



REGIONAL *thinking*

NORTHWEST AND CENTRAL INDIANA EXPERTS SHARE
WHAT IT MEANS TO BUILD QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL





BEYOND TOWN LIM

7 ORGANIZATIONS CONSIDER REGIONAL

LAUREN CAGGIANO

As the saying goes, the whole *is* more than the sum of its parts.

In the global economy, the rise and fall of metropolitan regions depends on the economic health of its counties, towns, businesses and citizens.

That's the case in Northwest Indiana, too.

"The Region," as it is colloquially known, includes many municipalities that make up the state's second-largest population center.

Like other economically diverse regions, cultural, educational and health institutions — museums, orchestras, universities and hospitals — play an important role in interregional competition.

But other factors like infrastructure, environment and resources such as airports, transit systems, air and water quality, water supply, waste removal and undeveloped land transcend local boundaries. They require local institutions to work together to solve problems.

In Indiana specifically, regional economic development and business organizations operate at the forefront of the state's local economies, industry clusters and supply chains.

The Region is no different. It has the second largest economy in Indiana, representing urban, suburban and rural communities with a more

than \$35 billion economy, according to the Northwest Indiana Forum.

While manufacturing makes up a significant portion of the Region's economic base, it doesn't tell the whole story. New construction is taking place in all sectors, specifically projects driven by e-commerce. Companies across the U.S. continue to seek future opportunities in the Region, because it has land available for development, and the workforce to build and operate large commercial facilities.

However, these developments don't happen in a vacuum. When regional organizations that work on issues like economic development, quality of life and livability are in alignment, everyone wins. Through collaboration and partnerships, their leaders show they have a vested interest in advancing the cause of the Region.

In other words, economic development is no longer territorial. Everyone wins when one community gains. But a single municipality might find it difficult to woo industry by itself.

"(Regional thinking) is bringing others along with us on this journey knowing that we can go faster alone but will go so much further if we include others in the planning and implementation," said Heather Ennis, president and CEO of the forum.

Enter regional thinking ...



Collaboration drives efficiency

Regionalism can be defined in two words: working together. Collaborating to achieve common goals and improving quality of life is what regionalism is all about. That's doubly true when budgets are constrained and economic uncertainty hangs in the air. This makes working together critical. Regionalism is important because it has been proven to make both the public and private sectors more efficient and effective.

Moreover, when regions are well-coordinated and well-supported, this synergy helps reduce costs, enhance innovation and improve manufacturing processes. It's no coincidence that

ITS FUTURE



Photo provided by the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

More than 150 softball teams from across the Midwest came to Northwest Indiana to compete in the NSA Girls' Fast Pitch "B" & "C" Northern World Series in July 2022.

these are critical drivers of competitiveness. In short, regional economic development leads to job creation, attracts foreign investment and boosts economic prosperity.

Still, regional thinking means something different to every leader or organization. Here's what some of the linchpins in the area have to say about this topic and how they're making their mark on both the micro and macro levels.

Tourism matters

The South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority is the destination marketing organization for Lake County. It promotes the Region to

\$35B

The Region has the second largest economy in Indiana, according to the NWI Forum.

409K

The labor force in the NWI Forum's seven-county coverage area.

THE ORGANIZATIONS

1 Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission is the Council of Governments for Northwest Indiana. It's the place where all 41 municipalities in the counties of Lake, Porter, and La Porte convene to discuss issues and problem solve.

2 Indiana Regional Development Authority

The RDA is a quasi-governmental development entity entrusted to make public investment decisions within a regional framework for supporting catalytic infrastructure projects and inducing private sector investment.

3 Northwest Indiana Forum

The Northwest Indiana Forum is the seven-county economic development organization covering Lake, Porter, La Porte, Jasper, Newton, Pulaski and Starke counties.

4 The South Bend - Elkhart Regional Partnership

The South Bend - Elkhart Regional Partnership is a regional economic development organization catalyzing economic growth across Elkhart, Marshall and St. Joseph counties in Indiana, and Berrien and Cass counties in Michigan.

5 Center of Workforce Innovations

The Center of Workforce Innovations leads economic invigoration efforts and advances Northwest Indiana's status as a thriving regional workforce hub where individual workers and local communities prosper. Its solutions range from building and maintaining broad-based partnerships to assisting individual organizations in creating targeted talent recruitment and retention strategies in Northwest Indiana.

6 One Region

One Region is a coalition of chief executives representing many of the largest, locally controlled enterprises in Northwest Indiana who are committed to using their collective voice to advance catalytic initiatives and strategies that will enhance the desirability to live, work, and play in communities across Lake, Porter and La Porte counties.

7 The South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

The South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority is the destination marketing organization (DMO) for Lake County. The SSCVA promotes the Region to attract meetings, sporting events, group tours and leisure travelers from around the nation.

— Lauren Caggiano



attract meetings, sporting events, group tours and leisure travelers from around the nation. The organization does this through collaboration with local business owners and destinations.

Practically speaking, SSCVA serves as a resource for local businesses, according to President and CEO David Uran. A partnership can mean creating greater awareness of the Region, ultimately leading to more meetings and events booked at area venues.

The organization can also help with marketing — an area of expertise for Uran’s team.

“We can provide social and digital media services, tailored marketing campaigns, insider tips and incentives to bring events to the area,” he said.

Uran said the success stories run the gamut, but one that reflects their partnership mentality in action is the National Softball Association.

“The NSA has hosted its Midwest World Series in July in Northwest Indiana for 10 of the past 15 years, bringing in over 200 teams and 10,000 visitors annually for an entire week,” he said. “These visitors are spending their dollars in our locally owned hotels, restaurants, attractions, retail spaces and gas stations, supporting and growing our local economy.”

In other words, catering to the visitor base is an investment that can pay dividends on many fronts.

“The visitor does not see municipal boundaries,” he said. “With that, we strive to work with our local municipalities, community leaders, stakeholders and neighboring DMOs to create and facilitate great life experiences and enhance quality of place.”

Sometimes the projects or initiatives are more modest, while others are more ambitious. Uran cites the potential impact of Senate Bill 434, which Gov. Eric Holcomb signed May 4. This bill provides the opportunity to develop and construct a convention center in Lake County.

Lake County is a hub for activity, with multiple interstates,

railyards and ports. Plus, it is situated at the border of Indiana and Illinois, and 30 miles from the third-largest economy in the country. Another selling point is its proximity to other major metro areas like Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati and Louisville. It’s about a four-hour drive from all of them.

“A convention center would provide the South Shore the opportunity to bring in national, state and local association conventions, larger sporting events and other specialty acts,” Uran said. “Currently, Lake County tourism impact declines in the winter months. A convention center would provide the opportunity for 12 months of sustained activities.”

One job at a time

With growth comes the need for workforce development. The sector has experienced significant shifts across Northwest Indiana and the nation recently. Lisa Daugherty, president and CEO of the Valparaiso-based Center of Workforce Innovations, knows this firsthand.

“To respond to ever-changing needs and demands, workers and employers alike are seeking economic regeneration,” she said. “The Center of Workforce Innovations finds itself uniquely positioned to lead economic invigoration efforts and advance Northwest Indiana’s status as a thriving regional workforce hub where individual workers and local communities prosper.”

She said the organization has much to offer.

“Our solutions range from building and maintaining broad-based partnerships to assisting individual organizations in creating targeted talent recruitment and retention strategies in Northwest Indiana,” Daugherty said.

In other words, the team at CWI knows how to turn research, relationships and resources into results. According to Daugherty, CWI has administered more than 40 public

REGIONAL THINKERS

The seven regional organizations tasked with leading economic development in the Region are led by:



LISA DAUGHERTY
CENTER OF
WORKFORCE
INNOVATIONS
President and CEO



HEATHER ENNIS
NORTHWEST
INDIANA FORUM
President and CEO



BETHANY HARTLEY
SOUTH BEND -
ELKHART REGIONAL
PARTNERSHIP
President and CEO



DAVID URAN
SOUTH SHORE
CONVENTION AND
VISITORS AUTHORITY
President and CEO



TY WARNER
NORTHWESTERN
INDIANA REGIONAL
PLANNING
COMMISSION
Executive Director



MATT WELLS
ONE REGION
President and CEO



SHERRI ZILLER
NWI REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
AUTHORITY
President and CEO



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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Photo provided by RDA

From left, NICTD President/General Manager Mike Noland; U.S. Rep. Frank Mrvan; INDOT Commissioner Mike Smith; RDA President and CEO Sherril Ziller; Gov. Eric Holcomb; and U.S. Sen. Todd Young were on hand June 20, 2022, for a groundbreaking of the double-track project in Michigan City.

and private ventures intended to improve the quality of the workforce, enhance the business climate and foster a higher quality of life. With those goals front and center, CWI employees work in regional WorkOne offices, adult learning centers, Ready NWI, the Northwest Indiana Workforce Board, among other places.

No matter the context, Daugherty said it's important to meet the client where they are. In 2022, CWI began a strategic planning process focused on outcomes for clients. They believe the strength of the Region lies within workers' capacity to achieve their versions of success.

That's to say that regional thinking means helping workers identify and own their stories.

"We engaged our many stakeholders and acknowledge them as co-creators in the strategic planning process and as contributors to its ultimate success," she said. "As a result, the CWI 2023-2027 strategic plan is reflective of our belief that workers, employers and community partners in our Region are poised to thrive, and it is our responsibility to see that they do. By putting the interests of our clients first, we can work toward a higher quality of life across our communities — urban and rural — and our Region as a whole."

One example of that concept in action is their inaugural event, NextGen Youth Expo. The conference, which took place in April 2022, was hosted at Avalon Manor in Merrillville. About 800 in-school and out-of-school youth from across the Region attended to experience a line-up of speakers and sessions. Exhibitors were on site and included employers, service providers, educational institutions and training providers for in-demand industries.

In Daugherty's estimation, this event helped establish CWI and NextGen as seriously youth-focused and effective at engaging and motivating young people onto career paths. Since, NextGen has hosted similar, smaller-scale events in Rensselaer and Michigan City, and played a major role in the presentation of the sixth annual Construction and Skilled Trades Day in November 2022.

One Region, many voices

Like CWI, One Region reflects the interests of many stakeholders. According to President and CEO Matt Wells, the organization acts as a coalition of chief executives representing many of the largest, locally controlled enterprises in Northwest Indiana. One Region members represent

several of the largest local financial institutions, utilities, media outlets, health care systems, universities, real estate firms and other local corporations that have a significant retail presence in Northwest Indiana.

No matter the industry, members share a common interest in using their collective voices "to advance catalytic initiatives and strategies to enhance the desirability to live, work and play in communities across Lake, Porter and La Porte counties." In turn, these moves can translate into increased population growth and higher household incomes across the Region.

In framing the organization's influence, Wells offers one standout example. "Our members were strong advocates in championing the expansion of the South Shore Line and the transit-oriented development it is now stimulating," he said.

The Double Track Northwest Indiana project spans more than 26 miles. It calls for the construction of a new second track between Michigan City and Gary that will expand service. In addition to the second track, the project includes construction of four bridges, five stations, expanding parking lots at the stations and nine new platforms.

A big-picture approach

Projects like these are a win for Northwest Indiana, according to Wells. However, leaders must learn to collaborate in ways that produce results. The competition for talent adds another layer of complexity. Wells said that One Region members are hungry for progress. That means thinking more about the collective and abandoning what he calls a "zero-sum mindset" embraced by some local communities.

"One Region is working to become the functional equivalent of a central city by organizing a high-level group of leaders to speak with one voice in matters of significance to our shared future," he said. "NWI's opportunity landscape is exceptional, but to see it fulfilled will require a critical mass of our regional towns, cities and counties to consistently pursue common goals over a long-time horizon in partnership with an organized private sector."

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission answers that call. Acting as the Council of Governments for Northwest Indiana, the organization convenes the 41 municipalities in the counties of Lake, Porter and La Porte. The NIRPC is made up of an elected official from each of those entities, as well as each county surveyor, representatives from two of the most populous townships and a governor's appointee.

According to NIRPC Executive Director Ty Warner, these entities come together to discuss matters that are bigger than any one of them alone. Harnessing this collective energy has produced significant results over the years. Like Wells, Warner said the double-tracking of the South Shore Line and the new West Lake Corridor commuter rail expansion projects are points of pride for the Region.

However, Warner said these projects would not be possible without NIRPC at the table and lending its support. That's because it holds the federal designation as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for this Region. That means federal transportation dollars

for any road, trail or transit project in the Region are decided by the NIRPC board through the allocation of federal dollars from the U.S. Department of Transportation to the commission.

Going farther, faster

Whether it's infrastructure or another type of investment, Warner said the essence of regional thinking is to recognize that we are stronger together. It also means internalizing that nothing of any real importance gets done without collaboration toward a common goal.

"Only by working together carefully to build a solid future will this Region be able to ensure the future of its natural assets while creating a desirable place to live and work in the midst of our unique environment," he said. "We'll only have a sustainable future if we take time to build the common 'glue' that helps us all get there together."

The Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority is also part of those conversations. Established in 2006 through a bipartisan effort, the RDA is a quasi-governmental

development entity entrusted to make public investment decisions within a regional framework for supporting catalytic infrastructure projects and inducing private sector investment.

The RDA, led by president and CEO Sherri Ziller, has a bold charge.

"Our mission is to make Northwest Indiana the first choice in suburban Chicago for new and current residents and businesses and the leading area for economic growth in Indiana," Ziller said. "The Region will be the best example in the nation for balancing growth with preservation, and exciting and trendy urban and lakefront communities with tranquil rural areas. Northwest Indiana will demonstrate what Hoosiers can be when given global opportunity."

Major moves

Ziller said the RDA has put the state on the map in several ways. She cited the restoration of multiple Lake Michigan shoreline parks and funding the extension of the main runway at the Gary/Chicago International Airport. However,



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those accomplishments are dwarfed by one project in particular.

“Our most gratifying project to date is the ongoing modernization and expansion of Northwest Indiana’s commuter rail system,” she said. “The RDA led the effort to assemble the package of local, state and federal funding to make the West Lake Corridor and double-track projects a reality. We are now the fiscal agent for the project, responsible for bringing these two projects, an investment of about \$1.5 billion, on time and budget. They have already spurred hundreds of millions of dollars of new development in Hammond and Michigan City.”

This investment might only be the beginning of forward momentum. According to Ziller, the RDA estimates that the projects will bring in more than \$2.7 billion in development to Northwest Indiana and an estimated 6,000 new jobs and 11,000 new residents.

But there’s more to Northwest Indiana’s success than these data points. Ziller said it’s critical to not lose sight of two key advantages and then act together to maximize them for the benefit of everyone.

“The first is our proximity to Chicago, one of the largest economies in the country,” she said. “The second is the Lake Michigan shoreline and its crown jewel, the Indiana Dunes National Park.”

Both provide significant opportunities. “These are two massive economic engines that no one else can have, no matter how hard they try, because they are facts of geography,” Ziller said. “And both are huge selling points for both people and businesses looking for a place to settle down. Call it fate. Call it providence. We have been given a pair of tremendous gifts, but we will reap the full benefits only if we work together.”

READI for change

All of these factors attract businesses, too. The Northwest Indiana Forum is here to help them along. The forum is the regional voice for the business community and the premiere source of a full package of services that promote economic development and retention of quality jobs. The forum is a seven-county economic development organization that covers Lake, Porter, La Porte, Jasper, Newton, Pulaski and Starke counties. Its five-member team serves 130 member companies that are dedicated to improving the economy and quality of life in Northwest Indiana.

Ennis, the forum’s leader, said one key win brings the forum’s mission to life. The organization acted as the shepherd for Northwest Indiana’s first regionwide economic development plan, Ignite the Region — Northwest Indiana’s Strategy for Economic Transformation in 2018. The vision

of the plan is to improve on critical components of the Region’s economy in sectors such as talent, placemaking, business development and marketing, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship and innovation.

Through this regional strategy, the forum secured \$50 million in Indiana Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative funding to be used in Northwest Indiana. READI provided hundreds of millions in funding to 17 regions around Indiana, which have used the dollars for a range of efforts to stimulate economic growth and improve quality of place.

Through a competitive allocation process, they were one of only four regions in Indiana to be awarded \$50 million, the maximum amount, in 2021. A regional selection team identified 34 projects that were regional in scope. Ennis estimates that their efforts will result in turning that \$50

million into a more than \$600 million total investment within the borders of Northwest Indiana.

The initiatives will make an impact in several areas that will help residents thrive. For instance, projects focus on improving quality of opportunity such as the employer upskilling project or the Minority Business Skills Enhancement Program.

The Marquette Greenway project is rooted in moving the needle on quality of place. The trail will connect Northwest Indiana’s Lake Michigan shoreline to Chicago and New Buffalo, Michigan. Many municipalities are committing to a few miles that will link together. Quality-of-life projects also include the Indiana Value Chain Network, which helps farmers in Indiana, and the Tolleston Opportunity Hub, a wellness campus in Gary made possible by a combined regional effort.

The South Bend-Elkhart Region also received \$50 million in READI grants, resulting in funding for 29 projects. As the only regional economic development organization in the area, the South Bend - Elkhart Regional Partnership “was engaged to administer the regional work on behalf of the RDA,” according to the organization’s website. The partnership is charged with catalyzing economic growth across Elkhart, Marshall and St. Joseph counties in Indiana, and Berrien and Cass counties in Michigan.

“We promote regional thinking by encouraging stakeholders to think beyond their individual interests and to consider the broader regional context in their decision-making,” said Bethany Hartley, president and CEO.

In Ennis’ view, stakeholders have everything to gain by embracing regional thinking. It means playing the long game and being open to partnerships.

“It’s putting the future of the Region first and dreaming of what we can leave behind to engage our children’s children,” she said. “It is true cathedral building, knowing that many of us will not be around to sleep in the shade of the trees we are planting.” ●

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— Bethany Hartley
South Bend - Elkhart
Regional Partnership