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JUNE / JULY 2026

# Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and North Central Indiana  
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## Digital infrastructure

*Northwest Indiana prime location for  
data centers, investment in future*

**Matt Reardon**  
Founding partner,  
MCR Partners



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**BIG NUMBER**

**1,800**

The number of jobs data centers supported in Indiana as of 2024, according to the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Policy Studies. ► **PAGE 12**

**IN THIS ISSUE**

**F**inally, the rest of the country is discovering what we've known for years: Business leaders can bet on Northwest Indiana to grow and thrive!

While the Bears are still considering their stadium options, other major organizations are building digital infrastructure and expanding operations here.

Our story about information technology focuses on why Northwest and North Central Indiana are attracting so many data centers, how communities are negotiating terms and what resources they will need. Community leaders are carefully considering the pros and cons of bringing these large installations here.

Companies also find that the Region offers the infrastructure they need, the workforce they are looking for and the quality of place their workers ask for. JNE Group moved a team of engineers to Merrillville. And Paradigm Health is expanding with a hospice and palliative care office in Valparaiso. More companies are on the way too.

The Region also has educational opportunities that help employees train for higher-paying jobs or a promotion. Some mid-career learners are changing occupations to take advantage of in-demand jobs like teaching. Holy Cross College's Transition to Teaching program offers professionals a doorway to sharing what they've learned and fulfilling a need in their communities. NWI Works is creating opportunity hubs designed to upskill workers and meet this growing

employer demand.

This workforce also wants something in return. Workers are looking for compensation that goes beyond traditional packages and supports "overall financial well-being," said Jackie Hofman, chief administrative officer at Purdue Federal Credit Union. Helping employees build wealth with the help of financial advisers and programs makes them stay and be more productive.

Every issue, I am usually surprised by a company's growth. In this issue, I learned about two: Trinity Displays in Portage and Janus Motorcycles in Goshen.

We feature Trinity Displays in a story about the resurgence of trade shows. People are embracing in-person interaction and interesting booths. Trinity is one company in the Region making a national difference, similar to Janus Motorcycles, who has some very loyal fans. Bike owners invested in the company's future via Wefunder, and share their talents as employees.

Business owners also need a clear path to succession planning. Brian Schutt, the first director of the Office of Entrepreneurship and Innovation for the State of Indiana, shares his plans for transferring ownership to the next generation. He chose Northwest Indiana to pilot a new program to help make that happen. Now that's confidence we can all share!

Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor



**The 300,000-square-foot former Elston High School in Michigan City is now the Elston Opportunity Hub, a workforce training and community services center established by NWI Works. ► PAGE 38**

# Professional advancement

Businesses and organizations share good news about new hires, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

### Agribusiness

**Greg Schmitt** was appointed a strategic adviser at Merrillville-based **FiberX**. He formerly served in several roles at **Borregaard LignoTech**. FiberX won the AgriNovus Indiana AgBioscience Innovation Award at the 2026 Mira Awards, presented by **TechPoint** in Indianapolis.

### Banking

**Karin DeVries** and **Kathy Ireland** joined **Purdue Federal Credit Union** as senior account vice presidents and member business loan officers. Both have more than 30 years of financial services experience. **Purdue University Northwest** Chancellor **Chris Holford** was appointed to the board of directors.

**Tech Credit Union**, which has headquarters in Crown Point, hired the following associates: **Ashley Patterson**, teller in Merrillville; **Lanice Lightning**, teller in Cedar Lake; **Ronnie D. Bogle**, contact center sales specialist; **Parker Reynolds**, teller in Crown Point; **Makayla Blair**, teller in Lowell; **Katie Domoras**, teller in Crown Point; **Sarah Roe**, MSR in La Porte; **Sam Seegers**, teller in Crown Point; **Avery Seberger**, teller in Crown Point; **Jasmine Cerda**,

teller in Crown Point; and **Natalie Baughman**, teller in Valparaiso.

**Alexia Martinez** was appointed a mortgage loan originator at **Notre Dame Federal Credit Union**. **Mireya Olvera** was appointed vice president and regional area manager, and **Jose Cazarez** to assistant branch manager at the new Elkhart branch. **Cesar Calvo** was named assistant vice president and branch manager and **Emilio Olvera** to a mortgage and market development officer, both in Fort Wayne.

**Tara Minix** was appointed a mortgage loan originator at **Horizon Bank** based in Michigan City. **Adam Lukas** was named a senior business banker. **Mark Ulyas** was named vice president and wealth investment portfolio officer based in Michigan City.

**Mike Dunn** was promoted to a vice president of **1st Source Bank** based in South Bend. He joined the bank in 2025 as the bank's west region commercial and business banking manager, which he will continue. **Josh Birky** was promoted to officer of the bank and is a business banker.

**Chris Doyle** joined **Old National** based in Evansville as president of commercial banking, and **John C. Thurston** was promoted to president of corporate banking. **Joe Wicklander**,

president of treasury solutions and payments. **Tim Kocher** will transition from chief credit strategy officer to chief service delivery officer. The leadership changes follow the departure of commercial banking CEO **Jim Sandgren**, who retired after 34 years.

**Austin Christner** was appointed a commercial lender at **Interra Credit Union's** new business center in Granger. **Jennifer Tinker** was welcomed as an assistant vice president and member experience strategy lead. **Jamie Loher** was named director and head of mortgage sales.

### Commercial real estate

**Michelle Czysczon** of **Latitude Commercial** based in Crown Point was promoted to director of business development. She will grow business in Indiana, Illinois and Denver, Colorado. **Edith Valdes** takes over Czysczon's office manager role. **Bailey Wirkus** was welcomed as marketing coordinator.

### Construction

**Ritchey Moore** was hired as vice president of **Tonn and Blank Construction's** western Indiana region, which has an office in Lafayette. Moore also is an engineer officer in the **Indiana Army National Guard**. He replaces



BANKING  
Adam Lukas



BANKING  
Austin Christner



BANKING  
Karin DeVries



BANKING  
Mark Ulyas



**Matt Weller**, who was promoted to executive vice president of the Michigan City-based company.

**Amy Henningfield**, director of workforce development for **Superior Construction**, joined the **Northwest Indiana Influential Women Association's** board of directors. Florida-based Superior has offices in Portage and Gary.

Benton Harbor, Michigan-based **Wightman** promoted several staff members: **Pete Siglow** and **Kevin Marks** advanced to principal associate from senior associate; **Paul Schram**, **Stefany Holland**, **Joel East**, **Melanie Stange**, **Suzannah Deneau** and **Patrick Schwyn** were promoted to senior associate from associate.

### Economic development

**Bethany Hartley**, president and CEO of the **South Bend-Elkhart Regional Partnership**, was named Woman of the Year by the **Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce** at their 2026 annual meeting.

**Jeffrey Bennett**, managing partner at **McColly Bennett Commercial Advantage**, joined the **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City's** board of directors.

**Wendel McCollum**, superintendent of **Michigan City Area Schools**; **Cassie Martin**, vice president of operations at **D. Martin Enterprises** in Michigan City; **Aco Sikoski**, chancellor of **Ivy Tech Community College** in Valparaiso; and **Antonio Conley**, CEO and founder of **Temerity Boutique** in Michigan City, joined the **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City's** board.

**Chuck Hughes**, president and CEO of the **Gary Chamber of Commerce**, was awarded the Distinguished Hoosier Award, one of the state's highest honors.

### Education

**Purdue University Northwest** faculty members received promotions starting in the 2026-2027 school year. **Jesse Cohn** will become a professor of English, and **Grethe Hystad**, a professor of statistics. Six faculty members were promoted to associate professors, which includes academic tenure: **Jodi Allen**, nursing; **Manisa Baker**, nursing; **Matthew Bauman**, hospitality and tourism management; **Farai Gombedza**, biochemistry; **Omeed Ilchi**, criminal justice; **Aref Yadollahi**, mechanical engineering. **Arash Asrari**, an associate professor of electrical engineering, also received tenure. **José Castro-Urioste**, professor of Spanish in the College of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, was named a **U.S. Fulbright** specialist.

**Brianne Oliver** was hired as the director of exceptional achievers by the **School Town of Munster** board of trustees.

**Mary Grace Almandrez** was appointed senior vice president and chief of staff to **Valparaiso University** President **Brian Konkol**. She most recently was vice president of people and culture at **Syracuse University**.

**Raj Biyani** was appointed chief innovation officer at **Goshen College** after a 30-year career at **Microsoft**.

**Brian Blagg**, the Charles Huisiking Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry and director of the Warren Family

Research Center Drug Discovery and Development at the **University of Notre Dame**, was awarded the 1st Source Faculty Commercialization Award for his work leading to **Grannus Therapeutics**, a venture focused on the development of ovarian cancer treatments. **Nathan Swenson**, the Gillen Director of the University of Notre Dame Environmental Research Center and professor in the department of biological sciences, was named a 2026 Fellow of the **Ecological Society of America**. **Joyelle McSweeney**, the William P. and Hazel B. White Professor of English, won the Windham-Campbell Prize for her work in poetry.

**John McKiernan** was appointed executive vice president and chief operating office of **Holy Cross College**. He also will serve as a member of the President's Executive Council. He most recently served as chief of staff to the president at **Wilmington College** in Ohio. Holy Cross awarded honorary degrees to **Thomas Gryp**, chair and CEO, **Notre Dame Federal Credit Union**; **John Gschwind**, senior vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary, **Rexel USA Inc.**; Sister **Ann Lacour**, congregational leader of the **Marianites of Holy Cross**; and **Alex Jones**, CEO and co-founder of **Hallow** during the 59th commencement ceremony in May. **Jelani Cotton**, a South Bend native, was named the college's first Fulbright recipient. He will spend a year in Spain as an English teaching assistant.

**Kenneth Smith** was promoted to



**BANKING**  
Mireya Olvera



**BANKING**  
Tara Minix



**CONSTRUCTION**  
Amy Henningfield



**CONSTRUCTION**  
Ritchey Moore

## AROUND THE REGION



**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**  
Bethany Hartley



**EDUCATION**  
Jessica Fullilove



**EDUCATION**  
Mary Grace Almandrez



**GOVERNMENT**  
Christopher Gootee

director of building, grounds and maintenance for the **Gary Community School Corp.** Smith began his career with the district in the 1980s. **Jessica Fullilove**, family and community engagement liaison at **West Side Leadership Academy**, received the 2026 FACE Impact Leader Award.

**Todd Grace** was appointed the **Tri-Township School Corp.**'s athletic director. He replaces **Rick Snodgrass**, who retired.

### Finance

**Brandon Sinclair** was promoted to director of marketing at **Calder Capital**.

**Amanda Calvert** and **Hunter Mang** were promoted to financial adviser relationship managers at **CAPTRUST Chesterton**.

**Edward Jones** Financial Adviser **Brock Lloyd** qualified for the Edward Jones recognition conference, Momentum, which celebrates the contributions and achievements of 406 of the most successful financial advisers.

### Government

**Steve Poulos** was named city administrator for the **City of Valparaiso**. He most recently was the executive director of Valparaiso City Services, a combination of public works and utilities departments. **Matt Zurbruggen** was named utilities director.

Capt. **Christopher Gootee** was promoted to assistant chief of police for the **Hammond Police Department**. He was hired in 2005 and earned captain in 2025.

Gov. **Mike Braun** made 33 appointments in March. Lake County: **John Todd** of **NIPSCO** to the Underground Plant Protection Advisory Committee; **LeAnn Angerman**, to the Emergency Response Commission; **Vince McGowen**, of **Traditions**, to the Medicaid Waiver Work Group; **Tony Ferraro** to the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. La Porte County: **Gene Schmidt**, farmer, to the Soil Conservation Board. Potter County: **Jason Lenz**, CEO of **Creek**

**Run Environmental**, and **Keith Slater**, of **Family Express**, to the Petroleum Storage Tank Financial Assurance Board; and Dr. **Jerry Rodenbarger**, of **Vale Park Animal Hospital**, to the Indiana Board of Veterinary Medicine.

The governor also made April appointments. Jasper County: State Rep. **Kendell Culp**, farmer, and **Sue McCloskey** to the Agricultural Promotion and Regulation Task Force. Porter County: **Jenny Orsburn** to the Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission. Lake County: **Robert Ochi** and **Anthony Broadnax** to the Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission. Elkhart County: **Philip Goodrich** of **Comcast** to the Statewide 911 Board. St. Joseph County: **Iris Hammel**, of **TeachMe3D**, to the State Board of Education.

**Jeff Schaffer** was appointed director of public works for the **City of Elkhart**. He was appointed city



**GOVERNMENT**  
Jeff Schaffer



**HEALTH CARE**  
Beth Lock



**HEALTH CARE**  
Raquel Gonzalez Heredia

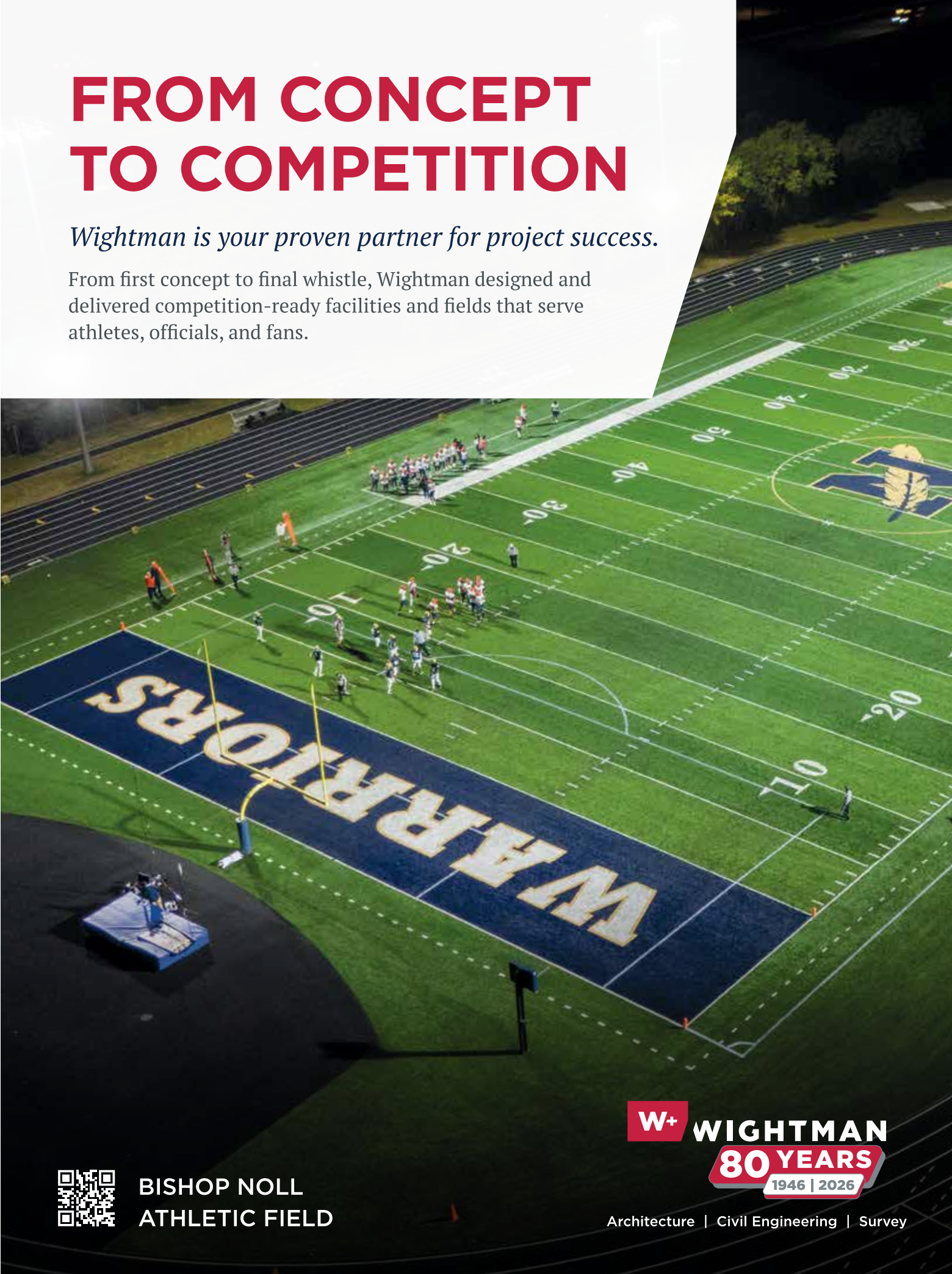


**HEALTH CARE**  
Sarah Paturalski

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**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**  
Eric Christopher



**MANUFACTURING**  
Michelle Fields



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Claudia Ruiz Pena



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Donna Stuckert

engineer in July 2025 after five years on the engineering team.

### Health care

Dr. **Susan Murrey**, obstetrician and gynecologist, joined the **Franciscan Physician Network** in Michigan City.

**Powers Health** welcomed three physicians to **Powers Health Medical Group**: Breast Surgical Oncologist **Raquel Gonzalez Heredia** at **Community Hospital** in Munster; Cardiologist **Elizabeth Riddell** at **St. Mary Medical Center** in Hobart; and Orthopedic Surgeon **Bryan Scott** at **Community Hospital** and **St. Mary Medical Center**.

**Sarah Paturalski** was named hospital president of **Beacon Dowagiac**, after a national search. She spent much of her career at **Memorial Hospital of South Bend**, most recently serving as vice president of nursing and clinical services and interim president. **Lee Herschberger** was appointed interim vice president of nursing and clinical services at **Memorial Hospital**. He most

recently served as executive director of operations at **Three Rivers Health Hospital** in Michigan. **Mary Wendt** joined **Three Rivers** as interim vice president of operations.

Paramedic **Michael Okray** was named director of **Northwest Health Emergency Medical Services**. Since 1996, Okray has served as a paramedic and then a captain.

**Beth Lock**, president and owner of **Lock Strategies**, is the new CEO and executive director of the **Indiana Business Health Collaborative**. She replaces **Luke Messer** who stepped down. **Lock Strategies** is a strategic consulting firm based in Fort Wayne.

**Carolyn Wiesinger** opened **Face Time with Carolyn** in Chesterton. She is a registered nurse.

### Information technology

**Taylor Griffin** has joined **Trust Tech** in Valparaiso as vice president of sales.

**Steven Rogers** was appointed to vice president of external affairs for **AT&T Indiana**. Rogers previously served as

director of external affairs for Indiana.

**Eric Christopher** was named president and CEO of Indianapolis-based **TechPoint**. Most recently, Christopher served as a strategic board and operating adviser to companies, including **Zylo** and **Pimly** and as a co-founder and adviser to a **Stealth Startup**, an AI company.

### Law

**Victoria Konstantinidis** joined **Krieg DeVault** as an associate attorney. The law firm has offices in Indiana and Illinois.

Former Indiana Utility Regulatory Commissioner **Angela Weber** joined **Barnes & Thornburg** as counsel in the firm's government services and finance department, based in Indianapolis.

### Manufacturing

**Henrik Nielsen** was appointed chief financial officer of **SMS**. The Portage-based steel mill services provider also appointed **Chris Dods**, formerly president and CEO of **Strategic Materials**,



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Katelyn Kazakevicius



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Melissa Litwicki



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Natalie Krivas



**PHILANTHROPY**  
Rebecca Weber

and **James Herald**, formerly CEO of **Evrax North America**, to its board of directors.

**Matthew Filer** was appointed executive vice president of finance, chief financial officer and treasurer of Elkhart-based **Patrick Industries**. He succeeds **Andrew Roeder**, who stepped down effective Dec. 31.

**Chase Sager**, of **Lippert** in Elkhart, and **Kartik Maheshwari**, of **enFocus** in South Bend, earned a spot on **Conexus Indiana's** 2026 Rising 30 list. Sager is a supply chain planner, and Maheshwari is an engineering project manager.

**Patrick Brown** was named a project manager at the **Haire Group** in Merrillville. Brown most recently worked for **Automated Conveyor Systems Inc.**

**Michelle Fields**, Gary, Indiana, plant manager at **HWI**, a member of **Calderys**, was recognized as a 2026 STEP Ahead Awards honoree by the **Manufacturing Institute**.

### Philanthropy

**Rebecca Weber** was named the development director and **Katelyn Kazakevicius** marketing manager at the **Art Barn School of Art** in Valparaiso.

**Natalie Krivas** joined the **Food Bank of Northwest Indiana** as vice president of development and communications.

**Claudia Ruiz Pena** joined the **Legacy Foundation**, Lake County's community foundation, as development and marketing manager, and **Donna Stuckert** as community news and initiative manager. **Donna Catalano** retired.

**Melinda Mote**, quality assurance director, and **Cassandra Dunn**, safety and facilities director at Valparaiso-based **Opportunity Enterprises**, were selected for the INARF Leadership Academy Class of 2026.

**David Gaona** was promoted from program director to executive director of **Lifeline Youth Ministries** in Elkhart. He replaces **Darrell Peterson**, who led the nonprofit for 17 years. Peterson will continue to support the organization's work-based learning programs for high

school students.

**Melissa Litwicki** was appointed director of community-based services at the **Crisis Center** in Gary.

**Lauren Schregardus** was appointed to the **Marvella Foundation** board of directors. Marvella plans to build facilities for girls sports at Fair Oaks Farms..

**Glenn Northern** was named executive director of the **Elkhart County Symphony Orchestra**. He was the

**Penn High School**, Mishawaka, band director for 24 years.

**Jessica Bamber** was appointed director of events and strategic partnerships at **Downtown South Bend**.

### Utilities

**Violet Sistovaris** was named the interim CEO of **Jasper County REMC**. Former CEO and General Manager **Jon Rich** retired Dec. 1. ■

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# Digital infrastructure

Northwest Indiana prime location for data centers, investment in future



Photo, Bert Cook/LEAP

► Microsoft is building a massive data center in LaPorte. This is a rendering of one of Microsoft's similar data centers elsewhere.

DOUG ROSS

**D**ata centers mean big investments in the communities that approve them, but some residents have concerns — how much energy and water will data centers actually use?

One of the biggest proponents of data centers is Hobart Mayor Josh Huddlestun, whose city stands to gain big money from the Amazon Web Services data center to be built there.

“There’s a lot of myths around data centers, and they’re not the movie villain everyone portrays them to be,” Huddlestun said.

Data Center Map reports that more than 100 data centers are either planned or operating in Indiana, and Northwest and North Central Indiana will boast about 50 of them.

In 2024, data center operations supported 1,800 long-term jobs in Indiana, according to a fact sheet published by the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Policy Studies.

Huddlestun wanted to be sure that data centers were right for Hobart, so he and his team went to Loudon County, Virginia, which has a high concentration of data centers.

Huddlestun talked with Loudon County officials and residents to get their take on data centers’ impact on their lives.

“What we found out is not all data centers are built the same,” he said.

That gave Hobart leverage in negotiating with Amazon. Now the city is getting a windfall.

“The city of Hobart will receive about \$200 million in the first three or four years and then \$50 million a year after that,” Huddlestun said.

“We think over the course of the next 35 years, we’ll receive additional revenue of about \$1.5 billion,” he said. And that’s on top of the property tax for the land and buildings and the personal property tax for the servers and other costly equipment at the data center campus.

Hobart’s tax base is roughly tripled. And despite a 2025 state law throttling property tax revenues for local government, a municipal income tax that otherwise would be a virtual necessity is unlikely to be adopted, economic development expert Matt Reardon said.

Reardon, founder of Hammond-based MCR Partners, said data centers are, per acre, “by far the most lucrative type of development I’ve ever seen with the least environmental drawbacks.”

## Negotiating terms

**A**long with Northwest Indiana Forum President and CEO Heather Ennis and others, Reardon spoke at an April 16 public forum that drew a large crowd to the Lowell High School auditorium.

“Northwest Indiana obviously has been getting a lot of attention on data centers lately,” Ennis said. “Over the last three years, it’s kind of astronomical what’s coming down the pike.

“This rush will not last forever. There will be a saturation point where we build

# \$200M

The amount the City of Hobart expects to receive in the first three to four years from the Amazon data center and then \$50 million a year there after over 35 years.



out the infrastructure that's needed."

Like Huddleston, she noted the economic benefits to communities they locate in. For Hobart, getting money beyond what property taxes will generate means massive amounts available for public safety, park amenities and other quality-of-life improvements that otherwise would be difficult to fund so generously.

In La Porte, Mayor Tom Dermody negotiated terms for the \$1.3 billion Microsoft data center going in there to include a massive amount for the school district as well as the city.

Data centers also enrich STEM partnerships. Companies building them have shown interest in partnering with communities to build the workforce, Ennis said.

"We're at the next industrial revolution

in technology, and we're watching it unfold in real time," Ennis said.

She encouraged people interested in data centers to check out NWIDatafacts.nwiforum.org, a website built by the Northwest Indiana Forum and partners to dispel myths.

Indiana Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources Suzanne Jaworowski spoke about data centers and utility needs. Data centers have a voracious appetite for electricity.

"This is the best step to take, to approach these opportunities with an open mind," she said. "It's a very tricky time

for Indiana and our country."

Energy sources have shifted during the last 20 years, she said, going from 90% coal to 49% coal and 43% natural gas now.

"These issues are really important to Americans because it affects affordability," she said.

Twenty years ago, demand for electricity was stable. That was before data centers began to proliferate.

"Nobody really knows what our demand (for electricity) will be," Jaworowski said.

"Data centers create demand," as does bringing more manufacturing to the United States, she said.



Photo, in.gov

► Suzanne Jaworowski is the Indiana Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources



Photo, Doug Ross

► A large crowd at the Lowell High School auditorium April 16 turned out for a presentation on a proposed data center nearby. Residents showed a heightened concern and curiosity about data centers.

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

"I'm not here to tell you you can't have data centers," Jaworowski said, noting that Gov. Mike Braun has said Indiana is open for business with data centers. "He is asking for data centers to pay their fair share" of the cost of additional electrical generating capacity, at least 80% of the energy infrastructure they need.

Jaworowski indicated that nuclear power is likely to have a comeback to supply electricity for data centers, but it takes a long time to get those permits in place.

"It's time for us to stand back, take an inventory of what is happening," she said, and make decisions with lots of information.

### Attracted by water

Data centers can use a large quantity of water, too, to cool the servers,

depending on the design chosen.

Sentinel Data Centers CEO Josh Rabina outlined the two types of cooling data centers can use. One is evaporating

water out of cooling towers. "It's a little bit more efficient. It uses a little bit less power," he said, but it can require a lot of water.

Air-cooled systems like the one proposed in Lowell use large HVAC equipment, typically mounted on the roof.

"That system uses zero water," he said. "You're discharging nothing,"

Huddleston said Amazon's plan to use 14 million gallons of water

annually at the Hobart data center complex sounds high, but it's less than the average golf course or 200 homes.

"A good portion of the year, they just open the windows and pull in outside air," another reason to locate in

Northwest Indiana, he said.

Kate Stoll, project director at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Center for Scientific Evidence and Public Issues, said the Great Lakes area is attractive to data centers. But it's not the industry's only target. Texas is the new Virginia, she said. "They're actually slightly ahead of Virginia in terms of planned data centers."

The Great Lakes have more than just a lot of water.

"The climate is cool in the winters, at least, so it's a little easier to cool them there," Stoll said.

In addition, Northwest Indiana is adjacent to a major urban area, offering fast data transfer and access to a skilled workforce.

### Concerns

Proponents have a lot of ammo, but opponents aren't without arrows in their quiver.

Opponents cite concerns about



Photo, Sentinel Data Centers

► Josh Rabina is CEO of Sentinel Data Centers



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transparency, the amount of water and energy needed and noise from generators.

Transparency is an issue for data center operators because they're so concerned about security, protecting equipment and data privacy alike.

"Security is definitely one of the concerns of data centers," Stoll said. Physical security is required, but "cybersecurity is huge. The tech companies know how important cybersecurity is," Stoll said. "If they get infiltrated, their business model is not going to go very well."

"Everything is redundant systems with all these data centers," to protect them.

A recent FBI report dealt with cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. "Water, power, all of these things are getting more and more hits," Stoll said.

Data centers are needed for artificial intelligence as well as cloud storage, but data centers need advanced AI technology to thwart the advanced attacks that AI can facilitate. "Nobody doesn't use AI for cybersecurity," Stoll said.

Randy Palmateer, business manager for the Northwestern Indiana Building & Construction Trades Council, said data centers require generators for emergency backup power. The generators power up 30 minutes a month just to make sure they're still operational, though they don't have to all be powered up at the same time.

Palmateer is very familiar with generators. "All my union halls in the area have generators in case the power goes out," he said.

### Workforce needs

Palmateer said just building a large data center can take 2,000 or more construction workers.

Once the data center opens, it needs not only programmers, custodians and security guards but also people

to maintain basic systems like HVAC, power and more.

But Stoll said once data centers are built, few people are needed to maintain them.

"There was a lot of promise with jobs with data centers," Stoll said, but they require few ongoing operational jobs once built. "That's something that people have better understood recently."

Technology is changing daily, so there are jobs out there to make changes all the time. "There's a constant flow of building trades men and women going in and out of those facilities," Palmateer said.

Building the electrical generation facilities takes even more workers, he said.

NIPSCO recently received preliminary approvals for a combined circle



Photo: Randy Palmateer

► Randy Palmateer is business manager for the Northwestern Indiana Building & Construction Trades Council

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## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

gas turbine project at the Shaffer Generating Station in Wheatfield. At its peak, 3,500 to 4,000 workers will be at that site, putting power on the grid to keep data centers running, Palmateer said.

The construction trades have enough workers for the proposed data centers and power plants because apprenticeships were increased an average of about 25% in anticipation of the massive hydrogen hub plant that would have been built in northern Lake County. President Donald Trump cancelled the next-generation energy project after taking office last year.

“We have the best industrial construction force in the country,” Palmateer said. “We do the most industrial man-hours in the whole country.”

Palmateer said his members appreciate the jobs data centers offer, but they’re also citizens.

“We do not support data centers in places they don’t belong. Our members live in those communities,” he said.

The first data center Palmateer was involved with was the Digital Crossroads project at the old State Line Generating Station in Hamond. Tom Dakich, who built it, did it the right way, Palmateer said.

Dakich contacted the building trades, ensuring there would be a local workforce and a project labor agreement, while working simultaneously with Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr.

“He built the first successful data center in Northwest Indiana with no remonstrators,” Palmateer said. “Why everybody didn’t follow that footprint after that blew my mind.”

“Mayor Huddlestun has done a phenomenal job, and so has Mayor McDermott,” he said.

### Next Merrillville

Palmateer also had kind words for Merrillville and Lake County, both of which have been proactive in developing zoning rules for data centers.



Photo, Doug Press

► A panel discussion at Lowell High School led by Lake County Councilman Randy Niemeyer lays out the facts regarding a proposed data center near Lowell and data centers generally.

Merrillville Councilman Rick Bella is a driving force behind the Merrillville discussion.

Like Huddlestun, Bella decided a look at Loudon County was in order. “Why would you build a million-dollar house next to a data center?” he wondered.

Bella convinced the council to create a committee to study data centers. About a dozen people volunteered, so he put them all on the committee.

The town already has been approached for data centers in three locations — AmeriPlex at the Crossroads Business Park along Broadway and south of 93rd Avenue; Colorado Street and Harms Road; and 101st Avenue, east of Deep River.

Why those locations? Because they’ve got access to high-power NIPSCO lines underground, Bella said.

“They’re kind of circling and getting their ducks in a row. I think we’ll be approached very soon,” he said.

Bella’s hopeful that Merrillville will get the kind of investment Hobart is seeing. “Hobart already got a check for \$47 million. That’s way more than their

entire budget for the year, almost double,” he said.

“It’s putting Lake County on the map in being leaders in this industry,” he said. “A lot of support businesses will come around because companies want to be around data centers,” just as happened with the steel industry.

“There’s a huge big picture here that a lot of people don’t look at,” Bella said.

Bella went to the data center at AmeriPlex in Portage. “It’s a small one, granted, it’s not a huge one there, but I couldn’t hear a thing” next to the fence, as far as he could go.

Opposition, Bella believes, is mainly just the unknown.

Taking land from farmers? Not an issue, he believes. “I see a lot of empty land all over that is not farmed.”

“Vertical farming is a thing now,” he added. Bella was in the produce and grocery business for decades.

Merrillville is partnering with the Northwest Indiana Forum to host a public event June 11 at the Dean and Barbara White Community Center to educate people about data centers. Participants will be able to visit various topic stations depending on their concerns.

“Really, Josh (Huddlestun) took all the arrows for us. I thank him all the time,” Bella said. ■



Photo, Rick Bella

► Rick Bella is a Merrillville councilman



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# Betting on NW Indiana

Region offers infrastructure, workforce, quality of place — plus, access to Chicago



Photo: Bill Dolan

JNE Group of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, moved a team of engineers to Merrillville.

**BILL DOLAN**

**D**a Bears aren't alone in the hunt to secure home field advantage in Northwest Indiana.

Eighteen months ago, JNE Group of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, moved its team of engineers here.

"We do a lot of heavy industry work, so this is an area we are familiar with," said Keith Taylor, JNE Group sales vice president.

JNE previously opened a U.S. location in Pittsburgh but opted this time for a less-congested Midwest venue than downtown Chicago.

"For us, it's about being close to our steel industry customers," he said. "The talent we were looking to recruit were going to come from that area, so they

would be less likely to want to drive into the city.

"We were able to secure office space in Merrillville, which has been a very positive experience. The team is settling in and quite happy with the facilities."

Many businesses are finding their happy place in this corner of the Hoosier State as companies relocate or expand their operations.

"Northwest Indiana is in play," said Anthony Sindone, associate professor at Indiana University Northwest's School of Business and Economics.

"It's still heavily industrial but is also becoming more diversified," he said, with growth in technology, healthcare and supply-chain-logistics sectors.

"Employment levels are rising, and the

unemployment rate is pretty low."

The average Northwest and North Central Indiana unemployment rate in February was 3.8 percent, nonseasonally adjusted, according to STATS Indiana. The national seasonally adjusted rate was 4.4%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"We are seeing a gross domestic product increase of 3.4 percent a year," a rate that is close to the golden mean of robust job creation without high inflation, Sindone said.

"We have grown in the healthcare, technology and supply chain sectors, which represents warehousing and transportation," he said.

"As more firms come in, there are more job opportunities. Personal incomes are



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actually growing pretty strong. That tells businesses there could be a demand for their services and products.”

### Resistance to change

Such development isn't an unforeseen windfall.

The Region's private and governmental interests are working together to fight other states for multi-million-dollar projects and overcome resistance such economic expansion imposes on a community's traditional character.

“The biggest challenges we see tend to be about the realities of relocation,” said Aaron McDermott, co-founder and president of Latitude Commercial, a Crown Point real estate brokerage.

“Moving a company is often a significant undertaking. For many users, especially in manufacturing or specialized industries, the cost to relocate equipment, re-establish operations, and manage downtime can be substantial. Even when the long-term savings are clear, that upfront investment can slow or prevent a move.”

Employee reluctance to move is another issue.

“There's a segment of business owners less driven by cost efficiency and more focused on maintaining a specific lifestyle,” McDermott said. “Companies have to weigh not just the economics, but also retention, culture and continuity of leadership.”

Jenny Walters, real estate counselor, site selection and incentives director for Sikich, a Naperville, Illinois-based consulting firm, said other bottlenecks could involve a shortage of skilled workers or infrastructure and market-ready spaces.

“If a site isn't ready, companies look at alternatives,” Walters said. “Speed to market becomes a major factor.”

She said site selectors, economic development organizations and real estate brokers break down the location strategy issues for prospective relocation-ready companies.

“Site selectors typically advise the company on where to go — often comparing multiple states or regions based on cost, workforce, logistics and long-term fit,” Walters said.

### Essential tools

Heather Ennis has been an influential proponent of economic development since she became president and CEO of the Northwest Indiana Forum in 2014.

“We actively market the Region as the place to do business, working closely with companies, brokers, site selectors, and developers to grow and attract investment to Northwest Indiana,” she said.

Once a company selects a prospective location for expansion or relocation, the city and other local government bodies “do the majority of legwork from there,” Ennis said.

“Economic development is a team sport ... done in strong partnership with local municipalities and economic development organizations,” she said.

McDermott said local commercial real estate brokers are engaged at the transaction level.

“We are hired to represent a specific client whether that's a property owner looking to lease or sell an asset or a company evaluating sites,” he said.

His company works on finding the perfect location for businesses, then underwriting and negotiating the deal “to get it across the finish line.”

“When those two efforts are aligned, it becomes very powerful,” he said.

That model worked when the University of Chicago Medicine selected property for a new

primary care location in Valparaiso. Latitude Commercial represented the landlord in lease negotiations for Cumberland Crossings.

“We're very excited with how Northwest Indiana has embraced us in the community,” said Lauren Hull, chief administrative officer for Northwest Indiana, in an October press release about the expansion of its Crown Point multispecialty facility.

Indiana offers advantages that other states struggle to match, McDermott said.

“We have constitutional caps on property taxes that provide predictability that many companies simply don't have elsewhere,” he said. “When companies run the numbers side-by-side, those savings can be significant.”

Both Ennis and McDermott noted the proximity to Chicago as a significant advantage.

“Companies are able to maintain access to a major metropolitan market while

operating in a much more efficient cost structure,” McDermott said.

Logistics and digital infrastructure are other factors.

“Our proximity to Chicago, the nation's third largest economy, creates a uniquely dynamic setting for investment,” Ennis said. “Our deep-water port, extensive interstate access, three Class I railroads, and robust fiber connectivity are the envy of Regions across the country.”

### Land available

The NWI Forum has more than 600 properties listed for sale or lease on its website.

“We are working with landowners and communities to align sites to accommodate market needs,” she said.

She said examples of major capital investment on the horizon include: the Amazon Web Services data center proposed in Hobart, a 1.2 million-square-foot John Deere warehouse and distribution center near Lowell and a 317,000-square-foot FedEx distribution facility in Gary.

“Seeing these Fortune 500 companies invest in our Region continues to



Photo, NWI Forum

► Heather Ennis, Northwest Indiana Forum president and CEO



Photo, Latitude Commercial

► Aaron McDermott, co-founder and president of Latitude Commercial

## COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

ensure the marketplace that Northwest Indiana is ripe with opportunity,” Ennis said.

Tim Healy, president and CEO of Holladay Properties, said his South Bend-based real estate company developed the AmeriPlex business parks in Merrillville, Michigan City and Portage. He has orchestrated other locations designed to provide attractive amenities, like spec built workspaces “for companies that don’t have time to wait on long planning and construction schedules.”

“The first reason (spec buildings) work is their location on the Interstates (Interstate 65 and Interstate 94),” he said. “They also have thoughtfully designed infrastructure. Power lines are looped underground, so if one line gets cut, you aren’t out of business.”

He said the facilities also have storm-water detention, “so if you buy 20 acres, you can use all 20 acres.”

“We have walking paths and nearby restaurants and hotels, so if you have guests who come in for business, you

have a convenient place to entertain them,” he said.

### Attracting talent

Paradigm Health, an Indianapolis-based hospice and palliative care provider, recently secured office space in Valparaiso, one of the newest of several locations across the state.

“Northwest Indiana offers a combination of workforce stability, cost efficiency and access to larger metro areas,” said Dawn Selke, chief experience officer for Paradigm. “Quality of life is a big factor. Access to strong healthcare services, safe communities and schools all influence whether employees choose to stay long term. In our field, this is critical.”

She said Paradigm looks for communities where employees would like to live and work.

“Northwest Indiana offers a combination of workforce stability, cost efficiency and access to larger metro areas,” she said. “For us, there is also

a growing demand for healthcare services as populations age. As we expand, we are looking at where we can meet needs and raise the standard of care for patients and families.”

McDermott agrees that the perks of living in Northwest Indiana help hiring and retention.


“The conversation around amenities starts and ends with the workforce,” he said. “More than anything else, companies are making location decisions based on their ability to attract and retain talent. If a location doesn’t support that, the rest of the real estate or cost savings simply doesn’t matter.”

He said the Region offers access to a diverse range of professionals.

“Not only from our immediate area, but we’re near major higher education institutions, including campuses throughout Northwest Indiana, Chicago, West Lafayette with Purdue University, and South Bend with the University of Notre Dame,” McDermott said. “That pipeline of talent ranging from skilled

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trades to highly educated professionals is a significant advantage when companies are evaluating long-term growth.”

Quality of life also plays a role.

“We have access to Lake Michigan and the Indiana Dunes National Park,” he said. “At the same time, (we are) still closely connected to everything that comes with a major metropolitan area.

“That type of access gives companies confidence that employees can commute efficiently while still enjoying a lower-cost, higher-quality living environment.”

### Business-friendly climate

The \$1 billion Microsoft data center, a 17-building campus set to go up in the City of LaPorte’s Radius Industrial Park, is where it all comes together, said Bert Cook, executive director of La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership, a government/business partnership.

Cook said his city of 22,000 landed the Microsoft project for several

good reasons.

“Indiana has decided to be a low-cost location,” Cook said. “When you look at the entire tax cost, it is so much lower than our neighboring states. That creates an opportunity for us.

“We also have a strong water, electric and natural gas utility network and road infrastructure. We have quality labor unions to build it, and once built, the transferable skill sets that are in demand for the future.”

Crown Point Mayor Peter Land said infrastructure improvements have attracted new developments that “strengthens our local economy by providing jobs across a variety of sectors, including healthcare and hospitality.”

Walters said Sikich has “seen

consistent interest in manufacturing, logistics and distribution.” They supported rScan’s move to a larger space

in the former South Bend Chocolate Co.’s production facility. The South Bend startup that resells returned merchandise scaled up from 15,000 square feet and 10 employees to 100,000 square feet that could eventually accommodate 152 employees.

“It’s a good example of the broader trend — companies choosing the Region because it offers access, infrastructure, and room to grow, while still managing costs,” Walters said.

“Overall, Northwest Indiana is competitive because it sits in that balance between cost, access and scalability, particularly for companies trying to balance cost and access.” ■



Photo: Sikich

► Jenny Walters, real estate counselor, site selection and incentives director for Sikich



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# Inside mid-career learning

Degrees offer pathways to new opportunities, professional advancement

LAUREN CAGGIANO

No longer is a college classroom the sole domain of students aged 18 to 22. Across the Region, a growing demographic of older, nontraditional students is heading back to campus.

These professionals are shifting gears, in a lot of cases, to pursue a second act. This transition often comes with financial costs, sacrifices and investments in time and energy.

Through specialized initiatives like Holy Cross College's Transition to Teaching program, local institutions are finding new ways to prepare working adults for different career paths. According to Ann Bingham, who oversees the college's program, this decision represents more than just a career change. For many, it's fulfillment of a lifelong vocation.

## Transition to teaching

If you ask Bingham, the push to bring experienced adults into the teaching profession was a strategic response to a growing crisis in education. In April, there were more than 1,800 unfilled educator jobs listed on the Indiana Educator Job Board. Schools have been struggling to find qualified educators for years, leading to an increase in emergency permits.

Bingham, a former educator, has seen this evolution firsthand. The T2T program at Holy Cross launched in fall 2020 to address this issue of supply and demand.

"What we were finding is more and more we have teachers with emergency permits ... they've got great hearts," Bingham said. "They want to work with children, but they do not yet have the expertise and the pedagogy and the content knowledge to be as successful as they would need to be in the classroom."

The goal was to take professionals who already have life experience and

equip them with the necessary educational foundation. The program attracts adults of all ages, from those right out of college to candidates in their early 50s.

## Vocation vs. career change

According to Bingham, the motivations for returning to school to ultimately find a place in the classroom vary among older students. Some candidates tried entirely different careers first before realizing something was missing. Others started by simply volunteering at their children's schools. They took jobs as classroom aides and soon realized they had a true calling for the work. As Bingham contends, for many of these nontraditional students, teaching is viewed less as a job and more as a vocation.

"You realize this is what you want to do and what you are called to do," she said.

For others, returning to school can mean improved quality of life. An adult learner at IU Northwest, Tim Smith of Hammond is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in public affairs with a focus on human resources. Smith, who previously worked in public services and technology roles, decided to return to school as a way to transition from physically demanding jobs to a management position that offers better pay and career longevity.

"I felt like getting my degree was necessary, not only for my own career but also for my family," he said. "It was important for my children to see me obtain a degree

that I've never had, to show them the value of pursuing higher education."

Smith admitted the journey hasn't been easy, especially balancing part-time work, health challenges and returning to the classroom after years away. Still, he's found the learning process motivating and credits both campus support and his family for keeping him on track.

Diava Carter, director of career services at Indiana University Northwest, knows that returning to higher education as an adult comes with a unique

set of challenges and evolving trends. That's the case for students and the institutions that support them. Carter works directly with nontraditional students and alumni as they navigate career changes and seek new opportunities.

Internships and practical experience have never been more important, especially with experience required for many professions, such as healthcare administration.

"One of the things that we are stressing the importance of is obtaining an internship; so, before students graduate, get that internship," Carter said, emphasizing both traditional and micro-internships as crucial stepping stones to employment.

She mentioned initiatives like Parker Dewey, which offers short-term micro-internship opportunities for students and alumni. These experiences

help them build real-world experience and improve employability.



Photo, Tim Smith

**"I felt like getting my degree was necessary, not only for my own career, but also for my family. It was important for my children to see me obtain a degree that I've never had, to show them the value of pursuing higher education."**

— Tim Smith,  
an adult learner at IU  
Northwest



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Online and hybrid academic programs as well as evening courses are now in high demand among nontraditional students balancing work and family. Carter also highlighted common challenges older returnees face, including competition with younger candidates, worries over ageism and family obligations.

“Many of the older students feel that they have to switch their degree, or they have to do something different ... because of the competition of the younger individuals. So, they often get discouraged,” she said.

In her estimation, confidence and the ability to embrace change can be significant barriers, along with financial questions such as affordability and loan options.

“Don’t be afraid to change — have that confidence. Be OK with the switch,” Carter said. “With all of these different changes that’s going on with the loan situation and affordability — financial components could definitely play a part in regards to why students may or may not return back to school.”

### Destination: MBA

David Garton views his decision to self-finance his MBA at Purdue University Northwest as an investment in his autonomy and career flexibility.

“Choosing to self-finance my MBA was a deliberate move to ensure total autonomy over my career trajectory,” he said. “Without the constraints of reimbursement contracts, my commitment to my work and my studies is driven entirely by personal accountability and the desire to extract maximum value from the program.”

Garton, who’s 38 and lives in Dyer, leads technical applications and engineering efforts for a company specializing in refractory metallurgical lances in the steel industry. His path began in sales and transitioned into engineering management, but he realized that advancement into organizational leadership required more than technical expertise.

“My journey with the company started in a sales capacity, where I focused on scaling our reach across the local Region steel mills,” he said. “Moving into engineering management allowed me to



Photo, Holy Cross College

► Transition to Teaching is a three-semester, 24-credit program designed to be completed while maintaining a full-time teaching position or other full-time work.

leverage my technical roots, and my current MBA studies are providing the final piece of the puzzle: a comprehensive business perspective.”

Garton said balancing a full-time management career and a demanding evening study schedule has brought both challenges and growth. But the impact on his career has already been significant.

“The MBA has fundamentally shifted my approach from a purely technical lens to a more holistic, strategic perspective of organizational health,” he said. “Beyond a deeper mastery of financial reporting and quarterly metrics, I

now find myself evaluating projects through the lenses of opportunity cost, risk mitigation and long-term market positioning.”

He encourages others to look past the line-item cost, viewing the MBA as a strategic tool for leadership rather than just a pay raise.

“If you only view it as a line item on a balance sheet, it looks expensive; but when you view it as gaining the vocabulary of executive leadership and a lifelong network, the math changes,” Garton said. “For someone established in their career, the goal is to pivot from being a technical expert to a strategic



Photo, Holy Cross College

► **Members of Holy Cross College's Transition to Teaching program cohort earn teaching certifications mid-career.**

leader, and that's where the real value lies. It's about more than just pursuing a higher salary; it's about gaining the knowledge to truly understand why certain decisions are made and having the confidence to lead through them."

### Balancing act

Garton is not alone in his experience managing all of these obligations. One of the biggest hurdles for older adults returning to higher education is time management. Traditional college schedules don't usually work for adults juggling 9-to-5 jobs, mortgages and family responsibilities.

With these constraints in mind, programs like T2T have to be highly flexible. However, Bingham is quick to clarify that flexibility doesn't mean rushing the process. Some online programs promise a teaching license in a year, but Holy Cross takes a more measured approach.

"We are mindful of the fact that the clock is ticking, but like a good sauce, you don't want to rush the process," Bingham said.

Candidates typically complete the program in three to four years by taking one or two classes a semester. The coursework is broken down into manageable, bite-sized pieces. Classes are held one night a week, allowing students to maintain their day jobs.

"They can still be working, they can still be on the emergency permit, or they can still be working as an aide in the

classroom," Bingham said. "We accommodate that, so they can keep providing for their families, and at the same time, be working towards their credential."

This deliberate pacing ensures that new teachers are genuinely prepared. Without proper classroom management skills and pedagogy, new teachers often burn out within three to five years. Taking time on the front end can set them up for success in a long-term career.

### Overcoming financial barriers

Financing a return to college is another pressing concern for older adults. Taking on new student debt while managing existing financial obligations can stop even the most promising career change in its tracks.

To counteract this reality, educational institutions and the state of Indiana have developed robust funding mechanisms for aspiring teachers. Holy Cross keeps its tuition deliberately accessible, charging \$1,200 per course for T2T candidates.

Beyond what she considers fair pricing, the state offers significant support. For the past several years, Indiana has provided full-tuition scholarships specifically for T2T candidates.

"What I have found is that any of my candidates who have applied for it, they have gotten that funding, and that has supported their coursework," Bingham said.

Schools hiring emergency-permit teachers also frequently use specific funds to pay for their candidates' tuition. Financial aid offices work closely with returning students to build the best possible packages. Ultimately, Bingham said, money rarely ends up being the barrier that prevents completion.

Joy Colwell, director of graduate studies at PNW and professor of organizational leadership and supervision, addresses the concerns around financing head on. She contends that PNW is a cost-effective institution, relatively speaking.

PNW graduate credits for Indiana residents are around \$350 each, she said, so a 30-credit master's degree program would cost around \$10,500 in tuition and composite fees. (College fees and texts are not included in this price.) Nonresident students pay about \$532 per credit hour.

Beyond helping students navigate the costs, Colwell and her team work with all the grad students and programs on campus. PNW offers 19 programs at the graduate and doctoral levels and several graduate-level certificate programs.

"My office supports admission and graduation of graduate students, development of new academic programs and helps graduate students with any challenges they may experience," she said.

Sometimes that means taking it slowly and steadily. For example, Colwell said that many returning adult students take one or two classes (three to six credit hours) per semester (as opposed to a full-time load of nine credits), to help balance their busy schedules. Many of PNW's master's degree programs can accommodate part-time students and those who aspire to complete a degree in a reasonable amount of time.

As for returning students' potential fears about being "too old," Colwell challenges this bias.

"Our mid-career students bring a richness to our classrooms that is very valuable," she said. "Insights into the workplace experience make those classroom discussions more enlightening for everyone." ■



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# Employee wealth plans

Companies discover financial well-being benefits foster loyalty, productivity

KERRY SAPET

In Northwest Indiana, where legacy industries meet a growing wave of logistics hubs, health care networks and professional services firms, employers are rethinking what it means to support their workforce.

Competitive salaries still matter, but increasingly, companies are discovering that long-term financial security, not just short-term compensation, drives employee motivation, loyalty and performance.

“Many employers are expanding benefits beyond traditional compensation and retirement offerings to support overall financial well-being,” said Jackie Hofman, chief administrative officer at Purdue Federal Credit Union. “This often includes a combination of insurance coverage, retirement savings plans, paid time off and access to financial wellness resources.”

At the center of this shift is a more sophisticated approach to benefits design. Equity compensation plans, financial wellness programs and employer-supported wealth management services are no longer reserved for Fortune 500 companies or Silicon Valley startups.

“More regional companies are looking to add financial literacy programs and financial advice for their employees than in the past,” said Alicia Gohdes, senior vice president at Wintrust in Crown Point. “They have recognized that having financially stressed employees not only impacts the employee but the company.”

Employee wealth plans and financial initiatives are becoming an integral part of the playbook for organizations across the Region seeking to build stronger and more engaged teams.



Photo, Purdue Federal Credit Union

► Jackie Hofman is the chief administrative officer at Purdue Federal Credit Union.



Photo, Crossroads Chamber

► Ty Tornincasa of Ty Financial speaks with Attorney Amy VonDielingen of Krieg DeVault at a Crossroads Chamber event in April 2026 focused on business succession planning.

## Financial security

For decades, the standard benefits package focused on health insurance, retirement plans and paid time off. While those elements remain foundational, employers today are layering benefits that directly address employees’ financial stress and long-term wealth-building potential.

The reasoning is straightforward. Employees who feel financially secure tend to be more focused, more productive and more committed to their organizations. Financial anxiety can quietly erode performance — leading to distraction, absenteeism and higher turnover.

“The more competitive the financial package, the happier their employees will be and will, in turn, be more loyal and productive to the company,” Gohdes said.

When structured effectively, these plans do more than supplement income.

They align incentives, foster a sense of ownership and create pathways to meaningful wealth accumulation.

Purdue Federal Credit Union’s employee benefits strategy focuses on short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. To that end, the credit union offers health, dental, vision, disability and life insurance coverage, flexible paid time off, access to virtual health care and financial counseling resources. They also offer a 401(k) plan with employer matching, tuition reimbursement and employee access to financial products that can support savings and financial progress.

“Our approach focuses on helping employees stabilize their financial health, build long-term financial security and access tools that support ongoing financial decision-making,” Hofman said.

## Financial wellness

Employees also need the knowledge and tools to manage their wealth wisely.

“We have to start with education about how important it is to save and to save early,” said Ty Tornincasa, president of



Crown Point-based Ty Financial. “Small amounts do add up, and employees need to understand how impactful that can be. School systems don’t teach this stuff. Where do you turn to get this message?”

To bridge this gap, Purdue Federal Credit Union, like many companies, is expanding its role beyond traditional banking services. Through a series of financial wellness sessions at Purdue University Northwest, the credit union is delivering practical guidance on budgeting, debt management, investing and retirement planning. These sessions reflect a broader trend: financial literacy is becoming a core component of employee benefits.

Rather than assuming workers will independently navigate complex financial decisions, organizations are increasingly bringing in experts to provide education. The goal is not just to inform, but to build confidence and to help individuals make decisions that support their immediate needs and long-term goals.

For many attendees, the value lies in accessibility. Financial concepts that might feel intimidating are broken down into actionable steps. Because these sessions are offered through trusted institutions, employees are more likely to engage.

“I believe many regional companies are focused on providing an attractive retirement savings option for their employees but also coupling that with regular educational forums so that employees are empowered to save in an effective way,” said James Dunne, vice president and senior wealth management officer at Peoples Bank in Munster. “It is great to have the option to save but knowing how to save makes for a more optimal experience for employees.”

### Designing benefits

Some regional companies are experimenting with combinations of benefits aimed at helping employees build and manage wealth over time.

Some of the most common strategies



Photo, Wintrust

► Wintrust hosted a spring event for business owners as part of its financial education programming. Jason Turner, Wintrust chief investment strategist, provided a brief market update and fielded questions from the audience.

include enhanced retirement contributions, equity participation, financial planning services, student loan assistance and savings programs. Employers are increasing matching contributions or offering profit-sharing plans that reward long-term tenure and performance. Stock options and employee stock purchase plans give workers a tangible stake in their company’s success.

Hammond-based Korellis has been 100% employee owned since January 2018 through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan. An ESOP offers advantages to employees and employers.



Photo, Korellis

► Brian Enright is CEO of Korellis.

“For employees, it builds a retirement benefit that grows with the company’s success and creates a sense of ownership,” said Brian Enright, chief financial officer at Korellis. “For the company, it’s a great succession planning tool. It keeps the culture intact.”

In addition to benefiting employers and current employees, healthy financial benefits programs are key for many job seekers.

Access to certified financial planners is a sought-after benefit, allowing employees to receive personalized advice without bearing the full cost. With younger workers carrying significant

debt, some employers are offering repayment assistance or integrating student loan considerations into retirement planning.

Recognizing that unexpected expenses can derail financial stability, companies are helping employees build short-term savings alongside long-term investments. The most effective packages are those that integrate these elements into a cohesive strategy that meets employees where they are financially while guiding them toward future growth.

### Growing awareness

In Northwest Indiana’s diverse economic landscape, several industries are particularly attuned to the connection between financial well-being and workplace performance.

Health care systems have been early adopters of financial wellness programs. With large, multi-generational workforces, these organizations recognize that employees face a range of financial challenges — from managing student debt to planning for retirement.

Manufacturing firms, long a backbone of the Region’s economy, are also evolving. As they compete for skilled labor in a tight market, many are expanding benefits beyond traditional pensions to include 401(k) enhancements and financial education

## FINANCE

initiatives. Logistics and distribution companies, fueled by the Region's strategic location near Chicago and Lake

Michigan, are investing in benefits that improve retention. High turnover can be costly, and employers are finding

that financial stability plays a key role in keeping workers engaged.

"Employers should look at their employee financial packages as a tool to attract and retain employees," Gohdes said.

What unites these efforts is a growing awareness: Employees who aren't worried about money tend to bring more energy and focus to their jobs.

### Financial advisers

Behind many of these benefits strategies are financial advisers who specialize in working with businesses to design and implement effective programs.

In Northwest Indiana, advisers are increasingly acting as partners rather than just service providers. Their role begins with helping employers assess their workforce.

"We start conversations," Tornincasa said. "We ask, 'What is your company structure? What are your goals?' Having conversations and educating them about different options is important."

Financial advisers can guide companies in selecting benefits that align with organizational goals and employee needs. A manufacturing firm with an hourly workforce may prioritize different benefits than a professional services company with salaried employees. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. The key is customization.

Even the most generous benefits package can fall short if employees don't understand how to use it. Many advisers host employee workshops, offer one-on-one consultations and provide ongoing support.

The partnership between businesses and financial advisers often extends beyond initial plan design. Advisers may help administer equity compensation plans, ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements while optimizing tax outcomes for employees. They can also provide guidance on diversification by helping workers balance company stock with other investments to manage risk.

"I think all companies, from large multinationals to smaller local shops, are aware of the importance of having a retirement savings offering. There are many options available that can cater to



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the size and capabilities for each company,” Dunne said. “A trusted financial adviser can play a key role in making sure the appropriate plan and features are utilized. Not having a retirement savings option can deter top talent.”

For employees, this access to professional advice can be transformative. Instead of making financial decisions alone, they have a resource they can turn to for clarity and direction.

For employers, the benefits are significant. By supporting employees’ financial well-being, they foster a more stable workforce that is better equipped to contribute to organizational success.

### Regional identity

By investing in financial wellness and wealth-building benefits, regional employers can differentiate themselves — offering not just jobs, but pathways to long-term stability and growth.

As the workforce continues to evolve, the importance of financial well-being is only expected to grow. Younger employees are entering the job market with different expectations, placing a higher value on holistic benefits that support their overall quality of life. At the same time, older workers are seeking guidance as they approach retirement, facing decisions that will shape their financial futures.

“We need to set up structures so we’re creating the atmosphere that we’re all in this together. That builds loyalty and trust both ways,” Tornincasa said. “It sends the message that, if you stay with us, you’re going to be taken care of. We’ll all reach that goal of retirement together.”

Employers who recognize these dynamics, and respond with thoughtful, comprehensive benefits strategies, will be better positioned. Organizations like Peoples Bank, Purdue Federal Credit Union and Wintrust demonstrate how financial institutions can play a pivotal role in this ecosystem, providing education and resources that empower individuals to take control of their finances.

In Northwest Indiana, the conversation around employee benefits is shifting from cost to impact. A well-designed benefits strategy can transform

the employee experience. Workers who understand their finances, feel confident in their future and share in their company’s success are more likely to

stay engaged, perform at a high level and remain loyal over the long term.

For employers, that’s not just a benefit, it’s a competitive advantage. ■

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# Quality trade show strategy

Companies focus on building relationships, booths that tell their story



Photo: Trinity Displays

► Trinity Displays partnered with the Indiana Economic Development Corp. to produce, fabricate and install custom displays and exhibits for the Global Economic Congress at the Indiana Convention Center in June.

KERRY SAPET

For decades, trade shows and industry expos have been the heartbeats of business development, serving as spaces to strike deals, show innovation and spark partnerships.

Far from becoming relics of the past, trade shows have become more important in today's marketing mix. In an era defined by digital saturation and AI-driven outreach, these live events are an anchor for businesses aiming to cut through digital noise. They deliver face-to-face engagement, a powerful tool for growth and brand positioning.

"Business is a lot of relationship building, and that's hard to do virtually," said Chase Lowden, Crossroads

Chamber expo committee co-chair and financial adviser at Lowden Financial Partners. "When people couldn't communicate face-to-face during COVID, it hurt business-to-business. We're still revving up from COVID. A place where business owners can meet is more relevant than ever."

Companies across the Region are adapting to the increasing value of these events.

"Trade shows allow the unique opportunity to see multiple business partners from all over the country and the world in a compressed time frame," said Tracy Soohey, trade show coordinator, and Paul Rekart, regional sales manager, at Chesterton-based Urschel, in an email.

"This allows valuable face-to-face contact with more efficient use of travel time."

While online marketing excels at generating awareness, in-person events accelerate trust and decision-making. Attendees typically arrive with intent. They are looking for solutions, partnerships or ideas — making these environments effective for moving prospects closer to purchase.

## An evolution

Lori Daly, Porter County Expo & Fairgrounds director, sees the change.

"In our experience over the last couple of years, we have seen trending for smaller more intimate shows," Daly said.

Some events have become smaller



READ ON PHONE

and more niche, focusing on specific industries or audiences. According to Daly, companies are adjusting their marketing and booths. This shift reflects a broader trend toward precision rather than scale. Instead of trying to reach everyone, organizers and exhibitors are prioritizing the right audience. Even as individual events may feel more intimate, the trade show industry continues to grow, driven by demand for meaningful, in-person connection.

Trade shows have not simply grown or shrunk; they have transformed. What matters now is not how many people attend, but how relevant those attendees are.

In the past, trade shows were largely transactional, with interactions often limited to introductions and the exchange of business cards. The emphasis was on quantity over quality. Exhibitors focused on collecting as many contacts as possible rather than building relationships.

Today's trade shows are more than companies passing out business cards

and promotional items smacked with the company's logo. The best booths today are built around human connection.

"Just sitting behind a booth doesn't generate much business," said Lisa Fronck, CEO of Generate Sales & Marketing in Crown Point. "If someone walks past your booth and there's no interaction and nothing memorable, it's too much money spent for the amount of good it's going to do."

Clear messaging, visible from a distance, helps draw people in, but it is the quality of conversation that determines success.

"As a business, you need to make sure that the people at the event are your target audience. If you're a bar, you're not going to attend a children's event," Fronck said. "You need to hit the right events and connect with that audience. If that's all done, then results are high."

### Redesigning booths

Bigger is no longer automatically better. In the past, large booths signaled dominance and drew attention

through sheer scale. Today, a smaller booth with a strong message and thoughtful layout can outperform a sprawling space that lacks focus. The key is how quickly a visitor understands what a company offers and whether they feel invited to engage.

"Of course, people are drawn to the flash of big, fancy booths. That doesn't matter if they are just there to look and have no use for what a company is offering," Soohy and Reckart said in their statement. "It isn't about traffic; it is about the right traffic. Having a booth that clearly illustrates the value being offered remains a solid principle."

Booths are also incorporating lounge-style areas or meeting spaces, reflecting a shift toward deeper conversations rather than quick pitches. Open layouts with clean sightlines also perform well, as they reduce intimidation and make it easy for attendees to step inside.

The types of booths that attract the most attention are those that emphasize experience over display. Interactive



Photo, Urschel

► In April 2026, Tracy Soohy and Paul Rekart attended one of the many trade shows Urschel participates in annually. Urschel attends trade shows throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe and Asia.

## MEETINGS/EVENTS

and experiential setups are particularly effective because they encourage visitors to participate rather than observe. Companies like Portage-based Trinity Displays help businesses plan for trade shows by serving as a turn-key provider of custom trade show exhibits, displays and signage.

“Throughout the last few years, we’ve seen a large increase in requests for more of an experience within the booth,” said Marty McGinnis, business development at Trinity Displays. “People are always looking for something they haven’t seen before — something they’re excited to tell their friends about or post photos of on social media. Including a fun game to win prizes or a cool photo moment experience is a way to engage with clients and get them to share your brand without ever even asking them to.”

Whether through hands-on product demonstrations, immersive digital elements, or simple but engaging activities, these booths create memorable interactions.

### Personalization

Tailoring conversations to the visitor’s needs or industry increases relevance and impact. Staff play a critical role, not as salespeople delivering scripts but as facilitators of meaningful dialogue. Any promotional items offered are an



Photo: Axiom Media Group

► **Rockland Page creates pins that come to life for the American Association of Nurse Anesthesiology. Attendees at a recent show could scan a pin of Goldie Brangman, a trailblazing nurse and educator, and hear her thoughts about the challenges facing nurse anesthesiology experts.**

extension of the company’s story, not something unrelated.

“If you’re a care-based company, you’re not going to offer an arm-wrestling competition to draw people in,” Fronck said. “Using fun experiences like karaoke, crafts or playing a game at a booth creates a moment. It shows a company’s personality and leads to conversations. Attendees may still take home a promo item, but it has more

than intrinsic value. It has a memory. It cements the message the company is trying to get across.”

Companies that excel in this area are rethinking the role of the booth entirely. Instead of serving as a static display, the booth becomes a hub within a larger engagement strategy.

The most successful marketers treat trade shows as part of a broader campaign rather than a standalone effort.

### Swag that sticks

**Instead of inundating trade show attendees with trinkets, many companies are rethinking their swag marketing strategies.**

**“Promotional products are one of the only forms of advertising you can actually hold onto,” said Kristin Jurczak, president of Schererville-based Spark Marketing. “That makes them incredibly powerful.”**

**Instead of handing out multiple low-cost items, companies are investing in fewer, higher-quality pieces, or kits that tell a story. A notebook, phone stand and pen bundled together can reinforce a brand narrative more effectively than a**

**handful of unrelated items.**

**“You want to be memorable,” said Rockland Page, owner of ROCKaBlock, founded in Northwest Indiana. “You don’t want to get lost in the sea of what everyone else is giving out.”**

**As trade shows become more digitally integrated, swag is following suit. A water bottle that links to a product demo turns a giveaway into a marketing channel. Page is creating promo pins with Augmented Reality artwork that comes to life when scanned.**

**“By incorporating AR tech into mundane promotional items, it**

**empowers a brand to make that swag measurable,” Page said. “Every time it gets scanned, you get a ping.”**

**Swag works when it earns its place.**

**“Swag can say a lot about a company without saying a word,” Jurczak said. “Whether it’s something polished and elevated, fun and creative, or practical and thoughtful, promotional products help bring a brand to life in a tangible way. Great swag is not just a giveaway, it’s an extension of your story.”**



► Marty McGinnis is the co-founder of Trinity Displays in Portage.

distinct zones that support different types of interaction, such as demonstrations, casual conversations and private meetings. Technology plays a supporting role, with digital displays and data capture tools enhancing the experience rather than overwhelming it. Above all, the design communicates a clear and consistent brand story, ensuring that visitors immediately understand the company's value.

### Behind the scenes

Trade show logistics have evolved. Many companies now rely on modular booth systems that can be reconfigured and reused across events, balancing cost efficiency with flexibility. Companies like Urschel ship their large machines to expos. They store their booth, literature and supplies in ready-to-ship crates and assemble everything on site. They bring mini candy bars to sweeten the visit to their booth.

"We're seeing an increase in clients who prefer not to be responsible for paying long-term maintenance of the exhibit

Before the event, they identify target accounts, schedule meetings and generate awareness through outreach. During the show, they focus on qualifying leads instead of simply collecting contact information. Conversations continue

beyond the show floor through dinners, off-site gatherings or follow-up sessions. The result is a more cohesive approach to lead generation.

Modern booths reflect this strategic shift. They are often divided into

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## MEETINGS/EVENTS

and/or any incremental storage costs to house their exhibit assets between expos,” McGinnis said. “This has led to a large increase in requests for rental exhibits. Trinity now offers rental frames that can be customized with graphics, greenery, shelves, lighting and closets.

Ultimately, trade shows are not shrinking so much as they are sharpening. Success no longer depends on having the biggest presence or attracting the largest crowd. Instead, it hinges on creating meaningful interactions, delivering clear value and

executing a well-planned strategy before, during and after the event.

In today’s digital world, the ability to connect in person has become more powerful than ever, ensuring that trade shows remain not only relevant but essential. Trade shows are ecosystems that combine marketing, education, networking and brand storytelling into a single, dynamic environment.

Companies that treat expos as a strategic investment rather than a routine obligation stand to gain the

most. The format may be changing, but the underlying principle remains the same: business is built on relationships, and there is still no substitute for meeting face-to-face.

“The No. 1 benefit to trade shows isn’t necessarily direct sales then and there,” Lowden said. “It’s reputation and exposure. You’re showing up, dressing up and engaged, not just home sitting on the couch. A trade show is a starting point to building business and community relationships.” ■

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# LEADER PROFILE

# Curiosity at heart



## La Porte native inspires basketball fans as Pacers/Fever in-game host, keynote speaker

MICHAEL GONZALEZ

Olivia West is best known as the in-house hosting voice of the Indiana Fever and the Indiana Pacers, pumping up crowds with high energy and a dynamic persona.

West also is a cofounder of Drvn Content Marketing, which landed marketing contracts to cover the recent NFL draft and the Coca-Cola America 250 campaign. Plus, she's powering up her keynote speaking business, at times speaking to more than 1,000 audience members a week.

But those successes started from much humbler beginnings in La Porte, showing horses and pictures in a 4-H club and serving as the chaplain for her Future Farmers of America chapter at La Porte High School.

"I think I benefit a lot out of not knowing how to do things," said West, who often credits her belief in God and her mother's work ethic with her success. "I really, really lead with curiosity."

In early May, West was one of three speakers at the inaugural SPARK Youth Summit, organized by the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest.

The event brought together 150 students and community leaders across Northwest Indiana to discuss the innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem in the Region, said Jason Williams, CEO of the Society of Innovators.

"(West) is a very engaging young leader," Williams said, "and it's just cool the work she does with her own marketing and branding firm, the work she's done with the Indiana Pacers and Fever."

"She's just a very dynamic personality. When I learned she was a graduate of La Porte High School, I knew she's someone who would be a great fit when we finally had a chance to do an event like this."

Like many entrepreneurs, West's ascent to business success was anything but a straight line. In fact, she declined



Photo, Olivia West

**Olivia West, a La Porte native, has been the in-house host for the Indiana Fever and the Indiana Pacers basketball games since October 2023.**

to consider what her future holds in five years, insisting she follows her faith and what she believes are God's plans for her.

That doesn't mean West hasn't prepared for her opportunities. She graduated from Purdue University in 2021 with a Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics. West then worked for a Big Pharma company for five years, learning how to build and scale brands and how to take an idea from concept to cash flow.

"I remember sitting there at that company, and I was saying 'If I know how to do this for these products and these brands, could I do the same thing for myself?'"

Watching her mother work as a nurse was also inspiring.

"As a young person, I saw my mother get up for work every single day very early to go to work," she said. "She was so passionate about what she did. She was on time, attentive every single morning, and she'd still find a way to show up and support me at every game."

West's love of basketball started when she played in high school.

While attending an Indiana Fever game in 2022, West said she had a vision from God that she could play a part in the Fever's story. She began asking questions, and a year later, West was the voice of both Indiana pro basketball teams.

West said her announcing work, the marketing company and her burgeoning speaking career are not easy to manage, but she works through it all with gratitude and focus.

"What I do is tough. It requires not just me, but a really, really good hearted, clear minded, great energy, funny, charismatic me," West said. "And, having to be consistent in that means I have to have a very high standard for self-care, very strict boundaries for what I do and don't do. I have learned the art of staying focused on the goal because I got to take care of me so I can continue to pour out. So, I can continue to add value to so many others." ■

# Passion project

Fans of Janus Motorcycles do more than buy, they invest in Goshen company's story



Photo: Janus Motorcycles

► Janus Motorcycles have been built in Goshen for 15 years.

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Richard Worsham moved to Indiana from Virginia to earn a classical architecture degree at the University of Notre Dame. But motorcycles made him stay.

He graduated in 2011 with a master's in architecture but found the job market was still difficult after the Great Recession.

"I used that as an excuse to start a motorcycle company," Worsham said.

Luckily for him, friend Devin Biek asked Worsham to work for him one summer during grad school.

Three years later, they turned the "passion project" into a business in Goshen.

"One bike would fund the next one," Worsham said.

Fifteen years later, Janus Motorcycles has grown to 25 employees.

Janus also was the first winner of the Coolest Thing Made in Indiana competition in 2022, and was featured in the state's "Entrepreneurship Indiana" yearbook twice.

The company has two types of motorcycles: 250cc and 450cc engines.

"Almost every bike we build is built to order," Worsham said.

They come in two styles that can be built online, including paint colors, finishes and accessories. They range in price from \$7,500 to over \$13,500, depending on upgrades and accessories.

Spencer Anderson purchased his first Janus 250 this way. He liked the experience so much that he looked for

the company at the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in 2024.

"As soon as I drove one, I made the purchase," Anderson said. Since then, he's put 20,000 miles on the bike and earned four SaddleSore 1,000 awards from the Iron Butt Association.

Janus owners like Anderson aren't just fans, they also are investors.

To raise funds for expansion, the company started a Wefunder campaign. The equity crowdfunding platform founded in 2011 allows companies to raise capital from customers and supporters. Janus owners were the first to invest.

"It also allows our owners to participate more in the company," Worsham said. "We've had requests many, many times over the years: 'Is there a way I can invest in the company?'"



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The Wefunder raised \$470,000 in April. Those funds also will be used to expand and move to a bigger facility on the south side of Goshen.

Worsham discovered Goshen on a ride and met his wife there. But starting his business in Goshen was more than a coincidence.

“We chose to manufacture here deliberately,” Worsham wrote in a Wefunder post. “Not because it was the lowest-cost option. Not because it followed a trend. We chose to build motorcycles in a restored brick dry cleaning facility in downtown Goshen because this community understands long-term work. There is pride in skilled labor here. There is respect for craftsmanship. There are families who value building something that lasts.”

The area’s reputation as a leader in the RV industry has helped too.

“We just found there are so many suppliers in the area,” he said.

That ecosystem also helps them find staff. Janus employs 25 people.

“We really have looked to the local

community for our employees,” Worsham said.

But that is changing with the hiring of Mark Zweig, who also was a Janus fan first. He learned about Janus on “Jay Leno’s Garage,” a reality TV show.

Zweig started off as a collector, then an adviser and investor, and now chief operating officer. Zweig, who is from Arkansas, is among the many customers who believe in Janus and the “antidote” it provides to the complexities of modern life.

“Our customers are pretty intentional about what they’re buying and riding and how they are living their lives,” Worsham said. “Our machines are very simple.”

Janus isn’t immune to supply chain issues. The engines are made in China, but the rest of the bike is sourced locally.

“You can’t ship a motorcycle if it’s missing one part,” Worsham said. “We’ve worked really hard over the last year to get production down to that 30-day mark.”

Worsham said he’s learned a lot

from the experience starting and growing Janus.

“My classroom has been the world,” Worsham said. “We have re-created the wheel in a lot of areas.”

As for the future of Janus, Worsham’s goal is to have 600 motorcycles built every year. They make about 350 now.

“We’re still here. We’re still delivering motorcycles. We still have happy customers,” he said. “Fifteen years in the world of motorcycles is not a short period of time.”

He said Janus’ longevity mainly happened because they “make a different kind of motorcycle.”

“People are interested in vehicles that have more of a story, more of a meaning,” Worsham said.

Anderson said Janus customers like that the motorcycles are made in U.S. and offer a more vintage style of riding. It helps that the customer service is exceptional.

“It’s got a lot of good things going for it,” Anderson said. ■

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# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Bridge for skills gap



## NWI Works opportunity hubs designed to upskill workers, meet employer demand

MARIE WILSON

**A**iming to bridge a skills gap that leaves positions unfilled and people unemployed, the partnership NWI Works has a new idea.

Their solution is an opportunity hub, and the new nonprofit is in the early stages of operating two of them — one in Gary and one in Michigan City.

Opportunity hubs are designed to combine workforce training and the support services necessary for potential workers to fully participate all in one place. Without this coordination, NWI Works leaders say it's tough for anyone facing unemployment to find the education, transportation, childcare, income support and other assistance needed to secure a job.

"The existing public workforce system ... is very fragmented and very difficult to navigate," said Lisa Daugherty, president of the board of NWI Works, and president and CEO of the Center of Workforce Innovations. "Workforce development has to happen from within communities, and that's been missing."

Opportunity hubs, however, are placed strategically within the communities proven by census data to need it the most. NWI Works, a new group organized in collaboration with the Center of Workforce Innovations, Goodwill Industries of Michiana and the United Way of Northwest Indiana, selected "the most distressed areas where the most people are going to benefit from the resources" before launching the hubs, Daugherty said.

The Gary hub is the smaller of the two and has been piloting a workforce training program with the city of Gary for more than a year. Plans call for this hub to prepare workers for in-demand careers in manufacturing, construction, trades, healthcare, logistics and green energy.

Michael Suggs, chief operating officer for the City of Gary, said the city began collaborating with NWI Works to help meet its needs as a large municipal employer.

"We realized that the city was woefully short in several areas of employees, and the workforce was needing some support," Suggs said. "We wanted to make sure the community was prepared for the opportunities."

Suggs said the program piloted so far combines two days of employability training each week with three days of field work in Gary's general services department, tackling tasks such as traffic management, waste collection, park maintenance and blight removal — "the bare necessities of creating a clean, safe community."

Fifty participants are finishing the 16-week course now, and the city has hired more than 15 previous participants as permanent

employees.

"The commitment they have to the community is simply amazing," Suggs said about the workers brought on board through the program. "It is, by all measures, a success."

Daugherty calls the framework used in Gary a "highly intensive, tough-love boot camp" that helps meet "what we

have found to be the greatest need — just very basic job readiness."

Employers are constantly calling for personnel with a will to work, a commitment to showing up and a strong work ethic, she said. So that's what the program teaches.

"The employer has to be part of the design," Daugherty said. "Everything we do begins and ends with the employer."

Early results from the program in Gary are informing how training is conducted at the second opportunity hub at the former Elston High School in Michigan City.

The first students began training at Elston on June 1 and are receiving a stipend to help meet their basic needs during their time in the program. Childcare and other wraparound services are available within the 300,000-square-foot space, which also is home to a Boys and Girls Club, two commercial kitchens, a theater and other community programming spaces.

NWI Works estimates the buildout of Gary and Elston hubs will cost about \$30 million total, with support provided by grants and partnerships with Michigan City Area Schools, the cities of Michigan City and Gary, and other partners.

Daugherty said the Elston Opportunity Hub also has space to provide instruction on specialized equipment for use with popular jobs in the Region, including hospitality, culinary, tourism, construction, healthcare, manufacturing, IT and administrative roles.

"As we're doing the planning for the programming around the hubs, it's giving us the opportunity to work with partners and reimagine what a unified process would look like," Daugherty said, a process for connecting the needs of both jobseekers and employers. "We're streamlining the experience ... and making it easier to navigate." ■



Photo: CWI

**Workforce development has to happen from within communities, and that's been missing."**

—Lisa Daugherty,  
Board President,  
NWI Works

# Great ownership transfer



READ ON PHONE

Gov. Braun initiatives will define next generation of Indiana's business owners

BRIAN SCHUTT

Indiana is entering a pivotal moment that will shape the future of its economy for years to come.

Over the next 10 years, tens of thousands of businesses across the state are expected to change ownership as aging business owners begin to retire. This wave of transitions, often referred to as the “silver tsunami,” is expected to be the largest transfer of privately held businesses in American history. But keeping these businesses alive and locally owned is not guaranteed — and Indiana Gov. Mike Braun is leading the effort behind this defining moment for Hoosier business owners.

According to a 2020 Census Bureau survey, 51% of small- and medium-sized businesses are owned by those 55 and older. In Indiana, that's almost 300,000 business owners nearing an exit. These businesses are the backbone for many communities, accounting for roughly 45% of total employment statewide and in rural areas climbing to nearly 85%.

The question facing Indiana is not whether these businesses will transition; it's whether they will transition successfully.

Too often, business owners wait too long to think about succession. National research suggests less than one-third have a formal exit plan in place. Without preparation, 92% of these businesses are closing, according to a February 2026 McKinsey report. Those that survive remain at risk of being sold in ways that move jobs, decision-making and long-term value out of local communities.

Concurrently, there is growing interest from a new generation of entrepreneurs who want to own and operate existing businesses rather than start from scratch. This concept, known as Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA), would allow Indiana to keep

businesses locally owned while creating new pathways to entrepreneurship.

This gap between aging business owners and eager entrepreneurs is now being bridged by the Indiana Office of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (OEI), created in 2025 by Braun. Through his leadership, OEI is supporting small businesses and giving them the tools they need to be successful, and that includes ensuring existing businesses have a path toward staying in Indiana under new Hoosier ownership.

Rather than prescribing a single solution to succession planning, OEI is focused on supporting a range of pathways through the Keep IN: Business Succession Initiative, which includes family transitions, employee ownership models like ESOPs, and sales to individual buyers through emerging acquisition marketplaces.

One of the most important steps in this work is simply helping business owners start the process earlier.

That's why OEI is supporting a regional pilot project in Northwest Indiana in partnership with emerging marketplace leader SMB.co.

The SMB.co platform is designed to make early stages of succession planning more accessible and less intimidating. Using publicly available data, the platform helps business owners:

- Get a free, data-backed valuation of their business
- Build their exit plan on their timeline
- Explore buyer interest before they're ready to list
- Connect with qualified advisers and buyers when the time is right

One of the biggest barriers in the ownership transfer market is not a lack of buyers or businesses, it is a lack of early engagement. Many owners don't know where to start, what their business is worth, or how long the process might take. By lowering those barriers,

this pilot aims to build a stronger, more transparent marketplace.

Northwest Indiana was selected as an initial region because of its economic importance and concentration of small- and medium-sized businesses. The insights gained here will help inform how similar efforts can be expanded across the state.

For business owners, the message is simple: you do not need to have all the answers to begin.

Taking a first step — understanding your business's potential value and engaging with available resources — can make a significant difference in the outcome when the time comes to transition.

For Indiana, the stakes are high. Successful ownership transitions mean preserved jobs, continued local investment and stronger communities.

This is a moment of both responsibility and possibility.

If you are a Northwest Indiana business owner, visit [SMB.co/Indiana](https://SMB.co/Indiana) to begin preparing for the future. Your engagement will shape the tools and resources that aim to support business owners across the entire state.

Thanks to Braun's focus on keeping Hoosier businesses alive and locally owned through ETA, Indiana's next generation of business ownership is taking shape. With the right preparation and participation, we can ensure that businesses built here continue to thrive here — for years to come. ■



Photo: Brian Schutt

► Brian Schutt is the first director of the Office of Entrepreneurship and Innovation for the State of Indiana.



# Common sense beats process

## Why experience still wins in today's hiring landscape

JOHN WILKENING

**H**iring practices today often seem to lack common sense, with issues ranging from ghosting applicants to excessive rounds of interviews. Change can only come from individuals willing to act.

While ageism is frequently discussed, those who practice it ultimately miss out on valuable talent. The talent pool remains rich and available, and we are all in this journey together.

To those with experience, your contributions are invaluable ... experience cannot be faked, and ignoring it is a mistake. In the hiring process, it's essential to empathize with applicants. It's time to move past the games and make decisions.

The hiring system isn't broken; it's often the people behind it who create unnecessary barriers.

### Why this matters

**E**xperience is an overlooked competitive advantage.

Across industries, employers consistently report that older workers bring what younger hires simply cannot replicate: decades of practical knowledge, critical thinking and refined problem solving.

The Columbia University Age Smart Employer study repeatedly highlights that older workers possess a depth of skill that takes years, sometimes decades, to build.

Many technical roles, such as jewelers, embroiderers, cabinet makers, and specialty service providers, require long periods of apprenticeship and hands-on mastery that older workers uniquely offer. Experience isn't an opinion. It's an asset.

### Older workers stay longer

**I**n a labor market plagued by churn, older workers bring stability. Workers aged 55 to 64 have a median job tenure of 10.4 years, compared to just 3.0 years for workers aged 25 to 34. That's not a small difference, it's transformative.

Industries infamous for high turnover, such as retail and restaurants, report a clear preference for older workers because they show up, stay longer and take the job seriously. When employers are forced to replace staff repeatedly, productivity suffers and culture erodes. When they hire experience, the opposite happens: teams strengthen, customers notice and operations stabilize.

Older workers don't just stay; they show up. Case studies highlight older employees who are:

- The first to arrive
- The last to leave
- Rarely absent
- Willing to step up in crises, even when not required

This isn't theory. It's lived behavior documented by employers across dozens of industries. Reliability is not age specific, but it is age earned.

### Institutional knowledge

**T**he hidden currency of high-performing teams is institutional knowledge.

Older workers hold irreplaceable knowledge about customers, processes and organizational history. Many businesses I've interviewed credited longevity with consistent quality, strong customer loyalty and operational continuity.

In long established shops, restaurants, manufacturers and service businesses, older workers are part of the brand. Customers return because they trust the people. That trust has been built over years, not onboarding cycles.

### Technology myth needs to die

**O**ne of the most damaging misconceptions in hiring today is that older workers can't adapt to new technology. The truth? When given proper training, older workers often outperform expectations. The tech gap isn't a capability issue; it's a leadership issue. Training works. Support works. Experience plus new tools is a powerful combination.

### Multigenerational teams win

**R**esearch shows something simple and powerful: mixed-age teams outperform age homogenous ones. Older workers bring context, intuition and mentorship. Younger workers bring new perspectives and energy. Together, they create balance, something every high-performing team needs.

Companies that intentionally build multigenerational teams report smoother operations, better decision-making and stronger internal culture.



Photo: John Wilkening

► John Wilkening is the executive vice president at Tech Credit Union.

### Americans working longer, better

**T**he average retirement age for men has risen to 64, driven by improved health, greater education levels and less physically demanding work. Today's older workforce is healthier, more capable and more motivated than any generation before. They're not slowing down; they're contributing more.

Ignoring this talent pool is more than an oversight. It's a strategic failure.

### Start making decisions

**H**iring should be human. It should be decisive. And it should value experience, not filter it out.

The talent is out there. The green circle on LinkedIn proves it every day. What's broken is not the system, it's the unnecessary friction people insert into the process. When you remove the games and trust your judgment, great hiring happens fast — just like the eight days it once took me to hire a great candidate.

Experience wins. Common sense wins. And the companies that embrace both will win too. ■

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