

FIELD TOUR NOTES: KOSCIUSKO COUNTY

Overview

The information discussed during the field tour has been organized into four key categories to allow for easy review and comparison between communities. The categories are defined below:

General Considerations:

A portion of the information discussed during the field tour meetings was to provide general information the community, the history and the residents living and working within the area. Items that could not be included in the three categories below have been accounted for in this General Considerations category.

Aspirations:

Aspirations are the goals/ objectives/ projects that the community hopes to achieve during or after this planning process.

Strengths/ Opportunities:

Strengths are internal, positive attributes of your department and/or system. These are things that are within your control. Opportunities are external factors in your environment that are likely to contribute to your success.

Weaknesses/ Threats:

Weaknesses are negative factors that detract from your strengths. These are things that you might need to improve on to be competitive. Threats are external factors that you have no control over. You may want to consider putting in place contingency plans for dealing with them as/ if they occur.

Summary

On Monday March 22, 2021 members of the project team met virtually using GoTo Meeting with Dan Richard, Matt Sandy, Commissioner Cary Groninger, and Jon Garber to discuss the County's existing conditions, aspirations, and overall needs. James Turnwald, Stephanie Overbey, Katie Clark, Scott Siefker, Donny Ritsema and Alec Poremen were in attendance from the project team.

General Considerations:

- The Area Plan Commission (APC) provides support to all incorporated municipalities except Warsaw, Winona Lake, Sidney and Mentone. Leesburg is the most recent addition to the APC.
- Work is ongoing to recodify existing zoning ordinances and as a part of this effort work is underway to digitize the ordinances to make them readily available to the communities and the public.
- The US 30 Coalition, along with state and local partners are looking at necessary improvements to the US 30 corridor. The study is just beginning and could take up to two years to see recommendations. Changes and improvements to the corridor could have huge impacts

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depending on what the recommendations include. This process should keep this study in mind and proactively think about what this may mean for the corridor. As an example, a moratorium on development or improvements could be necessary. This type of recommendation worked well for US 31 around Kokomo as they studied the corridor and prepared for long term improvements.

- There have been previous discussions around a SR 15 bypass around Warsaw. This improvement project has not been pursued lately and may not have a strong following backing the recommendation.
- Roadway improvements within Elkhart County include an extension of CR 17, south to provide a connection to US 6. As these improvements are made, further extension south to US 30 could be explored to determine how this would impact local communities and commuters within Kosciusko County.

Aspirations:

- Preserving the natural amenities within the County is a priority and identifying how to balance the environmental impacts of growth and development moving forward should be included in future action plans.
- There is interest in developing a group/ board that would function as a County parks department or parks board. The initial use of this group would allow the County to apply for funds but over the long run it could then organically grow into a broader County-wide parks system.
- In regards to the new comprehensive plan, there is interest in creating specific tools that the County can use in decision making. Providing a strong land use plan with defensible goals, objectives and policy statements will give the plan “stronger teeth” than what is available in the current planning document.
- The planning process and final set of tools should encourage residential development to be near existing utilities.
- In the future the County would like to ensure that they are preserving their roadway corridors (i.e right of way) to provide flexibility for improvements and enhanced pedestrian/ bicycle connectivity.
- Ideally it would be nice to find ways to connect each community to one another to encourage pedestrian/ bicycle connectivity across the County.
- Identifying projects or programming opportunities to bring a new focus to lakes and waterways would be helpful. This would increase overall use but also increase overall awareness of these local/ regional amenities.

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Strengths/Opportunities:

- The lakes throughout the County are a strong amenity. As the process progresses attention should be made to include additional waterways within this to see how rivers can be preserved and enhanced.
- The SR 15 corridor is primed for commercial development in many areas. Specifically, between Leesburg and Warsaw. Utilities are present making development easier.
- The Area Plan Commission does provide support for several communities. There are opportunities to increase membership with some local Towns.
- Currently the County is working on infrastructure upgrades to support their emergency response communication systems. These efforts include new and expanded cellular towers in key locations across the County. While these upgrades are focused on emergency response communication systems, internet providers could use these towers for their own purposes. This could allow broadband improvements throughout the County which are needed.
- Agriculture is a strong amenity to the County. The impacts on agricultural uses and land should be treated similarly to natural features such as lakes and waterways.
- There are opportunities to strengthen the use and programming along waterways such as the Tippecanoe River and Eel River. Making these assets more of a linear blueway elevates these underutilized assets.
- Identification and appropriate access to the existing Public Access sites could be considered.
- The Ride-Walk Committee has identified the potential for the trail network in Kosciusko County to be part of the National Trail Network that connects Elkhart County Pumpkin Vine Trail through the county to the Nickle Plate and Rochester trail system as a potential regional trail/bikeway.

Weaknesses/Threats:

- As communities grow, and even expand utility services to meet the need to new users/development, the County should be more proactive in helping local municipalities annex these areas.
- The County may need to take on a stronger, more prominent role when it comes to attracting and incentivizing development.
- The County's relationship with local communities is good, however there are opportunities to become more collaborative. Since some of the local municipalities are smaller, with limited staff, the County could take on a role that provides additional support and capacity.
- Currently the agricultural zoning classification is used as a holding tank. The new comprehensive plan should clearly identify how these areas should be treated in the future to help facilitate decision making.
- Current ordinances may not be a good fit for downtown focused development.

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- Due to the ongoing study of the US 30 corridor, development and infrastructure improvements within this area will be unknown for the foreseeable future. Interim considerations and options may be needed so that the area is not negatively impacted once study recommendations are finalized.
- Agricultural uses have specific considerations when it comes to growth and development. They are sensitive to residential exposure, trails and increased connectivity efforts at times because of their specific needs.
- At times the public (or adjacent development) has a negative perception of agricultural uses.
- Local waterways such as the Tippecanoe River and the Eel River are underestimated assets.
- Local broadband initiatives have improved, and will continue to improve, that critical infrastructure, and there is a need to continue on enhancing that network. Five new towers are currently being added within the county.
- There are several areas within the County that qualify as a food desert. As a part of this study, it would be helpful to showcase this information.
- Child care options seem to be limited across the County. The County could be able to play a stronger role, especially when it comes to approving in home day care establishments.