



# MESMERIZING MONROE COUNTY

## Collaboration, Innovation Fuel Growth

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

Monroe County is a sight to behold – literally and figuratively.

First, there's its scenic beauty and quality-of-life amenities. Miles of trails entice hikers and nature enthusiasts (Bloomington was built inside a national forest, after all). Tourists and residents alike dive into boating, swimming and more at Lake Monroe, Indiana's largest land-bound body of water. Festivals, farmers' markets and a host of restaurants (including International Row in downtown Bloomington) offer conversation and cuisine. And legendary Indiana University attracts bright minds as well as sports enthusiasts.

But the allure of Bloomington – and Monroe County – extends to a unique spirit of collaboration and a commitment to innovation. One of the major projects underway is the Trades District, a 12-acre technology park in downtown Bloomington made possible through a \$16 million Lilly Endowment College and Community Collaboration (CCC) grant awarded to IU.

"Think of it as almost a campus-like environment that's attractive for companies and talent," remarks former Bloomington mayor John Fernandez, who's leading the effort. He's also CEO of The Mill, a non-profit center for coworking and entrepreneurship that is part of the Trades District. "(That area) is very close to the university, to our core downtown and to a lot of housing to the west."

He characterizes the Trades District as a curated neighborhood that will house and support startup, scale-up community and tech-forward industries.

"Building a place that feels like home for talented people that are in the 25- to 45-year-old demographic is a big mission of the Trades District,"

Fernandez observes. "If you think of Bloomington almost from a brand perspective, it's a place where emerging growth companies and innovative companies can thrive. But it's also a community where talent can thrive. So, we think of that as our brand: where technology and the creative community kind of come together to drive economic development with a soul."

The county's primary industry clusters – life sciences, advanced manufacturing tech and microelectronics defense – also are experiencing growth beyond the Trades District. Approximately \$750 million in investments poured in between 2020 and January 2025.

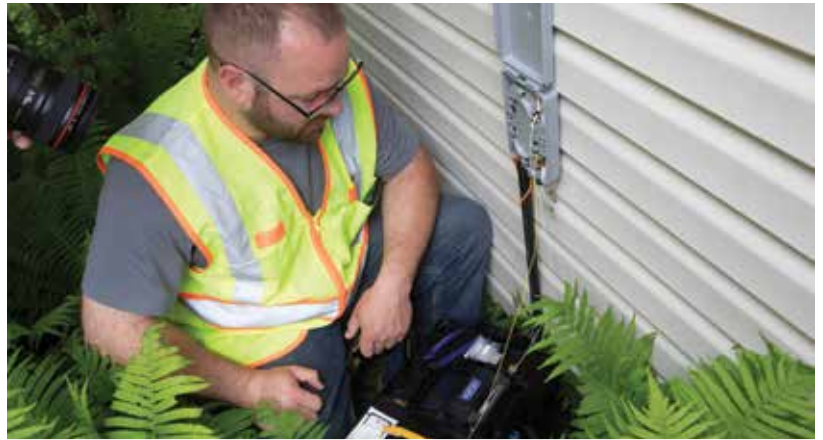
Among them is Simtra BioPharma Solutions' (formerly Baxter's) \$250 million facility expansion (announced in 2024), which involved adding syringe fill lines, increasing lyophilization capabilities and supporting clinical-scale production at its manufacturing campus. Last fall, the parent company of Danish pharmaceutical manufacturer Novo Nordisk acquired several Catalent sites worldwide (including the Bloomington location) through a \$16.5 billion purchase.

### Driving development

The origins of the life sciences industry in Monroe County start with Bloomington-based Cook Group.

"It's an interesting story," declares Dan Peterson, vice president of industry and government affairs. "In 1963, Bill Cook, his wife and their one-year-old son moved to Bloomington from Chicago. Gayle, his wife, had gone to school here. Bill always wanted to start his own company. ... So, (the business) literally started in an apartment on the east side of Bloomington out of a spare bedroom."

The organization started as a medical device company. Today, Cook Group Incorporated (the holding company within the Cook family of



(Left) Weddle Bros. Construction Companies has approximately 500 employees; an estimated 40% are located in Monroe County. (Top right) TASUS is an automotive tier two and tier one supplier, but has been exploring diversifying into other industries. The Smithville Charitable Foundation, represented by Darby McCarty and Cullen McCarty, has awarded more than \$10 million in grants since its founding.

companies) employs 12,000-plus globally. Its business portfolio includes companies working in areas such as life sciences, business services, resorts and property management.

“Cook has been intertwined in the development of the growth of the city and the county since the 1960s (through its CFC Properties real estate arm),” Peterson shares. He cites as examples the Fountain Square Mall project in the 1980s and converting the Showers Brothers Furniture Factory into the current site of Bloomington’s City Hall.

In recent years, others have joined Cook’s lead. In 2023, manufacturer of injection molded closures PHOENIX invested \$15 million in equipment at the former Otis Elevator facility. This summer, Canadian steel fabrication business Almvoy announced it will locate its new U.S. headquarters at the same building.

Redevelopment of existing structures “breathes new life into these facilities,” notes Jennifer Pearl, president of the Bloomington Economic Development Corporation (BEDC). “There’s great stuff happening here.”

### Building momentum

The hospitality industry is changing Bloomington’s landscape with a \$71 million

expansion of the current convention center (which will be the Bloomington Convention Center), Posh Hotel residential condominium project and a new hotel in the Trades District.

A key component of the Trades District is the aforementioned co-working space, The Mill, established in 2018 and located in the former Showers building. Thus far, a sampling of its businesses include a legal tech company, autonomous racing team, artificial intelligence, health tech, robotics and business software service companies.

“The CCC grant for the Trades District was awarded to IU, but it’s really three partners: the City of Bloomington, The Mill and IU,” remarks Anne Bono, director of regional and state economic development at IU. “We have staff housed at The Mill for implementation. We have a corporate recruitment working group made up of IU faculty and staff that’s working on business leads and on alumni-owned businesses to recruit back. And we also partner with IU Innovates, which is for student and faculty entrepreneurship.

“There’s also a huge arts component piece with IU faculty, staff and students to build large scale art projects in the trades district. So, we’re trying to make sure it’s an

innovation district that has this sense of place and is also a cultural destination.”

Across the street from The Mill is The Forge, a new office building containing businesses that are either scaling up or are already mature.

“We’re very interested in the talent they’re bringing into our campus – talent that can complement the work of some of our new companies, but also vice versa,” Fernandez explains, “and really build that kind of spill-over benefit to help build a vibrant, growing tech-forward industry here in Bloomington.”

Amid the excitement of new ideas and opportunities, there can be a sense of dread fueled by change and the unknown.

Michael Huber, vice president for university relations at Indiana University, contends that the community’s commitment to embracing change is a key strength.

“Change in any community is hard,” he acknowledges. “But when you’ve got local government leadership and the university and the private sector pulling all in the same direction, that’s huge because we’re all working together and also trying to convince the community that you’ve got to evolve. Change is not the enemy.”



IU 2030: The Indiana University Strategic Plan emphasizes three pillars: student success and opportunity, transformative research and creativity, and service to our state and beyond.

## Community collaboration, housing

The Town of Ellettsville has a rich limestone history and small-town feel. As it's continued to grow, area leaders launched a community-based visioning process in the years prior to COVID to develop a comprehensive plan. The effort was led by the Town of Ellettsville, the Ellettsville Area Chamber of Commerce, Ellettsville Main Street program and Edgewood Schools in partnership with the business community and culminated in the creation of *Envision Ellettsville* in 2022.

The vision “is all around being a complete community – meaning that we want you to come into (town) and get everything you need,” explains Christa Curtis, president of the Ellettsville Area Chamber board of directors (and vice president of global marketing and communications at Cook Group Incorporated). It created the roadmap for everything from downtown redevelopment to Parks and Rec and (enhancing connectivity). How you get around the community roads and sidewalks and trails.”

Affordable housing is a competitive advantage in Ellettsville, one that's led to a new mixed-use housing development called the Villages at Harman Farm consisting of more than 230 homes.

Pearl praises housing opportunities in Ellettsville: “Amongst the whole community, the median age of residents is 39. These are families, and that's exactly the type of growth that you want to see in your community. They also have among the highest household incomes in our county as well. We're seeing local leadership in Ellettsville embrace these opportunities for growth.”

Affordable housing in Bloomington, however, is a longtime challenge.

“I would say, for quite some time, Bloomington has struggled because we have a relatively low-income county where Bloomington is (located) but a very high housing cost,” asserts Nathan Ferreira, executive director of the Bloomington Housing Authority (BHA).

In response, the BHA and its Summit Hill Community Development Corporation nonprofit are working on projects such as The Rev. Dr. Marvin Chandler Early Learning Center. The building will have childcare services on one floor and apartments on the other.

“For low-income families, sometimes the biggest expense in their household or the second in some cases, is childcare over their housing costs,” Ferreira states. “We felt that getting that infant and toddler care within walking distance was key to helping people basically get off of assistance and become more self-sufficient.”

Another undertaking is redeveloping the historic Kohr Administration Building into apartments on the site of the former IU Health Bloomington campus in the Hopewell Neighborhood. The \$19 million Kohr Community Flats project will offer 38 affordable one- and two-bedroom units.

## Giving back

Many of the employers in Monroe County promote philanthropy. At Hoosier Energy, a generation and transmission electric cooperative, volunteerism is built into the culture.

“As a cooperative, there are cooperative principles (we follow),” says manager of government and community relations Matt Randall. “For us, one of those that's baked into our business model is what we call concern for community.

“We celebrate employees that engage in either volunteerism or leading other nonprofits outside of work,” he continues. “Hoosier Energy commits roughly \$100,000 each year toward its Community Impact Fund. I lead a team that supports a whole host of nonprofits and groups throughout the year. We kind of have separate categories for that: Quality of life is one of them. (There are) lots of different types of initiatives. For instance, one of my favorites is the cancer support community based in Bloomington. They do incredible things for patients and families that are dealing with either a cancer diagnosis or treatment.”

Established in 1922, Smithville also looks out for the region. The Ellettsville-headquartered family-owned business, which provides premier fiber internet, voice and security services to 17 Hoosier counties, gives through its Smithville Foundation and other endeavors.

“Our people are involved in work for nonprofits throughout the state,” president Paul Quick proudly relates. “For example, for at least five and a half of the years I've been here (at Smithville), I served on the board of New Hope for Families, which is an organization that focuses on homelessness and keeping the families together as they go



The annual Indiana Limestone Symposium in Ellettsville features carving opportunities for people of all ages and experience levels.

through a homeless experience. Our company not only gives back money, but our people give back time to the community. That makes a difference in a community. It's not always just about money. It's also about sharing your wisdom and giving your time."

### Powering the next generation

TASUS Corporation supplies plastic molded components, converted products and distributed products to the automotive and transportation markets. It operates manufacturing production facilities in Bloomington and Alabama as well as a second Bloomington location.

"TASUS has been in Bloomington for 35 years," remarks president Amy Ketcham. "It's owned by a Japanese company (TSUCHIYA Group North America) that's a third-generation, privately held family (entity). We have about 150 employees in Bloomington and the plant in Alabama is about the same size."

Ketcham is passionate about cultivating the next generation of talent – and keeping it in Monroe County.

"I grew up in Bloomington," she reflects. "I went to college at Indiana University and my career kept me here. ... My path never took me away from Bloomington, so it's always felt like home to me. It's just a great community. As far as TASUS is concerned, the one thing I've always loved about being a part of this team is that collectively the culture is always about making it better, whether that be the manufacturing process or a customer product or our community."

TASUS collaborates with Hoosier Hills Career Center to provide hands-on learning opportunities.

"We have a student who's starting to work with us in our maintenance group," Ketcham observes. "We partner with ROI (Regional Opportunity Initiatives), and have a high school apprentice with us in our IT department (doing) rotations through the different parts from programming to networking so he can see what those different roles are and what he might be more interested in."

Hoosier Energy supports skills training and scholarships for electric line workers and others.

"When students have an interest in our industry, which is kind of a unique and niche industry from a skillset perspective, we like to encourage (them)," Randall comments. "So, whether it's members of ours that have a career or community days (or similar events), we're right alongside them financially but also with our people. We also support skills awareness

through local career days and 4-H programs and STEM programs at local elementary schools. We want to grow, nurture and keep homegrown talent as much as possible."

### 'People working together and trying to get things done right'

Weddle Bros. was formed nearly 80 years ago in Bloomington and has offices in Evansville and Indianapolis. It specializes in self-perform (using its own people and equipment instead of subcontracting) and construction management services as well as general contracting and design build.

Customers range from higher education and life sciences to health care and manufacturing.

Lee Carmichael, a lifelong Monroe County resident, is chairman of Weddle's board of directors. He retired from the organization as

Fernandez is trying to create through there. You've got the university. There's a lot of different dynamics through here. And IU Health is a big player in town as well. People will embrace and work together and invest not only dollars in Monroe County, but they'll invest themselves. That's another strength we have."

Though not located in Monroe County, the Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center, Crane Division still has a big effect. "It drives a lot of the need for technology and space that's very secure, which all plays into the success of Monroe County," Carmichael notes.

According to the BEDC, one-third of Crane's workforce lives in Monroe County.

"We've seen interest in growth tied to the defense industry as well, or from companies that serve both defense and civil applications," Pearl shares. "That's been a lot of the



Hoosier Energy encourages employee volunteerism with various causes such as Habitat for Humanity. In addition, it commits about \$100,000 each year toward its community impact fund.

president and CEO in 2022 when Bruce Carter moved into the position.

"(It's) the people working together and trying to get things done right," he contends when reflecting on what sets Monroe County apart. "Monroe County's unique in really pushing quality of life. Lake Monroe attracts a lot of folks here. Just the whole atmosphere of downtown that exists within the community."

Carter cites the leadership of elected officials, such as new Mayor Kerry Thomson. "That strength that is truly a differentiator for Monroe County. They challenge each other, but at the same time those challenges bring solid results and positive spin that rises to the top."

Carmichael seconds that: "We've got a fantastic chamber. We've got a fantastic economic development (corporation), but you've got to have public officials buying into that. You've got The Mill and everything John

opportunity in what we see on the horizon."

Fernandez puts an exclamation point on what he's witnessing firsthand.

"In all the years I've been involved with economic development – and even in my professional life – I've never seen the level of alignment between Bloomington's leadership that I see today.

"From the president of the university to the leadership at Cook, to the mayor, to our friends at Crane and other corporate partners. Everybody's very focused on the opportunities in front of us," he affirms.

"People are looking at the work we do from almost a civic platform perspective – how we're all aligning around the big impacts we collectively need. We are so well positioned to have impact over the next several years that it makes it really exciting to get up and do the work that we do every day."

**RESOURCES:** Anne Bono and Michael Huber, Indiana University, at [bloomington.iu.edu](http://bloomington.iu.edu) | Bruce Carter and Lee Carmichael, Weddle Bros., at [www.weddlebros.com](http://www.weddlebros.com) | Christa Curtis, Ellettsville Area Chamber of Commerce, at [www.ellettsvillechamber.org](http://www.ellettsvillechamber.org) | John Fernandez, The Mill, at [www.dimensionmill.org](http://www.dimensionmill.org) | Nathan Ferreira, Bloomington Housing Authority, at [www.bhaindiana.net](http://www.bhaindiana.net) | Amy Ketcham, TASUS Corporation, at [www.tasus.com](http://www.tasus.com) | Jennifer Pearl, Bloomington Economic Development Corporation, at [www.bloomingtonedc.com](http://www.bloomingtonedc.com) | Dan Peterson, Cook Group Incorporated, at [www.cookgroup.com](http://www.cookgroup.com) | Paul Quick, Smithville, at [www.smithville.com](http://www.smithville.com) | Matt Randall, Hoosier Energy, at [www.hoosierenergy.com](http://www.hoosierenergy.com)