

Economy & Place Committee
July 9, 2025
Meeting Minutes

Chairman George Topoll began the Economy & Place Committee meeting with the pledge of allegiance and introductions.

Voting members present were George Topoll (Union Township), John Matwyszyn (LPC Surveyor), Lois Whittaker (BCCNWI), Jen Trowbridge (NWCAC), Joe Wszolek (NWIRA), and Andy Vasquez (Porter County).

Celena Green (ERC) was also present.

NIRPC staff present were Eman Ibrahim (committee lead), Denarie Kane (committee lead), Kathy Luther, Meredith Stillwell (technical assistance), and Flor Baum (administrative support).

On motion by Joe Wszolek, seconded by Andy Vasquez, the minutes of April 4, 2025, were approved as presented.

Economy

Celena Green, Economic Recovery Corps (ERC) Fellow, presented on brownfields and quantum opportunities for redevelopment in Northwest Indiana. She explained that the International Economic Development Corporation and the U.S. Economic Development Administration partnered to create the ERC Fellowship, with 65 ERC fellows currently serving with local host organizations across 44 states and territories. There is a total of three fellows in Northwest Indiana, hosted by NIRPC, the City of Gary, and Michigan City EDC, respectively. Celena's 2.5-year fellowship began in February 2024 at no cost to NIRPC.

The project aims to identify and prioritize eight brownfield sites within the Quantum Fiber Corridor to support economic growth, workforce resiliency, and quality of place goals by overcoming barriers to redevelopment. To date, preliminary GIS mapping has been completed, narrowing 443 parcels down to 42 properties in northern Lake County communities such as Gary, Hammond, East Chicago, and Lake Station. Candidate sites were evaluated based on size, environmental concerns, community input, zoning, infrastructure, and proximity to assets such as the I-90 Toll Road.

The committee discussed redevelopment challenges, including ambiguous ownership, limited municipal staffing, developer hesitancy, community opposition, and financing barriers. Opportunities included policy updates, capacity building, inclusive planning, expanding engagement with lenders, growing Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), and mobilizing resources through partnerships and funding proposals. Members emphasized the importance of learning from successful brownfield redevelopment efforts elsewhere to inform strategies in Northwest Indiana. The committee noted that the project was finalizing a shortlist of eight priority sites for redevelopment while continuing to engage stakeholders and community members. They also discussed the opportunity to attend the National Brownfield Summit in Chicago from August 5–8, which was expected to draw about 1,500 participants and include site visits and experiential activities. For information, contact Celena at cgreen@economicrecoverycorps.org.

Denarie Kane spoke about the EDA's FY 2025 Disaster Supplemental Grant Program. Lake County eligible applicants are encouraged to compete for a portion of \$1.45 billion in disaster recovery funding due to severe storms, tornados, etc which occurred in March 2023 and resulted in a federal disaster declaration. There are two funding paths - a readiness path for non-construction projects to

be completed in 12-18 months and an implementation path for construction and non-construction projects with a four-year completion time. Both funding options are aimed at improving the local economy beyond pre-disaster levels. NIRPC staff is reaching out to local commissioners, non-profits, and educational institutions to acquaint them with this funding opportunity and brainstorm potential application ideas. The federal government will provide 80% of funding needed which is a more favorable match ratio compared to traditional EDA funding at 60%. Please contact Denarie at dkane@nirpc.org for more information. Kathy Luther shared that NIRPC conducted an assessment of hazards and disasters in watershed areas and provided a report that can help communities in need of funding for resilience projects.

Place

Eman Ibrahim provided an update on Land Use & Housing, giving a snapshot of housing affordability and recommendations for future development in various communities. She emphasized the need to focus on creating housing for low- and middle-income residents. Data showed a shortage of 12,000 units for those earning up to \$25,000 annually and 1,700 units for households making between \$50,000 and \$150,000 annually.

The committee discussed best practices for middle- and high-density housing, including zoning and policy changes, infill development, and infrastructure upgrades tailored to both older and newer suburban communities. Members noted that Indiana lacked accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinances, unlike Illinois, which is considering state legislation to prohibit municipalities from banning ADUs. ADUs could help older communities by encouraging infill development and increasing density. The committee also considered incentives for small developers and streamlined processes to support affordable, higher-density housing in infill areas with existing infrastructure.

The discussion included strategies to incentivize builders, such as density bonuses and innovative partnerships with developers, lenders, and stakeholders to increase affordable housing options without reducing profits. Committee members emphasized the importance of unified housing strategies and reliable data to address complex housing issues, noting that challenges such as tax sale properties and investor interests often hinder progress. Effective community development required a long-term master plan with informed zoning decisions to address growth, density, traffic, and infrastructure needs. Infrastructure planning—covering sewer, water, and internet—was noted as critical for meeting current and future needs, particularly in emerging areas. The DNR was conducting a water supply study on the Kankakee River basin, with a public meeting held in March, and members encouraged community participation and awareness.

Eman also provided an update on the Sensible Tools Handbook. Two successful workshops were held, engaging about 40 attendees, including planners, elected officials, and environmentalists. The first workshop covered the role of public planning officials, zoning basics, and ethical considerations. The second focused on community planning to enhance green infrastructure through assessments of planning and zoning ordinances. Participants shared observations and recommendations, and the committee expressed interest in continuing the workshops annually.

NIRPC identified high-priority infill development areas based on underutilized land, proximity to infrastructure, and zoning compatibility. Infill opportunities were tied to future planning and transportation funding. The analysis revealed 618 available building and vacant sites in Northwest Indiana, including 391 vacant buildings and 227 vacant parcels, with Hammond and Munster showing significant redevelopment potential. The committee emphasized strategies such as zoning reform, streamlined permitting, and public-private partnerships to encourage redevelopment and economic growth.

Transit-oriented development (TOD) was highlighted as a regional priority. NIRPC identified TOD areas, including neighborhoods within a 15-minute walk radius, targeting redevelopment of deteriorating or vacant properties, particularly in lower-income communities. Hammond was noted as a leader in infill efforts, with \$50 million in ARPA investments in infrastructure, and projects such as Jacob Square, the Banc redevelopment, and the reuse of former hospital and school sites into housing, retail, and mixed-use developments.

The committee also discussed innovative housing and workforce solutions, citing Cincinnati's prohibition of investor-bought properties and Tennessee's initiatives to attract residents. Members noted that creative approaches to housing design, such as buildings with internal water reuse systems, could be part of future strategies, though public acceptance may be challenging.

Lastly, Eman described the NIRPC Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program, which would provide funding to local governments, nonprofits, and public agencies for projects addressing corridor urbanism, transit- and trail-oriented development, redevelopment in built-up areas, and housing variety. Other eligible projects included comprehensive and housing plans, TOD plans and ordinances, zoning updates, streetscaping, safety action plans, and more. For more information on these agenda items, please contact Eman at eibrahim@nirpc.org.

The Economy & Place Committee discussed upcoming events, including a housing symposium, a conference on AI for non-profits, and a peer learning cohort on electrical load growth.

Adjournment

Hearing no further business, the meeting ended at 11:37 a.m. The next Economy & Place meeting is slated for October 8th at the NIRPC building.

References

[YouTube Livestream of 7/9/2025 Meeting](#)



[Brownfield Mapping Results](#)



[National Brownfields Training Conference](#)



[EDA FY2025 Disaster Supplemental Grant Program](#)

