

Ardmore, Oklahoma

Incubator Feasibility Study

November 2025



Center
on Rural
Innovation



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Executive summary

This feasibility study finds that Ardmore, Oklahoma, has the assets, partnerships, and community leadership necessary to pursue an Innovation Hub that strengthens its economy and builds long-term resilience. While Ardmore's innovation ecosystem is still in the early stages, the city's strong civic leadership, engaged business community, and growing network of education partners position it well to take intentional next steps toward developing a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation.

This study recommends that Ardmore establish an Innovation Hub downtown to serve as a visible home for entrepreneurship, targeted workforce training, and collaboration. The hub should build on existing local strengths (Southern Tech, Murray State College's new Agricultural Innovation Center, and an active Main Street Authority) to connect training, mentorship, and small-business support under one roof. By locating the hub within Ardmore's revitalized downtown, the project would reinforce current momentum, attract talent and visitors, and signal continued investment in the city's core.

The proposed hub would combine coworking, training, and early-stage startup incubation in a flexible, right-sized space designed to evolve as the community's capacity grows. Importantly, the hub should not depend on any single funding source. While EDA Disaster Recovery funding may serve as one potential catalyst, Ardmore's long-term success will depend on a diverse mix of revenue – local philanthropy, anchor-tenant leases, memberships, and sponsorships – and a deliberate focus on building local entrepreneurial capacity before scaling programming.

As this work moves forward, consistent leadership and coordination across the Ardmore Development Authority, Main Street Authority, Southern Tech, and other partners will be the key determinant of success. Early wins, such as visible downtown activity, new small businesses, or successful pilot programs, will build confidence and momentum. With continued collaboration and a phased approach to growth, Ardmore can transform its strong community assets into a dynamic center for innovation and opportunity in southern Oklahoma.

Introduction

Ardmore, Oklahoma, sits halfway between Dallas and Oklahoma City, giving it strong regional connectivity and access to two major metro economies. For decades, Ardmore's growth was anchored by manufacturing, energy, and distribution industries that provided stable jobs and supported a vibrant Main Street core.

The [closure of the Michelin tire plant](#) in 2024, one of the city's largest employers, highlighted the community's economic dependence on legacy industries and underscored the need to diversify. Local leaders recognize that future prosperity will depend on building a more resilient economy rooted in innovation, entrepreneurship, and workforce opportunity.

To chart that path, the Ardmore Development Authority (ADA) engaged the [Center on Rural Innovation](#) (CORI) to assess how the community could strengthen entrepreneurship and explore the feasibility of creating an innovation hub or business incubator downtown.

This study serves two purposes:

1. To explain how tech-based economic development (TBED) can guide Ardmore's next phase of growth.
2. To evaluate the city's readiness, assets, and risks related to launching an innovation hub.

During the study, a potential opportunity emerged through EDA disaster-recovery funding. This report acknowledges that grant as one possible catalyst for the hub's launch but focuses primarily on Ardmore's broader innovation and ecosystem strategy.

Tech-based economic development: A new path for rural economies

For most of the last century, rural economic development centered on traditional industries and large employers such as manufacturing, energy, and agriculture. Communities invested heavily in infrastructure to attract and retain these companies, an approach that brought short-term gains but left many local economies vulnerable when industries declined or relocated.

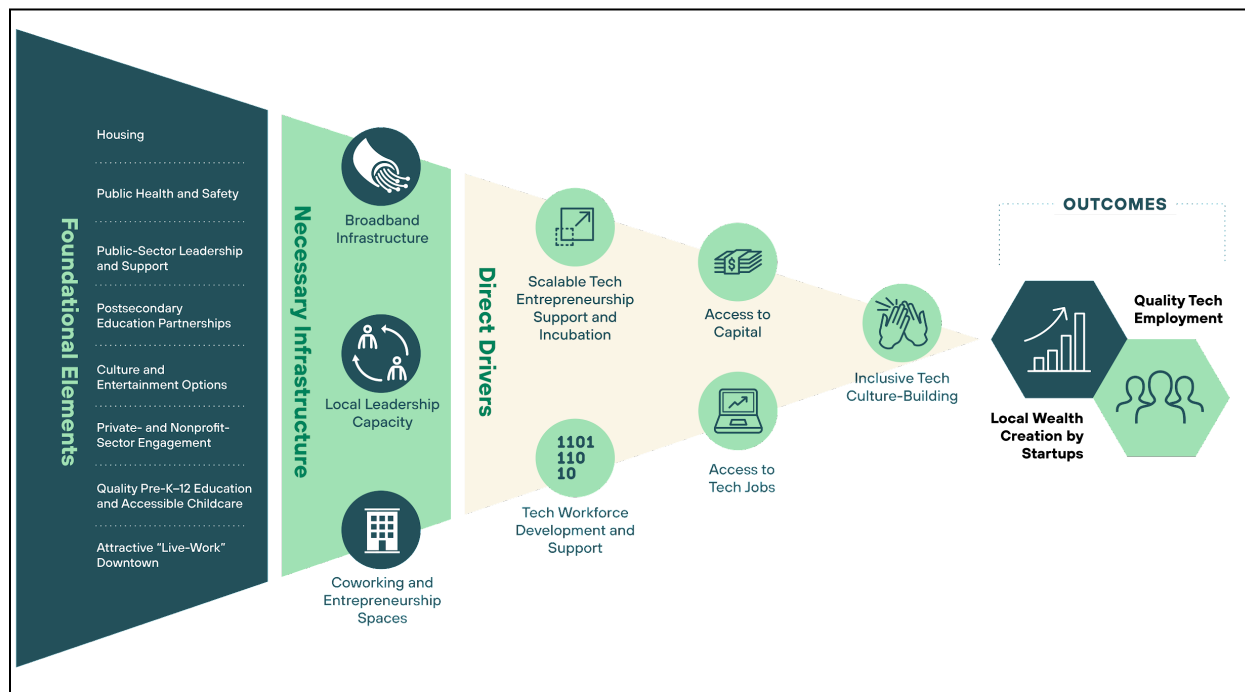
Today, those industries account for less than one-quarter of total rural employment ([CORI 2025](#)), underscoring the need for a more resilient approach. CORI's model of tech-based economic development (TBED) offers one such path, helping rural communities build local wealth by participating directly in the innovation economy rather than relying on outside employers.

The data illustrate both the challenge and the opportunity. Rural Americans make up 11% of the national workforce but only 4% of tech talent, and the gap is even wider in small cities and among people of color. Similarly, while 12% of U.S. businesses are located in rural areas, only 6% of high-tech establishments are ([CORI 2025](#)).

TBED seeks to close these gaps by equipping rural residents with the skills, tools, and spaces to participate in high-wage, tech work. CORI's framework (see Figure 1) identifies several components that work together to make that possible:

- Broadband and digital infrastructure create the foundation for participation in the modern economy.
- Innovation spaces (coworking areas, incubators, or maker spaces) act as visible centers for community collaboration and entrepreneurship.
- Tech workforce and education pipelines ensure residents can access training for remote jobs or tech careers without leaving their communities.
- Startup and capital support help entrepreneurs transform ideas into viable, scalable businesses.
- Inclusive culture building broadens participation so that women, young professionals, and underrepresented groups share in economic growth.

Figure 1: CORI's Tech-Based Economic Development (TBED) model



The takeaway is clear: infrastructure alone is not enough. Communities also need the local leadership, programming, and spaces that turn access into opportunity. Rural communities that invest in all parts of the tech economy, not just broadband or job training, have an opportunity to create a stronger innovation ecosystem than those that only focus on a single area.

For Ardmore, TBED represents a way to leverage its connectivity, strong civic leadership, and quality of life to compete in the innovation economy while maintaining its rural character.

The case for Ardmore's innovation hub

Ardmore is at an inflection point. For decades, the city's economy relied on manufacturing, energy, and logistics, industries that offered stability but limited diversification. The closure of Michelin's tire plant, which impacted roughly 1,400 jobs, underscored that vulnerability and prompted local leaders to consider new strategies for growth.

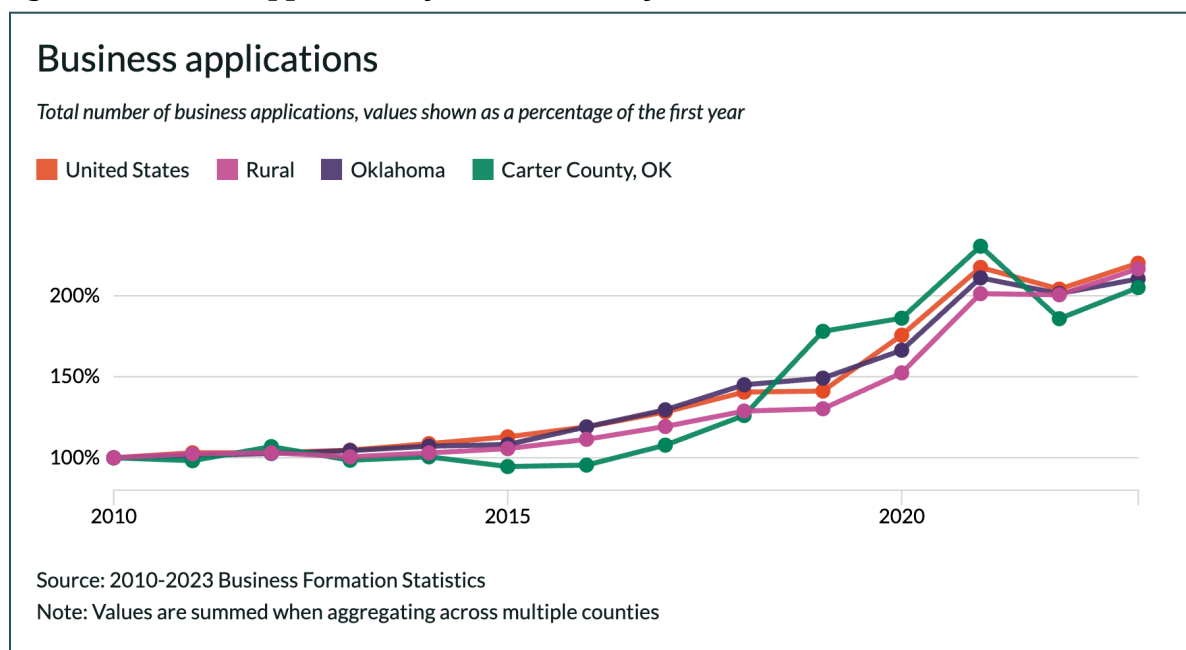
The community now faces an opportunity to define its next phase. By investing in entrepreneurship, targeted workforce development, and digital infrastructure, Ardmore can build a more resilient economy. The concept of a business services incubator or innovation hub is one way to organize that effort – a place to coordinate resources, support new ventures, and connect existing institutions working toward shared goals.

Economic context

Ardmore's position along the I-35 corridor (midway between Dallas and Oklahoma City) gives it a clear geographic advantage. The city has access to large markets while maintaining the affordability and quality of life of a smaller community. Broadband access, transportation infrastructure, and a revitalizing downtown make Ardmore competitive for both local entrepreneurs and remote professionals.

After years of limited business formation, Carter County has seen a surge in entrepreneurship. Business applications increased sharply after 2020, mirroring national trends in self-employment and small business creation.

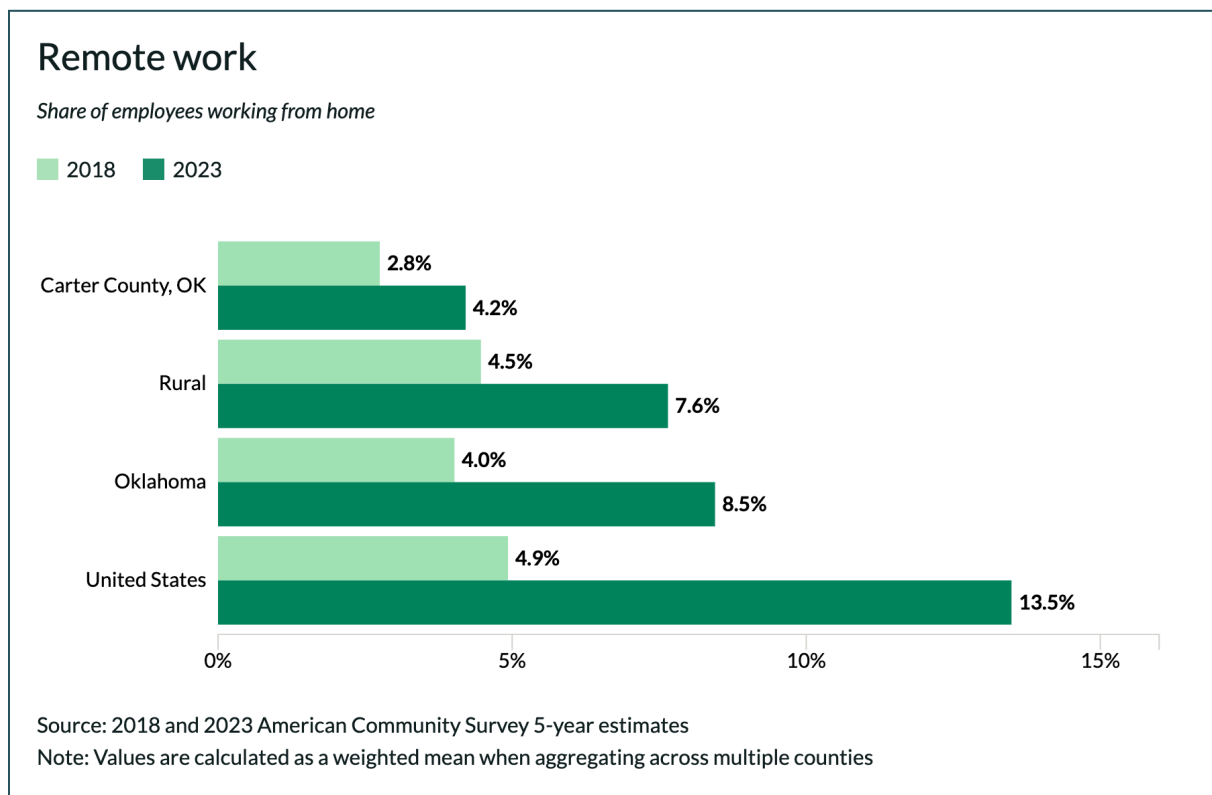
Figure 2: Business applications for Carter County



This post-pandemic surge mirrors national rural trends, where more people are choosing to work for themselves and create local opportunity. However, without shared space, mentorship, or startup support, many entrepreneurs are operating in isolation. A local innovation hub or business services incubator gives them a central place to learn, collaborate, and grow.

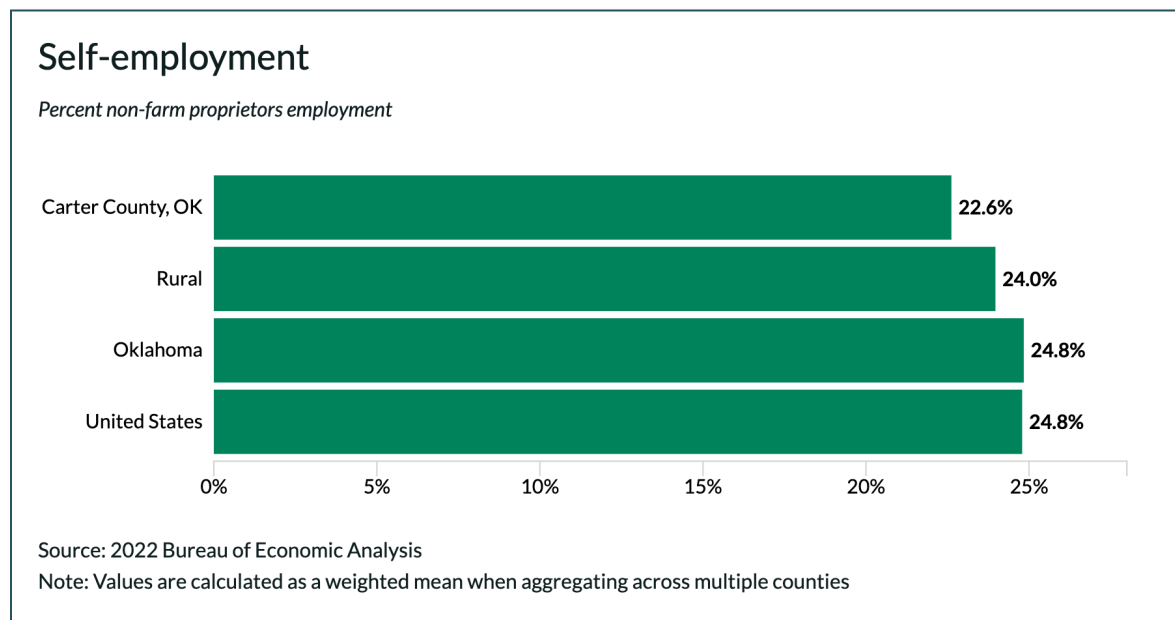
Remote work adds another dimension. Across rural America, the share of remote workers more than doubled between 2019 and 2023, but Carter County continues to trail state and national levels. Creating professional workspace and programming for remote workers would help retain and attract talent that might otherwise leave the region.

Figure 3: Percentage of remote workers for Carter County



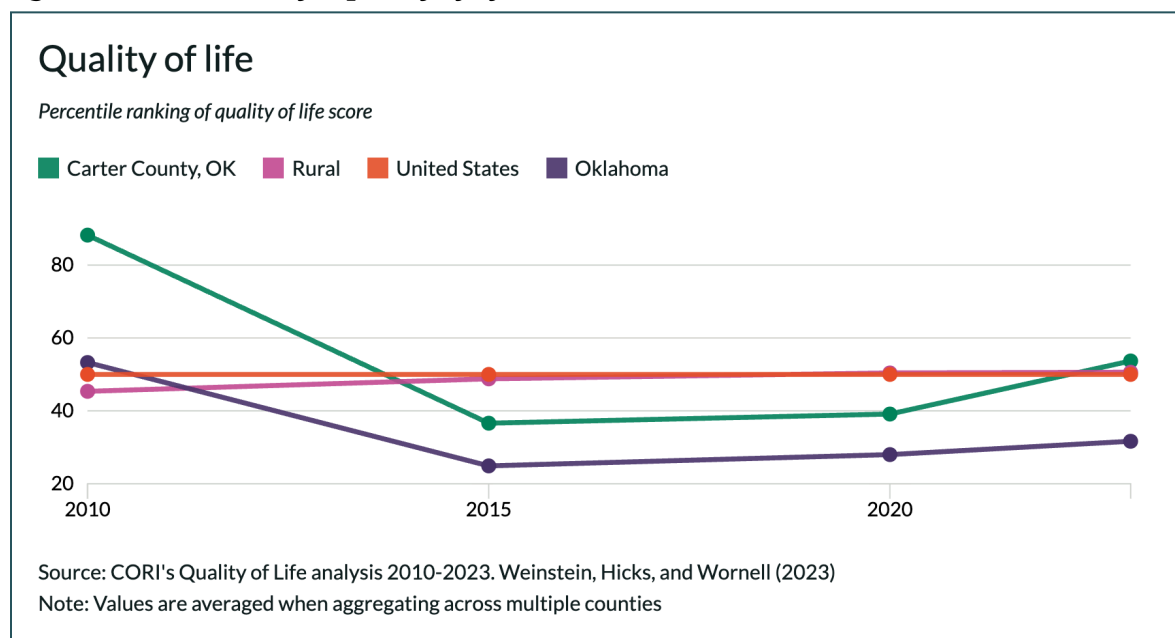
Even amid industrial decline, Ardmore's self-employment rate — about one in five local workers — reflects a culture of self-reliance. Local contractors, tradespeople, creative professionals, and service providers already form the backbone of the local economy. Expanding business support and digital-skills programming could help many of these small ventures evolve into scalable, higher-growth enterprises.

Figure 4: Self-employment rate for Carter County



Ardmore's quality of life is one of its strongest economic assets. The city offers what many rural communities aspire to: an affordable cost of living, easy access to nature, and a growing downtown filled with restaurants, shops, and events. CORI's Quality of Life Index measures how desirable a place is to live based on housing costs and residents' willingness to pay a premium for that livability. Higher scores reflect both resident satisfaction and a community's appeal to newcomers. Carter County sits above both state and national averages, reflecting progress in public amenities and community vitality.

Figure 5: Carter County's quality of life



Local leaders and residents alike describe this balance of livability and opportunity as Ardmore's competitive edge. As one community stakeholder put it, *"We have great leadership, great location, and great food... everything that makes people want to stay here."*

Community assets and partnerships

Ardmore's institutions provide a strong foundation for this next stage of development. The city benefits from a network of education, workforce, and civic partners that together create the building blocks of a local innovation ecosystem.

At the center of that network is [Southern Tech](#), a technical college that offers programs in advanced manufacturing, information technology, and business operations that align closely with the needs of local employers. Leaders at Southern Tech have expressed interest in expanding their curriculum to include entrepreneurship and digital-skills training, an important step toward preparing residents for tech-enabled careers. A nearby higher education institution, [Murray State College](#), can extend that pipeline, connecting students and adult learners to innovation opportunities within the region. The college is also developing an Agricultural Innovation Center, which will create additional opportunities for collaboration around technology and entrepreneurship.

The city's downtown core provides a physical foundation for this work. Guided by the City of Ardmore and the [Ardmore Main Street Authority](#), the area has seen visible progress in recent years, with new restaurants, shops, and community events breathing life back into once-vacant storefronts. Anchoring that activity is the [Goddard Center for Visual and Performing Arts](#), a cultural institution that attracts visitors, supports local artists, and contributes to the vibrancy of the city's center. Together, these efforts demonstrate a growing downtown ecosystem that blends commerce, culture, and community. Locating a hub in or near this area would build on that energy, offering entrepreneurs and professionals a visible, accessible place to gather and collaborate.

Institutional capacity is another of Ardmore's key strengths. The [Ardmore Development Authority](#) (ADA) coordinates efforts across business recruitment, workforce, and redevelopment, while the [Ardmore Chamber of Commerce](#) plays a key role in business-to-business networking and advocacy. Regional partners such as the [Southern Oklahoma Development Association](#) (SODA) contribute additional planning expertise, resources, and reach.

The combination of strong partners, an active downtown ecosystem, and leadership capacity reflect a community that is well-positioned to drive tech-based economic development. Ardmore's challenge is not the absence of resources, but the need for stronger coordination among them. A shared innovation hub could serve as the organizing platform that connects these efforts — linking education, small-business support, and leadership under one coordinated strategy for growth.

Stakeholder perspectives

To surface community priorities and test demand, the CORI team conducted both in-person and virtual stakeholder engagement sessions in fall 2025. During a two-day site visit to Ardmore, CORI staff met with local leaders, small-business owners, educators, and members of the Ardmore Young Professionals group.

Across these conversations, participants expressed a clear desire to see Ardmore diversify its economy and strengthen local entrepreneurship. Many noted that while the city has strong civic leadership and economic infrastructure, there are few coordinated resources for people who want to start or grow a business. Several attendees shared that they or their peers operate small ventures or side businesses, often from home, but lack access to shared space, mentorship, or early-stage funding. As one participant put it, *“We have people with ideas, but nowhere for them to go.”*

Others emphasized the progress already underway. Stakeholders spoke with pride about Ardmore’s revitalized downtown and strong quality of life, describing the city as a place with momentum and a growing sense of optimism. One local business owner noted that *“five years ago, you could pick any building downtown for next to nothing. Now they’re full.”* That shift, they said, reflects not only new commercial investment but also a broader belief that Ardmore can chart its own economic future.

Participants also raised important questions about sustainability — how a hub would be staffed, how it would generate revenue, and what success would look like over time. These comments reflected a pragmatic mindset rather than hesitation. Stakeholders were supportive of the concept but want to ensure it is right-sized for the community’s current capacity.

Taken together, these conversations point to a community that is ready to act but wants to proceed thoughtfully. Residents recognize the value of entrepreneurship, innovation, and targeted workforce development as tools for long-term resilience. They see the potential for a shared hub to serve as a gathering place, a visible signal of progress, and a catalyst for coordination among existing partners.

Facility concept and design

Ardmore's proposed innovation hub will be a multi-use, flexible space that connects the city's emerging entrepreneurial community, business leaders, students, and education partners under one roof. The facility will house business incubation, coworking, and training functions while serving as a visible anchor for downtown's continued revitalization.

Purpose of the hub

The hub will function as both a symbol of Ardmore's economic transition and a tool for long-term development. The facility's design will prioritize:

- **Visibility:** Reinforcing the downtown's role as Ardmore's economic and cultural center
- **Accessibility:** Creating a walkable, welcoming space that encourages collaboration
- **Flexibility:** Allowing programming and layout to evolve as the ecosystem expands

This approach ensures the hub is right-sized for Ardmore's current capacity while leaving room for future growth. CORI's work across similar rural communities shows that hybrid hubs (spaces that combine coworking, incubation, and training) are often the most successful early models. They balance ambition with feasibility, allowing a community to scale programming at a sustainable pace as demand increases.

Potential facility options

During CORI's on-site visit in October 2025, the project team toured potential facilities that could house the innovation hub:

- **Option 1 – First National Bank:** An old bank building located directly on Main Street offers high visibility in one of Ardmore's most active downtown corridors. Its central location would reinforce the hub's role as a gathering place for entrepreneurs, professionals, and community members. The site's proximity to restaurants, retail, and other small businesses would encourage cross-traffic and further investment in the city's core.
- **Option 2 – Ringling Road Station:** A site a few blocks off Main Street remains within easy walking distance of downtown and several popular restaurants. This building offers slightly more space and flexibility for renovation, allowing for a larger footprint or future expansion.
- **Option 3 – Former Sunset Grill Building:** Located on Main Street, the former Sunset Grill offers another downtown option with strong visibility and an existing layout suitable for adaptive reuse. Its location keeps it accessible to downtown traffic while providing an opportunity to revitalize a recognizable property and anchor new activity along Main Street.

Any of these options would situate the hub within Ardmore's thriving Main Street district, where residents, business owners, and visitors already congregate. Locating the innovation hub near this natural center of community life would strengthen visibility, support foot traffic, and create new opportunities for collaboration between entrepreneurs and local businesses.

Anchor tenants and partnerships

The ADA and Chamber are recommended to serve jointly as the primary anchor tenants and coordinating entities for the innovation hub. ADA has led the development of this project from the outset and has the institutional knowledge, partnerships, and administrative experience needed to guide the hub through its early implementation. While the ADA would retain ownership of the facility and provide fiscal and administrative oversight, the Chamber — as the largest tenant and organization with the most staff — would play a large role in the operation of the building.

Locating ADA's offices within the same building as the Innovation Hub, the Ardmore Chamber of Commerce, and the Ardmore Tourism Authority will not only strengthen operational stability but also enhance coordination across the city's key economic development functions. This co-location creates an accessible, one-stop destination for business support, workforce development, and tourism — allowing the organizations to work in closer alignment while maintaining their independent missions.

In the short term, ADA is well positioned to oversee initial operations and fiscal management of the hub, coordinating programming, managing partner relationships, and ensuring compliance with grant requirements. Over time, as the hub becomes more established and financially sustainable, operations could transition to a stand-alone entity or a jointly managed partnership model that includes the Chamber, Tourism Authority, and other community partners.

Each anchor tenant will maintain its own designated office space, while shared collaboration areas will encourage daily interaction and joint initiatives. Additional partners (Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Main Street Authority, Ardmore Young Professionals) will play active roles in programming, delivering business training, mentorship, and technical workshops within the hub's shared training and event spaces.

This approach balances early operational stability with long-term flexibility, allowing Ardmore to build the hub's capacity gradually while ensuring leadership continuity through ADA's initial involvement.

Facility use and layout

The hub will include three core functional areas:

- **Incubation suites:** Dedicated offices and a formal incubation program for early-stage businesses, supporting local startups ready to launch, grow, and scale
- **Coworking and collaboration space:** Open desks, meeting rooms, and shared amenities to serve freelancers, remote workers, and small teams
- **Training and event space:** A configurable area for workshops, classes, and public programming delivered by partners such as Southern Tech or the SBDC

In addition to these shared community functions, the facility will include dedicated office space for the ADA, the Chamber, and Tourism Authority. Co-locating these key organizations within the hub ensures day-to-day collaboration, visibility, and alignment across the city's core economic development efforts while providing stable anchor tenancy to support the building's financial sustainability.

Design priorities should include an open floorplan with flexible partitions that allow spaces to serve multiple purposes. With the facility concept and partners defined, the next step is to outline how the hub will be used and who it will serve. The building itself provides the structure, but programming will determine its impact. A strong mix of incubation, coworking, and community-driven activities will bring the space to life, establishing it as both a business resource and a civic gathering place.

Programming

The programming and design of Ardmore's innovation hub should reflect the community's current stage of ecosystem development, early but promising, and grow in sophistication over time. Programming should balance accessibility (ensuring anyone with an idea can participate) with focus (building depth in areas that align with Ardmore's strengths and demand).

Target audience(s)

While anyone can be an entrepreneur, the first users of the hub are likely to come from a few identifiable groups. Understanding these audiences will help guide early programming and outreach.

Southern Tech provides a pipeline of skilled students interested in entrepreneurship and technology. With mentorship and access to early incubation space, these young innovators can test business ideas and develop technical solutions locally. A partnership with Murray State College will further connect students to opportunities for hands-on entrepreneurship and applied learning.

Many of Ardmore's working professionals (especially those in manufacturing, trades, and services) have deep industry knowledge and a practical understanding of local challenges. Several stakeholders noted that this group is often curious about using technology to solve operational problems or diversify their businesses. Training in digital tools, automation, or AI could help them turn that experience into new ventures or growth opportunities.

The share of Carter County residents working remotely grew from 2.8 percent in 2018 to 4.2 percent in 2023 (American Community Survey). Based on an employed population of roughly 21,000, that translates to about 900 local residents working from home. While not all remote workers will need or want a coworking space, modest engagement could create a meaningful membership base. Even if one-third of these workers used the hub occasionally, that would translate to around 300 potential members. This demonstrates a clear pool to draw from if the hub offers the right amenities, programming, and sense of community.

Anchors like the Goddard Center bring creative energy downtown and offer natural crossover opportunities between art, design, and entrepreneurship. Engaging artists and creative professionals as collaborators, mentors, or event partners can help broaden the definition of innovation and make the hub a place where both business and creative ideas thrive.

These audiences will evolve as programming grows, but together they represent Ardmore's initial base of entrepreneurs, innovators, and community users.

Programming and priorities

Initial programming

The proposed hub is envisioned as a multi-use facility designed to meet Ardmore's current needs while allowing for future growth. Its primary functions would include:

1. Entrepreneurship and incubation: A portion of the building would operate as an incubator, offering affordable workspace, and shared services.
2. Coworking and remote-work space: Flexible desks, private offices, and meeting rooms would support freelancers, remote workers, and small teams who need professional space and connectivity.
3. Community and training space: The hub could host workshops, mentorship sessions, and community events — providing room for partners like Southern Tech, Ardmore Main Street Authority, or the Ardmore Young Professionals group to deliver programming and outreach.

Together, these uses would create a central, accessible place for entrepreneurship, collaboration, and innovation in Ardmore's downtown core. The structure of this programming, combining coworking, idea-stage entrepreneurship courses, and community-building events, will also serve as a feeder system for the incubation program. By engaging individuals early and exposing them to entrepreneurial resources, the hub will help identify and prepare promising founders who are ready to advance into more formal incubation support.

Programmatic priorities

Programming should align with community demand, stakeholder feedback and national best practices for rural incubation. Initial priorities could include:

- Startup fundamentals and business planning courses delivered in partnership with Southern Tech or the Oklahoma Small Business Development Center.
- Mentorship and peer networks connecting local founders with experienced business leaders and investors.
- Digital adoption and tech enablement training to help existing small businesses use e-commerce, automation, or AI tools to increase competitiveness.
- Events and showcases that highlight local entrepreneurship, attract partners, and reinforce community buy-in.

These offerings ensure the innovation hub functions as an active, program and community-driven resource rather than simply as leased space. Over time, as capacity and demand grow, additional offerings, such as visiting entrepreneurs-in-residence and advanced cohort-based training, can build on this foundation.

A strong facility and well-designed programming are only sustainable if paired with clear management and staffing structures. The success of the innovation hub will depend on dedicated personnel who can coordinate partners, lead programming, and maintain community engagement. As in other rural ecosystems, staffing will need to grow in phases – starting lean and expanding as activity, membership, and funding increase.

Operational and staffing plan

During early development, staffing should remain flexible and aligned with the community's resources and activity level. As participation and funding grow, staffing can scale accordingly. To help the community weigh these options, the table below compares three staffing models – low, medium, and high investment – showing how staff size connects to responsibilities and programming capacity.

Table 1: Possible staffing models

Entry level staffing model - .5FTE		
Community Manager (Part-time management through ADA and the Chamber)	.5 FTE	Responsible for maintaining the coworking space, driving membership, and serving as the primary liaison between anchor tenants and the hub. This shared position would split time evenly between broader economic development work (50%) and hub operations (50%), ensuring consistent coordination and oversight during the hub's early phase. The role also manages volunteers, assists with events, and helps connect entrepreneurs to local resources and support programs.
Mid-level staffing model - 1.5 FTE		
Community Manager	.5FTE	Responsible for maintaining the coworking space, driving membership, and supporting Program Manager in their event and programming work. This position could remain part-time between ADA and the Hub.
Program Director	1FTE	Leads development of programs, including monthly events, and directing entrepreneurs to resources. Does some outreach to local employers and business owners. Also has some fundraising and sponsor-cultivation responsibilities, especially associated with sponsoring events.
Advanced staffing model - 3FTE		
Community Manager	1FTE	Responsible for maintaining the coworking space, driving membership. As a regular presence in the space, they become a vital part of making the coworking and office space culture

		<i>vibrant and inviting. Volunteer management in coordination with the program manager. They can also act in an administrative support role for the team.</i>
Program Manager	1FTE	<i>Leads development of programs, including custom monthly events and programming, as well as recurring themed meet-ups. Actively cultivates new entrepreneurs and does outreach to businesses and employers.</i>
Executive Director	1FTE	<i>Responsible for fundraising, partnership development, sponsor-development, partner management, and overseeing the hub. Actively develops higher-complexity programs, such as investor networks and accelerator cohorts.</i>

Each staffing level reflects a different balance of cost and capability. A lean 0.5 FTE model keeps costs low but limits programming to coworking management, small events, and volunteer-supported activities.

A medium 1.5 FTE model provides consistent coverage of the coworking space and the ability to deliver regular programming, though it still depends on volunteers to extend capacity. Partnerships with local higher education institutions could create a steady pipeline of interns to support programming, communications, or event logistics.

A full 3 FTE model maximizes coverage and program depth, enabling the hub to offer a complete suite of services, from startup curriculum to tech enablement and events, while positioning it as a visible center of entrepreneurship in Ardmore.

Governance and oversight

During the first phase of the hub, we recommend that the ADA serve as the fiscal lead (handling contracts, financial management, and compliance reporting) while the Chamber continues to serve as the common paymaster for shared staff. Under this arrangement, employee wages and benefits would continue to be administered by the Chamber, with costs reimbursed monthly by the respective organizations (ADA, Chamber, and Tourism Authority).

This structure maintains continuity with existing administrative practices, leverages each organization's strengths, and minimizes the need to establish new systems during early implementation. The entry-level staffing model outlined above (with shared ADA and hub responsibilities) provides a practical first step toward operational independence. Over time, management responsibilities could transition to a stand-alone entity or a multi-partner governance model once the hub's revenue streams and oversight processes are firmly established.

Funding strategy and financial projections

The scope of staffing must correspond to the scale of available funding. The number of people the hub can hire determines how much programming it can deliver, while the amount of money available decides whether that staffing is realistic. In our experience, most hubs do not break even in the first few years.

A clear and sustainable financial model will be essential to the long-term success of Ardmore's innovation hub. Like most early-stage rural hubs, initial investment will rely on a mix of grant funding, local contributions, and earned revenue, with a gradual transition toward self-sufficiency over several years.

Early-stage funding

Initial funding will support renovation of the selected facility, equipping shared spaces, and launching programming. The ADA is currently pursuing an EDA Disaster Recovery Grant as a potential source of startup capital. To support this effort, CORI has prepared a separate report containing potential language and information that could support Ardmore's application for this funding opportunity.

Beyond federal support, other capital sources could include:

- Regional, state and national philanthropy, including contributions from community foundations, civic leaders, and local banks
- Corporate sponsorships from employers interested in workforce development, innovation, or small-business growth
- State or federal programs that fund entrepreneurship, broadband-enabled business development, or digital-skills training. Some examples include:
 - [USDA Rural Business Development Grant \(RBDG\)](#): supports infrastructure and technical assistance for small and emerging rural businesses
 - [EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Grant \(PWEAA\)](#): supports projects that spur economic growth and resiliency, with Innovation and Entrepreneurship as an EDA Investment Priority
- In-kind donations such as equipment, technology, or furniture from local businesses

A combination of one-time startup funding and recurring operational support will be necessary to sustain the hub during its early years.

State incentives

Oklahoma's Small Business Incubator Certification Program, administered by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, offers a state income tax exemption for up to 10 years to tenants of certified incubators on income earned from incubator activities ([Oklahoma Statute](#)

[§74-5078](#)). The exemption continues after a tenant graduates, for a total duration of up to ten years.

Certification requires incubators to demonstrate a viable facility, capacity to provide business development services, and market demand for tenant space.

According to the [2024 Oklahoma Incentive Evaluation Commission](#), tenants of certified incubators generated \$66.6 million in revenue and \$25.4 million in payroll in 2023, qualifying for about \$3.4 million in tax-exempt income.

Pursuing certification would make the Ardmore Innovation Hub eligible for this program, providing a 10-year state income tax exemption that can help attract and retain startup tenants while aligning the project with established state economic development policy.

Financial modeling

To support planning, we developed a [customizable financial model](#) that generates ten-year projections based on local inputs. By entering estimates for variables such as lease costs, staffing, membership pricing, occupancy rates, and grants, the model produces:

- Annual revenue and expense forecasts
- Year-over-year surplus or deficit
- How much outside funding is needed to cover any shortfalls
- How sensitive the budget is to key assumptions, like how many members join or how much space is rented

Anchor-tenant leases from ADA, the Chamber, and Tourism Authority will provide a stable baseline of earned income to offset building costs and operational expenses. This predictable revenue, combined with coworking memberships and grant funding, will help the hub reach financial sustainability more quickly and reduce reliance on external subsidies.

The model is not meant to provide one fixed forecast at this stage in planning. Instead, it is a decision-support tool to help community leaders test assumptions, explore trade-offs, and guide planning as conditions change. For example, leaders can see how hiring more staff affects long-term costs, or how membership pricing and occupancy influence when the hub might break even.

To make the tool more relevant to Ardmore, we have prepopulated it with two scenarios, one for the Ringling Building and one for the First National Bank Building. Each scenario reflects the square footage available and shows how space could be allocated for the business incubator program, coworking desks, private offices, and community amenities such as conference rooms and event space.

Users can adjust inputs for key variables such as membership pricing, staffing models, and funding sources (including grants, sponsorships, and earned revenue) to see how these changes impact a 10-year operating forecast. This makes it possible to compare how different approaches—such as lean staffing versus full-time management, or higher versus lower occupancy—affect sustainability and the potential timeline for the hub to reach break-even operations.

The table below summarizes three investment scenarios in terms of conditions rather than dollar figures. At this stage, without a space selected, cost estimates would be premature. Instead, the table highlights how staffing and programming scope aligns with different funding mixes.

Table 2: Funding mix across investment scenarios

Staff level	Staff responsibilities	Likely funding mix
Low (.5 FTE)	Part-time management through ADA/Chamber with volunteer and partner support. Focus on facility activation, coworking management, and occasional events. Incubation support limited to light-touch mentorship and referrals.	Primarily coworking memberships augmented by some philanthropic contributions or sponsorships.
Medium (1.5 FTE)	Dedicated full-time manager and part-time assistant. Consistent programming, early-stage incubation, and regular workshops. Begin formal data tracking and grant reporting to meet EDA expectations.	Balanced mix of memberships, anchor-tenant leases, local philanthropy, and grants (EDA, state, or foundation).
High (3 FTE)	Full staff complement (manager, program coordinator, administrative/marketing support). Broad programming including structured incubation and community events. Expanded partnerships and regional visibility.	Majority funding from multi-year grants or sponsorships (EDA, state, or foundation) with growing earned income from memberships, leases, and training fees.

The low-investment model would allow Ardmore to begin operations quickly and test programming while maintaining low overhead. The medium-investment model offers the most balanced path for early success, combining dedicated management with growing local support. The high-investment model (appropriate for a more mature stage of development) would position Ardmore as a regional innovation hub but requires additional external funding and full program capacity.

Implementation roadmap

With a clear vision, strong partnerships, and multiple potential facility options, Ardmore is well-positioned to move from planning to implementation. The next stage of work involves a series of decisions and coordinated actions that will determine how quickly and effectively the innovation hub can launch.

Immediate priorities (Next 0-5 months)

1. **Select a facility location:** Finalize which of the two candidate buildings best aligns with the project's goals for visibility, cost, and future growth. Conduct due diligence on building condition, renovation requirements, and ownership or lease structure.
2. **Decide on whether to pursue the EDA funding:** Make a final determination about submitting an application. CORI has provided the necessary documentation and policies in a separate report to meet program requirements. The grant offers a strong opportunity for launch funding but carries significant operational and reporting expectations.
3. **Identify local and philanthropic match sources:** Confirm commitments from potential local partners, including banks, foundations, and civic donors, that could provide matching funds or supplemental support for operations and build-out.
4. **Hire or assign initial staff:** Begin with a low- or medium-investment staffing model (part-time anchor tenant oversight or a full-time manager) to coordinate programming and manage early operations.
5. **Begin ecosystem-building activities:** Launch early-stage programming to strengthen the entrepreneurial network and prepare the community for incubation activities. Pilot workshops, small business roundtables, or speaker series can begin immediately using existing downtown venues such as the Goddard Center or ADA office spaces. The ADA can also build visibility by tabling at local events and presenting at Chamber luncheons, board meetings, and other community gatherings to generate awareness, interest, and early buy-in for the Innovation Hub.

Short-term priorities (6-12 months)

1. **Formalize management and governance structure:** Designate the ADA as interim hub manager and fiscal agent, and establish an advisory group of local partners – including the Main Street Authority, the Chamber, Southern Tech, and small-business representatives – to guide programming and strategy.

2. **Develop phased renovation and occupancy plan:** Depending on funding and building selection, outline a phased renovation strategy that prioritizes core operational areas (coworking, small offices, and event space) for the first year.
3. **Build capacity for incubation:** Work with CORI to refine the structure and services of the incubation program to ensure it aligns with national best practices and meets community demand. Identify mentors, develop curriculum, and define graduation criteria for startups.

Long-term priorities

1. **Expand staff and programming:** Add program and marketing staff as revenue allows. Introduce structured incubator cohorts, an Entrepreneur-in-Residence program, and larger regional events that elevate Ardmore's visibility.
2. **Evaluate performance and sustainability:** Conduct annual performance assessments to track progress toward financial independence, community impact, and EDA compliance (if applicable). Use findings to refine strategy and strengthen future funding proposals.

The next stage of work should focus on building readiness — both in physical infrastructure and ecosystem capacity. By moving deliberately through these phases (selecting a facility, solidifying funding, strengthening the entrepreneurial network, and scaling operations) Ardmore can position itself for long-term success as a center of innovation and business growth in southern Oklahoma.