

FOR INTERNAL PURPOSES ONLY
Bloomberg Harvard City Hall Fellowship 2026
CHALLENGE AREA: Strategic Economic Development

Strengthening Collaborations In and Out of City Hall to Reverse Population Decline

City: Toledo, Ohio

Reporting to: Deputy Mayor

The Challenge and Context

Like many medium-sized cities in America's industrial heartland, Toledo has been steadily losing residents for years. The city's population peaked at 384,000 in 1970. By 2020, that was down to 271,000. There is momentum in Toledo, however, including new parks and trails along the downtown riverfront and the renovation of a pair of vacant historic towers into apartments. City leaders are also inspired by population upticks in nearby cities such as Cincinnati, Detroit, and Fort Wayne, Indiana. This spring, Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz will announce an ambitious goal of growing Toledo's population back to 300,000 by 2040 and a new strategic plan to get there.

Operationalizing this vision will be an enormous challenge, particularly when it comes to growing the economy and updating the city's aging housing stock. In particular, City leaders want to identify successful strategies from peer cities that can be part of the Mayor's strategy. They also aim to strengthen coordination across departments to ensure that they are closely aligned and use shared metrics of success as they roll out new zoning rules, economic incentives, and other policies in ways that align with one another to have the maximum collective impact. Finally, they hope to identify strategies to creatively engage businesses, nonprofits, community groups, and other external stakeholders in cross-sector approaches to drive growth.

Efforts to Address the Challenge

Significant planning efforts set the stage for the Mayor's push to grow Toledo's population. In September 2024, the City adopted a new comprehensive land-use plan called [Forward Toledo](#). More than 5,000 residents engaged in creation of the plan, which identifies dozens of strategies aimed at advancing five goal areas: housing, connectivity, neighborhood and economic development, and quality of life. The City has since received a HUD grant to implement key recommendations of the plan, such as rewriting the zoning code, creating financing incentives, and streamlining construction approval processes. In 2025, the City launched the Toledo Community Improvement Corporation to provide a dedicated funding source for preparing sites for job-creating projects and housing.

Creating the Forward Toledo plan left City leaders with a [wealth of data](#) on current land uses, housing stock, employment clusters, workforce needs, small business creation, and more. This

built on an earlier comprehensive housing strategy, the 2021 [Toledo Together](#) plan, which analyzed market conditions, housing needs, and demographic trends. As City leaders and community partners align around the Mayor's goal to reach 300,000 residents, they will need clear, shared, and measurable indicators of progress to guide their strategic efforts. They also will need tools for rigorously evaluating whether individual strategies are moving the needle in the desired direction.

A broad range of internal and external stakeholders engaged in the Forward Toledo and Toledo Together planning processes, including local elected officials, City staff, private-sector civic leaders, and residents. City leaders also have collaborated successfully with other public agencies and the private sector to prepare vacant sites for redevelopment and attract job-creating projects and affordable housing development. While the City has a relationship with nearly every anchor institution in the area, there is untapped potential for deeper collaboration with some key players, including in the higher education and housing development sectors.

Defining Success

Success, as defined by City leadership, would be to have a number of promising cross-departmental and cross-sector initiatives underway in support of the Mayor's population expansion goal. Strategic systems and routines would be in place to prioritize and coordinate these and future initiatives, along with data-driven frameworks for evaluating progress and informing strategy across relevant City departments. Additionally, an overarching goal is to mobilize stakeholder networks in a sustained way that bridges disparate projects and focus areas into a common long-term commitment.