware, and associated training, to assist with plan reviews, permitting, inspections, and records retention.
- **Purchase** publications, or obtain digital license or printing permissions of publications, to support building code activities.
- **Engage** consulting services to support activities related to building codes.
- **Cover** costs associated with building department accreditation.
- **Conduct** public awareness outreach activities (related to new requirements).

If you have questions on hazard mitigation planning, please contact Matt O'Brien [mobrien@niacog.org](mailto:mobrien@niacog.org).



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