

2012 Volunteer of the Year

Indiana Vision 2025 Regional Hosts

By Tom Schuman

They are five business and community leaders from five different areas of the state. Geography aside, they share a common passion for doing what they can to help ensure success for their communities and the entire state.

Ed Hafer (Evansville Regional Business Committee), Kerry Stemler (KM Stemler Co., New Albany) and Mike Wells (REI Investments, Carmel) are members of the Indiana Chamber's executive committee leadership. Mark Maassel (Northwest Indiana Forum, Portage) and John Sampson (Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, Fort Wayne) are former Chamber board members and also long-term partners in efforts to enhance Indiana's business climate.

Each, as co-hosts of *Indiana Vision 2025* regional forums, was asked to help identify and bring together area leaders representing business, education, government and non-profits. The goal was for those regional representatives to receive an overview of the statewide plan, then work together to identify how those initiatives fit into local priorities and challenges. The end result: A strong *Indiana Vision 2025* blueprint and a greater realization that there is much alignment between regional and state efforts.

Pre-forum surveys, interviews and more were part of the process to ensure that each session was focused on that region's needs. Sampson admits that it turned out to be much more than just sending out invitations, "but in a very positive way. They (CHORUS®, forum facilitators) did a tremendous job researching what was important for our region and talking to our stakeholders. That added considerably to the value."

Making sure the proper mix of people was involved was a key role for the co-hosts.

"I actually think that (getting the right people to the table) is extremely challenging," Stemler shares. "People will participate or be involved if the right person asks. As great as electronic media is, the more personal you make it, the more passionate you make it about the cause ..."

Hafer says there have already been subsequent meetings in which several forum attendees have been around the same table again addressing some of the local issues. The prior experience together has been helpful.

Comments such as "plan fit nicely" and "initiatives dovetail" were used in describing the connection between ongoing regional initiatives and the statewide plan. Sampson calls it "affirming and reassuring that we are all headed in the same direction, that there was good alignment on the priorities that we had been professing as a region."

Participating in such a planning exercise was nothing new for any of the award winners. Maassel notes, however, that this "turned into one of the best of those kinds of sessions I have been involved in."

More importantly, others told me the same thing."

Long-term outlook

As busy professionals running their own companies or organizations and with a variety of other community commitments, why did these five devote more of their time to the Chamber and the *Indiana Vision 2025* effort?

"It's important that we are proactive in determining the direction of the state," Wells offers. "With the success of our *Economic Vision 2010* (a predecessor to *Indiana Vision 2025*), it was pretty apparent that we found a good mechanism to help move the state forward. I think *2025* is exactly the next step needed."

Hafer agrees, calling *Economic Vision 2010* a true policy roadmap for the first decade of this



Kerry Stemler (top photo, center) at the regional forum in Sellersburg with Ed Hafer in Evansville.

century. “The first one was so successful, it made you want to put together a new one and it made you want to think big and go for the whole pie instead of a bunch of bite-size pieces. That’s what I like about it. It’s not this session of the Legislature and how do we make a step forward, but how in the next decade do we really make changes.”

Stemler is passionate in his approach. “I personally believe Indiana is just on the edge of greatness right now. We have so many positive things that have happened in recent years (citing right-to-work, education reform, financial position of the state, and political and civic leadership). We have as much opportunity to be one of the premier states in this country as any of them. I just feel like we’ve got all the tools to do that.”

While education and workforce development dominate in many areas – Sampson terms it talent, talent and more talent when asked about his *Indiana Vision 2025* priorities – infrastructure also comes to the forefront and Wells adds “constraining the size and scope of government” as an area in need of additional focus.

Mixing it up

Engaging new leaders is often not an easy task. “There is a conscious effort to engage leaders of all types and backgrounds and have a dialogue,” Maassel contends. “Many of us find that to be absolutely essential and many of us struggle with how we do that. The next challenge is how we engage those leaders.”

Wells was excited to see the enthusiasm on display at the Central Indiana forum.

“What really struck me while I was participating was the passion of a lot of these people related to certain areas. These people, many who had little exposure to the Indiana Chamber, came in and spent a considerable amount of time,” he recalls, “and not just sat in their chairs but argued very vigorously for issues they thought were important and should be included in the plan. I was delighted they would take the time. I was delighted they were

as energetic and excited about the plan as, of course, we are.”

The co-hosts term it “essential” that the forums were on their home turf and that regional priorities were the emphasis. But unlike some who fear that too much of the policy focus in the state is Indianapolis based, they say it’s up to them and their colleagues to be involved.

“You’ve got to recognize (that) if something really great happens in Indianapolis, that’s really good for this part of the state,” says Stemler, who offers the Super Bowl and the tremendous growth of Columbus-based Cummins as two examples.

“The challenge is that I’ve got to get out of my chair and I’ve got to go to Indianapolis. I’ve got to build those relationships and I’ve got to invite people down here. You can sit in your own office or on your own couch and (complain) about it, or you can say I want to make a difference. The state Chamber has really enabled me to meet so many other people throughout the state that I probably never would have had a chance to meet. You have to reach out.”

Sampson: “In some respects, it is about Central Indiana. So much has been done and accomplished at the state level that has benefitted our region that we, in reality, cannot expect that everybody is going to come to us. We have to expend just as much energy to be on your turf, to be supportive of things that are important at the state level if we want to be connected – and we need to be connected. Just like we talk about Fort Wayne being the hub of our region, we also recognize that Indianapolis is the hub of our state.”

Stemler reports that he has a quote on his desk that states: “At every crossing on the road that leads to the future, each progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand opponents that guard the past.”

His closing thought after sharing that quote: “I think what we’re trying to do with this plan is look to the future. It’s not where we’ve been, but it’s where we’re going.”



Mark Maassel (top photo, far right) in Merrillville, Mike Wells in Indianapolis and John Sampson (far left) in Fort Wayne.