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APRIL / MAY 2023

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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2023 Best of Business

*Best of Northwest Indiana Business
and Best of Michiana Business Awards*

*Michael Schrage, chairman and CEO
Chris Campbell, president
Centier Bank*



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GOOD BIT

316,000 The number of visitors to South Bend's Potawatomi Zoo in 2022, according to Josh Sisk, executive director. ► PAGE 20

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

AI overload is not coming to get you!

Can you imagine a world in which robots rule over humans (in an "I, Robot" kind of way)? According to some tech futurists, this scenario is what our world will look like! Some are hailing artificial intelligence (AI) tools as the "masters" that will become unmanageably powerful with the intent of replacing humans. Poppycock!

Using AI technology doesn't have to mean putting humans at risk in the workplace — it can take on all the mundane drudgery and free up time for higher-level tasks. That time will help us achieve more than ever before.

It is important to remember that any tool can be used for both good and bad. This includes the powerful AI technology available today. While this tech can give us a unique competitive advantage and tremendous benefits if used correctly, it also, like any tool, has the potential to work against us in unseen ways if not appropriately managed.

I feel empowered by, not threatened, by AI. In the past, I've always felt hindered by my many shortcomings — a lousy speller, a poor typist, etc. Those deficiencies made writing a time-consuming, unfulfilling undertaking that I dreaded and avoided. But with today's AI-powered technologies like speech-to-text

dictation, chatbots, and grammar and spelling checkers, I feel more empowered than ever in my ability to share the ideas that are rattling around in my brain.

I was looking for a quote to include in this article, so I dictated to my chatbot underling: "Give me five recent quotes from small business leaders describing how they think AI will disrupt their business in the next year." With an investment of 30 to 40 seconds of researching by my chatbot underling, I found this quote by Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo.

"AI has already transformed some small businesses, giving them access to powerful technology that used to only be available to large enterprises," Yang said.

The quote fits the most likely outcome that AI will not only be a tool to help us be more efficient in our work, but it also will help level the playing field for small- and medium-sized businesses competing with larger ones.

Are you ready to step into the future? Have you been preparing for major disruptions and technological advancements that will shape your business in the coming years?

We all should be ready to embrace the coming changes!

— Troy Linker, publisher

PICTURE PERFECT



Photo provided by the city of Crown Point

The Crown Point cruise nights season will begin June 1 from 4:15 to 8 p.m. every Thursday through Sept. 28 at Bulldog Park, 183 S. West St. The event is one of many hometown events in the growing city. Crown Point is featured in our "the future of" series.

► PAGE 32

AROUND THE REGION



Learn about people, companies making a difference at work and in their communities

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Accounting

Charles Loitz, a staff accountant with **McMahon & Associates**, passed his CPA exam. He is a member of the Munster-based accounting firm's tax and accounting team. CPA **Brandon Underwood** was promoted to audit manager.

Architecture

Benton Harbor-based **Wightman**, an employee-owned consulting firm offering architecture, civil engineering and surveying services, hired **Scott Falk** as senior project architect. He will focus on clients in central and northern Indiana.

Banking

David Bochnowski is retiring as the executive chairman of **Finward Bancorp's** board of directors June 30. His son CEO **Benjamin Bochnowski** will succeed him as chairman of the board. **Leane Cerven** will retire as executive vice president, chief risk officer, general counsel and corporate secretary of Peoples Bank and Finward Bancorp effective May 5.

The board of directors of the **Wintrust Financial Corp.** chose

President **Timothy Crane** to succeed founder **Edward Wehmer** as CEO. Wehmer will continue to serve on the Wintrust board of directors and become executive chairman through May 23, 2024. He also will serve as founder and senior adviser through Dec. 31, 2026.

Thomas Prame will become the next CEO of Michigan City-based **Horizon Bancorp Inc.** and **Horizon Bank** on June 1. **Craig Dwight**, who has been CEO for more than 20 years, will retire. **Daniel Hopp** retired from the Horizon Bancorp Inc. board of directors Dec. 31 after 18 years. **Vanessa Williams** will fill the vacancy from his retirement. **Amber Haack**, who started as a teller in 2014, was named a commercial loan officer.

First Merchants Corp., the holding company for **First Merchants Bank**, appointed **Purdue University** President **Mung Chiang** to its board of directors.

Centier Bank's board of directors named **Chris Campbell** president of the Merrillville-based bank. Campbell joined the bank in 2006 and was appointed to the board in 2018. The bank promoted **Sharon O'Dell** of Valparaiso to vice president and manager of closing and disclosures. **Teresa Quezada** was named manager of the bank's

Munster branch. She previously served as the branch manager of Centier's East Chicago location. **Jameka Williams** of Merrillville was app-based savings account **Billinero's** monthly \$1,000 prize winner.

Ohio-based **KeyBank**, which has banking locations in Northwest Indiana, named **Seth Keirns** commercial banking leader in Northern Indiana and market president in Fort Wayne.

Education

Elizabeth Bennion is the new director of community engagement at **Indiana University South Bend**.

Jeffrey Rhoads, a leading mechanical engineering researcher and pioneer in engineering education, has been appointed vice president for research at the **University of Notre Dame**. **Keona Lewis**, associate director of research and evaluation for diversity, equity and inclusion at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has been named assistant provost for academic diversity and inclusion at the University of Notre Dame.

The **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** awarded **Renee Hall** its **Michigan City Education Award**. Hall is the guidance counselor at Lake Hills STEM Elementary School.



ARCHITECTURE
Scott Falk



BANKING
Benjamin Bochnowski



BANKING
Leane Cerven



BANKING
Timothy Crane



BANKING
Thomas Prame

Engineering

Jim Fier, vice president and chief technical officer at **Cummins Inc.**, will retire at the end of March. **Jonathan Wood**, vice president of new power engineering, will succeed Fier, effective April 1. He has been with Cummins since 1994.

Entrepreneurship

Marc Waite bought **Taylor Floor Covering** at 53894 County Road 9 in Elkhart from **Dave and Jayne Steed**, who retired.

Indianapolis-based **Elevate Ventures** awarded four Region companies with the **Elevate Nexus** award as part of its fall pitch competitions:

- **SAFA**, an intelligent software development company, earned \$80,000 in seed money. The South Bend company is led by CEO **Aarik Gulaya**.
- **Kinga Safety** earned \$20,000 in pre-seed money. The South Bend company was founded by **Ambrose Kamya**, who is an innovation fellow at **enFocus Inc.**



BANKING
Chris Campbell

- **New Territory Inc.**, whose CEO is **Renee Riecke**, earned \$20,000 in pre-seed money to build an enterprise management company.
- **rel Eve co**, a feminine hygiene company, earned \$20,000 in pre-seed money. The Merrillville-based e-commerce business was founded by **Jasmine Bennett**.

Finance

South Bend-based **Healy Group** hired **Lindsay Matthys** as associate account manager and **Katherine Corpe** as director of marketing.

Government

The **Indiana Department of Agriculture** promoted **David Coates** to director of the economic development division. He was the agribusiness engagement director for the department. He also will manage the **Indiana Grown** program. Director **Bruce Kettler** stepped down to become president and CEO of the Indianapolis-based **Agribusiness Council of Indiana**. **Indiana Grown** named new commission



BANKING
Sharon O'Dell



BANKING
Teresa Quezada

members, including **Natasha Cox** of **Farm Credit Mid-America**, which has locations in Valparaiso and South Bend, and **Jeff Bricker** of **Ivy Tech Community College**.

Gov. Eric Holcomb made several appointments, including **Steven Coxhead** of Hammond, president of the **Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance**, to the **Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact Commission**, and **Angela Comsa**, vice president/chief clinical officer at Merrillville-based **Regional Health Systems**, and Lt. **Michael Sharp**, a paramedic for the town of St. John, to the **Statewide Child Fatality Review Committee**.

Matt Murphy of Valparaiso, who will represent Porter County, and **Carl Baxmeyer** (South Bend), who will represent St. Joseph County, were appointed to the **Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District Board**. **Jim Arnold** of La Porte will represent La Porte County.

Jennifer Noffsinger of Goshen, a case manager with **The Columbus Organization**, was reappointed to



BANKING
Seth Keirns



EDUCATION
Elizabeth Bennion



EDUCATION
Renee Hall



ENGINEERING
Jonathan Wood



FINANCE
Katherine Corpe

the **Governor's Council for People with Disabilities**.

Kay Nelson of Portage, director of environmental affairs for the **Northwest Indiana Forum**, was reappointed to the **Great Lakes Commission**. **Chris Smith**, deputy director of the **Indiana Department of Natural Resources**, also was appointed to the committee.

Rebecca Anspach of Star City, resident manager at **Catherine Kasper Life Center**, was appointed to the **Indiana State Commission on Aging**.



GOVERNMENT
David Coates

John Ivory of Elkhart, the former Elkhart city police chief, was reappointed to the **Indiana State Police Board**.

Dave Roberts, **Indiana Economic Development Corp.** executive vice president of entrepreneurship and innovation, is the CEO of the **Applied Research Institute**.

Health care

Franciscan Health Crown Point's Zubair Dave, an emergency



GOVERNMENT
Steven Coxhead



HEALTH CARE
Zubair Dave

department physician, earned the **St. Raphael Award**. Interventional cardiologist **Kamal Sadat** joined **Franciscan Physician Network** at the **Franciscan Health Heart Center Michigan City** in the fall of 2022 where he and his team performed the first patent foramen ovale closure procedure in the hospital's history. Board-certified interventional cardiologist **Wisam Martini** joined the Franciscan Physician Network. **Valentin Drezaliu**, a board-certified obstetrics and gynecology physician,

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HEALTH CARE
Karen Allen

joined the Franciscan Physician Network in Michigan City

Karen Allen, dean of the **College of Nursing and Health Professions** at **Valparaiso University**, is the new chairperson for **Northwest Health - Porter's** board of trustees.

Amber Peterson was the recipient of **Northwest Health — La Porte's** DAISY award for exceptional nursing, and **Miriam Carpenter**, certified nursing assistant, earned the PETALS award for outstanding support



LAW
Brian Heaton

professionals. **Team Members of the Year** also were named, including: Team Member of the Year **Tina Ribordy**, radiology assistant; Non-Clinical Manager of the Year **Jennifer Whitenack**, service coordinator; Hospital Clinical Manager of the Year **Amanda Cleek**, manager of surgical services; Ambulatory Clinical Manager of the Year **Josie McLaughlin**, administrator for Northwest Health - Lakeshore Surgicare. Triple board-certified maternal-fetal medicine



LEADERSHIP
Maura Mundell



LEADERSHIP
Katie Eaton

specialist **Guillermo Font** opened an office at the **Northwest Health Medical Plaza** in Valparaiso. Triple board-certified pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine specialist **Marvi Bikak** joined **Northwest Medical Group**. Nurse **Jennifer Mrozinski** received the Nursing Excellence Award. Nurse practitioner **Ashleigh Peterson** joined the family medicine practice of Sudhakar Garlapati at the **Northwest Medical Group — Primary Care** in Valparaiso.

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MANUFACTURING
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Jose Escalera



TRANSPORTATION
Brandon Fehn



TRANSPORTATION
Ashley Thorsen

Law

Brian Heaton, partner and chair of **Krieg DeVault's** business, acquisitions and securities practice group, was named to the board of directors of the **Indiana Chapter of the Association for Corporate Growth**.

Michael Tolbert, an attorney with Gary-based **Tolbert & Tolbert LLC**, was inducted into the **National Academy of Distinguished Neutrals**. The invitation-only organization includes members who specialize in mediation and arbitration.

Barnes & Thornburg LLP in South Bend hired **Jason Schultz** as a partner in its health care department.

Amy VonDielingen joined **Krieg DeVault LLP** as a partner in the firm's business and estate planning and administration practices.

Leadership

The **Leadership Institute and Society of Innovators** at **Purdue University Northwest** have chosen 21 women for the 2023 Women on the Rise list:

- **Kelly Anoe** of Schererville — President and CEO, **Legacy Foundation**
- **Cassie Carlson** of Michigan City — Marketing Manager, **Tonn and Blank Construction**
- **Jessica Corral** of Valparaiso — Executive Director, **Valparaiso Creative Council**
- **Kayla Davis** of Hobart — Co-founder, **Patchables**
- **Angela Deutch** of Michigan City — President, **I&D Squared Consulting (Diversity Squared)**

- **Dominique D. Edwards**, M.A. of Michigan City — Engagement Specialist, **City of South Bend**
- **Isis Fleming** of Hobart — Co-founder, **Patchables**
- **Nicole Fleming** of Merrillville — Owner and CEO, **Grandma Irma Sauces**
- **Irelynd Alexis Fornelli** of Knox — Owner, **Irelynd Alexis Boutique**
- **Liliana Gentile** of Countryside, Illinois — President and Organizational Leadership Specialist, **Leaderable**
- **Heather Hahn Sullivan** of Valparaiso — Executive Director, **Dunes Learning Center**
- **Tionna Harris Crawford** of Matteson, Illinois — CEO, **Elevation Individual and Family Therapy**
- **Gisele Jones** of Hobart — Director, Community Partnerships and Engagement, **Big Shoulders Fund**
- **Joslyn RW Kelly** of Gary — Owner and Visionary, **J's Breakfast Club**
- **Charita Lucas** of Valparaiso — Founder and Executive Director, **Future Cycle Breakers**
- **Alexandra Moran** of Westville — CEO, **Plantennas**
- **Mary Perren** of Knox — Executive Assistant, **Starke County Economic Development Foundation**
- **Catalina Rodriguez** of Chicago — Assistant Vice Chancellor of Educational Opportunity Programs, **Purdue University Northwest**

- **Shanita D. Starks** of Gary — Founder and CEO, **Stark Truth LLC**
- **Erin Stojic** of Valparaiso — Level Up Program Director, **United Way of Northwest Indiana**
- **Chelsea Whittington** of Gary — Founder and CEO, **C WHITT PR**
- **Maura Mundell**, president of the Duneland Chamber of Commerce, and **Katie Eaton**, president of the **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce**, graduated from the **Institute for Organization Management**, the professional development program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Manufacturing

Pittsburgh-based **U.S. Steel Corp.** appointed two new executives to its leadership team: **Christian Gianni**, senior vice president and chief technology officer, and **John Gordon**, senior vice president, raw materials and sustainable resources.

Joe Beyer joined Michigan City-based **Sullair** as senior vice president of sales in North America.

Marketing

The Idea Farm moved to 9.5 Washington St. in Valparaiso from Danville, Kentucky. CEO **Jose Escalera** owns **Classic Cuts Barbershop**, 9 Washington St., in Valparaiso, which is below the Idea Farm.

Braden Walker of Kouts-based **Initium Creative** joined the **American Advertising Federation North Central Indiana** chapter.

Valparaiso's **JCMA**, a marketing and technology company, hired **Greg Sirko** as a UX designer.

Nonprofits

Jessica Love is the **Retired Indiana Public Employees Association's** next executive director. She was executive director of **Prosperity Indiana**. She succeeds **Bill Murphy**, who retired after 43 years at the Indianapolis-based organization.

Elena Dwyre of the **Campagna Academy** in Schererville will step down as CEO after 11 years. She moved to become the CEO of Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona. Campagna Academy will merge with **Gibault Children's Services** in Terre Haute.

The **Healthcare Foundation of La Porte** welcomed **Patricia Luck** to its board. Luck has worked at Hiler Industries in La Porte for 40 years. Luck replaces **Kathleen Lang** on the board. Lang, who is a judge and educator at Notre Dame and IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, was a board member since 2016 when HFL was established.

Retail

Rick and Rochelle Cantrell opened a franchise of **The Vitamin Shoppe** at 1805 E. Lincolnway in Valparaiso.

Transportation

Fort Wayne-based **Premier Truck Rental** recently hired **Brandon Fehn** as its new Michiana territory manager.

Ashley Thorsen, South Bend International Airport's operations manager, landed a spot on the 2022 Airport Business Top 40 Under 40 list.

News

Holladay Properties is converting 39,990-square-feet of space at 850 Marietta St. in South Bend into a self-storage facility. Florida-based **Store Space** will manage the day-to-day operations.

Mishawaka-based **Daman** will be one of two new hydraulics Regional Operational Centers of Excellence for **Helios**, its parent company.

Elkhart-based **Engineered Foam Packaging** acquired North Carolina-based **NatureKool**. ■

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BEST OF BUSINESS AWARDS

2023

2023
Best of
Northwest
Indiana
Business

2023
Best of
Michiana
Business

BEST OF BUSINESS

Our 2023 Best of Business Awards winners found ways to make the best of a difficult year, and our readers took notice!

The companies that thrived in 2022 embraced the challenges and focused on their employees and customers.

Our annual online awards highlight the businesses our readers voted the best in Northwest Indiana and Michiana in 30 categories across six distinct categories. Our winners excelled at providing many services and products to the more than 1.3 million people who call the Region home.

Several leaders of companies on our list said keeping and finding new talent helped them stay focused.

"We established a team of young leaders in the firm to provide their perspective on where the firm is and where they would like it to go," said Barry Hall, managing partner of Kruggel Lawton CPAs in South Bend.

Some of the companies said they rewarded current employees with promotions and bonuses.

"Instead of immediately bringing in new people to fill new positions, we chose to first look at the employees

we already had and provide them with opportunities for growth and promotion," said Jeff Meyers, vice president of operations at Meyers Glaros in Merrillville.

Centier Bank gave every associate a \$1,000 bonus to help with inflation costs, CEO Michael Schrage said.

Others focused on the work and keeping customers happy. Client problems became their problems.

"Existing marketing budgets, techniques and projections were thrown out with the uncertainties that many small businesses and their customers felt," said Seth Spencer, founder and owner of the Sera Group in La Porte. "... Our team has embraced the uncertainty with tenacity."

As for 2023, business owners say they are ready for growth and finding the right solutions.

Hall said his company's goal is "to become an even better place to be — full of opportunity and a great future."

On that note, we are happy to share the results of our annual survey with readers!

— Heather Pfundstein, managing editor,
Northwest Indiana Business Magazine



Congratulations!

to the winners of:



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

BEST OF NORTHWEST INDIANA BUSINESS AND MICHIANA BUSINESS AWARDS

BANKING-FINANCIAL

Best bank for business

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Centier Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

First Merchants Bank

Best bank for customer service

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Centier Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

First Merchants Bank

Best institution for obtaining a business loan

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Centier Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

First Merchants Bank

Best credit union

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Purdue Federal Credit Union

MICHIANA

Winner

Notre Dame Federal Credit Union

Best accounting firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

McMahon & Associates CPAs, P.C.

MICHIANA

Winner

Kruggel Lawton CPAs

Best business investment firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Centier Investments

MICHIANA

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BUSINESS-SERVICES

Best place to purchase office furniture

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

HDW Commercial Interiors

MICHIANA

Winner

Office Interiors

Best place to purchase office equipment and supplies

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Pulse Technology

MICHIANA

Winner

US Business Systems



"Our firm has taken a proactive approach to adopting enhanced technology and streamline procedures to meet our client needs."

— Karen McMahon
McMahon & Associates CPAs, P.C.



"We have a great team of brokers that goes above and beyond to find our clients the right product and manage expectations."

— Aaron McDermott
Latitude Commercial

Best information technology consulting firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Pulse Technology

MICHIANA

Winner

US Business Systems

Best ad agency/marketing firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Sera Group

MICHIANA

Winner

Force 5



Photo by Rick Bella

Chad Nally is a partner at Burke Costanza & Carberry LLP and a member of the firm's litigation and business practice groups. His company earned several Best of Business Awards, including best law firm for litigation and corporate law in Northwest Indiana.

Best graphic/web design firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Sera Group

MICHIANA

Winner

Marc Hyde Creative

Best commercial printer

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Miss Print

MICHIANA

Winner

Zipp Printing

Best employee staffing firm

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Staff Source

MICHIANA

Winner

Integritas Search

Best internet provider

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

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Indiana Dunes State Park in Chesterton offers 3 miles of beach with lifeguards in the summer and 16.5 miles of trails.

Photo provided by the South Shore Conventions & Visitors Authority

READY TO ENTERTAIN

TOURISM EXPERTS SAY THEY ARE GOING FULL SPEED AHEAD WITH PLANS TO ATTRACT VISITORS TO NORTHWEST INDIANA

LAUREN CAGGIANO

Tourism in Northwest Indiana is on the rebound after a few tumultuous years. Destination and marketing leaders especially are optimistic about 2023 and beyond.

Jack Arnett, CEO of Visit Michigan City La Porte Visitors Bureau, is bullish

have the third largest number of third-party rentals in the state of Indiana, right here in La Porte County.”

This trend is significant because these venues must collect taxes due to a recent change in federal law. This means the county sees revenue from those bookings. The second factor — the nature of

worst of the pandemic) about as good as you could get.”

For the most part, Northwest Indiana destinations didn’t see significant dips in numbers because state leaders kept Indiana fairly open during the pandemic.

Elaine Bedel, president of the Indiana Destination Development Corp., said that the leisure and hospitality industry is returning to pre-pandemic levels. However, the workforce needed to staff it might make it difficult to sustain that trend.

3M+

The number of visits to the Indiana Dunes National Park in 2021, according to the National Park Service. Park visits nearly doubled compared to 2018.

on the Region’s future in terms of tourism and economic development.

“We weathered the whole COVID situation, probably better than 95% of the rest of the destination management organizations across the United States,” he said. “The simple reason is that we have two factors at play. (For one), we

the venues — has helped the county’s cause, according to Arnett.

“Right as COVID hit, folks started making different decisions on how they would travel,” he said. “They weren’t necessarily going to use the (traditional) hotels. They started using third-party (venues). So, we came out of (the

Build it, and they will come

Hotels still are a major driver of revenue in the state. In 2019, the state took in more than \$705 million in hotel-generated state and local tax revenue, according Oxford Economics. The independent economic advisory firm

“(National) park visitors ... don’t necessarily mind traveling during cooler weather, so our busy season now extends from March through October. We think those types of visitors are going to remain as we’re on the national park bucket list now.”



— Lorelei Weimer, Indiana Dunes Tourism's president and CEO

projects that more than \$820 million in taxes will be collected in 2023 by the state. Hotel occupancy might even reach 2019 levels.

Increased lodging and tourism activity has made it hard for hospitality operators to keep up with the demand, making room for hotel expansion in the Region.

In late 2022, a \$240 million hotel and multi-family project was announced near the Michigan City shoreline, according to a report from the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority. Hotels in Hammond and Elkhart also have recently opened, as report on the Lodging Development website..

“In our case, we’re desperate for some extra rooms,” Arnett said. “And we’ll be glad to see these new properties come up.”

The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi also planned a grand opening in early March of its 23-story hotel with 317 rooms at its casino in South Bend. Lou Gramm of Foreigner fame is slated to perform there June 16.

Those properties also will come to good use with investments made in developing youth sports venues.

The Visit Michigan City La Porte Visitors Bureau has made partnerships with various sports associations like National Softball Association, Baseball Players’ Association, Dunes Volleyball Club, Pop Warner Football & Cheer and others. Arnett said regional leaders should continue to nurture those leads as they represent a sustainable source of revenue.

In 2021, the bureau hosted the Pop Warner Mid America Region Championships in Football and several cheer competitions that brought about 2,500 room stays, according to the organization’s 2021 community report.

Other communities also rely on sports-related tourism. Valparaiso announced last fall plans for a new sports and recreation campus on 248 acres on the city’s east side. Crown Point and Hammond also have venues touted by Sports Destination Management.

Other Region tourism organizations are planning special events to bring back revenue.

The South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority planned Savor the South Shore restaurant weeks earlier this year. More than 20 restaurants, breweries and wineries signed up. The group also is helping to fund the return of the Gary airshow this summer at the Gary / Chicago International Airport. It had been on hiatus since 2016.

Adventure awaits

Arnett said it was fortuitous that the Indiana Dunes were designated a national park in 2019.

The high point for tourism in the Region resulted in what he referred to

baseline. For instance, shortly after the pandemic hit in 2020, the Indiana Dunes National and State parks saw an increase in visitation as more people discovered the outdoors. However, in 2022, the national park was down by about 300,000 visitors from the previous year and the state park was down as well.

“So many significant events have happened since 2019 that it’s hard to know our new normal,” she said.

But she said the designation guarantees a certain type of traveler.

“Park visitors are different from beach visitors — they do the research before traveling and extend their stay beyond a day trip to the beach,” Weimer said. “Also, they don’t necessarily mind traveling during cooler weather, so our



Blue Chip Casino, Hotel & Spa in Michigan City offers a 22-story hotel tower, restaurants and spa.

Provided by Blue Chip Casino

as a “shot in the arm” for Northwest Indiana moving out of 2021 into 2022 and beyond.

The Indiana Dunes National Park in Porter is now a tourism hotspot. The park boasts 50 miles of trails that lead through shifting dunes, quiet woodlands, sunny prairies and lush wetlands across 15,000 acres.

Lorelei Weimer, the Indiana Dunes Tourism’s president and CEO, said the numbers have fluctuated during the last three years, so it’s hard to determine a

busy season now extends from March through October. We think those types of visitors are going to remain as we’re on the national park bucket list now.”

With that in mind, Michelle Senderhauf, director of communications, said the longstanding goal has been to encourage extended stays and overnight getaways. This approach is in the best interest of tourists, she said, as it takes more than five or six hours to experience all the parks and communities have to offer.



Photo provided by Potawatomi Zoo

Zoo patrons engage with animals like giraffes at the Potawatomi Zoo in South Bend. Last year, the zoo opened a new African savanna with Masai giraffes. Patrons also have the opportunity to feed them. This year, a new lion habitat is scheduled to open.

In 2023, Senderhauf said they launched the “love and protect” sustainable travel campaign.

“While we believe this will drive visits from travelers seeking sustainable and responsible vacation options, our goal is also to provide resources and tips to all visitors,” she said. “We want to help everyone visit the Indiana Dunes area in a responsible and environmentally friendly way.”

“Indiana Dunes Tourism purchased the Pedal Power Bike Rentals business to continue providing the service to visitors and locals who want to skip the line into the Indiana Dunes State Park or explore the many bike trails our communities offer,” she said.

And for those looking for respite, the Indiana Dunes State Park pavilion will open again this season. Senderhauf said the renovated 1930s-era building offers

to rebound fairly quickly. Many people were looking for a place they could be safe with family and friends, and the zoo was able to fill that niche.”

Sisk said that enthusiasm hasn’t waned, noting that in 2019 they reported 211,000 visitors. They ended 2022 with 316,000 and expect a similar attendance for 2023. He’s also confident that the recent investment in revitalization will pay dividends and drive “record-breaking numbers.”

“Last year, we opened an expansive African savanna with a big new species: four Masai giraffes,” he said. “We were able to offer feeding opportunities at the end of the season, which were hugely popular.”

A new lion habitat will open this year, and a concession lodge and new bear exhibit will open in 2024, he said.

“We’ve focused our marketing on increasing awareness of the zoo, and the big things it’s doing right now,” Sisk said.

‘IN Indiana’ takes off

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and the Potawatomi Zoo are just two of the many destinations that the state tourism agency Visit Indiana markets.

↑ \$11M The amount “IN Indiana” messaging has generated in taxes for the state, says Elaine Bedel, Indiana Destination Development Corp.

Conservation is one facet of that aim. According to Weimer, Indiana Dunes National Park is one of the most biodiverse parks in the country, with only five fewer species than Yosemite.

This means the organization wants visitors to enjoy themselves while also protecting the ecosystem.

Senderhauf said to look for the Indiana Dunes Discovery Trail ahead of the busy summer season, and bicycle rentals will be available at the Indiana Dunes visitor center this spring.

a restaurant, rooftop lounge, event space and an ice cream shop right on the beach.

Bouncing back

South Bend’s Potawatomi Zoo on the other hand suffered losses during the pandemic, although the impact on revenue was softened by federal relief funds.

“Because we are an outdoor facility, we were able to open for the season in June 2020,” said Josh Sisk, executive director. “We also benefited from the fact that people weren’t traveling, so we were able

Bedel's agency leads the campaign that is empowering destinations and venues to market and position themselves in their niche. Enter the "IN Indiana" statewide campaign, which launched in June 2022. This effort was funded through a federal grant to boost tourism after the pandemic.

"The idea is that every entity can use it because it allows them to create their own headline," she said. "So instead of ... creating a tagline ... that might not fit everybody, what we did was allow (them to) create their own headline, to complement what they're already doing."

Visit Indiana equips destination management organizations with other types of marketing collateral, such as video content. According to Bedel, they have created some video clips that can be customized.

This means the local municipality or the local tourism organization can insert their message there.

"It saves them a lot of money because all of the videos are done already," she said. "We just insert their portion of it, and it's a lot less

expensive. Anything we create is free for everybody to use. That's kind of how I look at it. We're using tax dollars to do it. So, we might as well share it as far and wide as we can."

Delivering results

The IN Indiana state tourism campaign is no exception to that rule. According to Bedel, the campaign has resonated with entities and the target audience alike because it's versatile enough to apply to many destinations. And perhaps most importantly, it's been effective.

She cited a study that found that because of the "IN Indiana" messaging, it created trips to Indiana that otherwise would not have happened. Per the research, those visits created more than \$11 million in new taxes. That translates to a 6-to-1 return on investment, according to her estimates.

"We've focused our marketing on increasing awareness of the (Potawatomi) Zoo, and the big things it's doing right now."

— Josh Sisk
Potawatomi Zoo in South Bend



If you ask Bedel, this campaign represents just the beginning of their efforts to make the Hoosier state more appealing to outsiders and its natives alike.

"We're going to be creating more tools to be able to share with corporations so that they have a way to (attract and retain) workers," she said. "We also want to work to retain some of the graduates of our great colleges and universities."


She said students come from all over the country and world, so why not try to keep some of them.

"We need to give them an experience that says, 'I could live here in Indiana. I could stay here in Indiana.'" ■



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BUILDERS OF TOMORROW



Students in Purdue University's Construction Club took part in a Habitat for Humanity project and built tables for campus.

Photo provided by Afshin Zahraee for Purdue University

TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTIONIZES INDUSTRY, LEADS WAY FOR COMPANIES TO ATTRACT, RETAIN YOUNGER WORKERS

KERRY SAPET

Actress Lily Tomlin once quipped, “The road to success is always under construction.”

Tomlin’s words could describe both the Region and the construction industry as a whole. In 2022, there were more than 1,300 projects scheduled for construction on Indiana roads, in addition to major railway and airport upgrades and expansions.

“We’ve got a lot of stuff going on,” said Randy Palmateer, business manager for the Northwestern Indiana Building & Construction Trades Council. “We’ve got the refinery. We’ve got the whole lakefront. We have everything from heavy industrial, light industrial, commercial and residential.”

At a time when construction projects dot the landscape and reshape how Hoosiers live, work and travel in the Region, the construction industry itself is undergoing vast changes.

“As with all industries, technology is a fundamental driver of changes,” said Joe Zwierzynski, chief operating officer at DLZ, a construction services company with an office in South Bend.

To meet the growing infrastructure demands in Northwest Indiana, the construction industry also is under construction, as new technology revolutionizes the field.

Tech innovation

Jon Gilmore, president and chief executive officer at Tonn and Blank Construction, remembers being the first

person in his office to have a computer. It was 1989. Cellphones were on the distant horizon. Fast forward 30 years, and technology has revolutionized the construction industry.

Innovative software, 3D laser scanning and modeling, drones and artificial intelligence have changed almost every step of the construction process — from the architect’s first rough sketch to the builder’s finishing touches on the project. Building information management software allows everyone from engineers to contractors to collaborate on a realistic 3D model. Field instruments can project plans to scale onto frame walls, giving builders a map so detailed that small dots pinpoint the locations of screws. Gilmore likens it to hanging a projector on a crane to show the blueprints.



"In the old days, we would have actual paper prints," Palmateer said. "Now it's all tablets. I say 'old days' and I'm talking a decade ago. Instead of having the blue-print on the ground and showing someone here's where the plug goes or here's where the light switch goes, it's all being done electronically now."

New technologies have made building faster, safer, more efficient and more accurate. Because of that precision, Tonn and Blank Construction is able to design, fabricate and assemble building elements, such as exam rooms for hospitals, before moving and installing them at a final destination.

"We build buildings inside of a factory," Gilmore said of the company's 85,000-square-foot off-site construction division. "Then we take it out and assemble it in the field. We couldn't do that 20 years ago. We've proven through technology that it's accurate enough to do. There are no tape measures anymore in that building."

High-tech construction methods, such as 3D laser scans, also have enhanced job safety. Laser scanners can collect millions of spatial data points in less than two minutes. The data creates a point cloud that displays the scanned object in 3D, with an accuracy down to fractions of a millimeter. The 3D renderings of the construction site or building are used for many purposes, including structural analysis. Scanning and analysis can be done at a distance.

"It keeps people out of harm's way," said Don Williams, a division manager at DLZ.

One of DLZ's equipment suppliers, Trimble, recently partnered with Boston Dynamics, a company that manufactures construction robots. Spot, their agile, dog-inspired robot, roams construction sites, scanning, collecting information and uploading data.

"Drones and robots can see certain aspects instead of someone having to get into a boom truck," said Rich Shields, senior director of marketing and business development at Chester Inc.

Chester, now a high-tech agricultural, architectural and construction services company, was originally a seed company, founded by Orville Redenbacher and Charles Bowman in 1947. The company tested thousands of popcorn seed strains. Like many companies in the Region, Chester evolved as technology transformed the industry.

"Northwest Indiana, especially being tied to the Chicago market, is on top of the technology," Shields said.

Industry challenges

Today, in the United States, there are 9,415,600 jobs in construction; 196,200 of those jobs are in Indiana. Indiana ranks fifth in the nation in construction jobs added in 2022, according to the Indiana Department of Workforce Development.

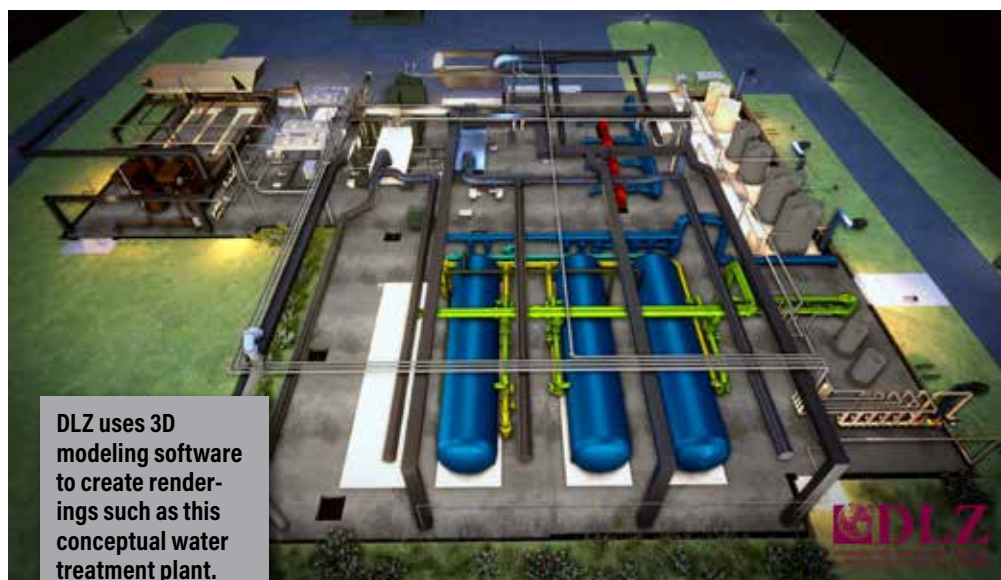
Despite the technological advances, companies in the Region are grappling with the same issues plaguing industries across the country. Supply chain issues, material shortages and heavy construction workloads have presented a myriad of challenges.

"It's a trifecta that impacts everything we do," Zwierzynski of DLZ said.

Construction companies also are struggling with worker shortages. In 2022, the industry averaged more than 390,000 job openings per month, the highest level on record, according to the Associated Builders and Contractors, a national trade association. They estimate that the industry will need to attract about half a million workers in 2023 to meet the demand.

"Indeed, the construction industry is no exception to the worker shortage," Zwierzynski said. "It impacts the entire sector, from those involved at the design stage through the final build."

196,200
construction jobs in Indiana,
according to the Indiana Department
of Workforce Development.



DLZ uses 3D modeling software to create renderings such as this conceptual water treatment plant.

Image courtesy of Anthony Glenn, DLZ

Construction is a "feast or famine business," said Palmateer, and the industry is thriving in the Region.

"There's a lot of pressure on all of us in the building community to meet our customers' demands," Gilmore said. "The world demands more today. Everything is a right-now expectation. The new technologies are helping us to do that. As those technologies continue to evolve, so will the speed and quality of construction."

High-tech training

To combat worker shortages, the construction industry is looking to the next generation. Retirement is draining the industry, with 41% of the construction workforce expected to retire by 2031, according to the National Center for Construction Education and Research. Companies, trade associations and schools are working to stay ahead of the numbers.

CONSTRUCTION

"In Indiana, we spend \$54 million a year, just in the state of Indiana, on apprenticeship training," Palmateer said.

Companies are partnering with schools, such as Purdue University and Ivy Tech Community College, to train and recruit students.

Through Ivy Tech Community College's building, construction and technology program, students learn carpentry, electrical work, and how to analyze and solve technical problems.



"The next generation has an entirely different frame of reference. Their entire life has revolved around technology. They are much more adaptable, technologically speaking, and I think that can be great for innovation."

— Joe Zwierzynski
DLZ construction services



"There's a lot of pressure on all of us in the building community to meet our customers' demands. The world demands more today. Everything is a right-now expectation."

— Jon Gilmore
Tonn and Blank Construction

"They have to have more than one skill set now. It's a whole different level. They can't just be one thing," said Bryant Redd, acting dean of the advanced manufacturing/machine tool program at Ivy Tech Community College's Lake County campus.

Schools use innovative technology to teach students before their boots hit the construction site. Ivy Tech Community College's South Bend campus is teaching through augmented reality technology.

"AR is a good selling point with the younger kids," Redd said. "The younger generation loves it. You get a feel for it with AR and then go out and do the real thing."

Growing up in a digital world gives students a boost in the industry.

"As funny as this sounds, students playing video games may actually help them on the job in the future," said Afshin Zahraee, an assistant professor

in Purdue University's construction engineering and management technology program.

"I recently spoke to a concrete truck operator, and he mentioned that a lot of the technological advances in operating the truck, or even cranes that are used on site, employ similar toggles and joysticks seen in modern video games. He told me that younger interns picked up operating this machinery quickly."

Back to basics

Construction is more than technology. Students also need to learn the fundamental skills of building. Students at Purdue University and Ivy Tech Community College gain practical skills by working on construction sites and in labs where they build mockups of houses.

"It is not enough to just sit through lectures and PowerPoints," Zahraee said. "Students need to have a taste of what is required of them on the job in the future and get that experience early before they lose interest and their passion for the field."

One of the companies partnering with Purdue University to provide internships to students is Powers & Sons, a third-generation, family-owned construction firm with a location in Gary.

"The students are very strong in the technical side, and they need more

expertise working on site," said Sharon Mayer, senior estimator at Powers & Sons. "They have to learn by watching and interacting on site."

Companies are working to fill the gap between the younger generation's tech savviness and their practical knowledge of construction basics.

"Technology is a tool, just like a hammer is a tool," said Williams of DLZ. "They can run the complicated equipment, but they don't know how best to use that information. Anyone can push buttons, but they need to understand what's behind the technology."

As companies work with young adults, they also are promoting science, technology, engineering and math programs, in hopes of inspiring middle and high school students to join the field one day.

"Generally speaking, our entire profession needs better outreach to be sustainable down the road," Gilmore said. "The more we engage youth, the stronger we will be in the future."

Next generation

"Construction does not like change," said Gilmore, who has been in the business for 36 years.

Although change isn't easy, within a few decades, construction has transformed into a high-tech industry. According to Gilmore, the human element is still key.

"We have to make sure we don't fall into the problem of relying on technology too much. If you put garbage in, you get garbage out," he said. "There's always that human touch that needs to be supplied. And in our world, it takes a lot of the human touch."

Across the construction industry, some say the old guard is stepping down and a new generation of construction workers is on the rise.

"They will bring the capacity and innovative ideas needed to address our country's ever-growing infrastructure. The next generation has an entirely different frame of reference," Zwierzynski said. "Their entire life has revolved around technology. They are much more adaptable, technologically speaking, and I think that can be great for innovation." ■



Front row left to right: Namrata Kanal, Wealth Management; Tony Martino, Business Banking. Back row left to right: Maureen Cipolla, Mortgage Lending; Phil Greiner, Business Banking; Monica Rubio, Community Banking; Paul Beneturski, Business Banking; Nikki Ross, Private Banking.

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Centier Bank employees gather items to donate to the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana. The bank is committed to helping the communities in which it serves.

Photo provided by Centier Bank

A LITTLE CAN MEAN A LOT

NONPROFITS RELY ON COMPANIES TO FILL FUNDRAISING GAPS, GIVE EMPLOYEES TIME TO VOLUNTEER

CHAS REILLY

Philanthropy can play a major role in business, and there are companies for which that benevolence has deep roots.

Centier Bank is one of those companies. It was founded in 1895 to give back to the community, said Lauren Zurbruggen, philanthropic engagement manager at Centier.

Whiting didn't have a bank at the time, and Henry Schrage opened the Bank of Whiting, which later became Centier. Schrage was heavily involved in the growth of Whiting, and he was a community steward.

"It's part of the very fabric of the Schrage family, and then it really became

an emphasis over the last several years," Zurbruggen said about Centier contributing to nonprofit organizations and other groups in the area.

According to Centier, the financial institution donated to more than 600 organizations in 2022. Centier also volunteered more than 20,000 hours last year at 560 organizations.

That is a lot of nonprofits, but just a drop in the bucket of the many organizations seeking donations and volunteers in the Region. The Indiana Nonprofit Database shows almost 6,500 nonprofit organizations in Lake County alone and more than 2,000 in Porter County.

Businesses have long collaborated with many of those entities to provide assistance

in their missions. Some contributions reach into the millions of dollars. But nonprofit organizations and other entities that rely on donations say every dollar matters. Gifts don't need to be large to have a significant impact in the community.

While corporate giving can come in different ways, there are also a variety of reasons why businesses provide assistance.

"Businesses choose to give back to the community through financial donations or volunteering time often because it is the way that they were raised and is a part of their DNA," said Jokima Hiller, an assistant professor at the School of Business and Economics at Indiana University Northwest.

Hiller said even if a businessperson doesn't have a natural giving spirit, they understand that philanthropy can benefit a company. She referred to it as the double bottom line.

"The first bottom line are your financial profits, and the second, or double bottom line, are the benefits of social responsibility," Hiller said. "This includes making a positive impact on your community."

She said there are a variety of other reasons businesses support community organizations, and that includes brand recognition, increased customer loyalty, employee retention and exposure to different audiences.

Hiller said donating to area organizations can also help business because it can create a "multiplier effect" in which resources provided to a group could be spent at different businesses in a region.

"For example, donations made to a school by a business will allow educators to go out into multiple businesses in the community to purchase school supplies, office supplies, offer incentives such as gas cards to be used at local gas stations, restaurant coupons to be used at local restaurants, student awards and trophies, new technology," she said.

Financial assistance

One of the simplest methods businesses give back is through monetary donations.

Griffith Police Chief Greg Mance said that's how the town formed its K-9 unit.

"Our canine team started in 2013, and it started from donations from the community, from residents to corporate neighbors like Centier, and it's continued to rely upon that to help it grow and expand and continue," Mance said.

The unit routinely approaches business owners when they see there are grants or other funding opportunities available. Mance said Griffith reached out to Centier about funding needed for a K-9 vehicle, and the department received a \$5,000 gift from the bank in December.

Mance said one of Griffith's K-9 vehicles was high in mileage, and when a dog is in a car, the vehicle is left running to keep it temperature-controlled.

"Those vehicles get put through a lot," Mance said.

He said property tax money and budgets only go so far in municipalities, and "those shortfalls, those gaps are filled by great community neighbors like Centier Bank."

Police departments in Lake County routinely share canines when there's a need in another community, so the Griffith dogs often help in different municipalities.

"(Centier's) donation not only benefits Griffith but benefits the entire Region," Mance said.

Dakita Jones, Centier's community relations manager, said when the bank provides support to a nonprofit or other organization, it doesn't want to just give a check and walk away. Centier strives to stay engaged with the groups it supports and looks at other ways the bank can help. That can include volunteering at an event or providing financial education.

Jones said Centier has been closely involved with Love, Jessica, which is a local nonprofit organization that provides financial support to families who have experienced stillbirth or miscarriages.



The Griffith K-9 unit was started with donations from the community. Here: Deno with handler Kevin Strbjak (left), and Kaz with handler Robert Gutierrez.

When the group initially approached Centier for assistance, the bank was able to help financially. It also helped Love, Jessica establish a plan to approach other businesses to seek assistance.

"So, we've had a really great relationship with that specific organization, and it's just a great example of how we want to support an organization and work together wholly," Jones said.

Volunteers welcome

Local nonprofit organizations agree that

financial support provided by businesses and individual donors is essential, but volunteering is equally important.

The Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana organization delivers more than 2,000 meals each day to homes, adult day centers, congregate sites and other locations to provide clients with nutrition that can help them age with dignity and maintain their independence. The Merrillville-based organization reaches Lake, Porter, Newton, Jasper, Pulaski and Starke counties.

Sandra Noe, executive director of Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana, said many businesses put together teams that receive extended lunch hours to help deliver food for Meals on Wheels.

"It takes a lot of volunteers to help us make that difference in the community, and yet, those donated services every year come pretty close to a half-a-million



Photos provided by the Griffith Police Department



Photo provided by Meals on Wheels

NIPSCO employees and their family members volunteer time at the Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana, which delivers more than 2,000 meals each day to homes.

back to the community, that's like a triple win," she said.

Noe said many businesses provide different forms of volunteer service and financial contributions to Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 697 based in Merrillville is among them.

"When we were kicking off our big end-of-the-year fundraiser, the apprentices came out and helped us set up our lights for our Light the Night-themed

fundraiser," Noe said. "Here were guys who were taking a Saturday to come out and climb up on ladders to help us put our lights up so we could have this very visual display of the impact Meals on Wheels has on the community. It was wonderful."

The Light the Night campaign included Trees of Hope outside the Meals on Wheels campus in Merrillville. The display lit up more as the organization received donations through the campaign.

Joree Richards, the business manager at IBEW Local 697, said the union's members

live throughout the Region, and they enjoy being good community partners.

"When we can, we pool our resources together for good causes to give back to our communities that we live in and we work in," Richards said.

Like other businesses that contribute to area organizations, there are a variety of ways the IBEW selects which places to donate time and funding.

Richards said IBEW members often come to leadership after hearing about a particular need, project or organization. He said many nonprofits also reach out to the union about possible assistance.

"When we're volunteering and giving back, it's a sense of pride to give back to our communities," Richards said. "That's what it means most to know that we are being a help and an assistance to the community."

Entities like the IBEW can be instrumental when volunteering at local organizations because they have equipment that can help nonprofits with specific projects.

Brian Fitzpatrick, the chief executive officer at Humane Indiana, said a recent experience with the Kankakee Valley





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“Businesses choose to give back to the community through financial donations or volunteering time often because it is the way that they were raised and is a part of their DNA.”

— Jokima Hiller
School of Business and Economics at IUN



“Those donated services every year come pretty close to a half-a-million dollars when we calculate what we would have to pay a paid driver for what we’re doing.”

— Sandra Noe
Meals on Wheels of Northwest Indiana



Rural Electric Membership Corp. is an example of that.

“They brought out all of their equipment (last year), and they helped cut down trees and clear some of the forest in our wildlife rehabilitation center,” Fitzpatrick said.

Two-way street

Humane Indiana has a shelter and clinic in Munster, a wildlife center in Valparaiso and its main office and shop in Highland.

Fitzpatrick made it clear that the volunteer services the organization receives are greatly appreciated.

“We exist only because of the volunteers because we could never afford to pay a staff” to handle all the work they provide, he said.

As much as Humane Indiana needs community support to function, the organization also focuses on ways to help others. That includes assisting area businesses. Fitzpatrick said Humane Indiana’s store at 8149 Kennedy Ave. in Highland features a “shop local” area that has items from Northwest Indiana businesses.

“So, we’re looking to also support other small businesses in the area, so we’ve got the local honey, and we’ve got the local jams and jellies and the soaps and the candles and the popcorn ... all the stuff that’s made here, we’re selling to help support them,” he said.

Fitzpatrick said Humane Indiana also handed out more than 15,000 pounds of pet food last year to area residents who likely would’ve given up their pets because they lost their jobs and couldn’t afford to buy food for their animals.

“Wherever we see people in trouble, we see animals in trouble and vice versa, and the ways that we can help, I want to be able to help,” Fitzpatrick said. ■

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The city of Crown Point could reach 42,000 residents by 2040, says the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission.

RESPONSIBLE GROWTH

CROWN POINT MAINTAINS SMALL-TOWN CHARM WITH CONSCIENTIOUS DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS

DOUG ROSS

Crown Point is a growing community that works hard to maintain its hometown atmosphere.

Since 2010, the city's population has grown by more than 7,000 people. The latest U.S. Census Bureau statistics estimate that 34,621 residents live here now.

"I see that continuing to grow," Mayor Pete Land said.

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission predicts it could reach 42,000 by 2040.

Developers are taking notice. The city that once didn't have a motel now has a Hampton Inn. Two hospitals are being

built. Stores and other businesses are quickly popping up. Along the way, public investments in infrastructure, including recreational facilities, have paved the way.

The 109th Avenue interchange on Interstate 65 opened in 2010, providing direct access to the center of Crown Point. Development quickly followed.

\$222,700

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2017-2021

\$87,500

Estimated median household income, 2017-2021



Photo by provided by the city of Crown Point

Keeping up with growth

The mayor, who was the police chief for 17 years, is focused on infrastructure, development and amenities. In 2018, a comprehensive plan was drafted to guide future improvements and growth for the next 20 years.

Chief of Staff Anthony Schlueter said the investments are paying off.

"It's obvious that the assessed valuation has been increasing year after year," he said.

That includes a bump of 8.1 percent in just one year, Land added.

One priority includes working toward a new wastewater treatment facility to meet anticipated needs not just in the

city but in surrounding areas as well. That would allow people using septic systems to have sanitary sewer service, which is environmentally the preferred option.

It's an expensive project, approaching \$100 million, but grant money will pay much of the cost, and it will happen in stages over many years, he said.

Good, responsible development will never outpace the city's resources, Land said. Each year, new firefighters and police officers are hired to meet demands of the growing city. A Federal Emergency Management Agency grant allowed the city to hire seven firefighters all at the same time. Other departments see appropriate increases in staffing and equipment as well, he said.

"I'm super protective of Crown Point," Land said. "It's larger and expanding, but it still has that hometown feel and hometown spirit."

The city employs more than 190 people and has an annual budget of \$35 million, according to its website.

Developers also are required to help provide amenities, including space for parks.

"I've lived here my whole life," Land said. "We want good amenities."

Thinking big

Some of those amenities needed some work, such as the Hub Pool at Sauerman Woods. Attendance dropped dramatically over the years. Now the pool has been removed as part of a massive drainage and recreation project at the park.

When it's complete, residents and visitors will be able to walk around a new pond. "It's going to be a big-size lake," Land said.

Patrons can rent a paddle boat or go fishing. Friends of the Veterans Memorial Parkway is planning to offer the opportunity to honor veterans as part of the trail there.

"It's a destination park, really. We're looking forward to it," said Adam Graper, director of Parks, Athletics, Communications and Entertainment, or PACE, for the city.

The Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission is kicking in \$3 million toward the project, which will provide stormwater relief to a large area on the city's east side.

The project also includes upgrades to its current facilities, including fixes to the skate park. A roundabout at U.S. 231 and South Street also is planned.

Graper said the park's estimated completion is in 2025.

Another venue that needed some upgrades is the Sportsplex just off Interstate 65. It has proven so popular that the city is spending \$1 million to replace the existing infields on six softball fields with turf, along with the necessary drainage and infrastructure for the project. The work is expected to be completed in time for this year's softball and baseball seasons.

"The city of Crown Point continues to make improvements to our 95-acre destination Sportsplex, which draws in tens of thousands of athletes and visitors annually," Land said. "The new field upgrades will keep our facility at the forefront of regional complexes and continue to make Crown Point a destination for youth and adult sports."

Upon completion, nine of the 12 fields at the Sportsplex will have turf infields.

"That Sportsplex is stuffed with national tournaments," he said, bringing "hundreds and hundreds of families."

Former Mayor David Uran, now president and CEO of the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, knows that well.



"I'm super protective of Crown Point. It's larger and expanding, but it still has that hometown feel and hometown spirit."

— Pete Land
Crown Point mayor



Photo provided by the city of Crown Point

The Sportsplex just off Interstate 65 has proven so popular that the city is spending \$1 million to replace the existing infields on six softball fields with turf, along with the necessary drainage and infrastructure for the project.

“People always invest in their kids,” he said.

The National Softball Association has been involved in Northwest Indiana since 2007, using fields in Lake, Porter and La Porte counties for tens of thousands of players. Uran, now negotiating with the NSA as a tourism executive, was mayor when the Sportsplex was developed. He said it has fulfilled his vision.

Bulldog Park, just a block from downtown, was another big investment. The

\$10 million project in 2018 became an immediate hit.

“The footprint of that facility is the old bus barn that was overgrown and rusted out,” Graper said.

The city bought the property from the Crown Point Community School Corp. in 2017. “We’re still kind of learning what this facility can do and what it can do for the community,” he said.

Bulldog Park offers not only sports facilities like an NHL-sized skating rink

in winter but also meeting rooms and a site for festivals.

Festivals all year round

Festivals are one highlight in Graper’s PACE portfolio.

“We looked at it as trying to bring that quality-of-life tradition back into one department,” Graper said.

That happened during the Uran administration, but he stepped down in 2022 to lead the SSVa after his election to a fourth term in 2019.

But the question: “What do you get as a benefit of being a Crown Point resident or a visitor?” is answered in large part by Graper’s department.

“The big beer drinking or the loud rock band might not be for everyone,” so the city tries to offer a variety of festivals and other amenities. Overwhelmingly, the city gets “fantastic feedback,” he said.

Planning the festivals is a year-round effort, Entertainment Superintendent Diane Bosse said.

“We used to have a down period,” Graper said. “It’s become something that’s nonstop. You’re planning for softball while you’re ice skating.”

Partnerships are key for the department.

“We don’t ever say we can’t do it,” Parks Superintendent Jennie Burgess said. “Any group, any opportunity, we’re just open.”

That is an attitude that helps Crown Point maintain that hometown feeling that residents value so much.



DIANE BOSSE

PACE ENTERTAINMENT
SUPERINTENDENT

Event planning is all year round from softball to ice skating.



JENNIE BURGESS

PACE PARKS SUPERINTENDENT

“We don’t ever say we can’t do it. Any group, any opportunity, we’re just open.”



ADAM GRAPER

DIRECTOR OF PACE

Rock bands and beer drinking aren’t for everyone, so a variety of events are planned.



TODD TERRILL

SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

Building upgrades reflect an effort to examine how students are taught.



JULIE WENDORF

LIBRARY DIRECTOR

Partnerships, including festivals, have led to more interaction with the community.

"You're not a customer of ours; you're a partner of ours," Graper said.

Lots of parking

A new parking lot opened last year, another partnership this time between the city and Crown Point Public Library.

The 60-space parking lot offers all-day parking. A shared dumpster for all adjacent businesses frees up additional parking spaces, as does the removal of half an island.

Library Director Julie Wendorf was happy to work with the city on the parking lot project. It serves library patrons and others who go downtown.

In addition, the city added 33 street parking spaces.

"As our city continues to grow, we want residents and visitors to be able to enjoy a walkable and inviting downtown area. Enhancing parking in and around the square is one way to do that," Land said.

Bulldog Park helps with parking too. Celebrating festivals there means the courthouse square is not frequently closed to traffic in the busy downtown.

Beyond books

The library has come a long way since 2012, when it moved into its current location at 122 N. Main St.

"The library has been actively serving the community since 1903," when it opened, Wendorf said. Previous locations were all near the courthouse square. The library also has a branch at 10771 Randolph St.

Wendorf was hired in 2015 as the library's first programming and outreach librarian. Festival participation "really made a big splash," she said. "We had an extraordinary response to that."

"By getting out to the public, we could talk about all the things the library offers."

In addition to the usual books, audiobooks, CDs, DVDs and other materials, the library also checks out Discovery STEAM backpacks for kids.

In Wendorf's initial role with the library, she began changing the way the library interacts with other entities. Partnerships have deepened. For example, the city's trolley is used to provide

around 10 tours of historical homes each summer. A reference assistant researched information on the homes using the library's Indiana Room.

A story walk outside the library is a partnership with the city, as is a story-time during the corn roast and Tour of Lights.

"By working together, we just make them bigger and better," Wendorf said.

In the classroom

Crown Point Community School Corp. Superintendent Todd Terrill said a recent demographics study that included Winfield and Cedar Lake as well as Crown Point showed 6,000 new houses are coming in the next few years. However, projected enrollment growth is fewer than 200 students. The new homes being built aren't starter homes but maybe a second or third home for the people buying them.

"That says a lot about society in general, as well as the Crown Point area, frankly," Terrill said.

All the development happening in Crown Point and the surrounding area



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*2013-2022, among Indiana community banks with less than \$10 billion in assets.



Photo provided by Crown Point Community School Corp.

Students sign a beam for use during the renovation of Timothy Ball Elementary School, which includes 13 more classrooms. The upgrades should be complete by summer 2024.

includes about \$350 million in capital projects by the school district. All of the work is being done without a referendum.

"We're building a new middle school (Taft) to replace a middle school, which has been around for more than 70 years

and in desperate need of an upgrade," Terrill said.

At Wheeler Middle School, an auditorium similar to the one at Taft is being added.

Four of seven elementaries are undergoing extensive renovations. Cafeterias

are becoming media centers, and the existing media centers are becoming STEM facilities.

Preschool classrooms are being added to every elementary building with the goal of making each elementary school capable of handling 700 students.

"You know people were thinking that our community was going to grow uncontrollably, and that has been a big pushback in our city with the growth and the new housing developments that are going in," Terrill said. "But it's really more than just being able to handle additional student populations in those buildings. It's looking at how do we teach students."

The schools are being prepared to teach the full spectrum, from needy students and special education accommodations to gifted and talented students, from college prep to career and technical education.

"Once you're done with all the construction and the infrastructure, then you know you've got a wonderful facility to use until you need to renovate it in another 10, 15, 20 years," Terrill said.

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2023 Best of Northwest Indiana Business

Partnerships lead to success

Like the library's facilities and PACE's upgrades, the schools not only serve students but the community as well.

The fire department practices rescues at the high school pool. Police and firefighters use the schools for training sessions.

Other community groups use the schools for meetings and other purposes.

Bulldog Park is adjacent to Wheeler Middle School, allowing the city and school system to share facilities as they partner with each other.

Mayor Land, who praises partnerships, invites dialogue with residents at monthly community forums. Residents ask questions about issues close to home, like missed garbage collections or specific roads that need attention. But they also offer feedback.

"(Residents) want great amenities. They want choices, even if they don't take advantage of them," Land said.

Working together has helped Crown Point to keep that hometown atmosphere and great quality of life — especially with growth on the horizon. ■



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A woman on the rise



Entrepreneur Chelsea Whittington focuses on educating clients, next generation of marketers

JESSICA TOBACMAN

Chelsea Whittington is truly a woman on the rise. And she has the Society of Innovators and the Leadership Institute at Purdue University Northwest to back her up.

She earned a spot on their 2023 Women on the Rise list, which includes 21 leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs. Whittington excels in all three categories.



► Chelsea

Whittington owns C WHITT, a PR consulting firm in Gary. She recently was named to the 2023 Women on the Rise list.

She has worked in communications for almost 28 years and has taught courses related to it at Indiana University Northwest as an adjunct instructor since 2004.

"I love teaching," she said.

But teaching communications courses is not enough, so she is growing course offerings at her business CWhitt, a marketing firm in Gary. "I want to give organizations and individuals the tools they need to build their brands,"

Whittington said. "I also want to continue to expand my career in academia."

Classes she offers now include branding with live videos, email marketing and a Canva tutorial, according to her website.

In 2019, Whittington took C Whitt full time and introduced a newsletter, C Whitt Sauce. She started the business in 2015. Now she is working to expand her business's public speaking opportunities, social media and other workshops, and on making her company's offerings available online.

She also wants to take on larger long-term projects, by acquiring state certifications for her company as a minority-owned and women-owned business. And she wants her three-person team

to grow, become stronger and more full time, she said.

With a potential client, she begins by offering a complimentary consultation.

"Meet people where they are, and work within their budgets," she said. "People must respect you for your experience."

She tells potential clients, "I'm going to produce; are you ready to be successful?"

She says the quality of the work should determine the pay.

"Don't nickel and dime yourself, and don't undersell yourself," she said. "Consider their (company's) budget magnitude and the timeline of their project. Charge per product, not per hour."

Karen Freeman-Wilson, president and chief executive officer for the Chicago Urban League and former mayor of Gary, has known Whittington since she was a high school honors student at West Side High School.

"I would describe Chelsea as a woman of faith who loves her family and community and is always willing to support others," Freeman-Wilson said. "She has a great sense of humor and is fiercely loyal."

Whittington worked as the director of communications in the administration of former mayor Freeman-Wilson from 2012 to 2015.

"It has been a joy to work with Chelsea in work and volunteer settings," Freeman-Wilson said in an email.

They have worked together for the city of Gary, Chicago Urban League, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Sojourner Truth House in Gary.

"I am especially proud of her commitment and success as a small businessperson," Freeman-Wilson said. "She has not only worked to grow her business but

takes joy in promoting and growing the businesses of others."

In May 2013, Whittington was voted Most Influential Woman of the Year in the marketing and media category by the Northwest Indiana Influential Women Association.

She also worked in various communications management and special events roles since 1994 at organizations, including the Chicago Urban League, U.S. Cellular Corp., Johnson Publishing Co., the Gary Community School Corp. and Lake

Area United Way in Hammond.

Whittington graduated from Purdue University in Hammond with a master's degree in organizational communication in May 1996; and a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism from Howard University in Washington, D.C., in May 1994.

She also was an adjunct instructor in business communications at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion from 2017 to 2021 and has been an adjunct instructor at Indiana University Northwest in Gary since May 2004. Subjects she teaches include social media, event planning, public speaking, public relations, introduction to computers, and email and the internet.

For those just starting out, she said to "be wise with your money early. As early as you can in your life, make wise choices." She said that placing a priority on being debt-free and saving "makes my dream more reachable every day."

Whittington is driven by her need to help other businesses thrive and receive support and give back to her community.

"I wanted security. I grew up in entrepreneurship," she said. As a spouse, teacher and worker in her community and church, she said, "I'm a normal, everyday American." ■

Meet people where they are, and work within their budgets. People must respect you for your experience."

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Equitable workplaces



READI grant supports Urban League's efforts to offer diversity, equity, inclusion training for companies

Editor's note: The Northwest Indiana Forum is partnering with Northwest Indiana Business Magazine to provide updates on READI grant recipients. This is the first in an occasional series.

SPENCER SUMMERS

Studies show that diversity, equity and inclusion business training has the potential to increase a company's sales revenue as well as its customer base and profits. That can only mean more economic growth and stability in Northwest Indiana.



► **Spencer Summers** has been the marketing coordinator at the Northwest Indiana Forum since 2022. Summers, of Valparaiso, graduated in 2022 from Purdue University Northwest.

Diversity, equity and inclusion is much more, though, than mere policies, programs, head counts or box checking. Equitable employers outpace their competitors by genuinely respecting the unique needs, perspectives and potential of all their employees, with the result that DE&I workplaces earn the deeper trust of their employees and show a meaningful commitment.

It's never been more important than now to build a supportive

and inclusive workplace culture, but diversity, equity and inclusion isn't just the right thing to do. It also makes good business sense.

The Urban League of Northwest Indiana Inc. has been awarded \$282,000 in Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative grant funds through the Northwest Indiana Forum Foundation. The organization's mission is to promote and enhance services to improve the social, educational and

economic conditions of African Americans and other minority groups in Lake, Porter and La Porte counties. With those funds, the Urban League will expand its existing

DE&I business training program to afford more opportunities to regional businesses.

READI was launched by Gov. Eric Holcomb and is administered by the Indiana Economic Development Corp. READI builds on the framework and successes of the Indiana Regional Cities Initiative and the 21st Century Talent initiative, encouraging regional collaboration and data-driven, long-term planning that, when implemented, will attract and retain talent in Indiana.

In 2021 the Northwest Indiana Forum was awarded a \$50 million READI grant to fund a list of 34 priority projects — including the Urban League's diversity, equity and inclusion business training program.

The READI grant's overall spending, sparked by the \$50 million investment, is expected to exceed \$600 million with an economic impact in the billions. The Northwest Indiana Forum is the Region's economic development organization, representing Lake, Porter, La Porte, Starke, Pulaski, Jasper and Newton counties. The grant funds are being managed by the NWI Forum Foundation.



The Urban League's READI funds will be used to provide awareness training opportunities to organizations in the Region and train and hire DE&I

facilitators. The Urban League's extensive training programs are customized and personalized for each organization. They will provide the appropriate tools and framework both to identify and address systemic barriers to creating a diverse and inclusive workforce, which truly represents the citizens and the communities they serve.

"Whether you are looking to make your next hire or level up your day-to-day leadership, keeping DE&I in mind can have a positive impact on your staff and your business," said Dr. Vanessa McCloud, president and CEO of The Urban League of Northwest Indiana. "With a thoughtful and well-executed DE&I strategy, you and your teams can work together to create a strong culture. This helps your organization retain talent, drive growth, show the community you care, and give your company a competitive hiring edge. But it all starts with leadership and DE&I awareness!"

The READI grant's support of this type of change is what makes the projects it funds so important to the Region and its future. ■



Many of the people involved in the READI grant process gather during an award ceremony.

Photo provided by Northwest Indiana Forum

10 steps for selling a company

Put your business' house in order before searching for a buyer

MAX FRIAR

Statistically, 61% of business owners spend either no time or less than one year planning for their exit. As a result, many owners settle for less than they could receive in a sale.

If you have two to three years to prepare for a sale, it can be time well spent. Here are 10 steps in the succession planning process that may help improve your business value and ensure a smooth transition.



► **Max Friar** is the managing partner and CEO of Calder Capital LLC, an investment bank. He founded the Michigan-based company, which serves North Central Indiana and Michiana, in 2013.

How much is enough?

Model out how much money you need from the sale of the business to retire and achieve your goals comfortably. It can be difficult, especially for entrepreneurs, to stop working, and particularly difficult if you do not know how much is enough. Conversely, if you stop working too early and without proper planning, you might wind up not having enough money. Consult with a qualified financial adviser.

Show clean, strong financials

If possible, show strong profitability in the two years leading up to the planned sale. Most buyers will want to examine at least three years of financial statements. If the seller shows one strong year, buyers might chalk it up to a one-time anomaly. With two back-to-back years of strong profits, buyers will be more confident and they won't have an argument that the business is trying to sell after one year of exceptional strength.

As you get closer to a sale, particularly in the year leading up to it, show strong profits on your tax return. Yes, you will pay more taxes, but showing strong

profits increases buyer confidence in the earning power of your business — which should increase the price. Lenders also are more likely to get excited about financing the transaction.

Clean up the company's financials — eliminate as many extraordinary expenses as possible. Examine the profit and loss and balance sheet statements for line items that are vague or inconsistent year-to-year. Work with your CPA to try to consolidate income and expense line items to show financials that are as clean and simple as possible.

Keep track of all personal discretionary expenses through the company's profit and loss statement. If the expenses can be substantiated, your business valuation could improve.

Obtain a business valuation

Think about a business valuation, the estimate of fair market value of a business, as simply information to make decisions. In fact, it is often beneficial to obtain a business valuation two to three years before your desired window to sell, so that you know where you are and what the valuation metrics are.

Small business owners often are dismayed to learn that their businesses will sell for two-to-five times adjusted earnings (depending on a variety of factors). While a properly run limited auction business sale process will yield the highest price and terms, often this range is reality for business owners. It is better to know sooner rather than later so that you can adjust your time frame accordingly.

Consider your transition period

Ask yourself what the ideal transition period would look like and the role you would play in it. If you were purchasing your business, what transition period would make you feel comfortable as a buyer?

Owners tend to work until they are burned out or close to it, not realizing that their transition post-sale may require another year or two of working,

particularly in an economy where it is difficult to find and retain upper-level management.

Furthermore, if you go to market communicating that you are “done” working or will not participate substantively in a transition period, you may significantly reduce the marketability of your business — and thus likely the value — and turn numerous buyers off.

Delegate responsibilities

Make the business less reliant on you, if possible. For example, work fewer hours by transferring your responsibilities to a recently hired or current manager. This is directly related to the last topic: your ability to transition quickly out of your business is directly tied to your level of involvement in the day-to-day operations and oversight of the business. Businesses that are less reliant on their owners are generally more marketable.

Align key staff

Identify the most valuable employees besides you and make sure they are properly vested in the business. Consider ways — for example, bonuses, phantom stock, compensation based on recurring customer revenue — to motivate that key person to stay with the business. If a key staff member has the aptitude and attitude to take over the owner's role, that can ease a buyer's mind greatly.

Given the endemic labor shortage, buyers are very concerned about staff morale, employee tenure and employee loyalty. The more you can demonstrate that your team is stable, the more marketable your business will be.

If you are considering an Employee Stock Ownership Plan, make sure that you talk to an expert to understand what that entails.

What is your employee base's skill set and age? Hiring a diversified mix of employees is vital to the longevity of your business. Now, there might not be much you can do about this, but some buyers

might frown on a business where the employees are largely close to retirement.

Diversify customer base

Consider how diversified your customer base is. While it might not be possible to shift this mix much before a sale, it's important to understand how customer concentration affects deal structure.

For example, if one customer consistently accounts for 30%-plus of your sales, it is reasonable to assume that a buyer will include an earn-out as part of the deal structure related to that customer. The earn-out is contingent payment over time based on that customer's sales with your business. The earn-out serves as a hedge against the larger customer leaving and significantly impacting the business.

Document processes and roles

Create a written business continuity plan. This protects the current value of the business if something were to happen to you or key employees.

Document key roles and responsibilities and critical business processes in writing or video so that a buyer can quickly understand what makes the business tick.

Evaluate assets

Establish the value of the company's equipment and real estate through a certified machinery and equipment appraiser and real estate appraiser. This evaluation should be done just before a sale — especially for manufacturing or other equipment-intensive businesses.

While the "asset value" may not be the proper way to value your business, showing buyers and lenders the present value of your equipment and real estate makes the business generally more marketable.

Physically clean up the company's equipment and facility to make it as presentable as possible to buyers. Keep up on regular maintenance and capital improvements, so your equipment is always in good operating condition. If you have unused equipment, consider selling it off before the sale. Buyers assume that any equipment on the balance sheet/depreciation schedule will be theirs in an acquisition, and selling off unused equipment before marketing the business gives you the opportunity to take more from the sale.

Identify growth opportunities

While your career might be winding down, the buyer will want to grow the business. Consider how you would grow the company 20 years ago. Explain precisely what could be done and what types of investment are needed. Document this, even if it's just bullet points.

Finally, the sale process can become more grueling when owners are not prepared operationally or financially for the intense

scrutiny that will come from potential buyers and lenders. These tips offer some guidance but remember to seek professional advice. Make sure you establish your team of advisers beyond simply a mergers and acquisitions expert, including a CPA, financial adviser, attorney and lender, among others. Your team is critical to a smooth acquisition and transition process. ■



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PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

Heart of business community



Chambers offer support, friendship to build community, climate for success

NORTHWEST INDIANA
CHAMBER EXECUTIVES

History shows that businesses and their leaders have banded together since the beginning of commercial activity. Codes, to govern trade and influence government, go back to at least the 17th century.

Today, chambers of commerce continue to play a critical role locally, regionally, statewide and federally. In Northwest Indiana, there are 17 local chambers serving communities from Lake, Porter, Jasper and La Porte counties. Members of the Northwest Indiana Chamber Executives Association meet to share best practices and enrich the chamber ecosystem, ultimately making Indiana's economy stronger.

Chamber members include businesses of all sizes, from Fortune 500 companies to home-based, one-person operations. In fact, the largest percentage of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's membership is made up of companies with fewer than 100 employees.

There is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to chambers, and each chamber is uniquely designed to meet the needs of its business community.

Despite that, there are some traditional activities that most chambers embrace. For example, chambers are known to be the "voice of business." Businesses coming together to educate lawmakers on what is or is not needed from a regulatory or tax policy can be very powerful. Businesses of all sizes are the engine for jobs and prosperity. A friendly business climate will enhance Indiana's competitiveness, and in large part, a business-friendly climate happens based on the intel legislators receive from chamber members.

Striving to help business and positively impact communities, many chambers execute initiatives focused on issues such as workforce development, housing and transportation. Others may offer visitor development services,

public relations, retail promotions and economic development.

Businesses need workers, and talent attraction often comes down to what an area offers from a quality-of-life standpoint. Chambers can work collaboratively with decision makers, subject matter experts and other organizations to focus on placemaking. Tackling obstacles for business success will grow the economy.

Chambers may be best known for the events hosted to facilitate networking. Chambers provide members with opportunities to meet other professionals as well as to frequent venues they otherwise might not visit. Signature events, awards recognitions and golf tournaments are some of the enjoyable ways to see friends and meet new contacts and potential customers.

As with anything in life, you get out of chamber membership what you put in. Generally, chambers offer opportunities to lead or serve on committees.

For example, there can be a real sense of reward by being part of a group interfacing with leaders in education, helping to communicate the skills needed in certain fields for the jobs of today and tomorrow. Specialized sector committees, such as a "manufacturing committee," allow for the exchange of industry ideas but also can create supply chain opportunities. A professional staff is employed to assist committee members and work closely with the members to ensure the goals of each committee are met.

The executive committee is charged with leading the chamber. Terms and officers vary and are outlined in a chamber's bylaws. A chamber's board will be listed on its website and is a "who's who" of that geographic footprint.

Chamber executives delight in being told that a business transaction has been secured because of the chamber network. Lifelong friendships often develop between chamber members. It is more than a social club. Chambers are

THE CHAMBERS

Learn more about the 17 members of the Northwest Indiana Chamber Executives by scanning the QR code on this page with your phone:

Here are the 17 members:

- Cedar Lake Chamber of Commerce
- Crossroads Regional Chamber of Commerce
- DeMotte Chamber of Commerce
- Duneland Chamber of Commerce
- Gary Chamber of Commerce
- HighlandGriffith Chamber of Commerce
- Hobart Chamber of Commerce
- Lakeshore Chamber of Commerce
- La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership
- Lowell Chamber of Commerce
- Michigan City Chamber of Commerce
- Munster Chamber of Commerce
- Greater Portage Chamber of Commerce
- Schererville Chamber of Commerce
- St. John-Dyer Chamber of Commerce
- Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce
- Whiting-Robertsdale Chamber of Commerce

the heartbeat of the business community and the best place to join to support business enterprises.

As stated by the World Chambers Federation, "Chambers are still the most important type of multi-sectorial business organizations in the world." ■

This article was provided in collaboration with the 17 member organizations of the Northwest Indiana Chamber Executives.

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Innovation for everyone



Youth entrepreneurship isn't about helping kids start businesses but teaching them skills to think big

JASON WILLIAMS

The kids are not alright. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the number of U.S. teens with major depression has increased 145% for girls and 161% for boys since 2010. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated challenges faced by young people and limited their potential positive impact on development.



► **Jason Williams** is the managing director of the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest.

Research is quite compelling about the long-lasting impact of the pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 45% of high school students were so persistently sad or hopeless in 2021 that they were unable to engage in regular activities. Almost 1 in 5 seri-

ously considered suicide, and hospital emergency room visits spiked for suspected suicide attempts.

One study found that the stress of pandemic lockdowns prematurely aged the brains of teenagers by at least three years and in ways similar to changes observed in children who have faced chronic stress and adversity.

Research also found thinning of the tissues in the cortex, which is involved in executive functioning. The brain's executive functions are specific types of self-regulation or self-directed actions that people use to manage themselves effectively to sustain their actions (and problem-solving) toward their goals and the future.

Additionally, the pandemic has had a particularly severe impact on youth employment, owing to disruptions to

education, job layoffs and income losses, and increased barriers to job market entry. For those young people who are still pursuing education, the pandemic is likely to result in unprecedented new inequalities upon graduation.

When discussing youth entrepreneurship, it is common to think about helping students learn how to start a new business. Learning how to run your own business is important, but it is entrepreneurial thinking that our students need the most.

Innovation and economic growth will depend on future leaders with entrepreneurial skills and attitudes. Youth entrepreneurship is a key tool to developing the human capital necessary for the future, unleashing the economic potential of youth and promoting sustainable growth. It is critical to the ongoing development of Northwest Indiana's economy, particularly during this period of dramatic upheaval and increasing uncertainty.

Helping young people tackle skills shortages could provide a future-proofed way to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic. Investing in youth entrepreneurship is not only critical for securing the livelihoods of young people but also for building a more sustainable, inclusive economic future for Northwest Indiana.

The Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest recently was awarded a \$470,000 READI grant by the Northwest Indiana Forum Foundation and the Indiana Economic Development Corp. to develop a youth entrepreneurship ecosystem across Northwest Indiana. In partnership with the Leadership Institute at PNW, we are focused on building entrepreneurship, leadership and innovation skills in high school students across the Region.

Accumulated from a variety of academic research, industry studies

and job skills reports, the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest has identified 36 key skillsets, such as collaboration, adaptability, curiosity, problem-solving and self-confidence, that underlie all programs and activities. Our goal is to prepare students with the skills necessary for an increasingly uncertain future.

Furthermore, we aim to address health and well-being, as well as much-needed mental health awareness. An increasingly important function of our youth programs is to help improve these aspects of our participants' lives. Studies show that student well-being is significantly better for teens who report feeling connected to their schools, peers and communities. Building strong bonds and relationships with adults and friends at school, at home and in the community provides youth with a sense of connectedness.

Innovation is a team sport. No one organization gets to own "innovation" or "youth entrepreneurship." Collaboration and partnerships with organizations like the STARTedUP Foundation, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana, ECIER Foundation, Future Cycle Breakers and others will be essential to helping every student in Northwest Indiana meet their potential.

All students deserve a world-class, well-rounded education, and entrepreneurship is an integral aspect of this goal. That is why we must break down barriers to innovation and entrepreneurship. It is critical for our Region's 21st-century economic success that all students are not just prepared to take jobs but to create them.

It is not just good enough to say that anyone can be an innovator. The time is now to engage with young people and develop their skills so that everyone has the real opportunity to be an innovator. ■



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