

SECTION FOUR
IDEAS AND PERCEPTIONS



COMMUNITY
CONDITIONS
ASSESSMENT

FEBRUARY 7, 2022



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Public Workshop at Creighton's Crazy Egg Café, Warsaw, IN | TSWDG





Community engagement increases the visibility and understanding of issues and empowers communities to have their say over decisions that affect their lives, and by extension their towns, cities and neighborhoods. It provides opportunities for community members to contribute to the public decision-making processes and helps inform and educate residents on policy issues and potential projects that impact their daily lives. Community engagement is an effective means to enable government and public decision-making organizations to listen to the needs of a community and begin crafting obtainable goals to meet those needs. This collaboration can also help strengthen the trust and relationships between the public and their community leaders.

FORWARD Kosciusko County's community engagement process was developed around the desire to create an inclusive and engaging outreach process that would gather input and ideas from a broad cross section of community members including residents, business owners and operators, educators, and community service providers. To date, the community engagement within Kosciusko County has taken many forms and, while each opportunity was unique in the tools and techniques used, all methods were designed to gain an understanding of local strengths, opportunities, challenges and desired outcomes for the County as a whole.

Land Use and Growth Workshop, Warsaw, IN | TSWDG



CONNECTING TO A **WIDE AND DIVERSE GEOGRAPHY**

Community engagement is important in any long-range planning process because it allows for multiple groups and individuals to come together to think about the future in an organized way. In a project like FORWARD Kosciusko County, where planning is being done often for the first time at both a county and local municipal level, community outreach and engagement is considered critical.

FORWARD Kosciusko County is a process rooted in community ideas and interests. To ensure that all residents and stakeholders had the opportunity to be a part of this unique process, a variety of outreach exercises were incorporated to provide multiple avenues for gathering feedback regarding existing conditions and local issues, needs, and the aspirations of local and county residents. Outreach exercises were also used to promote a sense of community and foster stewardship for the plan by underscoring that participants' voices have been heard and that their ideas have influenced the final decisions. While the primary goal of the engagement and outreach process was to listen and learn, the process also hoped to build trust and partnerships amongst the local community groups and stakeholder organizations.

The following summaries show the multiple approaches taken when gathering community input through the initial phase of the planning process. The findings of each method are summarized in the 'Common Themes' section found on pages 10-15. The timeframe for outreach during this first phase lasted approximately eight months from January through September 2021. During this initial phase of work, all meeting and workshop summaries were also posted to the project website to provide more in-depth coverage detailing public feedback.

Static and Digital Engagement

One of the easiest ways to extend community engagement within a county is through a series of static and digital platforms. Online surveys and activities may not be able to achieve the same level of detail as a face-to-face meeting, but they are an accurate way to gather input and receive feedback on various aspects during the comprehensive planning process. These engagement efforts were also crucial to the engagement process, because they allowed for ongoing conversations and input during the COVID-19 Pandemic when in-person options were prohibited or severely limited.

Mobile Display

While public engagement should always be a continuous effort throughout any planning endeavor, there are often constraints which prevent a planning team from constant contact with the community. A mobile display is a tool which helps close those gaps. At its base, a mobile display is a tool which allows for in-person input for those who are unable to attend specific meetings or cannot access online tools. It is a traveling data collection tool that can be used by individual towns who want to ensure their community's input is received. The mobile display for the FORWARD Kosciusko County effort was available to all communities within the county who wished to use it. Many communities were able to set it up at high-traffic locations such as local libraries, community centers, schools, local businesses and festivals. Using this tool not only allowed communities to gather additional input, but it also served as an advertisement for the project and how county residents could become involved in future events.

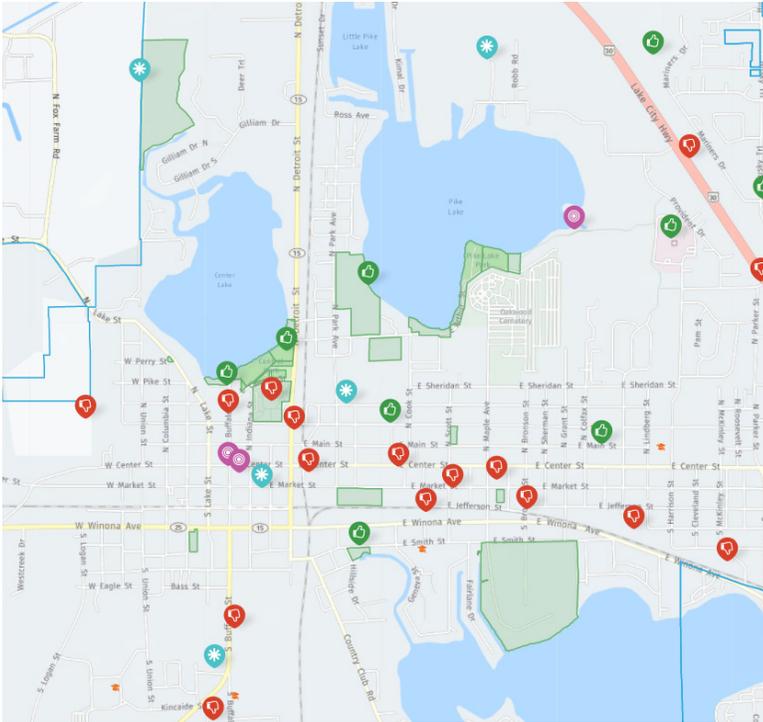
Interactive Map & Vision Wall

The interactive map and vision wall were two unique features housed on the project website. They were used to gather input, which might otherwise be challenging to receive from a typical online survey. These tools allowed residents to not only provide their own input but also let them see and comment on the responses of other residents, creating an opportunity for an ongoing, online dialogue. The interactive map asked respondents to place unique pins on the map which stood for places and amenities they saw as assets or challenges and gave them the opportunity to highlight places for future development or improvement. While the interactive map allowed participants to think specifically about locations, the digital vision wall allowed participants to choose a specific topic and share an idea or inspiration image that is not reliant on a physical location. During the initial phase of work, the digital interactive map and vision wall saw a total of over 3,300 visits with nearly 1,000 unique users adding comments on local assets, necessary improvements, ideas for the future, and concerning trends and challenges.

Community Wide Survey

One of the most commonly used engagement tools for any type of community-led project are online surveys. An online survey allows for the collection of data from residents of a community in a straight-forward and easily understood format. The initial FORWARD Kosciusko County survey asked a variety of questions to help the planning team gauge current conditions and perceptions of the county and the local communities. Online platforms make it even more possible to receive quality input, especially when local organizations work together to reach those individuals who may not be able to access the survey otherwise. The FORWARD Kosciusko County survey was available online and promoted by multiple public and private organizations within each community. Additionally, hard copies of the survey were printed and made available for distribution by local leaders. In an effort to make the survey more accessible and inclusive of the communities, it was also translated to Spanish.

The survey received 452 responses with participation occurring in each incorporated community. In total, the initial community survey provided input on perceived assets, challenges, development needs and improvements for the future. Additionally, over 2,100 individual comments were provided by local residents as a part of the survey process.



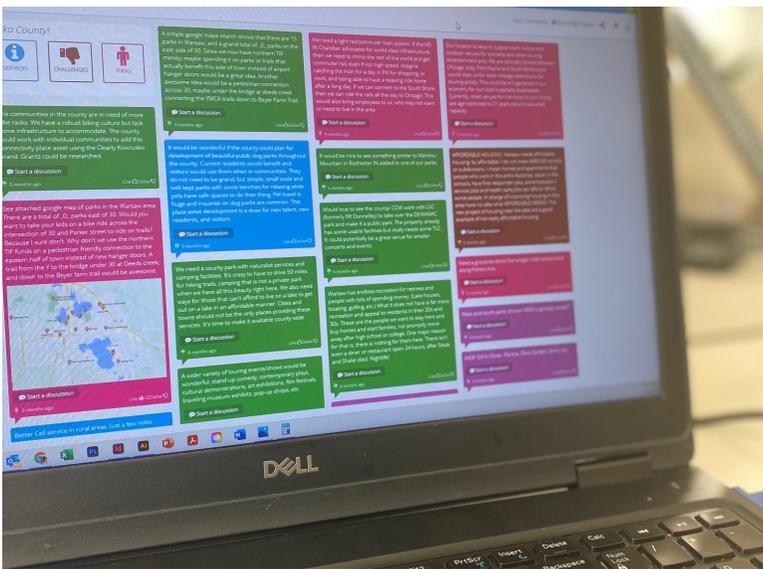
ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS

2,096

Total online map views with
647 unique users

1,003

Total online vision wall views with
345 unique users

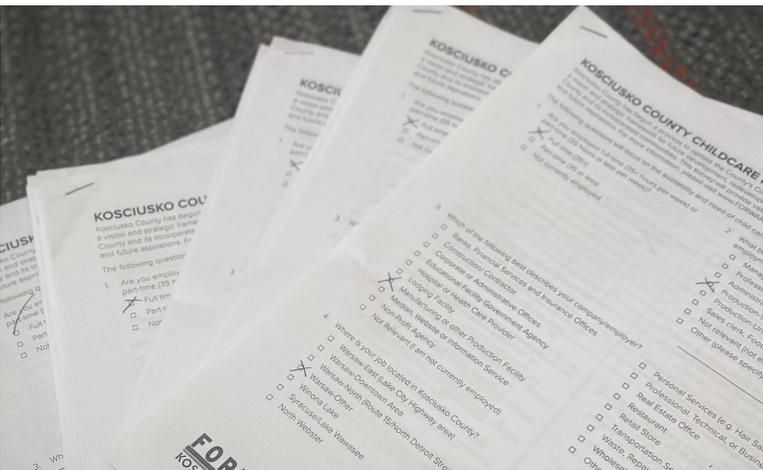


206

Total interactive comments across
ten categories

452

Total survey responses with an
84% completion rate



2,100+

Individual comments received

Facilitated Meetings and Workshops

Facilitated meetings and workshop events allowed for a clearer understanding of both county and community issues, ongoing and planned projects, and local community values, assets and aspirations. In total, over 45 in-person and virtual meetings and events were conducted, engaging participants from local communities, local businesses and industries, and community organizations.

Field Tours

The planning team engaged in field tours for each community within Kosciusko County. These field tours were led by a leader of each community and not only included a physical tour, showing various points of interest, issue areas, and development opportunities, but they also provided time for each community leader to sit down with the planning team and talk through the needs, wants, and aspirations of their town or city.

Each field tour began with a meeting between the planning team and community leader where current needs and aspirations of the communities were discussed. This meeting also served as an introduction between the community and the planning team, allowing for future avenues of contact and discussion to be created. The tours of each community were based upon what residents thought the team should see, including destinations of the community, areas of potential development, and sites that may become issues in the future.

Stakeholder interviews

Gathering input and connecting with the general public is important for planning projects as it ensures the effort accurately represents the needs and aspirations of a community. However, there are often topics or issues which might be known to the general public, but are often difficult to accurately assess due to their complexity. To fill this gap, the planning team held a number of stakeholder interviews throughout the plan process. Over multiple months, the planning team met with leaders within county-wide organizations, local businesses and industries, schools, non-profit and faith-based organizations. These meetings provided additional insight on concerns and ideas heard from public engagement efforts and influenced many of the individual community strategies within the comprehensive plan.

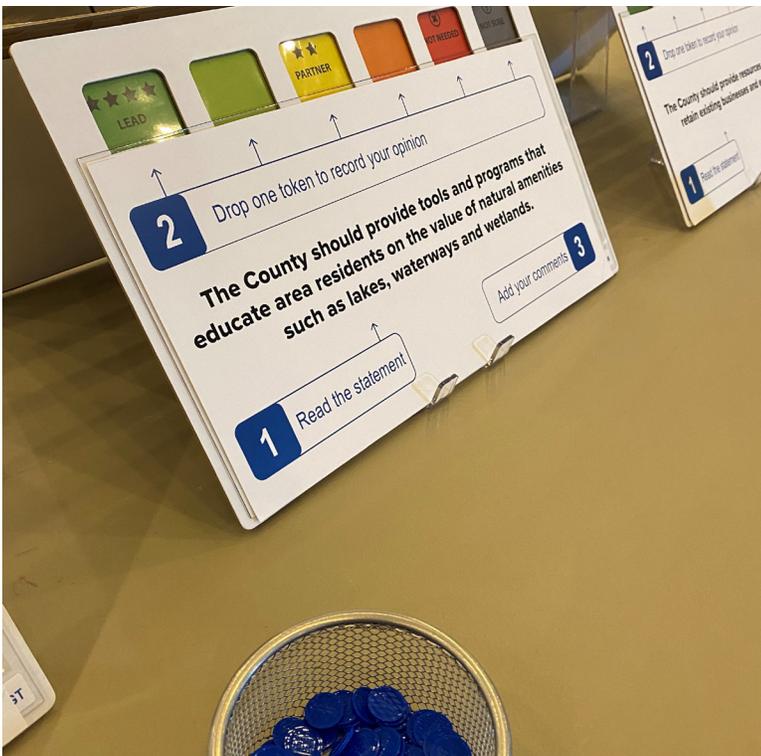
Community focus group meetings

Community focus group meetings allowed for input from members of a community and facilitated conversations regarding local growth, development and necessary improvements. These focus group meetings acted as small, public workshops, providing activities for participants to complete that gave deeper insight into issues and challenges brought up during prior public engagement efforts. To date, these meetings have been held in Leesburg, Mentone, Milford, North Webster, Pierceton, Silver Lake and Syracuse with participants including Town Clerk's, local department heads and participants of the previous Home Town Chat events, which were done prior to the FORWARD Kosciusko County process.

Public workshops

Public workshops allow for in-person discussions between community members and the planning team. These meetings often include a variety of exercises for the public to provide feedback to help steer the direction of the final planning document and give an idea of what should be priorities for the future of the community. The exercises at the public workshops held for this planning project included mapping exercises, boards asking participants to comment their big ideas for their community and what they would like to see in the future, and an activity which asked those in attendance to vote on how they perceived specific goals within the County and who should be in charge of leading efforts associated with those goals.

The public workshops were held in three separate locations to ensure all residents within the County had the ability to participate without needing to drive extended distances. These meetings were held at The Roost of Creighton's Crazy Egg Café on June 3, 2021, the Silver Lake Lions Club on June 8, 2021, and Milford School on June 9, 2021. These locations were chosen for their proximity and accessibility for residents in the north, central, and southern regions of the County.



ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS

13

Total field tours and conversations
over the course of four days

40+

Stakeholder interviews representing
unique special interest groups

7

Individual community focus group
meetings with local participation

40+

Participants across three initial
public open houses

44

Participants across seven land use
and growth workshop sessions

Pierceton Community Focus Group Meeting, Pierceton, IN | MACOG



WHAT WE HEARD

COMMON THEMES

Each engagement opportunity was summarized and presented independently, but, for the purposes of this Community Conditions Assessment, common themes were identified to highlight the core strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and challenges discussed during the initial phase of work. These common themes represent both assets and challenges that are areas of focus for the FORWARD Kosciusko County process as well as for future initiatives across the County. As the planning process continues, and ideas are explored, these common themes will be used to inform the development of final recommendations and action items.

The common themes or key takeaways outlined below have been organized into four key categories to allow for consistency between other sections of this Community Conditions Report. These items were consistently discussed through meetings, interviews, and workshops, and are found within survey responses. While they have been identified as common themes, they have not been prioritized in any way. The following are summarized sentiments from the initial outreach and engagement efforts and will continue to be used and expanded throughout the remaining steps of the planning process.

WHAT WE HEARD

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Strengths are internal, positive attributes that are within control of the County or local community. Opportunities are external environmental factors that are likely to contribute to the County's or local community's success. Throughout the initial engagement activities there was consensus around the following community strengths and opportunities.

Population Growth

The County, and many of the local communities, have seen an increase in population over the last decade, and this trend is expected to continue.

Established and Expanding Industries

Although the County still retains a strong agricultural base, advanced manufacturing and related industries are now a dominating force and act as an attraction for new residents. Furthermore, nearly 60% of survey participants believe that the County's business and industries are one of the its strongest assets.

Water Recreation / Tourism

The County is able to capitalize off its numerous lakes and natural areas, which are major tourist attractions, bringing in thousands of visitors and thousands of dollars in revenue each year. Nearly 55% of survey respondents selected parks, open space, and recreational opportunities as one of the County's strongest assets.

Strong Local School Systems

The County has 4 separate school corporations that are tasked with providing students with a well-rounded education. Just over 33% of survey respondents identified the local schools as one of the strongest assets in Kosciusko County. The quality of education offered within an area plays a significant role in attracting future residents. The County's schools can be promoted as an incentive to attract families with school-aged children.

Safe, Family-friendly Communities

70.3% of Kosciusko County Well-Being Index survey respondents indicated that they always felt safe and secure, friendly, and family-friendly were common responses when survey participants were asked about the County's strongest assets.

Expanding Year-Round, Seasonal Activities

Nearly 60% of survey participants expressed the desire to expand the types and frequency of festivals, concerts, and programs. Not only do these events provide entertainment for residents, but they can also attract visitors too.

Enhancing Tourism

Destination restaurants, outdoor event areas, and seasonal events were identified as things that could be leveraged to enhance the tourism environment within the County. It is the hope to provide more destinations so that people visiting the lakes are encouraged to stay longer.

Water Recreation | Visit Kosciusko



WHAT WE HEARD

OUR COMMUNITY WEAKNESSES AND THREATS

Weaknesses and threats are negative factors that detract from the strengths. These may require improvement in order for the County and local communities to be competitive as an attractive community. Throughout the initial engagement activities there was consensus around the following community weaknesses and constraints.

Aging Infrastructure

Due to the age of many communities within the County, outdated infrastructure will be a major concern for community leaders and residents in the coming years. When asked about the County's greatest challenge, many survey participants responded to the open-ended question by identifying road conditions and poor planning with regards to growth and services.

Lack of Quantity and Diversity in Housing Options

A key part to attracting and retaining the County's population is to provide desirable, attainable housing options. Nearly half (45%) of survey participants identified the lack of diversity in housing options as the County's greatest challenge. Furthermore, nearly 70% of participants said their communities needed more livable-wage housing for individuals and families.

Access to Quality Internet Services

Important to children, workers, and employers, access to high-quality internet is critical for personal and professional use. Nearly 40% of survey participants identified broadband as the County's greatest challenge and 60% noted they were not happy with current internet services.

Maintain Structures and Facades Within Downtowns

Similar to aging infrastructure, the age of many communities within the County correlates to the condition of the structures. Old buildings can be particularly challenging to renovate due to the cost of improvements being higher than the return on investment. Just over 30% of survey respondents identify maintaining structures and facades as one of the greatest challenges for Kosciusko County.

Access to Social and Support Services

There are a handful of services that are either nonexistent or not affordable for residents. Affordable childcare was a very common response when survey participants were asked about challenges. Over 75% of survey participants feel the County needs more childcare facilities. Additionally, substance abuse, homelessness, and poverty were noted as challenges that could be combated with the appropriate resources and facilities in place.

Resistance to Change / Unwillingness to Diversify

A challenge many rural communities are working to address is how to break a culture of unwelcomeness, unwillingness or inability to adapt to current trends. Many survey participants stated that the community is difficult for someone to break into if they were not born in the area.

Vacancies within the Downtowns

Similar to other rural communities, Kosciusko County is struggling to retain substantial business within its small downtowns. This challenge likely stems from two factors: the condition of the buildings and/or market demand. Over 50% of survey participants identified supporting the downtowns through reinvestment as a high priority.

Access to Fresh Foods and Pantry Staples

The survey included an open-ended question asking participants to identify the greatest challenges. A common response was the lack of grocery stores or the distance residents must travel to access a grocery store. Furthermore, 40% of survey participants identified the need for more grocery stores.

Maintenance of Recreation Areas

While residents value parks, lake access, and recreational opportunities, there is some dissatisfaction with how things are being taken care of. Survey participants expressed the importance of maintaining existing conditions before adding more to the plate.

Pedestrian Infrastructure and Connectivity

The County is interested in prioritizing improvements to sidewalks, trails, and other forms of active recreation. Currently, there is limited connectivity amongst trail infrastructure, and sidewalk conditions could be improved. Community members have expressed the importance of pedestrian infrastructure being considered a part of a complete street policy, instead of just a recreational amenity.

Lack of Transparency with Local Governments

There is some level of dissatisfaction in local leadership and the economic development-related efforts. Survey participants expressed the desire for more women and minorities in government, more communication between leadership and the general public, and stronger emphasis placed on retaining existing businesses and attracting new businesses to the County. When asked about the priorities for the future, the most popular response was supporting and retaining existing businesses.

WHAT WE HEARD

IDENTIFYING OUR SHARED ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations are the goals/ objectives/ projects that the community hopes to achieve during or after this planning process. There was consensus around the following community aspirations.

Agricultural Conservation

Kosciusko County has a rich history of agriculture; at one time, the County was the top egg and poultry exporter of the Midwest. Today, that agricultural pride is still deeply rooted in the community and serves as a main economic driver for the County. Many residents support the conservation of the agricultural and natural lands within Kosciusko County, and wish to see new policies enacted to find a balance between new development and existing farm land.

Family Friendly

Each individual town within the County holds close-knit populations that support creating a safe and welcoming community for both current residents and potential visitors. Many communities have future goals of creating or expanding their current parks facilities to include more activities for children, families, and the elderly.

Protecting and Enhancing the Lakes

One of the major assets of Kosciusko County are the multiple lakes, which are used for recreation and draw in thousands of visitors each year. Although new growth of housing, commercial, and recreational amenities surrounding these lakes may be necessary to draw in new residents and visitors, residents have expressed the need to balance this growth with conservation efforts to ensure the County's natural assets are kept intact.

Being a Safe Place to Live

One aspect of many rural communities is the safety and security that often comes with living away from more urban areas. Residents of the County wish to continue supporting and enhancing public safety measures to provide a higher quality of life within the communities. This not only includes ensuring police, fire, and EMS departments can adequately service the region, but it also means creating a safe environment for residents who may be battling with mental health issues, abuse, or addiction.

Growing in the Right Direction

As Kosciusko County continues to grow in population, it will become important for each town to capitalize on this growth and develop a plan to attract new residents. In nearly all engagement efforts, it was heard that towns within the County were missing certain businesses or infrastructure that could help grow their populations.

Creating a Strong Economic Base

Kosciusko County's economic base has shifted over the last several decades, moving away from being predominantly agriculture towards manufacturing; this is a trend occurring statewide. Not only is there a call to support the existing industries within the county, but there is also a need to support the local entrepreneurs who help bring businesses, entertainment, and quality-of-life amenities to each town.

Milford Library, Milford, IN | TSWDG





Land Use and Growth Workshop | TSWDG

