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BUT GREATER LAFAYETTE STILL HAS FOOT ON THE GAS

By Anthony Schoettle

Greater Lafayette is growing. And the evolution – which is touching every aspect of Tippecanoe County – appears to be accelerating.

It's not just about an influx of people – though that's certainly part of the story, with an anticipated population jump of nearly 100,000 in just five years. Numerous developments and infrastructure projects to accommodate the population surge – and to entice more of it – have happened in lockstep.



Greater Lafayette oozes with personality as illustrations at the well-known Wabash Walls – a public art initiative to rebuild and beautify the Wabash Avenue neighborhood – demonstrates.

Long known primarily for its famed university, Greater Lafayette – composed of Lafayette, West Lafayette and the remainder of Tippecanoe County – is undergoing a major transformation.

Visitors who haven't recently been to the county, about an hour north of Indianapolis, might not even recognize it. There are new developments, beautification projects and major infrastructure improvements seemingly

around every corner.

"When you look around Greater Lafayette, it's absolutely phenomenal to see the continued transformation," commends Indiana Chamber President and CEO Kevin Brinegar. "It's a testament to the dedication of business and community leaders in attracting new talent, retaining top workers and enhancing the quality of life. The area is a shining star for the state."

With internationally renowned Purdue

University located in West Lafayette and major international corporations such as Subaru Automotive, Caterpillar and Kirby Risk Corp. calling the area home, Greater Lafayette leaders have learned to think locally and globally to move their community forward.

"Even though our local economy and small businesses are critical, we compete globally for jobs and investment," states Scott Walker, president of Greater Lafayette Commerce. "Companies have choices, so we can't be complacent."

Greater Lafayette political, business and community heads – all working together – haven't been.

From 2015 to 2020, there was \$889.5 million in public investment into the area and a whopping \$1.5 billion in private sector investment.

The local school corporations have invested more than \$355 million in enhancement and expansion projects to accommodate the growing number of families drawn to the market by the new corporate expansion and quality of life improvements.

The stunning array of projects that are underway or have recently opened include street and infrastructure initiatives; housing developments; parks, recreation and sports outlets; educational facilities; and business and commercial developments (see sidebar).

'It's all about ships'

The projects, in many ways, seem to fall like dominoes, with one triggering another and on and on. As impressive as those brick-and-mortar projects are, the cooperation to get them done is equally amazing. Greater Lafayette – with two significant cities along with the county and Purdue – has more players than most communities, especially those of its size.

A SAMPLING OF NEWLY OR NEARLY COMPLETED GREATER LAFAYETTE PROJECTS:

- \$22 million multi-purpose/sports stadium featuring state-of-the-art playing surfaces, equipment and facilities that will seat 2,500 people in Columbian Park in Lafayette
- The Rise (\$80 million) and Hub on State (\$57 million) housing developments in West Lafayette
- \$34 million wellness center in West Lafayette
- \$24 million redevelopment of the Tippecanoe County Fairgrounds



Columbian Park, which is nestled in the center of Lafayette, has been the focus of a \$37 million-plus renovation over the last two years. The \$2.7 million penguin exhibit, which opened this year, has been a major draw at the Columbian Park Zoo.

But instead of competing interests pulling the community apart at the seams, Greater Lafayette leaders manage to get everyone rowing in the same direction on countless initiatives.

The secret to Greater Lafayette's success is simple, stresses West Lafayette Mayor John Dennis.

"It's all about ships, and it's not the kind of ships we're acclimated to. It's about relationships, partnerships and friendships," Dennis explains.

Those aren't just words on a postcard or a politician's public relations spiel – at least not here. Spend an hour – or even 15 minutes – talking with Dennis, Lafayette Mayor Tony Roswarski and Tippecanoe County Commissioners President Tom Murtaugh and you know it's real.

The trio jokes, laughs, teases and praises one another like family. They even joke about their different political affiliations and views. Dennis and Murtaugh are Republicans, but Dennis says – with a broad smile – he's much more moderate than Murtaugh. Roswarski is a Democrat.

Dennis and Roswarski might even be considered closer than family. After all, they spent more than 20 years fighting crime together as officers in the Lafayette Police Department. They even spent time in the same squad car – working the midnight to 8 a.m. shift no less.

"It's no secret how close Tony and I are," Dennis says. "It's the same with Tom. I've known him for a long time, and we have a very strong friendship."

"Those relationships allow us to be blunt and frank and honest and open with each other"

The longevity of these three political stalwarts has certainly fueled the cooperative atmosphere. Roswarski is in his 18th year as mayor, Dennis has been mayor for 14 years and Murtaugh is in his 13th year as county commissioner.

Partnerships of all kinds

The Greater Lafayette government bodies and their partners have come together on initiatives big and small.

The Wabash River Enhancement Corporation, for example, is a joint initiative of the two cities, Tippecanoe County and Purdue University to improve the Wabash River front between Lafayette and West Lafayette.

The joint venture is leading to \$150 million worth of investment along the Wabash River throughout Tippecanoe County. The first project, a \$3.4 million Riverfront Promenade overlooking the Wabash, was completed in 2020.

Local officials said the riverfront developments are quickly becoming a tourist attraction as well as quality-of-life amenity for

residents.

Not every collaboration is as high profile.

The two cities and county share fire and EMS services. Lafayette and Tippecanoe County have a joint purchasing board to leverage better prices on a variety of goods and services, and West Lafayette often takes advantage of those deals.

The city of Lafayette and Tippecanoe County have set up a joint tax increment finance (TIF) district for investment in the area and for infrastructure, including a proposed \$9 million regional sewer district that will undoubtedly spark future investment in that part of Greater Lafayette.

"The relationships and friendships we share aren't all about being warm and fuzzy," Roswarski emphasizes. "These close relationships

actually make us more efficient; it multiplies our money, and it allows us to do things that we quite frankly otherwise couldn't do. We don't fight over annexation. We don't fight over who gets what. We focus on moving forward in the best way for all the area's residents."

The teamwork between the different municipalities and government agencies runs deep – and smooth.

Murtaugh says everyone is simply carrying on a tradition. "This type of cooperation is a legacy in this county. We stand on the shoulders of those who served before us."

Boilermakers' backing

The trio rarely talks about collaborative efforts without mentioning Purdue, which



Research at Purdue University has led to numerous innovations and start-up companies – many of which have made Greater Lafayette their home. (Top) Propulsion research conducted at Zucrow Lab is aimed at making more efficient jet engines. (Bottom) A team of physics and astronomy researchers work on another groundbreaking research project.





The city of Lafayette helped start MatchBox Coworking Studio – the first of its kind in the state – to support local tech and innovation. MatchBox now has nearly 300 members and offers a variety of programs, events and technical assistance to encourage and support entrepreneurs of all types.

even agreed to be annexed into West Lafayette in 2014 – a deal that means the school has and will pay more taxes into the city’s coffers.

Then-Gov. Mike Pence worked with Purdue President Mitch Daniels, who previously served as governor, to clear the way for the annexation.

“The city and county and Purdue have worked very collaboratively with each other and have worked hard for the betterment of everybody here,” remarks Emily Najem, vice president of economic development and corporate counsel for the Purdue Research Foundation. “One of Mitch Daniels’ missions has been creating quality of place. Whether it’s annexation or renovating State Street, Purdue is willing and eager to be a partner in making that happen.

“It’s all about creating a place that not just students and faculty want to come, but to stay as well,” Najem adds. “We want to create great brains and retain them in the community.”

As a result of the annexation, Dennis says, the students are now counted as part of the city’s population, and therefore have more representation in local government. Annexation also will generate more revenue for both communities.

That annexation paved the way for West Lafayette’s State Street project, which local officials say is a key cornerstone to many of the recent improvement and redevelopment projects in Greater Lafayette.

The water, sewer and other infrastructure improvements helped transform the paths through and around Purdue’s campus and were the first step in a 30-year, \$1.2 billion transformation of West State Street and the development of Discovery Park District. It

also includes the development of the aerospace-focused business park, which is adjacent to Purdue University Airport, just west of U.S. 231.

All this complements the world-renowned hypersonics and other high-pressure combustion work and rocket science expertise at Maurice J. Zucrow Labs, Walker explains.

“This has also led to the recruitment of new companies and expanding programs led by companies like GE Aviation, Rolls Royce and Saab,” he says.

In addition, the improved infrastructure paved the way for new privately funded housing developments, which include additional retail options, and carry a total value of well over \$200 million.

Great place for all business

Doug Mansfield, a long-time executive at Lafayette-based electrical supply and precision machining business Kirby Risk Corp., has lived his entire life in Greater Lafayette.

The 72-year-old is awestruck by the region’s transformation.

“A lot of pastures and farm fields are now manufacturing facilities, parks and other developments, so there’s been a lot of growth here,” Mansfield says. “And I think it’s all tremendous because if you have a thriving community and a thriving business and manufacturing environment, as well as a stable university, we can weather the storm of the economy going up and down. We always have a good economy, and it continues to grow with great leadership that we have in our community.”

Mansfield, now the chairman of the manufacturing board at Kirby Risk, says

the 95-year-old company couldn’t have become what it is – with 38 locations and over 1,100 employees for its electrical supply business and a 330,000 square-foot manufacturing facility and service center in Lafayette – without the support of its home community.

While the big companies might grab a lot of headlines, the area also has become a hub for innovation through start-ups and entrepreneurs.

Purdue is teaming with researchers, innovators and inventors who have created products and launched companies. David Nolte, a world-class Purdue physicist, has pioneered work that could lead to new, better and more effective cancer treatments. The company his work spawned, Animated Dynamics, has raised millions in venture capital and appears to be on the verge of a breakthrough.

The research of Purdue analytical chemistry professor Peter Kissinger has given rise to Bioanalytical Systems, a contract research firm that sells its services to pharmaceutical, medical device and biotechnology companies around the world and had 2019 revenue of \$43.6 million.

The startup activity isn’t limited to Purdue. One look around MatchBox Coworking Studio on South 6th Street in Lafayette is proof of that.

Opened in 2014 with a goal of attracting 50 to 100 members, MatchBox now has 300 members and offers a variety of programs, events and technical assistance to encourage and support entrepreneurs of all types. This also has led to partnerships with Purdue University and its programs such as the Foundry and the Railyard.

Time for fun

The growth in Greater Lafayette is not just about business and housing development. There's been an emphasis too on recreational and entertainment outlets and attractions.

The stunning new West Lafayette Wellness Center with indoor basketball courts, a running track, a swimming pool with numerous fun features, an expansive and well-equipped workout area and childcare activity center so tricked out it will make you wish you were a kid again is just one illustration.

Neil Dale, the director of the Columbian Park Zoo, is right in the middle – literally – of much of the action in Greater Lafayette.

The Zoo and the larger Columbian Park complex, which has been the focus of a massive renovation in recent years, is nestled in the center of Lafayette. Dale has seen firsthand what the investments into attractions and amenities have done to the area.

“Having a giant park like this – which is beautiful and secure and has lots of amenities – in the middle of the city is pretty unusual, and the impact is dramatic,” Dale declares. “Investing in amenities like this not only provides something for your residents to do, it shows prospective businesses and residents this is a priority for local leaders.”

And beyond the bigger glitzier attractions are myriad smaller unique hangouts – like Copper Moon Coffee and Triple XXX Family Restaurant – that make the area ooze with personality.

Roswarski stresses that investing in entertainment outlets is not frivolous – it's good business.

“We know people can choose where they live, and they want those types of activities,” he says. “So we're working on refurbishing the Lafayette Theater, that's an arts and entertainment venue; the Long Center; and now Loeb Stadium, which is not just a baseball stadium. It can hold all types of different functions, including concerts, and other types of musical and arts entertainment. So we call it our three L's: Lafayette, Loeb and Long, and we know that those types of facilities, and different types of activities they host, are incredibly important to have a vibrant quality of life in our community.”

Charging forward

There's no thought from local leaders about basking in the glow of their success.

“No, no, no!” Dennis says at the notion of easing up. Roswarski and Murtaugh let out loud belly laughs at the idea.

Immediate plans call for launching a three-year marketing campaign – that's already fully funded – and creating alliances, including those with surrounding counties, to



Greater Lafayette has many unique attractions for residents and visitors alike looking to exercise, be entertained, find something to eat or drink, or just relax. The popular Copper Moon Coffee shop and the new \$34 million West Lafayette Wellness Center are two such outlets.



win tens of millions of dollars in Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) grants.

The Greater Lafayette Marketing Coalition (GLMC), which was formed in 2017, is the combined effort of Tippecanoe County, the cities of Lafayette and West Lafayette as well as Visit Lafayette-West Lafayette, Greater Lafayette Commerce, Purdue University and Purdue Research Foundation. The group has already invested \$840,000 to spur economic growth, increase talent attraction and retention, and create a positive perception of Greater Lafayette.

This year, the GLMC worked to secure ongoing funding – \$427,000 annually for the next three years from the local innkeepers' tax – for talent attraction and economic development marketing campaigns.

Tippecanoe County is also working on

partnerships with Benton, Carroll, Fountain, Warren and White counties for a READI grant. The READI concept was inspired by Gov. Eric Holcomb's desire to create regions around the state that work together and focus on achieving specific talent and economic growth objectives.

Some of the proposed projects within the Greater Lafayette grant include partnering with Purdue to create infrastructure and facilities for semiconductor manufacturing, constructing a new terminal at Purdue for commercial air service and Wabash River greenway trail and river access projects throughout the region.

“There's so much yet we can do,” Murtaugh surmises. “There's not one single person in this county that's easing off the accelerator. Now is the time to build on the momentum that's been created. It's full speed ahead.” ■