



2024

**EAST CENTRAL INDIANA**  
**regional development plan**

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# Chapter One



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# Executive Summary

## The Vision

“**East Central Indiana aspires to be a welcoming region in which new and existing residents are invited to be their authentic selves and create a life that matters. Backed by community resources, residents are empowered to forge their own path to success. There are three elements that serve as the backbone for East Central Indiana’s vision: a mosaic of communities, innovative eds and meds institutions, and amenities that enable residents to thrive. These three elements encapsulate the region’s strengths, while also providing a focus for the future.**”

### 1. A Mosaic of Communities

The region is made up of diverse communities ranging in size and character, from rural communities like Redkey to metros like Muncie. To leverage the unique perspectives, assets, and opportunities our region has to offer, East Central Indiana is committed to collaboration across sectors and scales. Our towns, cities, and counties understand that we are stronger together, and can learn from one another. When opportunities to work together arise, our region steps up.

### 2. Innovative Eds & Meds

The region is home to several higher education institutions and hospitals which provide transformative educational opportunities and critical health services to rural and underserved communities. To support the needs of these anchor institutions to fill high-wage positions, East Central Indiana is committed to talent development and talent attraction.

### 3. Amenities That Enable Residents to Thrive

The region leverages existing assets in outdoor recreation, arts and culture, and family-owned small businesses to enhance quality of life for residents. Residents are further supported by a commitment to increase educational attainment, expand access to childcare, and revitalize historic downtowns. By expanding access to valuable amenities, East Central Indiana enables residents to thrive.

By capitalizing on each of these distinct elements, East Central Indiana stands out as a desirable place to live and work, a place that both attracts and retains talent. When pursued, this vision should manifest in population growth and regional prosperity.

## Stronger Together

East Central Indiana combines the strengths and talents of eight counties, over 60 cities and towns, and approximately 375,000 residents. Counties in our region include Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph, and Wayne, each of which offers unique attractions and exciting opportunities. This regional development plan represents an effort to leverage county assets, build consensus on regional strategies, and promote vibrancy and resiliency in East Central Indiana. In preparing and implementing this plan, East Central Indiana acknowledges that the region is stronger together.

### East Central Indiana Regional Partnership

The East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP) is the leading economic development organization in the region, and the entity responsible for carrying out the plan. The Partnership serves Rush County, in addition to the eight counties participating in the regional development plan. Through collaboration with local economic development organizations and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership supports business attraction, expansion, and retention throughout the region. The Partnership also administers the Forge Your Path Talent Attraction Initiative. Launched in 2019, Forge Your Path is the central platform for regional promotion in East Central Indiana. Forge Your Path represents a regional brand, a team of enthusiastic ambassadors, and a network of communities.

## Previous Planning Efforts

This plan replaces the *Regional Development Plan* as the guiding document for East Central Indiana. The plan was created in 2021 to prepare the eight-county region for the first round of the Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI). Major critiques of the regional plan include a tendency to rely on past planning efforts, a failure to develop regional consensus, and a lengthy plan without focus and direction. This update builds off the previous plan by addressing unmet goals and objectives. At the same time, the updated plan intentionally focuses on community engagement, consensus-building, and collaboration. The purpose of this plan is to unite the region around a vision and investment strategy that will benefit individual counties, but most importantly, allow East Central Indiana to forge a path towards *regional* prosperity.

## Community Engagement

The READI 2.0 regional plan was developed with the input and support of community members across East Central Indiana. Through an engagement process which lasted more than six months, over 3,300 participants were encouraged to share their perspectives, ideas, and opinions about the future of the eight-county region. Intentional steps were taken to engage students, residents, employers, and community leaders from each county to build consensus and promote partnership. Engagement opportunities, which ranged from surveys to stakeholder meetings, allowed the project team to identify regional priorities and challenges. Shaped by abundant feedback, these priorities and challenges evolved to become the vision, goals, and strategies for East Central Indiana.



## Regional Strengths

East Central Indiana has strengths that set it apart from other regions. These strengths, including thriving eds and meds institutions and outstanding outdoor recreation amenities, propel the region forward. Through regionalism, individual county assets become part of a robust, interconnected network. This network supports growth and development through collaboration and partnership.

## Transportation

The region is connected to major cities, including Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, Dayton, and Cincinnati, via highways and railroads. Main corridors include I-69, I-70, US-27, US-35, and US-36. Rail lines, including CSX and Norfolk Southern provide crucial support to agriculture and industry.

## Education

The East Central region stands apart due to its concentration of higher education institutions, including Ball State University, Taylor University, Earlham College, Indiana Wesleyan University, Indiana University East, Purdue Polytechnic, Ivy Tech (Marion, Muncie, Richmond), and Bethany Theological Seminary. These colleges and universities are known for their excellence in preparing students for successful careers in teaching, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing. Higher education institutions present an opportunity to attract, develop, and retain a skilled workforce in ECI.

## Healthcare

East Central Indiana is fortunate to have great health assets. Hospitals and medical centers in the area include IU Health, Reid Health, Marion Health, Henry Community Health, Ascension St. Vincent, Centerstone, Meridian Health Services, Open Door Health Services, Neighborhood Health Centers, and Veterans Affairs Clinics. These healthcare institutions support quality of life and strengthen quality of opportunity through the availability of high-paying careers for residents.

## Agriculture

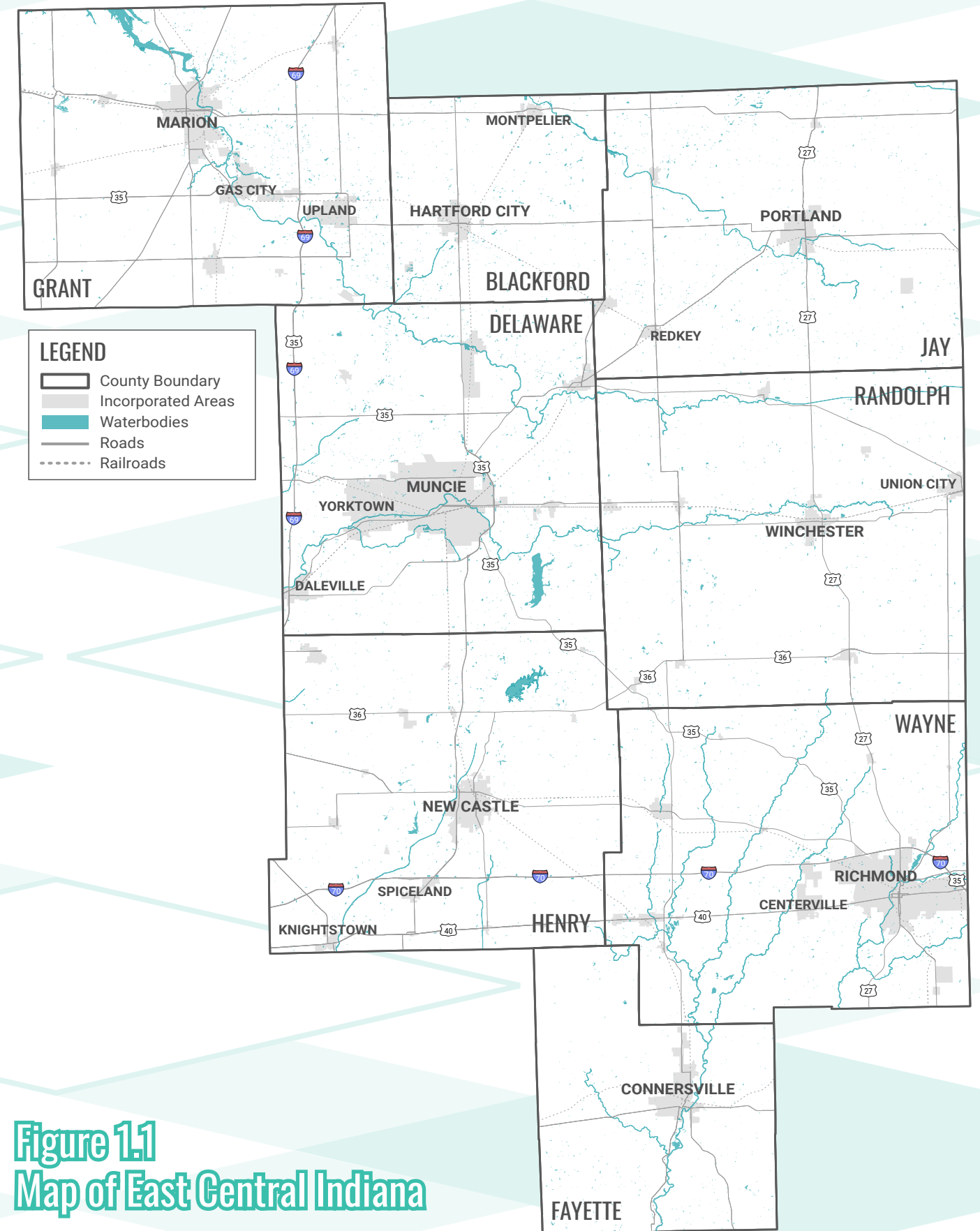
Agriculture is a key part of East Central Indiana's regional economy. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the region is home to over 4,500 farms covering over a million acres. These farms sell \$1.13 billion in agricultural products each year, which represents over 10% of the total market value of products sold for the State of Indiana. The region's rich agricultural heritage contributes to its charming rural character, provides jobs, and helps feed the state. The region's strength in agriculture also opens the door to added-value agriculture and agritourism opportunities.

## Manufacturing

Manufacturing is an integral part of East Central Indiana's history, culture, and economy. Over the last century, the region has produced a variety of products, from mason jars to automobiles. Today, manufacturing is the region's second largest industry, employing approximately 18.6% of residents. Major employers include GM, Draper, 3M, Ardagh Group, Astral Industries, and more. East Central Indiana is uniquely poised for growth and development in advanced manufacturing thanks in large part to skills training programs at career centers and higher education institutions throughout the region.

## Outdoor Recreation

East Central Indiana is well-known for its outdoor recreation amenities. The region is home to Summit Lake State Park, the Wilbur Wright Fish & Wildlife Area, the Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary, nature preserves, community parks, golf courses, and campgrounds. Paved trail networks weave their way through the region, including the 62-mile Cardinal Greenway, the state's longest trail and part of the Rails to Trails Conservancy Hall of Fame. Lakes and rivers, such as Prairie Creek Reservoir, Summit Lake Reservoir, White River, and Whitewater River, provide opportunities for boating, fishing, and swimming.

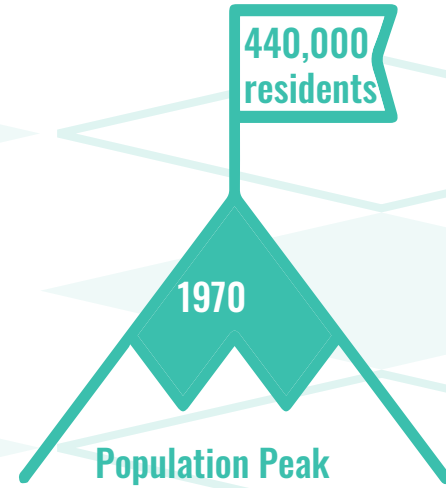


**Figure 1.1**  
**Map of East Central Indiana**

# Regional Snapshot

## ECI's Population is Shrinking

- ✦ East Central Indiana's population peaked at slightly under 440,000 residents in 1970 and has declined every decade since then.
- ✦ As of 2021, East Central Indiana has 375,510 residents, approximately 5.6% of the state's total population.
- ✦ From 2010 to 2020, East Central Indiana's population decreased by 4.1%; meanwhile, the State of Indiana experienced population growth of 4.7%.
- ✦ Population loss occurred in all eight counties in the region, ranging from 1.1% in Henry County to 6.4% in Randolph County.



Today's Population: 375,510

Since 2010, Indiana's population increased by 4.7%



Since 2010, the ECI Region's population decreased by 4.1%

## ECI's Labor Force is Shrinking

- ✦ As of 2022, approximately 136,384 people were employed in East Central Indiana, or approximately 4.5% of the state's total employment.
- ✦ The labor force declined by 5.5% from 2010 to 2020, while the state's labor force grew by 3.2% in the same period.
- ✦ The labor force is shrinking in all eight counties, but fastest in Blackford County and Jay County.

From 2010 to 2020, Indiana's labor force increased by 3.2%

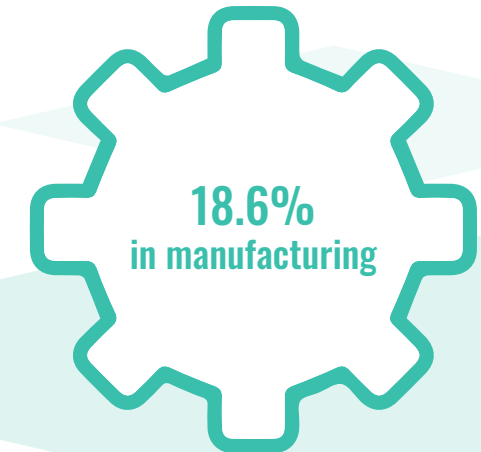


From 2010 to 2020, the ECI Region's labor force decreased by 5.5%



## Leading Industries

- ✦ According to 2021 data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, eds and meds (which includes Educational Services, Healthcare, and Social Assistance) is the top industry in East Central Indiana, employing approximately 27.5% of residents.
- ✦ Manufacturing employs approximately 18.6% of residents.





# Regional Snapshot Continued

## New Home Construction Fails to Meet Demand

- ✦ Approximately 75% of housing units in the region were built before 1980, compared to 56% for the State of Indiana.
- ✦ According to the 2020 American Community Survey, less than 10% of homes in the region were built after 1999.
- ✦ When new homes have been constructed, it has largely been in Delaware, Grant, Wayne, and Henry County.



## Health and Wellness on the Rise

- ✦ In 2020, the average county in East Central Indiana had a health ranking of 83 out of 92 (with 92 being the lowest performing county in the state).
- ✦ From 2020 to 2023, health rankings improved in four counties in East Central Indiana.
- ✦ There are opportunities to improve. From 2020 to 2023, poor mental health days increased in all eight counties, and adult obesity rates increased or remained the same in each county.



## Educational Attainment Lags Behind the State

- ✦ Despite the region's concentration of colleges and universities, educational attainment is slightly behind the rest of Indiana.
- ✦ Only 89.1% of the population (aged 25 and over) in East Central Indiana has a high school diploma or higher, compared to 89.8% for the State of Indiana.
- ✦ Only 19.8% of the East Central Indiana population holds a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 27.8% for the State of Indiana.



**83/92**  
health ranking



states of mental health decreased



obesity rates increased or stayed the same

# Regional Investment Strategy

To support the State of Indiana in its efforts to accelerate economic growth and forge a path to regional prosperity, East Central Indiana has identified four goals, each with a set of strategies.



## Quality of Life

Stabilize the region's population and encourage growth through investments that directly benefit the health and well-being of residents, promote tourism, and support vibrant downtowns.

### Regional Strategies:

- ✦ Market existing regional attractions and encourage the development of new arts and culture, recreation, retail, and culinary destinations.
- ✦ Revitalize historic downtowns through façade, structure, and streetscape improvements, as well as the introduction of new businesses, including nightlife.
- ✦ Advocate for the preservation of existing rural health services.
- ✦ Enhance pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to encourage healthy lifestyles and provide alternative transportation options.
- ✦ Enhance existing parks and trails and consider opportunities to develop new outdoor recreation amenities.
- ✦ Expand access to mental health resources in the region.
- ✦ Expand access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation services in the region.



## Housing & Infrastructure

Stimulate the development of quality housing in the region to create thriving neighborhoods that appeal to both current and future residents.

### Regional Strategies:

- ✦ Develop quality workforce housing across the region.
- ✦ Develop attractive rental options that appeal to young professionals.
- ✦ Invest in infrastructure improvements to spur housing development.
- ✦ Mitigate blight and encourage context-appropriate infill development.
- ✦ Encourage property maintenance and responsible homeownership in existing neighborhoods to instill community pride.



## Childcare & Support for Families

Position the region as a great place to raise a family, and attract employers seeking a robust workforce, by investing in quality, affordable childcare.

### Regional Strategies:

- ✦ Increase wages to attract more skilled professionals to early childhood education.
- ✦ Increase childcare capacity by encouraging local employers, schools, and churches to offer childcare services.
- ✦ Develop new, stand-alone childcare centers offering quality, affordable services.
- ✦ Develop a pipeline of childcare workers by supporting the attainment of degrees and certificates in early childhood education.



## Education & Opportunity

Enhance the upward mobility of residents and promote regional prosperity by developing talent, supporting innovation, and attracting well-paying jobs to the region.

### Regional Strategies:

- ✦ Increase awareness of existing educational resources and skills training opportunities as pathways to well-paying jobs in East Central Indiana.
- ✦ Connect recent college graduates to satisfying career opportunities in the region.
- ✦ Create dedicated spaces to encourage innovation and collaboration, such as co-working spaces, makerspaces, and community kitchens.
- ✦ Encourage the creation of new businesses through financing and technical support.
- ✦ Invest in quality-of-life and quality-of-place improvements to attract jobs and talent.



# Chapter Two



REGION BACKGROUND



# About the East Central Indiana Region

## Background

East Central Indiana is an eight-county region which borders the Indianapolis metropolitan area to the West and Ohio to the East. The region includes Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph, and Wayne Counties. Counties in the region are connected by proximity, shared employment and education resources, and a manufacturing legacy. Since the formation of the East Central Indiana Development Council in 1984, East Central Indiana has leveraged regional collaboration to implement change. Today, regional collaboration is guided by the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP), which has functioned as the main point of contact for regional economic development efforts since 2005.

In 2021, the Indiana Economic Development Corporation launched the Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) to accelerate economic growth and prosperity throughout the State of Indiana. The first round of READI distributed \$500 million in state appropriations among 17 Indiana regions. The East Central Indiana Region was awarded \$15 million in READI funding. Although East Central Indiana tied for the second smallest award in the state, READI funding still supported 19 innovative projects, from a performing arts center to downtown redevelopment. To maintain momentum and drive success in East Central Indiana, participating counties have come together to develop an updated regional plan and seek additional funding in the second round of the READI initiative.

The READI 2.0 planning process represents unprecedented consensus building for the region. Through the planning process, stakeholders from all eight counties were asked to confront hard truths and troubling statistics, identify shared obstacles, and outline opportunities for innovative growth and development. This process, although challenging, empowered the region. With confidence, East Central Indiana emerges stronger and more competitive than ever before.

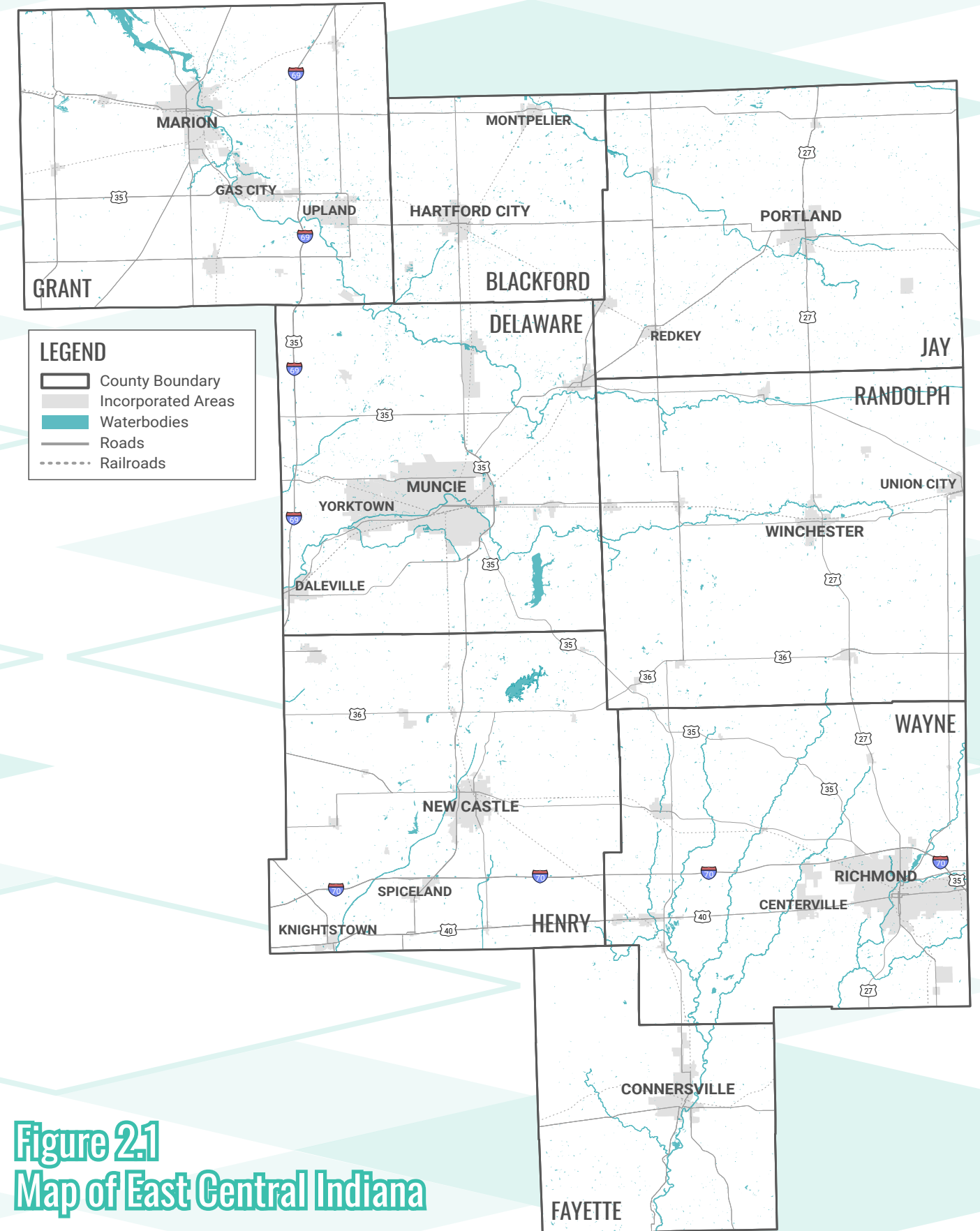


Figure 2.1  
Map of East Central Indiana



# Regional Organizations and Initiatives

## East Central Indiana Regional Partnership

The mission of the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP) is to foster economic growth in the region as the lead economic development marketing and business attraction organization in East Central Indiana. Since it was established in 2005, the ECIRP has supported a multitude of critical economic and community development projects throughout the region. In the first round of the READI program, the ECIRP helped manage and monitor \$15 million worth of state investment across a range of projects, from early learning centers to a performing arts venue. Looking to the future, stakeholders envision the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership continuing to play a central role by coordinating regional economic development efforts, engaging stakeholders, and communicating progress.

## Forge Your Path

The Forge Your Path initiative was launched in 2019 with a goal of attracting talent and establishing the region as a desirable place to live, work, and play. A coalition of counties worked to build the Forge Your Path lifestyle brand, which now serves as the central platform for regional promotion in East Central Indiana. The Forge Your Path initiative serves the following nine communities: Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph, Rush, and Wayne Counties. Forge Your Path is supported by a team of enthusiastic ambassadors eager to connect individuals and businesses to the unique assets the region has to offer.

## East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative

The East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative (ECITC) is a regional collective impact initiative aimed at improving talent attraction, development, and connection. The ECITC was established in early 2021 when East Central Indiana was designated as a 21st Century Talent Region. Today, the Talent Collaborative oversees the following priority initiatives: marketing and talent attraction, regional partnerships and the prioritization of diversity, equity and inclusion in talent attraction, and development and connection efforts. Ball State University's Office of Community Engagement serves as the backbone organization for the ECITC, and the Guiding Team acts as the central steering committee. The Guiding Team consists of representatives from key regional organizations, including the George and Frances Ball Foundation, Eastern Indiana Works, the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership, and county local economic development organizations.

# Previous Planning Work

## 2021 Forge Your Path Regional Development Plan

The *Regional Development Plan* is an economic development action plan for East Central Indiana focused on the following key themes: regional partnerships, talent enhancement, talent attraction, talent development, and talent growth. The plan was created in 2021 to prepare the eight-county region for the first round of the Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI). The plan was based largely on past planning efforts and the regional engagement associated with those efforts, including roundtables, regional summits, and stakeholder interviews.

East Central Indiana is facing several challenges, including population loss, emigration of emerging adults, lower post-secondary education attainment, and growth in low-wage, lower-skilled jobs, leaving residents with limited income and resources. East Central Indiana aspires to become a "region of choice for talent and industry," but these trends act as barriers to success.

To address these challenges, the plan outlines priorities, goals and objectives, and regional strategies to promote change. Below are the regional priorities from the 2021 plan:

- ✦ Boost population trends by 11% resulting in a net 0% population change by 2030
- ✦ Mobilize our learning systems to increase the educational attainment of 9,000 Hoosiers by 2025
- ✦ Build upon equitable economic opportunities to increase median household income and earnings by 7.5% by 2025

## Local Community Plans

In the last five years, many communities in the region have updated or developed local plans to guide community decision-making, including comprehensive plans, economic development plans, downtown plans, and parks master plans. Even so, there are communities that have yet to invest in local planning efforts. In communities like these, there are exciting opportunities for community leaders and members of the public to craft a unified vision, outline goals for the future, and identify potential projects. With the release of this regional development plan, there is an opportunity for local plans to align with regional priorities while also addressing local needs.

# Recent Planning Efforts (last 5 yrs)

## Regional Plans

- ✦ Forge Your Path Regional Development Plan (2021)
- ✦ Advance ECI Regional Development Plan (2018)
- ✦ Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Plan (2018)

## Delaware County

- ✦ TogetherDM Comprehensive Plan for the Delaware-Muncie Region (2022)
- ✦ Vision 2021 Economic Development Plan (2021)
- ✦ Delaware Muncie Transportation Improvement Program (2021)
- ✦ City of Muncie 2021-2025 Parks and Recreation Master Plan (2021)

## Fayette County

- ✦ Connersville Comprehensive Plan (2022)

## Grant County

- ✦ City of Marion Downtown Revitalization Plan (2019)

## Henry County

- ✦ Henry County Comprehensive Plan (2018)
- ✦ Safe and Welcome: Henry County, Knightstown, and New Castle Stellar Communities Plan (2019)
- ✦ City of New Castle Comprehensive Plan (2018)

## Jay County

- ✦ Jay! Region Stellar Communities Plan (2019)
- ✦ Jay County Economic Development Plan (2018)

## Randolph County

- ✦ Randolph County Comprehensive Plan (2018)

## Wayne County

- ✦ Wayne County Comprehensive Plan (2020)
- ✦ Wayne County Economic Development Strategic Plan (2020)
- ✦ City of Richmond Comprehensive Plan (2019)
- ✦ City of Richmond Parks and Recreation Master Plan (2020)
- ✦ Hagerstown Comprehensive Plan (2022)
- ✦ Cambridge City Comprehensive Plan (2021)



## Regional Assets

East Central Indiana is rich with assets that have the potential to propel the region forward. From transportation to outdoor recreation, communities across the region contribute to these assets. Consequently, these strengths unite the region and demonstrate a collective dedication to success and innovation. Within each of these assets, there are opportunities for regional growth and development.

### Transportation

East Central Indiana is home to the main corridors of I-69, I-70, US-27, US-35, and US-36 which provide excellent connectivity within the region, as well as to Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, and Dayton. There are also several railroads, including CSX and Norfolk Southern, moving freight through the region. Several of these rail lines meet in Muncie.

### Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare is a key component of livability, and East Central Indiana is fortunate to have great community health assets in the region. Hospitals and medical centers in the area include IU Health, Reid Health, Marion Health, Henry Community Health, Ascension St. Vincent, Centerstone, Meridian Health Services, Open Door Health Services, Neighborhood Health Centers, and Veterans Affairs Clinics. The region is also committed to developing the next generation of healthcare professionals. Optimus Primary is a strategic, collaborative partnership between higher education and healthcare institutions aimed at boosting local physician training programs and retention in Muncie. The program focuses on recruitment, innovative training experiences, healthy lifestyles, and overall excellence in the provision of medical education.

### Education

East Central Indiana stands out as a region dedicated to lifelong learning and educational excellence. Higher learning institutions in the region include Ball State University, Taylor University, Earlham College, Indiana Wesleyan University, Indiana University East, Purdue Polytechnic Institute, Ivy Tech (Marion, Muncie, Richmond), and Bethany Theological Seminary. Outside of colleges and universities, there are also opportunities to develop valuable skills, from cosmetology to welding, at local career centers.

Public K-12 schools in East Central Indiana are supported by the East Central Educational Service Center (ECESC). Established in 1987, the ECESC provides support and services to local school corporations in fourteen counties. Services include providing specialized equipment and programming, cooperative purchasing programs, professional development, and grants to support an innovative approach to public education in East Central Indiana.

### Agriculture

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, East Central Indiana is home to approximately 4,545 farms covering over a million acres. Together these farms sell \$1.13 billion in agricultural products each year, making agriculture a vital part of East Central Indiana's regional economy. Opportunities are emerging to expand the agriculture and agribusiness industry in the region, including creating more value-added agricultural products. Even so, agriculture faces a significant challenge: the need to attract and train young people in the industry. In all eight of the counties in the ECI region, agricultural producers over the age of 64 outnumbered those under the age of 35. For example, in Fayette County, there were only 56 agricultural producers under the age of 35 compared to 211 aged 65 or older, as of 2017.

### Manufacturing

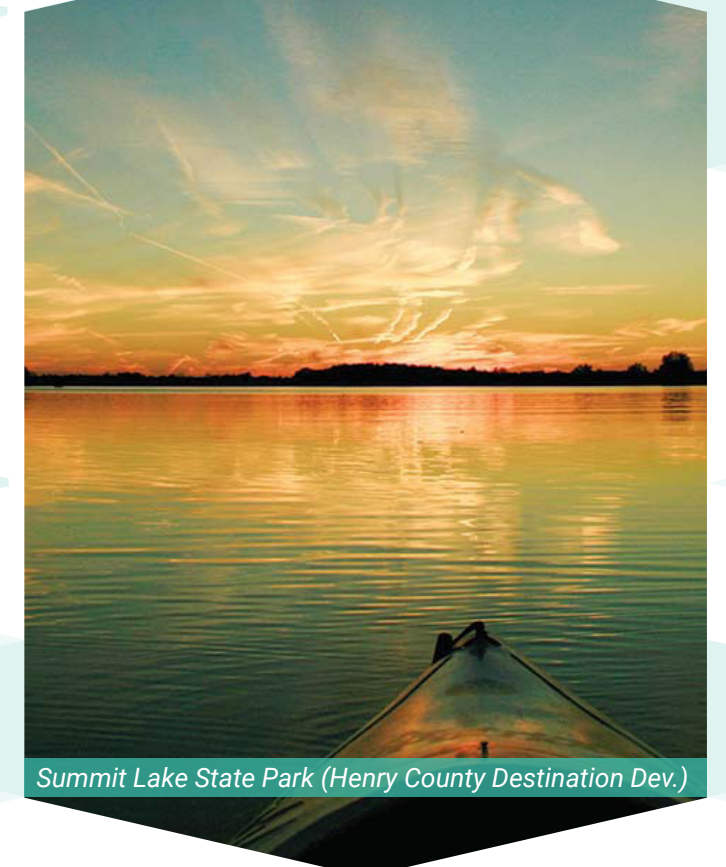
East Central Indiana has a strong manufacturing legacy. Over the last century, the region has produced a variety of products, from mason jars to automobiles. Today, manufacturing is the region's second largest industry, employing approximately 18.6% of residents. Major employers include General Motors, Draper Inc., 3M, Ardagh Group, MPT Magna Powertrain, Progress Rail (Caterpillar), Mursix, Astral Industries, Berry Global, Stant, INTAT, and FCC Indiana. Food processing is also a growing industry with companies like Tyson Foods, Sugar Creek Packing, and Boar's Head operating in the region, along with pet and animal feed companies like Blue Buffalo, Hill's Pet Nutrition, and Purina.

### Outdoor Recreation

Residents and visitors alike can enjoy ample outdoor recreation opportunities in East Central Indiana. The region is home to Summit Lake State Park and the Wilbur Wright Fish & Wildlife Area, as well as several nature preserves, community parks, golf courses, and campgrounds. Trails crisscross the region, connecting cities to small towns. The Cardinal Greenway is the most prominent trail in East Central Indiana. At 62 miles, it is the state's longest trail and part of the Rails to Trails Conservancy Hall of Fame. Other popular trails in the region include the White River Greenway, the Westwood Park Trail, the Honey Creek Trail, and the Sweetser Switch Trail. Boating, fishing, sailing, and other water activities are also available at Prairie Creek Reservoir, Summit Lake Reservoir, the White River, and the Whitewater River.



Ball State University (Delaware County)



Summit Lake State Park (Henry County Destination Dev.)



# County-Based Assets

## Blackford County

Blackford County is the smallest county in the region with a population of 12,139, as of 2021. Communities in Blackford County include Hartford City (the county seat), Montpelier, and Shamrock Lakes. The county's top employers are Blackford County Schools, BRC, 3M, IU Health Blackford, and Petoskey Plastics. The county is home to abundant arts and culture amenities. Annual events in the county, including Hartford City Heritage Days, Montpelier Jamboree Days, Rendezvous on the Reserve, and Civil War Days, celebrate community and preserve history. ArtsPlace operates the Blackford County Arts Center in downtown Hartford City, offering arts and music classes, in addition to public exhibits showcasing the work of living Midwestern artists.

## Delaware County

Delaware County is the most populous county in the region with 112,480 residents, as of 2021. Delaware County is home to the City of Muncie, as well as several smaller communities, including Yorktown, Albany, Chesterfield, Daleville, Eaton, Gaston, and Selma. The county features the highly rated IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital, in addition to other medical centers and community health resources. Higher education opportunities include Ball State University, which offers nearly 200 undergraduate majors and several graduate degrees, and Ivy Tech Muncie, which provides an affordable, yet high quality education across 40 academic programs. Residents and visitors alike can enjoy exhibits, nature trails, educational programs, and community events at Minnetrista Museum and Gardens, bike through charming historic towns along the Cardinal Greenway, or take a swim in the Prairie Creek Reservoir. Top employers are Ball State University, IU Health, Muncie Community Schools, Navient, and Concentrix.

## Fayette County

Fayette County has approximately 23,393 residents, as of 2021. The City of Connersville is the county seat, and the only incorporated community. Connersville is best known for its historical sites and museums, including the Whitewater Valley Railroad. The railroad, which attracts tourists from across Indiana and neighboring states, connects Connersville to Metamora in Franklin County. The railroad offers scenic excursions, including special themed events throughout the year. Fayette County also offers attractive outdoor spaces at beloved city parks, the Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary, Shrader-Weaver Nature Preserve, and along the Nickel Plate Trail. Top employers in Fayette County are Reid Health Connersville, Roots Blower, Stant, Walmart Supercenter, Forge Rack & Dunnage, NOVA Chemicals (coming soon), Fayette County Schools, and the Whitewater Career Center. Connersville is also served by an Ivy Tech Community College satellite location where students can take in-person classes for a variety of academic programs, from nursing to business.

## Grant County

As of 2021, Grant County has 66,802 residents. Communities include Marion (the county seat), Gas City, Jonesboro, Fairmount, Fowlerton, Matthews, Upland, Sweetser, Swayzee, and Van Buren. Grant County is well-served by educational and healthcare resources, including Indiana Wesleyan University, Taylor University, Ivy Tech Marion, Marion Health, and the Marion VA Medical Center. The City of Marion touts a rich arts scene centered around the community's historic downtown. Prominent organizations include the Community School of the Arts, CSA Civic Theater, Marion Arts Commission, and Orchestra Indiana. Destinations centered around the arts include the Gas City Music Center, Kennedy Art Center, and Quilters Hall of Fame. Grant County

also attracts visitors with its unique attractions centered around pop culture icons, including the James Dean Museum and the Garfield Trail. In addition to arts and culture amenities, ample job opportunities make Grant County a desirable place to live and a value part of East Central Indiana. Top employers in Grant County include General Motors, Walmart Distribution Center, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion Health, and the VA Northern Indiana Health Care System.

## Henry County

Henry County has approximately 48,857 residents, as of 2021. New Castle is the county seat. Towns in Henry County include Greensboro, Kennard, Knightstown, Lewisville, Middletown, Mooreland, Mount Summit, Shirley, Spiceland, and several other small, rural communities. The

county is served by Henry Community Health, which provides quality care across a wide range of services and specialties to promote health and well-being. Henry County also benefits from Ivy Tech New Castle, a satellite campus of Ivy Tech Muncie which offers in-person classes for a variety of academic programs, including health sciences programs. Top employers in Henry County are Henry Community Health, New Castle Community Schools, Draper Inc., Boar's Head, and the New Castle Correctional Facility. Popular attractions in Henry County, enjoyed by residents and visitors alike, center around basketball, outdoor recreation, and the arts. These attractions include the Hoosier Gym (filming location of the famed movie *Hoosiers*), the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, Westwood Park, Summit Lake State Park, and the Robert Indiana Arts & Culture District.



Robert Indiana's LOVE Statue (Visit Philadelphia)  
The famous artist was born in Henry County.



## Jay County

Jay County is the second least populous county in East Central Indiana with 20,570 residents, as of 2021. Jay County is home to the City of Portland (the county seat), the City of Dunkirk, as well as the small towns of Bryant, Pennville, Redkey, and Salamonia. Jay County is served by the IU Health Jay Hospital, which provides critical emergency care, as well as preventative and specialized care. The John Jay Center for Learning develops talent in the county by providing traditional college courses, vocational training courses, career planning, training, and certifications. Top employers in Jay County are FCC, Tyson, Ardagh Group, Motherson Sumi Systems, and ATI Forged Products. Standout attractions include the Key Palace Theater, Jay County Campus of Arts Place, and the Loblolly Marsh Nature Preserve.

## Randolph County

Randolph County has a population of 24,681, as of 2021. Winchester is the county seat, and other communities in the county include Farmland, Lynn, Parker City, Ridgeville, and Union City. There are also a few small towns with populations under 500 people. Randolph County is served by the Ascension St. Vincent Randolph Hospital in Winchester, a destination for primary care and specialty care, including women's health, urgent care, and emergency services. Top employers are the Ardagh Group, TOA Winchester, Astral Industries, St. Vincent Hospital, Frank Miller Lumber, and Workhorse. Attractions include Kamp Modoc, Modoc Gardens, Mrs. Wick's Restaurant and Pie Shop (home of Indiana's official state pie), the historic Randolph County Asylum, and the Farmland General Store. The county is also home to several historic downtowns with beautiful architecture, antique stores, and local eateries.

## Wayne County

Wayne County is the second most populous county in the region with 66,588 residents, as of 2021. The City of Richmond is the county seat, but other communities include Boston, Cambridge City, Centerville, Dublin, Fountain City, Hagerstown, Milton, Spring Grove, and several other smaller communities. Wayne County is a hub for higher education and is home to Earlham College, Indiana University East, Purdue Polytechnic Institute, Bethany Theological Seminary, and Ivy Tech Community College. Residents and visitors to Wayne County can enjoy historic downtowns featuring unique shops, beautifully restored homes, cozy eateries, microbreweries, and creative public murals in Cambridge City, Centerville, Hagerstown, and Richmond (the birthplace of recorded jazz music). Outdoor recreation amenities include Cope Environmental Center, Hayes Arboretum, Middlefork Reservoir, the Cardinal Greenway, and several much-adored city parks. Top employers in Wayne County include Reid Health, Richmond Community Schools, Belden, SugarCreek Packing, and Richmond State Hospital. Additionally, Blue Buffalo, the nation's leading natural pet food company, is working to expand operations in Richmond, investing \$200 million to add 169,000 square feet of processing operations and warehouse capacity to their existing plant by the end of 2024.

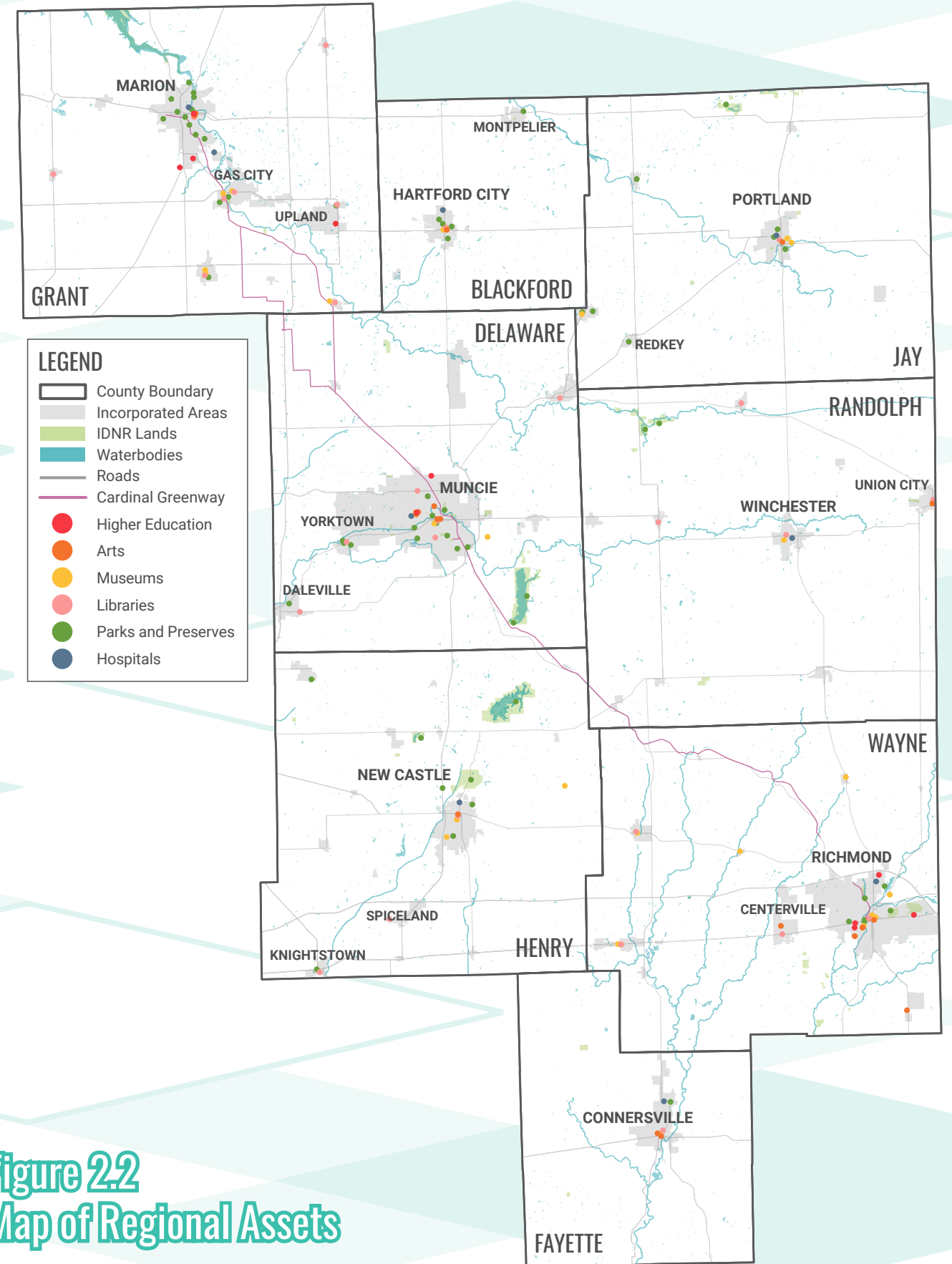


Figure 2.2  
Map of Regional Assets



# State of the Region

East Central Indiana is a region that perseveres. Over the last several decades, the region has faced significant challenges, from industrial decline to the COVID-19 pandemic, each with corresponding demographic and economic shifts. Despite these hurdles, East Central Indiana is committed to forging a path towards regional prosperity.

East Central Indiana includes one metropolitan statistical area, the Muncie Metropolitan Statistical Area, which captures all of Delaware County. The other seven counties in the region are not currently part of a metropolitan statistical area. Even so, from commuting patterns to shopping patterns, these counties are greatly influenced by neighboring metros, including the Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson Metropolitan Statistical Area, the Cincinnati Metropolitan Statistical Area, and the Fort Wayne Metropolitan Statistical Area.



## Population

### Trends

As of 2021, East Central Indiana is home to 375,510 residents, approximately 5.6% of the state's total population. The region has experienced consistent population decline over the last several decades. According to the U.S. Census, Indiana's population increased by 4.7% from 2010 to 2020. At the same time, East Central Indiana's population decreased by 4.1%. Population loss occurred in all counties in the region, ranging from 1.1% in Henry County to 6.4% in Randolph County. Although this trend is concerning, there are exciting opportunities in East Central Indiana to attract new residents and retain the existing population.

The 2020 U.S. Census reports that the median age for East Central Indiana is 41.3, significantly older than the state's median age of 37.8. Delaware County has the youngest population in the region with a median age of 35.7, due largely to the presence of Ball State University and Ivy

Tech Muncie. That said, although Delaware County is home to over 15,000 residents aged 20 to 24 (14% of the total population), the county struggles to retain students post-graduation. There are only about 7,000 residents aged 25 to 29 residing in Delaware County (approximately 6% of the total population). Fayette County and Randolph County are tied for the oldest population with a median age of 42.9.

### Needs

The previous regional development plan established stability as a priority for East Central Indiana. The plan set a goal to boost regional population trends by 11% resulting in a net 0% population change by 2030. In continuation of this goal, the vision of East Central Indiana is to counteract population decline and grow the population. This can be accomplished by enhancing quality of life, quality of place, and quality of opportunity within the region to attract new residents and encourage existing residents to stay. By stabilizing the population in East Central Indiana, our region contributes to the IEDC's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for population growth, which sets the State's annual population growth target at 24,000 people per year.

### Regional Outcomes

- ✦ To counteract population decline, East Central Indiana will increase the annual regional growth rate to 0% or higher by 2031. Assuming population decline occurs at approximately 0.4% annually, as demonstrated from 2010 to 2020, this requires attracting or retaining 1,500 people across the region each year. By 2031, the region will be poised for growth.

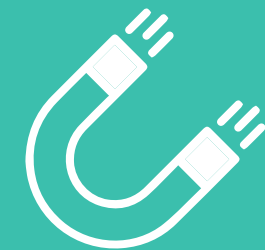
**FIGURE 2.3: EAST CENTRAL INDIANA POPULATION TRENDS**

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
TOTAL POPULATION (2010)	390,578	6,483,802
TOTAL POPULATION (2020)	374,534	6,785,528
TOTAL POPULATION (2021)	375,510	6,751,340
GROWTH RATE (2010-2020)	-4.1%	4.7%
GROWTH RATE (ANNUAL, 2010-2020)	-0.4%	0.5%

## POPULATION GOALS



REACH A POSITIVE, ANNUAL GROWTH RATE



ATTRACT & RETAIN

1,500

PEOPLE ANNUALLY



MAINTAIN A POPULATION OF

375,510

BY 2031



## Education

### Trends

From public universities to private colleges, East Central Indiana is home to twelve higher learning institutions and numerous learning centers. Despite the presence of these institutions, educational attainment is slightly behind the rest of Indiana. Only 89.1 percent of the population aged 25 or older in East Central Indiana has a high school diploma or higher compared to 89.8% for the State of Indiana. The gap is most notable when looking at bachelor’s degrees and graduate degrees. In East Central Indiana, only 19.8% of the population holds a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 27.8% for the State of Indiana. Community leaders and local organizations are dedicated to boosting these numbers. Through regional collaboration, East Central Indiana is committed to creating and promoting new learning and skill-building opportunities for all ages.

### Needs

The previous regional development plan set an aspirational goal of increasing the educational attainment (including the attainment of high school, undergraduate, and graduate degrees) of 9,000 Hoosiers by 2025. East Central Indiana should continue to leverage learning systems to boost educational attainment. By creating a more educated population, the region encourages upwards mobility, while developing the skilled, competitive workforce that employers desire.

To increase educational attainment, community leaders, especially those representing higher learning institutions, should work together to ensure that post-secondary education is attractive and affordable. Through interactive programming and events, middle and high school students should be encouraged to envision their future and make smart investments in their education. Students should be given

opportunities to explore career paths and should feel excited and fully equipped to apply for, enroll in, and complete higher education degree and certificate programs. By boosting the attainment of undergraduate and graduate degrees, East Central Indiana contributes to the IEDC’s Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for educational attainment, which aims for an increase of 3.5% in the share of the population with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

### Regional Outcomes

- ✦ Boost educational attainment in the region by enabling an additional 1,300 people to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher each year. This will result in 25% of residents holding such a degree by 2031.

**FIGURE 2.4:** EAST CENTRAL INDIANA EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AGED 25+ (2021)

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR HIGHER	89.1%	89.8%
ASSOCIATE’S DEGREE	9.3%	9.0%
BACHELOR’S OR HIGHER	19.8%	27.8%

## EDUCATION GOALS

25%



OF THE POPULATION  
(AGED 25 OR OVER)  
**WITH BACHELOR’S DEGREE  
OR HIGHER BY 2031**

INCREASE  
EDUCATIONAL  
ATTAINMENT  
OF

**1,300 HOOSIERS  
ANNUALLY**



5.2%



INCREASE IN THE  
POPULATION WITH A  
BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR  
HIGHER BY 2031





## Housing

### Trends

There are 170,437 housing units in East Central Indiana. Consistent with the State of Indiana, most of the housing units in the region (70%) are owner-occupied. Even so, there is a considerable inventory of renter-occupied housing, representing nearly one-third (30%) of all occupied units. Across the region, Randolph County has the highest percentage of owner-occupied units at 76.7% and Delaware County

has the highest percentage of renter-occupied units at 35.1%. The 2021 American Community Survey reports that 11.9% of homes in the region are vacant, indicating a slightly higher vacancy rate than the State of Indiana at 9.9%. High vacancy is often accompanied by blight.

East Central Indiana generally has older housing stock than the State of Indiana. Approximately 75% of housing units in the region were built before 1980, compared to 56% for the state. According to data collected by the 2020 American Community Survey, less than 10% of homes in the region were built after 1999. In the last two decades, when new housing has been constructed, it has largely been in Delaware, Grant, Wayne, and Henry Counties.

**FIGURE 2.5: EAST CENTRAL INDIANA HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS (2021)**

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
<b>HOUSING UNITS</b>	170,437	2,911,562
<b>OCCUPIED</b>	150,132 (88%)	2,622,601 (90%)
<b>OWNER-OCCUPIED</b>	104,870 (70%)	1,831,953 (70%)
<b>RENTER-OCCUPIED</b>	45,262 (30%)	790,648 (30%)
<b>VACANT</b>	20,305 (12%)	255,633 (10%)

**FIGURE 2.6: EAST CENTRAL INDIANA AGE OF HOUSING STOCK (2020)**

YEAR BUILT	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
<b>1939 OR EARLIER</b>	36,496 (24%)	285,491 (16%)
<b>1940 TO 1959</b>	34,017 (22%)	301,892 (17%)
<b>1960 TO 1979</b>	43,336 (28%)	429,517 (24%)
<b>1980 TO 1999</b>	25,864 (17%)	445,990 (25%)
<b>2000 TO 2009</b>	10,006 (7%)	253,889 (14%)
<b>2010 TO 2013</b>	1,154 (1%)	40,927 (2%)
<b>2014 OR LATER</b>	1,919 (1%)	50,587 (3%)

## Needs

There is a need for new housing development to replace aging housing stock, and to promote regional population growth. Housing development should be varied in terms of housing type and price to appeal to a diverse market of current and future residents. Notably, there is a need for modern multi-family units to appeal to young professionals, quality single-family homes to support the local workforce, and attractive higher-end homes to appeal to managerial-level professionals.

In addition to new development, there is a need for blight elimination and housing rehabilitation to improve community character, enhance safety, and increase the supply of housing across the region. This is especially true in downtown districts and adjacent neighborhoods.

As part of this plan, 3,000 housing units have been proposed, which could be constructed in the next few years with READI support. Building off this momentum, the region should aspire to develop 7,200 housing units by 2031, or 720 housing units per year. Given an average household size of 2.34 for the region, this would support a population increase of over 16,000 residents. Although this number may appear to outpace benchmarks for population growth, new construction is vital to counteract the loss of housing units through blight elimination and encourage continued growth in the coming decades.

## Regional Outcomes

- ✦ Build at least 3,000 housing units with READI support.
- ✦ Build at least 720 housing units per year across the region.

*\*Note: Multiple data sources, including the U.S. Census and American Community Survey, were used to compile the housing data. Although totals may not always add up, percentages were calculated with utmost accuracy to align with their corresponding data source.*

# HOUSING GOALS

BUILD AT LEAST

3,000

HOUSING UNITS WITH READI SUPPORT



BUILD AT LEAST

720

HOUSING UNITS EACH YEAR ACROSS THE REGION





## Economic Statistics

### Trends

East Central Indiana has faced great challenges over the last several decades, from post-industrial decline to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges have had a detrimental effect on the region's economy, stunting growth and impeding recovery. Nonetheless, there is hope that East Central Indiana can rise above these challenges and become a key player in the statewide economy.

As of 2022, approximately 136,384 people were employed in East Central Indiana, or approximately 4.5% of the state's total employment. According to the 2020 American Community Survey, the employed civilian labor force, increased by 0.4% from 2010 to 2020, while the state's labor force grew by 7.3% in the same period. Total employment is on the rise in half of the region's counties but declining in the other half, resulting in relative stability for the region. Employment growth is greatest in Fayette County (7.5% increase), while decline is most prevalent in Blackford County (8.7% decline).

The overall labor force in East Central Indiana is shrinking. From 2010 to 2020, the total residents in the labor force declined by 5.5%, while the state's labor force grew by 3.2%. The labor force is shrinking in all eight counties, but fastest in Blackford County and Jay County. This trend is likely due to a combination of factors, including an aging population and out-migration from the region. The unemployment rate for the region is 5.5%, higher than the State's rate of 4.7%.

Most workers in East Central Indiana both live and work in the eight-county region. This live-work population constitutes approximately 86,946 people. Although, due to the region's proximity to the Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, and Cincinnati metro areas, about 58,378 residents live in the region, but are employed elsewhere. East Central Indiana also brings in 43,378 workers that live outside of the region, primarily in neighboring counties. Approximately 3,155 of these workers commute from Ohio, indicating that there is an opportunity to capture population growth.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the largest industry in the region is Educational Services, Healthcare, and Social Assistance, which employs approximately 27.5% of the labor force. Other notable industries include Manufacturing and Retail Trade. The top 10 employers in East Central Indiana are IU Health, Ball State University, Reid Health, Marion Health, Indiana Wesleyan University, Walmart Distribution Center, GM, Belden, Henry Community Health, and SugarCreek.

The per capita income is significantly lower than the State of Indiana, with the region at \$46,900 and the State at \$51,646 in 2021. Within the region, Jay County has the highest per capita income at \$49,300 and Blackford County has the lowest at \$44,325, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Business Applications by County, from 2010 to 2020, East Central Indiana saw an increase in new business applications of 37.8%, compared to 53.4% for the State of Indiana. Although new business growth occurred at a slower pace than the State, the region continues to spur innovation. In 2022 alone, 2,908 new business applications were filed in the region with the majority coming from Delaware (30.5%), Grant (18.8%), Wayne (16.4%), and Henry (14%) County. Furthermore, in 2021, approximately 7,342 new business establishments were reported in the region, based on data from the Indiana Small Business Development Center (ISBDC). The innovation ecosystem in East Central Indiana faces challenges associated with funding, access to a skilled workforce, and ongoing national and international economic threats.

To overcome these challenges, resources are available across the region to support innovation and entrepreneurship. In Muncie, Innovation Connector helps new entrepreneurs with unique business ideas by supporting and accelerating the creation of successful technology-based and emerging companies. MadJax Makerforce, also in Muncie, is a makerspace designed to encourage creativity and collaboration. MadJax Lab (which offers special equipment, from 3D printers to vinyl cutters), office space, and retail space. Revolving loan funds, façade grants, and staff assistance from dedicated local economic development organizations are also available throughout the eight-county region to support new ideas and business ventures.

**FIGURE 2.7: EAST CENTRAL INDIANA INCOME AND WAGES (2021)**

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
<b>ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME</b>	\$46,900	\$51,646

**FIGURE 2.8: EAST CENTRAL INDIANA NEW BUSINESS APPLICATIONS (2010-2020)**

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	INDIANA
<b>2010</b>	1,628	45,021
<b>2020</b>	2,244	69,041
<b>GROWTH RATE</b>	37.8%	53.4%





### Needs

Paired with efforts to increase educational attainment in the region, East Central Indiana aims to increase income and wages over the next decade. The previous plan aimed to increase median household income and earnings by 7.5% by 2025. The revised benchmark aims to increase per capita income by 47% by 2031. This benchmark was determined by reviewing historic trends for East Central Indiana, and by considering the national average income growth rate. Gains should be made in counties across the region to enhance opportunities for residents, bringing their livelihoods closer to those of their fellow Hoosiers. This increase in economic opportunities aligns with the IEDC's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for per capita income growth, which targets an increase of \$2,750 per year at the state level.

There is also a continued need for innovation in the region. If provided proper support to transform dreams into real business ventures, entrepreneurs can create quality job opportunities that benefit both new and existing residents. The region should strive to catch up to the state's new business application growth rate. To align with the state, there must be a 15.6% increase in new business applications above the current rate for new business growth. This growth rate

is achieved when approximately 3,442 new business applications are submitted in 2031. A realistic benchmark for the region, which pushes East Central Indiana in this direction, is outlined below. The region's attempt to boost new business applications aligns with the IEDC's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for innovation activities, which targets an increase in patent filings, research and development spending, and new business start-ups.

### Regional Outcomes

- ◆ Boost the regional per capita personal income by \$22,043 by 2031, which would represent a 47% increase over the course of the decade.
- ◆ Encourage the filing of 100 additional business applications per year across the region, which would represent a 45% increase in new business applications by 2031.

## ECONOMIC GOALS



### INCOME

**47%** INCREASE IN ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME

**\$22,043** INCREASE IN ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME

**\$68,943** ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME



### NEW BUSINESSES

**+100** APPLICATIONS ANNUALLY

**+1,000** APPLICATIONS (2021-2031)

**45%** APPLICATIONS GROWTH RATE (2031)

**4.5%** INCREASE IN APPLICATIONS GROWTH RATE BY 2031

## Benchmark Regions

Benchmarking is an important tool for assessing and comparing regional performance to achieve continuous improvement. The previous plan outlined three benchmark regions against which to measure progress, including Southwest Kentucky (Bowling Green), North Central Illinois (Dekalb), and North Central Virginia (Harrisonburg). These regions were chosen based on their aspirational achievements and social, economic, and geographic similarities to our eight-county area.

As part of the READI 2.0 planning process, the East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP) selected a new benchmark region following a refined methodology. From a list of 927 metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, four communities were identified. In 1969, each of these communities reported a similar population to the Muncie metro area. However, by 2022, all four communities demonstrated significant population growth, outpacing East Central Indiana. Iowa City, Iowa was ultimately chosen from these four contenders, and the ECIRP met virtually with representatives from Greater Iowa City, Inc. to discuss their growth strategies, best practices, and overall successes.

Greater Iowa City, a 7-county region encompassing and surrounding Iowa City, IA, was selected as the peer community for East Central Indiana. An underrated region, Greater Iowa City is a growing center for creativity and industry. According to the U.S. Census, the top industry is educational services, health care and social assistance, which employs 28.5% of the civilian labor force, compared to 27.5% in East Central Indiana.

Greater Iowa City is home to the University of Iowa (UI) as well as smaller colleges and universities, including Cornell College, Coe College, Mount Mercy University, and Kirkwood Community College. Greater Iowa City is also home to

several hospitals and medical centers, including the UI Hospitals & Clinics, the UI Stead Family Children’s Hospital, and a VA Medical Center. The University of Iowa as well as its medical institutions are strong drivers of population growth and stability in Greater Iowa City. The undergraduate student body is larger than that of Ball State University (14,416) compared to the University of Iowa’s undergraduate student body (22,130). Greater Iowa City’s eds and meds focus, balanced by a diversity of other industries, including manufacturing, retail trade, and arts/entertainment, serves as a positive and aspirational example for East Central Indiana. With an established and growing arts scene, national pull for entertainment acts and Broadway shows, and trails offering cycling and recreational activities, Greater Iowa City represents an attainable, sustainable analogy to how East Central Indiana can focus its strategies for long-term growth.

Boasting a strong and targeted talent attraction website/brand, furnished with a “recruit me” call to action button, Greater Iowa City has been focused and intentional on its talent attraction and remote worker recruitment efforts. Similar to East Central’s Forge Your Path talent attraction brand, Greater Iowa City highlights Quality of Place as its strongest selling point for attracting individuals. Overall, Greater Iowa City would be an excellent peer community, providing East Central Indiana with a region to compare itself to and take inspiration from.

**FIGURE 2.9: BENCHMARK REGIONS ANALYSIS CHART (2021)**

	EAST CENTRAL REGION	GREATER IOWA CITY
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS AND ECONOMICS</b>		
TOTAL POPULATION	375,510	484,349
TOTAL EMPLOYMENT	136,384 (2022)	243,600 (2022)
PER CAPITA INCOME	\$46,900	\$55,502
<b>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>		
POPULATION WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER	49,608 OR 19.8%	118,001 OR 37.2%
<b>HOUSING</b>		
TOTAL HOUSING UNITS	170,437	210,605
TOTAL OCCUPIED HOUSING UNITS	150,132	195,282
TOTAL RENTAL HOUSING UNITS	45,262	57,206
TOTAL OWNER-OCCUPIED HOUSING UNITS	104,870	138,076
<b>INDUSTRY</b>		
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES, HEALTHCARE, AND SOCIAL SERVICES	46,437 OR 27.5%	73,638 OR 28.5%
MANUFACTURING	31,344 OR 18.6%	36,347 OR 14.1%



Downtown Iowa City (UI Office of Strategic Communication)



# Chapter Three



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



# Engaging the Communities

## Building Consensus

This regional plan was developed with the input and support of community members across East Central Indiana. Through a six-month engagement process, over 3,300 participants were encouraged to share their perspective, ideas, and opinions about the future of the eight-county region. Intentional steps were taken to engage students, residents, employers, and community leaders from each county to build regional consensus and promote partnership. Engagement opportunities, which

ranged from a public input survey to stakeholder meetings, allowed the project team to identify regional priorities and challenges. Shaped by abundant feedback, these priorities and challenges evolved to become the vision, goals, and strategies for East Central Indiana. United by a shared vision for the future, this process is intended to empower the region to implement change and emerge as a thriving network of communities.

This planning process represents the most recent effort to convene local and regional stakeholders. East Central Indiana has been working to build regional consensus since the formation of the East Central Indiana Development Council in 1984. Since then, the region has come together several times to learn from one another, tackle shared challenges, and develop regionally impactful solutions. This recent effort represents the most comprehensive, far-reaching engagement effort to date.

## Steering Committee

The Steering Committee consisted of a representative from each county's local economic development organization (LEDO), accompanied by another leader from that county. With two representatives from each county, this ensured that all eight counties were equally represented in guiding discussions. In addition to LEDOs, participants included representatives from local community foundations, chambers of commerce, and municipalities. When agreeing to participate in the planning process, Steering Committee members pledged to act in the best interest of the region.

The Steering Committee met every 1-2 months throughout the planning process to review engagement results and draft materials. Steering Committee members provided insight into the region, helped connect the project team to stakeholders, and promoted engagement opportunities to maximize reach.



Delaware County Workshop June 23, 2023

### TIMELINE OF ENGAGEMENT



**JUNE**  
SC MEETING #1  
COUNTY WORKSHOPS



**JULY**  
SC MEETING #2



**AUGUST**  
REGIONAL WORKSHOP #1  
PUBLIC INPUT SURVEY



**SEPTEMBER**  
SC MEETING #3  
YOUTH SURVEY



**OCTOBER**  
SC MEETING #4  
REGIONAL WORKSHOP #2  
STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS



**NOVEMBER**  
STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS



**DECEMBER**  
SC MEETING #5



# County Workshops

From June 13th to June 30th, the project team facilitated workshops in each of the region's eight counties to engage elected officials, anchor institutions, major employers, and other community leaders. Participants were asked to envision the future of their county, identify barriers preventing them from achieving their vision and aspirations, and outline actions that could be taken to overcome these barriers. Across the region, there were 217 participants in the county workshops. Workshops consisted of a brief presentation followed by three group exercises.

## Regional Priorities

As part of the workshops, participants were asked to envision the future of their community and share key elements from this vision. Across all eight counties, the following elements appeared again and again, indicating that they are priorities for the East Central region.

### 1. Quality of Life

Quality of life was a top priority in all eight county workshops. Workshop participants from across the region defined quality of life as a desire to create people-focused communities where residents thrive. When discussing quality of life, participants emphasized the importance of healthy communities (with improved access to nutritious food, healthcare, and recreation), social services (such as mental health and addiction rehabilitation), and attractions (including restaurants, retail, and entertainment).

### 2. Childcare and Education

Workshop participants indicated that childcare and education are a top priority for East Central Indiana. Participants expressed concern that childcare capacity at the county-level is insufficient and fails to support working families. To expand childcare access, participants suggested increasing wages for early childhood educators to incentivize young people to pursue this career path. Participants were also interested in increasing educational attainment, expanding opportunities to learn a skilled trade, and promoting educational excellence by developing innovative learning opportunities at the K-12 level to connect students to careers.





### 3. Quality of Opportunity

Workshop participants highlighted the importance of quality of opportunity. Here, quality of opportunity is defined as a holistic, people-focused approach to economic development which emphasizes access to education, workforce training, and job opportunities. These opportunities help uplift current residents, attract new residents, and develop a skilled workforce for employers. Quality of opportunity also includes the opportunity for entrepreneurs and innovators to start their own business in the region with support from local government, economic development organizations, and other small business owners.



Fayette County Workshop June 28, 2023

**FOCUS AREAS AS REGIONAL PRIORITIES**

-   
IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE
-   
EXPAND CHILDCARE & EDUCATION
-   
IMPROVE QUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY
-   
INCREASE HOUSING OPTIONS
-   
GROW THE POPULATION



#### 4. Housing

Housing stock in East Central Indiana is aging. According to the 2020 American Community Survey, approximately 75% of homes in the eight-county region were built before 1980. Consequently, there is concern that homes are not keeping up with the needs and desires of homeowners and prospective buyers. To retain and attract residents, workshop participants indicated the need for quality residential development. Workshop participants suggested developing a range of housing options, from single-family to multi-family units, at various price points. Participants also indicated a need to address blight and abandonment, especially in downtown areas.

#### 5. Population Growth

Workshop participants indicated an interest in retaining current residents and attracting new residents to East Central Indiana, especially young professionals, and young families. Participants suggested that pursuing the other identified priorities, from enhancing quality of life to developing affordable housing, may help grow the region's population. Additionally, participants noted that marketing existing assets at the regional level will bring new people to the area.



Grant County Workshop June 14, 2023



Wayne County Workshop June 13, 2023



Randolph County Workshop June 21, 2023



## Regional Challenges

Workshop participants were also asked to identify challenges facing their county. From their insight, the project team identified challenges at the regional level.

### 1. Funding Gaps

Funding was identified as a challenge in all eight county workshops. Workshop participants indicated that public funds can be difficult to obtain due to a limited tax base, competition with other regions for state and federal funding, grant obligations, and matching fund requirements. Participants noted that private investment can be just as difficult to obtain. Investors may be reluctant to spend their money in East Central Indiana due to the region's population trends. Participants expressed concern that investors are taking their money to more populated counties in other parts of the state.

### 2. Poor Attitude/Mindset

In nearly every workshop, participants identified negative mindset as a barrier holding their community back. Facets of this negative mindset include a resistance to change, fear of the unknown, lack of trust, lack of community pride, and apathy. Participants called for a drastic shift in attitude, and for community leaders to come together and aspire towards great things.

By engaging in the planning process, positive momentum has already been created. Participants have expressed a renewed hope for the future, and there is widespread belief that a READI award will further fuel this momentum.

### 3. Lack of Unified Vision and Coordination

Participants indicated that their community is not united by a single vision or focus. Instead, organizations and entities address competing priorities, spreading resources thin rather than concentrating efforts on targeted issues. Even when multiple organizations and entities address the same issue, many participants complained of duplicative efforts. Participants also expressed concern that politics, silos, and fractured leadership were dividing organizations, towns, cities, and counties within the region. Overall, workshop participants emphasized the need for a coordinated vision, collaboration, and enhanced communication at the county and regional level.

Through this planning effort, the region has already taken a step in the right direction. This plan, and the shared vision it outlines, are helping guide change in East Central Indiana.

### 4. Insufficient Marketing of County Assets

Workshop participants indicated that county assets aren't being marketed sufficiently. Residents may not know what is available in their own county, let alone what attractions, amenities, and resources can be found in neighboring counties. Workshop participants called for marketing campaigns at the county-level with seamless integration into regional marketing efforts. By successfully marketing East Central Indiana's assets, participants hope to enhance quality of life for residents, create opportunities for collaboration, and attract new residents and visitors.

Equipped with the Forge Your Path Talent Attraction Initiative, East Central Indiana is prepared to tackle this challenge. Forge Your Path branding was used throughout the planning process to help create strategic alignment. Moving forward, this tool can be used to market county assets, and reinforce regionalism.



Henry County Workshop June 23, 2023

## KEY CONCERNS AS REGIONAL CHALLENGES



LACKING FUNDS



PERPETUATING POOR ATTITUDE



LACKING VISION & COORDINATION



MARKETING ASSETS



# Regional Workshops

The project team held two regional workshops at the Alumni Center in Muncie, Indiana.

## Regional Workshop 1

The first regional workshop on August 15th, 2023 focused on building consensus around regional priorities. There were 107 attendees, including several individuals who had participated in the county workshops in June. The regional workshop began with a brief presentation which provided an overview of the READI initiative and summarized the results of the county workshops. Following the presentation, participants took part in fast-paced, energetic discussions at their tables about the five priorities. Participants were asked whether they agreed with the outlined regional priorities.

Based on feedback from workshop participants, the project team adjusted the regional priorities for East Central Indiana. The regional priorities were refined into the four priority categories: Quality of Life, Housing & Infrastructure, Childcare & Support for Families, Education & Opportunity.

## Regional Workshop 2

The second regional workshop on October 25th, 2023 focused on building consensus around the region's vision, goals, and strategies. There were 105 attendees, many of whom had participated in previous steps of the engagement process. The regional workshop began with a short video highlighting successful projects from READI 1.0. The project team then facilitated a light-hearted opening activity, shared project milestones, and provided engagement figures. The bulk of the workshop involved sharing the vision statement, goals, and strategies, all of which were carefully refined based on feedback from the Steering Committee. Spirits were high and draft content was well received. There was consensus among workshop participants that the plan was moving in the right direction. The regional workshop concluded with a call for projects, designed to help the project team understand available opportunities in East Central Indiana. To wrap up the evening, participants were encouraged to ask questions about the call for projects in a Q&A session with the project team.



Regional Workshop 2 October 25, 2023



### Quality of Life

There was general consensus that the region should prioritize quality of life. Quality of life is the desire to create people-focused communities where residents thrive. Quality of life investments should benefit the health and well-being of residents, promote tourism, and support vibrant downtowns.



### Housing & Infrastructure

Workshop participants were in full agreement that the region should prioritize housing. This will necessitate developing a range of housing options, from single-family to multi-family units, at various price points. Due to its connection to the housing problem, the project team also lumped infrastructure into this priority.



### Childcare & Support for Families

Workshop participants felt that childcare and education should be split into two separate priorities. Consequently, childcare and support for families became a priority of its own. This priority includes expanding access to childcare, solving the staffing issue at childcare facilities, and ensuring that students are prepared for K-12 education.



### Education & Opportunity

From conversations at the regional workshop, it became clear that education pairs nicely with quality of opportunity. This priority represents the need to connect residents to high-paying, satisfying jobs through education and training, as well as the need for traditional economic development efforts to attract and retain employers and job opportunities in the region.



# Stakeholder Meetings

The project team facilitated 12 stakeholder meetings with 115 participants from across the region to:

1. Gather feedback on the vision, goals, and strategies for the regional development plan.
2. Thoroughly identify assets, barriers, and opportunities in the region.

**FIGURE 3.1: STAKEHOLDER MEETING TOPICS OF DISCUSSION**

OVERARCHING TOPIC	ASSOCIATED STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS
LOCAL GOVERNMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ City Leadership</li> <li>✦ Town Leadership</li> <li>✦ County Leadership</li> </ul>
EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Higher Education and Career Centers</li> <li>✦ Early Childhood and K-12 Education</li> </ul>
QUALITY OF LIFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Hospitals and Community Health</li> <li>✦ Greenways and Recreation</li> </ul>
QUALITY OF PLACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Housing</li> <li>✦ Downtown Development</li> </ul>
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Entrepreneurs &amp; Chambers of Commerce</li> </ul>
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Foundations</li> </ul>
OTHER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Virtual meeting for participants unable to attend their assigned meeting.</li> </ul>

Each meeting had the same agenda, which was designed to mimic the second regional workshop. Following introductions, the project team provided a brief overview of the READI 2.0 process, including public engagement highlights. The project team then shared the vision, goals, and strategies for the regional plan. After reviewing this information with attendees, the project team facilitated a discussion on assets and barriers in East Central Indiana. The meetings concluded with a call for projects.

The results of the stakeholder meetings align with the vision, goals, and strategies outlined by the project team. Across all 12 discussions, the following themes were prominent: regional collaboration, education and workforce development, childcare, quality of life, and communication and storytelling.



Regional Workshop 1 July 15, 2023




Regional Workshop 2 October 25, 2023



# Surveys

## Public Input Survey

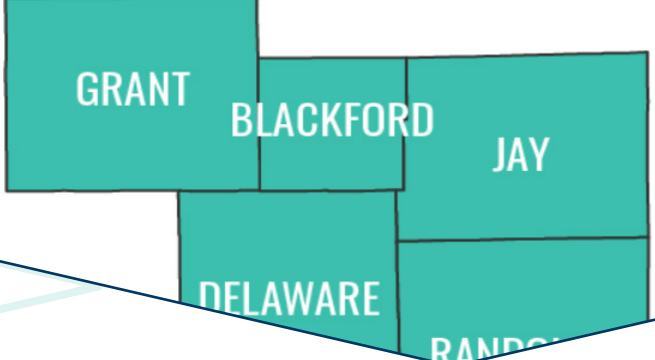
The public input survey was open from August 15th to September 10th. During this time, the survey generated 1,058 responses. Responses were well distributed across counties and age groups, with the exception that Wayne County garnered more responses than any other county. Wayne County residents were eager to participate, making up over a third (35.5%) of responses. Young adults were also underrepresented in the public input survey. Only 11.5% of respondents were between the age of 18 and 24. Most respondents (56.6%) live and work in the region.



### East Central Indiana READI 2.0 Public Input Survey

The East Central Indiana Regional Partnership (ECIRP) is seeking input to help our region develop a strong strategic investment plan to ensure that we receive our fair share of \$500 million dollars available through the State's READI program. Thank you in advance for investing your time to complete this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

The ECIRP READI region includes the counties of Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph and Wayne.



## PUBLIC INPUT SURVEY 1,058 RESPONSES

### REGIONAL STRENGTHS

- COST OF LIVING
- ARTS & CULTURE
- BICYCLE/PEDESTRIAN TRAILS
- FAMILY-FRIENDLY/SUPPORTIVE
- OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

### REGIONAL WEAKNESSES

- HOUSING OPTIONS
- ENTERTAINMENT OPTIONS
- ACCESS TO CHILDCARE
- DINING & SHOPPING OPTIONS
- YOUTH ACTIVITIES/ENGAGEMENT

EAST CENTRAL INDIANA IS A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE...

**65.7%**

OF RESPONDENTS "AGREE" OR "STRONGLY AGREE"

EAST CENTRAL INDIANA IS A GREAT PLACE TO RAISE A FAMILY...

**66.7%**

OF RESPONDENTS "AGREE" OR "STRONGLY AGREE"

### WHATS MISSING FROM EAST CENTRAL INDIANA?

1. STRONG EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION
2. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OPTIONS
3. DRUG/ALCOHOL REHABILITATION
4. MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS
5. ENGAGED CITIZENS WITH POSITIVE OUTLOOKS
6. AWARENESS AND COMPASSION TOWARDS DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION


**59.6%**  
AGREE THAT THERE IS A NEED TO DEVELOP **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES** AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

**77.5%**  
AGREE THAT THERE IS A NEED FOR MORE WORKFORCE **DEVELOPMENT & SKILLS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES**



## Youth Survey

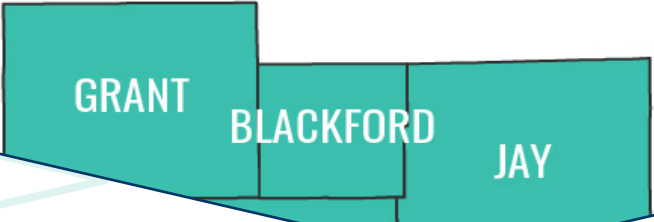
The youth survey, available from September 14th to November 10th, generated 1,720 responses. The survey was distributed to high schools and colleges throughout East Central Indiana. Responses were primarily from Delaware (59.1%), Henry (16.2%), and Jay (11.7%) counties. Most survey participants (81.3%) were between the ages of 15 and 21. Most respondents live (81.3%) and attend school (76.4%) in the region.



### East Central Indiana READI 2.0 Youth Survey

You are the future of East Central Indiana. We need your help to shape the community and get our share of Indiana's READI 2.0 funding. In 2021, Indiana created the READI program to encourage economic growth. Regions across the state competed for a share of \$500 million to support local projects and programs. Our 8 county region received \$15 million, but we can do better. To develop a strong plan, we want to know what you enjoy about the region and what you think could be improved. Thank you for taking time to complete this survey! We appreciate your feedback.

The ECIRP READI region includes the counties of Blackford, Delaware, Fayette, Grant, Henry, Jay, Randolph and Wayne.



## YOUTH SURVEY 1,720 RESPONSES

ONLY **21%**

OF RESPONDENTS ENVISIONED THEMSELVES LIVING IN EAST CENTRAL INDIANA **IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS**

**36.4%**

OF RESPONDENTS **COULD NOT** SEE THEMSELVES STAYING IN THE REGION

**42.6%** OF RESPONDENTS **WERE NOT SURE** WHERE THEY WOULD BE **IN 10 YEARS**



FACTORS **MOTIVATING RESPONDENTS TO STAY** IN THE REGION:

- CLOSE TO **FRIENDS/FAMILY** (51.9%)
- JOB OPPORTUNITIES** (29.4%)
- SMALL-TOWN **CHARM** (24%)
- CLOSE TO **SIGNIFICANT OTHER** (18.6%)
- HOUSING** OPTIONS (16.5%)



FACTORS **MOTIVATING RESPONDENTS TO LEAVE** THE REGION:

- \* **JOB OPPORTUNITIES** (50.7%)
- ENTERTAINMENT** OPTIONS (28.1%)
- LACK OF CITY LIFE (27.4%)
- HOUSING** OPTIONS (25.3%)
- SAFETY (16.2%)
- DIVERSITY (16.2%)

\* LESS THAN HALF (40.8%) OF RESPONDENTS SEE FUTURE JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEMSELVES IN THE REGION. 37.6% WERE NOT SURE.

TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAY, SURVEY RESPONDENTS SUGGEST...

- 1** EXPANDING **JOB OPPORTUNITIES** (55.8%)
- 2** EXPANDING **ENTERTAINMENT OPTIONS** INCLUDING FESTIVALS/CONCERTS (48.2%)
- 3** INCREASING **HOUSING OPTIONS**, INCLUDING RENTALS (41.9%)
- 4** IMPROVING **DOWNTOWN** (41.3%)
- 5** IMPROVING **SAFETY** IN THE REGION (38.8%)



# Chapter Four



## DEVELOPING A STRATEGY



# Developing a Strategy

## The East Central Indiana Vision

“ East Central Indiana aspires to be a welcoming region in which new and existing residents are invited to be their authentic selves and create a life that matters. Backed by community resources, residents are empowered to forge their own path to success. There are three elements that serve as the backbone for East Central Indiana’s vision: a mosaic of communities, innovative eds and meds institutions, and amenities that enable residents to thrive. These three elements encapsulate the region’s strengths, while also providing a focus for the future. ”



Delaware County Workshop June 23, 2023

## REALIZING THE VISION WITH...



### A Mosaic of Communities

The region is made up of diverse communities ranging in size and character, from rural communities like Redkey to metros like Muncie. To leverage the unique perspectives, assets, and opportunities our region has to offer, East Central Indiana is committed to collaboration across sectors and scales. Our towns, cities, and counties understand that we are stronger together, and can learn from one another. When opportunities to work together arise, our region steps up.



### Innovative Eds and Meds

The region is home to several higher education institutions and hospitals which provide transformative educational opportunities and critical health services to rural and underserved communities. To support the needs of these anchor institutions to fill high-wage positions, East Central Indiana is committed to talent development and talent attraction.



### Amenities That Enable Residents to Thrive

The region leverages existing assets in outdoor recreation, arts and culture, and family-owned small businesses to enhance quality of life for residents. Residents are further supported by a commitment to increase educational attainment, expand access to childcare, and revitalize historic downtowns. By expanding access to valuable amenities, East Central Indiana enables residents to thrive.

By capitalizing on each of these distinct elements, East Central Indiana stands out as a desirable place to live and work, a place that both attracts and retains talent. When pursued, this vision should manifest in population growth and regional prosperity.

# Regional Investment Strategy

To support the State of Indiana in its efforts to accelerate economic growth and help forge a path to regional prosperity, East Central Indiana has identified four overarching priorities. Each priority is accompanied by a goal and a complementary set of strategies. These strategies are closely tied to projects and initiatives designed to enhance quality of life, place, and opportunity, enabling the eight-county region to both retain and attract talent.



## Quality of Life

Stabilize the region's population and encourage growth through investments that directly benefit the health and well-being of residents, promote tourism, and support vibrant downtowns.



## Housing & Infrastructure

Stimulate the development of quality housing in the region to create thriving neighborhoods that appeal to both current and future residents.



## Childcare & Support for Families

Position the region as a great place to raise a family, and attract employers seeking a robust workforce, by investing in quality, affordable childcare.



## Education & Opportunity

Enhance the upward mobility of residents and promote regional prosperity by developing talent, supporting innovation, and attracting well-paying jobs to the region.





## Quality of Life

Stabilize the region's population and encourage growth through investments that directly benefit the health and well-being of residents, promote tourism, and support vibrant downtowns.

In the public input survey conducted as part of the regional engagement process, the majority of respondents (65.7%) agreed that East Central Indiana is a great place to live. Community members remarked on the region's affordability, family-friendliness, arts and culture amenities, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Even with these assets, the region struggles to retain and attract talent. Only 21% of youth survey respondents envisioned themselves living in East Central Indiana in the next decade. Many of the factors motivating residents to leave center around quality-of-life investments.

The Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) defines quality of life projects as those that impact the well-being and health of residents. These projects are diverse and comprehensive. Quality of life investments approach prosperity from multiple angles, including tourism, arts, culture, healthcare, and active recreation. Building off its current strengths, East Central Indiana can boost quality of life by improving the health and well-being of residents, promoting tourism, and supporting vibrant downtowns.

East Central Indiana is a region with outstanding community health assets, but relatively poor health outcomes. In 2020, the average county in East Central Indiana had a health ranking of 83 out of 92 (with 92 being the lowest performing county in the state), according to the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (CHR&R) program

from the University of Wisconsin Public Health Institute. Seven of eight counties in the region ranked among the least healthy counties in Indiana (i.e., in the lowest 0 – 25%). Across the board, quality of life indicators for the region were lower than for the rest of Indiana. On average, adults in East Central Indiana reported that their physical health was poor on 4.4 of the previous 30 days, compared to 4.2 for the State of Indiana. Adults in the region also reported that their mental health was poor an average of 4.8 of the previous 30 days, compared to 4.7 at the state level.

From 2020 to 2023, health rankings improved in four counties, remained the same in two counties, and declined in two counties. Poor mental health days increased in all eight counties, and adult obesity rates increased or remained the same in each county. Health outcomes are also threatened by the loss of inpatient and emergency services at IU Health Blackford in Hartford City, as of November 2023. To support the health and well-being of current and future residents, East Central Indiana must preserve existing health services, especially in rural areas. The region should support community members by expanding access to mental health and drug/alcohol rehabilitation services. The region should also continue to invest in parks and trail networks to expand access to exercise opportunities. Active recreation is vital to combat obesity, promote wellness, and encourage socialization.

As the gateway to eastern Indiana, the region attracts visitors from Ohio and beyond. East Central Indiana is also home to unique attractions, from Minnetrista Museum and Gardens to the Whitewater Valley Railroad. During county workshops, community members stressed the importance of marketing current assets, while encouraging the development of new regional destinations. There is a need for enriching activities in activated public spaces and at engaging private venues. To attract visitors and retain residents, East Central Indiana will support new entertainment, dining, and shopping opportunities.

These enriching new activities will center around the region's many historic downtowns. During workshops, community members were proud to share downtown revitalization success stories, while acknowledging the need for continued improvement efforts. Many downtowns need façade improvements, beautification initiatives, and business attraction and support efforts. New businesses should appeal to all ages, but especially young adults, who represent the future of East Central Indiana. While there is a need to preserve small-town character, there is also a desire to introduce nightlife into the heart of these historic downtowns. Through this multi-faceted approach, the East Central region can bring new vibrancy to these charming communities.

## QUALITY OF LIFE STRATEGIES

- ✦ Market existing regional attractions and encourage the development of new arts and culture, recreation, retail, and culinary destinations.
- ✦ Revitalize historic downtowns through façade, structure, and streetscape improvements, as well as the introduction of new businesses, including nightlife.
- ✦ Advocate for the preservation of existing rural health services.
- ✦ Enhance pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to encourage healthy lifestyles and provide alternative transportation options.
- ✦ Enhance existing parks and trails and consider opportunities to develop new outdoor recreation amenities.
- ✦ Expand access to mental health resources in the region.
- ✦ Expand access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation services in the region.



## Housing and Infrastructure

Stimulate the development of quality housing in the region to create thriving neighborhoods that appeal to both current and future residents.

East Central Indiana faces significant challenges regarding housing. Existing housing stock is aging. According to data from the 2020 American Community Survey, 75% of housing units in the region were built before 1980, compared to 56% for the State of Indiana. Fewer than 10% of homes in the region were built after 1999. To make matters worse, a series of economic downturns, from post-industrial decline to the COVID-19 pandemic, have left many East Central neighborhoods scarred by blight and abandonment.

Students, workers, and residents of East Central Indiana further indicated that housing is an issue across all eight counties. Public input survey participants selected housing as a top weakness for the region. Furthermore, approximately 41.9% of youth survey respondents indicated that more housing options were needed to motivate them to stay in East Central Indiana.

Overall, new housing stock has failed to keep pace with demand, nor has it provided sufficient options to appeal to young professionals. Consequently, employers struggle to recruit staff who cannot find suitable homes and young professionals choose to start their careers elsewhere. To solve these problems, East Central Indiana must support the development of quality housing products at a range of prices by investing in infrastructure improvements, mitigating blight, and encouraging responsible homeownership.

### HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGIES

- ✦ Develop quality workforce housing across the region.
- ✦ Develop attractive rental options that appeal to young professionals.
- ✦ Invest in infrastructure improvements to spur housing development.
- ✦ Mitigate blight and encourage context-appropriate infill development.
- ✦ Encourage property maintenance and responsible homeownership in existing neighborhoods to instill community pride.



Greater Muncie Habitat for Humanity (Delaware County)





## Childcare and Support for Families

Position the region as a great place to raise a family, and attract employers seeking a robust workforce, by investing in quality, affordable childcare.

East Central Indiana lacks sufficient access to affordable, high-quality childcare. On the public input survey, 45.3% of respondents rated access to childcare as 'poor' or 'very poor' for the eight-county region. Data from Brighter Futures Indiana, collected in September 2023, confirms that childcare is a regional problem. Licensed facilities in East Central Indiana have the capacity to support fewer than half (49.3%) of children in the region who may need care. This discrepancy in care is most prevalent in Blackford County, where only 17.7% of children can be served, and Jay County, where only 19.5% of children are able to receive the care they need in a licensed facility.

Scarcity of care puts a strain on families and holds children back. Childcare is vitally important to a robust, inclusive workforce. Without it, parents, especially women, may have to stay home, sacrificing income and career opportunities. Parents should have the choice, and the support, to send their child to a qualified center, if they so desire. Early childhood education also plays a key role in future academic success. Students that obtain sufficient care and instruction at an early age are more prepared for kindergarten, elementary school, and beyond.

Fortunately, the region has already made moves to tackle childcare issues. In READI 1.0, the East Central Indiana Talent Collaborative (ECITC) developed a birth to five Regional Training, Resource, and Advocacy Connector (TRAC) to combat regional issues. Once fully implemented, the TRAC will employ professionals to focus on leadership and advocacy, public-facing communication, and training for ECL professionals in East Central Indiana. An existing partnership with Ball State University will be leveraged to host this initiative.

The TRAC's goals include the identification of gaps and limitations in early care, training early care providers, and advocating for the needs of the Early Care and Learning Industry. In support of these goals, its primary work will include hiring Early Care and Learning professionals to leadership and advocacy roles.

The TRAC program will be a critical resource as East Central Indiana pursues strategies centered around the well-being of children and families.

### CHILDCARE AND SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES STRATEGIES

- ✦ Increase wages to attract more skilled professionals to early childhood education.
- ✦ Increase childcare capacity by encouraging local employers, schools, and churches to offer childcare services.
- ✦ Develop new, stand-alone childcare centers offering quality, affordable services.
- ✦ Develop a pipeline of childcare workers by supporting the attainment of degrees and certificates in early childhood education.







## Education and Opportunity

Enhance the upward mobility of residents and promote regional prosperity by developing talent, supporting innovation, and attracting well-paying jobs to the region.

East Central Indiana is uniquely positioned to develop a talented workforce, and to retain that workforce by connecting them to satisfying, well-paying jobs. The region stands out for its concentration of universities and colleges, including Ball State University, Taylor University, Earlham College, Indiana Wesleyan University, Indiana University East, Purdue Polytechnic Richmond, Bethany Theological Seminary, and Ivy Tech Community College. These institutions are known for their excellence in preparing students for successful careers in healthcare, education, and advanced manufacturing, vital positions

which the region and state depend upon. Despite having great educational resources, as of 2021, only 19.8% of adults in East Central Indiana had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27.8% at the state level. Educational attainment is highly tied to economic opportunity. Consequently, the annual per capita income in East Central Indiana is nearly \$5,000 less than it is for the State of Indiana. There is a need to leverage these institutions to increase educational attainment throughout East Central Indiana, and to increase awareness of education as a pathway to upwards mobility.

In addition to boosting educational attainment, there is a need to expand job opportunities in East Central Indiana. Youth survey respondents selected job opportunities as the top motivating factor for leaving the region and expanding job opportunities as the top strategy to encourage young people to stay. Less than half of respondents (40.8%) felt that there were future job opportunities for them in the region. Boosting job opportunities in East Central Indiana will require traditional economic development efforts, including business attraction, retention, and expansion at the county level, as well as more inventive approaches. During workshops, community members called for dedicated spaces to support collaboration and innovation, including co-working spaces, makerspaces, and community kitchens. These spaces provide a physical location, as well as the guidance and technical support, to launch a new business, whether a tech firm or a restaurant. To encourage the creation of new businesses, East Central Indiana should build off the efforts of local government, business incubators, small business centers in the region to foster innovation and entrepreneurship.

By increasing educational attainment and expanding job opportunities, East Central Indiana makes a commitment to quality of opportunity in the region. Quality of opportunity, according to the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), refers to economic opportunities for current and future residents. By supporting residents in their pursuit of a satisfying, well-paying career, East Central Indiana elevates its workforce and promotes regional economic growth.



Taylor University (Grant County)

### EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY STRATEGIES

- ✦ Increase awareness of existing educational resources and skills training opportunities as pathways to well-paying jobs in East Central Indiana.
- ✦ Connect recent college graduates to satisfying career opportunities in the region.
- ✦ Create dedicated spaces to encourage innovation and collaboration, such as co-working spaces, makerspaces, and community kitchens.
- ✦ Encourage the creation of new businesses through financing and technical support.
- ✦ Invest in quality of life and quality of place improvements to attract jobs and talent.