

THE MCPHERSON GROUP

The Fourth Turning & The Resilient Community

*A strategic guide for County Leaders, Chamber Executives,
and Local Economic Development Professionals*

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

— Margaret Mead

In every major American crisis, the institutions that held society together were not the federal agencies or the national corporations. They were the local ones: the county government that knew its people, the Chamber of Commerce that knew its employers, the community college that knew its workforce, the civic association that had been meeting every Tuesday for thirty years. These institutions are unglamorous. They rarely make national news. And in a Fourth Turning, they become the most important organizations in the country.

This paper is written for the leaders of those institutions: county commissioners and managers, Chamber executives and board members, economic development directors, community college presidents, and the civic leaders who sit at the intersection of business, government, and community. It makes a specific argument: that the Fourth Turning represents not only a threat to local institutions but an extraordinary opportunity for them — if their leaders act now, before the urgency makes action obvious.

The local leader who builds connective tissue, maps real assets, invests in workforce pipelines, and maintains institutional trust through a turbulent period will not merely survive the Crisis. In the reconstruction that follows every Fourth Turning, the leaders who shaped the response shape the next era. That is what is available to you.

The Pattern and What It Means for Local Institutions

Strauss and Howe’s Fourth Turning framework identifies a recurring eighty-year cycle in American history, moving through four phases: the High (strong institutions, collective confidence), the Awakening (cultural rebellion, challenge to norms), the Unraveling (institutional erosion, individualism ascendant), and the Crisis (institutional failure and reconstruction). We are in the Crisis phase of the current cycle — the Millennial saeculum that began after World War II.

The evidence is visible in three catalyzing events. The 2008 financial crisis revealed that the institutions Americans had been told to trust were operating on captured or false assumptions — and the resulting bailouts destroyed the social contract between large institutions and ordinary people. COVID-19 exposed every fault line in American institutional life simultaneously: supply chains, public health systems, schools, and long-term care all failed in ways that were foreseeable and preventable. The fracturing geopolitical order — Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s challenge to American naval dominance, the straining of post-WWII alliances — signals that the international architecture the last Crisis built is under its most sustained pressure since its construction.

For local institutions, the Crisis dynamic has a specific and important shape. National institutions lose legitimacy during Fourth Turnings — trust in Congress, federal agencies, national media, and large corporations has been declining for two decades and continues to fall. Local institutions, by contrast, have the opportunity to gain legitimacy rapidly by doing what national institutions

cannot: showing up, knowing their people, and delivering on their commitments. In an era of institutional distrust, the county government or Chamber of Commerce that is visibly competent and reliably honest is building one of the scarcest assets in America.

The Local Advantage in a Fourth Turning

Gallup's annual institutional confidence survey consistently shows that local government, small business, and community institutions retain significantly higher public trust than their national counterparts. In a Crisis period, this trust differential becomes a strategic asset. The local institution that acts decisively and honestly in the next five years will emerge with an authority that no national program can grant it.

Five Practices for the Resilient Community Institution

What follows draws on the historical record of local institutional response during the last Fourth Turning — the Depression and World War II — as well as contemporary examples of communities that have built genuine resilience infrastructure. The common thread is not resources. Communities that navigated the last Crisis best were not the wealthiest. They were the most connected, the most self-aware about their actual assets, and the most deliberate about building the infrastructure of mutual obligation before the emergency required it.

1. Become the Connective Tissue

The most powerful thing a local institution can do in a Fourth Turning is also the cheapest: convene. The Chamber or county government that brings together the organizations in its community that have never been in the same room — and should be — is performing a function that no other institution can replicate and that the Crisis will eventually demand anyway.

During the Depression and wartime mobilization, the communities that responded fastest were those with existing cross-sector relationships. The county that knew its employers, its school system, its social service providers, and its infrastructure operators as a networked system — rather than as isolated silos — could coordinate without the delay of building relationships under pressure. The communities that had to build those relationships during the crisis paid a significant lag cost.

Convening is not the same as meeting. The goal is not another committee. The goal is to create genuine working relationships between organizations whose interests align but whose paths rarely cross: the community college workforce development office and the three largest employers in the county; the public health department and the faith community; the economic development office and the school district's career and technical education program. These relationships are valuable in any environment. In a Crisis environment, they are essential.

Practical steps:

- Map the organizations in your county whose missions touch workforce, economic resilience, education, and social services. Identify the relationships that do not currently exist but should.
- Host a quarterly cross-sector convening — not a conference, a working session with a specific agenda item and a specific decision to make. Relationships built around shared work are more durable than those built around networking.
- Position your institution explicitly as the convenor. The organization that owns the table owns the agenda. In a Crisis period, that is a consequential position to occupy.

Model: Columbus, Ohio Regional Talent Partnership

JPMorgan Chase partnered with Columbus business, education, and public sector leaders to build a regional talent alignment initiative targeting the 60% of workers projected to need upskilling by 2027. The model's insight: no single institution has the resources or authority to solve a workforce crisis alone. The Chamber that convened the coalition shaped the direction and

captured the credit. The investment was in relationships and coordination, not primarily in programs.

2. Map Your Real Economy

The communities that mobilized fastest during World War II were those that knew their actual productive assets before the mobilization required them to. Which manufacturers had excess capacity? Which workers had technical skills that could be redeployed? Which logistics infrastructure could support new supply chains? Communities that had this knowledge could answer these questions in days. Communities that did not spent months discovering what they had.

Most counties and Chambers do not have a current, accurate map of their real economic assets. They have economic development reports with aggregate statistics, industry sector analyses, and incentive program inventories. These are useful. They are not the same as knowing what your community can actually do.

A genuine economic asset map answers different questions: What skills exist in the workforce beyond current job titles? Which employers have the physical infrastructure that could be redeployed in a disruption? What are the critical supply chain dependencies for the county's largest employers, and which of those dependencies are fragile? Which small businesses provide services that would be catastrophic to lose but are operating on thin margins? What is the actual housing and transportation infrastructure that either enables or constrains workforce participation?

Practical steps:

- Commission a genuine asset inventory — not an economic impact study, but a capabilities map. What can this community actually produce, supply, and do?
- Identify the three most fragile single points of failure in your local economy: the employer whose closure would cascade, the infrastructure whose failure would be catastrophic, the supply chain dependency that is entirely outside local control.
- Share this intelligence with the cross-sector convening group. Strategic intelligence is only valuable if the people who can act on it have access to it.

3. Build Workforce Pipelines Now

Every major American Crisis has produced a defining workforce transformation. The Civilian Conservation Corps. The wartime industrial training programs that converted a civilian economy to military production in eighteen months. The GI Bill that created the most educated generation in American history. In each case, the communities that shaped the transformation were those with workforce infrastructure already in place. The communities that waited for the federal program to arrive shaped nothing — they received what was designed elsewhere.

The workforce challenge of the current Fourth Turning has a clear shape: automation and AI are displacing routine cognitive and manual work at a pace that exceeds the adaptive capacity of traditional education systems, while simultaneously creating demand for technical, interpersonal,

and entrepreneurial skills that those systems are not reliably producing. The community that builds genuine school-to-career pipelines now — connecting K–12, community college, employers, and stackable credentials into a coherent pathway — is positioning itself for the reconstruction phase of the Crisis in the way that the communities that built manufacturing capacity in the late 1930s were positioned for wartime mobilization.

Practical steps:

- Identify the three to five occupational areas where your county’s employers have the most acute and durable talent gaps. Not the gaps that fluctuate with the economic cycle — the structural gaps that persist regardless of conditions.
- Map the existing educational infrastructure — community college programs, career and technical education in high schools, nonprofit training providers — against those gaps. Where is the pipeline broken or missing?
- Convene employers, educators, and training providers around a specific pipeline commitment: the employer who will hire, the school that will train, the credential that will signal competence. Make the commitment specific and public.
- Invest in barrier removal. The single most common reason workforce pipelines fail is not skill gaps — it is logistics: transportation, childcare, scheduling, and the economic cost of training time. Programs that address these barriers produce dramatically better outcomes than those that do not.

Model: NAF Career Academies

The National Academy Foundation operates career academies inside 620+ high schools, partnering with industry in finance, engineering, health, IT, and hospitality. The model produces work-based learning, industry credentials, and employer commitments — a genuine pipeline rather than a program. The local Chamber or economic development office that sponsors or convenes a NAF-style academy in its highest-demand sector is building infrastructure that pays dividends for decades.

4. Build Mutual Aid Infrastructure Before the Emergency

Depression-era communities with food banks, credit unions, and mutual aid societies before the crash deployed them faster and more effectively than those that improvised under pressure. The difference was not generosity — both sets of communities had generous people. The difference was infrastructure: the organizational capacity, the relationships, the logistics, and the institutional knowledge that allowed existing generosity to be channeled effectively.

The 2025 equivalent of mutual aid infrastructure is broader than emergency services. It includes the systems that allow a community’s economic life to continue functioning when conditions deteriorate: small business emergency funds that can be deployed rapidly, workforce transition support for workers displaced by automation or employer closure, housing assistance capacity that does not require a six-month application process, and local supply chain alternatives for critical goods that currently have no local backup.

Building this infrastructure is not primarily an expense — it is a risk management investment. The community that spends modestly on resilience infrastructure before a crisis spends dramatically less on crisis response than the community that builds nothing and improvises.

Practical steps:

- Establish a small business resilience fund — even a modest one — that can deploy rapid bridge financing to locally-owned businesses in a disruption. The economic multiplier of keeping a locally-owned business alive is significantly higher than replacing it after closure.
- Map your community's existing mutual aid capacity: food banks, emergency assistance organizations, faith-based support networks. Identify the gaps and the coordination failures. Build the directory before you need it.
- Work with regional employers to establish a rapid workforce transition protocol: when a significant employer reduces its workforce, what is the immediate community response? Who calls whom? What retraining resources activate? Having the answer before the event reduces response time from months to weeks.

5. Protect and Invest in Institutional Trust

Trust is the most important asset a local institution has, and the most fragile. It takes years to build and can be destroyed by a single episode of dishonesty, incompetence, or perceived self-dealing. In an era when trust in institutions at every level is at historic lows, the local institution that maintains genuine trustworthiness is building something genuinely scarce.

The county governments and Chambers that lost public trust during the Depression were those that minimized real problems, protected insider interests when ordinary people were suffering, or promised outcomes they could not deliver. The ones that built durable authority were those that communicated honestly about difficulty, made decisions that were visibly in the community's interest rather than any particular constituency's interest, and delivered on their commitments — even modest ones — reliably.

This is a higher standard than it sounds. In a political environment, honest communication about difficulty is genuinely costly. The temptation to manage expectations downward, to protect relationships with major donors or employers, or to present an optimistic picture that is not fully warranted is pervasive. Resisting it, consistently, is the core discipline of institutional trust-building.

Practical steps:

- Establish a communication discipline: when conditions are difficult, say so directly, then describe specifically what you are doing about it. The combination of honesty about the problem and specificity about the response is the formula for trust maintenance under pressure.
- Audit your institution's decision-making processes for conflicts of interest and insider bias. The community perceives these more accurately than institutions usually believe. Proactive transparency is far less costly than reactive damage control.
- Deliver on small commitments before making large ones. Trust is built incrementally through a track record of doing what you said you would do. An institution with a strong record of keeping small promises has the credibility to ask for community confidence in large ones.

Putting It Together: The 90-Day Priority Plan

The five practices above are most powerful when sequenced deliberately. A local institution trying to do all five simultaneously, without prioritization, will make insufficient progress on any of them. The following sequence reflects the dependencies: convening creates the relationships that make asset mapping possible; asset mapping reveals the workforce gaps that pipeline investment should target; the combination of all three builds the track record that maintains institutional trust.

| Month | Priority | Specific Action | Success Signal |
|---------|----------|---|--|
| Month 1 | Convene | Host first cross-sector working session with 8–12 organizations around one specific workforce or economic resilience question | Attendees commit to a second session and assign a specific follow-up action |
| Month 2 | Map | Commission or conduct a capabilities inventory of your county’s real economic assets, critical dependencies, and fragile single points of failure | You can answer: what are our three most fragile dependencies, and what is our alternative for each? |
| Month 3 | Pipeline | Identify the single highest-priority workforce pipeline gap and convene the employer, educator, and training provider who could close it | A specific three-party commitment: who will hire, who will train, what credential will signal competence |
| Ongoing | Trust | Establish a monthly public communication discipline: what did we say we would do, what did we do, what are we doing next | Community feedback (formal or informal) that your institution is seen as reliable and honest |

“The communities that shaped the New Deal were not the ones that waited for Washington to design it. They were the ones that showed up with proposals, relationships, and the organizational capacity to execute.”

— James A. McPherson

Action Checklist for Local Leaders

Convening

- Map the organizations in your county whose missions touch workforce, resilience, education, and social services
- Identify three cross-sector relationships that do not currently exist but should
- Schedule a first cross-sector working session within 60 days
- Position your institution explicitly as the convener of the regional resilience conversation

Asset Mapping

- Commission a genuine capabilities inventory — what can this community produce, supply, and do?
- Identify your three most fragile single points of economic failure
- Map existing mutual aid infrastructure and identify the gaps
- Share the intelligence with your cross-sector network

Workforce Pipeline

- Identify the three to five occupational areas with the most acute and durable talent gaps
- Map existing training infrastructure against those gaps
- Convene employers, educators, and training providers around a specific pipeline commitment
- Identify and address the logistical barriers (transportation, childcare, scheduling) that most commonly break pipelines

Mutual Aid Infrastructure

- Establish or support a small business resilience fund
- Build and publish a directory of existing mutual aid resources
- Develop a rapid workforce transition protocol with regional employers
- Identify one new mutual aid infrastructure gap to close this year

Institutional Trust

- Establish a monthly public communication discipline: say what you'll do, report what you did
- Audit decision-making processes for conflicts of interest and insider bias
- Identify three small commitments you can make and keep in the next 90 days
- Ask your community directly: where do they most need you to show up?

About the Author

James McPherson is a strategy and operations practitioner, educator, speaker, and coach. He holds a B.A. in Classics with honors from Johns Hopkins University, studied leadership under pressure in Homer's *Iliad* as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, and completed his M.B.A. at Duke University with a concentration in Strategy & Decision Science. He is the founder of The McPherson Group, which advises leaders, institutions, and communities on navigating large-scale disruption with clarity and purpose.

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