



# County Policy Playbook for an Equitable Economic Recovery

Data-Informed Decision Making



# About the National Association of Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) strengthens America's counties, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- Advocate county priorities in federal policymaking
- Promote exemplary county policies and practices
- Nurture leadership skills and expand knowledge networks
- Optimize county and taxpayer resources and cost savings, and
- Enrich the public understanding of county government.

## NACo's Vision

Healthy, safe and vibrant counties across America.

## Acknowledgments

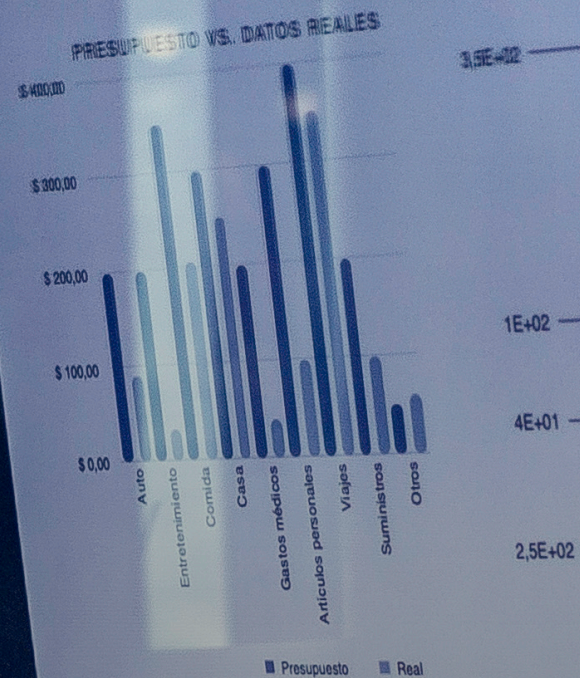
This report is a product of NACo's Equitable Economic Recovery Project. NACo's Equitable Economic Recovery Project is generously funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained above are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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PRESUPUESTO V

**Equidad económica:** Todas las acciones políticas económicas y se evalúan tomando cuenta lo que las personas consideran como lo e incorrecto.

**Eficiencia económica:** La eficiencia económica es el estado en el un sistema económico logra y utiliza recursos escasos de una manera más productiva.



# Harnessing the Data Science Lifecycle to Inform Decisions

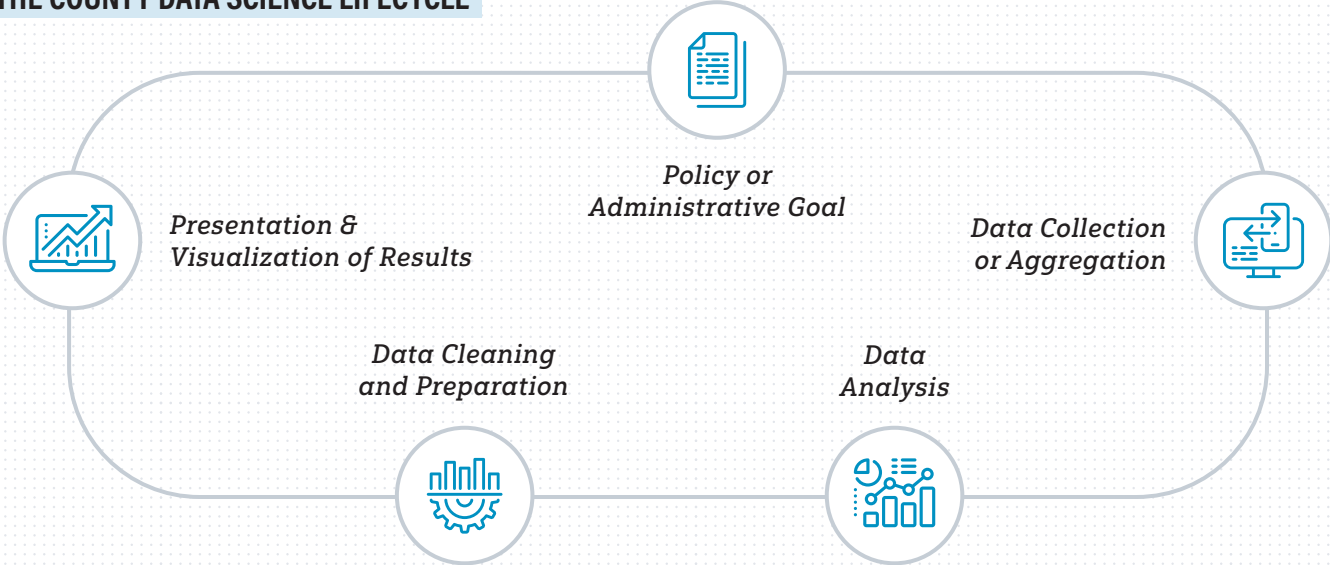
Data is critical to making, executing and studying the impacts of public policy decisions, county investments and program or service administration. From internal performance indicator tracking to external dashboards that increase transparency and community engagement, county governments have endless opportunities to leverage data, including in economic recovery.

In most cases, counties follow a data science lifecycle to transform data into insights for decision making. This cycle begins with the identification of the goal and then proceeds with data collection and aggregation. Data collection can involve multiple approaches, such as administering new surveys, conducting interviews or direct observation. Data collection can also include identifying existing data sets relevant to the policy goal, such as census data or participant data collected through existing programs. After the data is properly prepared to ensure accuracy and reliability, the county will then analyze it with particular focus on disaggregating the data that may reveal disparities by

key indicators, such as seasonality, neighborhoods, point of service or demographics. To support accountability and transparency, the county then presents the data to decision makers and the public. Presentation may include written reports, online data dashboards and public hearings.

County leaders are engaging in thoughtful conversations that take into account data literacy of staff and community members, individual privacy rights and the balance between quantitative results and leadership experience. To support the use of data, some county governments have invested in their own internal capacity by hiring analytic teams to aggregate, investigate and display county information in real time. To better understand and track progress toward pandemic recovery, counties have developed and tested new data systems for targeting response and recovery investments and programs. County leaders can use new findings to adjust public policy or generate new questions to address.

## THE COUNTY DATA SCIENCE LIFECYCLE



# Identifying Available Data

Counties collect vast amounts of data that is often underutilized. This is often the result of different departments collecting related data for different purposes, but not structuring their databases in a way that allows for easy mapping between associated fields (often called “crosswalking”). The lack of compatibility or accessibility of cross-agency data is common in county systems where one department houses data used for economic development, while another houses data used for other programming, such as infrastructure. Not only does this cause difficulty when attempting to analyze specific questions, but it can also be a hindrance to community engagement in the case of service delivery. An example of this is residents needing to provide similar paperwork to access programs for food assistance and housing, despite both programs being county administered. These bureaucratic barriers can disincentivize and disengage vulnerable residents who would most benefit from these programs from accessing or participating in the first place. Reduced engagement from these segments of the population also potentially biases the data that is collected, resulting in increased difficulty when determining the efficacy of a program or service.

To overcome this challenge, some counties have implemented single-point, unified application systems that streamline the intake process. These systems collect data once and share the information across all relevant systems. This approach is most useful for programs with extensive eligibility requirements like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), housing rental assistance, workforce development and job skills training. These unified systems are more user friendly for residents and help the county to better track data.

In addition to data sources available through service programs or public data sets, counties may collect data from other county activities. For example, many larger and more urban counties have installed community Wi-Fi hubs. The usage data from these hubs can help identify unconnected or under-connected areas of the community where, for example, there are high usage levels at irregular times of the day (e.g., Monday–Friday at 5 pm) indicating students may be relying on the public Wi-Fi to complete homework. Counties can use this data to make investments in broadband in those specific pockets of the community. Additionally, county vehicles can be outfitted with data sensors to help measure the degradation of road and bridge infrastructure. Finally, internal county data, like tickets from 311 public-sector customer service request systems and 911 emergency services systems, can help the county better align and position staffing resources to better respond to community needs.

## **Existing County Data Sources Could Include**



*Program and service administration*



*Applications for licensing and permitting*



*Geographic information systems (GIS) for assessment or land use planning*



*Public infrastructure and “smart county” technology*



*Community support platforms like 911 and 311 dispatch and ticketing information*

# Promoting Equity Through Data and Analytics

Data analysis can uncover longstanding inequities, help maximize impact across all communities and increase trust with residents and other stakeholders; but, the analytics produced are only as good as the data used as an input. Data, like people, can have biases. These biases can include a tendency towards the status quo, misalignment or misinterpretation of the data in comparison to the research question, underrepresentation within the sample compared to the population, and too many outliers that skew the results, among others.

One of the main pitfalls of inequitable data collection is the possibility of underrepresentation. When data collection methods or sources are biased, it often leads to the exclusion of certain populations or communities. This underrepresentation leaves out vital perspectives and needs of marginalized groups, resulting in decisions that overlook their experiences and perpetuate inequalities. One common example of inherent underrepresentation in data is the absence of disaggregation, which can lead to the invisibility of specific subpopulations within larger groups.

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*Data, like people, can have biases...*

*When leveraged appropriately,  
data can be essential to driving equity.*

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Another pitfall is the potential for biased interpretation of collected data. Even if data is collected from a diverse range of sources, it can still be interpreted through biased lenses based on stereotypes or prejudiced perceptions. Without sufficient context or understanding of the specific challenges faced by different demographic groups, decisionmakers may misinterpret the data, leading to policies or actions that exacerbate inequities. This can reinforce existing power imbalances and systemic discrimination, further marginalizing underrepresented groups.

When leveraged appropriately, data can be essential to driving equity. For instance, data can be used to assess the effectiveness and of policy initiatives and interventions. By collecting data on the impact of specific policies, programs or practices, county officials can determine whether efforts are achieving the desired outcomes.

Data can be a powerful tool in driving equity decisions when used in a responsible and thoughtful manner. By utilizing data analysis, decision-makers can identify disparities, evaluate the impact of interventions and promote transparency and accountability. However, data must always be used in conjunction with other sources of information and within the larger context of promoting social justice and equal opportunities for all.

# Benchmarking to Inform Decisions and Track Recovery

Data can be a powerful tool for county governments to track progress toward recovery goals. Progress tracking can include forming a set of performance indicators (or “Key Performance Indicators”) to analyze changes longitudinally, establishing target performance goals, comparing performance to baseline (pre-pandemic, in most cases), or other relative analyses.

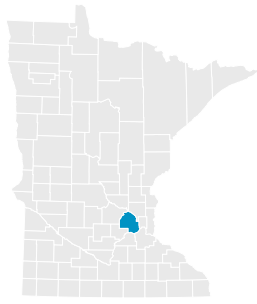
To support data use and transparency, some counties are developing data dashboards that organize data visually through graphs, counts or tables. Internal to county policymakers and staff, dashboards have been used to visualize data on public sector recruitment and retention metrics, public safety and public works project mapping and county service utilization clustering. External to a public audience, counties are using these tools to provide transparency in pandemic funding investments and general county expenditures, code enforcement tracking and public health tracking – as was common during the pandemic to measure community spread and COVID-19 cases.

Continuous data collection and data review enables counties to track progress on key performance indicators over time. Analysis of changes in indicators helps leadership to realign resources, identify inefficiencies in programs or better shape future investments into communities where resources have the most impact. Benchmarking over time also allows counties to identify successes and share powerful stories on the services counties are providing to revitalize and recover from the pandemic.

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## **Questions to consider when collecting and analyzing data to measure and inform decision making for an equitable economic recovery:**

- *Is the community accurately represented within the sample?*
  - *Are there any biases built into the research question or sample dataset that could impact the final analytics?*
  - *How was the data collected and how can we correct for missing or incomplete data?*
  - *What statistical methods will be used to analyze the data and how could they potentially inject bias into the results?*
  - *What other variables need to be considered in the analysis?*
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# Hennepin County, Minn.

## 2022 POPULATION:

Approx. 1.2 Million

## Using Data to Benchmark Progress on Recovery Efforts and Clearly Communicate Milestones

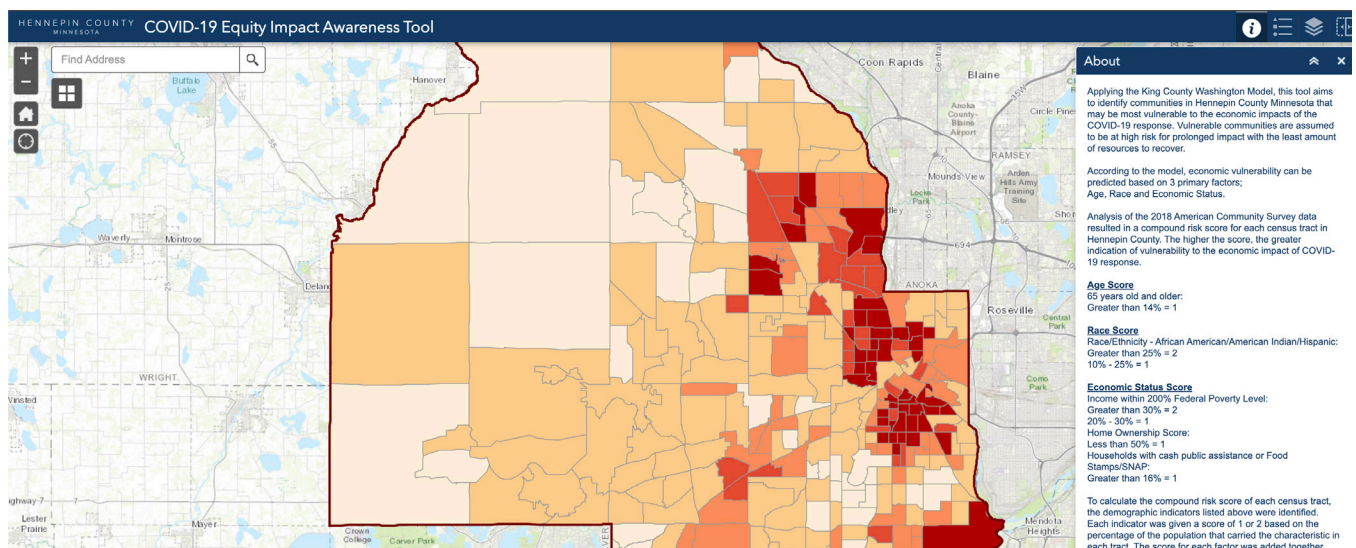
As the center of political unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer during the pandemic, Hennepin County is focused on embedding equity into all decisions, investments, systems and county policies, including in economic recovery efforts.

Hennepin County engaged a consultant to build on existing county data sources to better understand pandemic impacts and the communities within the county that may be most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the county's response. Through this effort, the county worked to curate key metrics that measure economic recovery progress in terms of growth, prosperity, inclusion and economic resilience.

Collecting data on these indicators helped to track localized impacts of relief funding investments.

The county convened focus groups of local entrepreneurs and business community stakeholders to guide the development of effective, targeted programming to support economic growth and recovery. Discussion themes provided the county with a clear vision of the outputs and outcomes resulting from prior investments, realistic community-level performance targets and overall success at closing the racial wealth gap in business ownership. The county also leveraged existing data and mapping capabilities to structure data tracking systems to have longevity without significant resource burden.

## HENNEPIN COUNTY COVID-19 EQUITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT TOOL



Source: Hennepin County GIS Office, available at <https://hennepin.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=78472553869a4862972c4e04aaed37e5>.



From these conversations, the county was able to develop a plan to use the metrics to track business ownership and focus on marginalized communities that have been left behind in the economic recovery. In addition to extensive outreach to gather direct experience from business owners and community stakeholders, Hennepin County's recovery plan was based on a thorough review of data available from multiple sources. According to the Hennepin County Pandemic Response Progress Report in April 2023, the number of open businesses declined by about 22 percent during 2020.

For each investment project, the county was able to develop performance indicators that help decision makers identify strategies to reduce disparities based on the intended goal of the program (e.g., service delivery or outcomes). The creation of a system for long-term metric tracking will allow the county to not

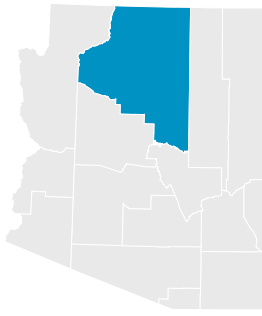
only benchmark progress moving forward but also compare Hennepin County outcomes with neighboring counties and peers across the country.

For example, one project used long-term metric tracking of residents' food insecurity. Using these metrics, the county revealed several hotspots where county leaders have made strategic investments to close the gap in food access and security. Helping residents become food secure is a critical component to providing better economic outcomes.

At completion, the final Pandemic Response Report will provide an avenue for residents to connect with and see county progress on economic recovery. By having this transparency available in real time, Hennepin County leaders will build trust within the community, which is important for effectively facilitating an equitable recovery and for responding to future incidents.







# Coconino County, Ariz.

## 2022 POPULATION:

Approx. 144,000

## Embracing Data in Rural America Through the Equitable Economic Recovery Dashboard

Located in the northern desert of Arizona, Coconino County has the second largest geographic area in the country. Though Coconino County is home to more than 145,000 residents, the majority live within the county seat of Flagstaff. Most of the sprawling county consists of dispersed pockets of rural communities. Not only does the county contend with a remote and unforgiving landscape, but it also contains a significant share of tribal and federal lands.

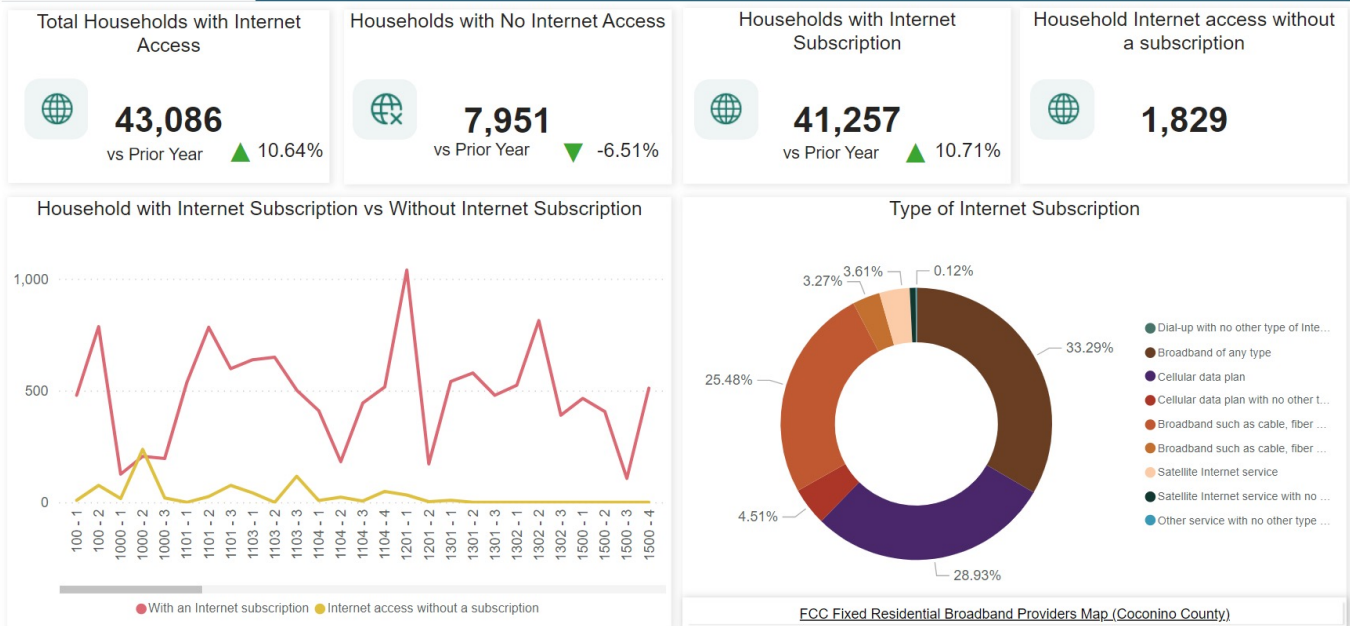
Due to these physical attributes, economic recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic requires significant intergovernmental coordination and relationship building. The county has strengthened these relationships through public data sharing and progress tracking. In 2022, Coconino County developed the Equitable Economic Recovery Dashboard, which provides community members and leaders with information on the economic conditions in the county.

Using national data from the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and other publicly available sources, Coconino County created a system to house and display county-specific data, including census tract level information where available. During the work of NACo's Equitable Economic Recovery

Cohort, Coconino County worked with experts at Brookings Metro to design a data guidebook to support county staff to embed the formulas and methodology within the county system, which has enabled tracking over time.

Similar to counties across the country, Coconino County faced the challenge of limited availability of sub-county and granularity of data for metric tracking. Many national or state data sets aggregate data by county, but counties need data by sub-county neighborhoods or census tracts to understand differing levels of needs, service delivery and outcomes across communities. Coconino County's dashboard tracks metrics down to the census tract level, ensuring decision makers and community members can see fluctuations and progress across the different areas of the county.

Similarly, counties need to be able to determine reach and impact of services on particular community groups. If data is in broad demographic characteristics, it is difficult for the county to confirm that there is equitable program access and outcomes, especially in terms of race, age, gender and income. With the help of Brookings Metro, Coconino County was able to identify administrative data sets that facilitated a high degree of specificity for location and community characteristics.



Coconino County’s dashboard includes a set of 10 metrics that measure levels of poverty, income, housing affordability, new business applications and business revenues. Another indicator critical to Coconino County is broadband access, which the pandemic demonstrated is an essential utility for residents needing to access jobs, health care, services and education. With the inclusion of easy-to-interpret icons, the dashboard makes it clear which direction the metric is trending so users can compare across years.

Overall, this data provides a roadmap for where county leaders can invest pandemic relief funding. Coconino County uses the data to determine the extent to which the recovery is equitable and to identify where and what investments need to be made to support the community. The data displayed through this project will also be used to inform and track progress on the Coconino County five-year economic development and recovery plan, which provides a framework for how the county can advance prosperity for residents over the long term.



# About NACo's Equitable Economic Recovery Project

In July of 2021, NACo's Economic Mobility Leadership Network (EMLN), with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched a small sub-cohort within the EMLN to focus on developing equitable economic recovery initiatives that ensure short- and long-term recovery and sustainability. Participating counties received customized technical assistance and seed funding to build internal planning capacity and execute elements of their customized plans. This project is based on NACo's research on counties' needs and challenges as they work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. This report was informed by NACo's nationwide county member survey, 15 one-on-one interviews and two virtual focus groups with nine participating counties each.

NACo would like to thank the counties and staff for their commitment to the project and ongoing work to foster stronger counties and a stronger America.

## Recovery Cohort Project County Leads

### Coconino County, Ariz.

**Hon. Lena Fowler**

County Supervisor

**Chris Pasterz**

Economic Development Manager  
(former)

### Multnomah County, Ore.

**Hon. Lori Stegman**

County Commissioner

**Layan Ammouri**

Director of Planning and Policy

### Palm Beach County, Fla.

**Hon. Mack Bernard**

County Commissioner

**Sherry Howard**

Deputy Director, Department  
of Housing & Economic  
Sustainability

### Erie County, Pa.

**Hon. Brenton Davis**

County Executive

**Douglas Smith**

Director of Administration

### City and County of Honolulu, Hawaii

**Amy Asselbaye**

Executive Director, Office of  
Economic Revitalization

**Florencio C. Baguio Jr.**

Assistant Director, Department  
of Human Resources

### El Paso County, Texas

**Hon. David Stout**

County Commissioner

**Michael Hernandez**

Economic Development Director  
(former)

### Hennepin County, Minn.

**Hon. Marion Greene**

County Commissioner

**Patricia Fitzgerald**

Director, Economic Development

### Kittitas County, Wash.

**Hon. Brett Wachsmith**




County Commissioner



*Scan here for more on  
county strategies for  
equitable investments.*



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