

MAKING A MARK

Indiana Companies Shaping Communities for the Better

By Matt Ottinger

Community engagement is no longer a supplementary effort simply reserved for annual volunteer days or charitable check writing. For more and more Indiana companies, it has become a core business strategy – one that shapes talent pipelines, strengthens communities and directly influences long term success.

From real estate and advanced manufacturing to utilities and healthcare ecosystems, organizations of varied sizes like The Garrett Companies, Cummins Inc. and NineStar Connect are demonstrating that responsible citizenship and financial performance are not competing priorities, but mutually reinforcing ones.

Corporate impact, local action

At Cummins, community engagement is embedded in the company’s DNA. Jim Schacht, vice president of corporate responsibility and CEO of The Cummins Foundation, traces that philosophy back to the founding of the Cummins Foundation in 1954 and a guiding belief articulated by former CEO J. Irwin Miller: “We believe that our survival in the long run is as dependent on responsible citizenship as it is on responsible financial performance.”

Today, that belief is expressed through a foundation strategy focused on education, equity and the environment. Cummins leads with employee time and talent – more than 80% of employees volunteer annually, contributing roughly 380,000 hours each year – and supports those efforts with approximately \$60 million in grants across the communities in which it operates.

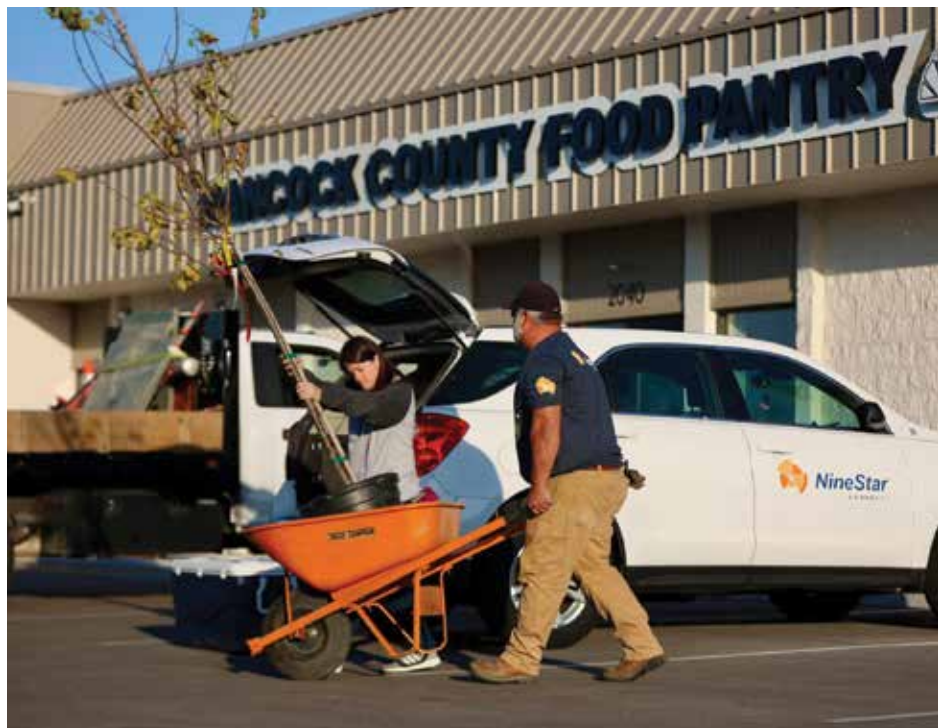
Programs such as Cummins READY, which focuses on STEM and the workforce of the

future, and Cummins Water Works, which advances sustainable water solutions globally, demonstrate how large scale initiatives can be paired with deeply place based work. In Indianapolis, that includes long term investment in the Martindale Brightwood neighborhood, partnerships with KIPP Indy Public Schools and Arsenal Tech High School, and involvement in homelessness initiatives.

“We’re very place based,” Schacht emphasizes. “We decide on an area in need where we operate and then focus there.”

A long-term legacy

Nowhere is Cummins’ influence more visible than in its global headquarters of Columbus, where its architectural legacy has shaped the city itself. Through the Cummins Foundation Architecture Program, the company has supported more than 50 public projects since the late 1950s, ranging from schools and libraries to fire stations, city hall and even infrastructure gateways that



Cummins and NineStar have changed the dynamics in their respective communities of Columbus and Greenfield – and beyond – through community engagement, infrastructure enhancements and many other endeavors.

intentionally signal entry into the community.

Beyond architecture, Cummins' impact in Columbus includes extensive volunteerism, broad nonprofit support and investments in childcare through the Cummins Child Development Center (operated by Bright Horizons) – addressing a critical workforce need while supporting families.

Sustainability also plays a central role in company strategy and community outcomes. Cummins' "Destination Zero" strategy aligns environmental responsibility with growth, guiding investments in energy transition technologies and water stewardship. Internally, the company has reduced millions of pounds of packaging waste annually, while globally its water projects have delivered billions of gallons of water benefit and significant CO₂ reductions.

A shining 'star' lifts quality of place

For Greenfield-based NineStar Connect, a nonprofit utility cooperative serving the greater Hancock County area, community engagement often takes the form of infrastructure decisions that ripple outward for decades. CEO Mike Burrow describes how investments in fiber optics, water and wastewater were driven not only by service delivery, but by a larger vision of quality growth.

Burrow notes that key subdivisions in Philadelphia (Indiana), for instance, would still be soybean fields without the infrastructure that NineStar has provided. For Burrow, elevating the area is a personal passion.

"Except for the time that I went to college, I've lived my whole life here," he shares, noting he's a graduate of New Palestine High School. "So, I'm really big in promoting the quality of life and quality of place here in Hancock County."

He estimates the investments in those subdivisions alone – when completed – will add nearly \$100 million dollars in assessed value, strengthen school funding through population growth and expand access to healthcare through telehealth connectivity. NineStar's water and sewer connectivity also is making possible initiatives like the Amplify Hancock Innovation Center – a new integrated workforce development ecosystem providing education and training opportunities for residents of varied ages.

As a nonprofit cooperative, NineStar returns margins to its members, but also recognizes long-term prosperity depends on strong schools, accessible healthcare and intentional partnerships with local government, libraries and economic development leaders.

From donating land for the county's first park to collocating a public library within its McCordsville campus (at McCord Square), NineStar illustrates how utilities – often invisible to the public – can act as conveners and catalysts.

Building talent pipelines – and homes

For The Garrett Companies (TGC), a full-service multifamily development, construction and property management company located in Greenwood, community engagement begins with people – specifically, how young people are introduced to careers and supported as they grow into professionals. Alyssa Skarbek, chief of staff and vice president of people and culture, describes the company's Garrett Internship Program (GIP) as far more than a résumé building exercise.

"The Garrett Internship Program is something we're genuinely proud of," she explains. "It's a premier, full time 12 week summer program for college students who want to explore their field of study within the real estate industry. What makes it stand out is the intentionality behind it."

Interns collaborate on a service project, participate in leadership



The Garrett Companies is not only known for building state-of-the-art, multifamily housing, but its robust internship program helps the company serve as a workforce builder as well.

workshops, attend development sessions and hear directly from seasoned professionals through a speaker series. The goal, Skarbek says, is not to "just have them sitting in a seat," but to help them build networks, skills and confidence, while also creating a deliberate pipeline for future talent.

Now it's yielding results. Since 2019, more than 80 students have completed GIP, and more than 20 alumni now work full time at The Garrett Companies. Those outcomes are reinforced through partnerships with universities including Purdue, Ball State, Colorado State and Arizona State, as well as local high schools.

"We're not just creating a great summer experience," Skarbek asserts. "We're identifying and developing our next generation of talent."

Foundational support

Like Cummins, TGC also has an impactful foundation. The Garrett Family Foundation's mission is to "ignite hope and create pathways to those facing unforeseen obstacles," Skarbek explains, adding that it grew out of the belief, "To whom much is given, much will be expected."

The foundation is led by Emily Griffin, whose husband Matt was the company's COO and passed away from cancer in 2023. In its inaugural year, the foundation hosted a golf outing that raised nearly \$200,000 for families and charitable causes in need. It focuses on two areas: immediate relief for individuals facing unexpected hardship and charitable support for organizations aligned with TGC's values.

"It's a meaningful extension of who we are as a company and a genuine expression of our values," she says.

Those listed here are far from alone. Increasingly, Indiana companies are redefining – in various ways – what it means to do business by weaving community engagement into their core operations.

Purpose, partnership and place-based commitment are no longer optional add-ons for many; they are strategic advantages shaping Indiana's economic and social future for business, workers and communities alike.

RESOURCES: Mike Burrow, NineStar Connect, at www.ninestarconnect.com | Jim Schacht, Cummins Inc., at www.cummins.com | Alyssa Skarbek, The Garrett Companies, at www.thegarretco.com