

# 5 IDEAS TO BUILD A BETTER NORTHWEST INDIANA

NIRPC Executive Director Ty Warner shares his thoughts on what it will take to build a better region.



Note: This column originally appeared in a special section of *The Times* on March 9, 2014. The entire series of "5 Ideas" columns can be found online at <http://www.nwitimes.com/now>.

While I wouldn't say Northwest Indiana is in the midst of an identity crisis, it has sometimes struggled. At times the region can seem neglected by Indiana as being part of Chicago even while it can seem ignored by Chicago for being in Indiana.

Fortunately, the region is coalescing around key ideas and gaining more momentum every day. There's an energy and vitality brewing in Northwest Indiana that is engaging both Chicago and Indianapolis as the region lays hold of its own identity and unique assets.

From my vantage point, here are five ideas that build on that momentum, and would make for an even better Northwest Indiana:

## 1 EXPAND TRANSIT SERVICE

This region has an integral link with the Chicago metropolitan area and economy, and for the future viability of our region, it is critical to provide access to the Chicago job market. Commuter rail provides the predictability and efficiency that make this connection to Chicago viable and reliable.

This kind of investment in our region sends signals to Chicago interests of the region's commitment to relating to the larger metropolitan area. And the investments in infrastructure needed to sustain this service give a signal to local developers of a commitment to providing that access to the Chicago market, spurring greater development within our region when that rail access is provided.

To complete the journey by rail to a destination in our region, bus, bicycle, and pedestrian amenities need to supplement that investment.

The existing bus transit providers across Northwest Indiana are doing a heroic job trying to offer a needed service for those without other means of transportation to jobs and medical care. But this service is fragmented and disconnected, providing localized service in some parts of our region but without the ability to connect that service regionally. The problem has always been finding a stable source of local funding to match Federal dollars to provide this regional service and make that larger connection. It remains the challenge today.

## 2 ENHANCE OUR DOWNTOWNS

The character of Northwest Indiana is found in the unique identity, culture, and history of each of its towns and cities, expressed most purely in their "downtown" environments. The way we shop has changed, and those downtowns that have become successful are those that have transitioned themselves into destinations for unique shopping, dining, entertainment, and other such opportunities.

Add commuter rail into that downtown mix with transit-oriented development, and you have a recipe for transforming Northwest Indiana into a vibrant powerhouse, especially when a 24/7 residential presence locates in walkable proximity to these centers.

This is the future residential market for multiple segments of the generational spectrum, as empty-nesters seek smaller residences in closer to proximity to dining and entertainment, older residents seek to drive less while being less isolated, and younger homebuyers just entering the market with new buying power seek greater community, vibrancy, and activity.

Focusing on our downtowns in this way also has the benefit of reducing the infrastructure burden outside these center places.

NIRPC's new Creating Livable Communities program, a direct outgrowth of the region's award-winning 2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan*, is an example of putting resources in place to match the vision

of making our center places more livable, walkable, and vital. This shift is already happening across the country, and Northwest Indiana is poised to seize it, from our urban to our more rural communities.

## 3 KEEP IMPROVING ACCESS TO OUR NATURAL AREAS

Our region is defined and framed by its natural areas, from the Indiana Dunes lakeshore on the north to the Kankakee River to the south (each the subject of compelling documentary films, one already released and the other forthcoming). We live in the very birthplace of the ecological movement and of important environmental initiatives.



A fall morning in Downtown Hammond, one of the region's traditional downtown centers.  
NIRPC Photo





*Flowers bloom at Coffee Creek in Chesterton, one of the region's natural assets. NIRPC Photo*

We share the rich heritage of the Calumet region, which has been the impetus for much bi-state partnership and collaboration from the Pullman neighborhood in Illinois to the west to our National Park on the east.

More and more visitors discover these natural areas every day as word spreads of what Northwest Indiana has to offer within close proximity of a major metropolitan population.

One of our greatest regional success stories is the creation of over 130 miles of paved trails in Northwest Indiana, used in all seasons by runners, walkers, and bicyclists. With most migratory bird species making their way through our region, greater numbers of birdwatchers have come to the state and national parks. And countless hours of volunteer work has helped clean up our waterways to propel Northwest Indiana into a premier destination for paddlers.

These are tremendous successes that can be further enhanced by increasing opportunities for access by the larger Chicago population. Just as Northwest Indiana seeks to create better access to the Chicago job market, the region should keep extending the opportunity of those from the Chicago area to share the uniqueness of our natural environment.

Finding a way for those from the greater Chicago area to bring their bicycles on commuter rail to access the region's trails and parks would open the door to additional economic development and tourism opportunities while having minimal impact on these natural areas.

While the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Indiana Dunes State Park collectively see millions of visitors each year, the region has yet to experience the kind of associated economic development that has been experienced in other parts of the country with such resources. The strength of partnerships forged across this region between environmental and economic interests is strong. Working together, the region can better leverage these natural assets for economic potential while ensuring the ecological sensitivity necessary to help preserve them.

## 4 CLEAN IT UP

Beautification efforts are not just gloss and show, but they lay the groundwork for bringing new residents and visitors and for increasing business investment. The civic improvements by former Mayor Richard M. Daley cannot be underestimated in contributing to Chicago's success. Northwest Indiana needs the same.

Cleaning things up changes perception, and perception has a lot to do with where people are willing to make investments of their homes and businesses.



Studies have shown a strong correlation between the cleanliness of communities and perceptions of safety. Real or imagined, the region will never make a dent in changing its image as a safe place to be unless it simply looks better.

That means trees and landscaping, new coats of paint, restoration and rehabilitation of historically significant structures, comfortable public spaces, and sometimes even demolition.

That means clean parks and waterways and beaches.

That means improved business facades, attractive transit hubs integrated into our downtown places, and landscaped parking lots that do not dwarf the businesses they serve.

That also means the things that capture folks' attention at high rates of speed. If they don't stop on their way through Northwest Indiana, most people's image of our region is the ads they are exposed to along the Borman. If these are all you saw, what are the few things you would think Northwest Indiana is all about? Are these the same things you are happy to point to as representing where you live? Cleaning things up is about how the region helps sell itself.

## 5 TALK IT UP

Soon after I started at NIRPC I was asked by a local media personality why I'd come to a region with so many politicians in jail. My response was that if that's true, at least they are in jail...which means the justice system is working! Decreasing tolerance for unethical behaviour is actually a sign of progress...and instead of cynically dwelling in a land of sarcasm, I'd rather tell the story of how Northwest Indiana is rapidly cleaning up its act and is, in reality, gaining increasing momentum.

Cynicism is as corrosive as the pollution and blight that mar some portions of our landscape. What we say makes a difference, and we can either contribute to perpetuating stereotypes – and be stuck there – or we can focus on what's unique and special about our environment and our towns and our lakefront and our industry and our people.

Each time someone asks us where we're from, there is an opportunity to change any negative perceptions about where we live, and to talk up the assets and the vitality of this region. We do need regional branding, but no branding campaign is as effective as word of mouth in personal, daily interactions. That's something that all of us have the power to contribute to.

Earlier I mentioned the challenges of Northwest Indiana finding its identity in relation to both Chicago and Indianapolis. The truth is, Northwest Indiana *is* unique, and not like anywhere else in Indiana, or Illinois. Or Michigan...or anywhere in the country, for that matter.

Acknowledging and improving our place in the larger Chicago market faces head-on the reality of our economic situation, and, frankly, is critical to our survival. But our uniqueness in that market is our strength, and we need to celebrate it, trumpet it, invite folks into it, and step up into our place in this larger regional economy. Talking it up is not something left to a few organizations or those with that specific charge. It's the responsibility of all of us, in every interaction we have. Sounds simple, but it may be the most important step any of us can take toward building a better region.



*Once home to acid pits left over from the steel industry, the Portage Lakefront Park and Riverwalk has quickly become a popular destination...and an example of what cleaning up our area can bring us. NIRPC Photo*