

Vision for the Future:

Northwest Indiana stands at the precipice of an era defined by strategic growth and inclusive prosperity. Building on the successful momentum of our foundational strategy, "IGNITE the Region-Northwest Indiana's Strategy for Economic Transformation," we have crystallized our vision- ***Northwest Indiana drives its vibrant and inclusive communities by creating the most dynamic economic environment of the Midwest, fueled by innovation, diversity, and talent.*** Building on the five pillars of IGNITE: Business Development & Marketing, Entrepreneurship & Innovation, Placemaking, Talent, and Infrastructure we added five new core strategies that will help propel us forward towards economic diversification, nurturing innovation, attracting talent, enhancing infrastructure, and elevating our quality of life. These five strategies are:

1) Advanced Energy Sector - Advance alternative energy technologies that are affordable and sustainable. Build out infrastructure to better leverage assets and cultivate energy investment and innovation in the region. This strategy builds upon the MachH2 Hydrogen Designation from the Department of Energy and the billions of dollars in solar projects happening in Northwest Indiana. It also facilitates infrastructure to drive investment in advanced energy and advanced energy research and development.

2) Investment Ready Assets- Identify and make ready quality land development and assembly in Northwest Indiana. Attract and support sustainable development in industrial, commercial, and residential development. Build out our Transit Development Districts, our enhanced commuter rail system, and advanced industries to lead to economic and population growth. Create a revolving loan fund to facilitate brownfield remediation and land assembly to ease the path for commercial, residential, and industrial growth. We have received an EDA Fellow to work with our region over the next 3 years to augment this work as well.

3) Opportunity Campuses: Develop multi-partner campuses providing education, social services, childcare, and entrepreneurship opportunities to enhance workforce readiness and economic advancement across Northwest Indiana and grow the community from within. Create a space where people know they belong and provide the tools to help them thrive. By bringing the community together, an internal support network can grow and ideas can be shared and capitalized on more freely. These campuses will incorporate partners in a space where they can be nimble and focused on driving dramatic change for the community.

4) Sustainable Destination Development: Refine, develop, and enhance assets that improve accessibility for visitors and residents to our natural assets. Turn visitors into vacationers and vacationers into residents. Northwest Indiana sees over 4 million visitors annually to the Indiana Dunes State Park and Indiana Dunes National Park. We enjoy amenities such as The Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Preserve which attracts 30,000 people who come to view over 20,000 Sandhill Cranes make their migratory trek between October and December. Northwest Indiana produces over 750,000 gummy bears an hour and attracts people from all over the globe to marvel at the Wonka like experience. Capitalize on day trip visitors by incentivizing additional amenities and lodging to extend stays in our communities.

5) Industry Innovation & Creative Culture: Amplify Northwest Indiana's creative and cultural experiences, provide necessary resources to spur industry innovation, and support a vibrant startup ecosystem. Continue to invest in the assets that make Northwest Indiana the most dynamic economic

environment in the Midwest. Expand the economic and industrial diversity of Northwest Indiana. We are named partners in two Tech Hub Designations: The BLOCH Tech Hub, focused on Quantum Commercialization, and the Heartland BioWorks Tech Hub focused on manufacturing biotechnology innovation in human, animal, and plant science. These two designations, in addition to the MachH2 Hydrogen Hub, can revolutionize our region's existing economy and are already attracting outside investment from companies around the world. Adding these designations to the underutilized assets of the Gary Chicago International Airport and the potential port expansion opportunity at Buffington Harbor creates an opportunity for a Department of Defense investment and research and development opportunities that are unparalleled in the Midwest and provide more secure locations than the coasts. This idea also plays a key component in attracting a creative workforce. In this area, we build on our creative culture where we amplify the Northwest Indiana Symphony, ballet, and theaters and drive opportunities for public art and creative placemaking.

These approaches are more than aspirations, they form the very bedrock of a strategy designed to accelerate our regional growth from a population of 863,000 to over 900,000 within the next 10 years, increase per capita income to meet and exceed State per capita income within the next 5 years and help lift over 3,000 families out of poverty to participate in the workforce and community growth.

Leveraging Regional Assets:

Our region's uniqueness lies in its diverse economic landscape, blending traditional manufacturing with burgeoning Agri-Tech, advanced manufacturing, tourism, and high-tech industries. We are poised to leverage and more fully engage our assets to meet the demands of tomorrow. Our underutilized assets of the Gary Chicago International Airport and potential port expansion at Buffington Harbor create an opportunity for research and development on aviation and maritime fuel that is unparalleled in the Midwest and more secure than the coasts. Our proximity to Chicago and the rich quality of the place offers the best of both worlds. Northwest Indiana is a close-knit community just a stone's throw from the third largest economy in the Country which boasts amenities that attract over 49 Million visitors annually. The South Shore commuter rail line and extensive roadways allow our residents to capture the benefits of proximity to Chicago in ways like many Chicago suburbs. However, the Indiana Dunes, Kankakee River, and many other amenities offer more than other Chicago suburbs. Our vision is to implement the core strategies listed to make Northwest Indiana a sustainable destination with creative, and cultural, industrial innovation, an advanced energy sector, and available investment ready assets that are supported by expanding workforce readiness and a surge in employment opportunities, the development of thousands of new housing units, and a marked enhancement in childcare capacities—all of which reinforce our region's escalating vitality.

Benchmarking Success:

We have looked outward to benchmark our progress, taking cues from global leaders that mirror our potential and ambition. Regions such as Silicon Valley provide a template for innovation-driven growth that could be replicated along the Southern Shore of Lake Michigan as we start to cluster quantum commercialization in partnership with the City of Chicago. We also looked at areas like Madison, Wisconsin, Southwest Michigan, and Northeast Ohio that have some common history and attributes of the region but still out perform our region in some respects. From a transit development perspective, we have studied New Jersey as an area adjacent to one of the country's largest economies and learned lessons from mixed use and mixed rate housing developments that have also been drivers of additional

industrial growth in those areas. These benchmarks are the standards we aim to meet and surpass as we forge a path toward a future where our region is synonymous with economic and social vibrancy.

Strategic Alignment with State Goals:

Our strategic plan mirrors the State's economic priorities, geared towards expanding the impact of 2.0 through meticulous alignment with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). We are dedicated to propelling the state's agenda by contributing to significant growth in target industries. We will bolster educational attainment, reduce childcare needs, increase per capita income, attract mixed rate housing development, and promote private investment with an emphasis on our unique blend of urban, suburban, rural, and disadvantaged communities.

Regional Collaboration and Enduring Commitment:

The spirit of collaboration is the cornerstone of our strategy, which has seen broad stakeholder engagement from conception through the implementation phases. This plan is not owned by the Northwest Indiana Forum but by the Region. Stakeholders raise their hands and work hard to move the needle on projects on a day-to-day basis. This collaborative framework is not just for the immediate future but extends over the next five years and beyond, involving key players ranging from local government units to major employers and educational institutions. Their roles and responsibilities are not just outlined but are integral to the strategic implementation of our collective goals.

Conclusion:

Northwest Indiana is a hot destination for businesses – In the last decade, Northwest Indiana has added a net of 1,585 new business establishments (+11%). In contrast, over the same period Cook County, Illinois lost a net of 9,091 (-6%) business establishments. After more than a decade of declining population, in the last four years the population in Northwest Indiana has grown by 2.8%, outpacing the national population growth of 2.0%. Employers, workers, and families are now choosing Northwest Indiana. Over the same period, Northwest Indiana has added an average of 1,300 new residents per year. In contrast, over the previous ten years, the region lost 2,280 residents per year. Real income in Northwest Indiana is rising rapidly despite the recent high rate of inflation. The typical worker in Northwest Indiana has seen their real pay grow by 5.8% since 2019. Higher real income drives greater discretionary spending and boosts future economic growth. Housing construction is accelerating in Northwest Indiana – Over the last four years, an average of 2,400 new residential building permits have been issued per year. Demand for housing continues to outpace supply in Northwest Indiana. Even with record levels of new residential construction, demand for housing is expanding faster than supply. In the last four years, the typical home value in Northwest Indiana has risen 42%, significantly more than a 31% rise in home value across the entire Chicago Metropolitan area. In addition, the typical home value in Northwest Indiana is 4.3% higher than across the state of Indiana. With IGNITE the Region as our catalyst, we will build on this dynamic change. Never before has regional collaboration been stronger or more results oriented. We are not just planning—we are promising a future where innovation flourishes, opportunities abound, and the quality of life is unmatched. Our five key strategies and foundational IGNITE pillars guide us in this pledge. The momentum we have gathered is only the beginning. With the support of the READI 2.0 initiative, we will not just envision but enact a future that sets new standards for economic development and community enrichment.