



MEMORANDUM

October 16, 2020

To: Form Whitley County Steering Committee
From: Brian Ashworth, PLA, and Sarah Kelly, AICP, planning NEXT
Re: Stakeholder Interviews
CC: Nathan Bilger, AICP, and Mark Cullnane, Columbia City/Whitley County Joint Planning & Building Dept.

This memorandum is intended to provide a summary of interviews with 27 stakeholders conducted virtually between September 16 and 23, 2020 as well as follow-up comments submitted via email by some who could not attend. The meetings had representation from various interest groups: economic development, quality of life, agriculture, education, environmental resources, local government, land developers, transportation, and utilities.

The interviews were conducted for a similar purpose as interviews that were conducted as part of the previous (2011) plan with “people with interests and knowledge in specific aspects of the County.” Interviews will inform the work going forward and are supplementary to the feedback that will be gathered through the first round of public engagement that will be held in late-October and early November.

The memorandum is divided into the following categories:

1. Background
2. What is working well?
3. What is not working well?
4. Vision for the future

1. Background

Interviewees were asked to share information about themselves and their perspective on planning issues, including familiarity with the existing Whitley County Comprehensive Plan.

- Many were aware that the comprehensive plan existed but knew little about it.
- Of those who referenced the comprehensive plan, most were focused on the land use portions and stated their belief that there are several areas where it is very general and therefore limited in effectiveness.
- There was some confusion about the respective city comprehensive plans and a county plan and how those differing documents may complement one another or work in coordination.
- There was a feeling from many that there is a fine balance between growth and preserving the County’s agricultural heritage. Many made clear to point out that it is not

their perspective that nothing should change, but development which does occur in the County should be thoughtfully considered.

2. What is working well?

Interviewees were asked “What is working well in the County?” Responses are organized into categories.

Agriculture

- Agricultural land values have been maintained or increased in recent years.
- Despite broader trends toward farm consolidation, within Whitley County many farms (estimated by some as roughly half) are still 50 acres or fewer.
- There is an effective process for farmers to transition uses when needed, compared to other neighboring counties (traditional agriculture to agriculture production, for example).
- The composition of crop farms has remained the same.
- Individuals with responsibility for monitoring water quality in the County stated that farmers are doing a great job at limiting water contamination.

Land Use

- The current plan has been effective in balancing agriculture and development.
- Infill development is challenging to encourage but there are a few state tools that have made it a little more feasible in recent years.
- Development of industrial parks and larger scale buildings/properties along the major thoroughfare (US30) has been critical to recent economic growth.
- It has been 30 years since there has been a city-driven annexation. The last annexation was Quail Ridge, which is now filled with houses and apartments and was previously just hay fields.
- There does not seem to be animosity from the County about Columbia City’s annexation policies.

Infrastructure

- The County has well water ordinance, which is unique to this region (1997). Wells must be 50 feet from septic.
- The regional sewer district is trying to reach township centers to encourage thoughtful growth. There is good coverage from utility service providers. When development is proposed, the County is set up well to accommodate it.
- AQUA’s sewer territory is well setup for growth. They anticipate growth and just recently saw a mile boundary expansion.
- The County has high density clay soils. This is great for foundations but terrible for septic systems.
- The County has a great recycling system but could promote it a little more to cut down on the burning of trash.

- The emergency management system has been very impactful. Users feel the system is reliable. It was good in the past and even better now with COVID.
- The County does a good job maintaining roads but recognizes that rural roads don't always meet the profile needed for modern street design requests, such as pavement width.
- County leadership has done their due diligence in assisting with the US30 corridor planning effort and have been proactive. They've promoted their preferred alternatives to INDOT.
- The road program has come a long way in the last five years. There is good communication at the top of the department and integration of GIS tools. There has been an increase of fuel tax and community crossings programs have been beneficial.
- The Health Department has aggressive septic system regulations to promote quality of life. All but two lakes now have sanitary sewer. One of the best things for Tri-Lakes was when the sewer district was created. The regional sewer district is another big step in the right direction and is imperative for growth and protection of the environment in the future.

Quality of Life

- The community has been working hard on quality of life initiatives. People want to visit and then find a reason to stay.
- It is an attractive community (lakes, agriculture, attractive and walkable Columbia City).
- Several companies relocated to Whitley County as they wanted to be closer to the talent pool but also to amenities for their employees. There is a strong work ethic in the community.
- Community pride is strong with many civic events such as First Fridays and 4-H groups. The community has been strong especially through COVID. "People just step up!"
- The lakes are a strong quality of life amenity.
- The city park system is a centralized system the benefits the County.
- Most people moving to Columbia City are coming from other counties.

Economic Development

- Whitley County "punches above its weight class" when it comes to economic development.
- Current and recent past leadership are doing a great job for the EDC. Accessibility and communication are easy. Business owners noted that the County is a business-friendly place. They also believe that the EDC is genuinely interested in how the companies are doing.
- The workforce that currently exists in the County is rock solid. A strong work ethic exists in the region with several companies noting that when you find loyal workers in the County, they often stick around a long time.
- Many residents have a full-time job and a farm; they "know the value of a buck."
- Whitley County is the envy of the region in terms of how quickly they move to take advantage of opportunities and what is offered to community members.
- The County has done a good job with economic development along US30 in sewer and water access. Many other areas were envious of what the County was able to pull off.

- Several industries have seen massive booms during COVID and are having a hard time keeping up with demand. EDC has been proactive in helping companies seek out expansion opportunities.
- There is strong government leadership with commissions that move at the speed of business. The same cannot be said for the rest of the region. Leadership is in a progressive mode with commercial development, TIFs and attracting businesses to the County with high paying jobs.
- There are many viable career paths for community members. Community businesses are great at opening their doors for internship and similar opportunities.
- The recent economic growth helps to attract people.

Education

- All three school systems are very good. While they somewhat compete for students, they all do a great job with education.
- The school districts turn out students who can find jobs in the County and remain living there.
- Columbia City is diverse and the school does a good job at meeting students where they are and matching their skill sets to opportunities.
- The new Career Center in the western portion County will be great for the community.
- Schools have good-to-great facilities and dedicated teachers and staff in all three districts.
- The new school in Columbia City is a wonderful asset for the County and the public rallied behind it.
- The school district to the north just passed a referendum as well (operating) and has strong public support.
- The school system and facilities have improved which has helped to make the County more attractive to residents and businesses.
- The juvenile justice system does a nice job to support students who have made bad decisions.

Collaboration/Leadership

- The County does a great job with all key players being collaborative. The setup could easily pit people against each other but there is great communication throughout the County.
- Leadership is truly trying to make the County better for their residents. There is appreciation of the work being put in.
- Leadership worked hard and proactively on US30.
- Columbia City works collaboratively with developers for mutual wins (annexation and development).
- Dedicated law enforcement is appreciated by school systems and has kept pace with population growth
- County officials do a great job of advocating for what Counties need and conducting planning.
- Leaders are good at communicating the long-term goals of the County.

- Communication between County staff and utility organizations has improved over the past few years and has improved efficiency, etc.

3. What is not working well?

Interviewees were asked “What is working well in the County?” Responses are organized into categories.

Planning Communication

- Some people think the comprehensive plan is the law. It should be better presented as a guiding document.
- Some would like to see more communication outside of public meetings. County officials recently gave an update on the progress since the last comprehensive plan, which was great, but people had to be there in person to get the information. Negativity can spur from a lack of communication.
- Some would like to see a bit better communication between the City and County as it relates to growth. The new County land use plan should be complementary to the City’s.
- Actions need to match the attitude from County leadership around the topic of adding housing. Developers are not seeing the same level of collaboration that businesses are seeing but the businesses will not continue to locate here without more housing.
- There could be better communication when development is going to occur so that INDOT and county engineers could help improve transportation circulation. Eagle Glen is a good example as there have been no improvements to the intersection.

Land Use

- Balancing land use and maintaining community character needs to be done intelligently. Growth can and should happen but will need to take place strategically near centers and limit greenfield encroachment.
- The diversity of land uses in the County is a challenge (balancing lakes, industrial community, large scale farming, hobby farming).
- Land use planning will be a challenge as farms are split up.
- There is plenty of frustration from both the residential and agriculture communities on land control and property rights. It is hard for some to understand the folks that don’t want agricultural development (CFOs or similar) but also don’t want residential development.
- Erosion control is a major environmental hazard and residential construction is one of the largest contributors. Farmers are generally compliant on drainage areas and want to keep their soil, not lose it to the creeks.
- There is a lot of pushback and controversy between farmers and residents about sewage runoff. However, recent data shows that environmental issues have been tied to human waste.
- US30 will have direct ties to how the County grows. Interchanges are likely to attract a certain type of land use. It will be important to know where interchanges are planned in the future in order to be proactive about land uses.

Employment/Workforce Improvements

- There is a lot of turnover in fulfillment positions. Several large companies draw their workforce regionally and about 30-40% are Whitley County residents. Staffing is an issue at the entry level. Are people looking for a quality place to work or more pay?
- Welding is a difficult position to fill (across the country but also in NE Indiana). Many of these positions are filled by Allen County residents simply because there is a larger population pool.
- There are a lot of open jobs in Whitley County that they can't seem to fill. This may be in part due to a lack of housing.
- Libraries and schools used to get 20 applications for one open position, but now get zero.
- Regional service EMS and fire departments are less reliable than they once were, but this is a trend beyond Whitley County. Fire departments are all volunteer based and seeing shortages (turnover rate has also been reported as high among volunteer fire departments)

Growing Pains/Growth Concerns

- We've been successful but it's important to try to manage growth. Many people are looking to expand, and the County has been trying to manage that. The County has taken its foot off the gas a little. Expansion of an industrial center should be a priority.
- There is significant tension between landowners and land users.
- Fort Wayne is "creeping" eastward.
- There is a shortage of available buildings for manufacturing. Most developers want to build just 60,000 sf, but there is demand above that. There is a minimum of a year from the start of a move process, through construction, and move in. Taking the lead on this may be a tool to control development better this way. "If you build it, they will come."
- There is an aversion to growth. Some places in the County don't want a single thing to change. The challenge is to recognize that if we are not growing, we are dying.
- Don't forget the little towns in economic development planning.
- With residential development costs rising, any avenues to keep costs down are really appreciated.
- There are lots of unknowns in transportation planning. Where will residential development occur? What's going to happen along the US30 corridor? Do we need to reserve rights-of-way?
- Lake and Jefferson townships are seeing growth that was not anticipated through the last plan.
- Everyone wants country living but no one wants it right next to certain agricultural uses. There need to be buffers. Smaller family-oriented farms could provide buffers.
- Addressing childhood poverty is important.

Access to Internet/Broadband Capabilities

- Infrastructure / high speed internet is needed. This is a major attractor for businesses, residents, and organizations.

- The longer the lack of access goes on, the further the community will be behind. Internet is just as vital as electricity.
- An online presence and portal to residents for permits instead would be better than having to call someone.

Transportation Improvements

- US30 is currently treated like an interstate and slated changes would make it safer.
- The US30 planning process has been troublesome, with people from the County wanting to see a much safer roadway and INDOT not being able to financially meet those demands.
- US30 is already pretty treacherous and making it even faster will that impact the community. This is a concern for the senior population.
- Many rural roads do not meet current design practices in terms of width and construction. With larger farm equipment the roads are more easily damaged.
- The last four years have been almost solely about repairing roads. Only now are plans for improvements being developed. The lengthy road-permit approval process is also an identified issue.
- INDOT's vision for US30 and the county's vision do not align at the moment. At some point in time one plan or another will go forward. Until there is an additional funding source, they will go the current way they are planning. There is a financing gap that's preventing the improvements some people want.
- The land use policy should drive transportation. At this time, there are so many unknowns that it makes it difficult to do thoroughfare planning.
- If there are changes to US30 and Route 9, there will be ripple effects to the network which will probably fall to Columbia City. Semi-truck traffic on US30 may already be impacting visitors to Columbia City at certain times of the day. People avoid visiting Columbia City at certain times of day because of that.

Housing Concerns

- Housing diversity is a concern. The County does well with lower income housing. Market-based housing (150-200k) is lacking throughout the County. In the Whitko area, it's especially a problem.
- Land availability is low with agricultural land values being pushed so high that it's hard to purchase and turn around a housing product that financially works. People are wanting \$20K per acre, "we can maybe pay \$12K."
- Columbia City makes up 30% of the County population which has seen significant growth over last 10-15 years. More and more individuals are wanting to live in Columbia City, but there is not the housing to support people from outside the County moving in.
- There is some frustration from builders with leadership pressuring to develop housing products that don't match the market analysis being conducted in the region.
- There is not a lot of housing at diverse price points. Rent rates are high in the County. Housing should not all be high-end single-family housing.
- Developers get a lot of pushback when proposing different housing products. Specifically, as density of the development goes up, it's directly proportional to the pushback they receive (NIMBY).

- There is a recognition that housing is needed and there is a desire for growth in the community from City and County officials, but not much action in that regard. Home builders are not seeing the same incentives/cooperation to build that large businesses are seeing.
- There are concerns about lack of aging in place options (independent living facilities, nursing homes, senior activity, etc.)
- Larwill specifically doesn't currently have a lot of housing and would like to rehabilitate the housing that they do have.

Parks/Recreation

- Currently, natural resources such as the Eel River are not promoted.
- There is not a County parks system currently in place. Acres gets a lot of calls of people wanting to donate land but they don't meet criteria. This leaves unincorporated towns to deal with quality of life items like parks. There is very little promotion through chambers of commerce or cities for water trail systems. Water sports are a multi-billion-dollar industry and Whitley may be missing that opportunity.
- Metea County Park (in Allen County) is nice but the Whitley County parks are woefully underfunded.
- Though our parks have nice amenities for younger crowd, we need to be mindful of seniors and adults at these facilities. (This has become especially apparent during COVID.)

4. Vision for the future

Interviewees were asked to consider the big picture about the County and consider key factors that will influence the next 5-10 years. This may include topics that would influence physical development, economic prosperity and/or the quality of life for people who live and work in the County.

Growing Pains/Funding

- There must be growth to sustain the population (businesses, industry, residential).
- People need to protect the backbone of the economy: food. Farm bureau members do understand the need diversification, however.
- The new high school will be great for growth in the area.
- TIF districts and similar economic incentive tools are a concern in rural communities. There is concern about drawing in businesses without having the students and becoming a drain.
- The fact that Fort Wayne keeps growing outward must be addressed.
- There needs to be a balance between different kinds of growth (housing, industrial, etc.). There has been a long history in the Country of segmented interest groups. When we look at the County, what would be a balanced plan that would include everyone?
- Providing better access to mental health services and rehabilitation programs for residents will increase quality of life and may increase community safety.

Maintain What We've Got/Attractive Place To Be

- Whitley County is an enticing place to be home, attracting kids back to family farms. There are still opportunities to grow family farms in this County.
- The Churubusco student population is up this year, which is a positive sign of growth.
- Residential development will be creeping in from both sides. Can we encourage a natural corridor before it's too late? The County should maintain some natural character and provide habitat that's natural to the County.
- One of the school slogans is "Small town values – world class results." This can be extended to the County as a whole.
- The regional economy is strong, and the County is known as a good place to get a job.

Industry Importance

- Agriculture has to be viewed as an important industry. There is a concern that agricultural property will be repurposed for urban or manufacturing use.
- Industrial development along the US30 corridor has been vital to the economic development of the community and cannot be taken for granted. Continued expansion of industrial parks will be impactful and helpful to transportation planners but also help fund US30 improvements. Establishing a job training program for construction trades (electrician, plumbers, brick masons, etc.) was suggested.

Housing

- A balance with housing and industry is needed, clustering near cities as much as we can.
- If housing is not kept up at the same pace of economic development, it will stifle the job market for the businesses that people have worked so hard to bring in. The communities that are being more proactive about housing are doing better. Whitley County is somewhat aware of this issue now, but there are not actions to match that awareness yet.
- Where will housing occur? That will determine where people travel and the roads that they travel on.

Infrastructure Maintenance/Growth

- Infrastructure of the County (water and sewer) is set up to support development in greenfields but there are several communities with aging facilities that are failing. Upgrading septic systems to state standards and expanding sanitary sewer systems were two recommendations from interviews.
- Emergency services will face difficult questions with consolidation of services in EMS and fire. Considering the need for a county-wide fire department, for future economic, public safety and health planning," if the population continues to grow.
- Expansion of sewer districts will be crucial as more and more investor construction takes place when farms go up for sale.