

# Adding to the Mix

## 2025 Plan Benefits From Regional Perspective

By Rebecca Patrick

**F**or any map to take you where you need to go, your route must be filled with good local information. With that in mind, the Indiana Chamber hit the road this summer.

The organization conducted a five-region listening tour throughout the state as part of the *Indiana Vision 2025* economic development plan, which features more than 30 goals in four areas of focus: outstanding talent (encompassing K-12, higher education and the workforce); attractive business climate; superior infrastructure; and dynamic and creative culture.

More than 175 community leaders from diverse backgrounds – in business, education, government and non-profit – rolled up their sleeves to share ideas and tell of initiatives that have already taken hold in some of their cities and regions.

Based on the valuable input gained at these stops in Evansville, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, Merrillville and Sellersburg, the Chamber and its many partners continue to refine the 2025 plan and its strategies. The ultimate goal being what's outlined in the 2025 mission statement: "Indiana will be a global leader in innovation and economic opportunity where enterprises and citizens prosper."

To discuss key takeaways from these regional meetings and to offer their local perspectives are:

### Participants:

- **Bill Bradley** – executive director, Jay County Development Corporation, Portland
- **Jay Conner** – investment advisor, Capital Asset Management, Jeffersonville
- **Wil Marquez** – principal, w/Purpose (urban and public design firm), Indianapolis
- **Dennis Rittenmeyer** – executive director, One Region initiative, Northwest Indiana
- **Terry Seitz** – mayor, city of Jasper

### Need to come together

"From an economic standpoint, what we have realized more and more is that regionalism is one of the ways that we need to be working together. No more can we be looking at our neighboring county as the competition. They are not the competition. In many cases, even the neighboring states are not the competition. We're a worldwide international economy, and we have to realize that," Bradley offers.

The concept of regionalism and getting people around a table to discuss the prospect is something all agree should happen, but unfortunately isn't nearly as easy as it should be. There are many individuals and, at times, almost competing groups working toward common goals – instead of everyone on the same page, collaborating and focused to get there faster.

Conner explains a scenario: "I understand what your vision is and you understand what my vision is, but then from there it's 'good luck' instead of actually working on it together and finding things that we might be able to help out on."

The show and tell of what one organization is doing to see if it may be transferrable simply isn't happening, Conner continues. "No one really seems to want to play that part of the game."

Seitz is interested in what the next governor might do to foster more regionalism.

"I have heard some reports from other mayors that, in conversations with Congressman Mike Pence (the Republican candidate for governor), that his IEDC (Indiana Economic

Development Corporation) would actually be pushing for more regional contact, which likely puts the mayor basically speaking to and through IEDC through a regional voice.

“If that’s the case, and it’s still very preliminary of course, that would probably drive things to a whole different ballgame than what we are used to right now. I would hope that it would be for the good.”



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*Wil Marquez  
w/Purpose*

## Crossroads, yet not connecting

Infrastructure was an identified priority in every region, whether it’s bridges in Southeast Indiana, the Gary airport in the Northwest or mass transit in Central Indiana. No matter the location, infrastructure – and public transportation to be specific – is viewed as a hurdle that must finally be cleared.

“It’s always amazing to me that we make a lot of things throughout the state; we move many goods, but we have no way to really move people. So it’s like saying we want to be connected, but in fact we have no way of moving all these things around very easily,” Marquez laments.

“There’s one Megabus that goes from Indianapolis through the entire state. It doesn’t even drop anybody off in Indiana. It takes them right to Chicago. That’s the fastest form of transportation that we have.

“We have a network that is very choked up; the reason is because we can’t demand that we want people to move around for commerce and for our interests to be shared across the state, but then we have really no instrument to promote that,” he surmises.

Rittenmeyer concurs. “We have not done a very good job with public transportation. We have only one rail line – until Central Indiana gets its rail line – and that’s the South Shore, which runs from South Bend to Chicago. That’s all it does. Our congressman has been trying to secure the local funding match to build a southern extension of the South Shore Railroad. He has gotten the federal money on several occasions, but we cannot come up with the local money.

“And just two months ago, the Regional Bus Authority for Northwest Indiana, which I chaired for 10 years (until about three years ago) just went out of business.”

In the positive column, “We move people well, but it’s individually,” notes Conner, who also references the impact the Interstate 69 corridor (Bloomington to Evansville) will have when it’s completed. But he also sees the need for turning toward the “Jetson vision of the future” with light rail and high-speed rail.

Investing in those transportation modes, insists Marquez, is long overdue. “We should have been investing a long time ago in high-speed rail, in all of that. And the more we continue to spend money on toll roads, things that support the vehicle, we continue to further put ourselves in the hole, where we are not competitive with other states.”

Bradley concludes, “The whole infrastructure is very important to the economics of the state. As we have heard around the table, making that infrastructure – making us interconnected – is going to be a crucial part of at least the next 20, 25 years in the state.”



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*Dennis Rittenmeyer  
One Region*

## What best in education really means

The same could certainly be said for education, another dominate theme at the forums. How to change the culture in our state to make sure parents and others value that education for their children is the \$64,000 question.

“All of us in our respective communities will say, ‘Our schools in our community, they’re great.’ However, when you start looking at and comparing our individual school districts, at the state, at the nation – we shouldn’t even be comparing ourselves (that way),” Bradley describes. “We should be comparing our school districts to South Korea

and places like that where we actually have to compete on an international basis.

“We’ve got to face that we have got to change the culture that says, ‘My school is good enough. It was good enough for me, it’s going to be good enough for my kids.’ Well, that’s not going to be the case anymore, folks. It’s got to get better. It’s got to be the best.”

Conner is on the Greater Clark Schools Foundation Board. One of its initiatives is to raise money to help students continue on to postsecondary education. An example is prepping them for the ACT test or guiding them to vocational type education if college isn’t realistic.

“Many (Hoosiers) are not able to work in the U.S. because they don’t have the interpersonal skills that we need to sit around and have ideas like this. It’s really a poverty versus wealth issue,” he contends.

“A lot of kids’ parents at the school where I graduated are now sending their children to the more suburban

schools. We were already a suburban school, so they are moving even farther out, to be with more like people. And how do you fix that poverty gap is really the issue there.”

Adds Marquez: “We want all our kids to be scientists, mathematicians and architects tomorrow, right? But the reality is that we have a growing issue of poverty here, and individuals graduating from high school with no basic skills. So how do we begin introducing, again, those vocational type classes to begin educating students how to do basic manufacturing skills? Our high schoolers need to graduate with some skills. That’s the issue.”

The Ready Northwest Indiana partnership strives to prepare students for either work or college. “The emphasis needs to be placed certainly on the high school students. You can’t write them off, absolutely not, but we’ve got to start earlier,” Rittenmeyer pushes.

“If we try to fix kids who are 14 and 15 and 16, after a long period of time of bad study habits, bad behavior, poverty certainly in all of that, violence in their neighborhoods, we are really climbing a steep mountain because those behavior patterns have been imbued in those kids from a very early age.”

United Way’s Success by 6 is one of the local initiatives in Northwest Indiana and elsewhere aimed to help. The idea is to make sure pre-kindergarten children are ready for school by school age.

### Job desired; skills needed

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the incumbent workforce – too many today who may be unemployed and

also without the skills necessary for meaningful employment.

“We have an unusually high unemployment rate in the state, but we also have a lot of open jobs that require certain (learned) skills. Why can’t we pair the two up?” Conner wonders.

He acknowledges the reasons for this not happening can range from people wanting to collect their two years unemployment to family hardship to a gray area somewhere in between.



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*Jay Conner  
Capital Asset Management*

“Most likely, though, people just don’t know that the opportunity is there, how to go about paying for it, and if there is aid or grants available for them to help themselves go out and do these jobs.”

Mayor Seitz’s community and county (Dubois) typically has among the lowest unemployment rates in the state, thanks to the manufacturing industry landscape that is adapting with the times.

“I wish I could put my thumb on it and say how we’ve maintained the high level of employment, but also the ability to still compete. We do know that we have a continually changing workforce. Our manufacturers, for the most part, have formulated some international alliances – whether that be through receiving goods and then reassembling here, fully assembling and then shipping there or actually investing in plants directly,” he explains.

“We have found a very unique way that has benefited us greatly, including sharing a lot among our manufacturers. I know that there is a competitive level, but also that the manufacturers for the most part here are extraordinarily friendly and are willing to meet and share. That is very rare.”

The mayor chalks some of this atmosphere up to the benefits of a small town. “You

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*Bill Bradley  
Jay County Development Corporation*



## Chamber Roundtable

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really run your business differently when you sit in the same church pew Sunday morning as someone you employ. It makes you think about everything in a whole different way.”

### The next Donald Trump

The climate for fostering entrepreneurship also is its own unique animal and one the group says is a challenge.

“We can throw venture capital dollars at them (entrepreneurs). But I’m not sure we understand and really have developed that model or several models of how do we assist the entrepreneur. And it’s a real quandary for us in economic development,” Bradley admits.

While Conner says “if an entrepreneur wants help there are resources to find, (but) ultimately the market determines if an entrepreneur’s business is successful or not based on the value of their idea.

“I help a lot of venture capital individuals invest in those companies. We never offer, but if they ask us to evaluate the investment, we will evaluate it. But I won’t tell them yes or no because it’s up to the investor at that point in time. It’s sort of a badge of honor to say you started a business in this economy and you’re still open two or three years later,” he comments.

Seitz wants people to realize an entrepreneur can come into his or her own at any time in life.

“We need to find a way of encouraging that, and to not make the assumption that to go into business or have this great idea that you have to be that young hustling, bustling guy. It could be a person that has been downgraded currently or just someone who could make that better widget. It’s just very important that we acknowledge that business success occurs at all ages.”

### Next steps

Going forward, the group offered some advice for how the Indiana Chamber can continue to best work with partners around the state to accomplish major goals in the 2025 plan.

Several mentioned that perhaps Indianapolis’ issues and needs play too big a role in impacting other parts of the state – where the needs may be far different and even aligned more with major cities in neighboring states.

“There’s a growing level of concern that our Legislature is focusing far too much on local issues and making them state issues. We need to have an Indiana vision, not just an Indianapolis vision,” Seitz assesses.

“You deal with the issues in your own backyard the (best) way you can, but don’t legislate a small problem into a state issue. And the Chamber needs to be at the forefront with us on the business side, asking, ‘How does that impact us?’ ”

Conner and Bradley view the Indiana Chamber as the key facilitator for both diverse and like-minded groups that need to come together, making those connections happen.

Meanwhile, Rittenmeyer believes Indiana has not made the kinds of investments that some of the other states have in research corridors.



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*Mayor Terry Seitz  
city of Jasper*

“I remember when Governor Daniels was candidate Daniels and he spoke to the Assembly of College Presidents. I was in the audience. He said one of the things he hoped to accomplish was to create more ties between the state economy, state government and the resources that are available at our colleges and universities. I must say I haven’t really seen the results of that effort.

“Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I’m missing things. I’m not as familiar with other parts of the state as I am in Northwest Indiana, but I think we can do a better job there, and the Chamber could help in that area.”

The last word goes to Seitz: “The Chamber has to underscore the inclusiveness of the (business) deal. People like deals, and no one really cares about anything else, because we all win. And that may address some of the greatest points that we have in our (2025) drivers and goals.

“When you look at the business climate, outstanding talent, and dynamic and creative culture drivers, it’s about the fundamental art of making a deal and having business work, and when that works well, everything else falls into place.”

### INFORMATION LINK

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