



Known as the "Orthopedic Capital of the World," Kosciusko County has approximately 6,800 workers in the orthopedic manufacturing industry.



Yamaha

COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR

GOING 'ALL IN'

Kosciusko County United in Vision

By Anthony Schoettle

Kosciusko County is well known across – and beyond – Indiana for many things.

It's an orthopedics epicenter, with some of the world's best known medical device manufacturers. Those companies offer a plethora of high-tech jobs that have kept the community's economy humming.

It also has some of the richest farmland in the Midwest and a vibrant agricultural economy.

Kosciusko County's various lakes, including the state's largest natural lake – Lake Wawasee – attract tens of thousands of visitors to their shores every year.

The county's 300 miles of trails are second to none, drawing myriad of walkers, joggers, hikers and cycling enthusiasts to the county annually.

But there's even more percolating in this northern Indiana region, although some of these developments might be – at least for now – a bit less known than Kosciusko County's signature strengths.

"There's been a recent movement here," explains Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Rob Parker. "And it's starting to really gain momentum.

"We believe this (award) reflects the dedication, collaboration and welcoming spirit that defines our community. We are confident that this approach will continue to guide us toward a stronger, brighter future – one that brings opportunity and prosperity to all who call Kosciusko County home."

On the rise

An example of that momentum is saving one of the best golf courses in Indiana, Stonehenge Golf Course, which was closed for a couple of years but recently acquired and relaunched by the Kosciusko Economic Development Corporation (KEDCo).

Another major coup was the transformation of the RR Donnelley printing plant in Warsaw into Slate Auto's production facility for electric vehicles, which is expected to bring in 2,000 jobs.

The factory floor that once printed millions of Sears catalogs and Yellow Pages directories is set to roar back to life, this time with electric trucks instead of paper. Slate Auto recently cast a vision for its \$400 million investment over the next two decades.

The county's ability to attract Slate marks a dramatic turnaround for the 1.4-million-square-foot facility, which sat empty after the printing company closed in 2023, eliminating the last 525 jobs from a factory that had employed thousands over its 65-year history.

Additional proof of the county's upswing is \$30 million secured from the state with the help of local lawmakers state Sen. Ryan Mishler and state Rep. Craig Snow. There's an effort to get federal matching grants to go with at least some of this state funding.

The money, which will be funneled through the OrthoWorx Vision Committee, is aimed at supporting efforts to attract talent and retain and expand the orthopedic device industry in the region. While some of these projects could be completed within a few years, others are more long term.



The county boasts a growing number of unique attractions and events. The Warsaw Summer Concert Series held in the Central Park Plaza and Central Park Glover Pavilion is a big draw for visitors and locals.



Parker notes that many Kosciusko County players have come together to make things come to fruition.

"It comes down to a simple phrase: ALL IN Kosciusko County," Parker emphasizes. "We're all in to make this community better."

But ALL IN Kosciusko is more than a catchphrase. It's a formalized movement.

The ALL IN initiative emerged in the mid-2020s from discussions among civic and industry leaders to address broad economic strength and talent retention, leveraging historic state and Lilly Endowment grants to create a collaborative platform and a unified message for the county's growth and innovation. It serves to align the county's varied strengths in orthopedics, agriculture and education to foster a shared, collaborative future.

Business boom

As they were researching where to

locate its new factory, officials for Troy, Michigan-based Slate discovered something locals had known for a long time and had been blowing the trumpet more loudly about more recently.

"We do everything we can, across the entire county, to work with businesses to make them as successful here as possible," relays Kosciusko County Commissioner Cary Groninger. "It's truly a team effort and something you can see the fruit of."

Groninger speaks from a place of experience. In addition to being the president of the Kosciusko County Commissioners, he is president of the Groninger family of companies, including G&G Hauling and Excavating and Groninger Group, both based in Kosciusko County.

Slate CEO Chris Barman, a Crown Point native and fifth-generation Hoosier, said he could tell during the firm's due diligence

phase Warsaw and Kosciusko County would be a place where his company could thrive.

“Several states competed for the factory and as we went through the process, I never put my thumb on the scale. This location had to win outright, and it sure did,” Barman exclaims. “I’m honored to take a piece of the industry and bring it back to where I was born and raised.”

What Barman said he and other Slate officials discovered is that Kosciusko County is a place where people work together to get things done, government officials support businesses’ growth efforts, a strong educational system – including a good K-12 system and Ivy Tech and Grace College – and there’s an ample workforce talent supply.

“What Slate is about to build for America begins in Warsaw,” he emphasizes.

Mindy Creighton Truex isn’t surprised Slate – and other business leaders – have become smitten with Kosciusko County.

Her grandfather started farming in Kosciusko County in 1925, and that grew into one of the biggest egg production operations, Creighton Brothers, in the U.S. The company’s large flock of hens lay nearly a billion eggs annually, and the company is well known globally in the agribusiness industry. It also runs the Crazy Egg Café and Coffee Bar, a regional destination on Old Road 30 in Warsaw.

“Creighton Brothers has been a part of the farm community in Kosciusko County from the beginning,” Truex touts.

“There’s good, rich soil here and we have good water sources, including the Tippecanoe River, which is a source for our irrigation. With all the lakes, rivers and nature side, this has been a great place to live and to work.”

The county has a decidedly bucolic feel, with Warsaw – population just under 16,500 – as its biggest city. But, Truex points out, “we’re halfway between South Bend and Fort Wayne and halfway between Indianapolis and Chicago. We have a very good 500-mile radius, with Detroit in the mix as well, and that’s attractive for a variety of businesses.”

Jerry Yeager, president of SYM Financial Advisors in Winona Lake, like Truex has realized the beauty of Kosciusko County more acutely after a time away.

“Coming back home (he was born in Warsaw) did not seem like a sacrifice at all,” says Yeager, who now runs the organization started by his father, Charles Yeager. “We are a company of Midwest values and Kosciusko County is a poster child for that.”

SYM has six offices and does business globally, but one of the things that makes it so attractive in Kosciusko County is the startup scene. “Entrepreneurism is a big deal here. It’s in the DNA,” Yeager believes. “And that’s been very good for our business.”

Additionally, he says: “My office is in Winona Lake, and the whole community was revitalized by a guy, Brent Wilcoxson, a Grace College graduate who was (previously) in my company. It took a plan, a lot of money and some real execution. We have four restaurants we can walk to from my office, and the lake is just beautiful. It’s a great setting (in which) to work and certainly to live.”

Amazing attractions

Winona Lake is certainly on the top of many lists in terms of attractions in Kosciusko County. But it’s hardly alone. Wawasee, Tippecanoe Lake, Syracuse Lake, Webster Lake, Chapman Lake and other lakes and charming towns dot the landscape.



Opportunities for highly skilled technical talent in Kosciusko County have never been higher, partly due to the work of the OrthoWorx Vision Committee, which is aimed at supporting efforts to attract talent and retain and expand the orthopedic device industry in the region.



Troy, Michigan-based Slate Auto, a maker of electric vehicles, chose Kosciusko County over a host of suitors for its newest high-tech production facility, bringing 2,000 jobs to the area.



Kosciusko County is a well-known agricultural epicenter. Creighton Brothers (shown) has a flock of hens that lay nearly a billion eggs annually. The county is also home to Maple Leaf Farms, a large duck producer, and Louis Dreyfus Company, which operates a major soybean crushing and biodiesel plant, among others.

“Being named Community of the Year means a lot because it’s a way to showcase why this is a wonderful place to live, work and play,” states Cori Humes, executive director at Visit Kosciusko County.

A fair number of people have already figured that out. And that number is growing. In 2024, Kosciusko County had 2.1 million visitors (who tallied 13 million visits); that total is on pace to increase this year.

Those visitors bring a serious economic impact, to the tune of \$186.3 million in 2023, according to Visit Kosciusko County. That’s up from pre-pandemic spending levels.

“Tourism is big business here,” Humes stresses. “We’re trying to share that quality of life story in Kosciusko County. And it all starts with a visit.”

Major attractions in Kosciusko County include cultural sites like the Wagon Wheel Center for the Arts and the Old Jail Museum, historical destinations such as the Winona History Center and the Billy Sunday Home Museum, and recreational areas like Winona Lake and Tippy Creek Winery, along with numerous lakes perfect for outdoor activities including boating, water skiing, kayaking, sailing and fishing. Pierceton is a known antique shop mecca. There are also numerous waterfront restaurants, from fine dining to pizza.

Major events in Kosciusko County include seasonal festivals like the Mentone Egg Festival, Heirloom Tomato Festival and the Dixie Day Festival, alongside recurring events such as the monthly Warsaw Third Friday art and vendor event and the annual Kosciusko County Fair and Taste of Kosciusko. The July 4 fireworks show on Lake Wawasee



Winona Lake – with its annual Fat and Skinny Tire Fest – in particular has become well known for its bike trails.

is one of the Midwest’s best. The county also hosts arts and culture events at the Wagon Wheel Center for the Arts and other locations.

“We have 10 great communities offering such great events,” Humes praises. “Many of them are free to attend.”

Fostering talent

Educational opportunities in Kosciusko County are their own big lure – and range from K-12 schooling to higher education, technical training and adult education. The county offers public and private options, with a focus on career readiness and meeting the needs of local industries like manufacturing

and orthopedics as well as college preparation.

“I would put this county’s schools up next to any in the state,” says Warsaw Mayor Jeff Grose. “We learned a long time ago, if you’re going to grow as a community you have to serve the youth.”

Kosciusko County has a special place in Grose’s heart. In addition to serving as a local politician for 26 years, he worked as an educator for 35 years, teaching social studies at Warsaw High School, the same school at which he earned Indiana Mr. Basketball in 1985.

“We have the personnel, scores and data that verify our schools are preparing kids to be the next generation of leaders,” Grose insists.



Grace College and Ivy Tech Community College have growing campuses in the county, and locals have made a hard push to retain the students as residents after graduation.



Kosciusko County is dotted with charming lake communities and other towns filled with unique shops and eateries.

Grose and his wife, Rachel, sent their four now grown children through the local school system. “It’s definitely prepared them for a successful future,” he says. “And it’s not just the K-12 system that’s strong here. Ivy Tech and Grace College are growing their curriculums. Notably, Grace College is expanding its engineering department.”

Humes moved to the county with her husband, Jeremy, and their children nearly four years ago.

“We knew the school system here was a big plus,” she imparts. “We wouldn’t be here otherwise. It’s one of the reasons we were eager to come here.”

“The communication from the all the teachers and administrators is very good. The class offerings, instruction and extracurriculars are all top-notch.”

Power of the people

For all its amenities, attractions, natural resources and beauty, great jobs and high-achieving school systems, residents unanimously say none of those things are Kosciusko County’s strongest attribute.

“I was drawn here, even without the family business,” Truex puts forth. “I wanted to live my life here. It’s hard to sum up. Kosciusko County has so much to offer, but as I think about it, it’s the people that truly set this place apart.”

“Maybe it’s the Midwest values or the warmth of Midwest people here. There’s so much good and so much caring about your

neighbor here,” emphasizes County Commissioner Sue Ann Mitchell. “People rely on each other and lean on each other. There’s always an open door here and a warm heart behind it. More than any other resource, we have that here.”

A host of Kosciusko County residents embody that, of course, but two most often get mentioned: Mary Louise Miller and Suzie Light.

Mary Louise and her husband Dane Miller were known in the Winona Lake and Warsaw communities for their kindness and generosity. Dane co-founded Biomet, now Zimmer Biomet, in 1977. Before he died, he said that wouldn’t have been possible without his wife’s support and insight.

“If you’ve ever traveled on the greenways in Winona Lake, shopped at The Village at Winona or ice skated at the Miller Sunset Pavilion, you have Dr. Dane and Mary Louise to thank,” explains Jim Lancaster, a recently retired Zimmer Biomet executive and longtime Kosciusko County advocate and volunteer.

Mary Louise Miller, who died in September, “was one of the most kind-hearted people you would ever want to meet. She absolutely had a generational impact on this community,” Lancaster notes.

According to Grace College, the Millers created the Dr. Dane and Mary Louise Miller Foundation to support leadership in philanthropy, public service and the advancement of the sciences. The foundation has supported numerous nonprofits and

thousands of families.

Even in her death, she’s bringing people together, according to Lancaster. “When someone like that dies, people realize you have to come together to at least try to fill that void, and that’s exactly what’s happening here.”

Moreover, Yeager believes, “You can’t tell the story of Kosciusko County and not mention Suzie Light. She’s so passionate about the community and the Kosciusko County Community Foundation. By working alongside of her, I learned just how generous our community is.”

When Light started working – initially 20 hours a week – for the Community Foundation in 1994, it had \$400,000 under management. It now has more than \$100 million.

“Through hard work, determination, dedication and even a little imaginative thinking, Suzie really tapped into the generosity of this community,” Yeager notes.

“She’s been retired from the foundation for a couple of years now, but her legacy lives on and that is born out by the love and generosity of the people here.”

Stephanie Overbey replaced Light as CEO of the foundation and Yeager shares she’s in “lock step” with Light’s vision.

“Some civic, community and business leaders and politicians talk a good game, but in Kosciusko County there’s a real belief in serving one another,” Yeager surmises. “Maybe that’s the secret here. It’s in serving and giving that we receive.” ■