

Selling Country Comfort

Economic Development Successes Picking Up

By Rebecca Patrick

“We can't go backward. We don't know cruise. We must be active and go forward,” says Portland Mayor Bruce Hosier. This sentiment on current economic development efforts in Jay County also aptly applies to neighboring Blackford and Randolph counties. Like much of Indiana, this east central region traditionally

has been focused on agriculture and industry. In recent years, the area has been working overtime to promote its quality of life attributes and bring itself into the 21st century technology age — leading to some encouraging results.

Area overview

“Things seem to be very good. We're having some substantial success in business start-ups lately; smaller projects that don't often hit the *Indianapolis Star* or the *Fort Wayne (Journal) Gazette*, but they've been good projects for Portland and Jay County as a whole,” states Bob Quadrozzi, executive director of the Jay County Development Corporation.

“This fits into what our strategy has been over the past couple of years. The big projects are getting to be few and far between and even when they come about, it's very difficult for a small community like Jay County to compete with some of the incentives that are being put on the table.”

Overall, Quadrozzi reports that existing companies are “more than holding their own and have shown some pretty good job increases. In fact, our best showing so far is job creation, with the new jobs coming within our existing base.” Case in point, FCC Indiana Manufacturing recently added on about 40,000 square feet of building space and now has over 520 employees. (The company started back in 1988 with about 120 employees).

While most of the goings-on in Jay County are in Portland and Dunkirk, Quadrozzi notes, “We've had a reasonable amount of success in some of our smaller communities. Our goal is to try to get at least one project every year in each of our incorporated communities.

“We don't always hit that, but we've been pretty successful in doing that for the past few years.”

Like Jay County, Randolph County sits on the Ohio state line. One town, Union City, is actually in both Indiana and Ohio. It and the largest community, Winchester, serve as the major draws for site selection groups.

Mike Seidl, executive vice president of Frank Miller Lumber in Union City, likes what he's seeing in the county. “Efforts are very positive. Local officials are getting more involved and doing more strategic planning, and it seems to be paying off.”

Frank Miller Lumber, which employs just under 200 and ships products worldwide, continues to be a committed leader. “We just completed a major expansion in our production facility that will increase capabilities by 30-35%,” Seidl reports.

Busier times

For Mindy Kenworthy, executive director of the Blackford County Economic Development Corporation, an increase in activity is finally taking place.

“I've been here for three years and, honestly, up until the first of this year it was just extremely slow,” she acknowledges. “This part of Indiana has been a little bit slower to recover (economically) because we are still tied so strongly to manufacturing, which has been hurt the worst in this recession.”

Now, though, she sees confidence in the economy gaining. “I think a lot of people were waiting until after

A favorite pastime — this region features five golf clubs (three public facilities and two country clubs).



the fall presidential election and waiting to see what was going to happen with the war, so I think a lot of people held off decisions in 2004.

“Then with the new year, it was just like everybody was on such a tight timeline now ... I’ve responded to more requests for information in the last six months than probably in the two years prior to that. So, we’re definitely seeing some increase on the new business front and then also with our existing companies.”

The two focal points in Blackford County are Hartford City, the county seat, and Montpelier, a smaller community in the northeast part of the county, which recently received a federal Economic Development Administration grant that is going to provide funding for the infrastructure to develop a new industrial park.

“It will be a small park that contains only about 50 acres, but previously we did not have any industrial land available for future growth,” Kenworthy shares. “We’ve been working on that the last three years and hope to begin construction in the spring of 2006.”

Businesses and projects

A vacated hospital serving as a catalyst for economic development? While it sounds unlikely, that’s exactly what has occurred in Hartford City. When Cardinal Health Systems’ new Blackford Community Hospital was built, the old one was purchased by entrepreneur Eric Olson of Multiple Networks. Olson’s ultimate vision: create technology and food incubators — and possibly a life sciences incubator.

This revamped facility, called a SmartCenter, opened for business this summer. A couple companies, including a web-based lingerie business, have already moved in. Ivy Tech held summer classes there and will return in the fall. A vehicle transportation broker was to be operational by September 1, bringing 10 jobs with it. In addition, there are discussions on putting the local employment office and a daycare center at the SmartCenter.

“It’s been very exciting. We have this 56,000 square foot facility that’s equipped for mixed usage and multiple tenants,” Kenworthy enthuses.

Taylor, Ball State and Purdue universities are all involved in getting things going. For example, Purdue is working on the full commercial kitchen in the food incubator. The facility also recently received a \$35,000 USDA grant.

Current companies focusing on upgrades have also given Kenworthy reasons to be encouraged.

“We’ve had a couple of businesses that have been investing in equipment and have gone before the city council seeking tax abatement on real estate improvements and also investing in new equipment,” she states.

“While it doesn’t always relate to new jobs because companies are trying to become more efficient, it shows the companies are thinking to the future ... For instance, International Paper just submitted a tax abatement for \$6 million in equipment, which is a sizable little investment for us, and 3M is another company that is constantly upgrading and investing in equipment.”

While Kenworthy cannot go into detail on some prospective efforts because, “we’re still in negotiations and they’re still looking at other sites,” she is optimistic. “We do have an agro-business company that is looking at us and we’re making progress on that. We have a former industrial building that is a finalist and that search is down to four sites, and I think they started out looking at 24 different buildings in a multi-state search.”

Additional progress

Meanwhile, several businesses have given commitments to locate in Randolph County.

“Tomasco, which is a Japanese company that makes parts for Honda, is going to be expanding here and hiring on about 82 new employees. They’ll be making filler tanks for Honda automobiles. It’ll be one of only five in the world that makes these tank assemblies,” describes Joe Wolfe, director of the Randolph County Economic Development Corporation.

“We also have a new plant, Kline Technologies, coming to Lynn. This company is one of the leaders in manufacturing dust control tanks for mining, quarry and construction businesses. They hope to have 35 employees by the end of the year.”

As important as bringing new jobs to an area is keeping the ones already there. For a while,



The former Blackford Community Hospital is now called a SmartCenter and is home to Ivy Tech, a Purdue food incubator and technology-based businesses.

things looked bleak for Union City Body Company, which was set to close its doors. “Then, a young entrepreneur here named Rob Likens stepped in and took it over and is now making step vans. He already had a factory (Production Concepts) near them. Taking that over was a big deal and saved 115 jobs in the county,” Wolfe states.

Right next to these two companies in Union City is Workhorse Custom Chassis, which makes chassis for motor homes, buses and step vans. Just this summer, it was sold to International Trucks, which has a plant in Fort Wayne. “Now they’re going to be making all those chassis for International here. We think that’s a big plus. Also, they’ve purchased 40 acres behind their existing plant, which sounds pretty good to us,” Wolfe affirms.

Potentially at the other end of the spectrum is Anchor Glass, one of Randolph County’s largest employers. “They filed Chapter 11 in August, so we’re all hoping and wishing that they come out of that and move forward because they employ about 435 workers here,” Wolfe explains.

Under the financial reorganization, Anchor Glass is looking to eliminate some of its unproductive plants across the country. “Our plant happens to be one of the money-makers, so we’re hopeful that we’re one of the ones they keep.”

On the horizon, Wolfe sees small strip shopping centers coming into Winchester. “I’ve been working with a couple of people that want to go in by the new Wal-Mart, so that’s looking positive.”

Wal-Mart is also a focal point of activity in Jay County, where a new supercenter is being built with a targeted March 2006 opening date.

“We expect that to have an extremely positive impact on our ability to draw in merchants. They seem to feed off of a Wal-Mart Supercenter,” Quadrozzi states. “Hopefully, we’ll see restaurants and other service businesses coming to town. Already, we’ve got a new major video store going up, plus a new bank on its way.”

Building on its agricultural roots, Jay County is working on an ethanol plant. “It would be a 100 million gallon per year ethanol plant, probably 36 million bushels of corn a year. We understand that we’re one of a few (Hoosier) counties that are being considered for one project,” Quadrozzi notes.

Another possible boon for the area focuses on a decorative glass company. “We’ve built a spec building in Dunkirk and are presently working with this company that is looking to consolidate their operations here. Currently, the company has three plants spread out in three states,” Quadrozzi offers.

Points of interest

In much of this region, one economic development area that has blossomed is tourism.

Randolph County enjoys a triple threat of visitor attractions — encompassing entertainment, desserts and shopping.

The NASACR-sanctioned Winchester Speedway reopened in 2005 after being shut down for a year (due to an ownership change). This track — known as the world’s fastest half-mile — has typically drawn over 100,000 visitors annually to Winchester for various racing events.

“Unfortunately, they’ve had a couple races rained out this year, but it attracts so much attention for us. It’s good for the

town and good for our economy,” Wolfe states. “Other events are also held there. They had a band contest a couple weeks ago, and we’ve had country concerts and things like that.”

Wicks Pies and Mrs. Wicks restaurant (see page 50 for more), as well as Silver Towne — a precious metals coin maker, collectibles and jewelry designer — are “also two big draws to the Winchester community,” Wolfe notes.

At the far edge of Randolph County, in Union City, is Ghyslain Chocolatier, which features European chocolates and pastries. “They ship chocolates throughout the world, all hand-painted chocolates and desserts,” Wolfe explains. “People come from all over to go to this chocolatier that’s located right here.”

To the north, Jay County offers a wide range of sightseeing and recreation options. Dunkirk is home to The Glass Museum, which features extensive displays of glassware that tell the history of glass manufacturing in east central Indiana.



Union City draw: Ghyslain Chocolatier, which specializes in European chocolate and pastries, and offers various tour packages — including making your own chocolate.

In Portland, the XPLEX Extreme Competition Park (see page 48 for more) has become a magnet for activity, with a series of national and regional racing events, plus concerts. “It’s been the talk of the town lately and one of the more substantial projects that we’ve been involved in here (involving approximately 200 acres of former industrial land in the northeast quadrant of Portland),” Quadrozzi shares.

“It’s about a \$3.6 million project that could potentially generate over 50 permanent jobs, with a bunch of temporary jobs as the events take place. So, we’re very excited about that. Plus, we’re hopeful XPLEX will help us develop our downtown area and get merchants that will sell goods and services related to that kind of a sports complex.”

Attraction efforts

When it comes to luring new opportunities to this region, small business is the name of the game.

“We like to think that we have a target audience for specific things that we do better than anybody else, but honestly, with

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30 years in this business, when they come in the door, I don't really care what they do. As long as they're going to provide good-paying jobs, we'll work with them," Quadrozzi declares.

Historically, he says Jay County fares well when it bids on between 10 and 15 projects that have shown interest in the community. "When we get below 10 projects that we're working on, our chances become a little slimmer as far as turning one or more of them into a success."

At the end of each year, Quadrozzi's ultimate goal is to see an increase of 100-150 jobs. "We've got a workforce of about 10,000 people, so if we can put 100 people to work, we can reduce our unemployment usually by four percentage points."

Kenworthy's magic number is also based on employment opportunities. "If we can get something that's for 50 to 100 workers, that would be great ... Most of the leads I get are through the state or from people just picking up the phone, maybe seeing our web site or getting information off that."

As for Wolfe, "We go for whatever we can...we'll embrace any project that comes along because we had all of our eggs in one basket (in the glass industry) for so long, and we surely need to diversify."

When it comes to what makes this region attractive to site selectors, a reliable workforce and all the components that encompass quality of life head the list.

"We have a ready and pretty well-trained workforce, and they're not afraid to work — a lot of people got their start (working) on the farm. We definitely think the quality of our workforce is one of our biggest assets," Wolfe offers.

"We also have good medical facilities and low crime, and we're near enough to Earlham, Ball State and IU East."

Being a short distance from Muncie, Marion and Fort Wayne is another plus. "You can still live in a small community and enjoy those qualities, but yet we're within a close driving distance to the bigger cities for shopping and cultural events, with the plus of not having to deal with that congested traffic on a daily basis," Kenworthy states.

Competition

With Blackford, Jay and Randolph counties sharing many similarities, it's no surprise that they're often competing with each other, as well as the remaining contiguous counties. But, the competition goes well beyond that — to "anywhere rural," Wolfe claims.

According to Quadrozzi, two specific competition hotbeds are western Ohio and southern Indiana. "Luckily, there are several companies already here in Jay County from western Ohio — Dayton, Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo," he notes.

Kenworthy adds, "This business has also become so global that we're not only competing with are neighbors, we're competing with communities all over the country and world."

Filling the gaps

What can readily stand out in the economic development hunt is what a community doesn't have. According to Wolfe, availability of high-speed Internet and broadband, along with proximity to an interstate "are things that potential businesses



Known regionally, the Arts Place, located in Portland, houses a theatre, art galleries, classrooms and studios.

often ask about first when looking at your site." Unfortunately, this area's answers aren't the desired ones. All three lack countywide broadband and closeness to a major highway.

Wolfe is quick to note, however, "A lot of rural counties are in the same boat. It's really tough to compete against the (bigger areas); we don't have the deep pockets and you don't have the broadband and so forth."

The broadband challenge, however, is one the counties are hoping to overcome soon. In fact, this spring Blackford and Jay counties were two of four east central Indiana counties (Grant and Delaware were the others) to each be awarded a \$50,000 state grant for regional communications.

"That money is specially targeted to help us put together our broadband capabilities," Quadrozzi notes.

In Blackford County, Kenworthy sees a void in recreational opportunities, one that is trying to be remedied. "There's been an effort here in the last few months to try to convert some of the old railroads into trails, walkways and bike paths. It would be an added selling point.

"Overall, we know, though, that it can be a long, long process before you do start to see things happen, but I think we've finally turned that corner this year," Kenworthy concludes. "Hopefully, by the end of 2005 and definitely in 2006, we're going to start to have some really good news for the community."

Surmises Quadrozzi, "We've always got challenges. Like most small communities, we just keep plugging away and take what's available to us and try to nurture it into something good."

These obstacles make the counties have to work that much harder at finding companies to come to their communities, but there is a positive effect, according to Wolfe.

"We know that when somebody comes here, they really want to come here — and stay. It will hopefully be a long-term relationship."

INFORMATION LINK

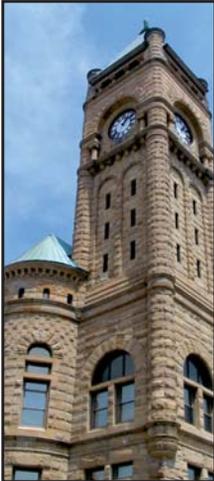
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Blackford County

(State ranks in parentheses)

Population (1990) 14,067 (82)
 Population (2004) 13,841 (83)
 Population (2010 projected) 13,570 (84)

Adults (25+ in 2000 census) 9,550 (83)
 Adults with high school diploma or higher 81.3% (39)
 Adults with B.A. or higher degree 10.3% (69)

Per capita personal income (2003) \$22,547 (80)
 Median household income (2002) \$35,907 (78)

Cities and Towns – 2003 Population

Hartford City – 6,728 Shamrock Lakes – 164
 Montpelier – 1,879 Dunkirk – 144

Commuting Patterns (2002)

	Number	Percent
Into Blackford County	1,163	16.0%
From Delaware County	338	4.7%
From Grant County	275	3.8%
From Jay County	171	2.4%
From Wells County	127	1.7%
From Randolph County	20	0.3%
Out of Blackford County	2,917	32.3%
To Delaware County	924	10.2%
To Grant County	628	7.0%
To Wells County	440	4.9%
To Jay County	229	2.5%
To Allen County	167	1.9%



Jay County

(State ranks in parentheses)

Population (1990) 21,512 (66)
 Population (2004) 21,654 (70)
 Population (2010 projected) 21,372 (70)

Adults (25+ in 2000 census) 14,280 (69)
 Adults with high school diploma or higher 78.5% (72)
 Adults with B.A. or higher degree 9.9% (77)

Per capita personal income (2003) \$22,147 (83)
 Median household income (2002) \$35,196 (83)

Cities and Towns – 2003 Population

Portland – 6,297 Pennville – 709
 Dunkirk – 2,499 Bryant – 267
 Redkey – 1,420 Salamonia – 153

Commuting Patterns (2002)

	Number	Percent
Into Jay County	1,469	12.2%
From Randolph County	429	3.6%
From Delaware County	353	2.9%
From Blackford County	229	1.9%
From Ohio (state)	136	1.1%
From Adams County	102	0.8%
Out of Jay County	3,336	23.9%
To Adams County	887	6.4%
To Delaware County	846	6.1%
To Ohio (state)	348	2.5%
To Wells County	342	2.5%
To Randolph County	199	1.4%



Randolph County

(State ranks in parentheses)

Population (1990) 27,148 (54)
 Population (2004) 26,697 (61)
 Population (2010 projected) 26,833 (59)

Adults (25+ in 2000 census) 18,310 (55)
 Adults with high school diploma or higher 79.6% (64)
 Adults with B.A. or higher degree 9.9% (77)

Per capita personal income (2003) \$23,926 (67)
 Median household income (2002) \$36,203 (74)

Cities and Towns – 2003 Population

Winchester— 4,889 Ridgeville – 817
 Union City – 3,502 Saratoga – 283
 Farmland – 1,410 Losantville – 271
 Parker City – 1,385 Modoc – 218
 Lynn – 1,109 Albany – 215

Commuting Patterns (2002)

	Number	Percent
Into Randolph County	1,420	10.1%
From Ohio (state)	553	3.9%
From Delaware County	242	1.7%
From Wayne County	234	1.7%
From Jay County	199	1.4%
From Henry County	67	0.5%
Out of Randolph County	4,923	28.0%
To Delaware County	1,966	11.2%
To Wayne County	950	5.4%
To Ohio (state)	755	4.3%
To Jay County	429	2.4%
To Marion County	154	0.9%

The Blackford County Courthouse, the Indiana Glass Museum in Dunkirk and the third turn at Winchester Speedway.