



# GATEWAY TO THE WEST

## Indiana's West Central Counties Build on Unity

By Matt Ottinger

When Hoosiers think about the rural counties near the Illinois border, magnificent scenescapes like Sugar Creek, Turkey Run and Shades State Park likely come to mind.

But beyond the ravines, covered bridges and river bends lies a much more complex and evolving story – one shaped not only by natural beauty, but by people deeply invested in the future of counties like Fountain, Montgomery, Parke, Vermillion and Warren.

This region of the state is defined by a passionate sense of place, a tradition of service and a growing collaboration among healthcare providers, economic developers, bankers and community leaders, who are working to ensure that rural life remains not just viable, but vibrant. And that's not to mention acclaimed destinations like The Beef House Restaurant in Covington, an annual destination for this reporter through the years while returning from fishing trips to Canada.

These counties are not stagnant or resigned to decline; they are adaptive, forward-looking and increasingly focused on leveraging their strengths – quality of life, human connection, agriculture, natural resources and community pride – while confronting challenges that are

familiar across the state and unique to more rural locales.

### A healthy perspective

Healthcare access is a critical component to well-being in a rural region. Few organizations would be better suited to illustrate the positive momentum, and identify remaining challenges, than Valley Professionals Community Health Center.

“Valley Professionals is a federally qualified health center, and we provide services in Parke County, Vermillion County, Montgomery County and Vigo County,” summarizes Tiffani Martin, vice president and chief human resources and legal officer. “Our services include primary care, behavioral healthcare, psychiatric, chiropractic, dental and a lot of support services.”

That breadth of offerings is all-encompassing – and necessary. Martin explains that in smaller communities, patients often lack the ability – or the transportation – to piece together care from multiple providers spread across several counties. Valley Professionals has built what she describes as a more holistic, integrated model.

“All of these services – community health navigators, support services, case managers – they all work together to treat the whole person, not just one part,” she reports. “Especially in rural communities, they can't get it anywhere else.”

The organization's growth tells the story of rising demand and a competent provider ready to serve. When Martin started in 2011, Valley Professionals employed just 21 people and operated two sites.

Turkey Run State Park became Indiana's second state park in 1916 and now attracts over one million visitors each year. The Parke County destination remains a gem of west central Indiana. (Photo courtesy of Harrison Cline)

Today, after the acquisition of JR Pharmacy and continued expansion, the organization employs over 350 people and assists about 30,000 patients across the region.

Yet numbers alone don't capture the mission. Valley Professionals serves everyone – from patients with Medicaid, Medicare or commercial insurance to those with no insurance at all.

"Anybody that doesn't have insurance, we do have a sliding fee scale for them as well," Martin notes. "Our mission's basically to serve the rural community and uninsured."

Recruiting skilled workers – physicians, dentists, CMAs, LPNs, behavioral health clinicians – remains one of Valley Professionals' greatest hurdles. "It's not just doctors," Martin imparts. "Our hardest is dentists, especially those who want to serve the underserved community."

The shortage is compounded by generational shifts in medicine. When Martin began her work in Parke County, the youngest physician there was 61 years old.

"Since then, all of them have retired," she points out. "The landscape of medicine has changed."

Telemedicine has helped fill some gaps, particularly in psychiatry and behavioral health, but even that solution reveals deeper rural inequities.

"I truly do not have cell service in my house," Martin explains. "I have to use Wi-Fi calling, and we use Starlink for internet. Just last year was the first year I was able to stream TV."

For lower-income families, the cost and availability of internet access remain real barriers – limiting the reach of telehealth and other digital services.

## Evolution in education

Martin indeed has seen progress and persistent gaps in the region over the past 10-15 years. One of the most significant changes in Parke County has been in education.

"Turkey Run and Rockville consolidated, and now we're under Parke Heritage," she offers. "One of the opportunities for my kids that wasn't there for me is the partnership with Ivy Tech (Community College) – AP classes and getting college credits in high school."

At the same time, she is candid about the ongoing disadvantages rural schools face.

"Rural communities, I think, are a little bit forgotten," Martin believes. "In the education system, funding for the schools is lagging behind."

## Back home again

Like many natives of rural Indiana,



Comprehensive care provider Valley Professionals Community Health Center has grown to serve around 30,000 patients in the west central Indiana region.

personal chapters include leaving their respective areas for a metropolitan experience at some point. However, the lure of the countryside and lack of a big city's hustle and bustle can sometimes warrant a return.

It's a sentiment Martin knows well. A Rockville native, she attended college and law school at Purdue University and Indiana University (in Indianapolis).

"I was probably one of those kids that said I'd never come back, but I did after having kids," Martin reflects.

"We lived in Greenwood while I was finishing law school, and so when I graduated, I wanted to go back home," she adds. "I wanted to go back into the middle of the cornfields – to the slower pace. And where I live currently, my husband and I have a sheep farm there and our kids do 4-H."

Cyndi Todd, executive director of Partnership Parke County, has lived in the county almost her entire life, but having a career there was a new experience when she began in her role in 2015.

"It's been really interesting because in my adult career, I never worked in Parke County (before this role)," she explains. "I was always in Vigo (County) and Marion County – and the company I was working for was going to relocate to the East Coast."

"I got connected with some folks here that really wanted us as a county to do something a little differently when they thought about economic development," Todd recalls. "They engaged me on a contractual basis as a consultant to figure out what economic development in Parke County should look like, and I came back to them, presented the case to create a separate nonprofit organization and make it publicly/privately funded."

She finds the opportunity to work to

benefit Parke County "rewarding."

"I do tend to get very passionate about the things that we're working on here and get involved in a lot, serve on a lot of boards to represent our county well, I think, and making sure we're being noticed," Todd shares.

It's a life experience more people are enjoying, she contends.

Studies have placed Parke County among the top counties in Indiana for attracting remote workers – a trend Todd sees firsthand.

"If we have broadband here, they will come," she asserts, noting significant improvements in coverage are in process, enlisting both state and federal funds.

Much of the appeal comes down to quality of place. Cecil M. Harden Lake – better known as Raccoon Lake – along with state parks and abundant outdoor recreation have drawn families from urban areas seeking space, affordability and connection.

Todd reports, "We've had people say, 'I want to raise my young family somewhere more rural.'"

## Parke County's economic backbone

Healthcare is only one piece of rural vitality. Economic development – particularly in a county as small and scenic as Parke County – requires creativity, realism and persistence.

For Todd, that work often begins with listening.

"A business owner may reach out to us with specific needs," she relays. "If it's not something we can handle in-house, we connect them with resources."

Those resources might include Ivy Tech Community College, small business development centers or customized workforce training through regional partners.

Parke County's largest private

employers include Bloomingdale's Futurex, FORMflex and AGI Products, a large employer in plastics manufacturing – an industry that presents unique infrastructure challenges.

"With plastics manufacturing, they use a lot of water," Todd shares, noting the usage of septic systems.

To support that employer and others, the county is championing a regional sewer district – one of the most high-profile projects Partnership Parke County has undertaken.

"When you think about ease of business, cost savings, ability to grow and even employee morale, this project is critical," she affirms.

Todd is quick to note that Parke County is not trying to attract megasites or auto plants.

"We're more in the ballgame of maybe a 50 to 100-employee attraction," she surmises.

The county is leveraging its assets: quality of life, natural gas pipelines, transmission lines and large tracts of remote acreage that open doors to energy projects, specialized manufacturing and data-related infrastructure.

### **Montgomery County: philanthropy, education and momentum**

Montgomery County tells a complementary story – one anchored by strong institutions, collaborative leadership and long-term investment in people.

Kelly Taylor, a native of the area and CEO of the Montgomery County Community Foundation (MCCF), has watched the county evolve over her 25 years at the organization.

"I'm one of those people who said I would never come back – and I'm back and love it here," she reports, noting she was living in Lafayette before returning.

"Our family was here and we just loved the community in terms of what it had to offer," Taylor recalls. "There are lots of good people here."

Her perspective highlights a recurring theme across west central Indiana: people leaving, gaining experience elsewhere and returning with renewed purpose.

In recent years, Montgomery County has seen both employer expansion and housing growth.

### **From childcare need to community boost**

In 2019, Montgomery County was considered a childcare desert. Recognizing that lack of childcare limits workforce participation and population growth, the MCCF led a five-year strategic effort.

"We knew 90% of brain development happens in the first five years," Taylor relays. "We need to make sure our young children are ready for kindergarten, so we put a lot of emphasis on that and knew that we needed more childcare seats in our community, especially around infant toddler age."

The result was the raising of \$5 million, leading to a 124-seat early learning center – funded by 15 partners spanning government, business and philanthropy.

"It is just about full," Taylor shares.

The project exemplified a broader strategy: investing in quality of life as economic infrastructure.

### **Parks, culture and placemaking**

That same strategy drove investments in neighborhood parks, museums and cultural assets.

"These are things that attract people and enhance quality of life," Taylor asserts.

Montgomery County's museums – the General Lew Wallace Study & Museum, Lane Place and Carnegie Museum – preserve history while serving as tourism anchors. Wabash College, too, plays a central role as a community partner, according to Taylor, from childcare to nonprofit capacity building to a forthcoming community center.

### **Banking on agriculture, community and trust**

Few institutions embody rural stability quite like community banks. For Brad Monts, president and CEO of Crawfordsville-based Hoosier Heartland State Bank, agriculture and community engagement aren't strategies – they're roots.

"Agriculture is kind of our foundation," explains Monts, a Ladoga native and Southmont High School alum. "When the ag sector works, everything works."

Although its roots go back to The Linden State Bank in 1899, the current bank formed through a 2009 merger (Linden State Bank and



Transformative art projects like this mural by New York artist Jenna Morello help shape the culture of downtown Crawfordsville. The mural was supported by a READI Quality of Life Grant with matching funds provided by the Montgomery County Community Foundation and other organizations.

Farmers State Bank, which was headquartered in New Ross). Now, the bank serves roughly 15,000 customers across Montgomery and surrounding counties. Since 2013, it has committed 10% of net profits back to local communities, donating \$2.5 million to nonprofits.

Through its upcoming Shared Values Awards program, the bank will distribute tens of thousands of dollars, while also investing time and talent through financial education in schools and nonprofits.

“That community aspect – it’s always been about helping,” Monts relays.

The bank’s employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), established in 2002, reinforces that philosophy.

“The employees truly are owners of the bank,” Monts shares.

In an era of digital finance and consolidation, Hoosier Heartland stays relevant by pairing modern technology with personal service.

“When they call, they’re talking to the same person,” Monts explains. “We know our customers by name.”

## A regional industrial anchor

Adding another layer to the region’s economic picture is the Vermillion Rise Mega Park in Hillsdale – a 7,000-acre industrial site with deep infrastructure assets. Formerly a defense facility, “The Rise” now accommodates advanced manufacturing, agribusiness, energy, plastics, metals, food processing and life sciences (and it includes a location of Scott Pet – a manufacturer and distributor of high-quality pet products also located in Rockville).

Its presence reinforces the idea that rural Indiana can compete – by thinking differently – on industrial development.

The park features partnerships in the area to enhance the workforce. Locally, job preparation begins in high school. Wabash River Career and Technical Education District (WRCTE) provides vocational training to students throughout Vermillion County. In addition to a number of other programs, WRCTE offers courses in welding, manufacturing, machining, new and emerging automation and computer technology.

## Winning in Warren

Warren County is moving forward with a significant quality-of-place effort through the development of the Warren County Wabash River Greenway (WRG), which represents the western segment of a planned 90-mile, five-county regional greenway system. The initiative aims to improve regional connectivity while elevating existing natural

and recreational resources into a destination-level asset. Central to the project is the enhancement of a natural waterfall and nearby park features, creating a unique outdoor attraction for residents and visitors alike.

Planned improvements include new trailhead signage and informational kiosks, updated wayfinding, wetlands restoration along the river corridor, trail surface enhancements and accessibility upgrades to support inclusive public access. Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) funding is critical to support construction of a pedestrian bridge, development of the primary asphalt trail and implementation of related restoration work.

The project builds on a master plan completed in 2022 by the Warren County Local Economic Development Organization

Economic development in Parke County, she emphasized, is now inseparable from community development – housing, infrastructure, partnerships and realistic conversations about what is possible.

“It’s easy to say, ‘Bring better jobs,’” she opines. “It’s harder when you have zero available land or buildings to market.”

That honesty, combined with creativity, has reshaped how the county approaches growth.

## Challenges that remain, hope that endures

Across all these voices, the challenges are consistent: workforce shortages, healthcare access, housing constraints, infrastructure funding and the difficulty of recruiting people back to rural places.

Yet so is the optimism.



Wabash College chemistry professor Laura Wysocki works in a research lab with a student in Hays Hall on the school’s campus in Crawfordsville. (Photo courtesy of Wabash College)

(LEDO), the Wabash River Enhancement Corporation and the Town of Williamsport. The Warren County LEDO is leading coordination efforts, while the Town of Williamsport is administering READI funds. Construction began in November 2022 and is projected to be completed in December.

## Collaboration as a catalyst

When Todd looks back on her 11 years serving the region, the most striking change isn’t a single project – it’s cohesion.

“There wasn’t the cohesiveness that we have today,” she acknowledges. “Different organizations are working together for the same goal.”

“There’s small-town pride,” Martin beams. “Great communities that rally behind each other.”

Taylor echoes that sentiment.

“Our community just has big hearts and is just very generous,” she remarks. “They want to give back and take care of one another.”

And Todd put it most plainly.

“If we have broadband, quality of life and collaboration,” she notes, “we can compete in our own way.”

It’s a reminder that rural Indiana’s story is not a relic of the past, but a work in progress, written every day by people who chose to stay, return and invest in their hometowns.

**RESOURCES:** Tiffani Martin, Valley Professional Community Health Center, at [www.valleyprohealth.org](http://www.valleyprohealth.org) | Brad Monts, Hoosier Heartland State Bank, at [www.myhhsb.com](http://www.myhhsb.com) | Kelly Taylor, Montgomery County Community Foundation, at [www.mccf-in.org](http://www.mccf-in.org) | Cyndi Todd, Partnership Parke County, at [www.partnershipparkecounty.com](http://www.partnershipparkecounty.com)