

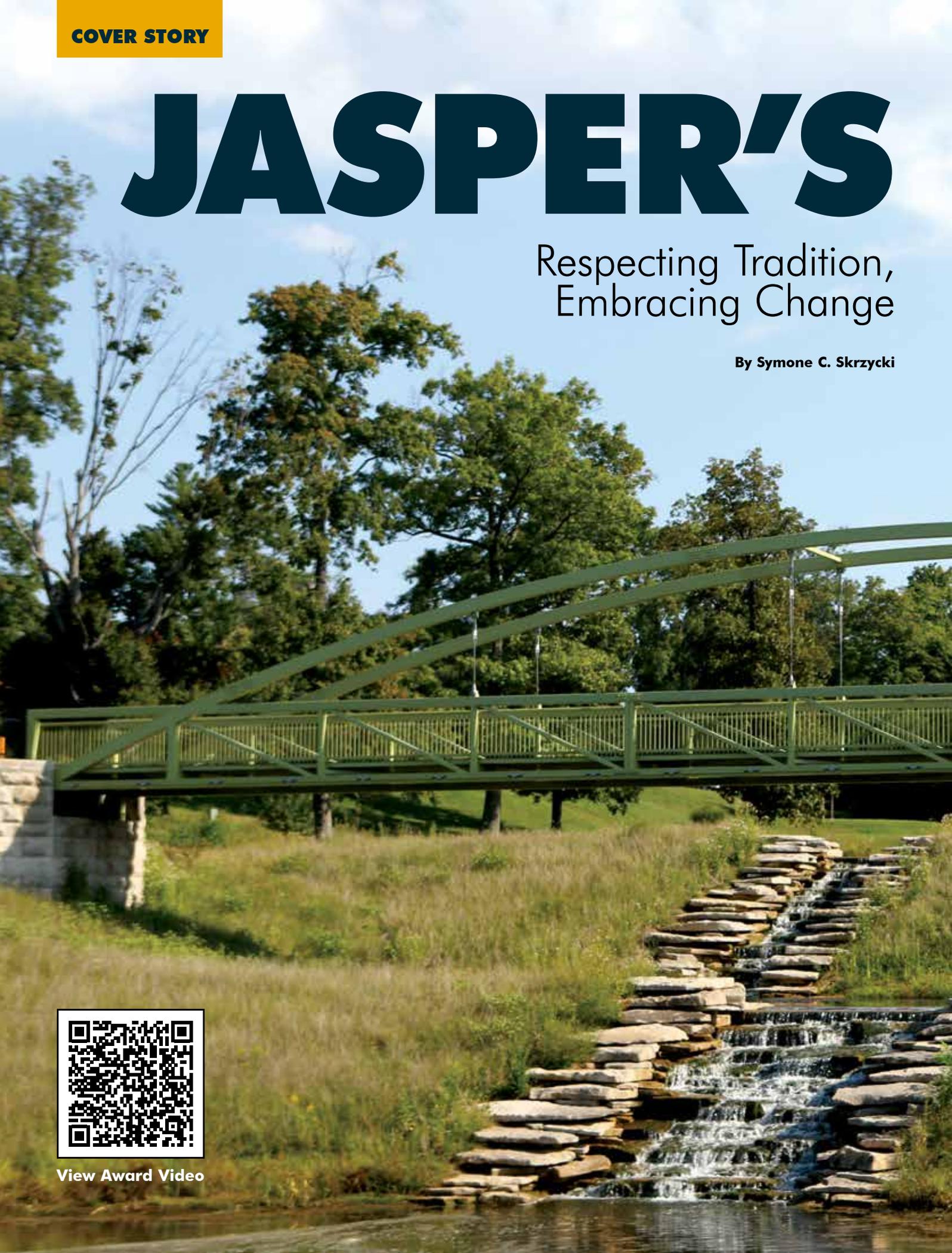
JASPER'S

Respecting Tradition,
Embracing Change

By Symone C. Skrzycki



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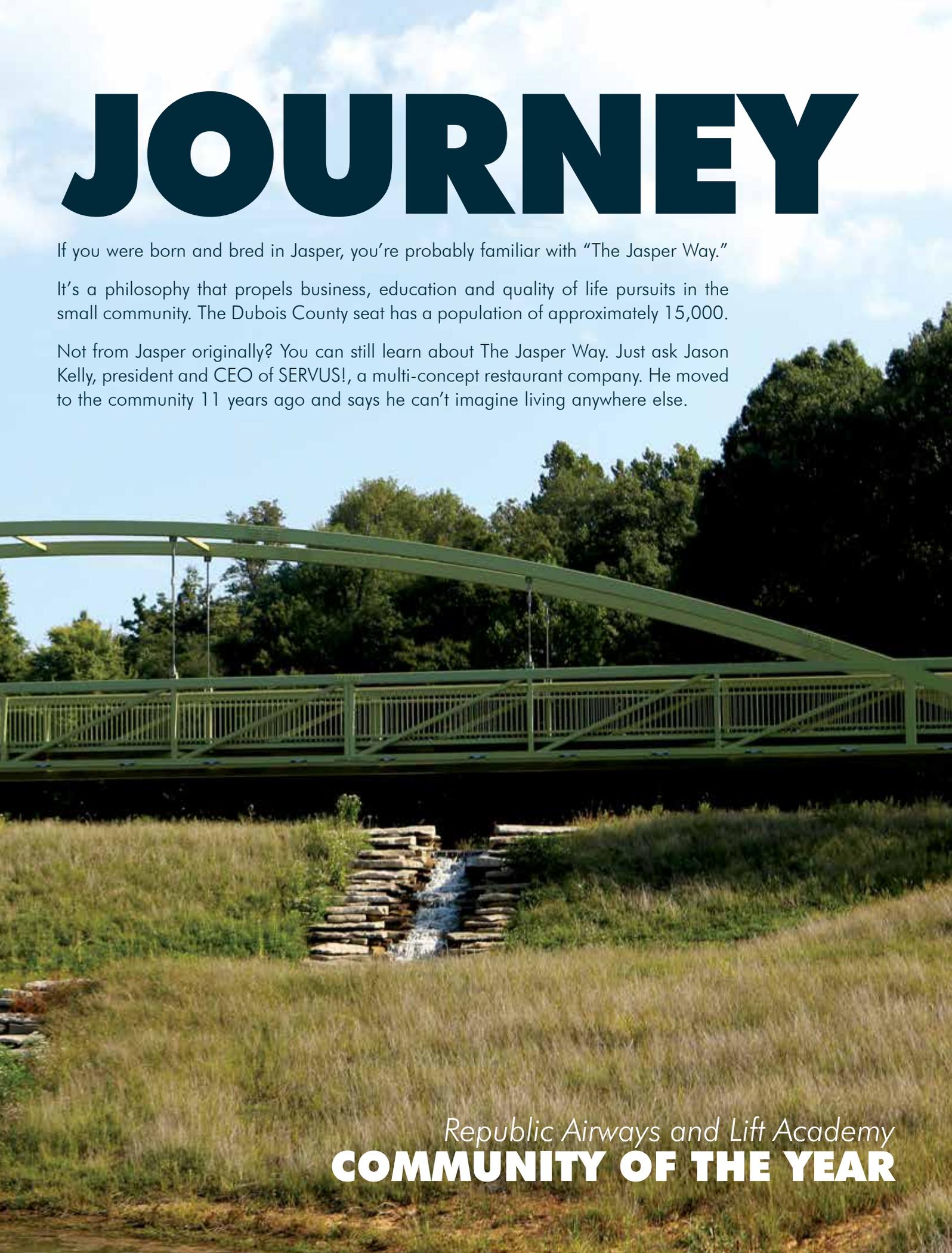


JOURNEY

If you were born and bred in Jasper, you're probably familiar with "The Jasper Way."

It's a philosophy that propels business, education and quality of life pursuits in the small community. The Dubois County seat has a population of approximately 15,000.

Not from Jasper originally? You can still learn about The Jasper Way. Just ask Jason Kelly, president and CEO of SERVUS!, a multi-concept restaurant company. He moved to the community 11 years ago and says he can't imagine living anywhere else.



Republic Airways and Lift Academy
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Jasper's German heritage is part of everyday life, while the annual Strassenfest Festival attracts thousands of people.



“The catalyst (for Jasper’s success) is the openness to change,” he declares.

At the same time, there’s a deep respect for its past – one with a rich German heritage and strong manufacturing history. There’s also an emphasis on taking care of its own.

“I have found that we are truly a community of doers – whether it’s the planning for the doing or just going out and getting things done,” remarks mayor Terry Seitz. “I’ve said several times to people who live in Indianapolis that are on state committees, ‘If you want to get something accomplished, have somebody from Jasper run your group and it will get done.’”

The “doing” revolves around building a competitive workforce. Enhancing

recreational spaces. Strengthening the quality of life for people of all ages.

Approximately \$200 million in current projects – from all sectors: private, public and partnerships between the two – is driving the city forward. Among those initiatives:

- The Parklands of Jasper: a 75-acre major urban renewal endeavor featuring two miles of walking trails (including a multi-purpose path), three ponds (all connected by elevated pathways), The Pavilion (an indoor public event space seating 160 people), outdoor exercise stations, an adventure play area, musical playground and more.
- Thyen-Clark Cultural Center: a new facility opening in 2020 that will house the

Jasper Community Arts Commission and Jasper Public Library.

- Jasper River Centre: a \$30 million mixed-use, private sector driven development along the Patoka Riverfront. It will include a new hotel and redevelopment of a former factory into 70-plus apartments, retail/ office space and public areas.

A table of business and community leaders gathers at the Schnitzelbank Restaurant, with an animated conversation unfolding. After relaying his sentiments, Seitz steps out of the room (and the limelight) with a parting thought to all: “Let the day be yours.”

What’s old (repurposed) is new

Tackle one project at a time or multiple initiatives simultaneously? Seitz contends that despite incurring criticism, Jasper’s strategy (the latter) is the right one for the community.

“We couldn’t spell ‘redevelopment’ six years ago. I don’t mind saying that. It was either new or it didn’t happen. We were a little stifled. But ultimately, we counted one million square feet of underused or unused former factories in or near our downtown.

“There is some heritage in those. They were in great places that we felt still needed to attract new people and we looked at them (to assess): Could we repurpose? Could we redo? Could we basically identify that this is a vision of the city?”

Roger Seger, president of the Jasper Park and Recreation Board, grew up in Jasper, where his parents started a farming business in the 1950s. He and his surviving siblings (he’s one of eight boys) run two agricultural businesses: Wabash Valley Produce and Farbest Foods (primary operations in Huntingburg with the corporate office in Jasper).

“We’re farmers. We employ (combined) a little over 2,000 people in the egg and turkey world,” he explains.

Passionately, he observes a common thread connecting The Parklands, Cultural Center and River Centre.

“The most amazing thing about these projects is that they’re all public-private partnerships. When I go to the other communities we do business in – I don’t care if it’s Illinois, Indiana or Ohio – nowhere else do you see this type of public-private partnership.”

River Centre’s Fairfield Inn and Suites hotel will feature 84 rooms and open in January 2019.

“It has an excellent hotel operator and owner: General Hotels,” comments Jane Hendrickson, River Centre developer and principal at Indianapolis-based Boxer Girl. “It’s bringing a lot of credibility to the city of Jasper that’s well deserved. I feel very



Redevelopment projects such as The Parklands are reshaping Jasper. The former golf course provides a place to cool off, unwind and enjoy nature.



fortunate to deal with great business leaders as well as the mayor to make things happen here – because honestly, it’s happened a lot quicker than it could have in a lot of areas.”

The development that will house market-rate apartments and retail is slated for completion in December 2019.

“We have a lot of local businesses that are looking at either moving their business there or having a second location,”

Hendrickson declares. “(It’s been) very well received and a lot of fun!”

Low unemployment, big problem

Is Dubois County’s unemployment rate (traditionally among the lowest in the state) positive or detrimental?

James (Jim) Thyen, former president and CEO of leading furniture manufacturer Kimball International, doesn’t mince words.

“The unemployment rate of our area has been so low for so long that it’s now the big elephant in the room that nobody talks about,” he asserts. “It’s the wrong thing to focus on. If we’re going to progress forward, we must focus on employment – not unemployment – because that will drive us to have an increased per capita income and a constantly expanding talent base.

“But it (the unemployment count that hovers between 2% and 3%) has been a point of pride for the area for so long. And it’s wrong. It’s actually a dead moose. It’s just rotting and stinking right there and we’re not talking about it.”

Kelly concurs that the key is finding skilled workers to fill positions. The question is how.

Founded in 1964, SERVUS!, operates over 60 restaurants across the Midwest. It has approximately 2,000 employees in Indiana.

“We’re franchisees of Wendy’s, Denny’s, Grandy’s and McAlister’s. We currently own a movie theater and are looking to expand that to another non-food franchise,” he notes. “We have obviously a strong presence in our franchise organizations as a whole. This (difficult labor market) is not limited to southern Indiana. This is a huge issue.



Looking for a nostalgic dining experience? Climb aboard the restored Spirit of Jasper Passenger Train.

“Frankly, many large areas like Columbus (Ohio) and Phoenix and Las Vegas are having even bigger issues in those markets than we would ever dream of having here. It’s hard to understand. But I will say this: Out of all the communities we operate in, DuBois County is the toughest area we have to staff.”

Creativity is crucial.

SERVUS! is preparing to test a program

that will allow employees to be paid daily.

“Literally, instant pay,” Kelly relates. “Every day. You get done and three hours after you leave your shift, you walk out and get an email that says, ‘Would you like 50% of your pay today?’ Believe it or not, three years from now, that’ll be standard in my opinion. Today, we’re probably on the cutting edge of that because we’re in such a

struggle and fight for people.”

He also stresses the importance of appealing to different generations. Take millennials, for instance.

“I have found that they’re not lazy. It’s not that they don’t want to work. I find that they want to work when they want to work, and they’re motivated by things far different than money. A lot of that is being in the loop and being in the know and feeling like they’re part of something and working for something – maybe even bigger than them.”

Diversifying talent

Matrix Integration, a technology consulting and implementation company, has clients throughout the United States and offices in Indiana and Kentucky.

Since CEO Brenda Stallings founded the organization 47 years ago, the number of female business leaders in Jasper has grown dramatically.

“They have really started to be involved in taking the leadership roles they’re capable of doing,” she affirms. “And we’re giving them the voice they need. I think there’s a lot more coming. There are a lot more start-ups that (are forming) because of that mind shift that has gone on for some time.

“I’m president of the co-working space we started in the county, Current Blend, which is really a model for other communities. We’ve had lots of other communities come down and visit. Those are the kinds of things that we as a community can’t forget. Because if you do want to come back to the area or start something on your own, you need a network of people that are going to be there to lift you up.”

‘The world was going to move right on by’

Picture the mid-1990s. That’s around the time when Jasper’s success – low unemployment, powerful manufacturing base that still includes companies such as Kimball (International oversees the furniture brands and Electronics became a separate company in 2014), MasterBrand Cabinets and Jasper Engines & Transmissions – led to a sense of complacency, according to Thyen.

“We were a community that took a great deal of pride in being self-reliant,” he recalls. “We talked about our German heritage and we actually felt like we needed nobody else. And when you look at how things have evolved – (Interstate) 69 is 20 miles away. (Interstate) 64 is 20 miles away. ... We started to realize that we were not the center of the universe, and if we didn’t start to join the world, it was going to move right on by ...

“I believe our community no longer sits



A new cultural center (rendering) includes more than \$4.5 million in private donations. Indulge in a sweet treat at Chocolate Bliss & Kitchen Essentials or express your style at Siebert’s. Jim Siebert (pictured) is the third-generation family member to own the clothing business, which was founded in 1922.



An exterior look at two of the community's manufacturing mainstays. In 2015, Smithville Fiber announced plans to make Jasper the state's first "GigaCity," bringing gigabit fiber internet to homes and businesses.

here and thinks, 'The world is going to come to us.' The mayor has led us through a path where we're saying the proper thing to do is go to the world and ask the talent to come back. Keep our value system. Keep our guiding principles, but embrace the diversity and ask the talent to join our community – to try us."

Pat (Clark) Thyen has served on the Jasper Community Arts Commission board for almost 28 years. During Kimball's hiring process, she would help familiarize spouses and family members with the area's cultural, educational and other offerings.

"They were looking at it from a different

point of view. The arts were a big part of it," she shares. "They wanted entertainment and education. The schools. That was an important thing."

Stallings adds that it's vital to create an environment that employees want to live in. She cites the business options and living space at River Centre as an example.

"Those people that are wanting to start a business will look at Jasper as a viable place to do that because of the environment. You've got the pubs and the breweries that are going in (downtown). That's all important to attract those people because we can have all the jobs in the world, but if they don't like our environment (in terms of) what we have here for them, they won't come back."

Jumping ahead

Kyle Rupert spent his middle school and high school years in Jasper before leaving to attend college. He returned after marrying "a Jasper girl" and is now director of the Jasper Community Arts Commission.

Rupert leans forward excitedly when describing the multitude of redevelopment projects underway.

"With the Cultural Center right across from the River Centre development within walking distance of a (planned) McAlister's, with The Parklands going on, what's exciting to me is the development that it will help spur."

He points to the Cultural Center's large atrium area designed for meetings and events.

"The atrium, with its size, is going to open us up to so many more opportunities – not only from an artistic sense, but also from a business and corporate sense as well. In Jasper presently, there isn't a space quite like that. The galleries being larger will open us up to different forms of art (and more visitors).

"The fact that it's (the Cultural Center) happening at the same time as the other things (such as The Parklands and River Centre) when they get done, it's going to feel like a light switch in the community. You're going to go to bed and you're going to wake up, and it's going to be totally different. It's remarkable."

As lunch winds down, it's clear that the conversation has whet the group's appetite – for change, for growth and for collaboration.

"It's a hardworking community," Stallings reflects. "I don't think that without hard work, determination, grit – all of that – we'd be where we are today."

Kelly chimes in: "I've never seen an area where people coalesced around an idea or had the buy-in we get from people."

Seitz and others know this is a starting point, not a destination, offering that the best is yet to come for their community.