



RUSH COUNTY

Readiness for Change: A Community Conversation

Indiana Communities Institute
Rush County Community Foundation
Fall 2019

BACKGROUND

The Rush County Community Foundation, as part of its Lilly Endowment GIFT VII efforts, invited the Indiana Communities Institute at Ball State University to host a series of meetings with community members (see Table 1). The “Readiness for Change: A Rush County Community Conversation” process, conducted in September and October 2019, aimed to share data and gather insights. The data helped provide context and spark discussion regarding the ongoing economic and demographic shifts and how these changes impact community decision making. Feedback related to the respective

Table 1: Community Meetings and Dates	
New Salem	September 3
Glenwood	September 4
Manilla	September 11
Mays	September 18
Carthage	September 23
Milroy	September 26
Rushville (two meetings)	October 29

communities and the county overall was also elicited through several discrete engagement exercises at each meeting. Additionally, the Rush County Community Foundation conducted a survey in November to further solicit opinions on a variety of topics. This report entails the following:

- A recap of some of the data shared at the community meetings
- Additional Rush County-specific data
- A summary of and rationale for the various exercises utilized as well as an overview of what was uncovered through each one’s deployment
- A recap of survey findings
- Considerations related to what was uncovered through the engagement effort

Attendance at each meeting was between 15 and 45 people. The survey included 437 responses. *While the feedback is diverse and helpful, it should not be considered a statistically valid or fully representative sample. The information in this report is intended to spark further discussion and help guide next steps, but it is in no way conclusive or prescriptive.*

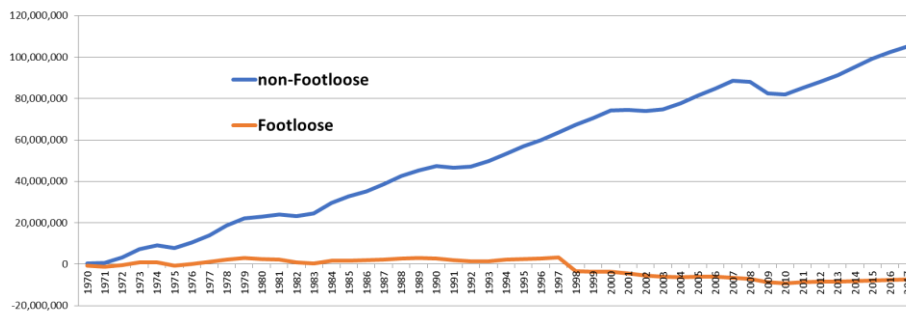
DATA

Change is inevitable. Described as a digital innovator and serial disrupter, Jay Samit once said, “Those that recognize the inevitability of change stand to benefit the most from it.” Rush County is not immune to the ongoing economic and demographic shifts underway across the country and in the Rust Belt particularly. The summary of three data points that follows captures the ongoing transition.

Cumulative Job Growth. The economy is increasingly service oriented. Footloose jobs, jobs that can locate anywhere and that are often most associated with manufacturing, have been stagnant or in decline since 1970 whereas non-footloose jobs, jobs tied to the local community and largely service oriented, have risen drastically over that same time. See Figure 1 (Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, CBER calculations). The culprit of

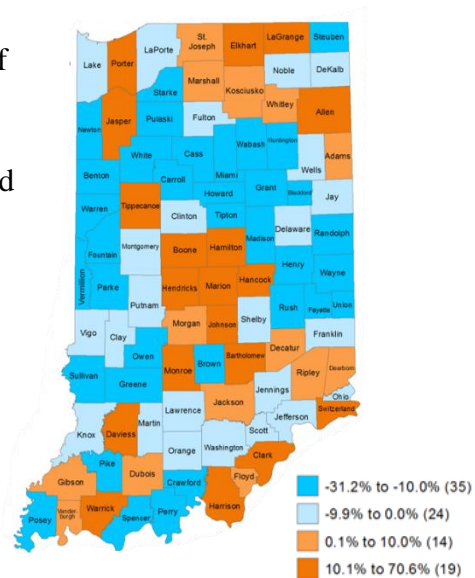
the decline in manufacturing jobs is primarily automation which accounts for up to 88 percent of the loss. Offshoring, the oft-stated reason, is responsible for as little as 12 percent of the decline.¹ And yet, the most productive year in manufacturing in U.S. history was 2018. Companies are doing more with less. By and large, then, those jobs are not returning. Instead, the locality based jobs speak to the importance of people and place.

Figure 1: Cumulative Job Growth



Population Loss. Fifty-nine Indiana counties are projected to decline in population between 0% and 31% by the year 2050. This means 64% of all counties in the state are losing people. Projections, of course, are a predictor of the likely outcome should nothing else change. Destiny, though, is not pre-determined. Robust discussions regarding decline and growth are necessary to address or manage the respective of each (or both). This is especially true given Rush County's projected decline juxtaposed with its location near areas of growth. See Figure 2 (Source: STATS Indiana).

Figure 2: Projected % Change in Total Population 2015 - 2050



Talent Retention and Attraction. The traditional economic development approach, deployed for a generation, was transactional in nature and focused primarily on business attraction. A more modern approach, one that was first popularized around the turn of the last century, prioritizes people and place. It focuses on talent retention and attraction and is premised on the fact that jobs follow people and people choose where to locate based on quality of life factors. That said, moving decisions are extremely personal and, therefore, rather heterogeneous. Findings from a University of

¹ Center for Business and Economic Research

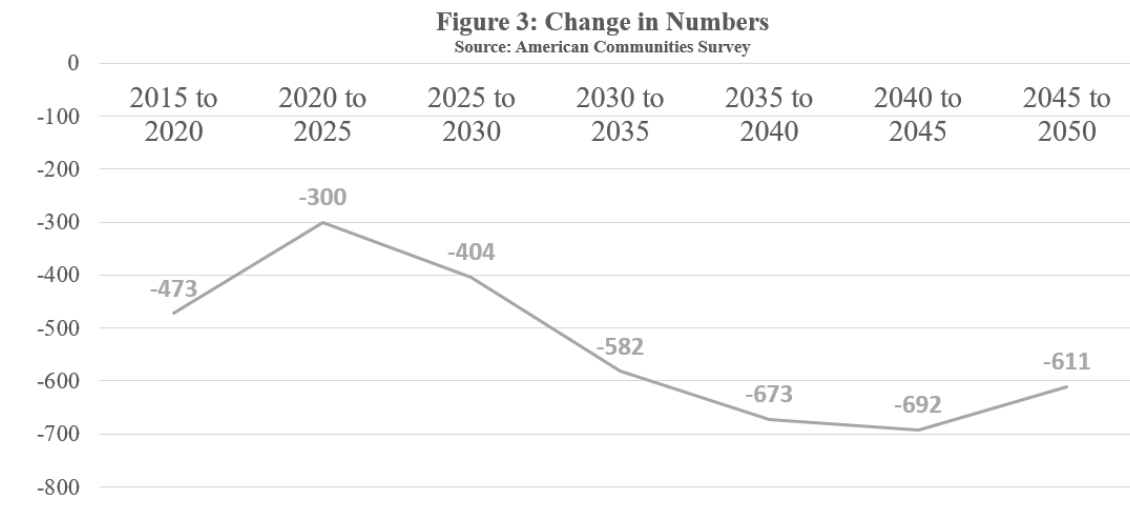
Wisconsin study on gaining and retaining young talent in communities, smaller ones in particular, reflects this.² The study identified the following rationale:

- Perceived quality of schools.
- Perceived appropriate affordability of housing—young adults at different life stages may define affordability differently.
- Outdoor amenities such as parks and trails, with appreciation for both motorized and silent (skiing, hiking, etc.) outdoor recreation.
- A small town sense of community and civic engagement.
- Proximity to cities that offered employment, entertainment, and shopping.

The last bullet raises an interesting point. Communities, even counties, do not have to check every box that may be required to retain or attract talent. Job opportunities and amenities, can be made appropriately ample via regional partnerships and approaches. Individual communities must identify and promote how they add value to the county or region.

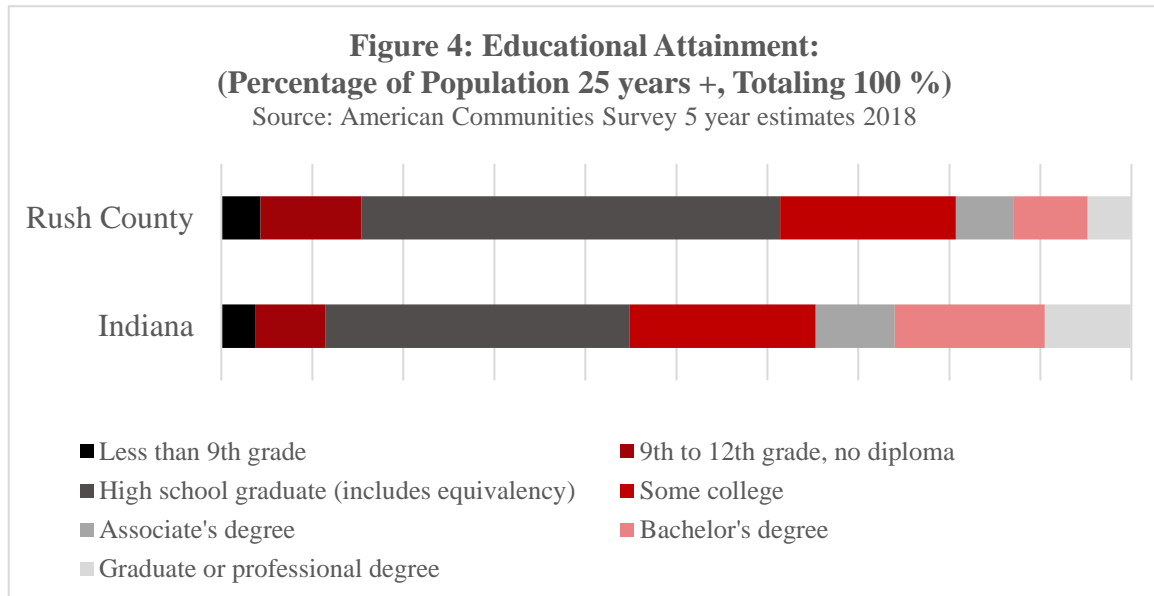
Given the changing paradigm, it is necessary to consider data that reflects more than economic information. Factors such as population change, educational attainment, household income, and poverty are increasingly of value. Following are some relevant data points from Rush County in comparison to Indiana.

In terms of population change in numbers by 2050, Rush County is *projected* to lose between 300 and 611 citizens, depending on the five year stretch considered. See Figure 3 (source noted within).



² Stoecker, Randy, Katherine Curtis, Matt Calvert, and Allyson Watson. 2017. *Gaining and Maintaining Young People in Wisconsin Communities Research Team*. Madison, Wisconsin.

The importance of an educated citizenry cannot be overstated. School quality is an extremely relevant and critical quality of life factor. Educational attainment also impacts people and place from a financial stability, workforce readiness, and job attraction standpoint. Rush County’s attainment lags Indiana. See Figure 4 (source noted within).



According to American Communities Survey data, median household income in Rush County as of 2017 was \$47,995. Its poverty rate was 18 percent. Indiana’s median household income was \$52,182 and its poverty rate was 15 percent.

FEEDBACK

During the series of meetings, participants were engaged in a variety of ways. First, they were asked to reflect on “one word or image” that comes to mind when thinking about their community and Rush County. Likewise, they identified what a “game changer” for their community and for Rush County might be if it were to happen (or not happen). These exercises served as ice breakers, but also enabled participants to begin thinking about their community as it is and as it might be in the future. Below is a recap of the most frequent answers for both the “one word/image” and “game changer” questions.

Table 2: One Word/Image and Game Changer Feedback		
Community	One Word/Image	Game Changer
New Salem	Ag/Rural/Small Town	Jobs/businesses
Glenwood	Ag/Rural/Small Town	Youth/young families
Manilla	Ag/Rural/Small Town and Blight	Volunteers
Mays	Ag/Rural/Small Town and Close-knit	Housing
Carthage	Falling behind/limited	Jobs
Milroy	Friendly/close	Population growth
Rushville	Growing/Improving/Progressive	Jobs/industry

The words or images most associated with Rush County *overall* were, overwhelmingly related to its rural nature which, of course, aligns with feedback from several of the individual communities. Regarding game changers, several were identified at the county level. Chief among them were jobs and industry (41) followed by amenities (21). Population growth, mindset, more businesses, and housing all solicited double digit responses. Among the amenities mentioned were bike/walking trails, a wellness center/pool, a county-wide library, and, more generically, things to do.

Participants were also asked to identify places, experiences, or qualities about their respective communities and Rush County that they Like (are glad to have), Love (care about most), and Would Like to Love (could be better). Table 3 provides a synopsis of these findings.

Table 3: Like, Love, and Would Like to Love Feedback			
Community	Like	Love	Would Like to Love
New Salem	Churches	Hospital; Family/Friends/People	Parks/Trails
Glenwood	Close-knit	Things to Do; Family/Friends/People	Activities, Blight/Beautification
Manilla	Small town feel; Safety	Family/Friends/People	Blight/Beautification
Mays	People; Schools	School; Family/Friends/People	Housing
Carthage	Pavey's	Ag/Rural	Pride/Involvement/Communication
Milroy	Safety; Family/Friends	Church; Family/Friends/People	Broadband; Parks/Community Center
Rushville	Parks; Local businesses	Rural/Ag; Family/Friends/People	Restaurants; Gathering Spaces (Parks, Community Center, Pool, etc.)

At the county level, what people “Like, Love, and Would Like to Love” varied quite a bit although a few common themes emerged. What people “Like” most about Rush County is its small businesses, healthcare, and safety. The most frequently mentioned “Like,” however, was the county’s rural/agricultural atmosphere and mentality. Similarly, it is Rush County’s small-town feel that residents most “Love” about the community. They also identified healthcare, schools, and amenities such as small businesses, the Farmer’s Market, the Princess Movie Theater, and covered bridges (among others) as things they cared most about, or “Love.” More investments in the park system, a community center and pool in particular, was the top mention at the county level for what residents “Would Like to Love.” The tally in favor of this, however, was not overwhelming. A consensus at the county level within this category was not obvious.

Additionally, meeting attendees in all but two sessions were asked to share their vision for the place they call home through the *Postcards from the Future* exercise. This engagement was added after the first two meetings to better elicit helpful information.

Residents were asked to pretend they had just returned to their community and the county after being gone for 20 years. They had to address and write a postcard to a real person describing what they saw and experienced (or did not see or experience) during the visit. Here are some of the postcards shared in full without names attached.

*“I just came back to **Carthage**. Goose Road was fixed! Pavey’s expanded. They now have a restaurant. Rue’s Tavern expanded as well. There is a new walking trail on the old railroad. Our library is open every single day now. Our community center has activities several nights a week. Our park got a face lift too.”*

*As I drive through **Manilla** and **Homer** and I love that I see a school here now. There is a huge park across the road from the fire station. I love that there are more homes, but yet the towns still look country. It has grown and the houses don’t look run down anymore. There is even a store to get all your groceries at.*

***Mays** now has two restaurants and a service/gas station! The population has increased enough we got our post office back! A child care center has opened just off of Highway 3 with a Paths to Quality “4” rating! A new housing development has opened east of 3 and north of town with 24 homes! I just may move back!*

*I was in **Milroy** today. A lot has changed in 20 years. We have murals on some of the historic buildings depicting history. However, we also have two parks now and a walking trail along the river that turns east and connects on the north and south side to the Elementary school and east side of town. The people had made it a tradition now to support block pots of flowers to enhance the beauty of town. It is relaxing to just drive by. Stop in and see for yourself soon.*

*I am amazed to find **Rushville** has filled storefronts downtown with unique shops catering to a wide range of needs for a moderately growing community. The walking/bike trail allows us to walk from one end of town to the other with a convenient stop at a bustling community center. I appreciate that they finally have a pool indoor for year round use as well as a walk track with toddler care. I am impressed. Job well done.*

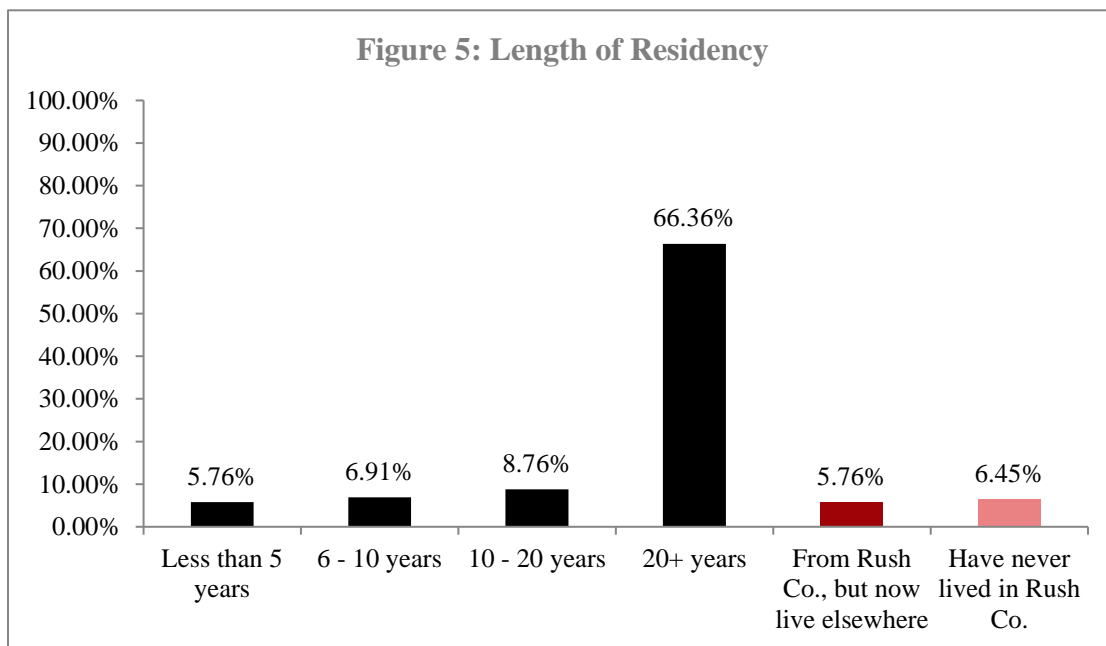
*I’m sure you’d be amazed at the changes around **Rush County** – who knew we’d be as populous as Shelby County in just 20 years? I think it’s partly due to all the agritourism opportunities, the new community center (with a pool—finally!) and the change in attitude about the nature of change itself – that the future can hold a wealth of positive if we only embrace the new and unfamiliar.*

As expected and as the above examples show, most people who participated in the *Postcards from the Future* exercise had (have) a positive vision for their respective communities and/or Rush County. Beautification, new trails, housing, population growth, and schools are among the highlights of what residents hope to see come to or happen within their hometowns. Both broad ideas and specific opportunities are shared. In total, this feedback can help provide a roadmap for priorities (note: all *Postcards from the*

Future notes will be shared in full with the Rush County Community Foundation). It was not all positive, however. One postcard helped capture what the future could look like for any number of Rush County communities if efforts to evolve and improve do not occur or continue.

Unfortunately our town is now in darkness. The lights were always kept on by donations from the community. As time went by apparently the new residents just didn't donate. In a town where I grew up the community has not grown but declined.

Finally, the Rush County Community Foundation distributed a survey between November 12 and December 1, 2019 to solicit feedback from Rush County residents on a variety of topics. The number of responses totaled 437, a solid sample but not likely representative in the technical sense. Following is some demographic information. Nearly 74 percent of respondents were female compared to 51 percent of the overall population.³ Forty percent of all respondents were between the ages of 35 and 54. The remaining age breakdown was: 1 percent under the age of 18, 23 percent between the ages of 18 and 34, and 36 percent aged 55 or older. Figure 5 captures the length of residency in Rush County.



Additionally, 47 percent of the survey respondents lived in Rushville Township. Overall, Rushville Township accounts for 45 percent of the county's population.⁴ On the other hand, Ripley Township only had three people respond to the survey, or 0.69% of the population. Overall, Ripley Township accounts for 11% of Rush County's population.

³ 2018 ACS 5 year estimates data profiles

⁴ 2018 ACS 5 year estimates data profiles

This disconnect is noted because, during the community meeting in Carthage, the lack of connectivity to the rest of Rush County, whether real or perceived, was broached several times. Of course, without further analysis regarding responses from all townships, none of these comments can attest to geographic representation.

Regarding the results, here are some takeaways noted within the context of the engagement findings.

- 37 percent of respondents strongly agree that Rush County is a great place to live (48 percent of respondents agree).
- 47 percent of respondents strongly agree that Rush County is a great place to raise a family, suggesting an even greater appeal in this specific way. Similarly, 69 percent of respondents also said what they like most about the county is that it is friendly/family friendly. Although coded slightly differently, words like “family” and “friends” came up quite often as the top thing people “Love” about their communities.
- 47 percent of respondents indicated that they like the farming community/rural/ag area aspects of Rush County. 83 percent identified the importance of hometown feel/small town living. This aligns with what people at the various meetings identified as what they “Love” about their respective communities.
- 32 percent of respondents disagree that there are plenty of things to do on the weekends in Rush County. This aligns relatively well with what many said they “Would Like to Love” about their respective communities. Interestingly, when asked how often they utilize resources such as the library, playgrounds, and walking trails, the results indicate a potential disconnect:
 - 57 percent of respondents never use the library; 28 percent only do so a couple of times a year
 - 41 percent never use local playgrounds; 33 percent only do so a couple of times a year
 - 35 percent never use walking trails; 29 percent only do a couple of times a year
- 74 percent of respondents say entertainment is important to them (64 percent say the same for youth entertainment). Similarly, 72 percent value indoor recreation and 67 percent indoor activities for children. The latter statistics may have been influenced by the fact that the survey was conducted in late fall. Regardless, these opinions reinforce the concern about things to do as mentioned in the previous bullet point. So, too, does the fact that 82 percent say dining options are important. Additional feedback shows that 37 percent of Rush County residents who responded to the survey seek recreation opportunities outside of the county.

- 53 percent of respondents strongly agree or agree that Rush County is leading the way in rural Indiana. On the other hand, just 13 percent of respondents say they strongly agree that Rush County is looking towards the future (Rushville, it should be noted, fared better in this regard at 30 percent). It seems, then, that there may be a level of pride in where Rush County has been and where it is now, but also some concern about where it is headed. This somewhat dichotomous paradigm is also reflected in the engagement feedback.

The survey also asked respondents to identify what they view as a problem within the community. Table 4 outlines some of these results.

Table 4: Rush County “Problems” (Survey Feedback)			
Problem Asked About	% said Major Problem	% said Somewhat of a Problem	% said Not a Problem
Community Involvement	11	61	28
Hometown Pride	6	51	44
Recreational Opportunities	34	58	8
Affordable Housing	24	47	29
Affordable Healthcare	34	48	18

CONSIDERATIONS

Following are considerations related to some of the key findings identified in the community meetings and survey. Other considerations should certainly be taken into account as challenges are addressed and opportunities pursued. The provided considerations are offered in no particular order. They are also not meant to serve as policy recommendations. Rather, they are aimed at sparking ideas and guiding additional conversation.

Past versus Progress. The feedback makes clear that Rush County residents take pride in their rural heritage. Perhaps the biggest threat to the county’s small towns and farm fields is population change. As mentioned above, Rush County is projected to lose population through at least 2050. Fewer people means less resources. Decisions about where to invest time and money will only become more difficult. Prioritizing quality of place—schools and amenities, in particular—can help stem population loss. So, too, can improved storytelling and regional associations. Insights on placemaking and messaging are provided below while the value of regionalism is referenced above (note the Wisconsin study in particular). Concerns about population loss are clearly valid, but worries over unchecked development are also not without merit. First, efforts to attract and retain talent will hopefully net results. In addition, Rush County is located relatively

close to a major growth area. No one truly knows how far or in which direction Indianapolis will grow, but the city's continued expansion is almost certain. One *Postcard from the Future* envisioned Rush County as a future suburb of Indianapolis. If true, managing growth will be key to maintaining the bucolic countryside that so many love about the county. Despite one commenter's suggestion that what he or she would "Love" most is for the county to "eliminate all zoning," having mechanisms in place to fairly and transparently deal with development pressures is especially critical in areas that are or that hope to be growing. Some communities across the country have even turned to urban growth boundaries to create more vibrant, dense cities and towns while protecting farmland and respecting property rights. The first urban growth boundary was actually created in Lexington, Kentucky at the behest of farmers in the horse industry looking to save their most valuable natural resource, grazing pastures⁵ Such policies, however, can



Photo: Brian Blackford

be controversial. Regardless, proactive discussion about the tradeoffs is better than reactive decisions. Avoiding under the gun solutions is key to ensuring the community engagement that is even more important when weighing complex issues. Even if more far-reaching growth policies are not pursued, common and accepted development practices such as comprehensive planning, brownfields mitigation, and historic preservation can help protect the past while allowing progress.

The Place Equation. Whether the aim is to make communities more competitive from a talent retention and attraction standpoint or to ensure they are the best they can be for the current residents, amenity development is important. Placemaking is one tool for creating or improving amenities within a community. Although rooted in 1960s urbanism, placemaking has only recently become a mainstay in the lexicon. Over time, it has expanded in scope and is regularly associated with broad-based community development efforts that range from wellness to economic revitalization. It has also grown beyond its big-city roots and is now an accepted and sought-after approach in communities of all sizes. Placemaking's larger reach and more inclusive focus has led to a bit of ambiguity about what it is and how it is best deployed. Dr. Cara Courage offers one of the better definitions that succinctly captures what placemaking, if done correctly, can mean for a community. She says, "A set of tools and an approach that puts community front and

⁵ "Urban Growth Boundary." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_growth_boundary (December 5, 2019).

center of changes to where they live.”⁶ This emphasizes an important point about placemaking. It is both a means and an ends. It is an engagement tool and an opportunity to test various strategies in a less intrusive, more feasible way. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) offers 11 principles of placemaking⁷ that are worth noting. They include:

- **The community is the expert:** The people living and working in a place know what needs to be done and how to do it.
- **You are creating a place, not a design:** Successful neighborhood improvements rely less on blueprints and more on engaged local citizens and a solid management plan.
- **You can’t do it alone:** The right partners will bring more resources, innovative ideas, and new sources of energy.
- **They’ll always say it can’t be done:** When officials, business people, and neighbors say it won’t work, what they really mean is, “We’ve never done it like this before.”
- **You can see a lot by just observing:** The best way to turn a neighborhood around is to take a close look at what works and what doesn’t in that particular place.
- **Develop a vision:** For a community vision to make a difference, it has to be created by the people that live there, not by outside consultants.
- **Form supports function:** If you don’t take into account how people use a place in the beginning, you will have to deal with the consequences later.
- **Triangulate:** A great place offers many things to do, all of which enhance each other and add up to more than the sum of the parts.
- **Start with the petunias:** Little things can set the stage for big change, especially by proving to skeptics that change is possible.
- **Money is not the issue:** If you are working in a spirited community, you’ll find creative ways around financial obstacles.
- **You are never finished:** Eighty percent of the success of any good place is due to how well it is managed after the project is done.

⁶ Courage, Cara. 2017. “Placemaking & Community: TedEx Indianapolis.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sfk1ZW9NRDY> (October 17, 2018).

⁷ “Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places” *Project for Public Spaces*. <https://www.pps.org/article/11steps> (November 1, 2019).

Understanding how best to implement placemaking strategies, as both a means and an ends, also requires consideration of the elements of place. People often associate place with or define place as a sum of its physical attributes. Aesthetics matter, but they are only part of the puzzle. How a site—a public space or alleyway or park—is activated is critical to its success. Additionally, ensuring that places tie to the local culture and have a deeper meaning is important. What does this mean in practice? Artist Matthew Mazzotta does a great job of this. In his project, Cloud House, he accounts for each element of place in a creative way. His installation looks good. It is whimsical and well-made. A closer look reveals a rocking chair inside (there are actually two). It provides a chance to sit back, relax, and have a conversation. The chairs activate the space. Identifying the meaning is more challenging. It turns out, as people rock and chat, they are generating energy that causes the cloud hanging above the facility to rain. That rain is then collected to water the community gardens situated in the park next to the structure. Understanding and properly deploying elements of place in all efforts to develop amenities can likely help mitigate a significant disconnect found in the engagement feedback and survey results. Rush County residents indicated that they wanted more to do, but then failed to fully take advantage of at least some of the offerings already provided. More robust activation that better ties to local culture and heritage makes amenities more accessible to more people. Additionally, a well-implemented placemaking endeavor engages people throughout the process which helps ensure amenities meet actual needs while increasing communication to and buy in from residents.

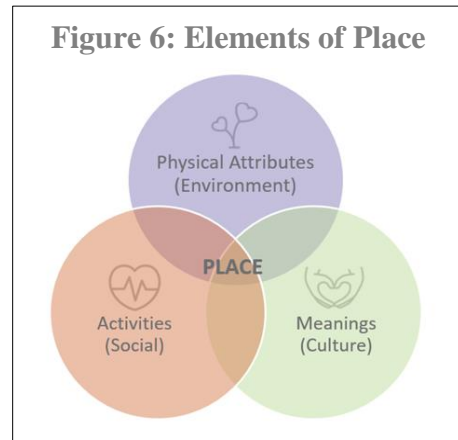


Photo: MatthewMazzotta.com

Sharing the Story: Beyond promoting a brand or developing a tagline, storytelling reflects a community’s collective pride and its ability to share what makes it great—with visitors, residents, potential investors, etc. It involves marketing and communications, but also relates to how communities represent themselves in practice. Here are some considerations:

- *Owning a narrative:* Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2011, was listed as one of America's most dying cities. Citizens who questioned that unfortunate ranking took it upon themselves to own the negativity and change it. They created a continuous loop video to the song "American Pie" engaging the entire community to do it. The video went viral. They successfully pushed back. Fast forward a few years and the city was ranked a top destination for Millennials looking to relocate. Of course, the video in isolation did not cause that shift, but it did help change the narrative and build positive momentum.
- *First impressions:* People judge communities by their covers, so to speak. One of the first interactions a visitor or potential citizen has with a community is its welcome sign. Think about it. Is that sign, if it exists, placed at the boundary among a bunch of sprawl and visual noise or is it located at the first point of interest? Is it a standard sign, or a work of art? It is a small thing, but it matters—as evidenced by investments developers make in the entry signs to the subdivisions they build.
- *Layered approaches:* The wrought iron fencing in downtown Kokomo's medians, for instance, look great. They take on more meaning when the full story is told. Apprentices with the union welded them as part of their training. Sharing that fact is important to painting the bigger picture.
- *The T-shirt test:* Flags, zip codes, area codes, and other local images from various communities increasingly adorn t-shirts. Would citizens wear a fun t-shirt that promotes one of the communities or an aspect of the overall county? What would the shirt have on it?



Photo: City of Kokomo

Beauty, not Blight. In its three-year *Soul of the Community* study on place attachment, a measure of connectedness to and pride in place among the people who live, work, or visit there, the Knight Foundation identified three key factors: social activities, openness and aesthetics.⁸ The bottom line: looks matter. People do judge a place by its physical attributes. Creating an attractive environment can help build pride and convey a positive message. Yes, renovated buildings and updated facades are important variables in the

⁸ Knight Foundation. 2010. *Knight Soul of the Community 2010: Why People Love Where They Live and Why It Matters: A National Perspective*.

beautification equation, but there are plenty of other ways to make places more attractive. Placemaking, as previously mentioned, provides a great opportunity to experiment with different approaches. Many communities, Rushville included, have taken simple and small steps such as turning trash cans or utility boxes into art. They have invested in street trees and flowers. Some communities are pushing the creative boundaries in ways such as the following:

- Hiding temporary construction fencing or even more permanent barriers with art weaved into the chain links.
- Elevating public art with a mix of traditional mural work and three dimensional sculpting—i.e. found trash to create a turtle.
- Using asphalt stamping not just for various crosswalk designs, but to make an alleyway turned public space more attractive.



Photos L-R: Cool San Diego Sights!; West Magazine; Northeastlittleleague.org; bocdalo Tumblr.com; Pinterest

Making a Move: In the above recap of the data presented at the community meetings regarding change, the complexities of what motivates people to move was mentioned. The Wisconsin study, in particular, sheds some helpful and encouraging light on the value proposition rural communities can offer, especially if regional partnerships are creatively utilized to make job opportunities available and to develop amenities. Another advantage small communities have is affordability. A Livability.com survey of Gen Z (1,008 adults between the ages of 18 and 23), the latest generation to be entering the workforce, found that 73 percent ranked affordability as a top three factor.⁹ Much of the community engagement feedback highlighted Rush County's low cost of living. It should be noted, however, that there is a bright line between the value a community can offer and a community being cheap, or perceived to not care enough about its present and future to make necessary investments. Any effort to elevate affordability as an asset must

⁹ From A to (Gen) Z. 2018.

be coupled with assurances of ample amenities, good schools, access to healthcare, and other quality of life factors.

Food for Thought: Restaurants are often cited as a major need for communities. Everyone eats. Many will travel for food. While an extremely tough business, successful restaurateurs have proven that quality and experience can overcome all other factors including location. Lower overhead, closer proximity to producers, fewer competitors, and greater flexibility are among the reasons chefs are pursuing opportunities in smaller communities. A 2016 article in Eater (*What Happens When Big City Chefs Open Small Town Restaurants?*) articulates some of these points. On the flipside, it also shares the challenges unique to small town eateries including staffing and promotion.

Here are three ideas for how communities can support restaurant development:

- The Boone County (Indiana) Economic Development Corporation launched a brewery recruitment campaign several years ago. They shared, often in whimsical ways, their status as a self-proclaimed “beer desert.” Efforts were made to connect with home brewers to gauge interest in taking the step from hobbyist to entrepreneur. Identifying small breweries in other communities, they pitched their county as a place to expand with a second tasting room or brewpub. Two of the communities found success in locating their first breweries to downtown as a result of this concerted effort. While focused on breweries in this case, the effort is translatable to other food businesses
- Valparaiso, Indiana, in the early 2000s, turned to a unique, little-used state law to free up more alcohol licenses in hopes of removing a barrier to entry and recruiting more downtown restaurants. The law requires there to be a designated historic district and within those boundaries the following: a county courthouse, a historic jail and sheriff’s house, and an historic opera. The presence of those amenities may be rare, but some creativity could help overcome the requirement. Crown Point, for instance, lacked an historic opera house and found a creative solution—a technicality related to their antique mall.
- Placemaking provides an opportunity for restaurant attraction. Creating outdoor seating through temporary parklets (see right) helps existing restaurants, brings energy to the food scene, and can double as a growing mechanism for local herbs or edible flowers—demonstrating an interest in food.



Photo: WFYI.org

CONCLUSION

Rush County residents are proud to call their communities home and are generally hopeful for its future.

“I came back home to see what the old hometown looked like. I must say that I was surprised to see its evolution. The town appears to have thought beyond “only agriculture” and thought for the next generation. They have focused on quality of life and it appears to have worked. They have created an oasis out in ag land. They still have the pride in their heritage, but have worked to create a respectful balance. Hope you come visit and see it for yourself.”

That said, residents also understand the depth and breadth of the challenges the county, overall, and their respective communities, specifically, face. Those engaged in this outreach effort, and others in the past or that may be planned, will be among the greatest resources available to the Rush County Community Foundation and other county leadership as they build a plan for what’s next.