OWEN COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Tax Abatement Policy Reform

Reese Brimm, Kaleb Ford, Louis Gallegos, and Katie Haubold

Table of Contents

I. Introduction
II. Executive Summary
III. Research
IV. Recommendations
V. Action Plan
VI. Tax Abatement Policy Highlights
VII. Conclusion
VIII. References

I. Introduction

About Owen County

Owen County is a rural area in Indiana with about 21,850 residents. Nearly 98% of people here identify as white, and the median age is 45, which is higher than the state average. This shows that bringing in and keeping younger residents is important. Manufacturing provides almost half of all jobs, and about one in four workers commute to jobs outside the county. Owen County faces some real challenges, including limited economic diversity, trouble keeping workers, and strong competition from nearby communities for new business investment.

Team Introduction

This project was completed by Katie Haubold, Kaleb Ford, Louis Gallegos, and Reese, four students at Indiana University Bloomington's Contemporary Issues in Public Affairs V450 course. Our studies in community engagement and public policy have given us practical skills to create tools that work in real situations, not just in theory.

The Project

Our client, Marcee, who is President of the Owen County Chamber of Commerce, asked us to improve the county's tax abatement process. Right now, abatements are not used much because many business owners find the process complicated and intimidating. We were asked to design a new policy that is clear, easy to follow, and includes a clawback clause to protect public funds. The materials we created are meant to help businesses, county officials, and economic development partners work together more effectively.

II. Executive Summary

Project Statement

This project presents a new, improved tax abatement package for Owen County. The plan is clear, enforceable, and aims to attract new businesses while supporting those already here, all without risking public funds.

Methodology

- Reviewed the Owen County Comprehensive Plan (2022) and Economic Development Strategy (2020)
- Analyzed demographic and workforce data to identify root economic challenges
- Studied Putnam County, Indiana, as a comparable case study for abatement best practices
- Drafted a revised policy with a clawback clause and a tiered repayment system
- Developed supporting application, scoring rubric, and user guide materials

Research Results

Owen County's economy relies mostly on manufacturing, but it has trouble keeping workers and attracting younger residents or a wider range of employers. One in four workers leaves the county each day for jobs elsewhere, which shows there are not enough local opportunities. These ongoing problems, along with a tax abatement process that is not used enough, keep the county from growing economically.

Recommendations

- Adopt a revised tax abatement policy with a clawback clause and a tiered compliance system.
- Deploy a standardized, easy-to-complete application form with a scoring rubric.
- Publish a plain-language user guide for business owners.
- Engage the Owen County EDC and Chamber as co-administrators of the program.

III. Research

Demographic & Economic Overview

The data below comes from the Owen County Comprehensive Plan (2022) and Economic Development Strategy (2020). It emphasizes the county's main economic trends and the challenges our recommendations aim to solve.

Statistic	Value	Implication
Race	97.4% white	Limited diversity; potential barrier to attracting new residents & workers
Median Age	45	Older population; a pressing need to attract and retain younger workforce
Workforce in Manufacturing	47.5%	Heavy reliance on one sector poses a risk to overall economic stability
Commuting Outside County	25%	Insufficient local job opportunities; underutilized skill base
Board Gender Composition	63.6% male	Decision-making may skew toward male-dominated industries

The data shows a clear pattern: Owen County's economy is concentrated, its population is aging, and many workers are leaving for nearby areas. These trends emphasize the need for business-friendly policies that attract investment and help keep both money and workers in the community.

History & Policy Context

Owen County's Economic Development Strategy (2020) named small business growth and attracting workers as its main goals. The 2010 plan mostly addressed infrastructure and employer sites, but issues with tourism, housing, and business recruitment continued. The Ready Communities Report (2019) also found that roads, utilities, and a lack of public recreation areas were still major obstacles to growth. Local stakeholders often said the county needs more varied economic attractions to bring in both businesses and workers.

Case Study: Putnam County, Greencastle, IN

We chose Putnam County as our main case study because its demographics and economy are similar to Owen County. Both are rural areas with manufacturing-based economies that are trying to diversify and grow. Some lessons from Putnam County's experience are:

- Projects included a solar farm development and a Buzzi manufacturing expansion.
- Strong county council and Economic Development Commission (EDC) participation was critical to success.
- Clear stakeholder communication and structured development plans drove outcomes.
- Clawback clauses and project-specific abatements protected the county's fiscal position.

IV. Recommendations

Overview

Our approach is to revitalize Owen County's tax abatement policy by adopting the most effective practices from neighboring Putnam County. The reformed policy is built around three ideas: clear and simple eligibility criteria aligned with community priorities; a clawback clause to ensure businesses deliver on their commitments; and user-friendly materials that remove the intimidation factor from the process.

This approach will make Owen County more attractive to prospective businesses while ensuring that public revenue is protected, and community investment yields measurable returns.

Deliverables

#	Deliverable	Description
01	**Clawback Clause**	A clawback clause with a tiered repayment system based on how well a business meets certain performance goals.
02	**Easy-to-Understand User Manual**	A plain-language guide explains who is eligible, how to apply, what the benefits are, and what business owners need to do to stay in compliance.
03	**Scoring Rubric**	A standardized rubric allows county officials to assess all tax abatement applications fairly and transparently.

Expected Benefits

- Business owners will face less confusion and fewer obstacles when navigating the tax abatement process.
- County officials will have clear and enforceable standards to help them evaluate and monitor abatement agreements.
- More businesses are likely to take part in Owen County's economic development programs.
- Accountability will be stronger because clawback provisions are in place to protect public revenue.

V. Action Plan

Overview

Implementation turns recommendations into real outcomes. The plan below lays out a straightforward six-week timeline, starting with a policy draft and ending with an official presentation. We have included a client review halfway through to make sure the final product meets Owen County's needs.

Implementation Steps

Step	Task	Responsible	Timeline
1	Finalize tax abatement policy draft	Team	Week 8
2	Develop application form & scoring rubric	Team	Week 9
3	Prepare user guide & template materials	Team	Week 10
4	Meet with Marcee for review	Team	Week 11
5	Implement feedback & finalize documents	Team	Week 12

Partners

- Owen County Chamber of Commerce is the primary client and leads the program.
- Owen County Economic Development Commission (EDC) serves as co-administrator and provides oversight for the program.

Goals & Objectives

- Adopt the updated abatement policy and user guide by the end of the project.
- Bring 3 to 5 new businesses to Owen County within three years after implementation.
- Improve workforce retention and create a more economically diverse community.

Troubleshooting

Two main challenges may come up during implementation. First, expectations between businesses and the county might not match. This can be addressed by using clear, simple communication and setting clear performance benchmarks in every abatement agreement. Second, participation may be low at first as businesses learn about the new process. Targeted outreach through the Chamber, local media, and direct business engagement can help encourage adoption.

Cost

No direct cost to Owen County is anticipated for the development and delivery of these materials. All work is completed by the project team as part of the V450 course requirements.

VII. Conclusion

Owen County is well positioned for real economic growth. It has a skilled manufacturing workforce, dedicated community leaders, and businesses ready to respond to the right incentives. However, the county has lacked a tax abatement process that is easy to use, trustworthy, and effective.

The updated policy and materials from this project offer a clear and practical way forward. We learned from Putnam County's experience and tailored every recommendation to Owen County's unique needs. This package is meant to work in real situations, helping county officials and business owners make decisions that matter.

We know that staying in touch, involving stakeholders, and being open to change are key for long-term success. We believe the tools provided here give Owen County a solid base to build on.

VIII. References

Owen County Commissioners. (2022). Owen County Comprehensive Plan 2022. Spencer, IN: Owen County Government.

Owen County Economic Development. (2020). Owen County Economic Development Strategy 2020. Spencer, IN: Owen County Economic Development Corporation.

Indiana University. (2019). Ready Communities Report: Owen County. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

Putnam County Economic Development Commission. (2023). Annual Tax Abatement Report. Greencastle, IN.