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COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR

COMING 'BACK TO LIFE'

La Porte Rises by Embracing Its Roots, Change

By Symone C. Skrzycki



"You're going to love La Porte. It's an amazing place," declares Mayor Tom Dermody on a cool summer morning. "It's my hometown and I was proud to come back home (and take office as mayor in 2019).

"One thing we tell our team members – on a daily basis – is, 'If you're not improving lives of our residents, why are we doing it?' "

He pauses thoughtfully before recalling an example of community unity during devastating storms earlier this year.

"Here's the example of people we have in La Porte," he stresses. "We have a senior living facility, Oakwood Manor, up on the west side of town. They didn't have a generator. I called BOSS Industries (a mobile air and power systems provider). They took one right over there. They didn't ask for anything. They said, 'Hey, you keep it as long as you need it.' "

The word "transformation" comes to mind as Bert Cook, executive director of the La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership (LEAP), describes the community's resurgence in recent years.

"La Porte is a unique community in that it's one of the oldest communities in northwest Indiana," he observes. "Over the past 100 years, it has experienced some significant change. A lot of people will refer back to the mid-1980s (as the catalyst) when Rumely Allis-Chalmers, which made farm implements, fully went out of business. They were the largest employer in La Porte by a long shot for a very long time. It started that process of what I would call 'rebirth.' Up until then things had been one way. They went out of business, and it forced a change.

"We all know change is hard. La Porte has been on that path for a long time, but it really has taken hold in the last few years."

Microsoft's $1 billion data center campus, now under construction in La Porte, is fueling tremendous growth. The collaboration includes a new Microsoft Data Center Academy at the La Porte Community School Corporation (LPCSC) Slicer Career and Technical Education Center.

"The investment Microsoft is making is greater than all of the investments in the history of La Porte," Dermody affirms.

La Porte also is earning national recognition for quality of life and affordability while revitalizing its historic downtown, upgrading local parks and finding creative solutions to housing and infrastructure challenges.

"They dream big (in La Porte). And they love their community," shares Heather Ennis, president and CEO of the Northwest Indiana Forum. "They're hardworking. They're humble. But there are these strokes of genius that come out of that community you just don't see in other places."

'A new day in La Porte'

Under an unprecedented agreement, Microsoft will forgo tax abatements and pay full property taxes on its data center campus. For the next 20 years, the City of La Porte Redevelopment Commission will allocate 15% of that revenue – the maximum permitted under Indiana law for educational programming – to the LPCSC, with no cap on the total amount.

Spanning 245,000 square feet across 489 acres, the data center will create thousands of construction jobs, with the first phase generating 600-plus permanent Microsoft positions.

"Microsoft is committed to responsible data center development," asserts senior manager of community affairs Matthew DeStefano Jr. "We will pay our own way to ensure our development doesn't increase other ratepayers' electricity prices, minimize our water use and replenish more than we use, add to the tax base, and strengthen the community by investing in local IT training and nonprofits."

The Microsoft Data Center Academy at LPCSC is tentatively scheduled to open for high school juniors and seniors during the 2027-28 school year, with plans to one day expand the program to adult learners.

The partnership will develop a mock data center classroom, giving students hands-on experience with industry systems and equipment. The initiative will support a graduation pathway aligned with credential and credit opportunities at Ivy Tech.

"We're seeing an industry partner right within our community coming into our building – and that just hasn't happened before," emphasizes LPCSC Superintendent Sandra Wood. "Every year, we prepare our students to graduate. We cheer for them. We celebrate with them when they walk across the stage and then we wonder what happens to them. … This partnership provides an opportunity for students to find something right in their backyard within their own community that gives them a career they're going to have the opportunity to succeed in and to build their dreams right here at home."

Dermody seconds that: "This is a new day in La Porte because of our partnership with Microsoft."



Microsoft, headquartered in Redmond, Washington, broke ground on its La Porte data center in June 2026. Phase one of the project will include six data center buildings, which are planned to come online starting in 2029. Eleven additional buildings will be part of phase two.

Giving back, stepping up

The LEAP Olympics is a week-long corporate games challenge for member businesses in the Greater La Porte area. Each May, employers compete in activities ranging from volleyball, kickball and euchre to bowling, cornhole and trivia.

BOSS Industries participates every year – and won the coveted traveling trophy in 2026.

Founded in 1988, BOSS employs approximately 80 people and fosters a family-oriented culture.

"We have one location, which is in La Porte," notes Todd Hudson, director of strategic accounts and corporate development (and former president). "It's roughly a 65,000-square-foot facility in the industrial park. We've always been in La Porte, and we'll be in La Porte forever."

Employees can play racquetball, work out and enjoy cookouts on site.

"We do something very unique," Hudson comments. "Monthly, a woman comes in and cuts everybody's hair for free. There are Christmas parties, and I became an ordained minister, so I've (officiated weddings) for some of the employees. It's a big family."

Reflecting on the aforementioned story of BOSS assisting seniors recover from storms earlier this year, he says, "It felt good to give back and see our equipment in operation because normally we ship it out the door and don't get to see it in a real-world environment."

Jaeger-UniTek Sealing Solutions, a leading rubber and plastics manufacturer headquartered in La Porte, serves the industrial, agricultural and transportation industries. Launched in 1925 as American Rubber, it was one of the community's leading employers.

In 2010, American Rubber was acquired by Germany-based parent company, the Jäger Group.

"The Jäger family visited and one of the things that sold them (on acquiring the business) was the people that work here," explains Colton Phelan, Jaeger-UniTek president and CEO. "The attitudes. The skillset. The down-to-earth hardworking people they felt they could trust."

Jaeger-UniTek builds the next generation of talent with its internship program. "We have at least one – if not several – interns every summer," Phelan remarks. "High school seniors all the way to college graduates intern with us. We try to give everyone a well-rounded experience. Typically, the first several weeks (involve) spending time in each department."

In addition, Jaeger-UniTek gives back to the community by supporting local schools and various events.

"We've sponsored Arts in the Park," Phelan shares. "Things that will help develop the next generation of 'La Portians' – those are near and dear to our heart."





La Porte has one of the largest shares of parkland per capita in the state and has invested significantly in amenities that enhance quality of life (top). The La Porte Civic Auditorium, which has stood for nearly a century, is a popular destination for sports, concerts, wedding receptions and more. Famed musician Stevie Ray Vaughan is among its most famous past performers.

Livin' the lake life

With seven lakes within its city limits, La Porte embraces the motto "Livin' the Lake Life."

"Water recreation is a huge piece of the puzzle for us," Cook stresses.

"We've got several inland lakes, and we have parks associated with several of the lakes," adds Jack Arnett, CEO of the La Porte County Convention & Visitors Bureau. "The visitors we talk to rate our inland lakes and the access to the lakes and the quality of lakes really high."

La Porte Lake Fest, for instance, is a three-day, family-friendly celebration held on Pine, Stone and Clear lakes. Attractions include art, live music, steamboat rides, an artisan market and a car show.

"We've had all types of top performers," Dermody comments. "Uncle Kracker performed this past year. Jesse McCartney performed the year before. We want to keep growing that. We get people from all over – a packed house – just enjoying life in La Porte."

Arts in the Park brings the community together for a summer concert series at Fox Memorial Park on Clear Lake. Free weekly concerts feature an array of music such as jazz, pop, blues, country, bluegrass, rock, funk and big band. Food trucks, poetry readings and art exhibits are among additional highlights.

Meeting the housing challenge

Growing La Porte's population is one of

Dermody's top priorities, and he says addressing the community's housing needs is essential to achieving that goal.

"Not only in La Porte, but you hear all across the nation that housing is an issue," Dermody observes. "We've said we want to be 30 by 30, which is 30,000 people by 2030. We're seeing companies and manufacturers – not just Microsoft – grow and set up shop here. So, we know we need housing of all types. We need the high end. We need the starter homes. We need affordable."

That vision is taking shape through single-family homes, townhomes, condominiums, rentals and the redevelopment of underperforming housing.

Nils Dietz, president of plastics manufacturer American RENOLIT Corporation (ARC), looks forward to attracting new talent as more people move to the area.

"It's an honor to have a business in this community," he emphasizes. "What excites me is hopefully the city will be growing because we are also growing and we need to have this growth with the citizens of La Porte because these could be potentially our employees," he reflects.

ARC is a subsidiary of the Germany-based RENOLIT Group, which employs approximately 5,000 people across more than 30 locations worldwide. Its La Porte site employs 240 people.

The organization manufactures plastic films and foils for a variety of applications. Among products are films for the sign and graphics market, decorative films for the recreational vehicle and furniture markets, and exterior films for applications (e.g., window frames).

"We have a warehouse down the road," Dietz explains. "Our warehouse for the import business was located in the state of New Jersey. We made the decision four years ago to move it here to La Porte close to our plant because it's business friendly here and (there's



Hands-on learning is a driving force at BOSS INSIGHT's mobile air compressor training school run by BOSS Industries, LLC.





The La Porte County Family YMCA will provide access to nearby amenities such as the Chessie Trail, a skate park and ball fields along Stone Lake.

a) good pool of employees. (It's) much more affordable to open a business here than, for example, on the East Coast. And we have a good relationship with the local government. I can pick up the phone, call them and we can discuss what can be done to help us or solve a situation."

A sense of place

La Porte's historic downtown honors the past while setting the stage for future growth.

The Indiana and Michigan Avenues Historic District, for instance, spotlights residential architecture. Its streets are lined with homes representing styles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including early Gothic Revival, Greek Revival, Tudor Revival and Colonial Revival.

Also downtown is the La Porte Civic Auditorium. Dedicated as a gift to the community in 1930 and renovated in recent years, it hosts the annual La Porte Invitational, which is the Midwest's premier high school basketball showcase.

"The city has consistently, over my 20 years here, invested heavily in the downtown, whether you're talking like facade grants for painting and revitalizing some of these historic structures or new construction or investing in infrastructure that serves them," Cook reflects.

When it comes to tourism in La Porte, Arnett declares, "We're lucky here. We're attuned to the agriculture that's tied in with La Porte and the surrounding communities. We've got great orchards that fall in the city limits of La Porte and those are big draws. And we offer some unique visitor destinations with regards to antiquing and shopping those niche shops."

A new YMCA will be built in the city's recreation area near Fox Memorial Park through a partnership with the City of La Porte, the La Porte County Family YMCA and the Health Foundation of La Porte. The project







A colorful traveling sculpture, history of La Porte mural and vibrant tables contribute to historic downtown's art scene at Plaza 618 (left). Music and memories take center stage at the Dennis F. Smith Amphitheater in Fox Memorial Park, which is within walking distance of the new La Porte County Family YMCA.

has been approved for $5 million in READI funding.

"We're trying to line up our programs, our facilities, our services to embrace the total wellness, meaning spirit, mind and body," asserts Scott Helmkamp, CEO at the La Porte County Family YMCA. "This (endeavor) really boils down to we want the Y to be so much more than a community center. We want the Y to be known as the center of community."

In addition to fitness facilities, basketball, pickleball and swimming, Helmkamp says the new Y will provide non-traditional programs.

"We're going to be able to offer more STEM programming for kids," he proclaims. "Like a Lego club and adult wellness classes. Not just the group exercise classes, but we're on the verge of being able to launch Rock Steady Boxing for Parkinson's.

"It's really exciting to think about being able to create something that's going to have a lasting impact on our community for generations to come." ■

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