



# Community Conversation

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Steps Toward a Sustainable Future for Our  
County

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## **Introduction**

The goal of this whitepaper project was to explore the social and economic needs of Kosciusko County from the perspectives of the community leaders who face these needs every day. Do we have the right education in place to create a sustainable workforce? Are we putting all our eggs in one basket by committing too strong a focus to the orthopedic industry? These are some of the questions presented to our leaders at “Community Conversation 3.0”, a public event sponsored by the Kosciusko County Community Foundation and the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce, as well as financially supported by other local businesses. It was held at the Manahan Orthopedic Capital Center at Grace College on November 28, 2016 and featured a free breakfast to approximately 140 attendees that included local business leaders, government officials, school administrators and students. The event featured segments of a film produced by Indiana Humanities titled “Hoosiers: The Story of Indiana – The Next Indiana”. This served as a springboard for small group discussions centered around the topics of manufacturing, quality of place, drug use, education/technology, arts/culture and innovation. The outpouring of feedback from our community was overwhelming, and two emerging themes soon developed: how will education support the future of our manufacturing industry and how innovation and quality of place will sustain our community for years to come.

## **Manufacturing and Education: Broadband & Technology**

The first emerging theme centered on how education will support the future of our manufacturing industries. To gather a deeper understanding, a small group of community leaders with extensive knowledge of these subjects was asked to attend a follow-up session to speak directly about some of the feedback we received from the Community Conversation event. The goal of the follow-up session was not only to get the community’s ideas into the hands of the decision makers, but to determine if these ideas could, in fact, become reality.

According to the Federal Communications Commission, broadband is “high-speed Internet access that is always on and faster than the traditional dial-up access.” It has become crucial for our schools as educators are implementing tablet learning and online homework. Based on a recent survey of Warsaw Community Schools parents, approximately 11% of students do not have access to broadband Internet outside of school. One participant, formerly with CenturyLink, stated that “fixed wireless” is underused in rural markets. With fixed wireless, the towers already in place can cast an array signal that can be received by users in the vicinity without the need for a wired infrastructure between households. Another representative from Kosciusko Economic Development Corporation (KedCo) commented that there are assets such as fiber cable not currently used along major highways, but it is not as easily accessible as other major utilities.

The good news is that solutions are in sight. Local school systems are investigating providing broadband onboard school buses, which would allow students to access high-speed Internet during the drive to and from school or sporting events, and would also allow hotspot access where the bus is parked. Although the bus-based option does not work for Whitko Schools’ landscape, this district has made an arrangement with towers in their area to offer discounted subscription rates to students’ families. Streaming video continues to consume large amounts of the supply of bandwidth, and looking ahead, Internet speed will continue to seem “not fast enough.”

### **Manufacturing and Education: Manufacturing Diversity and Sustainability**

Not only are citizens concerned with the speed of technological advancement, but discussion also centered around the heavy economic focus on the orthopedic industry and its implications. The dependency on manufacturing in Indiana is an economic asset, but possibly also a liability. Of our nearest five counties to Kosciusko, 40% of the workforce is based in manufacturing. KedCo discussed the trend for businesses to deploy high tech solutions to replace human workers. A desire for greater

efficiency and cost savings is driving companies into automated solutions – no insurance and no time off have their benefits to the bottom line! A representative from Ivy Tech’s Orthopedic & Advanced Manufacturing Training Center (OAMTC) commented that the highest demand in skilled jobs in manufacturing are in maintaining machines, and Ivy Tech’s programs strive to attract students to technologically skilled jobs. In the past, orthopedic companies required 5-10 years of CNC machinist experience; now a student can obtain a 200-hour certificate through Ivy Tech and meet these companies’ hiring requirements.

Another concern is the fact that as machinists retire the demand for younger workers to fill the vacant jobs will exceed the supply. Based on data provided by a representative from OAMTC, current job market projections indicated that 632 job openings will occur in Indiana in the 10-year period of 2014 to 2024 and currently only 52 applicants will obtain the Ivy Tech credentials to qualify for these jobs. These statistics show a deficit of 580 openings that will need workers trained at other colleges or industries to meet the job demand. If companies cannot maintain their workforces, they may choose to move their facilities to other states or countries where the supply of workers is more favorable.

The discussion then turned to the perception that too large of a focus is placed on the orthopedic industry in the county. Many commented that this perception may not be based on fact, citing that several large agricultural companies (Creighton Brothers and Tom Farms, for example) and many vendor companies that serve the orthopedic industry also have ties to other industries such as aerospace and automotive manufacturing. George Robertson from KedCo also stated that 4000 workers from Kosciusko County work in the RV industry in Elkhart.

## **Manufacturing and Education: Millennials<sup>1</sup> and Education**

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as individuals born between 1980 and 1995.

Today's students are faced with many choices, and parents tend to want their children to follow the "American Dream" which traditionally has been a 4 year college education. With 47% of college graduates now working in retail and food service, the need for good jobs to meet the demand is evident, as previously discussed. While Kosciusko County offers many education options for high school graduates, the stigma of a "vocational" education remains and many parents shy away from encouraging their children to pursue careers in manufacturing or technical fields. To address this concern, Ivy Tech is changing its brand messaging to a concept of value in addition to affordability. Community colleges should be embraced as viable options rather than second-best education. Further, since the term "vocational" is not well-received by students or parents, it was suggested to refer to these programs as "career and technical education".

Students should be encouraged to excel in many ways, even if they do not fit the traditional 4 year model. While the average college student changes his or her major three times, internships can allow a student to get hands-on experience in high school and make a more informed decision about the future. One school administrator suggested 'unlocking' the freshman and sophomore core curriculum to allow internships earlier in the high school career. Job shadowing could take the place of study hall giving the student a real life experience much earlier than his senior year. Another participant shared that this is especially critical for health and nursing students who enter a college program only to discover that they dislike body contact and must find another career path mid-year. High school programs, internships, and electives should inform students about the 'real' aspects of these jobs prior to their critical senior year when educational decisions must be made.

What is the most effective way to communicate these options? Several school administrators commented that parents are given this message repeatedly, but generally do not hear it and do not communicate it to their student. One-on-one sessions or small group interactions have been much

more effective. Some examples offered were parent/teacher conferences, “lunch & learn events”, and targeted appointments with teachers to identify specific students and parents who could benefit from this message.

## **Manufacturing & Education: Calls to Action**

In summary, Manufacturing and Education are closely linked and are only sustainable in our community when they are both strong. We suggest the following calls to action based on our community conversations:

- a. Broadband Internet access needs to be more prevalent, either through the use of mobile hotspots or wired and wireless access. As schools rely more on e-learning, the need to give our students reliable access will be key to ensuring our future workforce has the ability to meet tomorrow’s economic challenges. Jasper, IN was featured in the film series as being on the cutting edge of installing fiber optic cable through their community that has not only benefited residents, but attracted new businesses to the area. A city task force to investigate cities like Jasper and other towns that have solved this problem would be a first step in visioning this benefit for our community.
- b. Kosciusko County is economically diverse, and is home to many thriving industries in addition to orthopedics. While doing all we can to support the orthopedic industry (OrthoWorx, for example), encourage planning and skills training for agriculture, automotive, construction and manufacturing. This is the ‘three legged stool’ that will keep the economy thriving despite a possible downturn in any one of these specialties. Grace College, for instance, has just added an AgriBusiness major in its Business Department.

- c. Community college branding should move away from a “vocational” emphasis to a “career” emphasis in order to attract more students seeking technical education. High schools should identify and encourage students (and their parents) who may benefit most from these programs, while adding internship options much earlier than Senior year. Ivy Tech is offering CAD Camp and Robotics Camp this summer to students as young as 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Ivy Tech is also seeking funding now for adding a 3<sup>rd</sup> year CNC machining class at the high school which will equip students to go directly to skilled jobs after graduation.
- d. Schools should target small group communication to parents and students to encourage the exploration of technical education.

### **Quality of Place: Commuting & Transportation**

Much of our Community Conversation 3.0 ideas were centered on how we not only attract new individuals to our area, but how we keep them here. Too many of our orthopedic employees are commuters choosing to live in the Ft. Wayne or South Bend areas. Current research shows that Millennials are choosing “place” first and “occupation” second. They value green space, walkability, restaurants and entertainment. They highly value work-life balance, and they are a whopping 90 million strong – only behind the Baby Boomers in size – and in the next decade will comprise 75% of the global workforce. What seems to be a common thread among Millennials here is that they can afford more housing, but they do not want a permanent residence as they are unsure if they will stay here long term. This also makes for a strong demand for high-end rental units.

Our conversation very quickly centered on the price and availability of affordable housing in the \$120-\$160,000 range. This is generally the sweet spot for first time homebuyers and currently difficult

to find in Kosciusko County (and is in short supply in all 11 counties in Indiana). Local builders usually set a minimum of \$240,000, which can include up to \$60,000 for land and site development. Most builders are afraid to “cheapen” their brand by going into the lower market. Could there be an enticement for builders to meet the demand of a 1200 square feet \$140,000 starter home? City infrastructure is critical in this conversation as roads, water, sewer, and broadband need to be in place to support this price range. City officials are currently looking into best practices in other cities to determine how to solve this problem.

We were encouraged to see the City of Warsaw trying to capitalize on housing options wherever possible. The Little Crow Lofts are already under construction and will support 41 one-and two bedroom loft style units. The Buffalo Street extension project is also ready to break ground on the corridor between the Courthouse and Center Lake where 52 new townhomes will be built with garage access. Many will have street level commercial storefronts with residential dwellings on the second floor. The city has been working on this for 6 years and is now ready to begin construction. These and other projects including utility upgrades (such as a wastewater treatment plant), street upgrades (for example, the Main St. project), airport expansion and high occupancy in the downtown area are goals to keep our city vibrant.

Our neighboring communities (Leesburg, Milford, and Pierceton, for example) have much more affordable housing but are perceived as being “too far away” with no neighborhood factor. Some families with dual professionals looking to split their work commute (to Maple Leaf or Columbia City, for example) make these towns more attractive.

## Quality of Place: Entertainment Options

This conversation then lead into a discussion on the access to bike trails. Could a bike trail connecting these communities be a solution? For example, would a dedicated bike trail to Silver Lake re-invigorate that tiny downtown and make it a destination instead of a drive by? Kosciusko Velo Club is very interested in investigating these options, and their biggest hurdles are land donation and access and developer commitments. Their goal is to see bike trails connect all the towns from North Manchester to Syracuse and include a 10-mile connected ride around Winona Lake.

It will take both public and private partnerships to make projects like this happen. One knowledgeable participant said these projects need a “clear vision and capital with someone willing to stick their neck out and get it rolling.” K21 Foundation is currently researching ice rinks in Michigan to improve winter activities in Warsaw. A representative from K21 stated that the funding is there, and in the past when that “leap of faith” happened, it was very successful. Recent examples in the business sector would be Rainbow Childcare where all projections said they would not meet financial expectations, yet they recently broke ground on an expansion of their facility as they are at capacity. Joe’s Kids center for children with special needs also has exceeded all expectations for number of clients and continues to draw a large percentage of its clients from out of the area.

Available childcare was also discussed as a near crisis situation in our area. Many churches that previously provided it have decided it is too expensive or comes with too much liability. This is a huge issue for both residents with young children and employers who cannot get employees to work without childcare. Families rooted in the community find childcare expensive, while new residents from larger areas tend to see it as affordable. Kosciusko County Community Foundation is working with a few local providers on available grants and other subsidies to encourage providers to stay in the market.

## **Quality of Place: Cultural Diversity**

Cultural diversity was also discussed as an asset and a liability. A Parkview study identified 90% of our community as white, which makes global recruitment difficult, while 8% of our community is identified as Hispanic. The question was raised asking if we are doing enough to integrate the diverse community we already have.

Many participants expressed the opinion that our community is friendly but not welcoming. We have deep roots because of the large population that grew up here, and it is hard to break into those well-established groups. Some new residents also may not make efforts to connect because they do not plan to stay here permanently. One idea put forth was the Welcome Wagon concept, in which a “welcoming taskforce” would ask employers to identify new hires and greet them with local information, discounts, and gifts. Even a “City Concierge” could be a resource for medical referrals, school information, affinity groups, or community events to new residents. OrthoWorx is engaged in diversity initiatives and aiding the orthopedic industry in recruitment and this may be an asset for them to investigate.

## **Quality of Place: Calls to Action**

In summary, Quality of Place initiatives are at the forefront of concerns for both citizens and city officials. We suggest the following calls to action based on our community conversations:

- a. Form a taskforce to investigate other communities approach to affordable housing concerns. Develop a plan for possible builder/developer incentives to develop neighborhoods in the starter home category, or recruit a successful builder/developer from a surrounding area. Place a high priority on renovating

current neighborhoods with utility upgrades, sidewalks, fiber broadband access, etc. to keep them vibrant and attractive.

- b. Connect Warsaw to smaller outlying towns by bike trail. Make riding the “W” Trail a destination and encourage new businesses, festivals or group trail rides, etc. This connection helps make nearby “commuter communities” seem not so out of reach.
- c. Offer new residents a “City Concierge”. Local employers would identify new hires and they would be welcomed with discounts and gifts from local businesses as well as have points of contact for medical referrals, school information, and community happenings. OrthoWorx or City offices would be a great hub for this and could even be staffed by volunteers.
- d. Continue to think ‘outside the box’ to develop local childcare facilities. Could day care be added at Ivy Tech, Grace College, KCH. Could a plan be developed with an outside provider where a business would provide the space and a 3<sup>rd</sup> party would develop and staff the center?
- e. Communicate progress. Many citizens felt that they had heard ideas but did not know if projects were being completed. Some of the building projects (i.e., Buffalo St. corridor) take years to fund through state grants and even though the city provides many regular updates (“State of the City” by mayor, press releases, public input sessions listed in newspaper) the community still wants to know that projects are “on task”.
- f. Continue to pursue sports and leisure options with the “if you build it, they will come” mentality. Public ice rink, indoor sports fieldhouse (volleyball and soccer), biking and hiking trails, and county parks all need fearless vision and passionate

leadership to make them happen, but the payoff can be significant for a community like ours.

## **Northenor Award**

As stated above, the Millennials value green space, walkability, restaurants and entertainment before ultimately determining the location in which they live, work, and play. Through conducting our whitepaper project, we were able to pinpoint the importance of creating a location where people can connect with others. As our team contemplates the importance of all the emerging themes discussed with community leaders, we would like to assist in funding a project that immediately impacts the quality of place for Kosciusko County and surrounding communities.

If we are chosen for the Northenor Award, our goal is to assist in promoting collaboration and connectivity, as well as to encourage healthy and active lifestyles by supporting The Alley Activation project with the City of Warsaw and Patronicity. Patronicity is a program of the Indiana Housing and Community Development Funding Authority (IHCD) and currently offers a program for “placemaking” in Indiana. This initiative provides support to communities throughout the state that are interested in implementing their own “placemaking”, or destination, through various research and technical assistance as well as funding opportunities. The City of Warsaw has secured a launch date for crowdfunding to begin on March 27, 2017, and end on May 5, 2017. One stipulation states that if the City of Warsaw reaches their goal of \$50,000 in donations, IHCD will award an additional \$50,000 to this particular project.

It is our hope to assist in funding The Alley Activation project that allows downtown employees, tourists and visitors the opportunity to enjoy art, meet with friends, shop, dine, and have new experiences in a central location in downtown Warsaw. With this said, if we are chosen for the

Northenor Award, our contribution would be doubled by Patronicity to assist the City of Warsaw in creating The Alley Activation.

## **Conclusion**

Our KLA Whitepaper group are all proud citizens of Kosciusko County. With its rich economic impact through industries like agriculture and orthopedics to its abundant natural resources, we plan to call this home for many years to come. No community is without vision, and in order to ensure that vision is realized, its important to identify these social and economic concerns and continue to place those in front of the people and groups who can make an impact.

Through our study we often found that many solutions were already in place or in progress. School systems in Kosciusko County are fully aware of the need for available broadband for students and are exploring cutting-edge options to meet that demand. The short supply of affordable housing in the Warsaw area is known and this is a top priority among city and county officials and economic development leaders. Other concerns like manufacturing training and the lack of childcare are emerging as critical issues that will deeply affect the next decade in our community. Discussion and identification of these coming needs is critical in the long-term plan to keep Warsaw and our surrounding communities vibrant and prosperous.