



PROPELLED BY ITS PEOPLE

Delaware County Making Moves

By Anthony Schoettle

Elizabeth Rowray is hurrying from one meeting to the next, when she's stopped by a colleague at the Indiana Statehouse. There are a million bills and policies running through her head, but this colleague wants to compliment her attire.

Rowray, who has been a State Representative since 2020, doesn't mind the interruption. In fact, she revels in it. It gives her a chance to talk about one of her favorite stores, Lois Pearl Boutique in her hometown of Yorktown in Delaware County.

If she had the time, Rowray would talk all day about the booming business climate in Delaware County and the growing number of events and attractions in the place she was born, raised and now lives.

"There's so much to see and do and have been so many quality of life improvements in recent years," notes Rowray, who also is the Greater Muncie Chamber of Commerce president and CEO.

As good as they are, all those attractions aren't the best part of Delaware County.

"It's the people here that truly make this place different," Rowray beams "I tell people all the time that there is no finer place. We exemplify Hoosier Hospitality plain and simple. Everywhere you turn, there are people who are loyal and will do anything for you. I've experienced that firsthand."

Lasting connections

Jeff Parsons, market president for First Merchants Bank in Delaware County, could have chosen from many places to live when beginning his career.

"People kept me here," remarks the 59-year-old executive who's been with First Merchants for more than 35 years. "I've worked with great people, we have great clients and I've built great relationships all around (the area)."

Adam Unger, president and CEO of Accutech Systems Corp., suggests there's a genuine connection in Muncie and Delaware County that sets it apart.

"Any community is only as good as its people, and we have a lot of really great people," he states. "Here you have connectivity to the people and can feel really a part of the community. There's a very special culture here."

Unger believes so much in the community, Accutech – which is primarily focused on making wealth management software – has spearheaded several downtown developments.

Muncie and Delaware County have been working with MakeMyMove, a private Indiana company focused on attracting people living outside Indiana to the Hoosier state. Muncie has been involved in this initiative for several years and the wider county is now becoming involved.

"Muncie has become very attractive for remote workers looking to relocate," stresses MakeMyMove co-founder and chief operating officer Evan Hock. "(Local) officials have done a great job telling their story, and they have a great story to tell. People from outside of that area who we've helped locate there find it so inviting, and a fantastic place to get plugged-in and become active in the community. Those people moving in are adding to the growth momentum the city of Muncie and Delaware County are already experiencing."

A strong manufacturing hub in the 1970s and 1980s, Delaware County has seen a good chunk of its manufacturing sector – including Ball Corp. and various automotive companies – close or move away over the last four decades. But after 50 years of population declines, the

U.S. Census Bureau data shows that pendulum has started to swing in the opposite direction. In the last three years, the population has grown by more than 400 in Muncie alone. Other parts of the county have seen growth too.

“This is just the beginning,” emphasizes Muncie Mayor Dan Ridenour. “Our business sector is seeing growth, our downtown is being revitalized, we have new, exciting housing options, a growing list of amenities and events and much more.”

An Indianapolis native, employment brought Ridenour to town. “We fell in love with it here,” Ridenour shares. “It’s like no other place I’ve ever lived. It’s the perfect size city and county, and with Ball State (University) here, that really adds to the community in so many ways. Everything you need is right here.”

Delaware County residents coming together to aid one another was on full display in early April as a tornado ripped through the county.

“People at all levels in this county are eager to help and be of service,” says Delaware County Commissioner Stephen Brand. “There’s such cooperation between cities, towns and county officials ... and there’s a responsiveness to people’s needs here. Beyond (government, police and fire officials) rushing into help, citizens here are just as eager to help one another.”

Lots to see and do

All the praise for the people in Delaware County doesn’t mean there isn’t much new and exciting happening there.

“People who haven’t been here in awhile wouldn’t believe all that’s happening unless you see for yourself,” declares Ball State President Geoffrey Mearns. “When Ball State graduates come back to visit and haven’t been here for a few years, they’re blown away.”

Ball State is involved in some of the biggest county improvement projects.

The university is spearheading a \$210 million public-private renovation and improvement project to an area on the south end of its campus called The Village. The effort includes a new performing arts center; boutique lodging (Cantio Hotel); the Center for Innovation, which will support local businesses and entrepreneurs; owner-occupied housing, apartments and retail space.

Three projects in The Village – the hotel, performance arts center and innovation center – are under construction and will be completed in summer 2026. Ground will be broken on the housing sites this year and units are expected to be done within 18 to 24 months.

“We are a public university, and we believe taking a leadership role is part of our mission,” Mearns stresses. “We’re not just located here. We want to be an engine for economic

growth and civic vitality.”

Ball State officials are hopeful these developments will entice its graduates to remain local and more of its faculty and staff to live in the county.

For decades, city and county officials were narrowly focused on drawing businesses to the area. Now though, area officials have shifted and have begun to focus on quality of life issues and amenities, realizing that’s what will draw people to live, work and attend school in Delaware County.

“All the way up through the early part of the 2000s, it was an almost singular focus on business attraction and not enough on quality of life,” notes Michael Hicks, a Ball State economist known statewide and nationally.

“The community is in the process of trying to really make this a place where people want to work and live,” adds Hicks, who is the George and Frances Ball distinguished professor of

economics and the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State. “County officials have seriously focused on quality of life ... I think you’re likely to see improvements for decades to come.”

Path to prosperity

The Cardinal Greenways Trail draws businesses and residents alike. The attraction spans 62.3 miles through five east central Indiana counties. Of those, 22.5 miles of the trail – as well as its depot headquarters complete with gift shop – are in Delaware County.

“This trail is a major selling point for this county,” remarks Angie Pool, CEO of the private nonprofit that operates and maintains the trail. “Companies want to be located on the trail and they want a spur from their property onto the trail. Information on the trail is in the packet of Ball State and IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital to give to prospective employees.”



New shift: Leaders for the city of Muncie and Ball State have begun to emphasize adding quality of place attractions, including performing arts venues and events. Few Indiana counties have more trails than Delaware County, including 22.5 miles of the Cardinal Greenways Trail as well as its depot headquarters.





Among the businesses moving to downtown Muncie is software firm Accutech Systems, which renovated an abandoned Sears store in a historic part of the city for its headquarters and opened a restaurant, The Clubhouse, there.

The trail is not only great for recreation; it's also becoming a transportation alternative.

"Fresh Tyme (grocery store) is just one example of a company that asked to have its property connected to the trail, and the city worked to make that happen," says Pool from the depot on Wisner Street on the edge of downtown Muncie. "Fresh Tyme asked for access to the trail as a condition to locate in Muncie."

Other attractions include the new \$32 million YMCA which opened next to Muncie Central High School in March. The 73,000-square-foot facility features a multi-purpose aquatics center with an eight-lane competition pool and diving well, a full-size gymnasium, specialized spaces for cooking and nutrition programs and a childcare center.

"This new YMCA is a world-class venue and its right near downtown," Unger relays. "It's a special place and is going to be a real draw to this community."

There are almost too many Delaware County attractions to count.

"The Muncie Children's Museum is one place that has spurred people and companies to move here," Rowray begins. "Additionally, the Garfield Trail (featuring Muncie-based Garfield comic strip), Ball State Museum of Art, concert venues in Yorktown and Muncie, the Bob Ross Experience (featuring the late painter, who filmed his PBS shows in Muncie), Minnetrista Museum & Gardens, Prairie Creek Reservoir, Academy of Model Aeronautics and the David Owsley Museum; these are all major draws."

The county's hotel inventory is a sign of

growth in the county, affirms LaShanta Vaughn, CEO of Destination Muncie. "We have had two new hotels open recently and a third is set to open in 2026," she explains. "These new developments are a direct result of increasing demand."

There are now 1,007 hotel rooms in Delaware County, and the annual hotel tax income has grown from \$770,000 in 2019 to \$1.2 million in 2024. "With all that's happening here, we're confident that will continue to grow," Vaughn states.

Rising accommodations

With everything taking place, it's no surprise that housing is in demand. For the eight years before Ridenour became Muncie mayor, there was an average of 16.1 residential units built annually. In the last four years, there has been an average of well over 100 housing builds a year, with one year seeing more than 200.

Among the new housing in Muncie is White River Lofts, a mixed-use riverfront building that includes 55 residential apartments with high quality finishes and views of the White River. In addition to the White River Lofts, the \$9 million project which took shape in 2021 includes a new riverfront plaza and riverwalk to provide an expansive public space that invites strolling, cycling and socializing, and also connects to Muncie's expansive trail network.

In the Delaware County areas outside Muncie, housing activity is also picking up.

"We're seeing improvements in a lot of

different places, including Yorktown, Albany, Selma, Daleville, Gaston and Eaton," offers Brand.

The county is "seeing its first new apartment complex in I don't know how long on South Cowan Road outside the city limits," he adds. Foundry Row Apartments, a 140-unit complex is being developed by TWG Development.

What's more, he says, the county has 70 applications this year for "housing starts. Some of those are multi-million-dollar homes."

'Vibrant' business scene

Muncie-Delaware County has four industrial parks offering hundreds of acres of fully serviceable sites. Among recent business coups is the 2022 addition of a Canpack facility and the doubling in size of the local Delaware Dynamics facility.

First Merchants Bank, Indiana's second largest bank, is just one of the companies with expanding roots.

"When I joined the company in 1989, it had 250 employees. We now have 2,200," Parsons explains. "When I started, we had \$300 million in assets. Today we have \$18.5 billion in assets."

Parsons, a Delaware County native who graduated from Delta High School and Ball State, also has seen growth in other sectors.

"Despite some manufacturing departures, Muncie is still a hotbed for the manufacturing and industrial sector, but at a smaller scale," Parsons surmises. "With the redevelopment happening in The Village and downtown and other parts of the city, we think the business climate here is quite vibrant."

RESOURCES: Stephen Brand, Delaware County, at www.co.delaware.in.us | Michael Hicks and Geoffrey Mearns, Ball State University, at www.bsu.edu | Evan Hock, MakeMyMove, at www.makemymove.com | Jeff Parsons, First Merchants Bank, at www.firstmerchants.com | Angie Pool, Cardinal Greenways Trail, at cardinalgreenways.org | Mayor Dan Ridenour, City of Muncie, at www.muncie.in.gov | Elizabeth Rowray, Greater Muncie Chamber of Commerce, at www.munciechamber.org | Adam Unger, Accutech Systems Corp., at trustasc.com | LaShanta Vaughn, Destination Muncie, at destinationmuncie.org