

Vibrant

COMMUNITIES OF LA PORTE COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

February 2021

Process coordinated by:

**The Unity Foundation of La Porte County
The La Porte County Convention and Visitors Bureau**

For more information or to read the Action Agenda, visit:

VIBRANTLPCOUNTY.COM



What is Vibrant Communities?

In the fall of 2019, the communities of La Porte County joined together to embark on a momentous effort to develop a new county-wide Action Agenda. Having been thirty years since the county's last plan, and witnessing growth in surrounding counties, a coalition of leaders decided it was time to join together to define a pathway forward. The Vibrant Communities of La Porte County Movement is a community-wide effort to develop a unified vision. The Vibrant Communities Action Agenda is the result of this input serving as a roadmap towards making the communities of La Porte County more vibrant and prosperous.

MOTIVATION FOR THE MOVEMENT

Before pursuing new investment opportunities, certain steps must be taken to understand community priorities. Everyone benefits when a united vision is defined to guide investment strategies. The Action Agenda represents the potential methods for all the communities to enhance, preserve, and revitalize the greater La Porte County community. The coalition of leaders understood the need for positioning themselves for the future, leveraging the collaborative spirit that exists within the county to begin a movement for change.

The Vibrant Communities Action Agenda is the first expression of community programs, policies and projects to enhance the greater La Porte County community. These action items emerged from public engagement to identify priority areas affecting all communities and prepare for future investment. The Action Agenda will evolve over time as items are implemented, making each community in La Porte County more vibrant and prosperous.

WHAT IS AN ACTION?

An Action, simply stated, is a program, policy, or project. The actions are organized by three themes which influence all of the communities of La Porte County - People, Prosperity, and Place. Each theme contains a series of strategies which the action items seek to address, all while supporting the united vision.

CHAMPION CHANGE IN THE COUNTY TODAY!

Vibrant Communities is already promoting change in the county, pursuing several of the action items identified by the community. Get involved in Vibrant Communities today to ensure that every community in La Porte County becomes more vibrant! Visit the website below for ways to get involved and updates on the implementation of the Action Agenda.

- VIBRANTLPCOUNTY.COM -



Inclusion Strengthens our Communities

The Vibrant Communities of La Porte County process is intended to be transparent and inclusive. Vibrancy will occur when the diversity of perspectives and vision of all those who live, work, and travel to La Porte County is brought forward. During the process, world events made it clear that racial and social equity must be woven into the La Porte Vibrant Communities movement.

Encouraging diverse voices through embracing multi-culturalism will bring vibrancy. Involvement of residents of all races, ethnicities, faiths, identities, orientations, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses is needed to improve the quality of life for all. During community outreach, the leadership team and Steering Committee made sure that all groups were included in the conversation to help define the county's future. Listening sessions were spread geographically around the county. Everyone was encouraged to attend one or all. Discussions with African-American leaders identified challenges facing their community and pathways to support new opportunities. Small group conversations in churches with the Hispanic community revealed the impact of improving local governance and connecting people to career advancement resources. Further discussions with youth, homeless, disabled, and LGBTQ members complete the Vibrant Communities vision to represent and improve the quality of life for all.



Through implementation, La Porte County's Action Agenda will strive to reduce barriers and increase opportunities for all La Porte County residents. Ongoing discussions across the many communities of our County will help us reach our collective visions and shared goals.



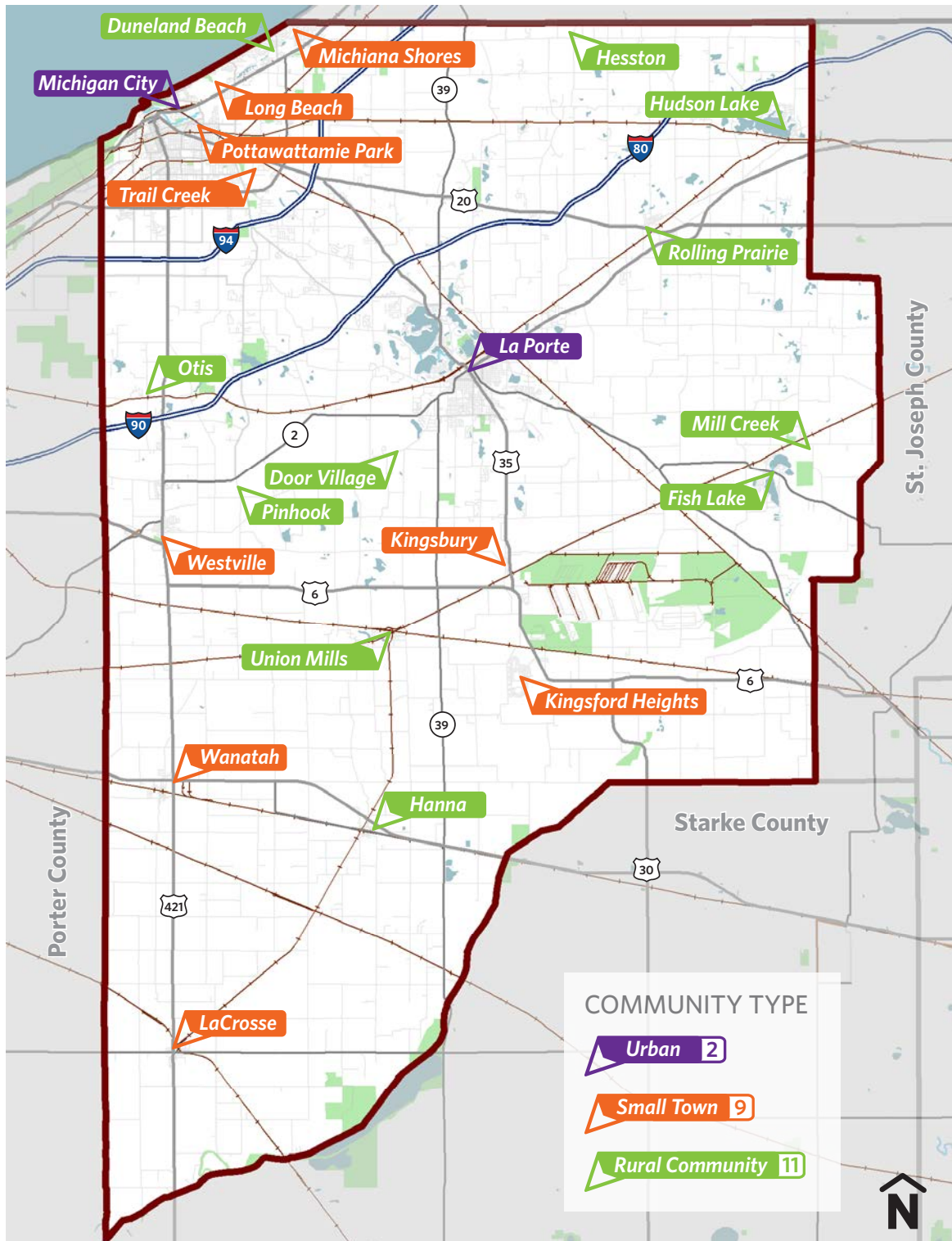
WHY DEFINE COMMUNITY TYPES?

La Porte County is home to a variety of community types, both in character and scale. Places such as Michigan City have a different set of challenges and opportunities than communities like LaCrosse. Similarly, these communities each envision their own pathway towards a more vibrant community that is represented in the people implementing the action items. Understanding the differences between these communities ensures the Action Agenda is inclusive of all the communities of La Porte County in improving the quality of life and quality of place. This led to the identification of three community types across La Porte County to define action recommendations; Urban, Small Town, and Rural Community.

Who is La Porte County?

Two Urban Cities, Nine Small Towns, and Eleven Rural Communities

A network of 22+ diverse places representing a range of characters from urban cities to small towns to rural communities. The unique places is one of many characteristics that sets La Porte County apart from other counties.





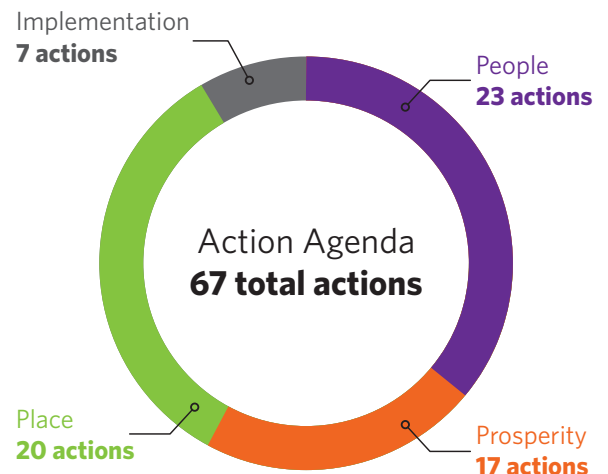
How to use the Action Agenda

The Action Agenda is a collection of specific recommendations based on community discussions to define the future of the county. These action items include a wide variety of opportunities from establishing new programs to refining existing initiatives. The recommendations have been organized based on three themes that influence all the community types of La Porte County - People, Prosperity, and Place.

WHO IMPLEMENTS?

The Action Agenda has a role for everyone in the community from supporting initiatives to championing actions. Within the last chapter, Implementation, each action item has been assigned potential leaders or partner organizations to support implementation. Here are a few suggestions on how various community representatives, organizations, and leaders can use and support the Action Agenda.

- » **Adopt the Vision Statement** - Organizations can officially adopt the vision statement, showing their dedication for enhancing the communities, supporting their people, and improving their prosperity.
- » **Identify potential roles in action implementation** - Everyone has a role in supporting the Vibrant Communities Movement. From individual people to private businesses to large organizations, all of the action items will require support to implement or may already be underway. Identifying opportunities to get involved in the movement will ensure that all of La Porte County’s communities become more vibrant in the future.
- » **Promote immediate action** - The Action Agenda contains a variety of recommendations which allow for realization. By supporting the movement, these actions can receive the resources, funding, or support necessary to ensure their implementation.
- » **Monitor the movement** - The Action Agenda represents the first expression of the movement. New recommendations will emerge as actions are implemented and partnerships form throughout the county. Continue to monitor progress of the Action Agenda by visiting the website: VIBRANTLPCOUNTY.COM to identify new opportunities to get involved.



La Porte County Today

An effective plan for the La Porte community must build off of a solid foundation of research and technical analysis to define the challenges and assets of each community. The county is a strong and diverse place, both in terms of its places and people. A “snapshot” of La Porte County’s vital statistics can serve as a benchmark for future progress. This work was initiated through the Focus on the Future process in 2015 and has been updated for the purposes of the Action Agenda across three broad categories.



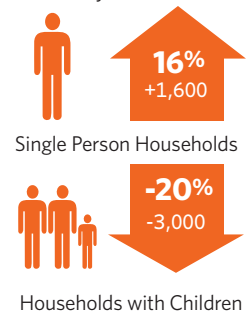
PEOPLE

Measuring the demographic conditions and trends for indicators like population and diversity.

Population stagnation. Small decline in between 2010 and 2018 of a little more than 1%. Faster regional growth. Overall growth in Northern Indiana region of 4% from 2000.

Over 50 population increasing. 37% increase from 2000 to 2014, more than 40,000 now over 50 with under-50 population declining during the same period.

Growing Hispanic population. Increase of 92% between 2000 and 2014 which changes the share of the Hispanic population from 3% to 6% or an increase of more than 3,000 individuals.



PROSPERITY

Measuring the economic conditions and trends for people’s personal prosperity, workforce and the economy.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

\$53,255

Below the state median, \$60,060

Wage growth stalled. Only 13% growth between 2000 and 2014 (inflation adjusted), currently ranked in the bottom half of Indiana Counties, earnings 93% of state average.

Decline in manufacturing. 32% decline from 2002, roughly 3,400 fewer primary jobs. Sector dominated by small establishments with firms employing fewer than 20 employees making up 95% of the total.

Unemployment leveling, higher than state. Peak in 2009 at 11.9% down to 7.2% in January 2019 (Indiana 5.5%).



PLACE

Measuring and describing place-based conditions and trends like transportation and housing.

High share of households with no access to a car. 12% of homes have no vehicle available (7% Indiana).

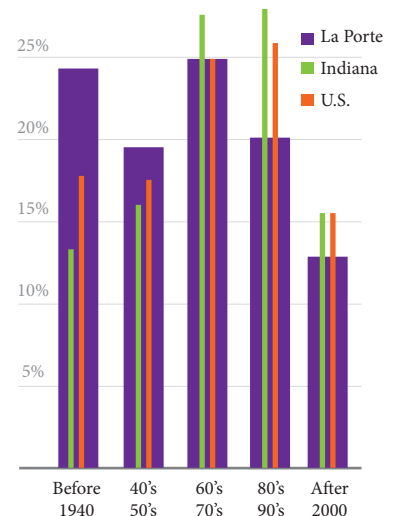
Older housing stock. 42% of homes built before 1960 (33% Indiana), 24% built before 1940. Majority single-family, detached housing. 74% of residential units detached.

Increasing Transit Options. Urban systems (La Porte’s TransPorte, Michigan City’s MCT), County Connections through the Transit Triangle, and regional

connections NICTD (South Shore Commuter Train, Baron’s Bus, Coach USA, etc.).

A variety of places and environments. A diversity of settings from urban town centers to working agricultural lands. Urban centers maintain a dense and walkable grid, giving way to more recent auto-oriented development. More than 731 active farms in the county, collectively producing more than \$200M in annual market value.

HOUSING YEAR-BUILT DATE





The Planning Process

The Vibrant Communities Movement engaged more than 900 people from across the communities of La Porte County over the six-month process. This involvement was inclusive of the diverse people who live, work, and enjoy the county. The hundreds of participants provided thousands of comments, thoughts, and ideas at both in-person sessions and online which directly shaped the Action Agenda.

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Managing the planning process was the leadership team composed of members of the Unity Foundation of La Porte County, La Porte County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, and Consultants. These members conducted weekly coordination calls, facilitated steering committee meetings, and oversaw the general management of the six-month planning process.

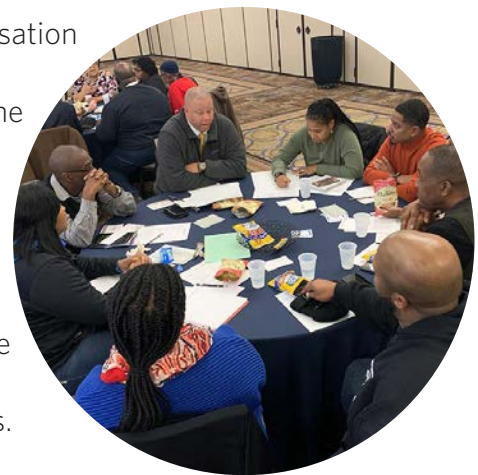
STEERING COMMITTEE

SC1

To support the process, the leadership team selected a diverse 24-member steering committee to guide the communities through the process. The group met several times during the duration of the planning process to discuss communication strategies, review ideas generated through the public process, identify potential actions and provide feedback on the initial draft of the Action Agenda.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The Community Conversations were intended to begin the conversation of the future of the communities of La Porte County. The six in-person events were designed to inspire participation throughout the process and stimulate discussion on how everyone can achieve a more vibrant and prosperous county. The agenda included a brief introduction from the Leadership Team, an overview of the process, and a series of individual and group activities to generate ideas. More than 750 participated in the conversations, generating thousands of comments on topics including pride in the diverse communities, innovative people, parks and environmental assets, improving amenities, and providing services to all residents.



SC2

October 2019

November 2019

SC3

SC1

September 2019

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

For those unable to attend one of the in-person meetings, the process website, VIBRANTLPCOUNTY.COM, allowed participants to share their thoughts, comments, and ideas online. Online activities mimicked the in-person meetings encouraging people to participate in defining the future of the county. The online activities collected hundreds of unique comments from people around La Porte County. As the process transitions into implementation, the website will provide up-to-date information on action recommendations underway and engagement opportunities for people to remain involved in Vibrant Communities.

MEETINGS-IN-A-BOX

Meeting materials were packaged to allow for small groups to meet and discuss their ideas about the county's assets and opportunities. These meetings-in-a-box were facilitated by the Leadership Team with specific groups who were underrepresented at the Community Conversations. Hundreds of additional ideas were generated from these meetings providing priority focus areas to guide the Action Agenda. Groups engaged included:

- » Hispanic / Latinx Community (two meetings held)
- » African American Community
- » LGBTQ Community
- » South County Coalition
- » La Porte Ministerial Association
- » Union Mills Lions Club
- » Middle & High School Students
- » Trail Creek Watershed Partnership
- » Grace Learning Center
- » La Porte County Public Library
- » Keys to Hope Community Resource Center
- » Meals-on-Wheels

THE SUMMIT ON THE FUTURE

The second round of public engagement culminated in a single event referred to as the Summit on the Future event which took place on December 4, 2019. The Summit was designed to reveal the key findings of the first round of engagement and test the direction for the action agenda. The Action Agenda framework was organized by an overarching theme, three specific goal statements, and a series of strategies supporting each goal. The agenda included a brief introduction, a trivia activity on La Porte County's unique assets, and a group discussion activity to provide thoughts and recommendations. Over 160 people participated in the Summit on the Future identifying their priorities for the future and sharing comments on the vision statement, goal statements, and strategies. Priority strategies were identified around supporting healthy lifestyles, training a skilled workforce, diversifying housing options, and strengthening Main Streets, among several others.



December 2019

January 2020

SC4

SC5

February 2020

SC6



Action Agenda Structure

The Vibrant Communities Action Agenda is organized into three major theme chapters, which help achieve the unified vision for the county. Each chapter is supported by a goal and several strategies that serve to organize the 67 specific action recommendations.

VISION STATEMENT

We envision La Porte County to be a vibrant collection of unique communities that invest in their diverse people, grow their economic and health vitality, and promote innovative leadership through talented citizens for a rich quality of life for all.

PEOPLE

In the communities of La Porte County, we are... Welcoming, inspiring, and community focused. We care about all our people and their future as demonstrated through our investments in education, human services, housing, health and civic engagement.

STRATEGIES

- » Diversify our available housing options
- » Prioritize healthy lifestyles for all people
- » Support a culture of lifelong learning
- » Broaden access to essential human services
- » Inspire greater civic engagement and involvement
- » Enliven the presence of our community culture

PROSPERITY

In the communities of La Porte County, we are... Growing a strong and resilient economy for all. In our communities, entrepreneurs find resources, workers find engaging opportunities, and visitors find world-class attractions.

STRATEGIES

- » Train a highly competitive and skillful workforce
- » Modernize and maintain enabling infrastructure
- » Stimulate local business growth and entrepreneurship
- » Promote and strengthen our attractions
- » Grow and maintain our employment sectors

PLACE

In the communities of La Porte County, we are... Maintaining vibrant places that celebrate our histories, protect our unique character and preserve our environment. Our investments support connecting our diverse communities through thoughtful growth and revitalization.

STRATEGIES

- » Direct growth and development through thoughtful planning
- » Strengthen our communities Main Streets
- » Reinvest in our established neighborhoods
- » Preserve our natural amenities
- » Improve multi-modal connectivity and efficiency
- » Celebrate our unique community character

VISION

Unified aspirations for the future quality of life and place across all communities.

GOALS

Intended outcomes expressed in simple terms for the Agenda's three theme chapters.

STRATEGIES

Objectives or subthemes within the goal that serve to organize actions.

ACTIONS

A specific project, program, or policy.

Priority Actions for Vibrant Communities

The Igniter or priority actions represent programs, policies, or projects that serve as the first implementable actions for the Vibrant Communities movement. These were identified through the Community Conversations and refined by the Steering Committee as the priority actions for Vibrant Communities.

ID* ACTION RECOMMENDATION

People

- 1.1 Conduct a countywide housing inventory and market study.
- 1.9 Support available drug / recovery services and resources.
- 1.10 Leverage health and wellness data for strategic investment.
- 1.17 Cultivate and support innovative civic leadership.

Prosperity

- 2.8 Expand broadband services throughout the county.
- 2.10 Build the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.
- 2.13 Establish a Certified Tourism Ambassador Program.

Place

- 3.7 Establish a targeted redevelopment program for Main Streets.
- 3.9 Create a neighborhood garden plot program.
- 3.16 Complete local bicycle and pedestrian networks and pursue connections to the regional trail system.
- 3.18 Initiate a community branding program.

UMBRELLA ACTION

The Northwest Regional Cities Initiative is a four county regional development plan focused on the long-term investment around the South Shore Commuter Line. This strategic plan includes the future extension of the double-track from Gary to Michigan City, greatly improving commuter efficiency from Northwestern Indiana to Chicago. This initiative influences all three themes of the Action Agenda - People, Prosperity, and Place - making this a unique opportunity for the communities of La Porte County.

*The action ID organizes and identifies the 67 actions within the three themes of the agenda; People (1), Prosperity (2), and Place (3).

WHAT'S NEXT FOR VIBRANT COMMUNITIES?

With the first list of action items identified, Vibrant Communities is already underway on implementing several priority recommendations. A **county housing study**, launch of the **NWI BizHub** (online resource for entrepreneurs in Northwest Indiana), and the Healthcare Foundation's **2020 Report to the Community** are among the several actions moving forward with the help from Vibrant Communities ambassadors. The movement is growing with opportunities for everyone passionate about La Porte County to get involved in making their community more vibrant. To find out more, visit the movement website for success stories, status updates on actions, engagement opportunities, community partnerships, and other news related to the Vibrant Communities movement!

- VIBRANTLPCOUNTY.COM -



For questions regarding this plan, contact:

Unity Foundation of La Porte County

(219) 879-0327

unity@uflc.net

or

La Porte County Convention and Visitors Bureau

(219) 872-5055

info@michigancitylaporte.com

