

Summary Memo

Round 1 of Public Engagement

December 10, 2020

This document summarizes the first round of public engagement for Whitley County, which was conducted between October 26 and November 30, 2020. Input was gathered in the following ways:

- Whitley County Focus on the Future Events (multiple dates, see in section 3); and
- Online activities that mimicked the in-person events

The memo also takes into consideration other correspondence that received from community members during this period.

The memo includes the following:

1. Purpose
2. Outreach and Publicity
3. Approach
4. Results
5. Participation and Satisfaction
6. Next Steps

1. Purpose

Whitley County launched a process to update its comprehensive plan, called Form Whitley County, in July 2020. The County's last comprehensive plan was adopted in 2011. One of the key inputs to the comprehensive plan process is insight from the community. Through the first round of public engagement, multiple opportunities across in-person and online platforms were provided for anyone who cares about the future of Whitley County to help inform the plan. This round of engagement will help to inform development of the plan's preliminary goals, objectives and recommendations.

"This process is extremely important to the future of our County."

workshop participant

2. Outreach and Publicity

Extensive outreach was conducted to spread the word about the opportunity to participate in Round 1 of the public engagement. The Team capitalized on existing networks through community groups, organizations, churches, educational institutions and local governments for outreach. Outreach and publicity included the following:

- A press release was distributed to local media outlets.
- Interviews with key stakeholder groups were conducted (documented separately) and interviewees were asked to help spread the word.
- 1,000 printed rack cards distributed throughout the County.
- Over 100 groups, organizations or individuals connected to networks of interest were contacted about the opportunity, including schools, nonprofit organizations, interest groups (e.g. Farm Bureau, business groups, etc.), local governments and others.
- Staff met with community members in parts of the County with a high interest in the process and promoted the events and online activities.

3. Approach

Form Whitley County's first round of public input included socially distanced engagement at an initial county-wide 'kick-off' event, held on October 26, in addition to seven, small group public engagement sessions from October 26 to November 16.

Below is a list of the completed public engagement sessions and their corresponding locations in the County:

- **Jefferson Township:** Monday, October 26 - 11:00 am - 12:30 pm - 4-H Community Center - 680 W. Squawbuck Road, Columbia City
- **All County:** Monday, October 26 - 3:00 pm - 7:00 pm - 4-H Community Center - 680 W. Squawbuck Road, Columbia City
- **Early Risers (one of two):** Friday, October 30 - 7:30 am - 9:30 am - Whitley County Government Center - Meeting Room A/B (basement) - 220 W. Van Buren Street, Columbia City
- **Larwill:** Saturday, November 7 - 9:00 am - 11:00 am - Larwill Town Hall - 108 N. Center Street, Larwill
- **Lakes Region:** Tuesday, November 10 - 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm - Thorncreek Township Fire Station - 821 E. 500 North, Columbia City
- **Business Focus:** Thursday, November 12 - 11:00 am - 1:00 pm - Whitley County Government Center - Meeting Room C (first floor) - 220 W. Van Buren Street, Columbia City
- **Early Risers (two of two):** Friday, November 13 - 7:30 am - 9:30 am - Whitley County Government Center - Meeting Room A/B (basement) - 220 W. Van Buren Street, Columbia City
- **Southwest:** Monday, November 16 - 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm - South Whitley Town Hall Community Room - 118 S. Front Street, South Whitley
- **Northeast (CANCELED):** Thursday, November 19 - 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm - Churubusco Scout Building - 501 N. John Krieger Drive, Churubusco
 - This event was cancelled due to public health precautions in place due to COVID-19.

The Focus on the Future events featured interactive engagement materials with staff and/or consultant team members on-site to facilitate and to answer any questions. Activities were designed to allow for social distancing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and state-mandated public gathering protocols. The same material was presented at each event. At some events, small group discussion was also incorporated. Online engagement opportunities were made available from October 26 through November 30, which also included the same activities.

Engagement at the workshops and online included two main exercises: a statement-rating exercise and an opportunity-mapping exercise. During the statement-rating exercise, participants were asked to rate a series of statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strong Agree”) and provide any additional comments in response to their statement ratings. The statement prompts corresponded with each of the five County goals, as identified at the start of the activity: Focus Growth; Foster Safe and Convenient Circulation; Nurture the Environment; Advance Economic Development; and Enhance Quality of Life.

The mapping exercise asked participants to identify three key opportunity areas in the county on a map and to explain why these areas were selected. An opportunity area could be places that should be protected or that should be improved / enhanced.

Participants also had the opportunity to offer their assistance as a volunteer, if needed, to support technical work.

4. Results

Every comment provided was recorded (in participants’ own words) in a database and has been provided on the Form Whitley County website. Following are key takeaways from the input.

Part 1: Statement Rating

In person or online, participants were asked to view display boards with information on five goals for the County:

- Focus Growth
- Foster Safe and Convenient Circulation
- Nurture the Environment
- Advance Economic Development
- Enhance Quality of Life

Under each of the five topics they were asked to give a series of statements a rating 1 to 5 where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree. They were then asked to share any other on each statement or the topic generally.

Following is a summary of reactions to each statement.

1. Focus Growth

1A. New development should generally be directed toward areas where there is already more development and existing utilities (cities, towns, corridors, etc.).

Average Rating: 4.2

Key takeaways from comments include:

- In general, residential growth should be focused in areas that are already served by utilities.
- Farmland preservation should be a priority and is aided by focusing growth in already developed areas.
- Zoning should inform where development takes place.
- Utility improvements may be appropriate in some locations to support development.
- The County should recognize existing trends and consider trying to encourage development in places where it is already taking place.

1B. When possible, the impact of more intensive land uses on residential areas should be lessened through physical separation and/or urban design improvements.

Average Rating: 3.8

Key takeaways from comments include:

- In some parts of the County, residents are very concerned about the environmental impacts of immediately adjacent agricultural uses and agricultural users are concerned about new residential development.
- Setbacks and/or buffer areas between residential and commercial and agricultural uses are desired by some.
- High quality design standards for new development, including requirements for open space and conservation of natural features, are a potential way that some residents see to mitigate impacts of other land uses.
- Conflicts might be addressed in part by focusing new residential development in already developed areas.

1C. Industrial and business park development should continue along US 30 in a similar way to how it has been occurring over the past 25 years.

Average Rating: 4.1

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Industrial and business park development should be supported along this corridor.
- While development is generally logical along US30, safety issues with the roadway must be addressed.
- Landscaping or design improvements should be considered to help reduce the visual impact of some of these developments.
- Other areas of the County, beyond US 30, should also be considered for commercial and industrial development.

1D. The County would benefit from clearer direction regarding the location of Confined Feeding Operations.

Average Rating: 3.7

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Significant conflict between landowners/residential property owners and CFO/CAFO owners/operators was expressed, specifically over reported odor problems, consolidated land ownership/control and septic system needs.
- There is a desire on behalf of some residents for more studies on CFO effects on groundwater and the surrounding environment.
- A recommendation for specific zoning for CFOs/CAFOs, as opposed to standardized agricultural zoning, was expressed by some to address potential regulatory needs, while others disagreed about the application of what they consider to be “spot zoning.”
- Some participants saw no further regulations needed for CFO operations as where they are allowed is already “clear” in existing zoning and more “unnecessary regulations” would only be to “appease those who lack understanding of normal farming practices.”
- Some participants questioned the “singling out” of CFOs from other land uses. Some were concerned about the potential for “misinformation” about the impact of CFOs to be shared in responses for this statement prompt.

1E. More homes that address the needs and desires of residents should be built in the County.

Average Rating: 3.5

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many participants supported building more residential development in locations where utilities and towns/cities currently exist.
- Other participants questioned “the need” for additional residential development and wondered who decides these “needs and desires.” Some expressed concerns for sprawl.
- The responses to this comment exemplified an “identity crisis” that many in Whitley County pointed to: keep the agricultural/rural way of life ‘as is’ or add more residential development, which could potentially change the character of Whitley County.
- A need to add more middle-income housing units was expressed by some participants.
- Some participants noted the challenges of owning/operating current housing stock.

2. Foster Safe and Convenient Circulation

2A. Dealing with increased traffic on US 30 should be a top priority.

Average Rating: 4.3

Key takeaways from comments include:

- A desire for or an assumption that US 30 will become a “limited access freeway” was echoed by multiple participants.
- Concerns were voiced that limited development/action can or will be taken in regard to US 30, due to the state’s direct control/involvement.
- Safety concerns for non-semi vehicular traffic were repeated by multiple participants.
- Straying away from the use/deployment of traffic lights was recommended.

2B. A long-term strategy for the design, upgrade, and maintenance of rural roads is needed.

Average Rating: 4.2

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Overall, participants found this to be an important consideration for the future of the County.
- Participants expressed a desire for a comprehensive approach to county-wide road improvements, as the current plan for improvements feels more like a “band-aid approach.”
- Some participants expressed that rural roads seem less maintained than town/city roadways.
- Other participants commented that they believe road maintenance has been “acceptable.”
- Some participants saw value in maintaining gravel or dirt roads throughout the County, while others preferred to have all rural roads, including gravel or dirt roads, paved.

2C. Improvements for people traveling other than car (foot, bicycle, transit, and other) should be made.

Average Rating: 3.2

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Some participants expressed an interest in more trails (along the lakes and the new high school, for instance).
- Others considered the investments to additional infrastructure as “not a priority,” especially if budgets are constrained.
- Some participants observed that “very few people around here would walk or bicycle to work,” while others noted that additional transportation options may “contribute to quality of life.”

2D. High speed rail and mass transit should be considered as a future transit option.

Average Rating: 2.5

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many participants rated this statement lower, compared to other statements in this theme/goal.
- Many participants responded that investments in high-speed rail and mass transit were “not feasible,” “not cost effective,” and without “enough population density to justify.”
- Others liked the idea but admitted that there are “more pressing issues” for the County to address and supported the exploration of alternative transportation methods only if they are “self-sustaining and not subsidized.”

3. Nurture the Environment

3A. Wetland protection policies should be pursued.

Average Rating: 3.9

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many of the participants who commented on this statement said that they believed the current regulations/policies in place, either locally, or from the State and Federal governments, were sufficient.
- Some participants commented that protecting wetlands is a high priority and may encourage more residents/families while improving quality of life.
- Other participants expressed concern for appropriate identification of wetlands for protection: “Every pool of water is not a wetland.”

3B. New development within floodplains, along lakefronts and in other environmentally sensitive areas should be discouraged and existing development restrictions enforced.

Average Rating: 4.1

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Multiple participants expressed concern that current regulations on lakefront development, specifically, have not been followed or enforced. They see this issue as a primary concern.
- Some participants expressed a strong desire to protect the County’s existing natural resources and prevent additional pollution/impacts.
- Other participants saw a need for “common sense” and “clarity” when it comes to development within floodplains and along lakefronts.

3C. Low Impact Development (LID) strategies (swales, rain gardens, etc.) to reduce stormwater runoff and improve water quality should be pursued.

Average Rating: 4.1

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Additional resources and educational materials may need to be provided on details of proposed policy: some participants had mixed views/opinions on what these policy strategies would call for.
- Some participants expressed reduction of stormwater runoff needed in residential, commercial, and industrial areas as well as in areas adjacent to lakes and other waterways.
- Others thought that the current regulatory requirements were sufficient, or that this issue should be addressed at the state or federal level and not at the expense of the individual property owner.

3D. The County should further regulate new septic field installations.

Average Rating: 3.6

This statement was moderately well supported. Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many of the participants who commented on this statement had strong opinions and/or personal examples when it came to septic systems in Whitley County.
- Multiple participants claimed that septic systems are the “worst polluters in the County” and called for more enforcement of current regulations or more restrictions.
- Another group of participants shared similar comments that current septic system regulations are “more than sufficient” and those who are in compliance should be “left alone!”
- Some participants questioned if all septic systems are problematic, or just older septic systems that are “out of code.”

3E. Solar power is an important trend that should be encouraged.

Average Rating: 3.2

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Participants were conflicted when it came to supporting additional solar power in the County.
- Some participants were concerned that solar power from solar panels is “not efficient,” “not environmentally friendly,” and should not be a priority for the County.
- Others expressed cautious optimism about solar power/energy generation and supported solar power over wind turbines/wind energy production.

4. Advance Economic Development

4A. Workforce development initiatives should complement existing and future jobs in the County and the skillsets / training of County residents.

Average Rating: 4.3

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Several participants mentioned Whitko Career Academy as a successful example of a similar initiative.
- Participants stressed employability skills, technology training, and job creation/retention strategies in response to this statement.
- One participant wrote: “Workforce development initiatives should lead not follow.”

4B. The County should continue to use Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts and other incentives to attract new businesses.

Average Rating: 3.7

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many of the participants were skeptical about TIF district use in the past or remain skeptical about the overall advantages this policy/incentive will present to the County.
- Other participants expressed inadequate information on TIFs and so did not feel strongly about their use in the future.
- Those who were in favor of TIF districts did so with caveats or conditions.

4C. New strategies to attract and retain workers should be pursued that consider changing preferences, commuting habits and lifestyle choices.

Average Rating: 3.7

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Participants expressed a desire for “balance” when considering this statement.
- Others believed that it should not be the County government’s goal to “persuade an individual’s habits or lifestyles.”
- Many participants believed that addressing the needs of current residents is more important than courting new residents.
- Participants overall wanted to see the County’s “rural heritage” be preserved and reflected in any future growth strategies.

4D. The County should seek to increase the number of people who are able to both live and work in the County.

Average Rating: 3.5*

Key takeaways from comments include:

- There were mixed sentiments on increasing the number of people who work and live in the County. Many responded simply with “Yes” or “Agree” while others were concerned that with more people, parts of Whitley County would become like the suburbs, which these participants did not want to see.
- Others were indifferent, stating that this aim is “not a government function” but rather a business obligation.

* Due to a printing error, the rating legend was not visible on this particular statement in the in-person meeting so not all in-person participants gave a rating. Online participants were given the option for a rating. Many participants still wrote in their comments/response to this statement even if they did not give a rating.

4E. The County should make increasing quality, affordable childcare / pre-school availability a priority.

Average Rating: 3.3*

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Some participants expressed a “big need” for more affordable childcare, as this strategy could be used as part of a “broader effort to support families” in Whitley County.
- Other participants expressed discontent with the “over-reach” of government being involved in childcare needs. (“Not the County’s place to do this.”)

* Due to a printing error, the rating legend was not visible on this particular statement in the in-person meeting so not all in-person participants gave a rating. Online participants were given the option for a rating. Many participants still wrote in their comments/response to this statement even if they did not give a rating.

5. Enhance Quality of Life

5A. A long-term plan and funding strategy should be created for County parks.

Average Rating: 3.7

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many participants see parks as an asset in their community and a contributor to quality of life.
- Some participants expressed a desire for a county-wide park system.
- Some participants recognized the benefits of parks but would not like to see parks divert resources away from other County funding streams.
- A few people commenting on this response thought the creation of new parks is not necessary, due to rural residential areas having sufficient open, outdoor space for recreation.

5B. Reliable high-speed internet is needed in the County.

Average Rating: 4.7

Key takeaways from comments include:

- This statement received the highest average rating among all the other prompts, indicating a strong desire to address reliable internet access across Whitley County. Many participants expressed the “desperate need” for reliable, high-speed internet access across the County – some even commented that this was their “highest priority.”
- Some participants expressed confusion in that they thought internet access had already been deployed county-wide. Some participants cited the example that they’ve not had problems with internet access in their “rural area.”

5C. Strategies to retain and attract young people to the County that addresses housing, employment, recreation and other quality of life considerations should be developed.

Average Rating: 4.0

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Overall, most participants expressed a desire to retain young people, particularly young people who will contribute to economic activities like farming and agriculture, and those who want to start families/invest in educational resources.
- Some participants did not want to attract other people from outside the County, instead preferring to retain those who are already in-County.
- Other participants disliked the emphasis on “young people” in the statement, instead preferring to consider the County needs/population as a whole.

5D. Aging-in-place strategies that support older adults (focusing on quality independent living facilities, senior activities, mixed use neighborhoods, etc.) should be enhanced.

Average Rating: 3.8

Key takeaways from comments include:

- While this statement received moderately favorable ratings, it did not receive as many written comments as other statements.
- Of those who did respond, many recognized the County’s aging population and saw aging-in-place strategies as something that would benefit the community, as well as mixed-use development in general
- For those who did want to see additional strategies in place, locating services/facilities near existing towns and emergency medical facilities was important.
- Some participants supported the idea, but not at the government’s/taxpayer’s expense.

5E. Rivers and lakes and preservation areas should be used and promoted for recreational purposes.

Average Rating: 3.9

Key takeaways from comments include:

- Many expressed that access to nature/recreational opportunities enhances quality of life and that Whitley County has access/opportunities to offer.
- Most participants wanted to see the County approach recreation/conservation from a balanced growth/development approach.
- Some participants thought that the County needs to do more to protect and promote natural areas, while others thought the current availability/protection of resources was adequate.
- Lakefront development’s impact on the natural environment/setting was a repeated theme for many participants.

Part 2: Opportunities Mapping

Below is the summary of key themes that emerged from mapping exercise performed at the “Focus on the Future” workshops and through in the online survey.

- The US 30 Corridor should continue to be a focus for commercial and industrial development, with selected other locations also potentially valuable to consider, including the Larwill TIF.
- Protecting, creating better access to and enhancing recreational opportunities along the rivers are significant opportunities.
- The already developed areas of Columbia City, Churubusco and South Whitley should continue to be focus areas for infill and new development. This could include a mix of residential, commercial and other uses and efforts to promote historic preservation and investment.
- Specifically, housing needs/opportunities were identified in several key areas, including in South Whitley along SR 5 (“critical”), the north side of 205, and the north side of W. Lincolnway.
- Rural character and land uses should generally be protected where they exist, and new development should not encroach in the most valuable agricultural areas.
- Over-development of the lakes should be avoided, although enhanced public access and amenities should be pursued.
- Larwill presents an opportunity for infill, redevelopment and revitalization.
- More residential development is desirable south of Columbia City.
- The eastern portion of Jefferson and Union Townships have seen increased residential development and this trend could be desirable if managed and designed sensitively to the context.
- Portions of Thorncreek Township have been developing with new residential and the Township could be a desirable place for additional development.

5. Participation and Satisfaction

Participation in the workshops and online activities met expectations for the process as conducted with necessary adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 150 people participating and approximately 1,500 unique comments collected, including both statement rating and opportunities mapping. (For the previous comprehensive plan 94 people participated in the planning process and the goal for this plan was to build upon that participation.) Participants who attended the public workshops were asked to fill out an exit questionnaire about their experience and themselves. The following insight is based on responses to the questionnaire.

Key Takeaways regarding participation and satisfaction

The following data was taken from exit questionnaires from public events.

- Word of mouth (34%) was the most common way people heard about the “Focus on the Future” workshops, followed by email (24%) and a flyer (10%).
- There was age diversity among participants, with over-representation of people 55 years and older.
- Those with a higher education and higher annual household income were overrepresented relative to the County’s population.

- The vast majority of respondents were residents of Whitley County’s townships (approximately 85%).
- Participants varied in the amount of time they lived in the County, with approximately 47% indicating they had lived in the County for 30 years or fewer and 50% indicating they had lived in the County for 30 years or more.
- Approximately 1/3 of respondents said they owned a business in the County.
- Workshop satisfaction rates were very high; 95% of participants in the workshop said they felt comfortable with the activities, and 97% felt that they had the chance to share their thoughts about the future.
- 98% of respondents said they will stay involved with the planning process for Form Whitley County.

6. Next Steps

Following from this public input opportunity, analysis in key technical areas will be undertaken to further the planning team’s understanding of certain topics of relevance to the update. That work will be considered in combination with community insight in order to inform the future Character and Land Use Plan as well as adjustments to the existing plan’s recommendations.

“We must all get along and build a better, cleaner, safer and prosperous County, not just for us but for the future to come.”

workshop participant