



A STATE OF MIND

Vanderburgh County Thrives on Partnership, Camaraderie

By Matt Ottinger

Hoosiers of many locales now enjoy ease of access to Vanderburgh County since the expansion of Interstate 69.

Along the Ohio River and anchored by Evansville, the state's third largest city, the county continues to leverage teamwork, positivity and visionary thinking into ongoing economic opportunity and boosts to quality of life.

With the current

If anyone knows the area, it's Lloyd Winnecke. Not only is he a former mayor of Evansville, he's also a native and University of Evansville (UE) graduate.

He now serves as president and CEO of the Evansville Regional Economic Partnership (E-REP). It's a conglomerate organization formed several years ago by combining three impactful entities: the Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana, Growth Alliance for Greater Evansville and the Southwest Indiana Chamber.

Winnecke points to an emphasis on partnerships as an integral driver in the area.

"(Teamwork) happens easily here," he remarks, noting stakeholders in the area "genuinely like each other." "So, it makes tough decisions easier; it makes collaboration easier. Everything happens easier

because there's a mutual respect and fondness for sometimes competing organizations, but everyone kind of comes together for the greater good. And that is something that has really evolved over the last 15 to 20 years."

Old National Bank has been headquartered in Evansville since 1834.

"The building I'm sitting in right now was at the exact same location," reveals Jim Ryan, Old National Chairman and CEO.

The financial institution will soon have approximately \$70 billion in assets and rank in the top 25 banks in the country. Yet, it's not too big for Vanderburgh County.

"We have no desire to move the company headquarters because I do think it's our secret sauce," Ryan remarks. "You have this sense of how being from a small town in southern Indiana affects your culture, and I think it's really important."

Anchoring the region

Industry in Vanderburgh County thrives in key sectors like manufacturing, advanced manufacturing, education, healthcare, finance, logistics and more.

The state's Regional Cities Initiative and Regional Economic Acceleration & Development Initiative (READI) funding have also been boons to Vanderburgh County through the years.

In fact, it benefits from those regional efforts as many citizens commute from neighboring counties. Warrick County, for instance, continues to thrive. The latest example is The Dominion project (part of READI 2.0), a roughly \$80 million mixed-use development in

western Warrick County.

“It’s a great example of contemporary architecture and more modern thinking about how buildings should be sited and connected to amenities right on a trail . . .,” relays Josh Armstrong, E-REP’s chief economic development officer. “You’ll be able soon to really get around all of our county through those trails that are right on the edge of Vanderburgh County.”

“In fact, I think the average citizen might not know – a lot of people wouldn’t know – when they’re leaving Evansville and moving into Warrick County or when they’re in the town of Newburgh. It’s a very porous border along that eastern side of Vanderburgh County,” he adds. “

Winnecke adds that while Evansville is a relatively large Indiana city, the city and county are geographically rather small.

“That’s why (it’s important to focus on) the concept of regionalism,” he offers. “It is imperative for our region to be firing on all cylinders in each community just based on the size of every community.”

‘Downtown, everything’s waiting for you’

Doug Petitt, executive vice president and chief people officer for United Leasing & Finance (a division of The United Companies) in Evansville, moved to Vanderburgh County from Ohio two decades ago.

He initially got involved in downtown revitalization, noticing at the time that Evansville’s downtown was, frankly, “sad.”

“There were maybe a couple of restaurants down there (and some) were boarded up; it didn’t look good . . .,” Petitt recalls. “Juxtapose that to today, and I think we’ve come an awful long way on downtown.”

Petitt now sits on E-REP’s board and credits its impact on the area.

“You have targeted strategies and visions that are not overlapping or working at odds, and we don’t have a number of organizations trying to do the same thing and doing it inefficiently,” he asserts. “I think we’re moving in the right direction there.”

Steven Bridges, interim president at the University of Southern Indiana (USI), concurs, noting, “The downtown area is looking much better than it did maybe (even) 10 years ago.”

As just one example of an aesthetic and impactful addition to Evansville’s downtown, he points to The Stone Family Center for Health Sciences – a collaborative effort among USI, UE and Indiana University School of Medicine – Evansville. The goal is to shape future role models through learning and innovation to improve healthcare in the region.

“So much good is happening in Evansville

and I think it’s going to further make new people want to come here and also keep our existing talent,” Bridges offers.

Soaring higher with higher ed

Bridges is in his 36th year at USI, where he was also a student and acquired undergraduate and graduate degrees.

He points to the school’s physical footprint as evidence of growth and impact through the years. Going back to its founding in 1965 (initially as Indiana State University – Evansville), Bridges points to USI’s entrenched relationship with the business community and the role industry leaders had in its origin story.

“They saw a need for public higher education in Evansville and they bought land (1,400 acres); they were real visionary individuals in my opinion,” he remarks. “We’re not landlocked and we don’t have to tear down business. We have room to grow.”

The school continues to enhance and add curriculum options coinciding with needs of the region. A current focus, in fact, is partnering with hospital systems like Deaconess and Ascension to produce qualified nurses. He also points to “cross-disciplinary” efforts and initiatives in business technology and occupational therapy as critical to building a future-forward workforce.

“We’ve done some really advanced things and employers are appreciating that,” Bridges adds. “I’m hearing things such as, ‘USI students are more prepared than some people that have been in the industry for 10 years.’”

Not only does the school continue to enhance its offerings for its student population. Its total enrollment is nearly 9,500, 75% of

which is in-state. And it’s not just the local community showing up. In fact, USI’s students represent 88 of Indiana’s 92 counties.

The University of Southern Indiana Screaming Eagles athletics programs recently jumped from Division II to Division I status and now compete in the Ohio Valley Conference.

“Not only are we elevating our visibility and reputation, but we’re getting community interest and investment in our programs,” Bridges relays.

The move continues to draw attention to USI, including a \$10 million gift from Liberty Federal Credit Union that includes naming rights to its basketball arena.

“I think we always feel like we were a division one level before,” he notes. “And this was a natural move for us, so obviously it brings a lot more attention. We’re ready for it and I think it’s going well.”

Educational institutions certainly play into the broader success of the area. Ryan also points to efforts like Talent EVV, the region’s strategic transformation plan, as a point of emphasis.

He explains the initiative includes the for-profit, non-profit and public sectors to enhance talent attraction, retention and quality of life.

“We really try to understand what things ultimately are going to matter to us around public health, education, income, jobs and young adult population growth and track all those,” Ryan reports.

Furthermore, regarding talent and state programs, Ryan also points out that the area will be hosting nearly 20 Orr Fellows in the 2025 cohort. Named after former Indiana Governor Bob Orr, the fellowship is a two-



Leveraging river scenery to encourage citizens to convene will only increase as the River Vision Plan is poised to revamp the riverfront in Vanderburgh County.



Downtown Evansville continues to solidify itself as a focal point of the region as mixed-use developments abound, drawing more residents and retail businesses.

year program that helps recent college graduates transition into the workforce with leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

“If you think about 20 young people, they’re going to start their careers here in Evansville, and probably would not be here otherwise,” he posits. “And you do that this year and then next year, (that number) grows to 25 and the next year grows to 30. You just have the compounding effect of bringing young, educated adults that are already engaged in our community in different kinds of ways.

“The potential there is huge for us, long term,” he adds. “Those are going to be the best and brightest minds that are going to come to our community.”

‘Bridging’ divides

Vanderburgh County is unique in that it benefits from proximity to two other states.

“Our labor shed is much bigger than our (metropolitan statistical area) in terms of population of folks that are driving into work already

for the high-quality jobs that we have available here,” Armstrong contends.

Winnecke notes that efforts are underway for a new Ohio River Crossing (as part of I-69) to connect with Kentucky.

“For 10 or 12 years now, there’s been a group of leaders from Henderson (Kentucky) and Evansville who meet every month,” he shares. “We call ourselves ‘Bridge Link’ and its focus is really to make sure that policymakers in (the capitals) Indianapolis and Frankfort and Washington, D.C. understand the need for that \$1.4 billion bridge and what that means to our region.”

Ports of Indiana also plays a major role in the area and its CEO Jody Peacock now sits on E-REP’s board.

“I would say that (Ports of Indiana) has really advanced our region’s ability to transport raw materials or finished product and it has made us more of a hub for transportation of goods and services,” Winnecke says. “I think it is the basis for a lot of manufacturing investment here.”

Air travel is also critical for the region. Last April, the Evansville



The University of Southern Indiana continues its momentum with a jump to Division I sports – a move that coincided with a major sponsorship at its basketball arena. The county’s education offerings also are bolstered by the Signature School, a highly ranked charter high school in Evansville.

Regional Airport announced a reinstatement of the nonstop flight to Chicago.

“The state of Indiana has been really an important partner in helping us get return air service from Evansville to Chicago,” Winnecke credits.

Petitt is also president of Tri-State Aero (now owned by United Companies), a fixed base operator at the airport, and testifies to the airport’s contribution as it now features new buildings and an enhanced aesthetic.

“It’s the front door to the community for a number of folks that come into our community, so when they step off the plane, they’re greeted by a world-class facility as opposed to a little shack,” he praises. “That’s a recent step, but it’s a big one and it’s one near and dear to me.”

He believes it’s just one example of ongoing improvements in the area.

“There’s a lot more to tell somebody if you are recruiting from out of town. There’s a lot more to tell and show people with restaurants and dining and other things to do and see,” Petitt imparts.

A sea of opportunity

The river plays a major role in the area’s future plans. But according to Ryan, who’s lived in the area for over 20 years, that hasn’t always been the case.

“Twenty years ago, I’m not sure the city necessarily embraced the river,” he contends. “They kind of turned away from it. (Now) we’ve turned toward the river and really tried to embrace it.”

He points to the new Ohio River Vision and Strategic Plan. Funded by READI, the plan will feature riverfront enhancements covering 50 miles.

Armstrong says it started with a vision several years ago after he woke up with an epiphany.

“I called an associate and I said, ‘We can’t continue to have a river that looks like this,’ ” he reflects. “We came into the office and we just started looking, dreaming differently about our river, because since 1928 from our city’s first master plan, there have been calls to improve our riverfront for our citizens.”

He recalls getting a blessing from then-Mayor Winnecke.

Renowned global design firm Sasaki is now spearheading the effort. Its resume includes Chicago’s riverwalk, Cincinnati’s riverfront and it’s currently working on a major new park development in Athens, Greece that will become Europe’s largest coastal park.



Cultural enhancements and various activities will continue to increase as Vanderburgh and its surrounding counties continue to improve in quality of life amenities.



“This is a plan to change our region using our most underutilized tool, which is the river, and then to leave behind a healthier waterway, and a cleaner and more connected community from all this work,” Armstrong shares, noting around 10,000 citizens in the region have been surveyed for their thoughts.

It will further build up and revitalize the riverfront with attractions, which currently features venues like Bally’s Evansville Casino & Hotel.

All told, Vanderburgh County is a burgeoning area with an abundance of

potential, fueled by an unwavering optimism and dedication to improve.

Perhaps Ryan best sums it up when relaying a recent conversation he had with an executive coach.

“I said, ‘Evansville is a state of mind as opposed to just this physical place,’” he recalls, imparting it’s a sentiment that holds true for the bank – and the community. “We wake up every day, and we think about how we can get a little bit better.”

RESOURCES: Josh Armstrong and Lloyd Winnecke, Evansville Regional Economic Partnership, at www.evansvilleregion.com | Steve Bridges, University of Southern Indiana, at www.usi.edu | Doug Petitt, United Leasing & Finance, at www.unitedevv.com | Jim Ryan, Old National, at www.oldnational.com