

St. Marys River and St. Joseph River converge in downtown Fort Wayne to form the Maumee River. These rivers, particularly around Headwaters Park, have been essential to the city's history and offer recreational activities and amenities, including kayaking, boating and scenic riverfront paths.



# INDIANA'S QUALITY OF LIFE PLAY

## Fostering Climates People Choose

By Anthony Schoettle

For decades, attracting businesses to Indiana was straightforward. City, town and county officials across the state emphasized the state's central location, transportation infrastructure and low cost of doing business. Those same officials lured in businesses with a tried-and-true set of tools: tax abatements, tax increment financing, training grants and other financial inducements. In some cases, land and even buildings were the cherry on top.

But about a decade ago, that script began to change.

Sought-after employers began looking for trails and greenways humming with joggers and parents pushing strollers, bustling parks, music and entertainment venues, arts and cultural outlets, sports venues, restaurants and bars and more.

Such amenities once considered nice extras are now front and center in the competition among cities and towns trying to attract and retain businesses – and workers.

“Not too long ago about the only amenities employers inquired about were roads and schools,” relates Shelbyville Mayor Scott Furgeson. “For a long time, communities led with low taxes and cheap land. Those things still matter, but they’re rarely enough on their own anymore.”

Economic development officials increasingly say quality-of-life features are influencing where companies choose to locate. In a tight labor market, the logic is simple: Businesses go where people want to live.

The pendulum has swung so fast and far that Molly Welch, quality of life manager for Greater Lafayette Commerce, the lead economic development organization serving Tippecanoe County and the Greater Lafayette area, says quality of life isn't just a rising factor in attracting and retaining businesses, it's now the top rung.

“Quality-of-life amenities is what attracts the people who live, work and play here,” she says unequivocally. “It's what creates the community we have here. We have a special outlook on that.”

Having an intentional strategy to enhance and maintain quality of

life is key, Welch continues. “We’re not trying to be New York, San Francisco or even Indianapolis. We have a special location. And what we offer is different from any place else. What we have allows people to choose us.”

Over the past decade, Tippecanoe County has invested tens of millions of dollars pursuing a multi-pronged strategy focused on public spaces, riverfront access, mobility, health, housing and placemaking.

That’s because across Indiana – and the U.S. – employers are struggling to recruit skilled workers, particularly in technology, advanced manufacturing and professional services. Those workers, in turn, are weighing lifestyle as heavily as salary. Access to outdoor recreation, cultural offerings and walkable districts often tip the scales between competing locations.

### **Pandemic push**

Lori Dukes, president and CEO of the Greater Kokomo Economic Development Alliance, started seeing the increased importance of quality of life just before the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020. “Post COVID, we saw communities really flip the script,” she notes. “And if you didn’t make the change, you got left behind.”

This was driven home in 2022 when Star Plus Energy, a maker of electric vehicle batteries, was scouting the Kokomo area. “We were anticipating questions about inducements,” Dukes recalls. “The first question was ‘what do you have for our employees to do?’ Until then, quality of life was seen as a nice to have. Now it’s a must have.”

And since many workers can live almost anywhere due to remote work, companies have learned they need to follow the talent – or risk losing it. As a result, cities and towns large and small are investing in amenities that improve daily life while also signaling long-term stability.

Communities that once struggled to attract attention from site selectors now promote themselves as affordable, livable alternatives to larger metros. A historic downtown with local restaurants, a strong school system and nearby recreational opportunities can be enough to catch a company’s eye.

Westfield Mayor Scott Willis has had a front row seat to see this shift on multiple fronts. A Kokomo native, years ago he saw his hometown lose companies and workers to other communities that invested more heavily in quality-of-life amenities. Chief among those was Carmel. Willis credits longtime, now former, Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard with being a pioneer in the quality-of-life movement in Indiana.

Under Mayor Brainard’s 28 year tenure (1996–2024), Carmel deliberately engineered

quality of life as core infrastructure, not as an afterthought. The strategy combined urban design, transportation reform, arts investment and long-range redevelopment – often ahead of public consensus – with the explicit goal of making Carmel more livable, walkable and economically competitive.

By the time Brainard left office, Carmel’s population had grown from about 25,000 to more than 100,000. The city was routinely ranked among the best places to live in the U.S. as corporate headquarters, skilled workers and families were drawn in.

Willis, who spent much of his life serving in the Marines and working in the private sector, has seen Westfield’s fortunes ebb and flow. The city invested tens of millions of dollars in Grand Park, which Willis thinks was an important step. Still, he says, the city lost employers because the downtown needed work.

“We have lost opportunities because our downtown was so decayed,” Willis admits. “We lost at least one (existing) company because our downtown showed no life. If you look at Carmel, it has zero percent vacancy in its downtown. That shows you the importance of what we’re talking about.”

With \$500 million in development planned for or happening in downtown Westfield, Willis and other Westfield officials are working hard to fortify their quality-of-life position. He says they’re also working to be more strategic with the continued development of Grand Park, including bringing in more businesses that can directly benefit from its presence.

Kokomo too has reversed its fortunes. Over the past several years, Kokomo has made a coordinated shift toward quality of life investment, pairing downtown revitalization, housing, parks, trails and cultural amenities

with its resurgence as a manufacturing and electric vehicle industry hub.

Kokomo’s downtown has emerged as a central focus of the city’s quality-of-life push. Officials broke ground in 2024 on a long planned downtown hotel and conference center, envisioned as the final anchor in the city’s downtown redevelopment effort. The project is designed to support conventions, tourism and community events while housing the Kokomo Automotive Museum’s permanent collection within the facility.

To enhance street level activity, Kokomo established a Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA) downtown, allowing visitors 21 and older to stroll with alcoholic drinks purchased from participating local establishments. City leaders view the DORA as a tool to increase foot traffic, support restaurants and bars and create a more vibrant urban experience year-round.

### **Retention and beyond**

Quality-of-life investments are not just a recruitment tool. They also play a role in retaining existing businesses. Employers embedded in communities with strong amenities often report higher employee satisfaction and lower turnover. When workers enjoy where they live, they are less likely to jump ship for marginally better pay elsewhere.

Employers in lower-amenity communities must often pay higher wages to compensate for lower quality of life, even when housing costs are cheaper, states Ball State University economist Michael Hicks. Simply put, he says, communities with better schools, walkability and recreation give businesses a wage and recruitment and retention advantage. From an employer standpoint, lacking quality-of-life amenities in the community in



Tippecanoe County boasts a variety of events – in Lafayette, West Lafayette and beyond – showcasing there’s much to do there even beyond the happenings on the Purdue campus.

Outdoor spaces and attractions are critical in drawing businesses and residents. Kokomo Municipal Stadium is a shining star in Howard County.



which they operate translates to higher recruitment costs, increased turnover and difficulty relocating experienced professionals.

“This is precisely why businesses should care about this issue,” Hicks emphasizes.

Public spaces, in particular, have taken on new importance. Well-maintained parks and trails are no longer just recreational assets; they are extensions of the workplace. Employees use them for midday breaks, walking meetings and team events. For companies weighing relocation, these spaces help paint a picture of a healthier, more balanced workforce.

Arts and culture matter too. Communities that support artists and cultural institutions often find that reputation carries weight far beyond city limits. Local theaters, music venues and museums contribute to a sense of identity that resonates with employees and corporate leaders. Creative energy suggests innovation, something many businesses want to be associated with.

### The need to adapt

For nearly 20 years, Fort Wayne officials have been surveying the city’s businesses – every five years, and one overarching theme continued to come through: Quality of life matters to the people who work there.

“We’ve spent a lot of time in the last 15 years working on our quality of life,” explains John Urbahns, president and CEO of Greater Fort Wayne Inc., which functions as the local chamber of commerce and lead economic development organization for Fort Wayne and Allen County.

What emerged from those surveys was a strong desire for riverfront and downtown revitalization. Somewhat surprisingly, Urbahns relates, those two things “ranked as the No. 1 driver for talent attraction and retention.”

Urbahns worked in economic development for the city of Fort Wayne for 18 years before joining the local chamber as executive vice president of economic development. He took over as CEO in 2019.

“The transformation I’ve seen in this city has been amazing,” he expresses. “It’s taken a serious commitment and a sizable financial investment. But the return has more than paid for itself.”

Fort Wayne’s downtown investment has paid off by turning public infrastructure spending into large scale private growth. Over roughly a decade, targeted investments in riverfront parks, streetscapes and utilities fueled more than \$1 billion in combined public-private development, including Electric Works – a 39 acre mixed use innovation district in downtown Fort Wayne – and mixed use housing.

Signature projects like Promenade Park, a riverfront park, alone leveraged roughly \$300 million in private investment, expanded the tax base, created jobs, boosted tourism and re-established downtown as a regional economic and cultural hub. The city’s zoo and minor league baseball venue, both long-time downtown attractions, continue to be important draws, Urbahns states.

### Sparking entrepreneurship

Of course, quality of life is not a one-

size-fits-all concept. What attracts a logistics firm may differ from what draws a software startup. But the underlying principle – creating places where people feel connected and supported – applies across industries.

Critically, these amenities benefit residents even if a major employer never relocates. Investments in sidewalks, public safety, schools and recreation improve daily life and can strengthen civic pride. That, in turn, can spark local entrepreneurship, another driver of economic growth.

Mikel Berger, Greater Lafayette Commerce president and CEO, has seen this firsthand. Powered by Purdue University – and local leaders – Tippecanoe County has fostered a strong culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.

“Much of this is about building community,” Berger stresses. “That fosters a sense of belonging that translates into a place where creativity and business startups can thrive. This is an effort that relies on players at many levels.”

One example he notes is the popular local farmer’s market, which is sponsored by Subaru of Indiana Automotive, a West Lafayette employer of more than 6,000.

“Those are very real dollars that make that event possible,” Berger remarks. “It’s where a lot of our small businesses get their start.”

There are challenges. Some critics worry that focusing on attractions for incoming businesses could drive up housing costs or leave longtime residents behind. Successful communities are increasingly those that pair quality-of-life investments with inclusive planning, ensuring growth benefits are broadly shared.

The trend of prioritizing quality of life shows no sign of slowing. Corporate site selection consultants report that tours now routinely include stops at neighborhoods, parks and cultural districts – not just industrial sites and office parks. Decision-makers want to envision how their workforce will live, not just where their equipment will sit.

In many ways, the renewed focus on quality of life represents a return to basics. Thriving towns and cities always have been places where people want to gather, create and belong. What’s changed is the recognition that those qualities are not just social goods, but economic ones.

As communities compete in an increasingly mobile economy, the message is clear: Attracting businesses is about more than balance sheets and broadband. It’s about building places where people can imagine a future – and where companies believe that future will grow.

**RESOURCES:** Mikel Berger and Molly Welch, Greater Lafayette Commerce, at [www.greaterlafayettecommerce.com](http://www.greaterlafayettecommerce.com) | Lori Dukes, Greater Kokomo Economic Development Alliance, at [www.greaterkokomo.com](http://www.greaterkokomo.com) | Scott Furgeson, city of Shelbyville, at [www.shelbyville.in.gov](http://www.shelbyville.in.gov) | John Urbahns, Greater Fort Wayne Inc., at [www.greaterfortwayneinc.com](http://www.greaterfortwayneinc.com) | Scott Willis, Westfield, at [www.westfield.in.gov](http://www.westfield.in.gov)