

Focus Group Report
Young Adult Perspectives and
Leadership Development

October 18, 2002

The Horizon Project

Focus for this group

- What are the concerns of young adults in their 30s?
- How can we put many of them on paths to become leaders in the community?

Composition

- This group included 6 young adults in their 20s and 30s and 7 persons involved in leadership development.

Vision for the future

- **Attract our college-educated young people:** jobs, activities, entertainment, unique restaurants (like a French bistro) and night clubs, recreational facilities, boathouses on rivers, river walk, millrace, Pumpkinvine Nature Trail, sculling on rivers, social clubs and organizations; something new – not what my parents did.
- **Enrichment programs for schools**

The most difficult issues for the next 10 years

- Viewing ethnic diversity as a positive resource.
- Being attractive to college-educated white-collar workers.
- Strengthening the public schools so that professionals and executives will chose to live in Elkhart County.
- Revitalizing center-city areas.

Leadership interest areas

- **Education:** transient nature of the student population; low test scores.
- **Elderly:** set up an organization that brings together children and the elderly; adopt a grandparent.
- **Revitalization of our downtowns:** positive image of the core areas of the cities; preserve buildings.
- **Cultural activities:** support and publicize what we have and create new activities.

Leadership career path

- Make connections and get to know current leaders; it is hard to get to know people when you are new. Chamber leadership programs assist in making connections.
- Everyone has potential. They have to be tapped by someone in a current leadership role.
- Develop a relationship with an older mentor who moves you along, trains you and pushes you.
- Get involved in a wide range of activities.

Barriers to leadership advancement

- Lack of financial resources; sometimes you need to have the money and be a major donor to be on a board.
- Not having time and flexibility to attend daytime meetings and two-hour lunches.
- Family obligations for persons with young children.
- Employers who do not see that it is important to be involved in the community, such as being on a non-profit board.

Perceptions of Elkhart County

Strengths

- **Business activity:** hub of employment; influx of workers from other communities; tourism accessibility.
- **Local culture and values:** entrepreneurship; climate of wanting to work together; ownership in the community; giving spirit; charitable mindedness.
- **Natural resources:** lots of water – rivers and lakes.

Weaknesses

- **Not attractive to many young professionals:** Large manufacturing base with less opportunities for college educated young adults; not a lot of white collar job opportunities; lack of activities for young people; educated young people move to Indy and Chicago; the county is boring; not a lot of cultural events for younger individuals; it is not a community that is alive; German executives from Bayer said that in Elkhart County “even little kids have a rotten time.”
- **Some persons in middle and upper management do not want to live in this county.** Realtors steer people to Granger. Our own county realtors do not support us. They talk about the schools. Education is not strong – Elkhart Schools particularly. Our diversity is a threat to some people in terms of safety – afraid of Blacks and Hispanics. Granger is pristine White. Lake Wawasee and Syracuse are attractive areas for executives and professionals. Our symphony struggles for support. One spouse refused to move to Elkhart County and stayed in Toledo for culture. Local cultural groups do not get strong support.
- **Lack of a countywide attitude and relationships:** “I have never sat in a room with people from Goshen and Nappanee before.”

- **Educational attainment is mixed:** some schools are good and some are not; many do not live up to their potential; many in the community are satisfied with being at the state average rather than wanting to be excellent.
- **Weak visual appearance:** entrances and exits to Elkhart are horrific; terrain is flat; what visual beauty we have is not marketed well.
- **Signs of economic decline:** Falling real estate values in the heart of our cities; businesses are not locally owned any more; we have lost unique Italian restaurants.
- **Signs of social stress:** Divorce rate in Elkhart County is in the 90th percentile of the country.

Opportunities

- **Focus on and build on strengths:** safe communities; strong work ethic, unique Amish culture; unique restaurants; opportunities for the children of immigrants; affordable housing and high ownership rates; opportunities to live on waterways; Goshen College music facilities; strong family units in some small towns; current cultural events; IUSB and Ivy Tech offerings.
- **Mobilize human resources:** encourage our best and brightest to run for public office; create leadership opportunities for young talent; create structures for countywide relationships and efforts; attract people who can learn, provide high value in work processes, and earn more.
- **Build ownership in neighborhoods:** legislate ownership requirement in trailer parks.
- **Strengthen schools:** resources for the disabled and enriched programs for the highly skilled.

Threats

- **Decline of center city areas:** people who are able leaving; the increasing number of rental housing units; students frequently move to new locations; loss of retail; higher crime rates; discomfort with racial diversity.
- **Environmental contamination:** Elkhart County is first or second worst in the nation for carcinogens in the air according to EPA data. These are largely industrial contaminants from plastics and laminants. Being downwind from Gary steel mills may also be a factor.
- **Health risks:** We are a medical hot spot for cancer.
- **Lack of acceptance of diversity:** race and gender.
- **Declining sense of safety:** people are concerned about public safety. “We don’t let the kids ride their bikes around town.”
- **Automobile culture:** We drive to shop and dine.
- **Good social services may attract poor people:** the poor in Elkhart County are poorer than anywhere else in Indiana. We pay a lot of attention to the social service side and helping people. Do people move here because we have a good social safety net? What does it cost us to bring in a low skill worker?

Improvement strategies

- Leadership development: have Chamber leadership groups meet together.
- Rentals need to meet high standards. Hold the owners accountable. In Indy if there are two drug arrests in a rental, the owner pays a fine. This has cleaned things up.
- Legislate ownership requirement in trailer parks.
- Work at center city revitalization by securing grants that are available and creating partnership with downtown businesses for improvement projects.
- Develop more countywide projects to bring people together around common interests.

Radical ideas for improving the economic and community life

- Any high school graduate will be supported financially for post-secondary education with a stipulation to come back and work in Elkhart County for five years.
- Quality childcare for anyone who needs it.
- Outdoor amphitheater for music like Deer Creek; 17,000 – 20,000 seats; put it in a corn field.
- Create a program for kids in the school systems: high intensive English program for Hispanics.
- New office space in the center city areas.
- High school is mandatory; no quitting at age 16.

Areas for Action Planning Teams

- Develop waterways.
- Community centers – outdoor activities.
- Countywide projects; use the media effectively to create awareness and ownership
- Community website.

Compiled

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