



BEYOND THE WATERFRONT

By Matt Ottinger

Porter County Braces for Next Phase

Comedian Tim Allen’s poetic waxing about his beloved home state may have the “Pure Michigan” campaign earning accolades, but just south of the state line Indiana’s Porter County is quietly executing its own economic movement.

The northern part of Porter features the mix of traditional heavy industry and recreational opportunities provided by Lake Michigan. Contrast comes in the agricultural strength of the southern communities, with the county seat of Valparaiso delivering an impressive business and higher education presence.

Rising tide

Lakeside Wealth Management, a Chesterton-based investment management firm, announced plans early this year to expand its operations and create up to 31 new jobs by 2020. The company has had marked success since it launched in 2006, serving many high net worth small business owners, most of whom live and operate in Porter County.

Chairman and CEO Mark Chamberlain cites the high quality of life Porter County provides his employees as a driver for his continued devotion to the area, adding that the region would be well served to parlay its proximity to Chicago.

“It would also be great to promote a reverse commute,” he advocates. “For years, I lived in Chesterton and worked in Chicago; I took the South Shore (train line) and it took about one hour and 15 minutes. There are many qualified people in Chicago that would work here if there was an easier way to get here. We could have access to another level of workforce out here.”

A major development currently being debated is a \$571 million South Shore commuter rail extension, which could help Northwest

Indiana fully leverage its access to Chicago. Considering the Chicago area economy is among the top three in the U.S. and ninth largest in the world, local officials believe this could offer dramatic economic potential. (Valparaiso is currently using ChicaGo Dash express buses to facilitate commutes between the area and the Windy City.)

Headquartered in Illinois, automotive acoustic, interior trim and thermal management product manufacturer UGN opened its Valparaiso operation in 1995. The company recently announced an expansion at the facility, potentially adding 14 new jobs to its staff of well over 300.

“We’ve had a great relationship with the city of Valparaiso and Mayor (Jon) Costas for many years,” iterates CEO Peter Anthony. “We’ve enjoyed our relationship with the state and have expanded that facility several times. And strategically, it’s in a good location for our customer base. We have a lot of our team members who have been at that facility for quite some time.”

While Anthony notes the company recently chose Ohio over Indiana for a recent expansion because the Buckeye state was “more aggressive” in pursuing its business, he too values the quality of life Porter County provides his employees and contends he’s been able to find workers with adequate skills.

“We are a team-based environment, so it’s important that the hourly team members understand that they would do a variety of tasks throughout their career at UGN,” he qualifies. “We want somebody who’s multi-faceted that would be a good member no matter what job they do.”

Additionally, property tax consulting firm Uzelac & Associates has 20 employees between its Valparaiso and Indianapolis locations, and CEO George Uzelac touts Porter County as an ideal business

location. He also explains its niceties help him draw tax specialists from outside the area.

“One of the items that attracts people is the educational system, including Valparaiso University and Chesterton High School,” he asserts.

“Yet in 45 minutes to an hour, you can be in Chicago to see some great theater. You have that access without the high cost of living in Chicago. It’s not a difficult area to recruit people to come to. Property taxes, crime rates and home prices are not high. There’s a great parks system. There’s not too much that’s bad.”

Something in the air

Porter County Regional Airport has blossomed since it was founded as a county-owned public service facility in 1949. According to airport director Kyle Kuebler, the facility is ranked No. 1 in the state for based aircraft, and its roughly 40,000 operations per year rank seventh in that category.

“Through the mid-1980s, the steel mills were our largest users,” he reports. “With the change of that industry, we’ve seen a diversification in Northwest Indiana with other businesses. Our greatest users now are the corporations doing business in the community – the store and restaurant chains, and some use by the steel mills, but not to the extent they once did.”

The airport itself has helped facilitate growth.

“Our bread and butter has been the support of corporate aviation, so it’s important for us to have the amenities (like conference rooms) that are necessary for that,” Kuebler says. “When a company flies into a community, one of the few things it sees during its trip is the airport. We want to have a terminal at the level people expect and the ability to have on-site meetings. We’ve had negotiations held here that have landed significant employers for the region.”

Air travel is just one infrastructure component that has made Porter County a player in business recruitment, according to Kuebler.

“(Officials) have tried to maximize the modes of transportation that are available in the area – three rail systems, a terrific highway system leading to interstates, and our airport, which has a runway 7,000 feet long (longer than the runways at Midway), and a proximity of 20 minutes to a deep water port.”

Kuebler points to a Cabinet Report released in 2012 that considered findings from interviews with 120 business and community leaders throughout the county to provoke discussion on how to leverage Porter County’s diverse assets to promote growth.

The report cited the Ameriplex industrial park in Portage – Porter County’s largest city – as an example of the benefits of tools

like public/private partnerships. At the time, there were 44 companies employing over 1,600 people. Today, the mixed-use park, located on I-94 less than a mile from Lake Michigan, boasts over 2,500 workers among its tenants. Ultimately, the report’s authors recommended a strategic focus on four areas – health care, industrial prowess (particularly steel production), information technology and tourism.

Harboring growth

MonoSol, a Merrillville-based polymer film manufacturer, announced plans last summer to locate a \$65 million plant at the Ameriplex. The anticipated creation of a 300,000-square-foot facility and up to 150 new jobs by 2020 was welcome news to area residents. However, it’s not just the municipal strongholds that are growing business opportunities.

The town of Burns Harbor, which had a population just over 1,150 in the 2010 Census, has taken a collaborative approach to encouraging development. The Burns Harbor Redevelopment Commission received 11 submissions in 2014 from interested firms hoping to facilitate efforts and had narrowed it down to three top contenders in January. The winning firm will provide assessment and strategic guidance on enhancing existing businesses and expanding employment and community development.

On the tourism front, Indiana Dunes remains Porter County’s largest tourist attraction and one of the state’s somewhat hidden gems. Indiana Dunes tourism officials recently revealed more than three million people from across the world visit the scenic getaway each year. An Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore study also indicates 80% of visitors are evenly divided between Indiana and Illinois, with 18% from other states and 2% coming from international locales.

Highway 65

Yet the internal struggle remains for those in Northwest Indiana, who generally feel more affinity for Michael Jordan and Mike Ditka than Reggie Miller and Tony Dungy, to engage in a mutual embrace with their state’s capital.

“The feeling in ‘The Region’ is that we kind of get left out a little,” Chamberlain surmises. “Porter County is part of that feeling, like we’re the red-headed stepchild up here in Northwest Indiana, at least when it comes to resources being allocated. And I’m not saying that’s true, but it’s the perception. So we don’t always feel like we’re part of the team.”

He adds that, as a business owner, he’d relish a more cohesive strategy at the county level.

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The Porter County Regional Airport caters to many types of planes, as well as the Eagle Aircraft flight training center. The airport also hosted Vice President Joe Biden twice in the last two years, as Air Force Two – a Boeing 757 – brought him in to visit his son in LaPorte County.



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“Porter County is definitely better than Lake County, but there’s still some infighting and individual fiefdoms and things like that,” Chamberlain contends. “I’m not really involved politically, but my sense is there are dysfunctions, but they’re easier to overcome and people are more willing to negotiate for the betterment of the county.”

Furthermore, he sees potential tourism enhancements as a net gain for the region.

“With all the work Portage is doing with the lakeshore, if you get increased tourism and light industrial in the Ameriplex, that’s just good for the county because of the halo effect,” Chamberlain concludes. “We’re more functional than most, and I’m optimistic things are heading in the right direction. Portage (Economic Development Corporation) has done a great job the last several years of attracting some businesses. Mayor Costas has also done a great job as (Valparaiso) has blossomed in the last five to eight years, and I think Chesterton is coming along.”



Lakeside Wealth Management is expanding and moved into new office space last year. The company renovated the top floor of a building in Chesterton and now has nearly 14,000 square feet, complete with conference rooms, a café and other amenities for staff.

RESOURCES: Peter Anthony, UGN, at www.ugnauto.com | Mark Chamberlain, Lakeside Wealth Management, at www.lakesidewmg.com | Kyle Kuebler, Porter County Regional Airport, at www.vpz.org | George Uzelac, Uzelac & Associates, at www.uzelactax.com