



A CITY TRANSFORMED

Carmel Thriving
on Creativity

By Symone C. Skrzycki

COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR

You could call it “the other city that never sleeps.”

In the last 20 years, Carmel has reinvented itself. The once-small town is today among the fastest-growing cities in the country. Restaurants, shops and a variety of residential and business projects form the new downtown. A focus on the arts and business advantages – particularly in the software and health care industries – also are fueling success.

“It’s been an exciting time for the citizens of Carmel because they’ve realized that it falls to our generation to build this new city,” declares Mayor Jim Brainard, rocking confidently in his chair at City Hall. “The thing about cities throughout history – there were only 35,000 people in Florence at the time of the Italian Renaissance. We have almost 100,000. We have the ability to do some very special things here that have the potential to capture the imagination of people around the globe. And we’ve gotten a lot of publicity – both in the U.S. and other places.”

The recognition includes being named (in 2015 alone) one of the safest small cities for retirement (Badcredit.org), best town to raise a family (NICHE; MarketWatch) and best place to get a job in Indiana (Zippia). In addition, *CNNMoney* Magazine deemed Carmel the Best Place to Live in America (2012) and the No. 3 best in 2014.

But why?

People – and businesses – are embracing its corporate culture and quality of life offerings:

- Serves as the national headquarters for more than 75 leading companies, including MISO (Midcontinent Independent System Operator), which manages the delivery of electric power across



Carmel stakes its claim and lays the foundation for a vibrant future.

much of North America.

- Investments in infrastructure, such as the community’s 90-plus roundabouts, have increased both safety and efficiency. Carmel has more roundabouts than any other city in the country.
- There are a number of new residential and business complexes recently completed and/or underway. Just last year, nine new or expanding companies brought in 1,390 new jobs; and plans were announced for a new Midtown development that will include 285,000 square feet of office/commercial space and 270 residential units in the heart of the city.
- Nationally-recognized school system, both in terms of academics and athletics.

Step into the city and behold how it’s experiencing a renaissance of its own.

At the center of it all

Established in the 1830s, Carmel’s roots are as a Quaker community. When Brainard was sworn in on January 1, 1996, the



The Center for the Performing Arts has attracted patrons from all 92 Indiana counties, 50 states and 22 different countries since opening in 2011.

official population was just under 30,000. Under his leadership, it's grown to about 85,000.

His philosophy is simple, but powerful: Try to do things just a little bit better than everyone else. The unofficial mantra: Build, build, build.

Noting that Carmel lacks the allure of San Diego's weather and palm trees or Colorado's mountains, Brainard observes, "We're trying to build a city that is able to compete. If we can't compete with the most beautiful and most fun places on Earth, we're not going to be able to get those people to Indiana and we're not going to then be able to attract the corporations that want to hire those people."

The solution was to construct something that was sorely missing: a vibrant gathering place.

"We bought 88 acres and 'master planned' a new downtown. That's what we call the City Center."

The City Center boasts more than 60 buildings, which include residential and retail space (offices, restaurants and shops) and underground parking. Expansions will continue with the addition of 10 buildings and a planned downtown hotel.

"We have worked hard to avoid the pitfalls of traditional suburban sprawl and instead embraced a shared vision of redeveloping our urban core, encouraging a walkable, sustainable community and challenging developers to pay close attention to architecture and density to maximize both the beauty and the value of their projects," Brainard reveals.

Mo Merhoff knows about venturing into new territory. She's president of OneZone, formed through a merger of the Carmel and Fishers chambers early this year.

"One of our members said, 'You make bold change out of aspiration or desperation.' We (both the Carmel and Fisher chambers) were in a strong position and said, 'Let's be bold,'" Merhoff recalls.

"You're looking at people (in Carmel) who see ahead. They're not keeping the plate spinning on the sticks; they're adding as many plates as they can in a strategic process to ensure that their community competes. I think that's what's unique."

Roundabout town

Investments in transportation infrastructure also are driving growth.

"We've figured out that most of the congestion is at the intersections," Brainard reflects. "Our roundabouts allow for 4.5 to five times the number of cars to move through in the same amount of time that a stoplight would. With roundabouts, we also



Students report on life at Carmel High School and beyond from an on-site television studio. Performers polish their skills and bond with fellow students during morning concerts.



can put a median down the middle and get a tree canopy going over the road much faster (enhancing aesthetic appeal).

"People love alternatives in how they travel," he shares. "The average American is on the road for two hours a day or 55-plus miles – that includes all the people who don't drive. The (total for the) average driver is more than that. We've tried to build a city where people don't have to spend that much time in their cars and can get around quickly.

Combined with the addition of 200 miles of bike trails and parkland which has jumped from 41 acres to nearly 1,000 acres under his administration, "That's how we're going to be able to compete for the employees those employers need to attract."

'If you like what you see ...'

Business is booming along the Meridian Business Corridor, which lies between 96th and 146th streets.

"We always like to say, 'If you like what you see, face north on 96th Street and look up to 146th Street and that's the economic engine,'" Merhoff relates. "That area employs the second-largest number of employees in the state – second only to downtown Indianapolis. If you look at the investment of businesses along that corridor, that's the economic engine that's funding the schools, that's providing the money for infrastructure, that's allowing the development."

The area is home to Leaf Software Solutions. Based in the Clay Terrace shopping center, Leaf was established in 1987. It has 55

employees and is “constantly growing.”

“We have – Indianapolis as a whole, and Carmel as a part of that – so many wonderful tech companies,” remarks Micah Wilson. “There’s incredible growth and a lot of innovative things happening in the tech community, so we’re proud to be a part of that.”

Wilson joined the company in 2000 (his uncle co-founded it, while his father has worked there almost 30 years) and is part of the communications team. He relishes Leaf’s laid-back culture (employees can wear shorts and T-shirts) and family atmosphere.

“It’s an awesome place to come to work every day. One of the benefits of being in Clay Terrace is that we have a lot of restaurants where we can have food catered in and can walk across the street and have lunch. And we can do some shopping during breaks if we need to.”

Exit Clay Terrace and a short trek downtown leads to MISO, which is helping to energize the economy. Approximately 800 people work out of its office there.

“What’s interesting is Carmel doesn’t necessarily bring diversity to us – we bring diversity to Carmel,” shares president and CEO John Bear. “It’s a very diverse workforce. We have about 250 visa-dependent employees, various nationalities.

“We found that (Carmel is) obviously a

great sort of calling card when we’re trying to attract people to work for MISO. You’ve got a very nice city that’s well planned out. It’s got great education for your children. It’s got low crime. It’s got a low cost of living. It’s a great place to live and raise your family.”

Since moving to Carmel from Houston in 2004, Bear has been impressed by the growth of the arts and cultural district, as well as the development of and around the Monon Trail.

“(I appreciate) the ability to have the arts here, which is really nice with the Palladium. I’m a big runner and a big golfer and there’s fantastic facilities for that.”

Indeed, the arts are changing the face of Carmel. Big-name entertainers headline shows at The Palladium at the Center for the Performing Arts, which opened in 2011. Sidewalk sculptures depict everyday life in the 1970s, and the Monon Community Center serves as a popular attraction for residents and visitors.

Jim Burrell moved to the city in the early 1970s. The retired Carmel Clay Schools administrator’s volunteer activities include (among a variety of others) CarmelFest, the Carmel International Arts Festival and the Carmel Farmer’s Market. “My wife and I have seen (Carmel) grow from kind of a sleepy community to something that is really

incredible. We’ve seen so much happen here. It’s a community we’ve loved and have been a part of.”

If you tout it, they will come

American Specialty Health Incorporated (ASH) is a health services organization that employs approximately 1,200 across the country. It offers specialty health provider networks and programs; fitness and exercise programs; and population health solutions for health plans, insurance carriers and employer groups.

ASH operates three primary offices – in Carmel; San Diego; and Southlake, Texas (a suburb of Dallas) – as well as a small technology center in South Carolina. In 2013, ASH relocated its national corporate headquarters from San Diego to Carmel. It has about 240 employees.

Among the characteristics that attracted chairman and CEO George DeVries were the availability of talent, cost of doing business and affordable living.

“I’ll contrast that candidly with San Diego, where the cost of housing is so high that less than 20% of the population can afford to buy a home and you have to live so far away from the office,” he contends. “There’s congestion and you spend a lot of time commuting back and forth. We’ve had about 70 or 80 of our San Diego-based



Carmel’s cultural amenities help connect businesses and residents. Bottom right is the first PorchFest (Brian McGuckin photo), bringing music to the city in a unique format.

employees move to Carmel and they've had a terrific experience.

"I have one guy who says, 'I live two songs away from the office.' It's about eight minutes away. I hardly talk to anybody who lives more than 10 minutes away and that's great. They can afford to live locally."

Noting that the Carmel operation has "ramped up very quickly," DeVries reveals, "We've found a lot of good people, so we're very excited about that. We'll continue to grow the Carmel office and I think we'll go well over 300 at a minimum as we go into next year."

Philip Thornton met Brainard this spring at the grand opening of Theta Chi Fraternity's Carmel office (previously the organization was based in Indianapolis). He's senior director of development.

"I mentioned that I was working remotely in Dallas, Texas, but was relocating soon to Indiana," he recalls. "The mayor highly encouraged me to move to Carmel, as I would greatly enjoy the community."

And that's exactly what he did, just in time to enjoy a busy summer at the Carmel Arts & Design District, local restaurants and the Monon Trail.

"Since moving to Carmel, I've hired two new employees and they have both relocated to Carmel as well!" he declares.

The arts: Music to their ears

Galleries, showrooms, eateries, antique stores and more line the streets of the Arts & Design District. It has a special place in the heart of councilwoman Sue Finkam.

She serves as chair of Carmel PorchFest, a free music event launched in 2014.

"It's in what we call the undiscovered streets of the Arts & Design District," she explains. "There are 40 bands on 20 porches. We have rock, jazz, blues, folk and pretty much any genre you can figure to further introduce people to music."

"We're now at full occupancy along Main Street. We have, if I recall, more than 80 arts-related organizations that have moved to the area. What I think a lot of people are amazed by is the vitality on any given weeknight – much less weekend night – along Main Street where there's patrons coming and going in and out of arts galleries,

dining and eating street side. It's really been a nice transition."

Brainard describes why investing in the arts is a priority.

"We spend about 2% of our revenues on the arts, both in supportive organizations and outdoor public sculpture. Many criticize, 'Why do you do that?' but it's pennies out of the dollar first, which isn't a lot, but the art we're investing in hopefully will appreciate and ... it's a tourist draw."

Bright minds, bright futures

Elvis, Johnny Cash, Peter Frampton and the Beatles all have their place in music history – and on the walls in the recording studio at Carmel High School.

They and other framed records set the tone for creativity. A massive gymnasium, television studio and planetarium also provide extraordinary educational choices.

"We have over 5,000 students. I tell our parents that our size is our greatest strength, and for us, size equals amazing opportunities," emphasizes Principal John Williams. "We have a community that really buys into and supports our school. One of the things that's unique about Carmel is that many, many people in this community live here because they want their kids to go to Carmel schools."

And business is brewing at the student-run coffee shop. "They'll do \$800 or \$900 in business before school," Williams proudly shares.

Pouring a cup of hot coffee for this writer, a student offers how getting a taste of business will benefit him long term. "It's really cool to get real-world experience," he confides, clearly enjoying his role as a budding entrepreneur.

Recalling his own youth, Leaf Software's Wilson shares how his early years play a part in making Carmel a perfect fit for his family today.

"My parents were missionaries. I lived in Austria as a kid for seven years, lived on the East Coast and the West Coast, but Indiana was always home base. Carmel was always a place you wanted to be, but I think now it's something you just don't want to be away from. It's an awesome place to raise a family. I don't have a desire to be anywhere else."



Companies of all sizes call Carmel home. American Specialty Health relocated its corporate headquarters from San Diego two years ago. Meanwhile, Mayor Jim Brainard (left) catches up with Marlin Meyer, an employee at The Bike Line, operating in Carmel City Center since 2012.