



LaPorte

2005 Community of the Year

By Tom Schuman



Companies are moving to the city. Existing businesses are expanding. A new spirit of cooperation is in place. All are excellent signs of a community on the move.

But just how well are things going in LaPorte. At a recent Greater LaPorte Chamber of Commerce board meeting, Mayor Leigh Morris talked about both annexation and potentially raising taxes. Chamber President Mike Seitz notes that “those are two things that could raise eyebrows, but they didn’t.”

To even a greater extent than many Indiana communities, LaPorte has staked its economic claim on manufacturing. Allis-Chalmers and American Home Foods were among the major company closings in the early 1980s when unemployment surged as high as 24%. Whirlpool, Berkle and others left town or scaled back operations within a three-year period from 1998-2000.

“We were arguably the world’s largest farm equipment center at one time,” Morris reviews. “We had never fully recovered from the first losses (when the economy soured six years ago). Manufacturing is still big, but it’s different than it once was. There are not one or two dominant companies.”

Constant communication with the business community is among the attributes Morris, Seitz and others have focused on in recent years. The mayor reports, “Virtually every company we are visiting is in a hiring or expanding mode.”

How did it happen? Much of the credit goes to Morris, who brought a businesslike approach to City Hall. The mayor quickly acknowledges many others who have contributed to the cause, but it all began with leadership that said the status quo simply wasn’t working.

Don Babcock, director of economic development for NIPSCO (the area’s energy provider), says, “LaPorte is a shining example of what a community can do with good leadership. It goes beyond community. LaPorte is on the edge of the Chicagoland region, it’s part of the South Bend region. A business doesn’t necessarily have to locate right in the community for it to benefit.”

James Dworkin, chancellor at Purdue University-North Central in nearby Westville and one of those key players outside of LaPorte, believes a business background is extremely helpful when it comes to running a city. (Morris came to LaPorte in 1978 and was CEO of the local hospital for 22 years before retiring).

“A business leader is familiar with human resources issues, with finance issues,” Dworkin contends. “When other business people who are considering moving here see a mayor with a business background and an aggressive style (it’s a major plus).”

Dan Tarpley is one of those newcomers, moving HRR Enterprises to LaPorte from Chicago a year ago. The edible food processing company employs more than 30 people and made a \$9.4 million investment in the community.

“LaPorte was geographically suitable. We’re close to our customers and suppliers. The east-west corridor is essential,” Tarpley summarizes. “I was able to meet one-on-one with the mayor and have my concerns listened to. I liked that. The incentives helped a small business like mine make an investment in the community and still have money to run the business.”

Coming together

The focus is on LaPorte, but the turnaround story involves neighboring Michigan City, LaPorte County and Purdue-North Central. The LaPorte-Michigan City rivalry dates back to the early 1830s when LaPorte was chosen as the county seat. Predecessors to Morris and Michigan City Mayor Chuck Oberlie (also elected in 2003) reportedly did not speak to each other and were certain to sit on opposite sides of the room if they found themselves at the same meeting.

“We (he and Oberlie) decided to change that. We had more to gain by working together,” emphasizes Morris, who adds there was no banking relationship between the cities, separate bar associations and other signs of a lack of cooperation. “We had to get some commerce going back and forth.”

Oberlie points out that the economies are complementary, with the

LaPorte Mayor Leigh Morris (right) emphasizes strategic planning and the inclusion of a variety of viewpoints in efforts to enhance the community’s business climate.





Recreational activities help enhance the quality of life in LaPorte.

strong job base in the LaPorte area and the larger retail establishments in Michigan City. The realization has also come that jobs gained or lost in the county impact each community due to the shared tax base.

“To a great extent, neither one of us approached it from the political side,” explains Oberlie, a Democrat. (Morris is Republican). “We talked about the issues, and we had a joint vision that we shared with Purdue-North Central and the county commissioners.” In this era of regionalism, Oberlie says it’s still possible to go it alone, “but you’d certainly have to question the allocation of resources.”

The four entities formed LaPorteCounty.biz to provide coordination of economic development efforts and to create a comprehensive countywide land use and zoning plan. Improving an already strong transportation base is a goal for all involved. Doing so with one master plan will certainly be easier than separate proposals

from the two cities and the county.

Closer to home, the Greater LaPorte Economic Development Corporation was formed as a public-private partnership. Morris and Seitz worked together to develop an enhanced retention and expansion program. In addition, city leaders utilized extensive public input in creating LaPorte’s first strategic plan in many years.

Listen and learn

Babcock credits Seitz, in LaPorte for three years after previous Chamber experience in South Bend and Logansport, with reinvigorating the local business organization. Even seemingly small steps such as inviting the mayor to give a State of the City address have gone a long way.

“When I got here, I didn’t see much of a positive outlook,” Seitz admits. The introduction of the survey and plan to visit businesses regularly was not met with a strong reaction by the volunteer business leaders. “But that committee started picking up and saw the purpose of the retention efforts. Now we hear more individuals saying, ‘We really need to get more involved.’”

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People are wanting to step up.”

The survey gathers detailed information on the area companies and allows business leaders to identify and evaluate needs and opportunities in 14 categories. Realtor Jay Pouzar, one of those administering the survey, says a byproduct is a stronger understanding of the companies and the products or services they produce.

“Business people don’t care (about political battles),” Pouzar asserts. “They just want to get things done. If we sense a problem (on a business visit), we bring the mayor or someone from City Hall along on the call. A lot of mayors try to do one or two things in their term. This mayor has 10 or 15 balls in the air – just like any businessperson. The business community sees that and likes his approach.”

Morris looks back at when he arrived in LaPorte in 1978. “People said, ‘We don’t want LaPorte to change. We want LaPorte to stay like it is.’ By keeping it that way so long, it did change – in a negative way. The community went backward.”

The mayor had a provisional strategic plan in place the day he took office. He gathered community input and revised it. Although some naysayers remain, those willing to become engaged and be part of the process are supportive of the changes taking place.

Business boom

HRR Enterprises is just one of several new companies to call LaPorte home in the past year. American Signature brought a furniture distribution center to town, a \$20 million investment with 157 new jobs. American Licorice, a leading producer of licorice and other treats for nearly 90 years, opened a production facility earlier this year. Its original numbers of \$7.8 million and 188 jobs are quickly becoming outdated as aggressive expansion plans are in place.

Retention, of course, is just as important as bringing in the new businesses. Included on that list are:

- American Renolit, \$4.9 million, 307 jobs
- Aero Metals, \$1.9 million, 374 retained jobs; 40 new jobs
- Alpha Baking Company, \$1 million, 259 retained jobs; 30 new jobs
- B&B Manufacturing, \$1.09 million, 35 retained jobs; 25 new jobs

Morris doesn’t plan to stop there. Although enhancement efforts in the late 1990s brought revamped sidewalks, lighting, benches and signage to downtown, the next phase is “strategic development into the business district of the future. We want to make this an area that attracts new types of businesses.”

The transportation planning is not only including county officials, but regional and state resources. Projects have been identified and prioritized, with funding in place for some. Applications for appropriate federal funds have been made. During a visit earlier this year, Gov. Mitch Daniels and the Indiana Department of Transportation praised LaPorte for the mechanism it has in place to guide future projects.

NewPorte Landing is a 160-acre brownfield area that includes portions of the Allis-Chalmers manufacturing property and the city landfill that was last used more than 30 years ago. A combination of commercial, residential and recreational uses could



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stimulate investment in excess of \$55 million, according to the mayor.

Revitalization of Clear Lake will provide recreational opportunities in addition to the current lakes, beaches and trails. Renovation of the downtown train depot will allow the Chamber and other groups to be housed together in an economic development center.

Even being recognized by the federal government as part of a metropolitan statistical area (with Michigan City and a small portion of Michigan) has its advantages. The designation brings access to highway and community development block grant funds that were not available before.

Team effort

The thawing of the LaPorte-Michigan City impasse rightfully deserves its fair share of credit. The relationship between city and county officials now more closely resembles the short physical distance between the two.

Mary Jane Thomas, city planner, has worked in a variety of economic development roles for the city over the past 22 years. Prior to that, she worked in county government. She's been through five different mayoral administrations.

"It was like the continental divide. County and city officials just didn't deal with each other," she recalls. "Now, that's changed. Before, we didn't even talk. We may not always agree, but at least we're talking."

Purdue-North Central, the fourth economic development



A former train depot is being renovated into an economic development center in downtown.

partner, serves as the neutral meeting ground for many activities. The campus is even somewhat jokingly referred to as Little Switzerland.

Dworkin says agreement on the countywide land use study is a good indication of the how the newfound cooperation is working. He has particular interest in the ongoing transportation efforts.

"We're a commuter campus. If people can't get here, we're in trouble," Dworkin comments. "We have good things in transportation already, but better ways of moving people and products around will be very helpful."

Dworkin says neighboring Porter County has been impressed

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Mayor Morris discusses development plans with Tim Larson, the fourth-generation owner of Larson-Danielson Construction Company.

by the broad-based program. Five economic development offices in that county have signed an agreement to work together in a similar fashion.

Judith DeMuth came to LaPorte earlier this year as superintendent of schools. She discusses her decision to come to the community and what she has witnessed thus far.

“Probably the most important thing was the potential for growth. I saw this community as a diamond in the rough, so to speak, and the leadership was in place to harness that potential.

“I can’t say enough about the positive relationships we’ve encountered,” she continues. “Our role is to ensure each student reaches their maximum potential, whether they’re staying here

to work or hopefully returning to the community. We have to know what the expectations of the employers are. They’re the ones who need the workforce. If we work together, the workforce is right in front of their eyes.”

Leading the way

Working in public service is new for Morris, who was in the retail and manufacturing industries (in addition to Army service and additional schooling) before coming to LaPorte.

“I hit 65 and it was time to retire, but not necessarily without the energy and desire to do something,” he recounts. “The more I looked at the city of LaPorte, the more I saw the need for strong leadership in the mayor’s office.

He compares the positions of CEO and mayor.

“They’re similar in that there is very little command or authority in either post. You have to create an atmosphere where others want it to happen. They’re very different in the resources you have available. I call our situation financial strangulation,” referring to state limitations on local spending. “There are two things you can do – run the places as leanly as possible, and my predecessors did that; or get legislative relief. We (Indiana Cities & Towns and its allies) plan to create an irresistible case for legislative relief.”

LaPorte is a city on the move. Morris and others in the community want to keep it that way.

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