



ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN

NORTHWESTERN INDIANA REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

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TIP STRATEGIES, INC., is a privately held economic development consulting firm with offices in Austin and Seattle. TIP is committed to providing quality solutions for public sector and private sector clients. Established in 1995, the firm's primary focus is economic development strategic planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Northwest Indiana stands at a crossroads. To the region's credit, it has largely sustained its economic success in the face of significant challenges. Some of these challenges, like the decline of the steel industry, have been impacting the region for years. Some, like the region's housing and workforce shortages, are nationwide concerns. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, a new set of challenges has emerged: recovering from the economic upheaval associated with the virus and building a more resilient economy moving forward. This global crisis has not affected every community equally, nor are the responses of all communities uniform. The state of Indiana has generally taken a more lenient approach to governing during the pandemic than places like its immediate neighbor, Illinois. Although this strategy allows for more businesses (particularly small businesses) to remain open and therefore competitive, the Northwest Indiana region has still sustained serious economic consequences.

Fortunately, area leaders recently completed an ambitious planning process, which laid the groundwork for regional cooperation and economic transformation. Completed in September 2018, *Ignite the Region: A Regional Strategy for Economic Transformation*, outlined [five pillars for economic vitality and growth](#). In late 2021, the region received a \$50 million (the maximum amount possible) funding allocation from the state as part of the Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) grant program¹ to continue implementation of the *Ignite* pillars and associated outcomes. This achievement is one example that displays the overall strength of Northwest Indiana relative to its peers, and it allows for some targeted investments that can help the region weather the recovery period. While the \$50 million READI grant is a significant win, it is not sufficient to address the many challenges that the region must attack head-on.

To build on these efforts, the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) engaged Austin-based TIP Strategies, Inc. (TIP), to prepare an Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan for its three member counties: Lake, Porter, and La Porte. It is by no means exhaustive, but the strategies and actions reflect insights gained from a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data and numerous conversations with stakeholders from various industry perspectives from across the region. The project progressed through three phases of engagement: discovery, opportunity, and implementation, respectively including the gathering of data, the transformation of that data into strategic recommendations, and the call-to-action for the translation of those recommendations into reality. To illustrate the influence of the discovery process on the plan itself, summaries of all the data collected are presented first in this document. By focusing its leadership, capital, and time on the recommendations, the NIRPC region can and will emerge from the aftermath of the pandemic in an even stronger position than when the crisis began.

RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

DEFINITIONS: Recovery is defined for the purposes of this plan as the short-term process of addressing the immediate economic impacts following a disruption in order to return to previous economic conditions. This disruption can take various forms, such as the loss of a major employer, a natural disaster, or a health crisis. In the present case, the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe disruptions to business as usual for both the businesses and the residents of the three-county NIRPC region. Quick and decisive action is required in the face of this kind of unprecedented event. The ability to react quickly will determine the region's success in rebuilding and recovering in the wake of future events.

¹ Launched by Indiana Governor Eric J. Holcomb in 2021, the Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) dedicated \$500 million to promote strategic investments through a competitive grant process. See <https://www.iedc.in.gov/program/indiana-readi/>.

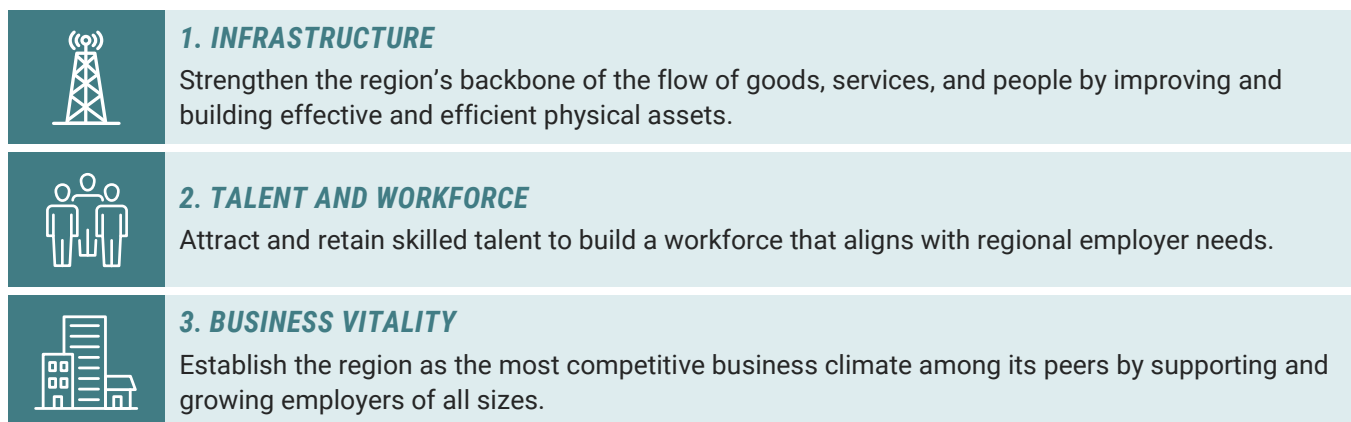
Resilience, on the other hand, is defined here as the longer-term process of cultivating an economy that is strong enough to withstand future catastrophic events (or even to avoid the event altogether) and to establish the region as competitive, modern, and forward-looking. This *proactive* process involves the sustained vision of area leadership (both public and private) of what the NIRPC region can and should be.

Together, these two characteristics of a well-oiled economy act as the driving force for this plan. The implementation matrix (delivered separately) is a tool for regional leadership to track strategies and actions that should be set into motion immediately as recovery tactics. Other strategies, for creating a more resilient economy, will be longer-term (and even permanently ongoing).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: In lieu of a singular vision statement, TIP offers the following guiding principles as the foundation for the goals and strategies outlined in this plan. During the opportunity phase, TIP presented these principles to the project steering committee (named in the Acknowledgments) and concluded that the terms below serve as the optimal framework to guide the plan. These key concepts are the building blocks that will influence the actions the region should take to recover and become resilient. Each guiding principle establishes an imperative that translates directly into implementable tactics and should be top of mind for regional leaders when evaluating all potential roads ahead.



GOALS: Throughout the discovery and opportunity phases of this engagement, TIP and NIRPC collaborated to evaluate a number of possible frameworks for the *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan*. The following three goals rose to the top as the most effective structure for implementing sound strategies for the region. NIRPC and its partners cannot pursue and achieve success in every facet of the regional economic situation at once. However, these goals provide the optimal design for decisive, targeted action.



CONCLUSION

Thoughtfully responding to disasters and planning for economic resilience is no small undertaking. NIRPC and the region's leadership should celebrate the fact that they have made great strides in helping secure the vitality and sustainability of the region's economy, thanks in part to previous strategic planning efforts like *Ignite the Region*. This plan serves to strengthen those efforts, reinforcing the need for the continuation and improvement of these prior approaches. It provides the framework and tools to better position the region to be prepared for and respond to future disruptions. Its implementation, however, will take a concerted push. The Implementation Workshop, held at the conclusion of the engagement, was a starting point for invested parties acting to assign roles and responsibilities regarding specific strategies and action items in the matrix. Moving forward, immediate and ongoing implementation efforts will require a coalition of individuals and organizations to champion projects and initiatives that fall within their purview. With singular focus and coordinated effort, Northwest Indiana can translate this plan into a stronger, more resilient economic future for the region.

2. PLANNING CONTEXT

During the discovery phase of this engagement, TIP amassed information on the economic situation of the region via both quantitative analysis and qualitative stakeholder outreach. This research culminated in an analysis of Northwest Indiana's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, commonly known as a SWOT analysis. Highlights from this work are presented in this section and informed the recommendations.

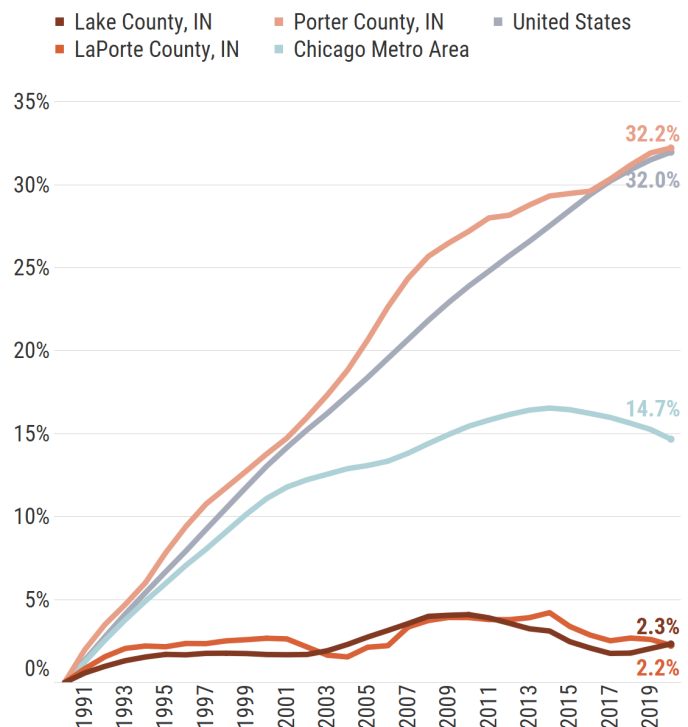
ECONOMIC CONTEXT

To provide a common foundation for the planning process, TIP gathered data from a variety of sources, including (but not limited to) the US Census Bureau, the American Community Survey (ACS), the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and privately available data from Emsi Burning Glass. This comprehensive analysis was delivered as an interactive data visualization, the *Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission Economic Explorer*, along with a publicly accessible link.² The *Explorer* presents information on Northwest Indiana's competitiveness and factors that influence its economic vitality. Significant takeaways are detailed in this section.

The region has grown slowly but steadily in recent decades.

The region has grown slowly but steadily over the past several decades, increasing by about 8 percent since 1990. However, this growth rate is about one-half of the larger Chicago metro area (about 15 percent) and far below the national growth rate of 32 percent in the same period (see Figure 1). While Lake County continues to account for more than 60 percent of the region's population, substantial growth has occurred in Porter County to the east. Porter County's growth rate has tracked with the national trend, increasing by more than 32 percent since 1990, compared to about 2 percent in both Lake and La Porte Counties. Porter County's growth in recent years can be mostly attributed to strong domestic migration into the county.

FIGURE 1. POPULATION TREND COMPARISONS
NIRPC REGION COUNTIES



Sources: US Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program; Moody's Analytics; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Notes: Population estimates prior to 2010 are sourced from Moody's Analytics. Estimates from 2010 to 2020 are sourced from the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program, which is based on the 2010 US Census and data on births, deaths, and migration. The Census Bureau will adjust population estimates 2010 to 2020 in the spring of 2022 to be consistent with the new population counts.

² The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission Economic Explorer is accessible on the NIRPC website at <https://nirpc.org/economic-recovery-resilience>.

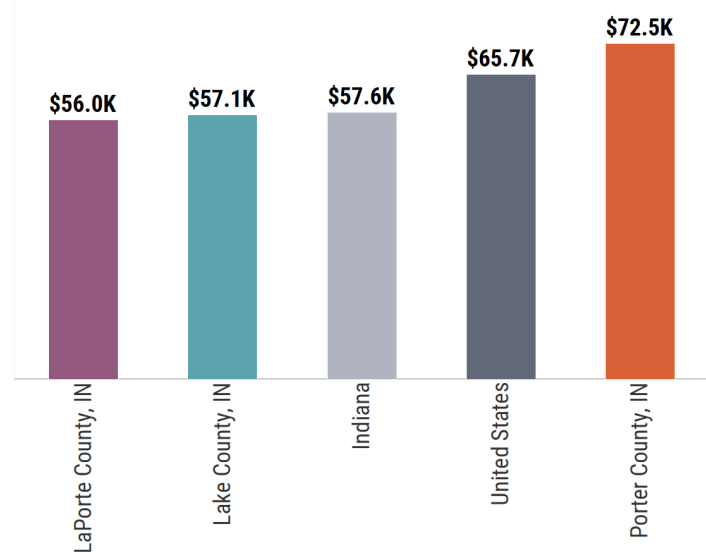
Regional demographics broadly mirror the US, but education and income levels lag.

The demographics of the NIRPC region look similar to the nation, but the racial and ethnic compositions differ within each county. Lake County, the most populous, looks more like the diverse Chicago metro area, while La Porte and Porter Counties are more in line with Indiana's demographics (about 80 percent White). Lower overall educational attainment is also a regional challenge compared to the state, the Chicago metro area, and the nation. Less than one-quarter of NIRPC residents 25 years and older have a bachelor's degree or higher while almost one-half (46 percent) have a high school education or less. Lower education levels have translated into lower earnings as La Porte and Lake Counties have lower household median incomes than the state and nation (see Figure 2). While Porter County has much higher educational attainment and median income than the other two NIRPC counties, it still underperforms when compared to the Chicago metro area on both measures. The pattern seen in educational attainment and median household income is repeated in poverty levels and percentage of households receiving nutrition assistance.

Regional employment gains have not kept pace with population growth trends.

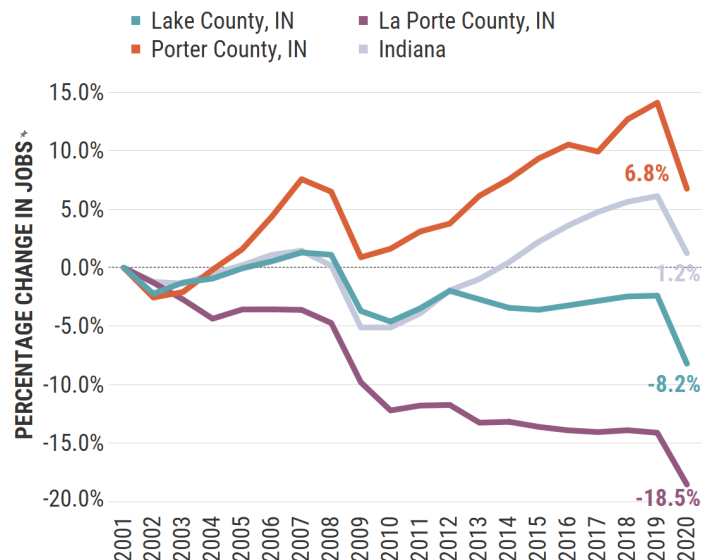
While population trends across the three counties have shown modest, consistent growth in recent decades, employment growth has not followed suit (see Figure 3). Compared to 2001, employment is down more than 8 percent in Lake County and more than 18 percent in La Porte County. Porter County has seen growth over the same period and employment is up nearly 7 percent in 2020, though the 6.4 percent single-year decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic was the sharpest in the region.

FIGURE 2. MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 2019



Sources: ACS, 2019 1-year sample; TIP Strategies, Inc.

FIGURE 3. COUNTY EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

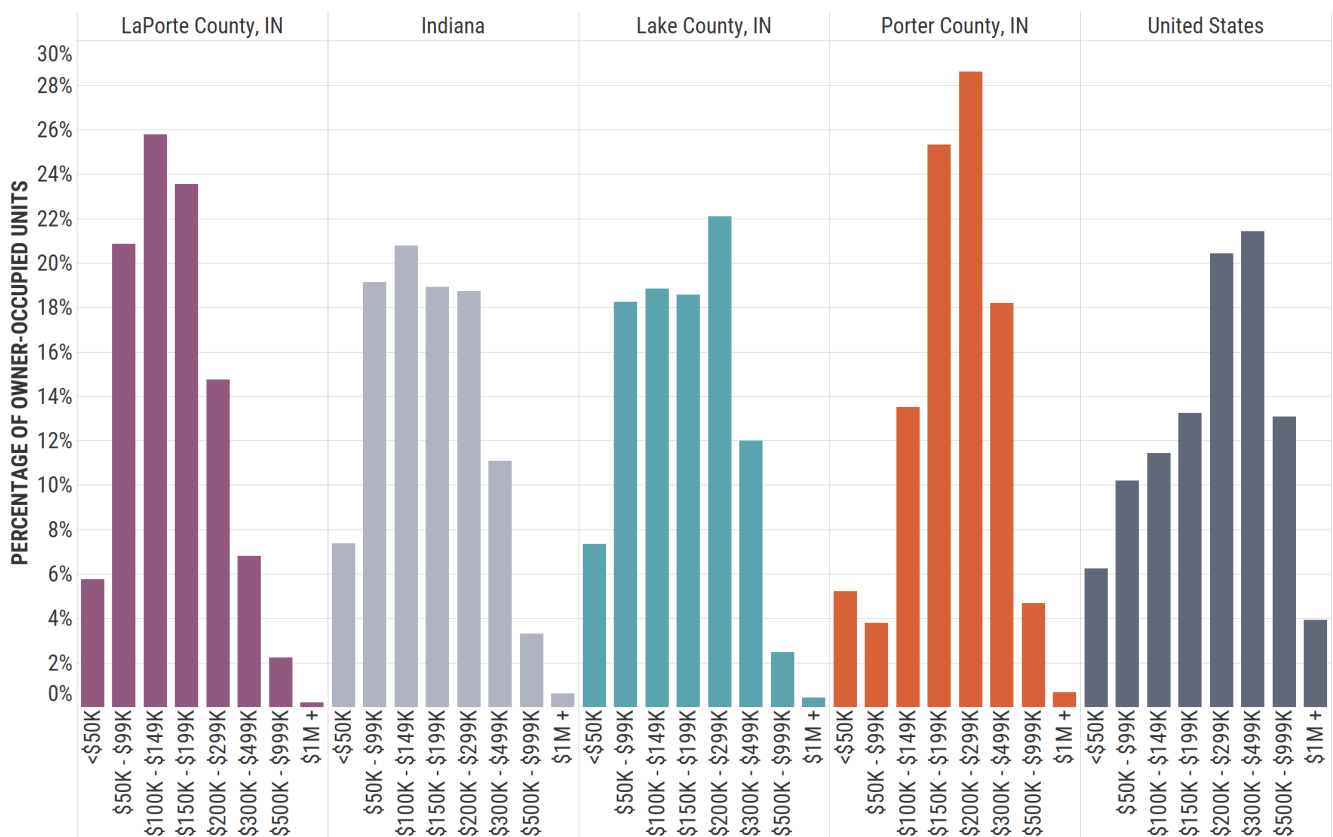


Sources: BLS; Emsi Burning Glass 2021.4—Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Though still more affordable than much of the US, recent housing construction translates to higher home values in Porter County.

Though lower than national levels, median housing costs in the three counties are on par with Indiana for both homeowners and renters. A closer look at the distribution of home values highlights differences: more than 25 percent of owner-occupied homes in La Porte County were valued between \$100,000 and \$149,000 in 2019, compared to about 20 percent in Indiana and Lake County, and less than 15 percent in the US and Porter County (see Figure 4). A similar, reversed pattern exists for owner-occupied homes valued between \$200,000 and \$299,000: almost 29 percent of Porter County homes sat in this range in 2019, compared to only about 15 percent in La Porte County. Porter County’s higher-valued homes are likely the result of more recent housing being built to accommodate the growing population—a trend not replicated in the other two counties—as about 50 percent of the county’s housing units were built after 1980 compared to less than 25 percent in Lake and La Porte Counties. Housing has been and will remain a national issue, inflamed by labor and material costs/shortages.

FIGURE 4. HOUSING COST DISTRIBUTION COMPARISON, 2019
DISTRIBUTION OF OWNER-OCCUPIED HOME VALUES FOR SELECTED GEOGRAPHIES

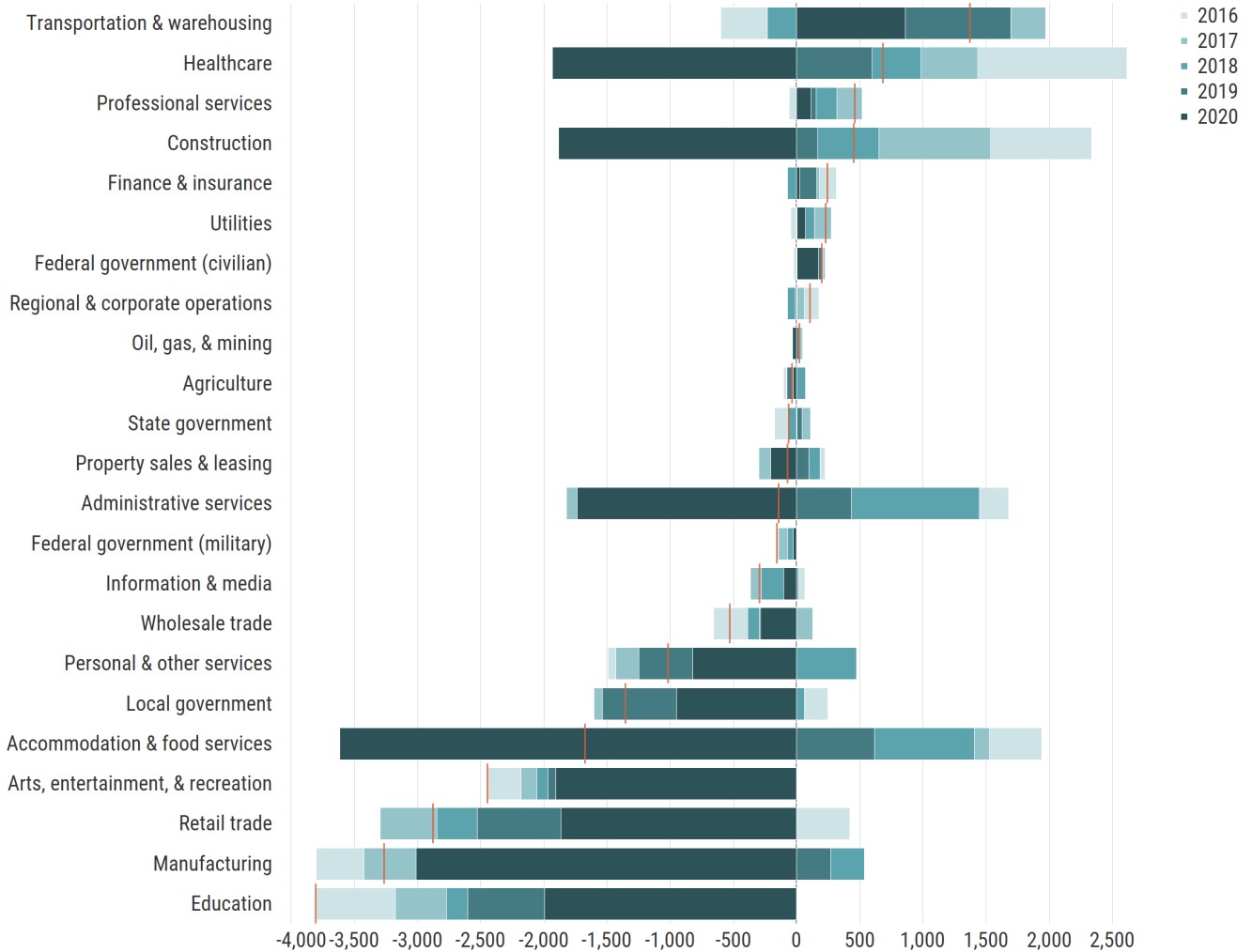


Sources: ACS, 2019 1-year sample; TIP Strategies, Inc.

COVID-19 pandemic job losses, while significant, were less severe for some sectors compared to the 2007–2009 Great Recession.

Healthcare continues to be the dominant regional industry, though manufacturing is a close second and is the largest sector in both Porter and La Porte Counties. Nearly all sectors saw substantial employment loss in 2020, including healthcare, though food services and manufacturing saw the largest losses of more than 3,600 and 3,000 across the region, respectively. The fallout from the COVID-19 recession has impacts across the economy, though the effects on construction, transportation, and manufacturing are notably less than the employment contraction after the Great Recession (2007–2009) in those sectors (see Figure 5, page 7).

FIGURE 5. NET EMPLOYMENT CHANGE BY INDUSTRY SECTOR: NIRPC REGION

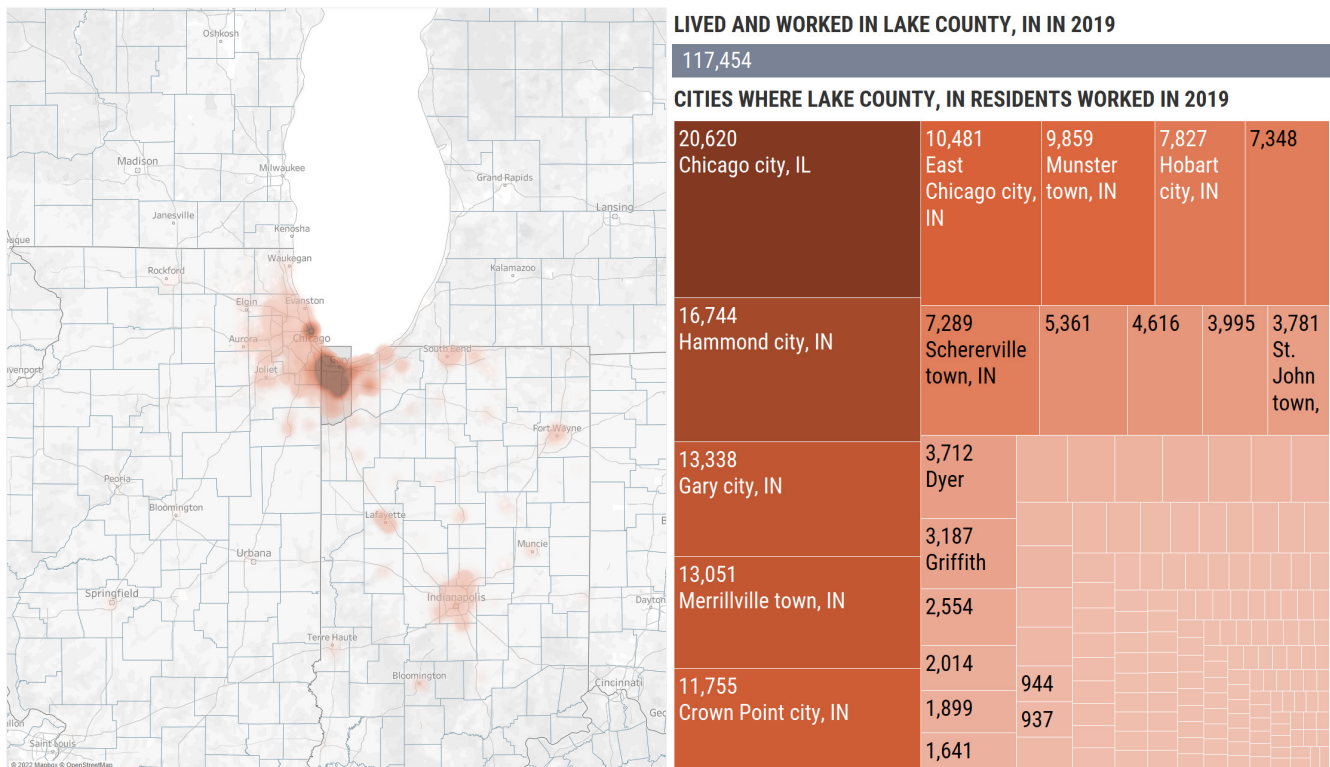


Sources: BLS; Emsi Burning Glass 2021.4—QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; TIP Strategies, Inc.
 Note: Red bars indicate the total net change for the selected period.

Regional commuting patterns, particularly Lake County's, are heavily influenced by Chicago.

The NIRPC region tends to be a net supplier of workers, as is typical of any community located near one or more major metro areas. In 2019, more than 20,000 Lake County residents had jobs in Chicago, mostly concentrated in the central business district, but scattered throughout the south side of the city as well (see Figure 6, page 8). While many workers commute out of their local communities for work, most Lake County residents (more than 117,000 or about 55 percent) also work in Lake County, concentrated in employment centers in Hammond (14 percent), Gary (11 percent), and Merrillville (11 percent). Some of these resident workers also live in the same part of Lake County (12 percent in Hammond and Gary, each), though a substantial portion prefer less urban areas to the south (about 9 percent live in unincorporated Lake County). A similar pattern exists for La Porte County residents (48 percent live and work in La Porte County), but not so for Porter County (41 percent live and work in Porter County), where more residents tend to commute outside of their community for work. These patterns emphasize the need for improved forms of public transportation to facilitate the movement of regional workers.

FIGURE 6. WHERE LAKE COUNTY RESIDENTS WORKED IN 2019
DARKER SHADING ON THE MAP INDICATES MORE LAKE COUNTY RESIDENTS WORK IN THE AREA SHOWN. LIGHTER SHADING INDICATES FEWER RESIDENTS.



Sources: Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics, Origin-Destination Employment Statistics; TIP Strategies, Inc.
Note: Only includes residents and workers in Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan.

OCCUPATIONAL RISK TOOL

With the threat of new COVID-19 variants, the *Occupational Risk Tool* for the NIRPC Region provides a timely examination of occupations likely to be affected by public health and economic crises. This interactive data visualization, which was delivered separately, explores occupational risk from two sources: the risk to personal health from COVID-19 and the economic risk from job or income loss. The two risk sources are used to plot a position for more than 700 occupations that illustrates the amount of risk to earnings and health that residents may experience as a result of their jobs. The information can be mapped by ZIP Code and disaggregated across demographic groups and by individual occupations within major occupational groupings as well as by major industry sectors. While workers continue to face health risks associated with in-person work, communities that understand the pain points of their local labor force will be better equipped to respond effectively to the evolving needs of resident workers. The data also speak to the urgent need for a more diversified economy and upskilling and reskilling opportunities, providing workers in the region with more occupational options.

A significant percentage of regional workers are in jobs with a high risk to earnings and to personal health.

Nearly one-half (44.4 percent) of all workers (totaling over 345,000) in the NIRPC region are in the highest risk quadrant with relatively high risk to personal health and earnings (see Figure 7). This percentage is well above the national rate of 34.7 percent and among 52 similar-sized metro areas with 250,000 to 500,000 workers. A few of the largest occupations in the highest risk quadrant include over 10,800 fast food and counter workers, 8,700 cashiers, and 8,000 laborers and freight, stock, and material movers.

Workers in low-wage jobs face disproportionately higher risks to both their earnings and health.

Risk is also disproportionately distributed among low-wage jobs. While 43.4 percent of jobs in the region pay less than \$20 per hour, these jobs comprise 74.1 percent of jobs with the highest level of risk to both earnings and personal health. Often, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are disproportionately employed in these low-wage jobs. Not only are BIPOC employed in jobs with greater exposure to risks, but they are also earning less. These disparities call for increased diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts regionwide to ensure that all residents of Northwest Indiana are safe and treated fairly.

Risk is not evenly distributed geographically throughout the region.

Workers who face the highest and lowest risks are not evenly distributed geographically throughout the NIRPC region. Instead, some communities along Lake Michigan, such as regions around Michigan City, Portage, and some areas of Gary and Hammond, have higher concentrations (more than 23 percent) of high-risk workers generally coinciding with lower household incomes. In contrast, areas with higher concentrations of low-risk workers tend to fall into two groups: suburban areas outside of urban centers with higher household incomes and rural areas to the south. The latter group includes more agricultural workers, a position associated with lower on-the-job risk of contracting contagious diseases.

FIGURE 7. OCCUPATIONAL RISK PLOT: NIRPC REGION SHARE (%) OF RESIDENT WORKERS BY THEIR OCCUPATION'S QUADRANT ON THE RISK PLOT. RISK TO EARNINGS AND HEALTH WITHIN A QUADRANT VARY BY OCCUPATION.



Sources: US Department of Labor, Occupational Information Network; ACS 2019 5-year sample via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS); Emsi 2021.4—QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; Charles S. Gascon and Devin Werner, April 3, 2020, "COVID-19 and Unemployment Risk: State and MSA [metropolitan statistical area] Differences," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Notes: Only detailed occupations with at least 10 resident workers in the region are included. Unemployment is by occupation group (2-digit Standard Occupational Classification). Selected occupations' essential and salary indicators have been modified from their initial designations by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

EMPLOYER SURVEY

As part of the strategic planning process, TIP conducted an online survey of business professionals familiar with the Northwest Indiana region. The survey was open for a four-week period between January 28 and February 21, 2022, and drew 101 respondents. The survey instrument opened with seven basic questions about respondent demographics, location, and professional responsibilities. The remainder of the survey included 12 questions directed at respondent perceptions of, and experiences with, recruiting workers in the Northwest Indiana region. All responses were confidential. Question-by-question survey results were provided to NIRPC in an interactive data visualization using Tableau Reader. The key findings of this survey were used to guide the direction of the strategic plan.

Nearly all respondents (83 percent) self-identified as having managerial or hiring responsibilities. A similar share of respondents (86 of 100 answering this question) worked in Lake, La Porte, or Porter Counties, with the remainder working in surrounding Indiana or Illinois counties. Generation Xers (48 of 101 respondents) were the dominant age group in the survey, followed by Baby Boomers (40), Millennials (12), and one Generation Z. The survey was not designed to be a scientific sample, nor was the pool of respondents large enough to provide standalone strategic feedback. Nevertheless, the survey did yield valuable corroborating input from a small, carefully targeted group of hiring professionals doing business in Northwest Indiana.

Hiring plans are mixed...

Across all occupational groups, the majority of respondents anticipate modest hiring activity within the next six months, and they expect their hiring needs to stay about the same over the next two to three years. In the COVID-19 pandemic environment, respondents indicated that positions typically take one to three months to fill regardless of occupational group.

...but skilled labor is in high demand.

Over one-half (54 percent) of respondents indicated skilled labor as the hardest occupational group to recruit. More respondents (15 of 73 responses for this question) anticipated hiring needs for skilled labor to accelerate over the next two to three years than any other occupational type. Additionally, when asked to prioritize pandemic recovery initiatives, respondents rated *attracting and educating a skilled workforce* as most important (average score of 4.2).

Some employers lack confidence in local leadership...

Respondents consistently singled out local leadership as holding back the region, with more than one-half (53 percent) indicating lapses in *government, cooperation, collaboration, or cohesion* as obstacles to sustained economic vitality. Additionally, the region today was described as *dysfunctional, backward, and divided* by almost one-quarter (23 percent) of respondents. However, there is hope for improvement, as more than one-third (34 percent) of respondents chose words like *collaborative, thriving, world-class, successful, diverse, prospering, efficient, resilient, and role model* to describe their vision of the region in 10 years. The conclusion can be drawn that opinions are significantly split among regional employers, and therefore more work is needed to address the concerns of those who responded negatively.

...and they want more investment in infrastructure.

When asked to evaluate activities for economic resilience, *expanding critical infrastructure* was ranked the highest among respondents (average score of 4.2 out of 5.0). Other areas related to infrastructure improvement that received high marks for resilience efforts were *revitalizing targeted areas* (average score of 3.8) and *redeveloping underutilized sites* (average score of 3.2).

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement was of paramount importance to the discovery process of this plan. By reaching out and speaking with groups and individuals in Lake, Porter, and La Porte Counties who have a vested interest in the economic development of the region, TIP both raised awareness and gave participants a voice in the process. NIRPC, in collaboration with TIP, facilitated the compilation of stakeholder lists and supplemented the initial selections with others who would contribute valuable insights. All roundtable discussions and one-on-one interviews were conducted virtually. During the roundtables, the team used the online live-polling tool, Mentimeter, to capture records of real-time feedback and input from attendees, which informed the creation of the SWOT analysis and, ultimately, the strategies and actions recommended in the *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan*.

Roundtable participants included representatives from the following groups.

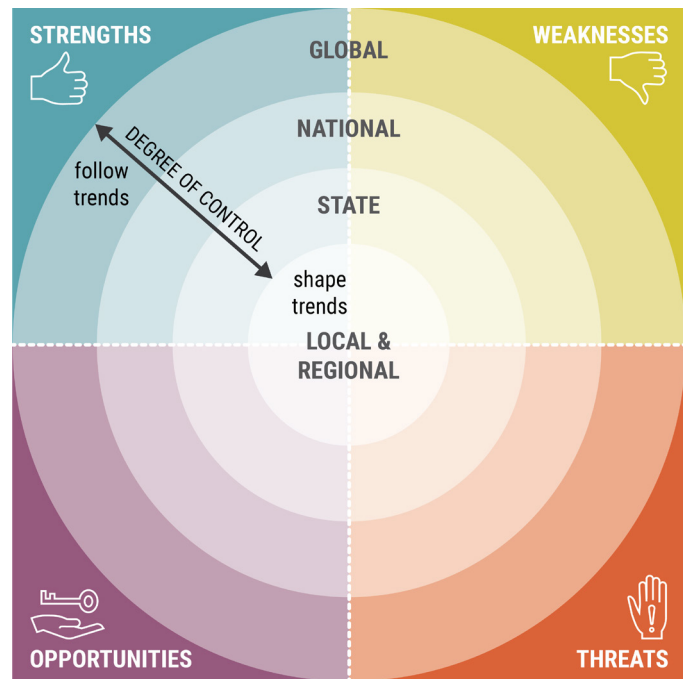
- ▶ One Region Members: representatives of a leading economic development organization in the region.
- ▶ Economic Developers: various stakeholders with close ties to regional economic development.
- ▶ Public Officials: elected individuals with influence in the region.
- ▶ Environmental and Natural Resources: leaders in the sustainability space.
- ▶ Real Estate Professionals: brokers and developers pursuing sites and projects in the region.
- ▶ Higher Education and Workforce: representatives from multiple area educational institutions and workforce development service providers.
- ▶ Community and Nonprofit Organizations: leaders in the region with a vested interest in the personal and professional well-being of residents.
- ▶ Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Leaders: movers and shakers in the development of resources for people of color and different abilities.
- ▶ Young Professionals: workers in the region who bring the unique perspective of the needs of young people.
- ▶ Key Employers: executives from businesses with a significant presence in the region.
- ▶ Targeted/Emerging Industries and Startups/Entrepreneurs: a combination of individuals involved in innovative and growing sectors.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Findings from the qualitative and quantitative tasks formed the basis for an analysis of the NIRPC region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, commonly referred to as a SWOT analysis. The four components of a SWOT analysis can be defined as follows.

- ▶ **STRENGTHS:** Assets and resources that can be built on to grow, strengthen, and diversify the local/regional economy.
- ▶ **WEAKNESSES:** Liabilities and barriers to economic development that could limit economic growth potential.
- ▶ **OPPORTUNITIES:** Competitive advantages and positive trends that hold significant potential for the attraction of new businesses, investments, and skilled workers.
- ▶ **THREATS:** Unfavorable factors and trends (often external) that could negatively affect the local/regional economy.

FIGURE 8. SWOT ANALYSIS OVERVIEW DIAGRAM



Source: TIP Strategies, Inc.

The SWOT analysis illustrates the region's competitive position and highlights factors that differentiate the area from competition. The results are then mapped to reflect the degree of influence that can be exerted. Items closer to the center of the graph are more local in nature. Those at the outer corners are influenced by state, national, or global trends, placing them largely outside local leadership's control (see Figure 8, page 12). While it is important to be aware of national and global trends, many of which have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus should be on maximizing Northwest Indiana's strengths and opportunities. Diagrams summarizing the results of the SWOT analysis are provided starting on page 13.

FIGURE 9. NIRPC REGION STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

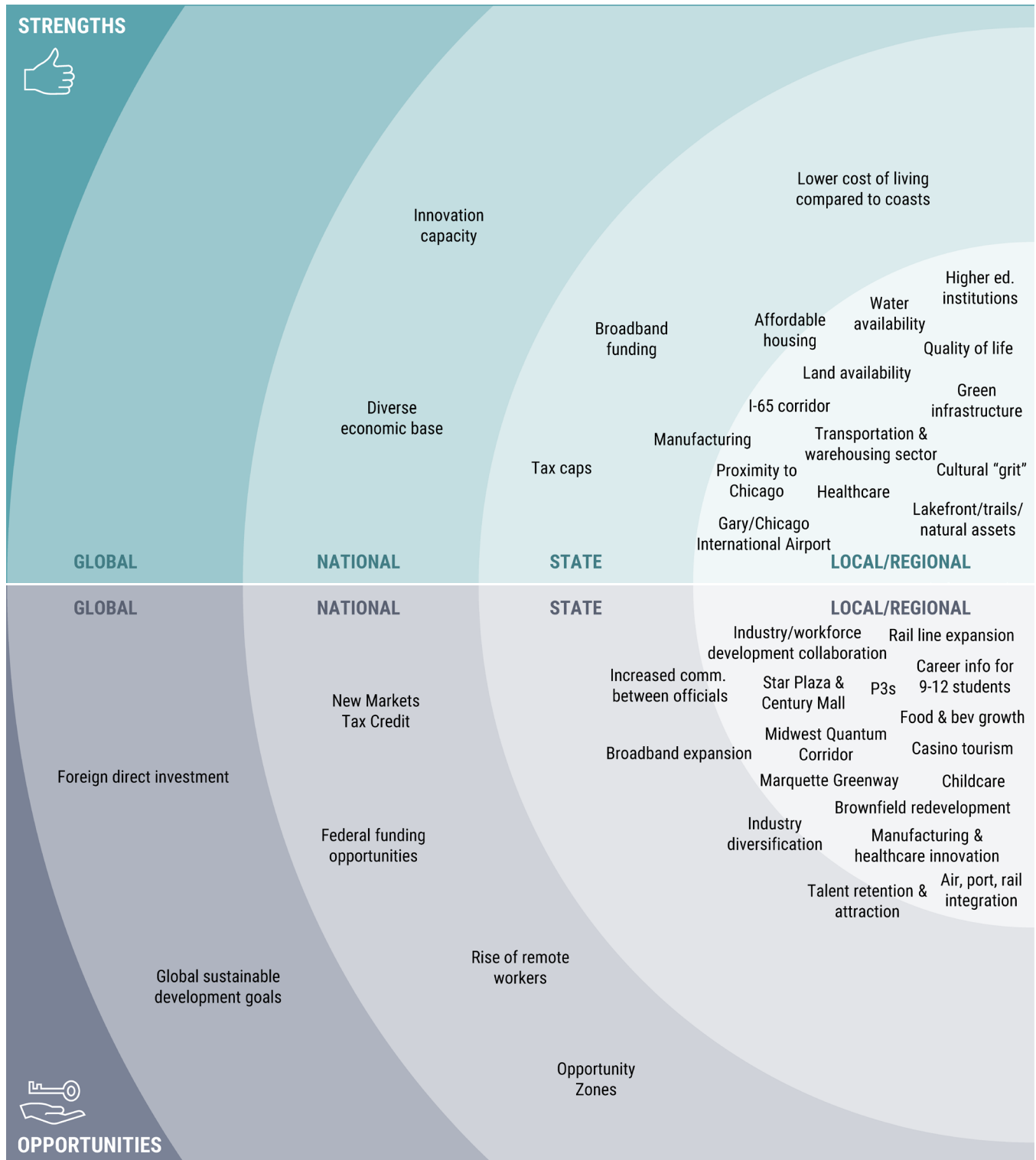
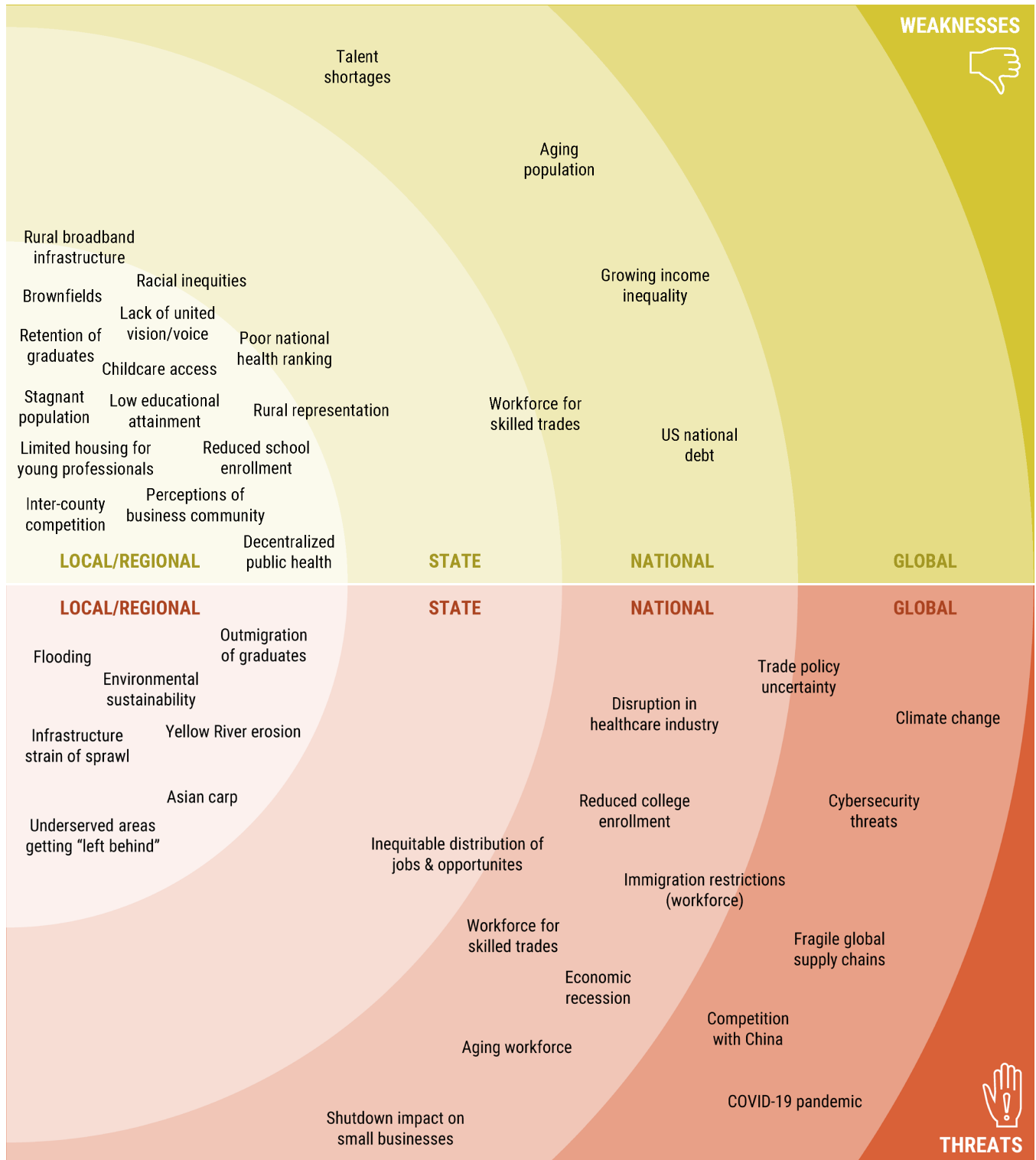


FIGURE 10. NIRPC REGION WEAKNESSES AND THREATS



3. ACTION PLAN

The goals encompassed by the *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan* address three critical areas: improving and building the regional infrastructure, developing a highly skilled and flexible talent base, and promoting the vitality of existing business. The recommended strategies and actions will help to ensure that NIRPC and its partners are well-positioned to respond to and prepare for future events. These strategies and actions, taken with the implementation matrix (delivered separately) and the appointment of a coalition of responsible organizations, will secure the region's economic resilience in the years to come.

GOAL 1. INFRASTRUCTURE

Strengthen the region's backbone of the flow of goods, services, and people by improving and building effective and efficient physical assets.

Without a strong system of infrastructure underlying its economic framework, a community will be unable to remain sustainable and prosperous in the face of unexpected shocks to that framework. In the NIRPC region, there are significant opportunities to capitalize on its natural assets, including its proximity to Chicago and Lake Michigan, as well as more intangible assets like its relatively unified regional identity that binds its various municipalities together. By investing in key infrastructure projects and initiatives, the region can emerge from the pandemic more effectively and cement its economic stability for years to come. It is also important to note that some economic shocks are caused by disasters other than public health emergencies, such as the flooding in 2008 that led to the prolonged closure of I-94. To illustrate the point using a different community: Texas was subject to a rare winter weather event in February 2021 that shut down the electric grid across much of the state for days. These types of natural disasters pose a significant threat to infrastructure specifically, and sustained efforts to increase the resilience of those structural assets are crucial to long-term economic stability and growth.

Some efforts related to infrastructure have already begun, but their completed development in a timely manner will be critical to the region's recovery and resilience. Other recommendations have not been implemented yet, but they will push the region past its current struggles if pursued effectively. The combination of unseen infrastructure (such as broadband and utilities) and large-scale developments (like railways and the airport) will establish the region as a premier destination in the Midwest for both businesses and residents.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

- 1.1. Maximize the development of the Midwest Quantum Corridor (MQC) and the Greater South Shore area as envisioned by the Greater South Shore Initiative.

The Midwest Quantum Corridor is a quantum communications network along the I-90 Indiana Toll Road and the South Shore commuter rail line. The Greater South Shore Initiative is a collaborative effort of regional stakeholders to position Lake Michigan's southern shore (Greater South Shore) from Chicago, Illinois to South Bend, Indiana, as a 90-mile-long, advanced-research, applied science, technology, and manufacturing corridor. Although of variable width, the Greater South Shore is anchored by the Midwest Quantum Corridor throughout its length.

- 1.1.1. For the Midwest Quantum Corridor, seek additional private and public funding to augment the \$4.25 million requested as part of the READI initiative; \$18 million in current private sector spending and matching funds of \$11 million (from the city of Hammond alone).
 - ▶ Build awareness and enthusiasm for the project by relying on existing funders to solicit new investment.

- 1.1.2.** Launch and support the Greater South Shore Initiative and broaden the consortium of associations and project partners to facilitate ongoing collaboration and information sharing.
- ▶ Work with the city of Chicago to develop relationships with communities surrounding the hub in Hammond, which is the data center campus located at the Indiana border on Lake Michigan.
 - ▶ Communicate and support phases 1, 2, and 3 of the Greater South Shore Initiative. Phase 1 is the creation of a vision, based on input from regional (Chicago to South Bend) stakeholders and from workshops. Phase 2 is the development and evaluation of various land use concepts to best leverage all assets, including but not limited to the MQC, plus the identification and prioritization of projects. Phase 3 is the finalization of the vision plan content and production of the vision plan products.
- 1.1.3.** Increase awareness among residents in Lake, Porter, and La Porte Counties of the new connection opportunities that will be provided by the proposed extension of the regional fiber network.
- ▶ Utilize a portion of the READI grant to launch a media campaign in geographies that will be impacted by the new fiber networks.
- 1.1.4.** Reach out to businesses in information technology reliant industries, like data centers, finance, higher education, and emerging technologies, to describe the commercial benefits of locating along the Midwest Quantum Corridor and the Greater South Shore.
- ▶ Identify both existing and new employers that are involved with quantum research and emerging technologies and are interested in expansion related to the MQC project's implementation.
 - ▶ Highlight the impact to date of the Digital Crossroad data center in Hammond and formulate projections of the advancements the new fiber networks will spur there.
- 1.1.5.** Commission an impact study of the economic benefits of the MQC project to better inform and educate regional leaders. The study should include relevant metrics, such as connection speed, number of residents served, service prices, federal and/or state funding procured, business expansions or relocations as a direct result of the development, etc.
- 1.2.** Improve broadband access, particularly in rural areas.
- 1.2.1.** Encourage all communities in the region to become state of Indiana certified Broadband Ready Communities to reduce regulatory hurdles that deter investment.
- ▶ Utilize the [Broadband Ready Communities Program](#) database to map served and unserved geographies.
- 1.2.2.** Pursue state and federal grant opportunities where applicable.
- ▶ Promote the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#) to help eligible households afford broadband.

EXAMPLE: The [Next Level Connections Broadband Grant Program](#) is an initiative formed by the Indiana Office of Community & Rural Affairs that funds the extension of broadband services to unserved communities in the state. Eligible expenses covered by the prospective grants include design, engineering, permitting, and construction of last mile infrastructure. The third round of awards included \$189 million for 154 projects across the state, reaching more than 52,900 homes and commercial locations, and utility cooperatives contributed more than \$239 million in matching funds. The grant program will serve as a best practice for future funding opportunities related to high-speed internet access.

- 1.2.3. Utilize the conclusions of the Purdue University Center for Regional Development's [Broadband's Impacts study](#) to drive investment decisions.
- 1.2.4. Set a regional goal of 90 percent coverage by 2025 at a minimum speed of 25 megabits per second downloads and 3 megabits per second uploads (the standard speed delineated by the Federal Communications Commission).
 - ▶ Raise the speed goal annually, based on rates of improvement in the region (e.g., 50 percent coverage with gigabit fiber by 2035).
- 1.2.5. Collaborate with the Northwestern Indiana Telephone Company, also known as NITCO, and other local service providers to evaluate major geographical gaps in service and possible user reimbursements.
- 1.3. Complete the planned South Shore Double Track commuter railroad expansion and the West Lake Corridor Project, a new commuter rail line extension in Lake County.
 - 1.3.1. More effectively utilize these assets for optimal impact on the region.
 - ▶ Update past economic benefit studies annually, after project completion, with the latest data on metrics like tickets purchased, average travel time between destinations, and secondary effects like sales tax revenue increases.
 - 1.3.2. Launch large-scale marketing and branding campaigns for each project.
 - ▶ Work with the city of Chicago and communities in the region to ensure marketing efforts are collaborative and aligned.
 - ▶ Emphasize the safety improvements that the new double track line will offer, such as the station at 11th Street in Michigan City that will eliminate shared roadways with pedestrians and cyclists.
 - 1.3.3. Incorporate modern amenities and standards of transit-oriented development practices surrounding station stops within the region.
 - ▶ Enhance pedestrian walkability and extend bicycle trails to connect to regional or local trail systems in the areas immediately adjacent to the stations.
 - ▶ Ensure that surrounding amenities are designed for year-round availability, rather than just seasonal use.
 - ▶ Evaluate opportunities for mixed-use developments in proximity to these walkable and bikeable environments in coordination with real estate developers and community leaders.
 - ▶ Generate environmental impact studies on the proposed plans for both projects and ensure these studies include carbon footprint metrics.
- 1.4. Ensure public transportation is accessible and efficient for all.
 - 1.4.1. Expand transit service connections between rural areas and urban centers.
 - 1.4.2. Update all transit vehicles with the latest accessibility features for residents with physical disabilities.
 - 1.4.3. Assess the need and appetite for increased availability of shared electric scooters and bikes in city centers in the region to provide alternative short-distance transportation options.
 - ▶ Based on public response, pursue investment in these services in all interested geographies.
 - ▶ Feature relevant information on these new options on all city websites.

EXAMPLE: The San Francisco Department of the Environment provides updated information on its website related to [shared mobility options](#), including bike share, car share, scooter share, and shared-use electric mopeds, which have a measurable impact on quality of life and sustainability. The department works with designated providers of these shared mobility services to establish common understanding of key issues, such as parking, distribution of devices, operational sustainability, community engagement, data sharing, and rider accountability. Accessible and thorough communication of available transportation options is a catalyst for increased use of these types of urban mobility.

- 1.4.4.** Expand the network of public trails for pedestrian and cycling residents and tourists, especially along the Lake Michigan shoreline.
- ▶ Ensure timely and cost-effective completion of the Marquette Greenway as funded by the federal Department of Transportation 2021 Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity grant program.
 - ▶ Extend trail access throughout all identified gaps in keeping with NIRPC’s regional priority trail corridors and local trail plans.

1.5. Expand shovel-ready sites for commercial, industrial, and residential development in the region.

1.5.1. Produce a comprehensive map of currently available sites.

- ▶ Evaluate sites for any limiting factors such as environmental risks, site constraints, etc. as well as contributing factors such as access, site assets, etc.
- ▶ Prepare potential use cases for undeveloped publicly owned lands that are optimized for development opportunities.

1.5.2. Improve access and ease of use for permitting application and review.

- ▶ Develop one-stop permitting portals that allow users to submit permit applications, pay permitting fees, upload plans and development documents, and monitor permitting progress.

EXAMPLE: The city of Louisville, Kentucky, operates a streamlined [online permitting portal](#) for all permit-related needs. Accessible services include applying for a construction permit or license, tracking progress via email, submitting drawings for review, paying permit fees, and requesting an inspection. The city also offers a user-friendly mobile app, Louisville Metro 311. All permitting types (commercial, residential, business licensing, and contractor licenses) are covered by the portal.

- ▶ Establish a fast-track commercial program that streamlines the development process, reduces project approval times, and provides a central point of contact.

EXAMPLE: The Department of Economic Development in Calvert County, Maryland, created a program to reduce wait times in the permitting process. If a project aligns with the Comprehensive Plan, Town Center Master Plans, and Calvert County Zoning Ordinance, it is qualified for the county’s [Fast Track Permit](#) service. Projects that fall within the scope of certain identified target industries within the county are also given special preference. Users are directed to the Fast Track Application and are scored on project characteristics like job creation and capital investment.

- 1.5.3.** Ensure that utilities infrastructure (electricity, natural gas, and water/wastewater management) keeps pace with growing demand for housing, office, and industrial construction in the region.
- ▶ Conduct ongoing discussions with Northern Indiana Public Service Company, also known as NIPSCO, and other major service providers to evaluate and pursue opportunities for necessary expansion within unserved or underserved areas.
 - ▶ Work with the major real estate holders and community leaders to identify infrastructure needs within and surrounding privately owned sites for different types of development desired, with priority given to industrial and housing sites.
 - ▶ Coordinate between municipalities to pool resources for infrastructure projects that would extend regionally.

EXAMPLE: In April 2022, the City of Highland and the Town of Griffith reached an agreement to spend \$100 million on sewage systems improvements, which includes a significant increase in the amount of wastewater that will be sent to neighboring Hammond for treatment. The goal is to reduce overloading in the two municipal systems. Additional regionally collaborative infrastructure efforts like this model would have a substantial impact on communities in Northwest Indiana.

GOAL 2. TALENT AND WORKFORCE

Attract and retain skilled talent to build a workforce that aligns with regional employer needs.

The ability to attract, retain, and grow the right talent is critical to sustaining a vibrant and resilient economy. However, workforce shortages are apparent across much of the country and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to amplify existing challenges to find skilled labor. Communities have now been prompted to become even more competitive in the race to find the right labor. As the competition for labor gets stiffer, many regions are compelled to find creative ways to retain the talent that they have as well as attract and grow talent where there is a shortcoming. These efforts stem from the understanding that having the right workforce helps to strengthen employer productivity and retain businesses, both of which add to and strengthen the local economy.

Like many other parts of the US, the NIRPC region struggles to source the skilled talent needed to meet the demands of regional employers. The region's leadership has made noteworthy efforts to solve its workforce issues through initiatives like Jobs for America's Graduates and the Ready NWI Talent Alignment Program. Still, stakeholder input confirms that while hundreds of students graduate each year from multiple higher education institutions in the area, much of that brainpower is lost to other communities. To counteract some of these losses, the region needs to retain talent, grow it from within, and attract skilled labor from outside the region. The region is well positioned to do just that with recently awarded READI funding. Attraction, retention, and growth efforts will fall short, however, if there is not a shared vision for workforce development. Any lack of coordination will prevent workforce development providers from delivering a unified solution to workforce issues. Without a unified workforce development solution, it will be nearly impossible to retain, attract, and grow the talent needed to bolster the region's economy against future shocks.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

2.1. Retain graduates of postsecondary institutions.

- 2.1.1.** Launch a boomerang effort that targets former residents with college degrees and links them to local services and jobs.

- ▶ Create a website that highlights the stories of residents who left the region and shares why they moved back. Use the website to bring together boomerang residents who serve as ambassadors, promote the region, and answer questions. The website should also list resources on how to find a job, a house, and networking opportunities.

EXAMPLE: Action Greensboro launched the pilot program, [Boomerang Greensboro](#), which aims to bring back former residents who relocated for school or work to Greensboro, North Carolina. Central to the effort is a website that spotlights positives about the community to include the city's spirit of individuality and inclusivity, family friendliness, and low cost of living. The website also connects potential returning residents to Greensboro Gurus, current residents who serve as ambassadors for the community, and helps to link those who are considering relocation to necessary resources.

2.1.2. Establish a student loan debt relief program for local higher education institutions that encourages college graduates to move to or remain in designated neighborhoods.

- ▶ Reimburse graduates up to a fixed amount in monthly student loan payments if they commit to live in certain neighborhoods for a specified number of years.

2.1.3. Work with nonprofits and universities to expand leadership development programs, experiential learning, and community volunteer programs to strengthen the student–community connection of college students.

2.1.4. Attract remote workers by creating a relocation incentive package and listing communities on the [MakeMyMove](#) website.

2.2. Align workforce training with employer needs through apprenticeships and credentialing.

2.2.1. Continue and expand industry and workforce training collaboration that prioritizes apprenticeships and other forms of on-the-job training.

EXAMPLE: Philadelphia convened a citywide, 40-member Workforce Development Steering Committee to drive the development of the workforce strategy, [Fueling Philadelphia's Talent Engine](#). Comprised of representatives from education and workforce training sectors, the committee was charged with designing the guiding strategy document, spearheading its execution, and evaluating its implementation.

2.2.2. Develop pre-apprenticeship programs that target women as well as minority groups and provide a pathway to full apprenticeship programs.

2.3. Grow the talent pipeline for high-demand occupations.

2.3.1. Survey the business community annually to determine hard-to-fill but high-demand occupations.

2.3.2. Strengthen worker pipelines by incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion targets into workforce development plans.

- ▶ Aim for higher inclusion of women and people of color in key industries, such as tech and advanced manufacturing.
- ▶ Increase educational attainment (to include two-year degrees, apprenticeships, certifications, or credentials) of individuals from marginalized communities and participation in experiential learning programs.
- ▶ Pursue greater congruence between the makeup of minority workforce and of the population.

- 2.3.3.** Increase minority participation in apprenticeships and internships in high-growth sectors by offering additional wraparound support services, such as financing and childcare.

EXAMPLE: [Apprenti PGH](#) is Pittsburgh's information technology apprenticeship program, which targets underrepresented groups who are interested in tech careers but find it cost prohibitive to enter traditional apprenticeships. Understanding the barriers to participation for these groups, Apprenti PGH helps to eliminate these barriers by offering a stipend and the technology needed to complete the program. Wraparound services, such as transportation and childcare, are also provided on an as-needed basis.

- 2.4.** Increase collaboration among workforce development service providers.

- 2.4.1.** Continue to expand the role of the Center of Workforce Innovations as a convening organization or catalyst for workforce development collaboration in the region.

- ▶ Develop forums composed of workforce providers, education institutions, and industry to discuss enhanced and new curricula for in-demand positions.

- 2.4.2.** Host regular conversations, like a monthly Workforce Connections breakfast, that encourage information sharing and create a forum for solving talent challenges.

- 2.5.** Attract skilled talent from outside the region to fill gaps in the existing workforce.

- 2.5.1.** Capitalize on the designation of Northwest Indiana as a 21st Century Talent Region.

- ▶ Develop metrics for the 21st Century Talent Regions strategy of supporting “the development of vibrant downtowns and distinct neighborhoods and districts.”³

- 2.5.2.** Create a regional messaging strategy based on the goal of recruiting talent to fill high-demand jobs.

EXAMPLE: The employer-driven organization, [Hello West Michigan](#), was launched in response to the region’s challenge of finding talent for open positions. The organization’s website is designed primarily as a talent recruitment tool in that it connects job seekers with employers. However, it also makes the case for why West Michigan is the place to live and work. Plus, it serves as a platform for creating connections between newcomers, residents, and the community.

GOAL 3. BUSINESS VITALITY

Establish the region as the most competitive business climate among its peers by supporting and growing employers of all sizes.

Local businesses contribute to the economic growth and vitality of their host communities. They create jobs, add to the local tax base, and provide needed services to residents. These establishments can also help to diversify a community’s economic base, which further adds to the resilience of the communities where they are located. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, is negatively impacting businesses in communities nationwide. The pandemic is forcing some establishments to slow or halt their operations. Essential business owners have to find the workforce needed to staff extended hours. The pandemic is causing a sense of uncertainty and posing a host of

³ The 21st Century Talent Regions are designated by the state of Indiana as places that commit to using a systems approach to attract, develop, and connect talent. Each region works together to develop shared goals and implement a plan that includes strategies and metrics for success. More information is available at <https://www.in.gov/cct/21st-century-talent-regions/>. Quote from 21st Century Talent Regions, Talent Dashboard, <https://www.in.gov/cct/files/21CTR-Dashboard-Northwest-Indiana-FINAL.pdf>.

other challenges for most businesses. Regionally, the effects range from the extreme, like the permanent closure of restaurants, to the less severe, like employers needing to shift employee roles to keep all staff on the payroll.

To ensure the resilience of the NIRPC region, local companies need additional support to make sure they can be successful. While aid for the business community is typically focused on providing financial help, technical assistance can offer the reinforcement needed to stabilize and improve operations. Fortunately, the region has some of these essential business supports in place. One notable resource mentioned during stakeholder conversations is the NWI BizHub, which provides entrepreneurs and small business owners with access to the resources needed to thrive. READI grant funds will help to ensure its continued operation and the acceleration of other initiatives, such as the Minority Business Skills Enhancement Program. The continued expansion of assistance like this will help to ensure that the NIRPC region is positioned as a place to do business.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

- 3.1. Continue efforts to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem and support innovation.
 - 3.1.1. Ensure networks of entrepreneurs and their supports, such as capital, technical assistance, and mentors, are inclusive and accessible.
 - 3.1.2. Identify gaps in entrepreneurial education and support services that address the challenging aspects of establishing and growing a business.
 - 3.1.3. Map the emerging technologies that create opportunities for entrepreneurs and maximize the current areas of expertise in the region.
 - 3.1.4. Conduct a regional assessment to understand the angel investor community and identify potential group members.
 - 3.1.5. Design and deliver seminars on private equity investment for current and potential angel investors. Topics should include angel investing, finding a good investment fit, and evaluating risks.
- 3.2. Expand and promote the NWI BizHub.
 - 3.2.1. Launch an awareness campaign about the NWI BizHub that highlights offerings and testimonials or success stories, with a focus on reaching minority businesses.
 - 3.2.2. Design and promote a mentorship program that pairs established business leaders with startups and new entrepreneurs.
 - 3.2.3. Maintain efforts to secure additional funding to ensure continuity of the NWI BizHub.
- 3.3. Educate business owners on how to build a resilient business and better prepare for disruptions.
 - 3.3.1. Work with the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center (Northwest ISBDC) to create a preparedness workshop series on key topics, such as risk assessment, business continuity planning, and crisis communication.
 - 3.3.2. Enlist chambers to deliver presentations on business readiness topics via avenues, such as lunch and learns and webinars.
 - 3.3.3. Evaluate post-disaster business financing options, such as establishing local small business recovery programs, and develop a model for post-disaster business assistance.
- 3.4. Continue to design programs and supports that serve targeted populations of business owners, such as women and people of color.
 - 3.4.1. Expand specialty service offerings of the Minority Business Skills Enhancement Program to include disaster preparedness resources.

3.5. Work with major employers to implement on-site childcare services or provide childcare support for working parents.

3.5.1. Increase employer awareness of the Early Learning Indiana Early Learning Works program.

EXAMPLE: [Early Learning Works](#) is a program of Early Learning Indiana, the state's oldest and largest early childhood education nonprofit. Early Learning Works assists employers with developing childcare solutions for their workforce, such as onsite care, tuition benefits, backup care, or employer-reserved seats.

3.5.2. Inform businesses of the advantages of providing childcare assistance by launching an advocacy campaign highlighting the business case for offering support.

3.5.3. Encourage employers to provide on-site childcare or provide childcare financial assistance and invite those businesses to complete a self-assessment to qualify for a business designation from The Best Place for Working Parents.®

3.5.4. Connect employers with area childcare centers to staff on-site childcare facilities or provide special rates for childcare services.

EXAMPLE: The US Chamber of Commerce Foundation [developed a roadmap](#) to help business leadership and owners better support working parents with their childcare needs. The roadmap offers numerous childcare solutions and shares insights about common pitfalls employers face when attempting to increase access to quality childcare.

3.6. Maintain and strengthen the ongoing business attraction, retention, and expansion efforts at the regional and state levels to continue economic diversification.

3.6.1. Support the industry targets identified in the Northwest Indiana Forum's *Ignite the Region* plan.

- ▶ Expand technical training for occupations, such as hospitality management, needed by target industry clusters. Prioritize clusters within sectors that are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the tourism and heavy industry sectors.
- ▶ Develop new revolving loan programs for business expansions and relocations in targeted industries after researching funding gaps and determining the types of revolving loan funds needed.

3.6.2. Leverage and promote small business support organizations, such as the Northwest ISBDC and US Small Business Administration, with one-page fact sheets that highlight the services offered.

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan's* strategies and actions will be an ongoing process undertaken by many parties. The *Implementation Matrix*, developed in consultation with the project steering committee during an implementation workshop, includes all the strategies and actions items described in the Action Plan section. The *Implementation Matrix* also identifies multiple time periods that can be assigned to each strategy and action item. These time periods include ongoing, 0 to 6 months, 6 to 12 months, 1 to 3 years, and 3 to 5 years. Status remarks and key accomplishments or notes complete the *Implementation Matrix*, which exists as a separate, ongoing, and living tool to help carry out the actions within this plan.

With NIRPC serving in the role of meeting convener, the *Implementation Matrix* will be discussed in more depth with the steering committee and partner organizations in the following months. Ultimately, each strategy and action item will be assigned to a lead organization, with supporting partner organizations identified as may be applicable. If similar strategies or action items exist in *Ignite the Region: A Regional Strategy for Economic Transformation*, they will be augmented and supported by the *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan* in order to ensure these strategies and actions are seamless and mutually supportive toward a more resilient economy in Northwest Indiana. The timeline for completion of each strategy and action item will be determined during these discussions.

The implementation process correlating to the *Implementation Matrix* will be evaluated on an annual basis. NIRPC's role will again be to convene these evaluation sessions with the steering committee and associated partner organizations. Adjustments to the matrix will be made accordingly. The *Implementation Matrix* and *Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan* are available at <https://nirpc.org/economic-recovery-resilience>.