



The number of attractions and amenities in Vigo County has grown exponentially over the last decade, including Griffin Bike Park, which has become a regional draw for fans of fun on two wheels.

VIVA VIGO COUNTY

By Anthony Schoettle

POWER OF PURPOSEFUL PLANNING

People who haven't been to Vigo County recently probably don't think of it as a tourist destination, museum mecca, arts and music hub, equine epicenter or cross country running capital.

But it's all those things – and more.

The county's carefully crafted mosaic has been pieced together – some of it quite recently – by city and county officials, Republicans and Democrats alike, and through energized public-private partnerships sparking a transformation that has changed the county sitting just east of the Illinois border so completely that it's even unrecognizable to people familiar with the area.

"When you take a step back to look at Terre Haute and Vigo County, the response is simply 'Wow,'" offers David Patterson, who has lived and worked in Vigo County for nearly 30 years.

The revitalization has been a true team effort. "It's not left all up to government officials here," says Patterson,

Terre Haute Convention & Visitors Bureau executive director. "There are many, many people from many varied organizations working together to make all this happen."

Tourism trickle down

Much of the redevelopment started with a spark from tourism – and an unlikely sport.

When city officials were trying to decide what to do with a former coal mine site that was later a landfill, local resident and avid runner John McNichol, who coached at Indiana State University (ISU), had a seemingly strange idea: Make it a cross country running course. But not just any grass course. McNichol had a vision to make it a world-class venue that drew national races and top runners.

Against the odds and the advice of more than a few naysayers, the LaVern Gibson Championship Cross Country Course was born in 1997. Since then, the course has been rated by *Runner's World* magazine as one of the best in the nation. "We're Cross Country Town USA," boasts Patterson.

More importantly, the venue has become a tremendous drawing



Visitors to Terre Haute, the Vigo County seat, might be surprised to find nine museums downtown, with a 10th – the much-ballyhooed Larry Bird Museum – set to open in the city’s new convention center next year.

card – attracting more than 50,000 runners and spectators this year alone – and a proving ground for Terre Haute and the wider county. It has hosted 14 NCAA Division I national championships and a Division III championship, 13 Indiana high school state championships and multiple Nike-sponsored championship events, one of which is held under the lights and this year drew 3,400 runners.

“Hosting cross country events has opened the door for a whole lot of other sporting events for us,” imparts Terre Haute Mayor Duke Bennett. “They see what we do here for cross country and they come here to host other events.”

Twelve of the 16 cross country competitions held in Terre Haute this year will fill nearly all 1,938 Vigo County hotel rooms. Six events create complete hotel sell outs in Vigo County and send runners and spectators scrambling for hotels in several adjacent counties and even in nearby Effingham, Illinois.

From 1981-1995, the Terre Haute Convention & Visitors Association never brought in more than \$262,000 from the innkeepers’ tax in any one year. But as cross country started taking off – and sports and other events followed – the tax steadily climbed. In 2019, it hit a record \$2.6 million. This year it’s on pace to eclipse \$3 million.

“Now,” Patterson reports, “tourism is a \$30 million annual industry in Vigo County. The average person is shocked by that number.”

To illustrate his point, Patterson points to April, when Terre Haute hosted four events that sold out every hotel room in the county.

“We had the state percussion event at ISU’s Hulman Center, the state robotics event at Rose-Hulman, a regional soccer competition at Spring Hill Soccer Complex that brought in 1,400 participants and we had a first-year craft beer and wine festival: Haute, Hops and Vines,” Patterson lists. “We’ve never had four sellouts in a month.”

There was a time when Vigo County counted on events in other counties to drive business to its hotels.

“When I started, the two biggest draws to our hotels and restaurants were the Covered Bridge Festival in Parke County and the Indy 500,” Patterson says. “Now, we’re generating our own business.”

Downtown a real destination

Nowhere is the county’s transformation more obvious than downtown Terre Haute.

The downtown is now anchored by a \$30 million, 43,000-square-foot convention center. There’s a new privately funded music venue, The Mill, on the nearby Wabash River front and a bevy of new hotels, including two – Hilton Garden Inn and Candlewood Suites – that opened this year, along with several recently opened restaurants and retail sites.

Visitors to the Vigo County seat might be surprised at the arts and culture attractions. Downtown Terre Haute is the home to nine museums, including the Terre Haute Children’s Museum, Swope Art Museum and Candles Holocaust Museum and Education Center. The much-anticipated, two-story Larry Bird Museum – set to open next spring at the convention center – will be No. 10.

Vigo County is also home to nearly two dozen outdoor arts installations, and The Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra is one of the longest running in Indiana. “People might not think it, but we have a huge arts community,” Mayor Bennett stresses.

Fab four

It’s difficult to talk about Vigo County without mentioning its four higher-education institutions; ISU, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods College (SMWC) and Ivy Tech Community College. Not only do the county’s four higher-learning institutions bring about 30,000 students to the area, they also offer an ever-expanding array of infrastructure projects and activities.

For instance, the \$50 million-plus Hulman Center renovation at ISU was complete in December 2020. Among the most visible changes are a new exterior facade and a glass entrance at the south end that adds more than 6,000 square feet and provides additional event and meeting space. Other changes and improvements to the venue that is home to the school’s basketball teams and other events include new restrooms and concession stands, as well as a widening of the main floor concourse; a new multi-purpose suite overlooking the event floor; new lighting for the court area and improved acoustics.

At nearby Rose-Hulman, the school recently completed the 70,000-square-foot, three-story new academic building, which was designed by Indianapolis-based Ratio Architects. The \$29 million facility is one of the first “well buildings in the state,” according to Rose-Hulman Provost Richard Stamper. “It is designed to encourage



Vigo County's four higher education institutions bring 30,00 students to the area, and their programs and projects attract people from far and wide. Two draws: Rose-Hulman's new \$29 million new academic building and, below, Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods nationally acclaimed equine studies and sports programs.



the wellness of people in the building with access to natural light, sound abatement and air and water quality.”

Students will have access to new design studios, collaborative workspaces and science laboratories where they can innovate, make new products and food, and mix complex chemical compounds for research projects. Access to laser-cutting devices, 3D printers, machine tools and CNC machines will allow students to take their creative ideas from conceptual renderings to working prototypes and eventual finished products.

Armed with the latest technology and innovations, Rose-Hulman engineering students will be taking on projects in the Wabash Valley and surrounding areas that focus on structural, geotechnical, environmental, water resources, transportation and design, Stamper says.

Rollin' on the river

One of the next missions in Vigo County is developing the Wabash River front and connecting it to downtown Terre Haute.

Kelly Drake and her husband, Tim, dove head-first into the river development idea. They opened The Mill, a music and entertainment venue, in 2021 on a long vacant site that was the former home of a paper mill and a distillery before that. The couple invested \$1.5 million into the site and this summer received \$200,000 as part of the area's Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) grant to improve ADA accessibility.

Developing The Mill was a big gamble, and the Drakes admit there were plenty of doubters. But they would not be dissuaded.

“My husband and I were born and raised

in Terre Haute,” Kelly Drake begins. “We both believe that Terre Haute is a prime location for big entertainment and that this town is on the verge of a tourism boom. We would love to see the amazing asset that we have, that is the riverfront, develop and attract more business growth.”

The Mill, an outdoor music venue with a capacity of 10,000 on a sprawling 65-acre parcel, had six events in 2021 and there are 11 on tap this year.

“They're bringing in nationally known artists,” Patterson relays, “including Nelly, Jake Owen, Jon Pardi, Flo Rida and Lynyrd Skynyrd.”

“For the Drakes to come and invest (\$1.5 million) and put something there with such a positive economic value, it's just fantastic,” Patterson adds. “It's even beyond that; it's unbelievable.”

Michael Shaw, president of Riverscape, an organization dedicated to transforming the Wabash River front, says The Mill is having an immediate impact.

“Our entire riverfront was heavy industrial,” Shaw explains. “Going back, we used the river for disposal. We started dumping into it. As environmental regulations changed and our desire for what we wanted in the community changed, we've expected more from our riverfront. We don't want it to be a sewer; we want it to be clean. We look more and more to our riverfront as a place to recreate and having The Mill on the riverfront is a huge victory.”

Patterson is confident The Mill could become one of Vigo County's biggest attractions. That tide has already started to rise, Shaw remarks.

“After the first concert at The Mill, Nelly, I was at Federal Coffee downtown and a young woman came in and started talking to the barista,” Shaw recalls. “She said, ‘I graduated from Indiana State in 2005. This is my first time in Terre Haute since I graduated.’ She went on to say she stayed at the Hilton Garden Inn, went to the Nelly concert and she was spending money at Federal Coffee. The Mill is going to be a leader for development on the river, but it's also driving business right now downtown and all over the city and county.”

While tourism is becoming big business in Vigo County, the developments aren't just for visitors. “The amenities and events we've created make a great quality of life for our residents, and that's going to bring in more businesses and residents,” Patterson stresses.

Smooth riding

There are many Vigo County attractions beyond Terre Haute. One shining example, albeit a bit of a hidden gem, is The Mari Hulman



Developing the Wabash River front that runs through Terre Haute has long been a dream for locals. That took a major step into reality last year with the opening of The Mill, an open-air entertainment venue, which has begun drawing national acts.

George School of Equine Studies at SMWC.

Located in the county's northwest corner, SMWC has a nationally recognized program that offers four major concentrations in equine studies. It's the only school in the state – and only one of 20 in the nation – that offers a bachelor's of science degree in equine studies. It is a key institution in the U.S. working on racehorse reproduction. The school also competes nationally in equestrian sports.

"Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods is a very unique institution with amazing facilities," says Rachel Leslie, owner of RJL Solutions, a business and community development, advocacy and strategic communications firm headquartered in Terre Haute. "They have 30 horses in their stables and attract the nation's best equine faculty and students."

Big business bounce-back

Vigo County has had to evolve as the business landscape changed. Notable losses

for the area were electronics manufacturer Sony, which previously made its Bluray devices in Terre Haute, before exiting and pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, which started pulling out just more than a decade ago and took its 800 high-paying jobs with it.

"That hit us hard. All those people owned homes and were involved in the community and donated to local charities," states Mayor Bennett. "But we've sustained ourselves, now we're gaining momentum and turning the corner."

Vigo County has more recent business wins than losses, including Steel Dynamics, which recently announced a \$261 million expansion and 80 new jobs that will average more than \$80,000 in annual wages.

"We want to continue to diversify our economy. We have a lot of things in our pipeline and there are a lot of things we're going after," Bennett notes.

Steve Witt, Terre Haute Economic

Development Corporation president, says the area's diversity has kept its economy rolling.

"We have a wide variety of manufacturers that are international in scope. We have significant not-for-profit community, four universities and three major health care institutions," he emphasizes. "We still have a significant retail presence and some exciting new projects."

"We've had a half a billion dollars in new investment in Vigo County starting in 2020," Witt adds.

German pet food maker Saturn Pet Care acquired the former Pfizer facility, invested more than \$75 million and has 160-plus employees. Hearthside Food Solutions acquired a former Pillsbury and Kellogg's facility in Seelyville just east of Terre Haute, invested \$125 million and created 300 jobs.

CHI Overhead Doors, Great Dane, Bolder Industries and Hydrite Industries also have multi-million dollar projects in the works that will add 300-plus jobs combined to the county.

Life at the crossroads

One big asset that is driving the area's growth is its transportation infrastructure. Interstate 70 is a major east-west corridor that brings nearly 900,000 vehicles through Vigo County and Terre Haute every day. State Road 40 is a major north-south artery.

"We are literally at the crossroads of America," Witt says. "We make it easy for companies to do business here. The big thing right now is workforce availability. We draw from a 35- to 40-mile radius, which spreads throughout Indiana and Illinois. Our location is a tremendous advantage."

What might be less acknowledged is the strength of the Terre Haute Regional Airport, which is the third busiest – behind



The Queen of Terre Haute Casino Resort, a \$260 million project that includes a 125-room hotel and three restaurants, recently broke ground and is set to open by early 2024.



Tourism officials said sports was the first building block in making Vigo County a travel destination. The annual Ride Across Indiana brings more than 3,000 riders and fans to the city, while the LaVern Gibson Championship Cross Country Course attracts some of the biggest running races in the nation, including the NCAA Division I championship.

Indianapolis International and Fort Wayne – in the state. The airport is strengthened by the presence of the 181st Intelligence Wing, a part of the Air National Guard and United States Air Force.

“The 181st Intelligence Wing is relevant not just to our state, but the entire United States,” offers RJL’s Leslie. “It’s important to our economic status here, because (members) not only serve here but live here also. The unit has their drills and training missions here, so it’s an economic engine to our community.”

Witt notes many of the county’s businesses fly corporate jets in and out of the airport.

Vigo County leaders also have been creative with their geographical location. For instance, the county is positioning itself as a westerly front door to Indiana to uplift itself and the state, and it has made itself a strategic pit stop for tour busses heading to Branson, Missouri.

“Terre Haute is an eight-hour drive from Branson and motor coach drivers can only drive eight hours by federal regulation,” Patterson explains. “So, we work with motor coach operators to make sure they have a place to stop, re-fuel, get something to eat and perhaps stay the night. It became big business for us. It’s all the little ways you can creatively bring people into this community.”

“With tourism, you never know who’s going to walk through that door to get some bacon and eggs,” he adds. “It could be Phil Knight from Nike or Joe Blow from Hoboken. But you treat them all the same. You never know what doors will open.”

And there’s about to be a whole lot more people coming on those roadways.

The Queen of Terre Haute Casino Resort is a \$260 million casino project approved for Terre Haute by the Indiana Gaming Commission on November 17, 2021. The operation is being built on a 50-acre site

on the eastside of Terre Haute and features a casino with 1,000 slot machines and 50 table games, three restaurants, two bars and a 125-room hotel with a rooftop bar and lounge. It is set to open in late 2023 or early 2024.

Banding together

The effort to grow Vigo County has been not only bipartisan but included city, county and state lawmakers working together.

For instance, Jon Ford, an Indiana state senator representing the area, worked to get the General Assembly to pass a 1% food and beverage tax in Vigo County to help finance the new convention center. Officials from the city, county and surrounding towns also rallied around the project.

The town of Riley and Vigo County government officials worked together on a memorandum of understanding for snow plowing. The town of West Terre Haute, which is its own taxing entity, and the county work together on an animal control ordinance. There are also various agreements in place for grass mowing, garbage collection, fire and police protection and the construction and maintenance of various pedestrian and cycling trails that traverse the county, Terre Haute and various towns.

The political landscape has become much more diverse in recent years, says county commissioner Chris Switzer, and that hasn’t slowed progress.

The Terre Haute City Council is composed of nine Democrats, but the mayor is Republican. The Vigo County Council has four Republicans and three Democrats, and the commissioners are two Republicans and one Democrat.

“The working climate here is pretty dang good,” Switzer shares. “We realize we all have to pull in the same direction to stay ahead of the game.”

RESOURCES: Mayor Duke Bennett, City of Terre Haute, at www.terrehaute.in.gov/mayors-office | Kelly Drake, The Mill, at www.themillterrehaute.com | Rachel Leslie, RJL Solutions, at www.rjlsolutions.com | David Patterson, Terre Haute Convention & Visitors Bureau, at www.terrehaute.com | Michael Shaw, Riverscape, at wabashriverscape.org | Richard Stamper, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, at www.rose-hulman.edu | Chris Switzer, County Commissioner, at www.vigocounty.in.gov/commissioners | Steve Witt, Terre Haute Economic Development Corporation, at terrehauteedc.com