

Focus Group Report
Inter-Governmental Cooperation
October 29, 2002
The Horizon Project

Focus for this group

Intergovernmental cooperation for Elkhart County - how to develop and implement countywide plans and have a community-wide effort.

Composition

This group included 15 persons. Fourteen are leaders in city and county government and one is a business owner.

Vision for the future – governmental issues

- **Need a county strategic plan.**
- **Land use planning:** control urban sprawl and growth; use an area plan commission concept – one advisory body over the county, and the cities of Goshen, and Elkhart. The plan commissions are advisory in nature; city and county governments make ultimate decisions. Our plan commissions are not aware of some issues. The county plan commission focuses on the issues at hand rather than long-range planning.
- **Improve land use:** develop policies so that no lots are sold, unless it is 80 acres that are subdivided. Now we have planning by auctioneer; the 3-acre pattern is a waste. We have to learn to live closer together. We have talked about it for a long time. It has been a county legislative issue since 1977. People in the county want city services. St. Joe County has a 20-acre rule. Cities are losing residents and the counties are gaining. We should require subdivision of all parcels.
- **SM4 storm water management:** this can be a catalyst for intergovernmental cooperation; establish a unified permit with county and cities joining in; other things could start to spin off, like joint building inspection of sites and runoff inspections. Make changes so that there are not so many permit entities. Cities and the county could share these processes. It would save money and avoid duplication.
- **Political action:** direct communication with the state legislature; tax and revenue issues; bring federal dollars to the county.

Vision for the future – other issues

- **Human capital:** strengthen workforce education to develop skilled employees; some companies can't find skilled employees; all companies in the county share a common workforce.
- **Transportation:** get workers to job sites; poor workers do not have cars. Could companies work together? Have a central pooling place and share transportation – like driving the Amish to work locations.
- **Education:** important for where people live. People are moving to Northwood, Northridge, and Penn. Schools are the greatest magnates. How to make the schools more equal. 49% of housing stock in Elkhart is rentals. 23% of families are single parents. Our schools suffer. The parents who can move out of Elkhart, do. Middlebury will spend 70 million on new schools. Nappanee has a harder time coming up with the money.

- **Families:** Put the emphasis on families. It is not the teachers and the school systems. Need to get the parents involved in the schools. Many kids do not have a family life. Beck Elementary School had 100% turnover in 1999. This is an uneducated underclass. 93% of juveniles in crime are boys without a father.

Major Concerns

- **Need for shared vision:** not doing well at creating a vision and knowing how to guide the county. We meet the challenges of today, but not the challenge of the future. With the current structure of county government it is hard to know where power is concentrated. It is a very decentralized model of government. We work around an inefficient form of government.
- **Urban sprawl:** county roads with so many houses. There are neighborhoods out in the county and they have no sewer and water.

Regional improvement strategies

- **Regional perspective:** we are a regional economic engine competing with Chicago and Ft. Wayne.
- **Regional strategy:** individual counties have been good with economic development. Now we need to go to the next level –collectively entice industries to come into our region. We need to have the same policies, rather than competing with each other.

Better ways for governmental entities to work together

- **Sharing revenues and services between units of government:** combine and merge services, such as code enforcement. There is pressure in the county to increase services, like picking up the leaves. The county needs to increase services and increase taxes. We are moving toward a move even playing field.
- **Consolidating services:** the 911 Center and emergency management is centralized. This is going to happen in more areas. We should cherry pick the issues and set the example for integrating services. Emergency dispatch is one that needs to be integrated. How many police and fire departments do we need? County law enforcement is slow to cover the whole county. Nappanee could provide law enforcement to the southwest part of the county.
- **Unit government:** Indianapolis was hugely successful with unit government. It is a big factor in their efforts to reinvest in the downtown.

Areas for Action Planning Teams

- **Land use:** subdivisions and development in rural areas.
- **Economic develop**
- **Worker issues:** training and transportations.
- **Family and school issues.**

Current inter-governmental cooperation

Joint infrastructure projects

- Infrastructure projects have gone very well for 20 years. They do not get a lot of publicity. When a company wants to locate on the edge of a city, it is easy to get the roads, sewer and water in place.

- It has been hard to organize a sewer district. This is a countywide issue.
- There has been aggressive highway development in the county. This also needs to involve extensions of sewer and water by the cities.
- We need wider participation from the smaller communities.

Consulting assistance

- Smaller communities have had good consulting assistance from the county and the larger cities.
- Lots of growth issues in Nappanee; help received from Goshen and the county.

Contracted services

- Nappanee has contracts with county to do building inspections.

General comments

- Intergovernmental cooperation is increasing.
- We need to hear from our communities about sewer and water issues.
- Cooperation is at an all time high, but there is not good publicity. The publicity goes to some high visibility problem officials.
- Nappanee is partially in Kosciusko County and needs to coordinate with them, too.
- We get along outstandingly among the entities. We are all in this together. Residents regard the whole area as theirs; county people view themselves as part of the local city.
- Mayors, County Councils and Chambers are working well on joint economic development efforts. The “them and us” talk is gone. Also some mixing with St. Joe County. Proud of our efforts. Going beyond parochialism.
- Good agreements between the county and city of Goshen concerning extra-territorial jurisdiction in the county. We need regional planning, especially in the areas of transportation and economic development – probably 2-3 counties.
- Solid waste is a very good example of inter-governmental cooperation. It is run from tipping fees – no tax dollars. We have very high recycling rates – the highest in Indiana.
- Elkhart city and county cooperation is stronger in the last three years.
- A lot of issues are driven by growth of population: Middlebury school system growth; lot of transportation to move people to and from businesses. Funding from state will be much less. Our roads need maintenance and upgrading because of our severe winters and the need for safety.

Other perceptions of Elkhart county

Strengths

- Amish in business. There are dozens of cottage industries, especially furniture. This is a \$15 million dollar industry in Elkhart Co. There is an Amish coop. They have a county woodworking fair at the fair grounds. Cabinet making has the highest career status in the Amish culture. The Amish may shift from working in large factories to working in their own small shops.
- We are in the center of a statistical area. We can attract the surrounding workforce. Middlebury has 2/3 of its workforce from other counties. It is blue-collar workers that are coming here. Perhaps we need a workforce development board.

Weaknesses

- Have lost some companies in the transportation industry. This is scary, but there is resilience.
- Federal bankruptcy court – Northern Indiana has the highest rates in the U.S.
- Restructuring in the banking industry – not locally owned any more. Is it harder to get support for new businesses. Credit union has rapid growth in deposits. The Amish have money.

Threats

- Population is not growing equally. White-collar workers are moving to Northridge, Northwood, and Penn. Blue-collar workers are in Elkhart and Goshen.

Compiled November 11, 2002