

Photo courtesy of Visit Shipshewana



STAYING TRUE TO THEIR ROOTS

Northeast Counties Honor Heritage, Embrace Change

By Symone C. Skrzycki





Photo courtesy of Steuben County Tourism Bureau

Clockwise from top left: Sunset bike ride along the trails (LaGrange County), Halloween festivities (Garrett State Bank, DeKalb County), Apple Festival of Kendallville (Noble County) and vintage train adventures (Steuben County)

For businesses, residents and visitors alike, DeKalb, LaGrange, Noble and Steuben counties are firmly "in their corner" – geographically, in Indiana's northeast corner, and through the workplace cultures, quality of life amenities and community spirit that define the region.

Agricultural heritage, manufacturing muscle, scenic parks and historic landmarks help tell the story of this four-county area. Each county has its own personality, but together they contribute meaningfully to northeast Indiana's economic vitality and unmistakable sense of place.

Come along with *BizVoice*® as we spotlight the people, places and innovations shaping these communities – and helping them honor their roots while embracing what's next.

"I think a lot of mayors and communities look at affordable housing as a challenge. We've (in Auburn) got at least five approved projects that include single-family and multi-family housing. We try to find ways we can work with developers to hopefully reduce the cost of some of these new subdivisions." – Auburn Mayor Dave Clark, DeKalb County

"Approximately 53% of the overall county population in LaGrange County is Amish. They still drive a horse and buggy and live without electricity. They're very entrepreneurial and have extremely large businesses on their homesteads making furniture, solar panels and products like leather purses, jams, noodles and fried pies." – Sonya Nash, CEO, Visit Shipshewana/LaGrange County CVB

"Working for the region's largest employer is both an honor and a responsibility. Our size gives us the opportunity to make a meaningful impact – through the care we provide, the experience we create for our co-workers and the support we offer the communities we serve." – Hallie Custer, vice president of human resources, Parkview Health, which has a presence in DeKalb, LaGrange, Noble and Steuben counties and beyond

"The John and Mary Pellegrino Student Design Center (opening this fall) is a $15 million, 22,000-square-foot facility with state-of-the-art labs that will benefit not only our students and faculty, but also the community because so much of our success is being in line with industry needs." – Tony Kline, president, Trine University, Steuben County.

DeKalb County
Population: 44,732 | County Seat: Auburn

LaGrange County
Population: 41,492 | County Seat: LaGrange

Noble County
Population: 47,928 | County Seat: Albion

Steuben County
Population: 34,834 | County Seat: Angola

DeKalb County: "A destination where rich automotive history meets small-town charm"

Annually, DeKalb County's automotive heritage fuels the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Festival, drawing 80,000-plus visitors. Among signature events are a garage cruise, downtown cruise-in, concerts and a parade of classics.

In downtown Auburn, the former Auburn Hotel site is bridging the city's history and its next chapter. Demolished in 2025, the landmark will be replaced by The Auburn, an $18 million, four-story development offering commercial and retail space, apartments and two penthouse suites.

The reconstruction project includes $2 million in state Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) 2.0 funding.

"The developer is actually rebuilding it to be very similar to the original hotel," Clark remarks. "Putting features (e.g., brick and limestone) back in this new project has been great. That building meant a lot to the downtown."

Clark's "No. 1 passion" is continuing to provide quality of life initiatives. The $2.4 million renovation of Memorial Park, for instance, opened last fall. Amenities encompass a stage with a canopy, new restrooms, refurbished basketball courts, a pavilion, six pickleball courts and three quarters of a mile of trails.

"It's the city's second oldest park," Clark proudly shares.

Cultivating Auburn's next generation of leaders is another priority. Launched in 2025, the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (MYAC) empowers high school students (ninth through 12th grades) to collaborate with local officials and voice their input. Students apply to participate and build skills in areas such as media training, networking and public speaking.

One of MYAC's current endeavors is developing a sensory park.

"Some individuals may have disabilities or sensitivities to sound and other (stimuli)," Clark explains. "We're looking at 10 or 12 different pieces of equipment that could make the park a welcoming place for everyone."

Located just west of Auburn, Garrett State Bank serves the community through four locations (two in Garrett) as well as branches in Ashley (Steuben) and Fort Wayne (Allen County).

"The bank's been around since 1893 – 133 years," stresses president Mike Tullis. "(To succeed), you have to look at the past, but you also have to look at the present. What you do today defines what you're going to do (in the future)."

People are the bank's greatest commodity.

"You spend about one-third of your day at work," Tullis says. "We want (to maintain a culture where) people come in with a smile on their face. If you can do that – it projects



Grand reopening and 80th anniversary of Memorial Park in 2025. It will house DeKalb County's first public splash pad, a project from the city of Auburn, Fortify Play and other community organizations (slated to launch by September).



Dolly Parton, the Bee Gees and Willie Nelson are among music legends that have performed at Blue Gate Performing Arts Center in Shipshewana. The venue opened in 2020.

to the customer that this is a good place to work. It trickles down."

From a customer standpoint, he notes, "I think what sets us apart is the same thing that sets a lot of other small community banks apart. Being there when somebody needs you for a loan. Being there when somebody needs to talk through a project or an idea. And being honest with them – if you can't help them, finding (another) way to help them."

LaGrange County: Third-largest Amish settlement in the nation

Headquartered in Howe, Lord's Seed (LLT Group LLC) is one of the nation's leading independent seed producers. The company produces seed corn, field corn, soybeans and small specialty lots.

Established in 1980, David Larimer owns and operates the endeavor with his brother and brother-in-law.

"It's a family business," Larimer explains. "Our actual production is split probably 50/50 between LaGrange and Steuben (counties). We're a little bit bigger in LaGrange County in terms of land. Our main production hub is in Steuben County.

"We raise seed corn for the industry in a wholesale (capacity), where we provide third-party service work for anybody and everybody in the seed corn industry. From the big companies all the way down to the mom and pops, we produce corn for them and soybeans."

The staff at Lord's Seed is lean, with roughly 25 employees for eight months of the year and 17 year-round.

"Everything we have, we try to make it as efficient as possible," Larimer relays. "The equipment is as efficient as possible. Our model right now is if we invest any capital, it's got to be for efficiency's sake. How do we help reduce inefficiency? That's our main focus."

Yoder's Shipshewana Hardware has deep community roots as well. Originally known as Yoder Shopping Center, it was built in 1967 and brought several locally owned businesses together: a department store selling fabric, clothing and shoes; a hardware store; and a grocery store, which has since closed.

In 1979, the Yoder family purchased the business in partnership with Winford Jones and renamed it Yoder's Shipshewana Hardware. Today, it sells a variety of locally made products from the Amish community, including birdhouses, leather belts, candles, fire pits and wooden toys, as well as housewares, tools and more.

"Growing up, my school was right behind the store," remarks Winford's son Nathan Jones. "I'd walk down and my mom would be there working. I'd sit with her at the front register helping her price things – that was when we still priced items with stickers back in the '80s. Or I'd go with her down to Fort Wayne to different vendors. It was fun to pick out toys to sell in our store.

"(Years later), my wife was working at the store when she was in college. That's how I met her." The duo runs the business.

"We're always trying to surprise people," Jones reflects. "That's the fun of shopping, right? Going through and browsing and finding that little treasure you didn't even know was out there."

A few miles away, anticipation is building for the opening of the LaGrange County Innovation Center in November.

Spanning 13,000 square feet, the structure will house the LaGrange County Economic Development Corporation, LaGrange County Chamber of Commerce and GO Explore Childcare & Preschool (currently operating as Imagination Station). It will feature a 60-person community meeting room, co-working areas, startup incubator space, rentable offices and conference rooms. Moreover, individuals can take advantage of learning opportunities through the Purdue Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

Noble County: "Where nature is always in season"

Home is where the water is for Noble County, which boasts 117 natural lakes and waterways – the most in Indiana.



Herbruck's, the largest egg producer in Michigan and the 10th largest in the United States, donates two million-plus eggs annually to the communities it serves. Pictured is Blue Springs Egg Farm, its sustainable, cage-free egg-laying facility in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. *Photo courtesy of Herbruck's Poultry Ranch*

"They're small kettle lakes, so they're perfect for kayaking and canoeing and fishing and swimming," observes Grace Caswell, CEO of Visit Noble County. "Something our whole community has in common is this ability to play in water. Even in the winter, people will come for ice fishing experiences."

Just outside downtown Ligonier is the Annie Oakley Natural Perfumery gift shop and studio, where customers can create their own fragrances. In Rome City, history enthusiasts can visit Hoosier author and nature photographer Gene Stratton-Porter's Cabin at Wildflower Woods along Sylvan Lake.

"It's a beautiful asset with gardens and trees," Caswell marvels. "And it's home to a (globally recognized old-growth) forest designation."

In Kendallville, Herbruck's Poultry Ranch renovated a 75,000-square-foot facility that opened this year and will generate approximately 60 jobs.

"We're a fourth-generation family business headquartered in Saranac, Michigan," states vice president of operations Cody Herbruck. "My great-grandfather had a milk and egg processing plant and delivery business over in St. John's, Michigan. My grandma and grandpa bought the farm (in Saranac) in 1958."

Herbruck's has farmed in northern Indiana for more than two decades, primarily in Elkhart and LaGrange counties. In addition, it operates a feed mill in Topeka in LaGrange County.

"Kendallville was a perfect location for the new plant for a number of reasons," Herbruck shares. "It was centrally located to where our farming operations are in Indiana. But also, when we first even looked at the building, going through Kendallville felt like home to us. … Everyone was so welcoming and excited. That's not what happens everywhere in the U.S. and everywhere that agriculture and farming is involved. So, for us, it was a no-brainer."

Another addition to the city in 2026 was Park Center Kendallville, a 1,680-square-foot behavioral health clinic launched by Parkview Health.

"Kendallville is an ideal location for behavioral health expansion because it combines demonstrated community need, rural access challenges, strong healthcare infrastructure and a growing focus on integrated care," asserts Adam Kurtz, vice president of operations for community mental health at Parkview Behavioral Health Institute. "The clinic is intentionally designed to support both therapy and psychiatric services under one roof.

"Patients will have access to our therapists who will provide comprehensive diagnostic assessments, individual, group and family therapy. The psychiatric prescriber will be able to complete psych evaluations and provide ongoing medication management for mental health and substance use diagnoses." They also plan to offer medication-assisted treatment for opioid and alcohol use disorders, including long-acting injections, as well as case management support between sessions.

Along with prioritizing mental health, partnerships among industry and schools in Kendallville are paramount. The Community Learning Center is one example.

"It's one of the gems of the city," contends Nikole Albright, executive director of the Greater Kendallville Area Chamber of Commerce. "It's a wonderful community resource rooted in collaboration."

The building, once a high school, has art and pottery classes, cooking programs, pickleball, walking space and more. It houses the AM Strauss Theatre, which hosts musical and theater performances, along with Gaslight Playhouse and other non-profit organizations.

Albright also points to the Impact Institute and Freedom Academy as an invaluable resource. The former's mission is to positively affect lives and create career and college-ready students.

Freedom Academy, a technical and vocational school, serves students of all ages and has a robust internship program that many local companies use.

Steuben County: Land of 101 Lakes

In 2025, Trine University in Angola unveiled "Something Greater," a $120 million master plan for new and upgraded facilities. Highlights include academic and dining spaces, expanded green space and the Thunder Dome, an inflatable, climate-controlled training facility standing 90 feet tall and spanning 92,000 square feet.

The university also is investing in additional student housing.

"We've been among the fastest-growing private universities in the state of Indiana over the last decade, so we continue to build new residence facilities for our students," Tony Kline comments. "Last fall, we opened Summit Street Apartments (featuring the largest student bedrooms at Trine and inviting common areas)."

Trine's Innovation One program incorporates a new way for students to gain real-world experience. It's designed as a one-stop shop connecting employers with Trine faculty and students.

"Our ties to industry are so important," Kline emphasizes. "Innovation One, at its core, is about being useful to our community and helping industry solve problems. Industry can just go to our website and click on a button to submit any type of problem – big or small – they're trying to solve within their company."



Curiosity and innovation converge at Trine University.

If approved, Trine connects them with a faculty member and a group of students for one or two semesters to develop a cost-effective, viable solution.

Headquartered in Angola, JICI Construction is strengthening its workforce while taking on major projects across the region such as Trine's John and Mary Pellegrino Student Design Center and the LaGrange County Innovation Center.

"JICI is getting ready to celebrate its 50th year in business – all 50 years here in Angola," shares vice president of business

development Ian Garner. "We're a general contractor – both commercial and residential development throughout northeast Indiana – but specifically in Steuben County as well.

"The vast majority of our team members have been here more than 10 years. We have (an employee) pushing 30 years and several pushing over 40 years. The company has only been around 50 years, so the longevity that many of our team members have I think is the biggest testament to their involvement in the organization and how the organization values everything that our people do for the company."

A current project is Graber Post Buildings' 60,000-square-foot facility in Ashley.

"They're headquartered down in Montgomery, Indiana," Garner comments. "It's a business that's expanding into northeast Indiana from southern Indiana. (The project) is a manufacturing building where they make components for post-frame buildings. They'll use it as a distribution center.



Based in Fort Wayne, Parkview Health is northeast Indiana's largest employer with more than 17,500 co-workers across Indiana and northwest Ohio. The Parkview Pups therapy dog program is one of many ways Parkview prioritizes employee wellness.

"We were able to attract them due to the uniqueness of Northeast Indiana with I-69, the I-80/90 Corridor. Close proximity to Michigan and Northwest Ohio really makes Steuben County in particular – but Northeast Indiana as a whole – a really attractive place for companies like this that are trying to increase distribution throughout the region."

JICI supports the community in many ways, including contributions to Cameron Health, Turning Point of Steuben County (provides temporary emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness or other urgent housing needs) and the YMCA.

Reflecting on what makes the region special, Garner pauses. "It's the people, which is really cliché to say. But I can tell you that the hospitality, the generosity and just the overall people in this region are tremendous."

RESOURCES: Auburn Mayor Dave Clark, at www.ci.auburn.in.us/245/Mayors-Office | Hallie Custer and Adam Kurtz, Parkview Health, at www.parkview.com | Ian Garner, JICI Construction, at www.jici.com | Nathan Jones, Yoder's Shipshewana Hardware, at www.yodershardware.com David Larimer, Lord's Seed (LLT Group LLC), at www.lordsseed.com | Sonya Nash, Visit Shipshewana/LaGrange County CVB, at visitshipshewana.org Mike Tullis, Garrett State Bank, at www.garrettstatebank.com



