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APRIL / MAY 2024

# Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and surrounding counties*

## 'Community builders'

*Companies find housing opportunities  
as Region's population grows*

*Drew Eenigenburg  
Owner  
Eenigenburg Builders Inc.*

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APR-MAY 2024

**Publisher/Executive Editor**  
Heather Pfundstein

**Contributing Writers**  
Lauren Caggiano ■ Bill Dolan  
Aaron McDermott ■ Michael Noland  
Heather Pfundstein ■ Michael Puente  
Chas Reilly ■ Doug Ross  
Kerry Saper ■ Steven Zalusky

**Editorial Advisory Committee**  
Erin Bonin ■ Jessica Cantarelli  
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Spencer Summers ■ Raecann Trakas  
Jason Williams ■ Linda Woloshansky

**Copy Editor / Proofreader**  
Shelley Hendricks

**Photography**  
Michelle Hamstra  
Joey Lax-Salinas

✉ news@nwindianabusiness.com  
🌐 nwindianabusiness.com  
📘 facebook.com/nwindianabiz  
✂️ twitter.com/nwindianabiz  
🌐 linkedin.com/company/nwindianabiz  
☎️ 219-230-3777

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GOOD BIT

**\$474,416**

The average list price of the 336 new construction homes listed for sale in Northwest Indiana on March 1. ► PAGE 12

IN THIS ISSUE

If it seems like something is missing from this issue, there is. We usually publish the winners of our annual Best of Business readers' survey in our April-May magazine.

We had big plans — a new website that would streamline the voting and tabulation process. But with new technology, as often happens, come glitches and rabbit holes that cause delays in the best laid plans.

The good news is that voting is now open at [BestOf.NWIndianaBusiness.com](http://BestOf.NWIndianaBusiness.com). Readers can vote once a day for each of the awards in Northwest Indiana and Michiana until April 26. Winners will be announced in our June-July issue.

The survey gives readers the opportunity to acknowledge local business leaders who are excelling in their service to the community.

For those of you who reached out about the awards, thank you for your patience and interest in our annual survey. Now, VOTE!

As for this issue, our stories reflect on the ways development is changing the economic landscape of the Region.

Construction of new homes follows an influx of new residents. Builders are busy keeping up with demand in new housing developments from Dyer to South Bend.

Those new homeowners are also looking for things to do — and they don't want to have to drive to Chicago for high-end entertainment. Since the Star Plaza was torn down in 2017, smaller venues and casinos are trying to fill the void. But state and regional officials have big plans for a convention center in Lake County. Until then, orchestras, playhouses, casinos and bars are ready for more patrons at their shows.

With new construction of homes and big projects, calls for sustainable building practices grow louder. Architects are answering with new ways to limit the impact their projects have on the environment and the people who live and work in them.

We also hear from Aaron McDermott from Latitude Commercial about how the surge in population here will bring more opportunities for commercial development.

Then we share the story of a steel company owner who also owns a golf course. Edgewater Health celebrates its 50th anniversary. And Michael Noland explains how the completion of the two-year double-track project in May will bring more opportunities for everyone. Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor

PICTURE PERFECT



Merrillville celebrated the 2024 "Still I Rise, Created for Greatness" Black History Month Scholarship and Celebration Dinner on Feb. 23 at the Dean and Barbara White Community Center.

► PAGE 28

Photo provided by the town of Merrillville

# Professional advancement



Businesses, organizations share news about new hires, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN AND KERRY SAPET

## Accounting

**Joel Cooper** was promoted to partner at Munster-based **McMahon & Associates CPAs**.

**Krugger Lawton CPAs** will welcome three new partners and 11 professionals on June 1 when Portage, Michigan-based **Cole Gavlas** becomes its sixth location. Cole Gavlas partners **Jeffrey Cole, Dan Gavlas** and **Jason Martin** will bring the team to 19 partners.

**Angela Grothaus** and **Lisa Human** were promoted to director roles at Michigan City-based **CLH, CPAs & Consultants**. **Jordan Sheets, Victor Hernandez** and **Ryan Cetnar** are new staff accountants, and CPA **Gary Bushue** joined the firm as a senior client adviser.

## Agribusiness

Hammond-based **FiberX** won the top prize in the Producer-Led Innovation Challenge, courtesy of the **Indiana Corn Marketing Council** and **Indiana Soybean Alliance**.

## Architecture

**Wightman** hired **Nandita Mishra** to lead its education team.

## Banking

**Benjamin Schmitt** was appointed the senior vice president, chief financial officer

and treasurer of **Finward Bancorp** and its subsidiary, **Peoples Bank**.

West Lafayette-based **Purdue Federal Credit Union** received a **2024 Best** award from **WalletHub**. **John Newman** was hired as the bank's new vice president of enterprise risk management and general counsel.

Merrillville-based **Centier Bank** promoted **Mike McKean** to assistant vice president, loan operations officer and hired **Brian O'Meara** as senior vice president, chief marketing officer. **Linda Davidson** was promoted to vice president, director of compliance. **Janet Gary**, longtime Centier Bank employee, was promoted to officer of the bank. **Molly Hershenhouse** joined the bank's marketing department as the lending and credit card business line manager. **Emilie Hunt** joined **Centier Financial Partners**, the bank's investments and fiduciary services department, as assistant vice president, trust officer. **Gina Boersma** and **Michael Rebey**, both of Crown Point, and **Barbra Hall** of Valparaiso were monthly and quarterly \$1,000 drawing winners of the **Billinero** savings account. The bank also received the Community Lender Silver Award and the 3rd Party Lender Award from the **U.S. Small Business Administration's** Indiana district office.

**John Thurston** was appointed corporate banking executive and senior

vice president of corporate banking at Evansville-based **Old National Bank**.

Michigan City-based **Horizon Bank** hired **David Pendley** as its divisional president of mortgage banking.

Goshen-based **Interra Credit Union** hired **Madison Olsen** as a preferred services specialist. Three employees were honored with the President's Award: **Jason Golden**, senior vice president, agribusiness lender; **Nicole Henschen**, assistant vice president, manager retail branch; and **Brad Hochstedler**, assistant vice president, senior software engineer lead.

**American Banker** named **PNC Financial Services Group's Bill Demchak** its Banker of the Year.

## Commercial real estate

**Latitude Commercial** expanded its team by appointing **Chris Marshall** as property manager and **Ken Turner** as associate broker.

## Construction

Michigan City-based **Tonn and Blank Construction** promoted four employees: **Kyle Harris** to project manager; **Adam Schwalm** to senior project manager; **April Brown** to director of continuous improvement; and **Jessica Taylor** to senior real estate manager.

**Larson-Danielson** was awarded the 2024 Outstanding Concrete Project of



ACCOUNTING  
Joel Cooper



ACCOUNTING  
Gary Bushue



ARCHITECTURE  
Nandita Mishra



BANKING  
Benjamin Schmitt





**BANKING**  
John Newman

the Year Award from **the Indiana Ready Mixed Concrete Association** for its Ironworks Plaza Improvements and Riverwalk Extension project in Mishawaka. **Clarence Gehrke** was promoted to general superintendent. **Heather Brown** is the new controller, assuming financial responsibilities of CFO **Patti O'Brien**, who is retiring this spring. **Davin Kibbe** is the new warehouse manager.

### Economic development

The Merrillville-based **Crossroads Chamber** appointed new board members: **John Jordan**, CertaPro Painters of Northwest Indiana, as chairman of the board; **Katie Holderby**, Purdue Northwest, as chairman elect; **Bethany Crose**, McMahon & Associates, as treasurer; **Patty Stovall**, **Hasse Construction**, as secretary; and **Jennifer Doffin**, Centier Bank, as immediate past chairman.

The **Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission** was selected to host a fellow as part of the **Economic Recovery Corps Fellowship** program.



**BANKING**  
Mike McKean

The cities of **Gary** and **Michigan City** also received fellowships.

The **National Electrical Contractors Association of Northern Indiana** recently gifted a yearlong **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** membership to **Selah Brooks**, owner of **Phenomenal Photo Booth Co.**

**Bryce Carden** of Members Source Credit Union and **Benjamin Tomera** of Tomera Media Production joined the **Highland Griffith Chamber of Commerce's** board of directors.

### Education

**Indiana University Northwest** Chancellor **Ken Iwama** joined the board of directors for **One Region**. **Dr. Ellen Szarleta** was the primary author of the 2023 Indiana Civic Health Index report.

**Dan White**, associate professor of electrical and computer engineering at **Valparaiso University**, was named the recipient of the Michael V. Carano Teacher Excellence Award from the **IPC Education Foundation**. **Martin Buinicki** was appointed the next Richard P. Baepler Distinguished



**BANKING**  
Brian O'Meara

Professor in the Humanities. Senior student **Matthew Yee** accepted a position with the **U.S. Coast Guard Band**.

**Mason Burdan** and **Joshua Mola** of **Hanover Central Middle School** in Cedar Lake won the **2023 Congressional App Challenge** in Indiana's First Congressional District.

Gary-based **Computer Skills and Training Center** and the **Center of Workforce Innovations** launched an adult learning center in Gary.

**La Porte County Career and Technical Education** launched a program in smart manufacturing.

**Purdue University Northwest** was affirmed by the **Higher Learning Commission** as a doctoral-granting institution. PNW received a \$7,158,034 grant from the **Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy** to advance decarbonization of the steelmaking electric arc furnace. **Amy Fry** was named dean of the College of Nursing. **Purdue University Northwest** named **Thomas McDermott**, **Diane Kavadias-Schneider** and **Jeff Strack** to its 2024 Alumni Hall of Fame class.



**BANKING**  
Linda Davidson



**BANKING**  
Janet Gary



**BANKING**  
John Thurston



**BANKING**  
David Pendley



**BANKING**  
Madison Olsen

AROUND THE REGION



COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE  
Chris Marshall



COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE  
Ken Turner



CONSTRUCTION  
Kyle Harris



CONSTRUCTION  
Adam Schwalm

**Jennifer Newsome Martin** is the next director of the **de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture** at the **University of Notre Dame**. She will succeed **O. Carter Snead**, the Charles E. Rice Professor of Law, who will conclude 12 years of service in the role June 30.

**Gary Community School Corp.** STEM Coach **Anna Swope** was a presenter at the **Center for Excellence in Leadership of Learning's** STEM Cadree Educator Preparation Programs Forum in Indianapolis.

**Facilities**

**Performance Plus**, a commercial janitorial contractor, promoted **Jason Kendera** to director of operations for locations in Gary, Michigan City, South Bend and Indianapolis.

**Government**

**Gov. Eric Holcomb** appointed two mayors to the **Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District** board: **Jon Costas**, mayor of Valparaiso, until May 31, 2026, and

**Eddie Melton**, mayor of Gary, until May 31, 2028. **Frances Vega-Steele**, of Portage, associate vice chancellor of student affairs for Ivy Tech Community College Northwest, and **Carol Slager**, of Schererville, founder of Inkwell Healthy Lifestyles, were reappointed to the governor's **Commission on Supplier Diversity** until Nov. 30, 2027. **Jessica Witherspoon**, of Valparaiso, WIOA partner navigator with the state of Indiana, was appointed to the **Governor's Council for People**

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**EDUCATION**  
Amy Fry

with **Disabilities** until Dec. 31, 2026. **Jennifer Diaz**, of South Bend, representing INSOURCE, and **Marc Ruiz**, of Hebron, were appointed to the **Vocational Rehabilitation Services Commission** until Dec. 31, 2026.

**Jennifer Thum** was promoted to soil conservation director for the **Indiana State Department of Agriculture**.

**Stanley Thompson Jr.**, **Christopher Trotter-Borrelli**, **Roberto Espinosa** and **Thomas Sarsfield** joined the **Merrillville Police Department**.



**EDUCATION**  
Jennifer Newsome Martin

**Health care**

Munster-based **Community Healthcare System** was named a Best Place to Work in IT by **Computerworld**, and opened its new Munster Immediate Care Center, which also is home to its **Occupational Health Clinic**.

The new **Franciscan Health Crown Point hospital** opened Jan. 28. **Franciscan Health Cancer Center Rensselaer** was approved as a clinical research site. Family medicine Dr. **Kimberland Anderson** moved to



**FACILITIES**  
Jason Kendera



**HEALTH CARE**  
James Leonard

the **Franciscan Physician Network Family Medicine St. John** office at 8345 Wicker Ave. Dr. **Sheryl Christy**, a cardiologist, joined the Franciscan Physician Network in Crown Point.

The **Franciscan Alliance** acquired the **Franciscan Beacon Hospital** in La Porte.

Valparaiso-based **Northwest Health** earned accreditation from the **Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education** for its internal medicine residency program. Dr. **James Leonard** was named CEO of **Northwest**



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## AROUND THE REGION



**HEALTH CARE**  
Roosevelt Haywood III



**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**  
Steve Carender



**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**  
Marc Shapiro



**MANUFACTURING**  
Michael Lorenzo

### Health – Porter. Northwest Health

– **La Porte** recently honored two caregivers: **Rachel Faucher**, earned the DAISY award for exceptional nursing, and **Ashley Hall**, a certified nursing assistant, the PETALS award for outstanding support professionals. Dr. **Navleen Gill** joined **Northwest Medical Group's** maternal-fetal clinic in Valparaiso. Northwest Health's Valparaiso urgent care reopened in December.

**Plum Creek Surgery Center** plans to open in Munster in the fall at the Lake Business Center.

**Roosevelt Haywood III**, principle at Haywood and Fleming Associates, will receive the inaugural **Edgewater Health** Circle of Excellence award during a VIP reception June 1.

### Hospitality

**Ruhani Sharma** opened the restaurant **Tandoori** in Griffith.

PGA coach **Jeff Zurawicz** opened **Good Ball**, an indoor golf simulator and practice facility, in Dyer in February.

### Information technology

**Diego Anderson** is the new executive vice president of broadband at Mishawaka-based **Schurz Communications**. **Brian Lynch** retired from the position.

**Steve Carender** was promoted to director of special funding at Elkhart-based **Surf Internet**.

**Marc Shapiro** was named an IT sales executive and **Maleeha Mazhar** a business development executive for **Pulse Technology**, which has a Merrillville location.

Jasper-based **Matrix Integration** promoted **Tim Pritchett** to vice president of technology and innovation.

### Law

**David Francisco** was appointed to the **St. Joseph County Superior Court**.

Burke Costanza & Carberry attorney **Kayla Davis** was named a member of the board of directors for the **Valpo Parks Foundation**. Attorney **Alfredo Estrada** is the **Indiana State Bar Association Latino Committee Chair** for 2024.

### Life sciences

**Vince Wong** is the new president and CEO of **BioCrossroads**, a state-wide initiative of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership.

### Logistics

**Mark Keen** was hired as senior accountant, **Tim Barnett** and **Brad Mills** as engineers, **Kristen Brier** as vice president of integrated planning and sustainable development, and **Ian Hirt** and **Matt Service** were brought on to help develop rail and maritime cargo projects at **Ports of Indiana**.

### Manufacturing

Merrillville-based **Siltworm Inc.** promoted **Michael Lorenzo** to the new position of chief operating officer.

**Angela Holt**, of **Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing**, is the new chair of the Indianapolis-based **Indiana Manufacturers Association**.

Elkhart-based **Thor Industries** appointed **Jeffrey Lorenger** to its board of directors. He is the president and CEO of **HNI Corp**. He replaces **Wilson Jones**, who retired in December.

The Wakal family opened **Wakal Machining**, a precision machine shop, in Knox.

### Marketing

**Michael Marchese** recently launched Michigan City-based **Augmented Experts**, a new platform that helps businesses with content marketing.

### Nonprofit

**GAF**, a roofing company with a plant in Michigan City, donated \$50,000 to the **Boys & Girls Clubs** of La Porte County's Great Futures Capital Campaign.

**Mariana Reyes**, assistant branch manager of Centier Bank's Elkhart north branch, was recently named Volunteer of the Year by **Junior Achievement of Northern Indiana/Elkhart County**.

**Shannon Walker**, vice president of **Unity Foundation of La Porte County**, graduated from the **Mutz Philanthropic Leadership Institute**.

The **Northwest Indiana Influential Women Association** announced elections to its executive committee: **Mary Wright**, Horizon Bank, chair; **Aida High**, NiSource, vice chair; **Robert Joseph**, ArcelorMittal R&D, secretary; and **Erica Dombey**, Regional Development Co., treasurer.

**Victor Garcia**, president and CEO of the **Food Bank of Northwest Indiana**, recertified as a Certified Fund Raising Executive. He has earned the designation since 2018.

The Healthcare Foundation of La Porte changed to its name to **Health Foundation of La Porte** to better reflect the organization's mission. **Eric DeWald** is the nonprofit's next president and CEO to replace founder, **Maria Fruth**.

**Bonnie Johnson** is the new associate chief of programs; **Lourdes Castellanos** is director of marketing; and **Christina Cook** is agency



**NONPROFIT**  
Mariana Reyes

training director at Valparaiso-based **Opportunity Enterprises**.

**Retail**

The **East Race Market** opened in South Bend.

**Blast Laundromat** opened in the **Harvest Square Strip Mall** in Gary.

**Great Lakes Sports Hub** opened in Crown Point, featuring a clubhouse and indoor field.

A new **Cricket Wireless** store opened in Hobart.



**NONPROFIT**  
Eric DeWald

**Jet's Pizza** plans to open a location in Hammond.

**Tourism**

The annual **Pierogi Fest in Whiting** will appear on the cover of the **2024 Indiana State Festival Guide**, marking a first for a festival in the Region.

**Utilities**

**NIPSCO** hired longtime Michigan City advocate **Katie Eaton** as public affairs manager.



**UTILITIES**  
Katie Eaton



**WELLNESS**  
Tiffany Blakemore

**Wellness**

**Dr. Mariah Payne** recently opened **Agape Family Chiropractic** in Munster.

**Tiffany Blakemore** opened **Vitamin T Fitness** in Merrillville.

Professional basketball players **Jarrod Jones** and **Lazeric Jones** opened **D1 Training** fitness facility in Merrillville.

**Stephanie Hunt** opened **Sage** wellness shop in Chesterton. ■

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## CONSTRUCTION

# 'COMMUNITY BUILDERS'

COMPANIES FIND HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES  
AS REGION'S POPULATION GROWS



Olthof Homes of St. John, a family business since 1961, has become one of the largest, building about 500 homes annually. In the front row are founders Karen and Fritz Olthof.

Provided by Olthof Homes

### BILL DOLAN

**N**orthwest Indiana, growing in population and fresh, new commerce, is also framing the walls and pouring the foundations of a strong housing market.

Hundreds of contemporary, craftsman detached single-family ranches, cottages, patio homes, townhouses, villas, and paired villas are under construction.

Ready-to-move-in and existing homes are listed for sale throughout the Region.

Sellers received 96 percent of their asking price, said Peter Novak, CEO of the Northwest Indiana Realtors Association.

"The housing market has been on an amazing ride."

Novak said the demand to live in this corner of the Hoosier state can be

measured by how quickly the current supply of houses for sale would be exhausted if no new houses came on the market.

He said both the Chicago and national markets have accumulated more than a three-month inventory of houses to sell, while locally it's only 2.1 months.

"That's a seller's market," he said. "A lot of that definitely has to do with spillover of people coming from out of state, in particular from Illinois."

The attractions are lower housing costs, lower real estate taxes, strong schools and easy access to Chicago.

He said the number of existing houses for sale is relatively low because many have put off plans to move. They locked in low mortgage

rates — less than 3 percent in 2021 — and are disinclined to face today's high rates environment.

But that didn't stop population growth in six of the Region's counties from 2022 to 2023, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2023 estimates.

"Domestic migration patterns are changing, and the impact on counties is especially evident," said Lauren Bowers, chief of the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Branch, in a press release.

The counties that grew include:

- **Lake County:** 499,657 to 500,598
- **Newton County:** 13,839 to 13,960
- **Jasper County:** 33,345 to 33,535
- **Porter County:** 174,848 to 175,335
- **St. Joseph County:** 272,282 to 272,848
- **Starke County:** 23,203 to 23,206





## New construction

The growth of new construction has been even more dramatic. About 70 construction firms are on the job around the four-county area, according to homebuilders' associations.

Olthof Homes of St. John, a family business since 1961, has become one of the largest, building about 500 homes annually.

"We are probably considered a production builder, but we like to call ourselves community builders," owner Todd Olthof said.

Leading national builders like Texas-based D.R. Horton, Lennar Construction of Miami, and Century Communities of Colorado began taking interest in the local market in recent years.

To compete with these large-capacity builders, many local firms moved into custom-centered work, including Phillippe Builders, O'Donnell Homes, 1st Metropolitan Builders, Diamond Peak Homes, Ennis Builders, Majestic Builders, Steiner Homes, Bucher Construction and Coolman Builders.

More than 90 percent of their Lake County work happens south of U.S. 30 in the exurbs of Cedar Lake, Crown Point, Dyer, Schererville, St. John and Winfield. Crown Point alone approved construction of 111 new single-family homes in 2023.

"Developers like Olthof, Lennar and Horton like to own and develop large tracts of land," said Bob Micunek, Home Builders Association of Northwest Indiana president. "That's why they head to south county for large pieces of land."

## Custom design

Tyler Tadian, president of South Bend's Irish Custom Homes, said he sees a similar trend in his area.

"The dynamics here are very similar to Lake County," he said. "Demand is off the charts."

However, he sees new residents coming from Michigan.

"We see a lot of people moving out of Chicago but less than Lake," he said. "We see the same kind of thing out of southern Michigan."

The University of Notre Dame helps, too. "We get a lot of demand from clients associated with Notre Dame, who want

a house near campus during the football season," he said.

Housing prices reflect that demographic. "For most local builders, our price points have gone up between the \$500,000 and \$800,000, and our clients can pay cash to build a luxury house," he said. "The highest volume in our area's new construction has been that \$300,000 to \$400,000 due to high interest rates."

But the median price is a touch lower. The Elkhart-Goshen area landed the 12th spot on the winter 2024 Wall Street Journal/Realtor.com Emerging Housing Markets Index. Median home prices are listed at \$260,000.

Those lower prices attract builders who want higher production, Tadian said.

"I bet in the next year or two, we'll see a heavy presence from outside large national builders because local builders can't compete with their economies of scale," he said.

"It's very systemized. They do that with Ikea-like schematics and instructions. If it's done well, you can build a quality house."

Drew Eenigenburg, owner of Dyer's Eenigenburg Builders, said his company has constructed about 300 homes since 1989 and is currently busiest in Crown Point, Winfield and St. John where he said lots are thriftier.

"If you want to build a new house in Munster, lots can be very expensive," Eenigenburg said. "There are only so many people who want to spend \$1 million to move to Munster. You would have a hard time recapturing that out of the house."

The town of St. John alone approved 254 residential building permits in 2023, including 215 single-family homes, 31 duplexes and eight townhomes.

When asked why so few rental properties were approved, Town Manager Bill Manousopoulos said it depends on what proposals are presented to town leaders.

"The town doesn't develop any of the land, developers bring their plans and ideas to the town for approval," he said.

"The town deals with them on a case-by-case basis."

He said future residential projects include three proposed subdivisions, which are under consideration by the town's plan commission.

## An open floorplan

The stress, time and expense of having a new home built is daunting — even for someone as close to the real estate market as Lydia Bowen. She is a Centier Bank vice president who deals in commercial real estate loans, and her husband works in construction.

Bowen, born and raised in La Porte, said she's owned several homes over the years.

"I fixed them up and flipped them, moving my way up," she said. "I recently got married and decided we would have a home together."

## WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

**"I bet in the next year or two, we'll see a heavy presence from outside large national builders because local builders can't compete with their economies of scale."**

— Tyler Tadian, Irish Custom Homes



**"Growth will have to go where you have land and infrastructure. Gary and Michigan City are obvious places to look. Once you start to gain a critical mass, it will start snowballing."**

— Micah Pollak, IUN



But they were specific about where they wanted to live.

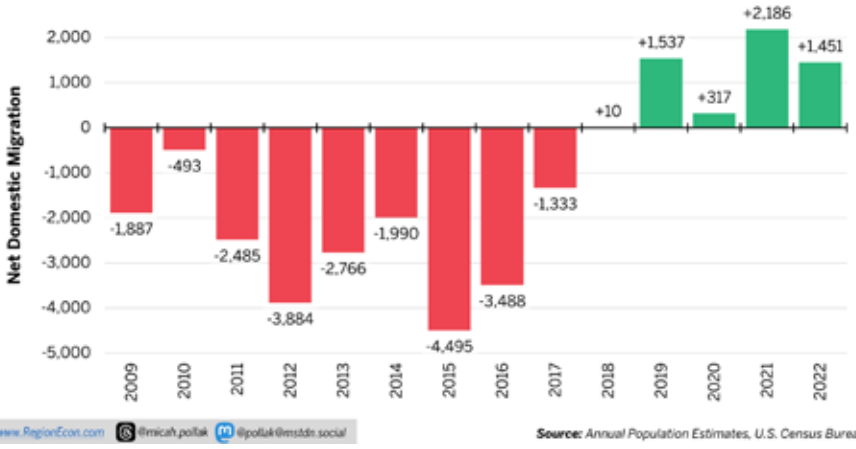
"We didn't want a subdivision that popped up in the middle of an open field," she said.

They found wooded acres that came on the market within the scenic lake communities north of downtown La Porte.

"I believe in researching your builder, so you are the one in control," she said. "We

**NET DOMESTIC MIGRATION FOR NORTHWEST INDIANA**

For this analysis, Micah Pollak, associate professor of economics at IUN, used the U.S. Census Bureau's annual population estimates for Lake, Porter, Newton and Jasper counties.



interviewed several and met with Tyler (Tadian) who had an open floor plan very close to what we were looking for.”

The pandemic and its accompanying spike in building materials costs stalled their house project for several months.

“We were out there every day checking the progress to ensure we avoided

concerns and got answers to our questions,” Bowen said. “(Tyler) was very good at working to keep it within our budget.

“We got a ranch with a walkout basement and customized to exactly what we wanted in our life. My husband even did our fireplace and the stonework. We want this to be our forever home.”

She said their total out-of-pocket cost for the house and the property and material and labor they provided was close to \$600,000.

**What's affordable?**

Housing prices in the Region are on the rise.

“The median price of existing homes sold in the area hit \$240,000,” Novak said.

Mark Markovich has been in the business 32 years as owner of Chesterton-based Mark One Homes.

“If you want higher end cabinets, crown moldings, tile and better carpeting, you will pay a little more for a better-looking house,” he said. “That is my market. I hate to say it, but \$370,000 to \$400,000 is the entry-level range now.

Realtor Chuck Vander Stelt reported on Quadwalls that new construction homes for sale in early March had an average list price of \$474,416 and a median list price of \$432,555 in Northwest Indiana.

“Homebuilders introducing new inventory are doing really well in the market,” he said. “They are giving more options





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for homebuyers. They are filling a need in the (market)."

Some larger builders entice buyers with discounted mortgage rates and closing fees.

"It is easier to sell new home construction with mortgage rates being high," Vander Stelt said. "Many builders are offering a lot of incentives."

Those higher price points can be difficult for younger homebuyers.

Micah Pollak, associate professor of economics at Indiana University Northwest, said too many young and low-income families are only looking for a roof over their heads they can afford.

He said what's missing are enough rental properties, according to an ongoing IUN housing survey. He said rental units have dropped from 27.3 percent of total housing in 2016 to less than 25 percent now — in comparison to the national average of 33 percent.

Pollak blames the overall cutback in rental property on a lack of new multi-family construction.

"There is a notion (that) Northwest Indiana cities should go for single-family homes and not apartments if they want to attract wealthier, high-income people," he said.

"I think it's a misunderstanding. Apartments aren't necessarily equivalent to lower-income households, and you need a rich diversity of housing necessary to attract a wide range of workers."

Pollak said a 2016 U.S. Housing and Urban Development survey suggests tens of thousands of renters and homeowners in Northwest Indiana, paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing, feel the deficit of affordable housing.

Attorney James Wieser, representing Northwest Indiana developers for many decades, said large apartment complexes like Griffith's Mansards, once sustained rookie professionals, like himself, in the 1970s and are just as necessary today.

"But it's challenging," he said. "The apartment concept doesn't seem to work very well."

Wieser said developers are often met with objections that apartments would depress surrounding property values and attract transient tenants with no

stake in the community's preservation and maintenance.

An exception is The Linc, a 121-unit apartment complex under construction in downtown Valparaiso — a city where 44 percent of its housing market is rental, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"I'm aware of several projects being undertaken to provide some apartments, but it's still pretty much single family," he said.

## Strong future market

As interest rates stabilize, Wieser sees Northwest Indiana continuing to expand both residential and commercial markets in the foreseeable future.

"I know what I'm working on as an attorney for developers right now include several large potential residential developments," Wieser said.

Pollak said someday future developers will rediscover communities along

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Rendering provided by Michigan City Economic Development Corp.

**SoLa (South of the Lake), a 14-story building, is under construction in Michigan City's downtown. Plans feature a mixed residential setting with a view of the lakefront.**

the South Shore commuter line, which is completing its double track and West Lake expansion.

"I think growth will have to go where you have land and infrastructure," Pollak said. "Gary and Michigan City are obvious places to look. Once you start to gain a critical mass, it will start snowballing."

Clarence Hulse, executive director of the Michigan City Economic

Development Corp., said the time is now for his community.

"We are having the first subdivision built in the city in over 50 years, over 113 homes," he said. "Along with that, we are getting 220 apartments and luxury condos under construction at The Franklin. That is a big deal."

SoLa (South of the Lake), a 14-story building, is under construction in

Michigan City's downtown. Plans feature a mixed residential setting with a view of the lakefront.

"It will be a homestead for people who are going to live and pay taxes there — taking advantage of the Indiana tax rate, a second home for residents in investor-owned units and units we will run as vacation houses," developer Barry Schain said. "We have some corporate interest, executives who would prefer staying there to some highway motel."

He also pointed to other amenities that will attract buyers.

"Michigan City has infrastructure, an increase in restaurants and hotel demand," he said. "It is all going in the right direction, a national park, the south shore double tracking and a carefree lifestyle."

Hulse added his city is looking into mixed housing and retail development on a lakefront tract NIPSCO's coal-fired power plant will eventually vacate as well as the 100-acres becoming available when the Indiana State Prison is decommissioned.

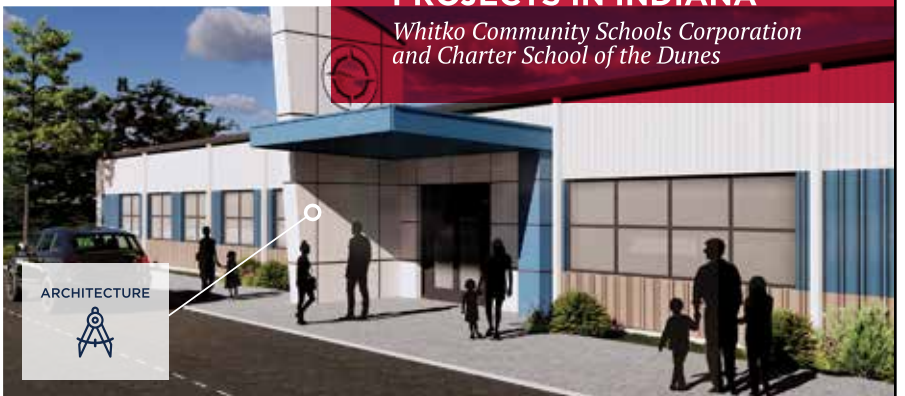
"The wind is in our sails," Hulse said. ■

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# ENTERTAINING REASONS

## OPTIONS FOR A FUN NIGHT OUT ABOUND, WITHOUT HASSLES, PRICES OF CHICAGO

MICHAEL PUENTE

**W**hile Chicago might seem to corner the market on fun, Northwest Indiana's entertainment options come with a few more affordable perks for patrons.

And sometimes, residents of the Windy City even come to the Region for its after-hours options.

"This is my first time coming down for something, but I consider Northwest Indiana part of our Region," said Olga Bautista, who lives on the southeast side of Chicago, which is right near the state line with Indiana.

That's why more and more Region residents are getting their entertainment fix closer to home — at events from Hammond to South Bend.

### More is more

**C**arolyn Jacobs is part of that group. The Dyer resident also visited the Center for Visual and Performing Arts with her husband for the C.S. Lewis production.

"We love it. It's so easy. Parking is free. You don't have to worry about anything. You just come and relax. We come here a few times a year," Jacobs

Gregory says Northwest Indiana hasn't caught up with the exploding market for live entertainment. He said more venues are needed to host productions.

"Right now, there's an influx of population coming into Northwest Indiana (from Illinois), but the arts haven't caught up with that influx. There needs to be an influx of the arts. There's a burgeoning population but not a burgeoning arts community," Gregory said. "You have artists that are in Chicago that will come over here and work. They just have to have opportunities."

He said Region officials need to step up to help the arts scene.

"Maybe there is something to do from a municipality standpoint, a civic standpoint," Gregory said. "If you go to rent a space here in Northwest Indiana, there aren't that many."

Phil Potempa, the director of marketing for the Center for Visual and Performing Arts, said the center attracts audiences from the south suburbs of Chicago to La Porte County.

School Town of Munster Superintendent Bret Heller said the board of trustees is considering buying the center's property and possibly retaining the current tenants. He said members of the community alerted them to the potential sale.

"We were immediately intrigued by the opportunity," Heller said. "... The fate of the building and its current programming and tenants stands as the primary concern, and currently, there are no definitive plans in place."

The CVPA is home to the Theatre at the Center, South Shore Arts, the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra and Trama Catering.

Another regional theater is the Towle Theater in historic downtown Hammond. The theater has been a mainstay for professional theater productions for almost 20 years.

"We're big storytellers here," said Emily Nelson, Towle executive director. "I don't want to say we're cutting



Photo provided by Blue Chip Casino

**Blue Chip Casino in Michigan City featured Journey tribute band ReCaptured on March 9.**

Bautista attended "C.S. Lewis on Stage" in February at the Center for the Visual and Performing Arts in Munster.

"It's easy. It's like a 15- to 20-minute drive. I get to see some amazing artists here," Bautista said. "A lot of my friends and family have moved to Indiana, so it feels like home."

Of course, traveling to Chicago from Northwest Indiana is time consuming (at least 60 minutes one way by automobile) and expensive, at least \$150 if you factor in gasoline, tolls and parking — not including dinner or tickets to an event.

said. "It's hassle free when you come here. And they have a lot of great quality and lots of variety here. It is on a professional level."

Another patron, Caren Jankowski of Valparaiso, says Northwest Indiana needs more quality entertainment.

"I think this is a wonderful experience," Jankowski said. "I wish more people knew about it."

"C.L. Lewis on Stage" director Timothy Gregory, who lives in Dyer, owns Provision Theater Co., which stages productions in and around the Chicago area.





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# TO STAY

edge but like new and upcoming works. Stuff that isn't very familiar, but many shows tell a significant story."

Just a block away from the Illinois-Indiana state line, the Towle Theater has a distinct advantage in grabbing Chicagoans to spend their time and money in Northwest Indiana.

"I feel it's like a 50/50 split. A lot of our audience is for sure in Northwest Indiana, but we do get a lot of people from Chicago," Nelson said. "I think it's a vibrant theater but not too many people know about it."

Nelson said construction in downtown Hammond can make it difficult to get to the theater. But other than that, it's a great place to catch a production.

"I think this is a very vibrant place, and it is upcoming. It's such an intimate space, but that creates such great art," said Nelson, who became director in February. "A lot of people don't know about us. I think we just have to get out there and share our stories."

## Filling the void

The big man on campus for local entertainment in Northwest Indiana for more than four decades was the Star Plaza Theater in Merrillville.

At U.S. 30 and Interstate 65, Donna Summer opened the Star Plaza in December 1979. For almost four decades, the theater attracted some of the biggest names in entertainment, from Garth Brooks, Bob Hope and Whitney Houston to Christina Aguilera. But it was closed and demolished in 2017.

For a while, attracting top notch entertainment suffered in the Region, but it's picked back up thanks to local casinos such as Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, Hard Rock Casino in Gary and Blue Chip Casino in Michigan City.

Pitbull, Diana Ross and a host of comedians and top country stars have been coming to the Hard Rock Casino over the past year.

"When the Star Plaza closed down, the market was left really untapped," said Shane Evans, who co-owns the Hobart Art



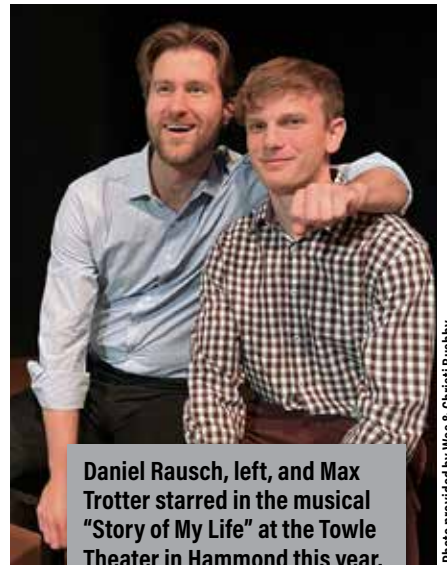
The Los Angeles-based group L.A. Guns performed at the Hobart Art Theater in February.

Photo provided by Words Can't Explain Creations



The LCSO re-signed Musical Director Carolyn Watson to a three-year stay.

Photo provided by LCSO



Daniel Rausch, left, and Max Trotter starred in the musical "Story of My Life" at the Towle Theater in Hammond this year.

Photo provided by Wes & Christi Bushby



Munster's Theatre at the Center production of the Broadway smash "Million Dollar Quartet," starring Ariel Williams and Zachary Stevenson, broke box office records in early 2019.

Photo by Guy Rhodes

## TOURISM

Theater with Blake Gillespie. “Of course, now you have the Hard Rock Casino involved. They are a big player in the area.”

Blue Chip Casino also is signing some big acts. A Boyd Gaming Corp. spokesperson recently announced a June 1 visit there by comedian Matt Matthews.

The Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority wants to help fill that void with a convention center. A new study that builds on a 2018 analysis confirmed that there is a need in Lake County for an entertainment venue. The state agrees, too, with a promise to match up to \$100 million for the construction.

“When the Radisson hotel and conference center closed, it left a gap in Lake County’s event space market,” said Charles Johnson, CEO of Johnson Consulting, in a press release.

His company scored 14 locations for the new facility. Patriot Park in Hobart was the study’s leading site to implement its 145,000-square-foot plan. The Hard Rock in Gary came in second, with Century Mall in Merrillville; the former Radisson Hotel at Star Plaza site at I-65 and U.S. 30;

and Kennedy Avenue and Interstate 94 in Hammond rounding out the top five.

“A new, state-of-the-art convention center adding millions of dollars to the local economy every year would keep ... momentum rolling and help cement the Region as the place to be,” said Sherri Ziller, CEO of the RDA, in a press release.

### Ready for more

**T**he Art Theater in downtown Hobart is a venue that is trying to attract talent that’s a notch below what you might find at the Hard Rock Casino, or possibly a new convention center in Lake County.

“(Hard Rock gets) those bigger acts that we really can’t touch, but anything under that, we’re going after,” Evans said.

He said the demand for entertainment options is there.

“The feedback we get from our guests is that our venue is stellar, and they love the experience they get here,” he said.

Evans has operated the Hobart Art Theater since 2019. It originally opened in 1941 as a single-screen movie theater.

“The Art Theater has been around for a

long time,” Evans said. “It’s one of those best-kept secrets.”

The theater hosts comedians, comedy acts and tribute bands that cover the classics like Nirvana and even the late Tejano singer Selena.

“We work hard to keep really diverse options. I’m kind of a rock guy, but it’s important to us that we’re doing things that are eclectic and unique and across the board,” Evans said. “We try to have something for everybody if and when we can. We like to mix it up and do things that will appeal to any and all age groups.”

Evans said the venue attracts followers from near and far.

“Most of it is Hobart and then a lot of Merrillville,” Evans said. “Third is Chicago or the 773 area code. We also get a lot of people from La Porte, South Bend and even Lafayette. We kind of shoot for a 60-mile radius.”

When Chicagoans attend events at the Hobart Art Theater, it’s welcome news to learn that they don’t have to pay for parking and drinks aren’t double digits.



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“They’re shocked that they are not paying \$20, \$30 or \$40 for parking, and drinks aren’t \$12,” Evans said. “There is neighborhood parking, and we keep concessions and drink prices as low as we can for shows. If you’ve shopped for tickets in the past year, you know how ticketing prices can be nowadays. We work hard to keep tickets at a very reasonable price and moderate level for people for sure.”

### Classical tastes

For others who like classical music, the La Porte County Symphony Orchestra offers a 60-member orchestra. It hosts about eight performances a year at the La Porte Civic Auditorium.

“We are in our 51st season,” said Emily Yiannias, executive director of the symphony. “We started out as a community orchestra and have grown into a professional orchestra.”

In addition to hosting four subscription concerts a year in November, February, March and April, the orchestra also hosts the Hoosier Star Voice competition in September.

“We’re in our 19th year. We get contestants from all over the state and from southwest Michigan,” Yiannias said.

The orchestra also performs a holiday pops concert in December and education concerts for children in October.

“We get about 5,000 school children come through over the course of a day for three concerts in October. We also do a summer concert in an outdoor venue in Michigan City,” Yiannias said.

Yiannias said the orchestra is trying to extend its reach into Porter County, which does not have a professional orchestra.

“It is wonderful to have this professional orchestra right in our backyard here. You don’t have to fight traffic or find a place to park,” Yiannias said.

One of the orchestra’s bigger performances will be April 20 with the Classical Mystery Tour for Beatlemania! “It’s going to be so cool. They do the costumes and the whole thing,” Yiannias said.

The board of directors also re-signed the LCSO’s musical director to a three-year contract. Carolyn Watson was brought on in 2021 after a nationwide

search. The native of Australia directs performances worldwide. She also is principal guest conductor of the Kansas City Chamber Orchestra and the director of orchestras at the University of Illinois.

“Under her leadership, the LCSO has achieved new levels of artistic excellence and will no doubt continue to do so over the next three years,” Yiannias said.

### Around the corner

Northwest Indiana is home to a host of smaller venues, including Dunes Arts Summer Theatre. It also offers musical theater classes for students.

Local bars are a good option too, including Hunter’s Brewing in Chesterton.

“Besides good beer, every Thursday through Sunday is live music. They do painting and other family-friendly specials too,” said Jean Morin, a regular patron there. “I’d much rather go local than downtown because of traffic and parking. Plus, supporting local is important.

“I think Northwest Indiana has a lot to offer; sometimes it’s just hard to find it all.” ■

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The University of Notre Dames' Joyce Center arena has 32,000 trays of plants with 25 plant species. The university has six buildings with rooftop greenscapes.

Photo by Matt Cashore/University of Notre Dame

KERRY SAPET

**A**s climate change becomes more urgent, so does the challenge to create sustainable buildings.

Tom Vavrek, owner of Vavrek Architects Inc. in Whiting, has seen the field of architecture change as people become more aware of the need for sustainability.

"The discussion of sustainable architecture started when I was in school nearly 30 years ago; however, back then it was considered more of a niche," Vavrek said. "Today, with concerns over the climate crisis, sustainable design has become a mainstream issue."

Greg Monberg, the director of architecture for Wightman, said buildings designed before World War II were

more sustainable because air conditioning wasn't widely available then. Electricity also played a part in the movement away from more natural lighting and ventilation.

"The energy prices of the 1970s started a movement towards sustainability and energy efficiency," he said.

Since then, he said, standards for energy efficiency and sustainability have pushed designers to think of more efficient ways of building.

According to the World Green Building Council, 47% of building professionals expected the majority of their projects would be sustainable by 2021.

Sustainable architecture will play a pivotal role in reshaping the built environment in communities across the Region.

Buildings are responsible for 40% of the total energy use in the United States, according to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. They account for 75% of the nation's electricity consumption and 35% of the nation's carbon dioxide emissions.

"Based on this, any impactful improvement we can make as an industry will greatly affect total emissions released into our environment," said Ryan Anderson, architect at Shive-Hattery, a Midwest-based architecture firm.

Climate change is impacting states across the country differently due to variations in geography, climate and industry. The Hoosier state is no different. Its history, steeped in agriculture and manufacturing, has its own set of challenges.



**“We wanted to be good citizens of the world and set an example. It makes me feel good that I (built a net-zero facility), and I would do it again.”**

— Dr. Claude Gendreau  
Veterinary Orthopedic Center

“Sustainability is something very few people thought about when Northwest Indiana was being industrialized over a hundred years ago,” Vavrek said. “In some ways, we continue to pay the price for decisions made by those in the past and will continue to do so for many years to come.”

### Sustainable design

Sustainable architecture involves a fundamental shift in design philosophy.

As architects work to devise buildings that are healthier for the environment and for people, they are rethinking traditional designs, materials and construction processes.

“Architects are utilizing many different methods to conserve power, water and maintain better indoor air quality,” Vavrek said. “The means to achieve this can range from the selection of low VOC (volatile organic compound) adhesives and paints to incorporating alternative energy systems.”

Vavrek’s firm designed The Mascot Hall of Fame in Whiting, built on the site of the Standard Oil Co. refinery from the 1890s. The building’s design includes a rain screen system, high-performance glass and broad overhangs to minimize solar heat gain, while still offering views of the lake.

“Many passive approaches can also be incorporated into the design such as studying the building orientation, the effects of landscaping to reduce solar gain and building insulation,” Vavrek said.

Other facilities, like the Veterinary Orthopedic Center in Highland, are taking those concepts a step further.

“People use too much of everything constantly. We are known for wasting,” said Dr. Claude Gendreau, veterinary surgeon and owner of the Veterinary Orthopedic Center in Highland. “We

are rich in natural resources, but we still have to conserve them.”

His facility is LEED certified. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is a green building rating system used worldwide. The building features materials with high recycled content

and Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood. During construction, waste was reused or recycled.

The Veterinary Orthopedic Center also is an example of a net-zero facility. The concept is a cornerstone of sustainable design.

Net-zero buildings produce as much energy as they consume, creating a balance that mitigates the environmental footprint. The integration of energy-efficient designs, solar panels, wind turbines and other renewable energy systems is a defining feature of net-zero buildings.



Photo provided by the Veterinary Orthopedic Center

Topped with solar panels, Gendreau’s center is all electric with no gas. Insulation, windows and high-efficiency heating and cooling systems reduce the building’s energy demand.

“I have been concerned about climate change for 20 years,” Gendreau said. “I am a believer that we need to conserve our resources. Our behavior is really causing damage.”

Gendreau worked with the architectural firm Farr & Associates

in Chicago to design the building. The building is part of the Cardinal Campus, a carbon-free office park — the first of its kind in Northwest Indiana.

“We wanted to be good citizens of the world and set an example,” Gendreau said. “It makes me feel good that I did this, and I would do it again.”

Monberg said Wightman also believes in being a good steward of the people who will work in their buildings.

“Our focus, more than ever, has been on the health and wellness of the people who live, work and learn inside the buildings we design,” he said.

### Construction waste

While architects of buildings in the Region moving beyond conventional designs to incorporate eco-friendly elements into their creations, they also are thinking more about the waste that comes with construction.

“The building industry is a major consumer of natural resources, and when incorporating sustainable design principles, it promotes efficient use of our finite natural resources, such as water, timber, minerals and fossil fuels,” Anderson said.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an estimated 600 million tons of construction waste are







Photo provided by Rob Szrom

The bioswale at St. Paul Church in Valparaiso meanders down the hillside, keeping pollutants out of the nearby creek. Lakeshore Landscaping came up with the solution.

generated every year in the U.S. Wood, brick, steel and concrete are piling up in landfills.

To combat the building industry’s environmental impact, architects are reducing, reusing and recycling. Recycled and upcycled materials are finding their way into architectural projects. Old buildings are finding new uses. Shive-Hattery’s South Bend office recently repurposed a vacant medical office in South Bend into an apartment complex.

Traditional construction methods involve significant carbon emissions, resource depletion and waste.

Architects, increasingly mindful of the environmental impact of construction materials and methods, are exploring alternative construction techniques.

In one recent project, Shive-Hattery used locally sourced, recycled materials, instead of new materials. Their choice to shop local cut down on transportation-related pollution.

“Responsible material selection aided in reducing the project’s overall carbon impact and footprint,” Anderson said.

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Another construction innovation is the use of 3D printing technology. This technique allows for the precise layering of materials. It minimizes waste and enables the use of recycled or sustainable materials.

Some construction firms, like Tonn and Blank Construction in Michigan City, have embraced modular construction methods. They build components off-site before transporting and assembling them on-site. Tonn and Blank recently assembled bathrooms and exam rooms this way before installing them in the new Franciscan Health Crown Point hospital. Modular construction saves time and minimizes disruption to the surrounding environment.

Architects are also exploring innovative approaches to water usage. One technique involves constructing buildings on beds of gravel to absorb water and reduce the risk of flooding.

Rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling and efficient irrigation systems are becoming standard features in sustainable buildings. These systems help conserve water and reduce the footprint of the built environment.

Eco-friendly fixes can sometimes resolve water problems caused by construction.

Rob and Paula Szrom are the founders of Valparaiso-based Lakeshore Landscaping. A Purdue-educated landscape architect, Rob Szrom came up with a green solution to a problem at St. Paul Church in Valparaiso. The church's parking lot was draining to one side. It emptied into Beauty Creek, eroding the hillside and creating a gouge the size of a car. Szrom solved the problem with a bioswale. Similar to rain gardens, bioswales collect stormwater runoff and filter pollution.

"We didn't just say let's help the environment," Szrom said. "We solved an erosion problem. We solved an ecological problem. We used common sense and created a great rain garden, planting small-scale trees rather than small plants."

### Living architecture


Another trend is the increasing popularity of green roofs and walls. Architects are transforming rooftops into lush gardens and incorporating vertical gardens on building facades. These sustainable landscaping practices




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## ARCHITECTURE

Photo provided by Yarek Architects Inc.



**The Mascot Hall of Fame in Whiting was built on the site of the Standard Oil Co. refinery from the 1890s.**

blur the boundaries between built and natural environments.

The University of Notre Dame is home to the largest green roof in Indiana. Sitting atop the university's Joyce Center arena are 32,000 trays of plants with 25 plant species. The university has six buildings with rooftop greenscapes.

"Green roofs use a special planting called sedum, which is a very hardy and drought-resistant plant/flower," said Tony Polotto, senior director of

construction and quality assurance at the university. "Each roof system is creatively designed by a landscape architect with a blend of sedum to create patterns and visual interest unique to the installation."

A green roof improves the building's energy efficiency because it acts as an insulation barrier. The vegetation helps divert water from the storm sewer by absorbing rainwater. It cools and prolongs the roof's longevity because the plants soak up the heat. It also reduces the heat island effect, when buildings and roads absorb and re-emit the sun's heat, creating higher temperatures in the area.

"In our opinion, a collateral benefit of this type of system is also the beauty it adds to the campus landscape," Polotto said.

Purdue University Northwest is using one of their rooftops for honeybees. The university has four honeybee yards on its three campuses. The hives are part of an environmental initiative launched in 2020.

"The bees serve as vital pollinators, contributing to increased crop production in and around our three campuses,"

said John Bachmann, senior grounds and landscaping manager at the university. "Additionally, the honey harvested from these hives is a testament to the rich biodiversity of the Midwest, known for its diverse array of wildflowers, trees and other flora."

Students from the honors college and student government helped paint the hives. They also bottle and label the honey each year.

"Efforts such as the honeybee initiative not only promote urban farming and increased pollination levels but also provide invaluable opportunities for education and research," Bachmann said.

Whether carpeting the top of a building with a green roof or installing groupings of native plant species, landscape architects consider cost, maintenance and location to ensure success.

"Sustainability needs common sense," Szrom said. "It's about the right spot and the right expectations. Trees just get better every year if you plant the right tree in the right spot."

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## Challenges, opportunities

Although the adoption of sustainable building practices is on the rise, architects face challenges. Green buildings are often more expensive upfront. Clients are treading in unfamiliar territory. However, these challenges present opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

For example, Monberg said Wightman is working on a school project in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that “sequesters hundreds of thousands of pounds of carbon in the roof construction.”

“It is also designed thoughtfully to integrate daylighting throughout the core academic areas,” he said.

Acumen Research and Consulting reported that \$290 billion was spent worldwide in the green construction market in 2021 and is expected to top \$774 billion by 2030.

Architects, as visionaries of the urban landscape, are working to integrate sustainable design, construction and landscaping practices to shape a more resilient and harmonious future.



Photo provided by Wightman

**The Pokagon Community Center in Dowagiac, Michigan, is LEED Gold certified and adheres to the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi’s heritage.**

That same philosophy guided the construction of the LEED Gold certified Pokagon Community Center in Dowagiac, Michigan.

“The community center was developed in a culturally and environmentally sensitive way and in harmony with the (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi)’s heritage and mission statement: promoting culture education and self-sufficiency

for our citizens while preserving Mother Earth,” he said.

This kind of thoughtfulness will lead building designers to become stewards of the planet, leading the way toward a greener and more sustainable horizon.

“Sustainability provides a means of accountability for the world we live in,” Vavrek said. ■

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U.S. CENSUS  
BUREAU  
SAYS

# 36,233

Estimated population  
of Merrillville, July 1, 2022



Town of Merrillville officials are working on a comprehensive plan to attract residents, businesses and visitors with new amenities and incentives.

# 'HEART OF THE REGION'

## MERRILLVILLE LEADERS PLAN NEW FACILITIES, DEVELOPMENTS AS TOWN CONTINUES GROWTH TREND

DOUG ROSS

**M**errillville's leaders are quick to point out that the town is at the crossroads of Northwest Indiana. They recently began using the "Heart of the Region" slogan to emphasize that point.

They also note Lake County's third largest municipality is growing, attracting residential and commercial developments.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported its population at 36,233 as of July 1, 2022. Figures from the Merrillville Planning

and Building Department show the estimated total cost of construction in 2023 exceeded \$193 million.

Town officials aren't content to stop there. They continue to plan years into the future to ensure quality of life for residents, visitors and businesses.



# \$176,600

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, July 2018-2022

# \$62,221

Estimated median household income, 2018-2022



Photo by Joey Lax-Salinas

## New center of town

**B**ella and his colleagues have been working on a new comprehensive plan for the town. Among the ideas under consideration is replacing the 40,000-square-foot town hall, which once was a Tepe's catalog showroom.

"It's old, and it's starting to have some older building issues," he said. "If we're going to do a new town hall, it's not going to be just a new town hall. It's going to be an entire governmental complex."

The town owns about 16 acres behind the town hall. The new facility would be built there, but so would a new town park.

"We probably need a centralized park," Councilman Shawn Pettit said. "We don't really have large parks."

Pettit envisions not only a new town hall but also a new police station and amphitheater for 1,500 to 2,000 people.

Bella explained how it could work. The town hall would be built while the existing building remains in use. Once town offices are moved to their new home, the existing building would be razed.

A town square would be developed on the property, with a park in the middle, and ice cream and doughnut shops among the retail attractions around it. Residential development would be encouraged to the north.

"It all goes into our desire to have a walkable community," Bella said.

Merrillville has a lot of traffic. It also has 188 miles of roads in its 30 square miles. The town, created in 1971, developed quickly in a time when the automobile was king. Now the town is trying to become more pedestrian-friendly.

"I see people trying to cross U.S. 30 once in a while, and I cringe. I hope they make it OK," Bella said. "We're starting to think about how do we make our town more walkable. Let's park the cars."

Pettit, president of the Redevelopment Commission, is key to making these plans happen. The RDC is looking at opportunities across the city.

"We're going to need a public safety facility to service what's known as the panhandle," Pettit said.

Merrillville is a landlocked community, like several others in Lake County, and has an odd shape that has developed over the decades. In

addition to the core of the town, which stretches west of Mississippi Street, a rectangle goes east to encapsulate Deep River, both the river itself and the county park.

The public safety facility will be important in reducing response times, Police Chief Konstantinos Nuses said.

"It takes a long time to get there," he said. "I think that's being somebody who cares about their town" to plan the new public safety facility.

In addition to a police substation, the structure would include a fire station and room for a

street department truck. The fire station on 73rd Avenue isn't close enough, Pettit said.



**"I think that's what's kept me here my entire life is (Merrillville) has a great feel to it."**

— Town Council President Rick Bella

## Future development

**T**own officials know that Merrillville is on track for development with its central location near major highways.

"Probably the biggest thing that the RDC will look at is the Whitcomb Street corridor from U.S. 30 basically down to 93rd Avenue," Pettit said. That area is ripe for development. Robinson Engineering has been retained to do an analysis.

The town and the Gary Diocese are also discussing what to do with the roughly 200 acres the diocese owns between Broadway and Merrillville Road north of 93rd Avenue, Pettit said. That land is being farmed.

"What early on impressed me is the quality of the department heads," said Michael Griffin, who became interim town manager in early September. "It's a big town, and the department responsibilities are really big."

He also said the town is working hard to offer the highest level of services at the lowest possible cost. Voters have picked the right people with the skills and will to do that, he said.

Town Council President Rick Bella said he is partial because Merrillville is his hometown.

"I think that's what's kept me here my entire life is it has a great feel to it," Bella said.



## THE FUTURE OF MERRILLVILLE

Liberty Estates, with 1,100 housing units, is also a popular topic. That area includes apartments, townhomes and light warehousing with an entrance off Whitcomb.

The big question, of course, is what to do about the vacant land at Interstate 65 and U.S. 30 where the Star Plaza and Star Theatre once stood.

That site put Merrillville on the map when it comes to entertainment in

The holdup was the Lake County Council, which balked at the \$75 million incentive White Lodging sought.

“Other people could not see the forest for the trees, and it’s a shame,” Pettit said. “He was willing to create construction jobs, and we couldn’t get past this word ‘tax.’”

The new food and beverage tax recently implemented would have been used to promote tourism by helping fund the new convention center. A study

General Assembly’s blessing to levy the tax, Griffin said.

In Nashville, Indiana, the tax is being used to create additional parking and public restroom facilities for the tourists who support the small Brown County town’s economy.

Griffin, with 30-plus years in public finance, has helped businesses in Merrillville navigate the arcane rules of when to charge the new tax. For example, fountain drinks are subject to the tax but not soft drinks in cans.

When the new tax was adopted, three people spoke against it. Town officials take that as a sign that the new tax is well accepted. It’s considered to be primarily funded by tourists.

Revenue will be seasonal, unlike property tax revenue, so the amount generated each month will fluctuate.

“If the economy goes a certain way, we’ve got to be prepared for that,” Griffin said.

Bella expects the food and beverage tax to generate \$1.8 million each year for the town. “It’s probably a low estimate,” Bella said. That much money will allow the town to improve the quality of life for residents without costing them anything, he said.

Among the uses could be pedestrian bridges over Broadway, Bella said, as well as helping parks and recreation, economic development and tourism.

Money from the town’s tax increment financing districts is also vital.

“There’s a huge benefit to doing that to attract a business,” Bella said.

“I kind of drive economic development” through those TIF funds, said Bob Swintz, partner with LWG CPAs and Advisers in Indianapolis. That money primarily funds infrastructure work.

The TIF districts and town incentives have been effective in bringing development to the town. Those allocation areas, as they’re called, are long-term investments. For 10 to 12 years, the town saw slow growth. Now, Swintz said, “it’s just exploding.”

The Silos at Sanders Farm project includes a 1 million-square-foot spec building. The 196-acre Silos at Sanders Farm development on Mississippi Street received a \$1.41 million Regional

# \$193M

The estimated total cost of construction in 2023, according to the Merrillville Planning and Building Department

Northwest Indiana. Town officials hope it can do so again.

“People are nostalgic about it. It was a great destination,” Griffin said. “It comes up all the time.”

Griffin, like others, recalls many concerts and other events he attended there.

In 2018, White Lodging proposed a \$356 million complex called The Farms at Crossroad Commons that would have included four hotels, a meeting and event center, an office building and a variety of restaurants at that site.

“The White property should be built as it was designed by Bruce (White) prior to his departure from this life,” Pettit said. That would have created 900 permanent jobs, he noted.

is being done this year on a possible site for a new Lake County convention center, with the White property considered a frontrunner. It was the top spot in a previous study on that topic.

“How could you argue with the location, say, where Star Plaza used to be?” Bella asked.

A second top location was the nearby Century Mall site south of U.S. 30.

### Tax incentives

In February, the town began charging its new 1% food and beverage tax.

“It wasn’t done lightly,” Griffin said. “It was thoughtfully considered.”

Only about 35 units of government in Indiana have been given the Indiana

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“That was farmland, generating next to nothing in terms of taxes and revenue for the town of Merrillville,” Bella said.

Domino’s Pizza began using a \$50.3 million building at AmeriPlex at the Crossroads business park to make and distribute pizza dough.

Red Bull Distribution Co. planned to occupy space in a 39,483-square-foot building at that business park, with room for other tenants.

AmeriPlex also attracted a Big Lots distribution center.

Ground was broken last May for a new facility at the Mississippi Crossings development.

And the list goes on.

Last year, the town issued 30 permits for new single-family homes, 24 for duplex to four-plex homes, nine for multi-family homes, 426 for commercial buildings and more than 1,300 for miscellaneous improvements. Those building permits generated more than \$1.7 million for the town.



Photo by Rick Bella

**AmeriPlex at the Crossroads on 98th Avenue in Merrillville includes 386 acres for development. Ground originally was broken on the mixed-use technology park in 2004. Amazon built a 141,360-square-foot fulfillment center on 35 of those acres. It opened in 2021.**

“I think we have a reputation of being very business-friendly,” Bella said. “We don’t charge an arm and a leg for permits.”

The Plan Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals and Town Council are also easy to work with, he said.

“Some cities and towns figure they’re going to grow anyway, so they don’t

want to do it. We’re going to take a more aggressive approach,” Bella said.

Town officials are competitive with neighboring communities, perhaps making Merrillville a more attractive site, but each project’s merits are weighed before making a decision, Bella said.

“If it doesn’t make sense financially, we’re not going to do it,” he said.

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## THE FUTURE OF MERRILLVILLE

### Curb appeal

Merrillville officials embrace the heavy influx of new development but also recognize the need for redevelopment.

Broadway Plaza is one of the sites being considered for improvements. The strip mall includes not only a variety of storefronts but also a vast sea of concrete in the parking lot.

"It's the remnants of a shopping center," Griffin said. "The challenge to them is they don't have very much curb appeal."

The mall's owner has been successful in attracting tenants.

"We know there's cool things going there and conscientious business owners," he said. "There are some interesting businesses going in there. There's a lot of entrepreneurship."

The town is considering a new streetscape for Broadway Plaza and the adjacent City Mall that would break up that sea of concrete, adding islands with trees and other landscaping to make it more attractive. In addition, sidewalks could be added with separation from the roadway to enhance pedestrian safety.

"Cities and towns get older, buildings get dilapidated, and you have to work on that to keep the community strong and moving forward," Bella said.

That's just one of the long-term changes Bella wants to make.

Extending 93rd Street to Colorado Street would create an entirely new corridor. "That would be a huge, huge boon to the community," he said.

At 96th and Whitcomb, where the government center lets out, Bella envisions a roundabout.

"We're going to have to soften the corners and curbs once the Liberty Farms development gets going," he said. "When you put in 1,000 housing units, that's going to be a lot of traffic."

### For the youth

Bella is also concerned about creating more activities for teens.

"Teens and the desires to do what they want changes so often," he said. "If you're not into parks at all, then no, we're not offering a whole lot."

The Dean and Barbara White Community Center, a 95,000-square foot facility on Broadway, opened three years ago to promote health and improved quality of life for residents of all ages. It includes a gymnasium with three basketball courts, six volleyball courts, an elevated jogging track, pickleball court, two-story rock-climbing wall, fitness center and more.

The new town center created behind the existing town hall would help keep teens from being bored, creating a place to hang out and maybe see a concert. The amphitheater could appeal to every age group, depending on who is booked to supply the entertainment. Even garage bands could be invited to perform there for an hour or so, Bella suggested.

"I feel that there's been a paradigm shift in our culture," Police Chief Nuses said, with fewer people going to nightclubs and bars.

### Growth mentality

Geographically, Merrillville is Lake County's second-largest municipality, second only to Gary, its neighbor to the north.

Traffic counts are high, with over 1 million people driving through town in a 24-hour period. "We have a lot of people who come through here," Nuses said.

"Public safety issues in town tend to depend on who's coming through town, not long-term residents.

The crime rate, according to bestplaces.net, is significantly lower than the national average.

"We're a lot safer than what some people believe," he said. "Merrillville is a lot nicer than some of the areas we're compared to."

Merrillville's shops and other businesses generate a high number of jobs. "Our daytime numbers exceed some of these other communities," he said.

Not that Merrillville's population is small. With an official Census count of about 35,000 residents in 12,000 individual households, Merrillville is the county's third-largest town. "I'm willing to bet we're closer to 40,000, 42,000," Nuses said.

### Success stories

Rockland Page, owner and founder of Merrillville-based ROCKaBLOCK, is happy with the town.

"We've come to get away from the hustle and bustle and even lack of public safety in some of those communities," he said.



**MICHAEL GRIFFIN**

INTERIM TOWN MANAGER

*Town has the right people in place to build a bright future for the growing community*



**SHAWN PETTIT**

COUNCILMAN

*Town needs a park to anchor the site of a new town hall and government facilities*



**KONSTANTINOS NUSES**

POLICE CHIEF

*New public safety building would help reduce response times*



**ROCKLAND PAGE**

BUSINESS OWNER

*ROCKaBLOCK wouldn't be a success without the people of Merrillville*



**DJ MOORE**

SILTWORM CEO

*Merrillville's primary asset is its location, with Interstate 65 running through it*

“It wouldn’t be Merrillville if it wasn’t for the people, and there wouldn’t be a ROCKaBLOCK if it wasn’t for the people to support it.”

Page started ROCKaBLOCK in 2017.

“It was just a hobby at first, just because I was so bored with my day job, doing creative services for a Chicago engineering firm,” Page said.

He designed and made T-shirts in his basement. He sold them online via his website and social media, then began selling at various events and pop-up shops.

Then the pandemic hit, and his job’s hours were cut. But his side gig took off.

“I started getting random orders from all over the country” as people wanted to support Black-owned businesses when Black Lives Matter gained traction because of police incidents across the country, Page said. One day an ABC 7 producer set up an interview.

“That’s the story of how ROCKaBLOCK was really put on the map,” he said.

The company now operates out of a storefront in Merrillville. The town

is just the right distance between Indianapolis and Merrillville, he said.

“There’s actually room for growth. If you start here, you can grow here,” he said. “I think we’re the crossroads, a link in the chain between Indiana and Illinois.”

“You really want pride in the community. You really want to see things grow,” Page said.

Siltworm is another Merrillville-based business. It sells erosion control products for builders. As its name implies, Siltworm is different from the black plastic fences used on some construction sites, instead lying across the ground to keep silt from running off the site.

It works like a coffee filter, explained Siltworm CEO DJ Moore. The netting is filled with recycled filter media inside, trapping sediment inside the long tube. “Anything that’s on the site stays on the site,” he said.

The company began in Griffith but moved to Merrillville in 2019. “Honestly, we just had a good opportunity with a

building,” meeting the company’s needs, Moore said.

Daniel Vicari, executive director of Gary/Chicago International Airport, also sees Merrillville as important to the Region’s future.

After studying the idea for a few years, his agency bought the Griffith/Merrillville airport, knowing the importance of general aviation there.

With his agency’s ownership, the airport is no longer privately owned and can qualify for Federal Aviation Administration grants for improvements, Vicari said.

The acquisition is good for Gary’s airport, which can steer general aviation flights to the Griffith/Merrillville airport, freeing up space for additional commercial cargo and passenger flights in Gary, Vicari said.

Merrillville’s primary asset, from Moore’s viewpoint, is its location.

“You’ve got I-65 running right through there,” he said. “We ship all over the country. The Region is a great place to be.” ■



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# More houses, more services



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## As Region grows, so will demand for commercial amenities

AARON McDERMOTT

**A**s a commercial real estate broker established in the ever-evolving market dynamics of Northwest Indiana, I've had the pleasure of witnessing firsthand the impact new residential developments can have on our area over the past 20-plus years.



► **Aaron McDermott** is the founder and president of Crown Point-based Latitude Commercial, a commercial real estate brokerage firm specializing in Northern Indiana and the south suburbs of Chicago.

It's not just about building more houses; it's about the chain reaction that reshapes our communities and alters the commercial real estate landscape.

Let's start with the obvious: New homes bring with them a surge in demand for services and amenities.

As families move into new neighborhoods, they require access to essential services like grocery stores, pharmacies, restaurants and health care facilities. Suddenly, there's an influx of commercial developments being

built around these neighborhoods, catering to the needs and preferences of the residents.

Look at the impact new housing has had on areas like Crown Point and Schererville over the years.

We used to have large areas of vacant land on U.S. 41 from Main Street to U.S. 30. Over the course of the past 10 years, there is virtually no vacant land left for development. The same can be said about the area just off I-65 and 109<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Crown Point. Where there was once only farmland, there now are three large medical centers, a large grocery-anchored retail center, hotels and numerous retail centers — with room to grow.

But the impact goes beyond retail essentials and conveniences.

Look at what new housing and growth has done for a town such as Merrillville. We have 2.4 million square feet of speculative industrial distribution centers because AmeriPlex is almost 100% occupied with distribution centers and business.

Because of the increase in population in areas like Crown Point, St. John and Cedar Lake, companies are incentivized to establish or expand their presence in proximity to these new residential growth areas. This not only streamlines logistics and reduces delivery times but also creates jobs and drives demand for commercial real estate space, whether it's warehouses, distribution centers or last-mile delivery facilities.

Moreover, the ripple effect extends to other sectors as well.

Entertainment venues suddenly find themselves with a larger, more affluent customer base, prompting facilities such as Up Your Alley in Schererville or Urban Air in Hobart to set up shop near these new residential developments. Whether it's cinemas, theaters or recreational facilities, businesses in the entertainment industry stand to benefit from the influx of residents seeking leisure and recreational options close to home.

The rise of new housing developments also significantly impacts the medical office sector. As residential populations increase, so does the demand for health care services. This creates opportunities for medical practitioners to establish or expand their practices in proximity to these growing communities, leading to heightened demand for medical office space.

Thus, new housing developments serve as catalysts for the expansion of the medical office sector, ensuring residents have access to essential health care services

while driving growth and investment in the office sector tailored to medical needs.

For commercial real estate firms, this presents challenges and opportunities. On one hand, it requires us to adapt to a rapidly changing market landscape, where traditional census tracts lag behind or otherwise are inaccurate. We need to provide customized marketing packages to account for these changes.

On the other hand, it literally opens up a world of new clients. Where we once might have seen the majority of clients from the Chicago area, we now are seeing more clients from other countries and states as far as California.

Of course, with every wave of change comes a degree of uncertainty. The rapid pace of development can strain infrastructures like our aging roads, exacerbate traffic congestion such as on Route 41, and place pressure on local government budgets that have property tax caps in place.

As commercial real estate brokers, we have a responsibility to navigate these challenges thoughtfully and responsibly, working closely with local municipalities, developers and community stakeholders to ensure sustainable growth that benefits everyone.

The impact of new residential developments on the commercial real estate

market here cannot be overstated. From fueling demand for retail in Schererville, driving investment in industrial demand in Hammond and decreasing vacancy rates for medical office in Munster, the ripple effect of residential growth is far-reaching and transformative.

As commercial real estate brokers, it is our role to embrace these changes, seize the opportunities they present and chart a course toward a more vibrant, dynamic future for our home here in Northwest Indiana. ■

**“It's not just about building more houses; it's about the chain reaction that reshapes our communities and alters the commercial real estate landscape.”**

# 80 and ready for more



## After lifetime of achievements, retired CPA starts business with his children

CHAS REILLY

**A**t 80 years old, Carl Bossung has no plans to retire. “I’ve got too much energy,” he said recently after returning from a walk.

Bossung spent four decades as a certified public accountant. During that time, he worked for Crowe, one of the nation’s leading accounting firms. He eventually became a partner in charge of the South Bend office.

As he was approaching 65, he contemplated what he wanted to do during his retirement age. Settling down, wasn’t on his mind. He knew whatever was next in life was going to involve his children: Kyle, Corey and Patrick.

Bossung started Senior1Care with his children in 2008 after leaving Crowe.

The home care agency has headquarters in Mishawaka and also has offices in Elkhart, Fort Wayne and Carmel.

“We started at our kitchen table,” Bossung said.

Senior1Care began with a couple of caregivers. The company has flourished and now employs about 500 people.

Bossung said he thought that, if he could impart to his kids what he learned, that would be a real gift. “If we can do something that helps people, give back to the community, that would be even better.”

At that time, his mother needed care, but she didn’t want to go to a nursing home. While considering options for his mother, Bossung recalled how strategic planning sessions he facilitated for major companies often involved products or services for baby boomers.

“If we can find something that baby boomers need, you don’t have to go out and sell it, they’re going to be coming to you,” Bossung said.

That’s when the light bulb went off in his head, and he decided to pursue the home care agency.

The past 16 years with Senior1Care have “been a lot of fun,” he said, because he had the chance to watch the business grow and see his children excel as leaders.

“It’s an amazing experience,” Bossung said of working with his children. “I never thought it would be as great as it is.”

His son Kyle Bossung is grateful for the opportunity.

“I’m truly honored to work alongside him as we continue to make a positive impact on the lives of seniors and their families,” he said.

When Senior1Care was formed, Carl Bossung thought it would be a lot different from his work as a CPA, but it didn’t turn out that way.

He said the home care business is almost identical to the CPA business except for the type of people working there.

“If you just switch CPAs and consultants with caregivers, it’s almost the same business in terms of what you have to do to make that business successful,” Bossung said. “It’s all about providing great quality of service.”

He said in both industries, the best advertisements are satisfied clients.

“That was true at Crowe, and it’s true at Senior1Care,” Bossung said.

Although he’s been away from the accounting world for 16 years, the industry’s leaders haven’t forgotten about him.

In November, Bossung received the Recognition of Lifetime Achievement by the Indiana University Kelley School of Business Accounting Department.

Bossung said the Kelley School of Business has one of the top accounting schools in the nation, and he wasn’t expecting to be selected for the prestigious honor.

“I was surprised but very humbled and honored because of the thousands of accounting grads that come from the Kelley School of Business,” he said.

Bossung received the award because of his many contributions to the accounting industry. During his 40 years in the field, he mentored numerous CPAs. He also was selected for the award because of his decades of leadership in business and the community.

“(Bossung) is the personification of the IU Kelly culture,” said Professor Joe Schroeder, chair of the graduate accounting programs, and PWC Faculty Fellow at the Kelley School of Business. “His career reflects that strong Hoosier work ethic, considerable ingenuity and an entrepreneurial spirit that has led to a lifetime of achievements making his community better. He’s a true inspiration to us all.”

Kyle Bossung thinks so too.

“I am immensely proud of my father’s achievements and his unwavering commitment to his professional endeavors,” he said.

And although Carl Bossung has already had a lifetime of achievements, he is ready to accomplish much more.



Professor Sonja Rego, of IU’s Kelley School of Business, presents Carl Bossung with the school’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

At 80 years old, he said he doesn’t want to slow down. He runs 3 miles every other day, and he walks on the days in between those running sessions. “I feel much younger,” Bossung said.

“I’m as active as I was 25, 30, 40 years ago.”

He also joked that when he started Senior1Care, he thought one of his children would learn how to care for him as he ages.

“They’re not quite there yet in terms of my quality of standards,” he said with a laugh. “I’ve got to keep working.” ■



# 'Steelguy' fired by two irons

## Businessman forges new life for Crown Point golf course

STEVE ZALUSKY

**D**ave Hegan runs a successful steel shearing business. But he has made a success of another business where customers use irons.

Hegan owns Majac Steel in East Chicago. Since 1995, the company has been shearing steel for use in a variety of industries. Its products have been used by trucking and railroad companies, as well as manufacturers of such products as office furniture and garbage bins.

With that business rolling, he received the news that the 95-year-old Oak Knoll

tournaments and against older competitors who were his role models.

J.T. Wirth, who is semi-retired from the steel industry, met Hegan 35 years ago playing golf.

"Golf has always been in his blood," Wirth said. "Some guys are jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Dave's really kind of the master of both."

Both played together in pro-am events. "He was as good as the pros we were playing with," Wirth said.

Hegan continued playing golf at New Trier West High School in Northfield,

"There's a lot of times that things aren't going your way," he said. "Life is tough. And I overcame a lot of those fears from what I learned playing rugby."

After graduating, Hegan began working as an accountant, but quickly found he hated being stuck in an office. At 28, he tried his hand at professional golf. Three years later, he was broke.

"I tried to play pro, and I didn't make it," he said. "So, I had to figure out another way to make a living."

But golf came in handy in discovering his niche in sales in the steel industry. He said he was hitting golf balls on a driving range when he met a man in the steel processing business who said his salesmen were ex-college athletes like Hegan.

Hegan soon learned that the business of shearing steel could be lucrative, and with a partner, formed Majac.

"I have processes that make what are called blanks," he said. "And you do that either by burning flat steel into shapes or shearing, which is like a big pair of scissors for steel, into shapes."

His suppliers are predominantly domestic, with more than 90 percent from Northwest Indiana. Many of them have workers who have played at his father's golf courses.

Ken Gospodarek, who takes care of the shop at Majac, has been with the company for 28 years and has known Hegan since they were teenagers.

"He always took the customer's interest in hand, and they really appreciated that, and they just gave him more and more business," he said. "That was the No. 1 thing that probably accounted for the repeat business that we got."

### Dad's legacy

**E**ven with all his success in the steel business, Hegan still felt the call of his first love, golf.

Hegan's father, then in his early 90s, had been running Oak Knoll for 58 years when he approached Hegan.



Dave Hegan bought Oak Knoll Golf Club in Crown Point after his dad retired from managing it.

Photo provided by Dave Hegan

Golf Club in Crown Point was shutting down. His father, Chuck Hegan, had been leasing and running it.

But Hegan couldn't let it go.

### Golf lessons

**A**thletics has always been a big part of Hegan's life.

"My father was the king of golf in Northwest Indiana," he said. "He ran a number of low-cost golf courses," including Oak Knoll, which the elder Hegan originally leased in 1960, and Indian Ridge in Hobart.

The young Hegan learned to play at Oak Knoll, honing his skills in junior

a suburb of Chicago, before he was accepted by Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. Although he walked on the golf team as a sophomore there, he ended up on the rugby team, a sport he had played at New Trier West.

"A lot of my life successes are because I've learned that you got to deal with your fears," he said. "And let me tell you, every Saturday in college when you went to go play rugby, you were scared to death that somebody was going to kill you out there."

He credits the life lessons he learned playing rugby with helping him succeed in business.



“My dad came to me and said, ‘I think I’m going to retire.’” Chuck Hegan passed away a few months ago at age 97.

When Dave asked who was going to take over Oak Knoll, his dad said, “Nobody. It’s going to shut down.”

Hegan decided to take ownership of the 96-year-old golf course. What that meant, however, was an investment in time as well as money.

“It was really run down. The rounds had dropped off. There was a lot of competition,” Hegan said. “I don’t know why I said ‘yes.’ Other than my dad didn’t want to see it go down.”

He worked out a lease with the landowner that included a clause that gave him the first right of refusal to buy it after three years.

Not only did he buy the golf course — and the land with it — he invested in new equipment and improved the greens.

“We went from averaging 9,000 rounds (to) ... just under 24,000 rounds of golf,” he said.

This year, he is preparing to see another 20,000 golfers.

“Dave has tried to make (Oak Knoll) a nicer course than what it has historically been,” Gospodarek said. “He has done a lot of stuff with getting kids involved. When you go to his course to play, you will see a lot of families.”

Every year, Gospodarek added, Hegan improves the course, making the greens and fairways better and upgrading the carts.

“It’s a feel-good course, and it makes you want to come back,” he said.

Oak Knoll is what Hegan calls a low-end golf course. However, it fills a valuable niche. South of U.S. 30 in Lake County, he said, there are only three public golf courses. Two of them are high end, while the third is Oak Knoll.

“It’s the kind of place where, if you don’t play, you’re not going to feel uncomfortable playing there,” he said. “It’s not hard. It’s easy. If you wanted to take your son or your daughter to play and they’re not very good, we promote that. We promote grandpas taking their grandkids. We don’t make the price too high. We don’t have a

lot of fancy stuff. But you can go there and play golf.”

Oak Knoll has proven as durable as the tree that gave it its name. When Hegan took over in October 2019, there were five golf courses in that market south of Lake County. Oak Knoll is the only one left.

After he opened in March 2020, Hegan ran straight into the pandemic. However, even that worked out. Because his course isn’t within any city limits, he was allowed to have golf carts.

“So when COVID hit, literally, I was the closest public golf course (to) Chicago with golf carts,” he said. “We were just inundated with people. A lot of people thanked me for staying open.”

Steel and golf are two sides of the same coin for Hegan.

“I’m known as the ‘Steelguy,’” he said. “We have a Steelguy plaque on the wall at the golf course. Steel is the history of Northwest Indiana. I’m just a tiny little part of that history.” ■



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# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Five decades of care



## Edgewater Health helps close gap between mental, physical health

LAUREN CAGGIANO

For staff, supporters and community health champions, Gary-based Edgewater Health's 50th anniversary offers a chance to reflect on its past, present and future.

Edgewater Health is like many organizations around the nation that for a long time had a singular focus. Educator, consultant and event

and supports what she refers to as "whole-person care."

As a champion for improving overall community well-being, Edgewater Health President and CEO Dr. Danita Johnson credits Dr. Okechi Nwabara for this impactful organizational shift.

"Dr. Okechi Nwabara, former chief medical officer of Edgewater Health, was actually the physician that ushered in primary care," Johnson said. "He was the one to say, 'There's a connection here between mental and physical health, and we shouldn't ignore

mental health services. Serving the Northwest Indiana area, the Rapid Access Center includes an Immediate Psychiatric Care Center (IPCC) and Subacute Stabilization Unit, all aimed at meeting the needs of those facing a mental health crisis. From a practical standpoint, this model helps decrease the strain placed on other community institutions.

"Instead of overwhelming the ER or the local lock-up, individuals in crisis go to the rapid access center where they are met with professionals who can assess and diagnose mental health conditions," Johnson said. "Edgewater provides crisis stabilization and in-patient services so individuals can get the treatment they need in a more compassionate way. So, we're super proud of this fact because it was a first in the state."

**Edgewater provides crisis stabilization and in-patient services so individuals can get the treatment they need in a more compassionate way."**

Dr. Danita Johnson, Edgewater Health

chair Karen Bishop Morris said the full-service clinic has evolved from an institution primarily focused on mental health to one that promotes

it. Instead, we should underscore that connection to provide whole-person care."

More recently Edgewater Health has responded to the need to streamline



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WINNERS ANNOUNCED IN THE JUNE-JULY ISSUE

Every patient's journey is different, though there are some commonalities regarding demographics. According to Johnson, Edgewater serves 3,000 people a month and 80% identify as people of color. Edgewater treats more women than men and care for people from youth to senior citizens. Whatever the patient's background, Bishop Morris said the organization is focused on addressing the social determinants of health.

Recent developments have allowed them to serve people in areas outside of Gary. For instance, they have a primary care facility in Griffith, one in Maryville and another in Cedar Lake. Johnson said expansion into these markets has made it possible to serve new and different populations.

Patient Charlene Wright is grateful for the quality of primary care she received. She was impressed with the late Dr. Nwabara's bedside manner.

"I liked the fact that a physician would still lay hands on and touch you and take your vitals, etc.," she said. "But what really impressed me was that he never changed

(despite his success). He was always the same and always made you feel valued."

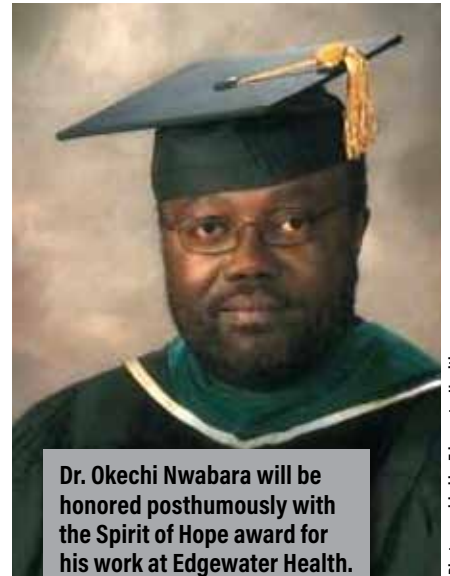
Anecdotes like this help cement the nonprofit's reputation in the Region.

The organization is marking five decades of care on June 1 at the Duneland Falls Banquet and Meeting Center in Chesterton. According to Bishop Morris, the evening will offer opportunities to share and reflect on their plans for the next 50 years. The event will include a celebration and recognition of leaders who've advanced the cause of mental health in the Region and state.

Honoree Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch is being recognized for improving outcomes for one in five Hoosiers and their families who struggle with mental health.

Attorney Kenneth Allen, founder of the Kenneth J. Allen Law Group and Gary native, will be honored for his longstanding service to the community and commitment to advancing education.

Roosevelt Haywood III, principal of Haywood and Fleming Associates, will receive the inaugural Circle of Excellence award during the VIP reception.



**Dr. Okechi Nwabara will be honored posthumously with the Spirit of Hope award for his work at Edgewater Health.**

Photo provided by Edgewater Health

Bishop Morris said the fourth and final awards and related presentations are expected to stir up many emotions. Nwabara, who died in 2021, will be honored posthumously with the Spirit of Hope award for his tireless work in bringing the mind-body connection to the forefront of every patient interaction. ■

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# Dreams do come true



## Rail improvements will lead to more opportunities for youth, new residents

MICHAEL NOLAND

**T**he \$650 million double-track project is officially coming soon to a station near you, with new and vastly improved commuter rail service in May.

At the end of February 2022, the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District discontinued train service over a 26-mile section of the railroad to allow Walsh/Herzog Joint Venture, the contractor for most of the project, to construct the improvements along the railroad right-of-way without interference.

We know that it has been a long two years for our riders and our employees, and we thank everyone for their patience during this once-in-a-lifetime infrastructure improvement to Northwest Indiana's commuter rail system. The great news, though, is that the completion of this project is a matter of weeks, not months or years, away.

We can't wait to stop busing and resume regular, continuous train service operations. We are testing and commissioning the new infrastructure and will provide route familiarization trips for our employees in the weeks ahead.

When the project began, we provided more than 3 million passenger trips a year. But the pandemic changed the commuter service model nationwide. While our ridership has improved over the past several years, we are currently at 50% of our pre-pandemic levels.

The days of the 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday work schedule are likely gone forever. Flexible work

schedules are the norm, with two to three days per week in the office, with varying start and end times. To be competitive, we must deliver a service model that serves these flexible schedules.

When we open the new service in May, we will add 14 week-day trains to the system, providing the frequency of service to meet the needs of the new, post-COVID workplace trends.

The investment in the South Shore Line will allow us to significantly reduce travel time to and from Chicago. Reducing travel times by 30 to 60 minutes daily gives back our riders precious free time, which is unquestionably a tremendous benefit to their quality of life.

Plus, by eliminating the bottlenecks caused by a single-track railroad environment, we will greatly improve our on-time performance; we know that to be successful, our customers need to be able to rely on us to get them to their destinations on time.

We believe improvements provided by the double-track project will allow us to significantly grow our ridership.

Ridership growth is very positive not only from a revenue standpoint for our budget but for the Region's economy as well. The more residents who have the opportunity to commute to jobs in Chicago — where jobs pay on average 40% more than similar jobs in the Region — the more income comes back to Northwest Indiana.

The household income of our riders is nearly double that of the average household income in the Region for nonriders.

By providing more service frequency and reduced travel times, the attraction to locate to the Region is enhanced. Our population growth has been stagnant for many years.

As a Region, we provide wonderful educational opportunities for our young people. Still, far too often, when the time comes to start a career, young people move out of the Region, which is not a long-term strategy for its success.

The improvements to the commuter rail operation, coupled with investments in local communities associated with transit-oriented development, provide the opportunity to retain and attract our younger residents.

Before the start of the double-track project and the companion \$950 million West Lake Corridor Project,

economic estimates projected \$2.5 billion in private sector investment over a 20-year period. We haven't even started any new service, and there already is \$400 million in committed projects in Hammond and Michigan City, with many additional projects in the works.

This private sector investment, coupled with the income boost from residents with greater access to the Chicago job market, will translate into additional tax revenue available to contribute to local, county and state government. In fact, conservatively, it is estimated that for every \$1 of investment into these projects, \$2 in revenue will be returned to the state. This rate of return will likely be higher, and the return will be quicker.

The Double Track Northwest Indiana and the West Lake Corridor projects have moved from dreams to planning, from environmental review and engineering to construction, and are now at our Region's doorstep. It's a new day for the South Shore Line system, and we are excited to be a part of the Region's success. ■

**“The improvements to the commuter rail operation, coupled with investments in local communities associated with transit-oriented development, provide the opportunity to retain and attract our younger residents.”**



► **Mike Noland** was appointed president of the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District, or the South Shore Line, by its board of trustees in October 2014.



# BUSINESS LOANS



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