

COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR

MIRACULOUS MADISON

Life So Good It's Hard to Believe

By Anthony Schoettle



Madison has one of the fastest growing populations in Indiana and has been an especially popular nesting place for people under 40. While much commercial development has taken place in recent years, there's plenty of wide-open spaces for more growth.



“Madison is the community America forgot existed.”

That’s the way Bob Courtney, the city’s mayor and a lifelong resident, puts it.

“Our mantra is clean, safe and beautiful,” Courtney stresses. “It’s a three-word mission statement. We’ve curated an atmosphere that is very friendly and welcoming.”

Perhaps some have forgotten enclaves like Madison exist. But a growing number are discovering it. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Madison has one of the fastest growing populations – about 4% annually – among all Indiana cities and towns. And one of its fastest growing demographics is citizens under age 40, a population segment every city wants.

Madison is being rediscovered for good reason. This postcard picture berg with a deep and rich history nestled along the Ohio River on the Indiana-Kentucky border has recently come alive with commerce, tourist attractions – including a growing music and arts scene – and much more.

Madison is growing organically, but people also are moving in from around Indiana and other states.

One transplant is Beth Lewis, who moved her business, Old Tyme Market Place, from North Carolina, after an unannounced visit and a frenetically arranged pitch from local officials so stunning, it won her over.

“With the support I’ve gotten here and the idyllic, unique setting, it’s been a match made in heaven,” Lewis declares.

“My business has grown significantly since we’ve moved here. I’ve stuck with social media, and I’ve been able to fully develop my brand here,” explains Lewis, whose store has 165,000 Instagram followers and 70,000 on Facebook. “We’re able to promote our business and Madison, and we’re bringing people into town every day.”

The reaction of those visitors to Madison is a universal “wow,” she states.

“My customers from out of town absolutely fall in love with Madison,” offers Lewis, who moved her store from the Charlotte area to Madison in 2018. “We tell them, while they’re here, you get to live like a local, because that’s how they’re treated. They love that.”

One out-of-state visitor who came specifically to shop at her

Madison is known as a warm and friendly place where residents eagerly welcome visitors and business owners support each other.



5,000-square-foot store even bought a house down the street in downtown Madison. “I hear from so many people who say they want to live here just after staying one weekend.”

Tony Steinhardt was born and raised in Madison but spent 25 years working for Ratio Architects in Indianapolis, before getting a call from Courtney in 2022. It didn’t take much to convince him to move back to Madison to become the city’s economic development director.

“It’s plain to see what’s happening here is special, and I wanted to be a part of it,” Steinhardt exclaims.

Boom town

What’s happening can perhaps best be seen on the business front. Mayor Courtney, a Republican, took over in 2019 under difficult circumstances when his predecessor, Damon Welch, died in office.

The 61-year-old Courtney, who had a lengthy career in banking and finance with a focus on institutional investments, has used an analytical approach to enhancing and growing Madison. He recruited Steinhardt to lead the initiative.

“Because we make data-driven decisions, we’re not afraid of taking risks,” Courtney explains. “We’re working hard, and we’re being intentional in what we’re doing. And we’re experiencing a renaissance in Madison because of it.”

Courtney is quick to spread credit around. “This isn’t just about me or even a small group of people. The growth and revitalization happening here is about the public-private efforts of a whole lot of



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people. The level of cooperation we're seeing among various groups is part of what makes it so special."

Courtney and Steinhardt have been eager to upgrade the city's technological approach to growth. For instance, in 2022 Madison began using Placer AI, a software package that helps the city recruit the right businesses to spur growth for those enterprises and the city as a whole.

"You have to be able to speak the language of those you're trying to recruit," Steinhardt states. "This software allows us to talk about the visitors' journey (to Madison), where they come from, where they go, their education and income level, what day of the week people come to town and how long they stay, what markets here are void and to compare this market to others."

Not only does Placer AI help the city draw new businesses, it also helps the city run its own operations, including the municipal golf course, parks and swimming pool, and railroad more like a for-profit business, Steinhardt relays. And that means more resources for future upkeep and enhancements.

New investments

With reams of data in hand, Madison – with the help of the state's READI grant program – has secured \$200 million in investments in areas such as housing, manufacturing and small business in the last three years.

Perhaps the most visible – and notable – of these developments is The Shoppes at Sunrise Crossing, a \$55 million mixed-use project on Madison Hilltop at the corner of Clifty Drive and Michigan Road. The project is significant for numerous reasons. It's being constructed on a 20-acre site that has been abandoned and blighted for 25 years. The

initial phase includes 96 apartments, the first new housing in Madison in 30-plus years, and retail developments as well. The second phase features another 96 apartments, and city officials say, the development is bringing 150 new jobs to Madison.

The city not only partnered with developers on the Sunrise Crossing project to bring in such retailers as Hobby Lobby, Kohls, Domino's Pizza, Five Below, TJ Maxx and Mattress Firm, but it also addressed and fixed water flow and flash flooding issues on the site.

Additionally, the city has attracted a new grocery store, DG Market, on a site downtown that has been vacant since 2018. The city acquired the land and worked with a developer to clear the way for the project.

An aquatic park at the entrance of town that has been closed since 2022 was re-built and re-opened this year.

Two mainstay manufacturers also have major job-generating projects. Super ATV is investing \$30 million in an expansion endeavor that will generate more than 100 new jobs. And Grote Industries Inc. is making a \$22-plus million investment that will result in more than 30 new jobs.

"We've seen, if we lead and make investment, others will follow," Courtney contends.

Rising tourism traffic

Since 2021, Courtney, Steinhardt and their staffs have rattled off a series of public-private partnerships the way rising Indiana Fever star Caitlin Clark nets three-pointers. But it wasn't always that way in Madison.

City officials in 2021 brokered a deal to redevelop a cotton mill along the Ohio River that had been vacant for more than 35 years. What resulted, the Fairfield Inn & Suites at the Historic Eagle Cotton



Few cities anywhere can boast the types of attractions and recreational activities Madison offers.



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Mill, is unique unto itself. The way the deal came together is equally notable. The 85-room hotel and adjacent conference space with a capacity of nearly 400 was the first public-private partnership in as long as Steinhardt can remember – and possibly ever.

“It’s certainly been the first deal of its kind in Madison in decades and decades – in recent times,” he says of the hotel which opened in fall 2021.

The showpiece features vaulted ceilings in a historic structure built in 1884. It was recently voted as the No. 1 Fairfield Hotel in the U.S. Additionally, the \$22 million transformation of the Cotton Mill into a hotel and conference center in 2023 won Indiana Landmarks’ new Renaissance Award, recognizing the revitalization of long-decaying historic properties.

The Cotton Mill had landed on Indiana Landmarks’ 10 Most Endangered list in 2013. But that bleak picture changed when a consortium of partners including Riverton LLC, the city of Madison, and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation put together a plan to revitalize the mill as an amenity designed to boost the entire region.

Today, the Eagle Cotton Mill is a regional destination for tourists and conference groups and an economic powerhouse in the city’s National Historic Landmark District. Overlooking the Ohio River, the Cotton Mill is the last large historic industrial building remaining along the city’s waterfront.

The facility is far from the only hotel in Madison. And Andrew Forrester, Visit Madison’s executive tourism director, is thankful for that. Madison has just under 500 hotel rooms and another 100 Air BnB properties. The city has seen steady gains in revenue from its innkeepers’ tax, Forrester says, which is poured back into the effort to draw more people to Madison.

Fueling the tourism growth, Madison has been crowned this year as the #1 Small Town in the Midwest by the esteemed USA Today 10Best Readers’ Choice Awards. Also this year, Madison’s Main Street Program was one of three winners nationally of the 2024 Great American

Main Street Award, which recognizes communities for their excellence in comprehensive preservation-based commercial district revitalization.

“It’s kind of a chicken-egg scenario,” Forrester enthuses. “Did we win the awards because we’re a great city and travel destination that people are finding? Or are more people finding us because of these awards? It’s probably a combination.”

Either way, Forrester reports that Madison hotels are now largely filled every weekend for nearly seven months each year.

“They come for one of our many music events or festivals, our arts festivals, historic home tours, our new river boat tours, hiking, biking, the restaurants and shops and so much more,” Forrester offers. “Most of all, I think, they come for an atmosphere few other towns in the U.S. offer. There’s a warmth and charm here that’s truly unique and difficult to match.”

The city’s proximity to Clifty Falls State Park, one of Indiana’s most scenic parks, and the city’s downtown historic district, which spans a jaw-dropping 133 blocks and has been deemed the largest of its kind in the nation by the National Register of Historic Places, certainly doesn’t hurt.

The crown jewel of Madison historic venues is Lanier Mansion State Historic Site – open all year with guided tours – which boasts beautiful formal gardens surrounding the property.

Great place to do business

Lewis’ story might be Exhibit A of the city’s charm. She had run her business, which sells a variety of old and new home décor items, food, clothing and jewelry, plants and more, happily in North Carolina since 2005.

Then she had a chance encounter with a Madison Main Street board member at a trade show. An unofficial sales pitch was made for Lewis to move her store to the city.

Quite frankly, Lewis recalls, the pitch sounded too good to be true. “She said my business would explode in Madison.” Lewis initially dismissed it. After talking with her husband, however, they ultimately



Hot air balloon displays and rides have become one of many activities that draw tens of thousands to the Madison Regatta each summer.

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Sunrise Crossing: Shaping Madison's Future

As part of Madison's recognition as the Indiana Chamber's 2024 Community of the Year, Winterwood Inc. proudly presents Sunrise Crossing. This development will bring new housing options to Madison's hilltop. With rents starting at \$770 for a one-bedroom, \$910 for a two-bedroom, and \$1,110 for a three-bedroom unit, Sunrise Crossing is an affordable option for local families and individuals.

The development includes a playground, bike/pedestrian access, and public art, plus a stormwater retention basin to reduce flooding in the area. Winterwood Inc. also supports Madison's growth through Riverside Tower Lofts and Clifton Heights, further enhancing the community. Winterwood Inc. is excited to help shape Madison's future with affordable, sustainable, community-focused developments.

decided to make an unannounced trip to Madison.

“I was surprised to see how vibrant the town was at 8 p.m. on a weeknight in May,” Lewis marvels. “I was enamored. I could see why the lady I had met was so in love with where she lived.”

When the Main Street board member discovered Lewis was in town the next day, she invited her to dinner. Much to Lewis’ surprise, the mayor and his wife, the economic development director, Madison tourism officials and Main Street executives and several others were all at the dinner – at a restaurant that had arranged things just for her visit. “There was an entire restaurant full of people there just to encourage us to move to Madison,” she relates.

After some internal debate, her husband imparted something that struck a note. “He said, ‘You have the experience to run this business. What you get here is a community that is behind you.’ He was absolutely right. Since we moved here in 2018, it’s been full steam ahead. Madison offers a lifestyle change that is so community driven, it’s sometimes difficult to believe.”

Lewis’ decision to move has paid off for her business and Madison. One example she points to is two women from Texas who recently rented a truck – to carry their purchases – and drove to Madison to shop at her store. “With the money they spent at a hotel, restaurants and our retail outlets, those two women brought \$5,000 into Madison in four days,” she relates.

All for one

Dominic Grote, president and CEO of Grote Industries, isn’t surprised Lewis has found a great home for her family and business in Madison.

Grote Industries, one of the world’s leading manufacturers and marketers of vehicle lighting and safety systems, has been in Madison since 1959 and Dominic has been CEO since 2009. He says Madison has always been a great city “but has gotten even stronger in the last five years.”

“There’s been such a purposeful effort by this mayor and the previous mayor, that has really helped,” Grote remarks. “There’s an emphasis on cleanliness and looking good in town. You get that vibe when walking down Main Street. The blight has been cleaned up. There’s so much curb appeal here; that has really helped in our recruiting.”

One downside is that Madison, which is a 30-minute drive to the nearest interstate, can be difficult to access.

“I’ve been here for 30 years, and it’s not always easy to get people to Madison,” relates Grote, whose company has 1,500 employees,



With the largest downtown historic district in the nation and its vibrant business sector, it’s no surprise Madison this year was named #1 Small Town in the Midwest by the USA Today 10Best Readers’ Choice Awards.



(550 of which are in Madison). “You must have a reason to come here. But it’s such a warm and unique place. People just love it. People who we get to come here and visit, always come back.”

It’s more than pretty streets, historic homes and the Ohio River that make Madison an ideal home to work and live, says Kenton Williams, president of Royer Corp., a global custom injection molding and manufacturing firm that counts food service firms, board game makers and trading card companies among its array of customers.

“The level of support you get – beyond tax abatements and other financial assistance – would be almost unimaginable in other places,” stresses Williams, whose company employs 200 in Madison. “Not only do government officials offer a high level of support, but the business community works

together to make sure all boats rise together. The skilled talent base here is very strong, and the educational institutions here – including Hanover College – have worked to make sure it stays that way.”

Many Madison companies are just as eager to support Madison as local officials are to support area businesses.

“Royer helps out financially with arts and other programming, but our people volunteer on various boards and committees and with community events and causes as well,” Williams notes.

“But it’s not just us. Companies like Super ATV, Grote, Madison Chemical, Madison Precision Products, Arvin Sango and many others put the community at the center of all its activities. With all of us pulling in the same direction, it makes Madison a place to live, work and play like no other.”