

## Introduction

Following the initial release of *Indiana Vision 2025 (IV 2025)*, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with other organizations and leaders, conducted five regional forums around the state of Indiana. The purpose of the forums was to:

- introduce *IV 2025* regionally;
- identify regional priorities among the report's stated goals within *IV 2025*; and
- gain perspective on issues and opportunities specific to different geographical areas of the state.

Together, the Indiana Chamber and the regional hosts invited thought leaders in both the for-profit and non-profit arenas to facilitated discussion and planning forums in Merrillville, Fort Wayne, Sellersburg, Evansville and Indianapolis. Prior to the forum, participants were invited to complete an online survey that asked them about regional issues, opportunities and trends, and asked them to prioritize each of the 33 *IV 2025* goals in four key drivers. The responses were then used to shape the specific content of each forum. To help them further prepare, each invited participant was provided with an executive summary overview of *IV 2025* and was asked to become familiar with the full report prior to attending the forum.

Besides the invited regional thought leaders, each half-day forum was also attended by several members of the Indiana Chamber executive leadership and policy teams who served as information resources to the participants. The forum discussion served as an invaluable opportunity for the Chamber regarding the regional priorities reflected in the report.

## Forum Structure

Each forum was launched by the respective regional host (listed below) and participants were welcomed and thanked for their time. After a brief overview on the history and content of *IV 2025* presented by Kevin Brinegar, president and CEO of the Indiana Chamber, participants then reviewed and discussed the regional challenges and opportunities identified through their survey responses. The forums were facilitated by representatives from CHORUS<sup>®</sup>, Inc., an Indiana-based management consulting firm.

The regional leaders then turned their attention to the core content and focus of the forum – discussion of the drivers and goals within *IV 2025* that they believed were the specific priorities for their region. Working in teams, the participants expanded the content on nine of the goals to include **Objectives, Strategies, Regional Assets, Immediate Next Steps and Milestones**. Each team then presented its expanded goal to another team for “spirited critique” and revision, followed by a brief presentation to all forum participants. A summary of all nine of those expanded goals is included in the following report.

## Forum Dates and Participants

A total of 178 participants attended the five regional forums hosted in June 2012 at locations throughout Indiana. Attendees represented many of the most prominent community and corporate citizens in their specific areas of the state.

### **Northwest Regional Forum | June 5, Merrillville |** Host: Mark Maasel, Northwest Indiana Forum

Most participants at the Northwest Regional Forum work and live in the seven counties typically considered as the economic base of the Northwest region near or bordering Lake Michigan.

### **Northeast Regional Forum | June 6, Fort Wayne |** Host: John Sampson, Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership

Participants to the Northeast Regional Forum were primarily composed of the leadership of the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, an organization formed in 2006 to help build a globally competitive economy in that area of the state.

### **Southeast Regional Forum | June 12, Sellersburg |** Host: Kerry Stemler, KM Stemler Co., Inc.

While the majority of participants at the Southeast Forum were from the counties immediately north of the Greater Louisville area along the Ohio River, leaders from counties throughout the southeastern quarter of Indiana attended.

### **Southwest Regional Forum | June 18, Evansville |** Host: Ed Hafer, Evansville Regional Business Committee

Southwest Forum participants were drawn primarily from the counties adjoining or within a 60-mile radius of the Evansville/Vanderburgh County area of Indiana bordering the Ohio River.

### **Central Regional Forum | June 19, Indianapolis |** Host: Mike Wells, REI Real Estate Services

The economic nucleus of Central Indiana is Indianapolis and the nine-county area surrounding it. Representatives at this forum also came from a geographical area reaching west to Terre Haute, east to Richmond, north to Kokomo and south to Bloomington.

## Statewide Challenges & Opportunities

Through survey results, personal interviews with regional leaders and forum discussions, challenges and opportunities/assets characterizing the economic environment in the five regions of Indiana were identified. Some challenges or opportunities were specific to particular regions and may have only been expressed by the participants in one or two areas of the state. For example, bridge infrastructure is a primary challenge to the two regions bordering the Ohio River, but was not mentioned or of any concern in Northeast Indiana. However, the presence of a number of concurrent challenges and opportunities arose in all regions of the state and particular consequences or benefits resonated across geographic boundaries. Summarized on the following two pages are the challenges and assets/opportunities in which the regions found a great deal of common ground.

### PRIMARY CHALLENGES

1. **Educational Excellence:** In every region, forum participants expressed their strong belief that Indiana's educational system was failing to produce adequate numbers of high school graduates ready to either further their education at a postsecondary institution or effectively begin their careers in a highly technical 21st century economy. Rarely did participants assign specific blame for this dilemma. Quite the opposite, they considered the issue a challenge needing the attention and efforts of all Hoosiers in order to find a remedy. There is a pressing need for improved access and funding from early childhood education through higher education. Schools must produce students with dramatically improved competency in areas such as math, science and reading skills. Along with workforce development (see below), no challenge was more frequently mentioned or passionately discussed than a need to raise the educational expectations and performance of Indiana's student population. No two related issues rise to this level of importance.
2. **Workforce Development:** Forum participants agree that throughout Indiana, there is a strong and urgent need for a technically competent and innovative workforce. The basic skills and technical expertise possessed by a significant share of Indiana's workers do not measure up to current or anticipated expectations of high-tech employers. In its *Indiana Vision 2025* report, the *IV 2025* Task Force identified the need to develop outstanding talent as the number one priority for the state's economy. Leaders in every region agreed their current workforce is unprepared to fulfill the requirements of the high-tech jobs that their regions are seeking. Additionally, once the economy recovers, those who have lost their jobs during this economic downturn are unprepared to perform the technically demanding jobs likely to replace the ones they lost.
3. **Transportation Infrastructure:** Though different segments of transportation infrastructure drew the specific attention of different regions' leaders, there is no doubt that moving people, products and ideas is absolutely vital to Indiana's economy. Whether they emphasized interstates or bridges, waterways or airways, Indiana leaders expressed concern for the condition of the state's transportation infrastructure. In many cases (and in many areas of the state), that infrastructure would be considered in excellent shape and expanding in its capability. But forum leaders recognized that growing and maintaining our means of transportation will be both expensive and challenging. Developing new fiscal systems for funding infrastructure projects received considerable attention and discussion in every part of the state.
4. **Quality of Life:** Forum participants defined quality of life as representing a number of factors or amenities depending on where they live and work. Cost of living, access to recreation and cultural events, adequate housing, climate, and awareness for issues of diversity and inclusion all were referenced when participants discussed quality of life. Though the cultural markers for this issue were different for each region, there was solid agreement that improving the quality of life in Indiana is critical to growing our economy and attracting and retaining talented individuals. Each region's leaders discussed ways to improve the place they call home so that others will want to call it home too.
5. **Collaborative Effort:** Regional forum participants noted that a significant amount of good strategic planning has already been produced by numerous local and county governments, foundations, organizations and associations throughout Indiana. This planning has addressed important regional topics including education, economic development, transportation and workforce development. If there is a common gap in the effectiveness of this planning, though, it is often the absence of good communication and collaboration among organizations that results in either duplication of efforts or reduction in the potential impact of the planning. Coordinated strategic planning in all areas related to economic growth is a daunting task with multiple challenges, but such collaboration could lead to dramatic results throughout the state.

## OVERARCHING OPPORTUNITIES TO LEVERAGE

1. **Logistics & Transportation:** Though transportation infrastructure was noted as a common challenge at regional forums throughout the state, there was also strong consensus among participants that Indiana's transportation and logistics capability is among its strongest assets. The combination of an extensive interstate system, waterways both north and south, and advantageous geography make Indiana a major economic force in terms of moving people and products. The ways that different regions of the state can leverage these advantages vary, but collectively few states can boast of so many features and benefits related to their transportation.
2. **Quality of Life:** Another area that forum participants across the state viewed as both a challenge and an asset was Indiana's quality of life. Despite some areas of concern (as noted in the challenges) there are consistent quality of life advantages that nearly all regions enjoy and that often set them apart from their economic competitors. These include a low cost of living and a favorable tax environment. As well, the collective opinion among most participants is that Indiana communities represent a good place to live and raise families. Efforts to build active and revitalized downtown areas have created hubs of cultural and recreational activity in what were once stagnant urban areas. Regional leaders agreed that the quality of life in much of Indiana becomes an increasingly marketable feature.
3. **Educational Resources:** Without question, Indiana faces a number of major issues regarding its educational system and student achievement. Yet, in the midst of those challenges, forum participants noted that Indiana can leverage an exceptional number of outstanding higher education resources. Life sciences research, health care, engineering and vocational training are but some of the examples of quality educational programs around the state that can benefit its citizens and its economic base. The presence of distinguished public and private institutions makes Indiana well-positioned to prepare its students and workforce for the 21st century economy.
4. **Economic Base:** Despite a recession that adversely affected the economies of every region of Indiana, forum participants were encouraged that the state's diverse economic base places it in a better position for recovery and growth than most of its neighboring Midwest states. When coupled with what is regarded, both nationally and internationally as a relatively friendly business regulatory environment, Indiana's diversity and economic health should attract considerable interest from companies looking to expand or relocate their businesses to Indiana.



Indiana Vision 2025 hosts

1. Mark Maassel (right), Merrillville
2. John Sampson (left), Fort Wayne
3. Kerry Stemler (center), Sellersburg
4. Ed Hafer, Evansville
5. Mike Wells, Indianapolis

**Driver/Goal Feedback**

Participants at the five forum events selected nine goals from *IV 2025* and addressed how these goals could be specifically leveraged in their region. The mix of those nine varied from region to region since leaders were given the opportunity to select which goals their teams would discuss. Objectives, Strategies, Immediate Next Steps and Milestones were all considered and applied to the goals. Below is a synopsis of the discussion and subsequent recommendations made in each of the four driver areas under which the goals appear in *IV 2025*.

**Key Driver #1: Outstanding Talent**

The goals detailed in *IV 2025* under the driver of Outstanding Talent address a number of educational and workforce development issues. Among these are increasing high school graduation rates; improving students' math, science and reading skills; graduating a higher proportion of the state's population with quality postsecondary credentials; and increasing the technical skills of Indiana's workforce.

Regardless of the forum's geographic location, participants spent more time addressing Indiana's talent gaps than on any other topic. While regional leaders were often very specific and targeted in their approaches toward improving Indiana's educational achievement and workforce skills gaps, there was also a clear theme that emerged: increasing the preparation and competency of Indiana's students or adult workers will take an "all hands on deck" mentality and there is no time to waste. Administrators, teachers associations, universities and colleges (both public and private), parents, legislators, foundations, advocacy groups, community associations and businesses are just some of the interested parties that must display levels of collaboration and cooperation perhaps never seen before in the state.

A recurring recommendation regarding education was to develop more accurate tools for measuring student achievement as they relate to the anticipated skills students will need in the 21st century economy. Additionally, participants continually referenced the important role that parents and families play in student achievement, but they often admitted to uncertainty as to how parental engagement can be effectively addressed.

There was strong consensus that closing educational gaps (and ultimately building a competent workforce) requires early intervention in children's learning opportunities. Participants continually stressed an urgent need for development and state funding for early childhood education.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the passion with which forum participants approached the topics of education and workforce development. Their collective message was clear: nothing will affect Indiana's future – positively or negatively – more than the talent and workforce skills of its citizenry.

**Key Driver #2: Attractive Business Climate**

Throughout Indiana, forum participants believed that local government reform is a priority to building an attractive business climate. In every region, leaders referenced the Kernan Shepard report on government reform and consistently urged state legislators to adopt its recommendations. Not only would this reform significantly impact economic growth, it will result in greater fiscal responsibility and efficient use of tax dollars.

In addition to local government reform (and closely related to it), forum participants said that Indiana would benefit from more uniformity in municipal ordinances and processes regulating business. They recommended that counties and municipalities collaborate on their codes related to businesses and arrive at acceptable standards. A uniform regulatory environment would help increase economic opportunity.

Indiana's business climate – especially in terms of its business-friendly tax policies – already has certain advantages to offer business site selectors compared to our neighboring Midwest states. Uniform codes would be another positive factor regions of Indiana would have over areas competing for business opportunities. This driver also includes an emphasis on additional tax reforms, maintaining a strong legal environment, enhancing the overall regulatory environment and containing health care costs – partially by reducing high smoking rates and obesity levels

### Key Driver #3: Superior Infrastructure

Establishing new fiscal systems to support the array of infrastructure projects critical to economic growth was a goal discussed at every regional forum. The geography and the most pressing needs of any given region caused forum participants to focus on different components of the issue, but they were unanimous that the old systems for funding and maintaining infrastructure will not apply to future projects.

Several solutions for funding infrastructure were recommended. User fees, such as road tolls, would be an effective method for generating funding for interstates and bridges. These tolls should necessarily extend to out-of-state users (particularly trucking firms) that pass through the state, often “free of charge”. The technology now exists to track commercial usage and collect fees based on that usage.

Beyond funding, participants stressed the need for excellent planning and prioritization of infrastructure projects. Attention and funding should be directed at those projects that will produce the most financial return for any given region of the state. As well, most major infrastructure projects affect more than one region of the state (or regions of other states); therefore, good communication, planning and collaboration will improve the economic impact of multiple regions. Participants stressed that, given the dynamics of a global economy, it is not prudent nor is it productive for regions of the state to conduct infrastructure planning apart from each other.

Participants also called attention to the impact that future economic growth and expansion will have on those infrastructure projects “below the ground”, noting that investments in electrical grid upgrades and new water and sewage systems are equal if not more critical than transportation infrastructure projects. Specific focus was given in many regions to developing strategic water resource plans that would ensure all areas of Indiana can provide adequate and abundant fresh water for both its citizens and business.

### Key Driver #4: Dynamic & Creative Culture

Participants at the five regional forums focused much of their discussion regarding Dynamic and Creative Culture around two of the goals listed under that driver in *IV 2025*: 1) aggressively promote entrepreneurship and business start-ups, and 2) promote a culture that further values diversity and civility.

Much of Indiana’s economic history has been crafted by its long and productive relationship with manufacturing. Huge sections of that manufacturing base have either eroded or completely fallen away. The state’s economic future will rely heavily on the efforts of gifted and technically-minded entrepreneurs who are sought out, encouraged and supported to bring their ideas and enterprises to Indiana. Forum leaders encouraged developing systems of support for entrepreneurs and aggressively promoting business start-ups. This was a unanimous focus at all forums. A key indicator of success in this arena will be whether Indiana develops a culture that encourages entrepreneurs to take risks and pursue their visions, as well as whether the state and regions will build systems to financially support entrepreneurial ventures. Developing such a system will require collaborative effort on the part of government, for-profit and not-for-profit stakeholders.

A culture that further values diversity and civility is paramount to attracting and retaining talented individuals to Indiana. Some forum leaders believed their regions were further along the path toward diversity and inclusion than what others expressed. But regardless of where they currently find themselves, all forum participants agreed that a culture rich in understanding and civility is a critical quality of life issue in Indiana’s future. Plus, nurturing a culture of diversity will likely require the ongoing efforts of more groups and individuals than any of the 33 goals within *IV 2025*. The collective energy from a myriad of businesses, not-for-profits, foundations and associations is needed to advance this goal.

Participants recommended creating multiple entry points into communities and activities so that people outside of the region’s traditional culture find ways to be engaged and to bring their own culture into an area. The more opportunities that are developed in which diverse cultures and people can intersect, the more likely that healthy interaction and civil discourse can occur. Again, this will require exceptional collaboration and levels of communication among individuals and organizations unaccustomed to partnering with each other. But participants believe that exceptional collaboration is needed in order for Indiana to participate and fully function within a global economy.