

Economy & Place Committee

NIRPC Lake Michigan Room

YouTube Recording:

<https://youtube.com/live/BtzJ61M8Ing?feature=share>

April 4, 2025

Minutes

Committee members present: George Topoll (Union Township), Lois Whittaker (BCCNWI), Gary Johnson (Society of Innovators), Jen Trowbridge (CoAction), Joe Wszolek (NIRA), and John Matwyszyn (La Porte County Surveyor).

Staff and others present: Annie Cruz-Porter and Hyewon Shin (PCRD consultants), Dean Button, Don Babcock, A. J. Bytner, Kelly Anthony, Doug Ross, Eman Ibrahim, Denarie Kane, Candice Eklund, and Meredith Stilwell.

Chairman George Topoll called the meeting to order with the Pledge of Allegiance and introductions.

The January 29, 2025, minutes were approved on motion by Joe Wszolek and seconded by Lois Whittaker.

It was noted that there were no public comments.

Annie Cruz-Porter presented and led the discussion on the draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) document. The document's sections include *About the Region*, *The Economic Framework in the United States*, *Planning Context and CEDS Structure*, *Economic Performance Indicators*, *Qualitative Input and Engagement*, *Goals*, and *Evaluation Framework*.

The CEDS is designed to guide economic development efforts across the NIRPC region over the next five years. This CEDS has three goals: Economic Diversification and Innovation, Workforce Resilience, and Quality of Place. Annie illustrated each goal and its objectives.

Discussions were held with suggestions for possible changes to the draft CEDS. Topics included information regarding the threat to the steel industry, semi-conductors, the pushback in some communities regarding certain industries (data centers), setting the stage for what is happening elsewhere in Indiana, and in the larger Chicagoland area, with new or expanded industry sector initiatives, and tying in northwest Indiana's desire to be a part of these in-state or larger regional initiatives, if feasible. It was noted that the CEDS is not intended to address issues associated with specific sites for certain types of development that may face potential opposition when a project is seeking approval to become a reality. However, it can include points about the fact that northwest Indiana is on the cusp of change and provide information to help people understand the change. Other topics of discussion included the addition of the Society of Innovators in building key support systems necessary for talented and ambitious entrepreneurs, the utilization of the Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) tool related to workforce development efforts, replacing the term affordable for a certain type of housing with a different term, and the lack of coordination for transit services. Denarie clarified to the group that the CEDS is focused more on the broader economic development objectives, and the drill-down on certain topics such as transportation or transit is in the *NWI 2050+*.

Annie then introduced the evaluation framework and noted that it is different from how things have been evaluated in the past. The proposed evaluation is predicated on having cross-sector partnerships and a stakeholder engagement focus to achieve the goals. Regional development and engagement, workforce development, and governance and management measurable metrics were

presented. Denarie stated this is a much different CEDS approach than was taken when the current CEDS was developed. A key challenge will be identifying all of the industries in the ecosystems to be developed and finding the appropriate company contact. Furthermore, there must be a strong effort made to convince these companies of the value in participating in building their industry specific ecosystem. The attempt is to build on what NIRPC can capture and what outputs NIRPC sees from the activities. Historically, since NIRPC has become an Economic Development District (EDD), one of the primary tasks has been building awareness of available grant opportunities, especially those from EDA. To date, the grant applicants have prepared their own applications, but NIRPC has helped to explain the eligibility requirements needed to compete for EDA funding and also the various grant programs. NIRPC has assisted in communication with the EDA's economic development representative so he or she can help applicants develop a competitive application. This type of service from the EDD will continue.

The draft CEDS will be posted online, and a link will be provided for comments. The final CEDS will be ready by the NIRPC Full Commission meeting on May 15. Denarie and Annie will have weekly calls to evaluate the comments and discuss any minor adjustments to be made to the document during the 30-day comment period. A resolution for a favorable recommendation of the CEDS document to the NIRPC board was presented for approval. Jen Trowbridge motioned, and Lois Whitaker seconded, to approve the resolution to recommend the CEDS document to the NIRPC Board for approval. After discussing the inability to know what comments might be received and what changes would then need to be made to the document, the motion was amended to include the comments from today's meeting and the 30-day comment period. Jen Trowbridge amended her motion to approve the draft CEDS with today's meeting comments incorporated, and then, after the public comment period is over, if there is anything significant or if there are significant changes that must be made, the Economy & Place Committee will reconvene for a final vote. With second by Joe Wszolek, and no opposition, the motion passed.

A motion was requested for approval to post the CEDS for public comment. On motion by Joe Wszolek, seconded by Lois Whitaker, and with no opposition, the motion passed.

The next Economy & Place Committee meeting is slated for Wednesday, July 9, 2025, at 10:00 a.m.

Meeting adjourned at 2:42 p.m.