# **Public Comment Report**

# **Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission**

May 1, 2015

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) convened a public comment period to gather input on three items: the update to the 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan (CRP), the 2016-2019 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and the new Air Quality Conformity Analysis. The comment period began March 9, 2015 and was originally scheduled to end on April 10, 2015. It was subsequently extended to April 27, 2015 due to issues encountered with the development of the air quality conformity analysis. The extension allowed for the required 30-day review period.

Seven public meetings were held throughout the region during the month of March. The meeting schedule was as follows:

- March 12: Valparaiso City Hall, 166 Lincolnway, Valparaiso, IN, 2:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.
- March 17: Merrillville Town Hall, 7820 Broadway, Merrillville, IN, 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- March 19: Michigan City City Hall, 100 E Michigan Boulevard, Michigan City, IN, 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- March 21: John W. Anderson Library, Indiana University Northwest, 3400 Broadway, Gary, IN 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
- March 24: Munster Town Hall, 1005 Ridge Road, Munster, IN, 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- March 26: Porter Regional Hospital Community Room, 85 East US 6 Frontage Road, Valparaiso, IN, 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.
- March 31: East Chicago Public Library Main Branch, 2401 E Columbus Drive, East Chicago, IN, 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

As required in the 2014 Public Participation Plan (PPP), meeting reports were prepared for each of these meetings and provided to meeting attendees and the NIRPC Commission. These reports are also available online at <a href="https://www.nirpc.org">www.nirpc.org</a>.

In addition to the public meetings, comments could also be submitted by email to <u>comments@nirpc.org</u>, by telephone at 219-763-6060, ext. 160, or by United States Postal Service.

The following pages contain the comments received, the manner in which the comments were considered by staff, whether or not the comments are considered significant, and if there was a need to modify the documents.

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
Valparaiso P	ublic Meeting, March 12, 2015		•
The Valparaiso V-Line should serve the new Porter Regional Hospital at US 6 & SR 49	The City agrees and has applied for a CMAQ demonstration grant to operate a route to the hospital to test its feasibility and local support.	No	No
The V-Line needs to expand its service area west of Campbell Street. There are many people who could use the service in that part of town who cannot because the bus is too far away.	The City is looking at route changes based on the recently completed route analysis. Service west of Campbell Street is one of the areas under review.	No	No
I wish Valpo would develop more housing (i.e. condos, townhomes) near transit hubs and main artery streets, with bus routes, and 2-3 story apartments with retail on the first floor (grocers). Areas like around Butterfield Park, North Calumet, and near bus/train depot. Me and 50 friends are for Complete Streets in Valpo, County, and region! Please make Willowcreek extension walk/bike lane/separated lane and/or a bus route the whole length to the lake!	Valparaiso has been planning for transit oriented development for the downtown area. The City recently acquired several large tracts of land in the vicinity of the existing train station/Chicago DASH commuter bus parking lot. They are also working with the RDA on a large grant to support higher density development in that area. NIRPC adopted a Complete Streets Policy with guidelines in 2010, and a design manual was adopted the following year. This policy are for projects that are funded with NIRPC-programmed federal monies. This is not applicable for state or local projects. Even so NIRPC is working with several communities at this time in getting Complete Streets policies adopted at their local level. Lowell was the first to adopt a policy in late 2014, and NIRPC will be working with Valparaiso, and number of other communities this year. Regarding the Willowcreek extension project, if this is funded with NIRPC-attributable monies, then we will make sure the jurisdictions involved will incorporate sidewalks and bike lanes to the greatest degree possible.	No	No

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
The 2040 Plan is excellent, especially Greenways/Blueways component. Mitch is doing a wonderful job! But, most of the money for implementation is going toward roads and highways which will become obsolete in coming decades. We need more bikes and trains and fewer cars, trucks, roads, and highways.	NIRPC agrees that alternative transportation options need more focus, and thus more funding to expand regionwide. This includes expanding both non-motorized and transit routes. To this end NIRPC affords a significant percentage of federal transportation dollars to non-motorized facilities such as multi-use trails. This has been accomplished with the broad understanding that these improvements offer more choices of travel for region residents, and provides major quality of life enhancements towards our health and economic well-being.	No	No
Can we have a continual bike path – like in Hobart, Chesterton, Highland, etc.?	NIRPC continues to work with all region communities in Lake, Porter and LaPorte Counties towards expanding our popular multi-use trail network – both on land and water. Although a majority of communities are connected via abandoned rail or utility corridors, there are a few that pose significant challenges. Primary of these are Valparaiso and the City of LaPorte. Even so NIPRC has identified corridors that connect these, and all other communities into a vast network vision encompassing over 500 miles of off-road trails. To date over 130 miles of trails have been opened, with many more to come in the near future. Other than the land challenges, another major obstacle is funding. Last year NIRPC solicited \$7 million for new trail projects over a 7-year period. We received over \$35 million in requests – a clear indication of the popularity of trails in NW Indiana, as well as the obstacles that remain in expanding our network.	No	No

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
I very much appreciate being invited to these meetings. I try to make every meeting. This is very important to me.	NIRPC is happy to provide the opportunity for the public to be involved and provide input.	No	No
What are the Valparaiso streetscaping/landscaping Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) improvements?	The City of Valparaiso has an area designated for TOD. These projects, listed in the transit Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), are for establishing and enhancing that area.	No	No
How does the region's air quality rate?	The region is generally on par with the rest of the state.	No	No
There seems to be no regulations governing water withdrawals, and the state DNR just tracks the amount of water withdrawn.	We are unique in this region, and Valparaiso especially, because we straddle the boundary line for the Lake Michigan watershed. Because of this, that means any new proposed withdrawals from Lake Michigan comes with many hoops that need to be jumped through due to the Great Lakes Compact.	No	No
Merrillville P	ublic Meeting, March 17, 2015		
There needs to be more frequent and widespread bus transit that stops at more places. For example, in Chicago buses can typically stop every second or third block. We need to be looking beyond places like the mall to other places people go.	NIRPC supports more public transit across the region. The lack of a dedicated source of local funding is the major roadblock to developing a regional system.	No	No
The South Shore Line extension should go across Lake County to Valparaiso first to give more people in communities that may not be as affluent better access to the train. It seems like the decision to go down the west side of Lake County was made without much public input.	The decision to build the West Lake connection first was made by the NICTD Board of Directors after extensive analysis of current and future population growth and economic impact.	No	No

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
Why are there so many fewer opportunities for access to Lake Michigan in the urban core?	At the turn of the century, when industry began to expand around the southern shore of Lake Michigan, land with potential industrial development was in great demand. Thousands of acres of submerged land were filled to expand facility operations. Housing and commercial development that supported the workforce occurred further inland since the lakefront was viewed to have greater value in supporting industry operations. Our urban core communities were first developed during this time period. During the early two thirds of the past century, these industries created tens of thousands of jobs, and operated as did all industry of the time, with little or no environmental controls. Most of these facilities continue to operate today, and their private property is heavily regulated under current environmental, safety, and homeland security laws created with the intent to protect people and the environment. These rules also make it exceedingly difficult for these lands to be transferred to other uses or to allow public use.	No	No
Munster P	ublic Meeting, March 24, 2015		
What is currently happening with the Illiana Expressway?	The Illiana Expressway is currently on hold in both Indiana and Illinois pending the results of the project evaluation that Illinois Governor Rauner asked be performed to determine if it was fiscally responsible for Illinois to continue to participate and contribute.	No	No
What kind of impact on the region's air quality is expected with the shutdown of things like the coke ovens at the steel mills in East Chicago?	There will most likely be an improvement. However, NIRPC does not track this kind of air pollution, only the pollution	No	No
Porter Regional Ho	ospital Public Meeting, March 26, 2015		

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
Technology and modern communications are enabling groups to form and get projects going without the traditional channels being used. There is currently a movement to form a civic incubator or "C-Lab" in Valparaiso. The hope is to create a template and package the concept so it can be moved to other communities throughout the region such as Gary and Hammond. These C-Labs are meant to function outside traditional channels and participants, such as 20 to 30-somethings working in citizen teams. These citizen teams would contribute to improvement efforts with civic activities. NIRPC's work could fit with this.	NIRPC is always looking to work with groups within the region to improve their communities. NIRPC would be happy to help in any way we are able as the C-Lab concept moves forward in Valparaiso or anywhere else.	No	No
East Chicago Public Library, March 31, 2015			
Sidewalks, lighting, and safety should be priorities in planning. In Gary specifically, resources need to be focused on business districts, such as the one at 11th & Grant. Programs such as façade grants would be helpful.	While NIRPC doesn't fund or administer these types of programs specifically, they are the kinds of programs which help create livable centers.	No	No

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
Opportunities for fishing access and/or a marina in Gary are needed to provide access to the lakefront.	At the turn of the century, when industry began to expand around the southern shore of Lake Michigan, land with potential industrial development was in great demand. Thousands of acres of submerged land were filled to expand facility operations. Housing and commercial development that supported the workforce occurred further inland since the lakefront was viewed to have greater value in supporting industry operations. Our urban core communities were first developed during this time period. During the early two thirds of the past century, these industries created tens of thousands of jobs, and operated as did all industry of the time, with little or no environmental controls. Most of these facilities continue to operate today, and their private property is heavily regulated under current environmental, safety, and homeland security laws created with the intent to protect people and the environment. These rules also make it exceedingly difficult for these lands to be transferred to other uses or to allow public use.	No	No
What is the current timeline and plan for the Willowcreek Extension in Porter County?	The Willowcreek Extension will go from Willowcreek's current terminus at 700N south past US30 to 100S. The current projected open-to-traffic date is 2026.	No	No
The ADA has to be the core for any type of planning. We need to be thinking of how to integrate/retrofit it into the existing landscape. New development needs to be held accountable for it as well. Should look beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law when planning for the future and making plans.	The ADA absolutely must be considered and planned for whenever any projects are being done. For example, any trail projects must take the requirements of the ADA into account, while NIRPC's Complete Streets policy expands these requirements to the idea that roadways should be properly designed in order to be accessible and open to all users.	No	No

Comment	Manner Considered by Staff	Significant?	Need to Modify?
Outreach needs to be done in a way that accounts for the different personalities/character of the region and its different communities. There should be more engagement with people in the different communities as well as new generations like high school seniors. It's difficult to civically engage the current generation.	NIRPC is always working to refine its public involvement process, and any suggestions are always welcome.  Additionally, NIRPC is always open to invitation from groups throughout the region to come and be a part of any meetings or activities they may be having.	No	No
Oth	er Comments Received		
From the April, 2015 Environmental Management Policy Committee meeting: NIRPC needs to try harder to communicate with news sources to inform citizens of the region.	NIRPC informs local news sources (including newspapers, television, and radio outlets) when there are upcoming events or important news items from the agency. NIRPC staff also appears on local shows and in newspaper interviews to talk about current projects at the agency and to promote NIRPC's vision for the future. NIRPC cannot, however, control what the various media outlets decide to publish or air. We can only provide the information and encourage its distribution.	No	No

Please note: This comment is being presented separately from the other comments due to formatting constraints.

Please be advised that I attended the public meeting at the East Chicago Public Library on March 31, 2015. I would like to add additional comments regarding the west side of Gary, including but not limited to areas such as Tolleston, Tarrytown, Black Oak and Small Farms area of Gary, Indiana. In line with NIRPC's vision for livable communities, these are areas in Gary which deserve significant investment and resources.

#### J-PIT

This landfill needs to be addressed. Previously, there were plans to change the J-Pit to be an area similar to Centennial Park in Munster, IN. NIRPC should include the repurposing of the J-Pit as part of any future plan.

#### WEST SIDE AREA BY WEST SIDE HIGH SCHOOL

The area surrounding West Side High school should receive an investment of funds to re-do the sidewalks, lighting, and other infrastructure improvements. Chicago has the United Center. Merrillville has the Radisson. Gary, Indiana has the West Side Theater Guild which brings world class acts to Gary. That NIRPC should invest in West Side High School in line with providing the resources to Gary to have a 22nd century school. By assisting in creating an entertainment district around Gary's high school, the city would be able to attract sporting events, entertainment acts, restaurants and other economic activity which will be stimulated by investment in an entertainment venue in Gary.

#### WEST SIDE HIGH SCHOOL AND SHIRLEY NATURE PRESERVE

That NIRPC should also invest in hiking trail, bike trails, picnic tables and other infrastructure investments to allow the residents of Gary to have the full benefit of a nature preserve in their community. West Side High School is located adjacent to a nature preserve. However, the students and community have not received the full benefit of this nature preserve because it is not fully marketed or developed to encourage local use. NIRPC can help spearhead this effort by allowing investment in the west side area.

# BUSINESS DISTRICT - 11th and Grant to 11th and Burr Street

The business district on 11th avenue needs to be updated. The side walks and lighting have not been touched in decades. NIRPC can assist an existing business district by encouraging infrastructure improvements in sidewalks, lighting, and curb appeal for the local businesses.

#### FRANCHISE RECRUITMENT AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

There are job fairs held in Gary. However, efforts should be made to help local residents start businesses and capitalize on franchise opportunities. NIRPC can help lead the crusade to help Gary residents become local business owners. This will require the development of partnerships with franchises to invest in the people of Gary and the community. There should be a goal to create at a minimum five new businesses in the west side area. The population exists to support businesses. Opportunities must be given to the community to create small

businesses which will help the economy grow. In addition to franchise opportunities, there needs to be incubation services to help new businesses start, grow, achieve, succeed and prosper.

### **SMALL FARMS**

Resources should be given to the small farms neighborhoods in Gary. There should be resources to add streets, lighting, and other resources to make this area in Gary clean, safe and prosperous.

#### RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

There are many areas on the west side which are facing decline because of vacant houses. There should be funding available to provide grants of up to at least \$50,000 to allow people to obtain vacant property, clear title, and become a resident in Gary. If the person does not live in the house for five years, the person should be required to pay the grant back.

# **PARKS**

NIRPC spent approximately \$28,000,000 on Marquette. There are around 57 parks in Gary. Each park should receive an improvement grant of at least \$500,000. The monies would be use to upgrade and maintain the facilities. It will also be use to create revenue streams to make each park self sustainable.

#### SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS

Efforts should be made to target high crime areas with better lighting and in some cases, reconfigurations of the different streets. Some neighborhoods may be better served by cul de sacs to allow a better effort to fight crime. Additionally, efforts should be made with the local police department to have community policing in the different neighborhoods.

#### **BROWNFIELDS**

The brownfields in Gary should receive the benefit of a plan on how to repurpose and reuse the existing brownfields. This should be coordinated with NIRPC.

**NIRPC Response:** When developing the 2040 CRP, NIRPC was sure to examine and include what was in the comprehensive plans of the various communities in the region. Many of the suggestions made in this comment ultimately depend on the municipal government to initiate them. There is overlap with concepts identified in the 2040 CRP, and NIRPC always stands ready to help with programs and projects that are within its areas of work. However, it is also important to keep in mind that NIRPC's main charge from the federal government is to do transportation planning for the Northwest Indiana region. Over the years, the agency has expanded this mission to other areas such as the environment and

economic development. Over the years the agency has helped coordinate planning and other work on a regional level, but ultimately specific projects in a specific community must be initiated by the community itself.

# J-PIT

NIRPC is aware that the City of Gary has plans and is working with federal and state natural resource agencies to utilize the J-Pit as a green infrastructure and wetland mitigation site. Beyond providing input regarding environmental mitigation of federally funded local transportation projects, NIRPC has no authority to plan for the J-Pit. Green Infrastructure, and re-purposing of brownfields as Green Infrastructure is an implementation strategy highlighted in the 2040 CRP. As such, the City's plans for the site are consistent with 2040 Plan. Further questions regarding plans for the J-Pit should be directed to the Gary Department of Green Urbanism and Environmental Affairs.

# WEST SIDE AREA BY WEST SIDE HIGH SCHOOL

NIRPC works with all regional communities on identifying funding sources to improve transportation corridor infrastructure. All municipalities are encouraged to map out areas of greatest need in their community, and NIRPC can partner with them on funding outlets that suit their needs. NIRPC has no direct funding for local projects. NIRPC does implement a federally required regional planning process to solicit for and prioritize local transportation projects eligible for various federal transportation funding programs. NIRPC makes every effort to prioritize these funds in a manner consistent with the 2040 CRP, which includes a high priority on reinvestment in urban core communities. NIRPC can only prioritize and fund projects for which local units of government apply, have 20% local funding available, and are eligible activities within a given federal transportation program.

#### WEST SIDE HIGH SCHOOL AND SHIRLEY NATURE PRESERVE

NIRPC has produced several planning documents over the years that address improving and creating access to a number of areas of natural conservation throughout the three-county region. NIRPC staff also worked alongside the City of Gary on the creation of their Gary Green Link Plan which highlighted a number of potential areas of environmental protection and enjoyment in the city, including the acreage around West Side High School. These plans have been produced to guide all communities in planning for more open space opportunities. However, it is up to the municipality to take these plans and seek funding for project implementation. To this end NIRPC has advised the City of Gary on funding avenues to aid in the development of trails and connections to natural destinations regionwide. The Shirley Heinze Land Trust owns two nature preserves within the City of Gary. We believe the comment refers to Ivanhoe South which is to the north and west of West Side Leadership Academy. The Nature Preserve is private property owned by SHLT, and as such is not eligible for federal funding for trail development (double check this with Mitch). The site includes one hiking trail with parking available on Colfax Street south of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve is intended to preserve globally rare dune and swale wetlands, black oak savannah, and endangered species habitats. These fragile resources may limit its ability to sustain greater recreational development, which would be at the discretion of the property owner, as well as state and federal natural resource agencies. Further information about public access to the Ivanhoe South Nature Preserve should be directed to the Shirley Heinze Land Trust.

#### BUSINESS DISTRICT & RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

According to NIRPC's Livable Centers analysis and staff input from the City of Gary, we identified six Livable Centers. These Centers include Downtown, Midtown, Brunswick, IUN-Glen Park, Glen Park, and Aetna-Miller Beach. West Side High School is on the periphery of the Brunswick Neighborhood Center. 11<sup>th</sup> Street east of Grant Street is identified as part of the Midtown Neighborhood Center. All of the identified Livable and Neighborhood Centers in Gary are eligible for NIRPC's Creating Livable Communities (CLC) grant for planning.

The City of Gary received a NIRPC CLC grant for \$150,000 to plan for three neighborhoods: Downtown, Emerson, and Horace Mann. The project's name is Livable Center Plan. Another effort by the City and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) staff which is in-line with NIRPC's notion of Livable Centers is the Employer Assisted Housing project for the Horace Mann and University Park areas. NIRPC staff is part of this team to provide guidance. The City and EPA staffs put together a charrette to seek implementation actions to promote job opportunities, rebuild neighborhoods, and strengthen community health and safety.

During the process of the 2040 Plan, there was broad consensus in the region that investment and revitalization of the region's core urbanized areas, generally located along the lakefront, is critical for long-term regional, social and economic stability. Revitalizing the urban core cities of Hammond, Gary, East Chicago, and Michigan City is a challenge. As a result of that, in 2012 NIRPC formed an Urban Core Subcommittee of the Pathway to 2040 Implementation Committee. NIRPC staff, in consultation with the subcommittee, has identified the following objectives for the group:

- Articulate the priorities of the urban core for the purpose of integrating them into existing programs, e.g. NIRPC transportation funding programs, Marquette Advisory Committee and Lake Michigan marina and shoreline development commission activities, Economic Development District funding.
- 2. Enable partnerships: Provide a meeting place where grants can be identified and discussed and where partnerships can form.
- 3. Others: knowledge and information exchange, to be determined.

NIRPC staff worked closely with staff from the four municipalities to identify priorities and implementation action items.

NIRPC is also responsible for the planning and programming of federal transportation funds. The 2040 CRP is the policy plan that guides this process. NIRPC updated its transportation and transportation enhancement selection criteria to support the goals and objectives of the CRP and to prioritize transportation projects that support the development of Livable and Economic Centers, Revitalization Areas and Infill and Growth Areas.

NIRPC also worked with the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) on a Pedestrian and Bicycle Assessment. The assessment took place on April  $16^{th}$  of this year. The assessment addresses safety and accommodation of pedestrians and bicyclists in four selected areas within Gary, IN. The selected areas are Downtown  $4^{th}$  and  $5^{th}$  Streets, Broadway from downtown to IUN, US 20 and Lake Street.

# FRANCHISE RECRUITMENT AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

NIRPC participates in local economic development through the Northwest Indiana Economic Development District and other partnerships. Currently, as part of the Northwest Indiana Regional Brownfield Coalition, which also includes the RDA and the Cities of Gary, Hammond, and East Chicago, NIRPC has applied to the USEPA for an Environmental Workforce Development Grant. Should this grant be successful, the training program will include both environmental technical training as well as entrepreneurship training.

# SMALL FARMS

NIRPC has no direct funding for local projects. NIRPC does implement a federally required regional planning process to solicit for and prioritize local transportation projects eligible for various federal transportation funding programs. NIRPC makes every effort to prioritize these funds in a manner consistent with the 2040 CRP, which includes a high priority on reinvestment in urban core communities. NIRPC can only prioritize and fund projects for which local units of government apply, have 20% local funding available, and are eligible activities within a given federal transportation program.

# **PARKS**

NIRPC was not a part of the Marquette Park Restoration project. This project was funded primarily by the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority (RDA), with contributions from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) Lake Michigan Coastal Program and organizations. NIRPC has received funding from the RDA and the IDNR Lake Michigan Coastal Program to update the Marquette Plan, which is a document identifying a vision and strategy for the Lake Michigan Shoreline area across the entire Indiana Coast. NIRPC is aware that the Indiana DNR Lake Michigan Coastal Program has an annual grants program, for which development of public access to open space and certain park amenities can be included, depending on specific state and federal eligibility and a competitive process. These grants require a minimum of 50 % local cost share, as well as a 20 year maintenance commitment to the project. NIRPC is not aware of any federal or state funding streams available for routine park maintenance. NIRPC does not provide funding for the development or maintenance for municipal park facilities.

# SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS

NIRPC works with all regional communities on identifying funding sources to improve transportation corridor infrastructure. All municipalities are encouraged to map out areas of greatest need in their community, and NIRPC can partner with them on funding outlets that suit their needs. NIRPC has no direct funding for local projects. NIRPC does implement a federally required regional planning process to solicit for and prioritize local transportation projects eligible for various federal transportation funding programs. NIRPC makes every effort to prioritize these funds in a manner consistent with the 2040 CRP, which includes a high priority on reinvestment in urban core communities. NIRPC can only prioritize and fund projects for which local units of government apply, have 20% local funding available, and are eligible activities within a given federal transportation program.

# **BROWNFIELDS**

NIRPC has partnered with the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority and the Cities of Gary, Hammond, and East Chicago to form the Northwestern Indiana Regional Brownfield Coalition. This Coalition has successfully secured \$800,000 in USEPA funding to establish a Brownfield Revolving Loan Fund, the purpose of which is to loan money for removing the environmental obstacles to redevelopment projects in the participating cities. The Coalition has also successfully secured \$600,000 in USEPA funding to assess and inventory properties to identify those environmental obstacles present on sites targeted for redevelopment.

Significant? No

Is there a need to modify the plan? No.