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**COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR**

# MASTER STRATEGY

Innovative Image Puts Fishers on the Map

By Rebecca Patrick





“Fishers could have stayed nothing more than what it was when I moved there in 1995: a nice place to live with lovely vinyl apartments. But it’s not that (today). And that’s not an accident; it got there with a strong plan,” declares John McDonald, CEO of Fishers-based CloudOne.

No matter who you talk to – business leaders, local officials or longtime residents – they all cite adopting the vision in recent years to become a “smart, vibrant, entrepreneurial city” as the turning point for Fishers. They credit Mayor Scott Fadness for instilling that, with the backing of the city council.

What’s followed is quite the transformation.

Major economic announcements are the new norm, not the exception. Innovation is now synonymous with the fast-growing locale.

That speaks to how dominant a player Fishers has become in the last several years in business attraction and expansion. It boasts an impressive entrepreneurial spirit thanks to Launch Fishers, the largest collaborative co-working space in the state (if not the Midwest).

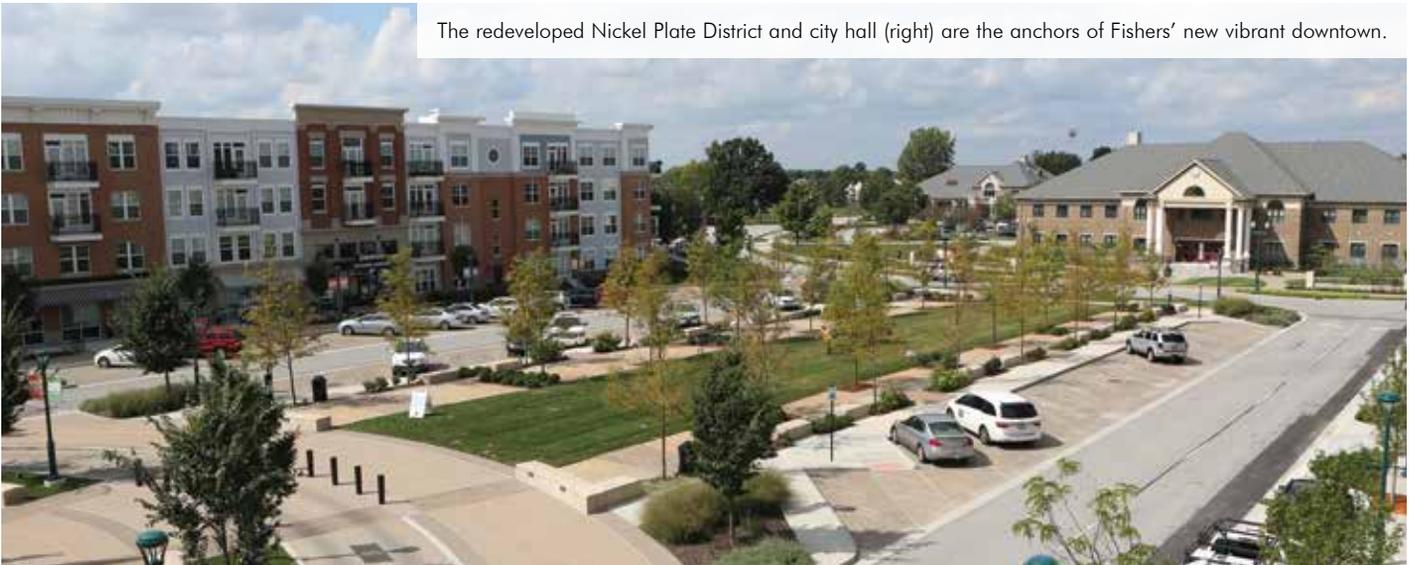
Collaboration – key participants being on the same page – is what allowed and keeps allowing Fishers to rise to the top.

Continued on page 58



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The redeveloped Nickel Plate District and city hall (right) are the anchors of Fishers' new vibrant downtown.



“We have such a clear vision of where we want to take the community. So, for instance, creating Launch Fishers or working with the private sector to recruit companies here – we recognized those opportunities right away because we understood what the vision was, and because we were so aligned we could move quickly,” Fadness explains.

“That alignment is probably the differentiator for us. It sounds a little abstract, but it is absolutely critical.”

And it also helps, Fadness adds, to have residents who embrace change. “They recognize for the most part that change is inevitable and if you can articulate to them why that change makes sense, they’re apt to go along with that.”

“That positions us well to attempt new things to move our community forward.”

### **Live, work, play, etc.**

Fadness was Fishers town manager for four years before becoming its first mayor in January 2015; that’s when the transition to a city became official.

He’s candid about what the location lacked and what needed to be done. A vibrant downtown was near the top of that list.

“We just didn’t have one. Really, you wouldn’t know where downtown was,” he admits.

It took three years to redevelop the area into a robust center of activity. The essence of downtown is what’s known as the Nickel Plate District, featuring emerging businesses in addition to various community events.

“Our employees fell in love with the downtown that Fishers has created with all the mixed-use buildings. It put us right in the middle with the action and the momentum in the community,” says Larry Gigerich, managing director at Ginovus (which relocated there from Indianapolis this summer).

“All of the quality of place amenities that are here and walkable from our offices. We can walk and be in 15 restaurants and the trail system that Fishers has created and is continuing to expand.”

Innovative companies CloudOne and SteadyServ Technologies also reside in the Nickel Plate area, as do the local government and emergency services.

Deputy Mayor Leah McGrath: “One of the most rewarding things about working here is coming out during lunch or in the afternoon or early evening and seeing people exploring this new downtown. Seeing the activity, energy and excitement of the people here in Fishers who want to be a part of this special time.”

And that’s not by accident.

“A lot of the events and the programs that the city is driving are focused in that area – to foster that sense of engagement, vibrancy and interest in downtown,” states Tony Elliott, Fishers director of parks and recreation.

“Our hope is that people on a Friday night or Saturday night or even a Tuesday night could walk into the Nickel Plate District and maybe not even know what’s going on specifically but walk around downtown and know they are going to find something interesting and entertaining.”

Indeed, the Tuesday night summer concert series is a marquee draw, bringing out an average of 4,500 people every week.

In the northeastern section of Fishers sits Saxony, another mixed-use development. The 750 acres include housing, office districts, retail, health care facilities and pedestrian-friendly amenities. The residential component came first, beginning in 2003.

Sean McKinnies, senior vice president of Republic Development, the developer of Saxony, says more exciting things are on the horizon.

“Our lake district is underway; we’ve built somewhere in the neighborhood of 350 apartments now, with another 500 to come.

Continued on page 62



Weather permitting, those working downtown can stroll outside during lunch or on a break to enjoy live music.



Launch Fishers helps entrepreneurs with space, technology needs and connections.



Mayor Scott Fadness (right) lured SteadyServe with his dynamic vision and story of what was taking place in the community.

The next phase includes some commercial restaurant opportunities and additional multi-family (units). We think of the Lake District as the heart of Saxony.”

One popular attraction already there is Saxony Beach, which saw nearly 25,000 visitors this season.

“The other thing that can’t be overstated is that we are very lucky to have a diversity and wide range of park properties and park amenities,” Elliott mentions. “(In addition to) Saxony Beach, we’ve got a new sledding hill and mountain bike trail at Flat Fork Creek Park.”

Yet another selling point is the area’s school district, Hamilton Southeastern. The system has had more four-star schools than any other Indiana district in the last two years.

McGrath concludes, “Fishers is just very accessible. It’s a place you can come and create your life.”

### Lift off

Arguably nothing has had a bigger impact on the city’s evolution than the opening of Launch Fishers in 2013.

It has quickly become the go-to place for entrepreneurs to explore their dreams and bring them to life. Today, more than 600 call it home. To accommodate that growing number, the new digs are 52,000 square feet – more than three times the original space.

John Wechsler, CEO of Launch Fishers, explains the organization’s role: “We serve as the tip of the spear for this entrepreneurial city vision and all things related to entrepreneurship and innovation, and removing barriers for entrepreneurs to get started.

“When you bring these bright, talented, creative people with great attitudes together, amazing things can happen.”

The success of Launch Fishers has been beyond anything either Wechsler or the mayor expected.

“It’s an example of the city partnering with the private sector and allowing them to do what they do best – for them to create whatever they’re going to create,” Fadness offers. “John Wechsler deserves a lot of the credit for what’s going on there.

“We have worked very hard over the last several years to create an environment that is the most hospitable environment around for people to pursue their entrepreneurial passions. Launch Fishers demonstrates that commitment to the entrepreneurial ecosystem,” he continues.

“I seek out the entrepreneurs, not the company. If I have an aggregate group of critical mass of serial entrepreneurs in my community, I’m not sure what they’re going to do, but whatever they’re going to do is going to be good for the local economy.”

Wechsler relays a recent encounter he had with an employee of the local Vardagen coffee shop about one of its interns coming through

the Launch Fishers high school fellowship.

“It was a really sincere, really authentic conversation about how we are changing the climate in our community and creating opportunities for talented, bright, creative minds to actually grow up and contribute here in the Fishers business community after they go away to college or go to college locally and continue to work for the companies here.

“Seeing that impact in the community has been the most rewarding aspect of what it is we are doing.”

McDonald reflects, “Some cities want to become city beautiful; others focus on athletics, others focus on the downtown. There’s nothing wrong with any of that, but Fishers’ focus is entrepreneurship, and business and growth of jobs and economic opportunity. That is very impressive.”

### Staying close to home

A driving force behind the shift in Fishers is the goal to increase local employment opportunities.

Continued on page 64



The Saxony area is home to medical services, housing, retail and more; its Lake District features popular Saxony Beach.



In about a year's time, Fishers' IKEA store will become a reality and a visible fixture off Interstate 69.

"We really believe a comprehensive economic development strategy includes and should focus on organic job growth and job creation," Fadness begins.

"One of the best quality of life measurements for me is to eliminate residents' need to commute a long distance. If you could spend another hour with your family, rather than being in the car, why wouldn't you?"

At the State of the City address in February, the mayor announced 1,000 new jobs were on the way. Even more impressive, he says Fishers

may see as many as 4,000 in total for the year.

"We've certainly raised the bar. I don't know what we're going to do next year!"

In all likelihood the answer is: Just be yourself.

In the race to attract businesses and jobs, Fishers has a leg up on the competition beyond comparable incentives. City officials believe the lure is wanting to join a kindred culture.

They are correct, according to Steve Hershberger, chairman and CEO of SteadyServ Technologies, who relocated the company from Carmel in September.

"We needed to go where other like-minded companies are. They're talking about building an Internet of Things (IoT) Center of Excellence here (led by CloudOne). ... A bunch of little things that all added up," he recounts. "For me to be a responsible leader of the company, I really had no choice.

"Because we fit the (Fishers') vision and the vision is so clear for what they're attempting to do, when it works, they know exactly how to help you. And when it doesn't work, they don't try to force a round peg in a square hole."

CloudOne's McDonald was blown away by the mayor, who unbeknownst to him, had visited his old Indianapolis location in preparation to entice the business to Fishers.

"He had gone there to scope us out. He talked to members of the staff, asked about what kind of company CloudOne was. This mayor was doing his homework and decided, 'This is a company I'd really like to have as a part of Fishers' – and that impressed the hell out of me."

The approach taken by the city truly is one of engagement – not only at the initial stage but throughout the company's existence.

Fadness shares, "We attract these companies, I know their names, I know their stories. We celebrate the successes of a two- or 10-person

Continued on page 66



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company as we would a 1,000-person company. We celebrate when they each have a win.”

And it’s not just Indiana-based companies recognizing the city’s appeal.

IKEA, the world’s largest furniture retailer, broke ground in October for its first store in the state. Located at 116th Street off of Interstate 69, it’s slated to open fall 2017 (as is Indiana’s only Topgolf sports entertainment venue).

“IKEA stores are very complicated undertakings, both from IKEA’s standpoint as well as the city. We bought 35 acres of land and they are one-of-a-kind buildings,” offers Joseph Roth, IKEA U.S. expansion public affairs manager.

“We very much appreciated the in-depth understanding, awareness and professionalism that the folks in Fishers had to offer. They understand the needs of the local residents and businesses. They have a strong focus on the long-term vision and very much a can-do attitude.”

### Only the beginning

Affirmations like those from IKEA and others “all the time” encourage Fadness that the city is on the right path – one with many exciting things around the corner.

“Fishers is about to go through a significant second round of transformation; it’s in the works – things just haven’t been built yet (in reference to all the company announcements),” he stresses.

“When people are like, ‘What’s next?’ What’s next has been approved, it’s in the pipeline. From where I sit, buckle up!

“What you’ll see in the next 12 months is a continued development of this urban core. You’re going to see some significant development along the I-69 corridor, see things happen in the northeast with the medical technology corridor and see development



For generations, children and families have enjoyed Conner Prairie, the interactive history museum that both showcases innovation and recreates aspects of Hoosier life in the 19th century.

at the airport, and then frankly you’ll start to see us hone in on some specific visions and other areas of our community as well,” he predicts.

A more holistic concept is what’s on tap – one that isn’t as focused on downtown. But Fadness assures, “I love what’s happening downtown and by no means are we going to step off the gas pedal on that.”

Virtually all aspects for the continued success are planned out via a roadmap for the city called *Fishers 2040 Plan: A Framework for Our Future*.

McGrath is heading up the effort.

“This was a first for our community to come together and look at the long term of where we wanted to go – from land use to parks and

Continued on page 78

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Continued from page 66

how we maintain that vibrancy in every corner of the city. To be smart, to be intentional about things,” she explains. “We have about 90,000 (residents) in Fishers today; in 2040, we could have 130,000-135,000.”

Progress is characterized as having act one of a 10-act play in the books. “We’ve set a great foundation for the framework. Now we’re getting into where the rubber meets the road and taking action.”

The enthusiasm from officials is readily apparent.

“We are a city with a capacity to have lots of great features to us,” Fadness maintains.

“We have a Smithsonian-affiliated living history museum – Conner Prairie. We have Geist Reservoir, an emerging downtown, the largest co-working space in the state. We have a Fortune 500 headquarters (Jarden Home Brands, a division of Jarden Corp.) on I-69.

“We’re not a single, shiny object community. We’re a collection of unique assets that make it a really interesting place to live,” he surmises.

None of this happens, the mayor insists, without “these really bright, hardworking, committed public service folks, who are entrepreneurial in their own right. We learn as we go – we’re a school of hard knocks group. That’s the key to our success in a lot of regards; we just roll up our sleeves and go.”

The scary part for those competing against Fishers: Fadness says they are just getting warmed up.

“This is going to be a very, very dynamic community. We’re setting the stage right now for more to come. By no means are we declaring victory on the battleship.”