Location, location, location. The three counties that comprise the Wabash River Region formed for two primary reasons: shared proximity to Illinois as well as the Wabash River. They have a combined population of nearly 170,000.

“It was a recommendation that the regions hit a certain threshold (200,000),” Goode recalls. “We knew we weren’t going to be able to turn that around in the given time, but it was very much a victory for us to pull together the way we did – and even more importantly to establish and get a regional development authority moving.”

Projects in the plan focused on (among others) two dominant themes: leveraging the Wabash River as a natural resource and the region’s robust higher education institutions.

Located along the northern banks of the

The ICON project will transform a former industrial facility along the Wabash River into residential space. Greg Goode, director of governmental relations at Indiana State University, praises the Regional Cities process for boosting the initiative’s profile.
They say home is where the heart is. It’s certainly at the heart of East Central Indiana’s vision for attracting residents and talented workers to its communities.

“Addressing the real estate market is a big component of what we want to do here,” explains Terry Murphy. Affable and a bit nostalgic, he was preparing to retire as vice president of economic development at the Muncie-Delaware County Economic Development Alliance just a few days after we spoke in July.

Observe that many individuals working in the region live elsewhere and commute, he reveals, “In Delaware County’s case, we have 10,000 people that live outside the county and come to work here, so we need to provide more housing for professionals and millennials, health care professionals and the university people because

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“Economic development is a team sport.”

It’s not only a sentiment expressed by Indiana Humanities president and CEO Keira Amstutz, but the powerful philosophy behind the Regional Cities Initiative.

Amstutz characterizes herself and others who served on the Strategic Review Committee, formed by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), as “listeners” and “connectors.”

They reviewed proposals, listened to presentations and shared input during question and answer sessions.

“What the projects and proposals centered on was how to improve quality of place to create talent magnets and improve the economy,” Amstutz remarks. “Part of what I found exciting about the process is that it not only included traditional economic development voices, but also folks like me who represent the cultural sector.”

Mark Maassel, president of the Indiana Energy Association and another member of the committee, seconds that.

“For any single city – or frankly in many cases, even single counties – (economic development) is not going to be as effective as it could be if you worked on a broader basis. That’s absolutely one of the keys to this.”

The other, he emphasizes, revolves around quality of place.

“To me, it’s as simple as connecting things and people.”

In reviewing the proposals, he and others considered whether “those things were present – not just in the planning, but in a sustainable fashion. Had organizational structures been built that would allow for the conversations to continue, for combined decision-making?”

Equally important to Kathy Davis – systems advisor to Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett and Indiana’s first female lieutenant governor (appointed in 2003) – was “readiness.”

“I’m a former budget director,” she relates, “so I want to invest in efforts that are ready to go and not only are going to provide a strong return, but provide it as soon as possible because the ability to start an improvement now changes the slope of the trendline and gets us a better result.

“And then – these are all interconnected – (we sought) a demonstration that there were the private and local resources that were going to come along besides the state’s investment to...
really optimize the return for what was being allocated.”

Transformative proposals – both culturally and economically – took center stage.

The IEDC selected North Central (Innovate Indiana Plan), Northeast (Road to One Million Plan) and Southwest Indiana (Indiana’s Great Southwest Plan) to receive $42 million each in matching funds to support their regional development plans.

Amstutz, Maassel and Davis commend those regions and the remaining four (Central, East Central, Northwest and West Central) on the quality of their proposals.

“High and wide, they were all terrific,” Maassel reflects. “In some cases, the regions were newly formed. They hadn’t spent a great deal of time working with each other, yet they were able to put together an exciting proposal. We tried in all cases to encourage them, to give them some thoughts on, ‘Perhaps you can look at this, that or the next,’ and sent that through the IEDC, which has been out talking with folks in each of the regions (about how to carry their initiatives forward).”

“It wasn’t top down like, ‘Region X, you should do this and not that?’ ” Amstutz chimes in. “It was more, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s a really interesting idea! Have you intersected with the Department of Tourism?’ Trying to make those links to provide every opportunity to take advantage of what’s there so these projects and programs can be realized.”

Davis offers her take: “There were elements of the proposals (submitted by regions that weren’t selected to receive funding) that some of us felt were very, very valuable. We certainly expressed that to those communities and are interested in figuring out how to get some of those things done.”

Amstutz reveals her hopes for the future.

“I encourage the IEDC to continue to think along these lines of quality of place, and how to combine community and traditional community development methods,” she declares. “It’s a very effective recipe for success.”

we’re losing them now.”

Enter the White River Canal District.

Urban-living apartments, a boardwalk, public plazas, a restaurant, café, commercial space and more will dot the 10-acre development in downtown Muncie.

“It’s a multi-year project, but the steps are being taken that are necessary to keep the project moving forward,” Murphy outlines.

Innovation will take shape at an old building with an enticing new name: Madjax, the Muncie Maker Force. Originally touted as Gearbox: Muncie A Maker Hub, it will foster creativity and innovation on the site of an 85,000 square foot former laundry business. In January, the city approved a $1 million loan related to the endeavor.

Opening this fall, Madjax recently announced its first tenants: Tribune Showprint Posters and The Guardian Brewing Co.

Reflecting on the variety of collaborations that have grown out of Regional Cities, Murphy shares, “In East Central Indiana, we haven’t had an effort like this before. (For the most part), the areas that have been funded (through the Regional Cities Initiative) have been doing this for 10 or 15 years or longer. We started with the Regional Cities program, so we’re lagging behind a little bit. But it was good to see people’s enthusiasm. We had regional meetings where we had as many as 250 people showing up. There was a genuine enthusiasm for the concept, and we got a lot of good thoughts that went into the process.”

The South Shore line, which runs from South Bend to Chicago, links Northwest Indiana to the nation’s third-largest metro economy.

“It gives us an opportunity to really touch that Chicago workplace,” remarks Heather Ennis, president and CEO of the Northwest Indiana Forum. “Having that opportunity for our residents to get to high-paying jobs in the metropolitan area, and then coming back to Northwest Indiana to live and spend their money offers great opportunity to us.”

Fully double tracking the line would cut commuting times between Chicago and South Bend to one hour. In addition, a trip from Gary to South Bend would drop to 30 minutes.

Enhanced mobility adds to the rail’s appeal. It’s an enticing proposition to all age groups, but especially millennials.

“Many millennials want to be free of – we’ll call it traditional transportation,” Ennis asserts. “They don’t necessarily want to be tied down to a car; they want a more transit-oriented lifestyle where they can get on a train or get on public transportation and get to the things they really want to see.

“If you look at the infrastructure around the city of Chicago and the suburbs of Chicago, from a rail perspective, we just aren’t competing with that. We don’t have the infrastructure that they have.”

Building a proposal around one project – as opposed to other regions that embarked upon several – simply made sense in Northwest Indiana.

“(We asked ourselves), ‘What are our strengths and how do we capitalize on them most quickly? And how do we attract talent to the marketplace most quickly?’ We’ve got these great amenities in Lake Michigan, lakefront and trail

Partnership Potential
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Northwest: Indiana’s Third Coast Gateway Initiative
Proposal: Fully double tracking the South Shore line from Gary to Michigan City (and related transit-oriented development)
Counties: Lake, LaPorte, Porter and St. Joseph

Downtown revitalization in Muncie and other cities emphasizes the region’s focus on housing and commercial development.
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Fully double tracking the South Shore line is a $270 million, eight-year project aimed to maximize the region’s proximity to Chicago.

Breaking down boundaries

Ennis acknowledges that a lack of cooperation among various entities in Northwest Indiana has hindered regionalism in the past. But she emphasizes that’s changing.

“Whereas the Northeast (region) has Fort Wayne as their major city and their major hub, we’ve got quite a few different cities, but no one large city. The diversity of our area is such is that it can get siloed very quickly … but this process has really allowed us to get regional in our approach, to look at the broader brushstroke of the region and what things we can come together on that could be game changers.

“It’s been a fun process. We’re thrilled about the opportunities going forward for us.”

Murphy couldn’t agree more.

“There’s a realization that what’s good for one of us is good for all of us,” he stresses, “that we’re not so much in it independently, but for the good of the entire region because we know we all benefit from that.”

RESOURCE: Indiana Regional Cities Initiative at www.iedc.in.gov/programs/regional-cities-initiative

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