GRANT COUNTY STRATEGIC VISIONING PLAN

Creating a strategic vision for Grant County, from the ground up.

Final Report — July 27, 2024

Photo Credit: City of Marion, Indiana

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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

CREATIVE INSIGHT community development

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Executive Summary

In the winter and spring of 2024, the Ball State Indiana Communities Institute (ICI), along with consulting firm Creative Insight Community Development (CICD), entered discussions with the Community Foundation of Grant County ("The Foundation") to work with stakeholders across Grant County to create a strategic vision to guide the county's future. The goal of the project facilitators, ICI and CICD, was to create a strategic vision that maximized citizen and stakeholder input. This input would then be given equal priority to the goals of formal leaders within the county, as citizens, employees, business owners, youth, and retirees often see their community through a different perspective than traditional leadership.

Through a series of listening sessions held across Grant County, facilitators used a variety of creative and constrained brainstorming methods to identify and prioritize the most important issues facing Grant County, and the best ways to address those issues given the unique culture and context of Grant County. Facilitators then took the citizen data received during the sessions and analyzed it, developing key themes that were used to create a strategic vision statement and several key objectives to guide Grant County's development from 2024 onward.

In the final stages of the project, facilitators worked with The Foundation along with community leaders and stakeholders to interpret the data created during the five listening sessions to develop a) a vision statement for Grant County that incorporates public sentiment, and a set of key goals and recommendations that the county may pursue in the future. To do this, ICI and CICD personnel met with The Foundation on March 27 and May 22, 2024 to discuss future directions. A "member checking" session was held in a public forum on June 25 where a broad group of community stakeholders — many of whom participated in the listening sessions — had a chance to review the final plan first, correcting any inaccuracies or adjusting any interpretations of the data to ensure that the plan is maximally representative of public input.

Project Summary

In February and March of 2024, the Ball State Indiana Communities Institute (ICI), along with consulting firm Creative Insight Community Development (CICD), began facilitated stakeholder meetings in tandem with the Community Foundation of Grant County ("The Foundation") to gather feedback from across Grant County, with the purpose of creating a strategic vision to guide the county's future. This strategic vision is intended to capture both the aspirations of the people who live and work in Grant County, as well as some concrete objectives to be accomplished over the next ten years. This final report is a cohesive strategic visioning plan

that originates with citizen perspectives about what is important to them in the places they live and work, and that can be used to guide decision making well into the future.

Methods Overview

The goal of the project facilitators, ICI and CICD, was to create a strategic vision that maximized citizen and stakeholder input. This input would then be given back to the community, as well as leaders within the county; as citizens, employees, business owners, youth, and retirees often see their community through a different perspective than formal leadership. Our methods are designed to amplify citizen expertise to create a final product that citizens of the County can be confident that they had a hand in creating. A successful plan is one in which citizens can see their input and ideas come to life on the plan's pages. It should represent a creative process that is conscious of what is feasible — an optimistic approach to planning with citizen-driven ideas about how to best overcome constraints. And, it should include opportunities for action across the county and across diverse stakeholder groups.

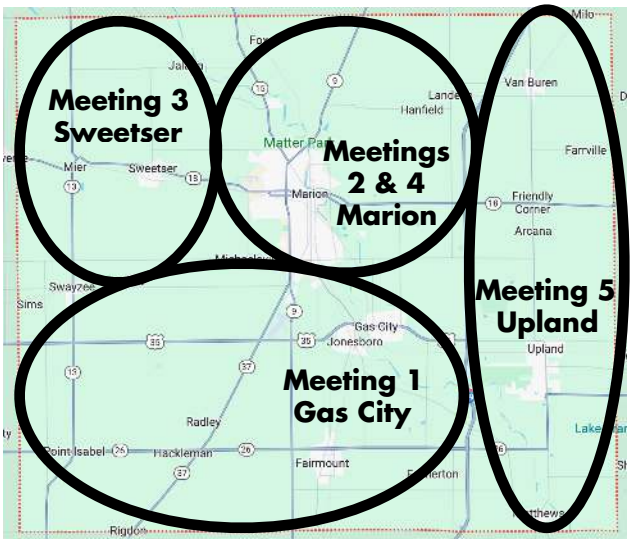
ICI and CICD took the following steps to gather data for the strategic vision plan:

a) Hosted initial planning discussions to coordinate action among the facilitation team and leaders in Grant County in Fall of 2023.
b) Created a basic community profile with a selection of important community-level socioeconomic trend data to provide a context for the visioning exercises. Data from this profile was presented at each strategic visioning session in each community.
c) Five town hall-style strategic visioning sessions were conducted at five strategic points across Grant County: Gas City on February 8, 2024; Marion (I) on February 15; Sweetser on February 22; Marion (II) on February 29; and Upland on March 7. County residents were encouraged to attend any session that was convenient for them, and some participants attended multiple sessions.
d) A data analysis stage that compiles and simplifies data from each town hall meeting was conducted, organizing diverse responses into a cohesive set of data that were used to craft the vision/goals across all five meetings.
e) Analysis of key participants and potential collaborations/partnerships that emerge from the process was conducted.
f) A "member check" meeting was conducted on June 25, 2024 to ensure that the vision and strategic action goals are relevant and representative to all members, and to gain valuable feedback prior to completing the final report.
g) Delivery of the final vision and action plan occurred on August 1, 2024 for one final revision by the Foundation and key stakeholders who organized the process.

Strategic Visioning Sessions

The visioning process selected for Grant County was designed to gather data from a wide range of stakeholders in a short amount of time using an expansion-alignment-compression-prioritization methodology facilitated brainstorming sequence. The facilitation began before

each session with a challenge to The Foundation and other local leaders to invite as diverse a population as possible from each community. The Foundation accomplished this by using multimodal promotions for the event. Participant diversity is absolutely necessary to ensure that a full range of perspectives is gathered from various parts of the county and from diverse groups facing different circumstances across the county.



Since the population of Grant County is heavily concentrated in the city of Marion, the facilitation team took great care to avoid making the strategic visioning process seem like an Marion-focused exercise. To do this, separate visioning sessions were held in Gas City, Sweetser, and Upland, with two meetings in Marion due to its central location in the County. Across all five meetings, approximately 120 citizens and leaders from the community participated. The geographic diversity across these meeting sites was found to be very important, as different communities within Grant County have different histories and aspirations. The sequence of meetings and the areas served can be seen in the map presented here.

Visioning sessions included these steps:

1) Recruitment of diverse participant groups
2) Introduction of the facilitation team
3) Expansion: "Postcard From The Future" exercise
4) Alignment: Presentation of Community Profile and Socioeconomic Data
5) Compression: Turbo-SWOT exercise
6) Prioritization: Dots exercise

This series of exercises ensures that participants first gain a level of comfort with the facilitators. They then use the "Postcard From The Future" exercise to imagine Grant County in 10 years, whether good, bad, or neutral. By writing a postcard to a friend who lives out of town, participants enter a more positive, imaginative frame of mind that removes them from thinking about their community in technical terms, or in terms of tasks they would like to see accomplished. Instead, they are able to paint a broad, creative vision of the future they would like to see — not for the facilitators, but for a friend. This expansion step widens the sphere of ideas about the community beyond common "issues" and issues-related language and focuses in on what participants really care about. Participants were asked to share their postcards with the group as a means of sharing diverse perspectives with others but were not forced to do so, as this exercise can be quite personal in nature.

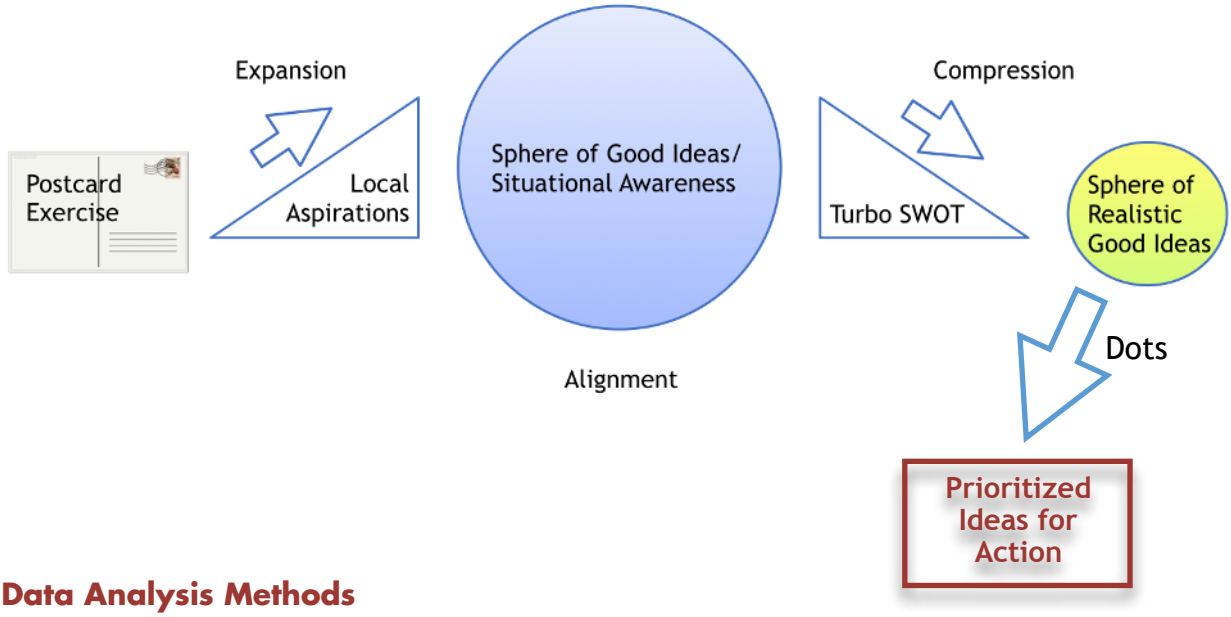
At this point, participants were given a data-driven community profile presentation. This presentation included data on economic, population, educational, and public health trends. The purpose of this step was to create a sense of collective understanding about some of the objective forces acting on the community. Attention was given to drawing out any "surprises" in the data, such as health outcomes or the structure and composition of the local economy. This alignment step explicitly follows the expansion step as a way to "get everyone to the same table" after being expansive in exploring big-picture ideas and aspirations. It is also a way to improve the situational awareness of the county among participants.

Next, participants took part in an exercise we call the "Turbo-SWOT." SWOT is a standard "Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Threats" exercise, which is still a superior method for encouraging participants to think in terms of both needs (a deficit-focused approach) and opportunities (a solutions-oriented approach) with both an internal and external locus of control (i.e., strengths and weaknesses are controlled by the community, opportunities and threats are not). Both deficits and solutions, along with internal and external situational understanding are important in identifying future directions for action. The "Turbo" refers to the speed at which the exercise is conducted. In only about half an hour, participants are taken through the entire exercise, which forces participants to think viscerally about the greatest SWOT components, and to decide on the top two or three most important ideas in each SWOT category as a table (generally 4-8 people). This ensures that participants do not over-think the situations they face but respond with their most urgent and pressing answers instead of relying on slow thinking about past conversations or complicating factors. While both fast and slow thinking are important to crafting strategies, at this stage we are seeking the most viscerally important ideas about what matters most to participants. The Turbo-SWOT introduces important, realistic constraints and compression into the analysis about the real and perceived situations facing the community. Following the open-ended postcard exercise, this step ensures that the big-picture ideas explored earlier are appropriately feasible and viewed in the light of the real weaknesses and threats facing the community.

The results of the Turbo-SWOT (all identified SWOT components) are recorded table-by-table in real time and posted for all participants to see. Redundant answers are simplified by either identifying repeated answers publicly or by modifying existing answers to capture related ideas as well. Facilitators utilized a round-robin style report-out of SWOT components. Each table had one spokesperson who would report out one SWOT component, and this would continue around the room until no new SWOT components emerged (i.e., spokespeople would "pass" if they had nothing new to contribute from their table).

Finally, participants engage in a "dots exercise." Each participant is given three dot stickers. Participants are asked to walk up to the results of the Turbo-SWOT exercise and to place one dot on the three most important ideas anywhere on the SWOT. This helps to identify the relative importance of each idea on the SWOT to each individual person in the community — giving each participant an opportunity to break from the group and prioritize the issues and ideas they feel are most important and require the most immediate attention.

The process of idea generation through expansion, alignment, compression, and prioritization can be seen in the figure below:



Data Analysis Methods

The community visioning sessions described in the previous section produced a large amount of data that must be simplified and streamlined, without omitting important and unique ideas that may belong to marginalized and oppositional voices. As we would do in a rigorous case study analysis, the facilitation team analyzed all data acquired from the strategic visioning sessions using thematic coding, case-based triangulation, and pattern matching techniques to identify key themes for the strategic vision, and prioritized the most important ideas for local action. Facilitators used as much data as is available to create a comprehensive picture of the goals identified by participants and to create a broad vision that captures as much public sentiment as possible. The facilitation team did not omit unique viewpoints that may differ from the mainstream for the sake of simplicity, and it is noted when there is county-wide disagreement on a particular topic.

Additionally, the facilitators identified patterns across all four sessions where there may be mutual interest in addressing certain goals. This can be the seedbed of future collaborations, especially during future action-based planning efforts.

The postcard exercise was analyzed using ChatGPT qualitative analysis capabilities[1] to create word frequency tables, a word cloud visual representation of results, and to conduct a data reduction step by combining synonyms for similar ideas. This exercise revealed the top key words, phrases, and ideas that should be used in any comprehensive vision statement, capturing the highest ideals expressed by the community for the future they would like to see in the county. These key words and ideas are also quantified and prioritized later in the report.

[1] These capabilities replace Nvivo, a common qualitative software analysis package in use through 2023.

The Turbo-SWOT results were also compiled on a community-by-community basis. Ideas are ranked and prioritized based on feedback from the dots exercise. These ideas are then combined across communities to determine the most important ideas and issues facing the entire county. Presentation of both sets of data enables decision makers to isolate and address issues that are important to each community within Grant County, while also understanding their priority in the broader context of the needs and opportunities facing the county as a whole. This analysis is followed by key observations identifying integrated patterns that emerged from the data.

Member Check and Final Draft

A member check meeting was conducted on June 25, 2024 at Ivy Tech Community College in Marion, with former participants, local leaders, and members of the general public, that revealed the refined objectives, vision statement, and key recommendations that resulted from the analysis. The facilitation team presented the analyzed data, draft strategic vision, and identified county-wide objectives in person at a two-hour workshop. This gave participants the opportunity to ask questions about the results and to clarify any issues that may be unclear to the group, or identify areas that the facilitators may have missed in the data analysis phase. This stage, known to researchers as "member checking," is critical for ensuring the validity of the data and that all data were captured accurately by the facilitation team doing the study. Facilitators encouraged "brutal feedback," as this is important to ensuring an honest and transparent interpretation of the data. It also provides an opportunity for participants to interact with the findings prior to the final release, which may generate new perspectives that are important in catalyzing action.

ICI and CICD incorporated this feedback into this final report. Facilitation was used to resolve any discrepancies where possible. CICD and Ball State ICI will remain available for feedback via e-mail if further questions or concerns arise.

In this report, ICI and CICD provide strategic recommendations on taking quick, collective action on the issues identified in the strategic visioning exercises. These recommendations can be used by local leaders and proactive citizens alike. Strategies that worked well in other communities facing similar issues may be presented if relevant, although these "best practices" are only suggestions for action, and will only be considered in the context of feedback received by the community as to their potential efficacy.

The next section of the report presents key results, findings, and observations prior to the member check meeting and creation of the final draft.

Results: Postcards

The postcard exercise provided facilitators with a wealth of information about what is most important to Grant County residents, and which key themes they focused on when thinking about an ideal future. The following is a "word cloud," or a graphical depiction of the raw ideas that emerged in terms of their importance and relative frequency in the exercises. The closer words appear to the center of the cloud (with the most important words in red), the more common the theme was during the postcard exercise.

Word Cloud of common themes in the postcard exercise

As seen above, the word cloud gives a helpful idea of relevance, but also contains some "noise," or common words that do not relate strongly to the vision of the community. To overcome this, a frequency analysis was conducted on the central, most relevant themes found in the postcard exercise. Common words like "Grant," "just," and "really" were dropped, and highly similar themes were combined. The results presented here include all ideas relevant to the community plan that were mentioned more than 10 times. The frequency analysis of top thematic words can be found in the chart on the following page:

Top themes by Frequency from Postcards from the Future (excluding words like "dear," "Grant," "County," etc.)	
Community	81
People	27
Downtown	21
Park	16
Jobs	16
Businesses	15
Schools	14

The frequency analysis presented here shows a sharp focus on the term "community," indicating that participants envision a strong sense of community well into the future as the focus of their writing. This important word appeared 81 times, and was a far greater focus than the physical attributes of Grant County. "People" was the second most commonly cited word, appearing 27 times, demonstrating a humanistic focus. Beyond these terms, participants began to focus on other attributes of Grant County. "Downtown" was mentioned 21 times, typically in the context of a thriving or growing downtown area. "Park" was an important theme, being mentioned 16 times, as were "jobs," also mentioned 16 times. "Businesses" was mentioned 15 times, and "schools" 14 times. Overall, this demonstrates a future vision focused on building a strong sense of community grounded in improved and livable downtown areas with natural amenities, a strong economic core, and excellence in education.

The following text represents a small sampling of postcard responses that are intended to demonstrate the diversity of visions and interests represented across the county. There are a few noteworthy findings across this sample: a) Participants focused on a wide range of issues and amenities that shape their view of the future, b) Responses offered mostly positive and optimistic views of the future, and c) While response diversity was high, certain common themes had higher recurring frequency, as demonstrated in the table above. The sample below is not exhaustive, but provides a good idea of response diversity.

Greetings from Grant County! My husband and I would love to see you soon! We want to take you all out to all of our favorite restaurants and to Matter Park! Grant County has grown so much in the last ten years - new businesses, lots of activities, an expanded trail system. You can feel the collaboration that we have made possible. So, we'll see you this summer? Lots of love.

Years ago, Grant County experienced the "Rust Belt" syndrome like so many other Midwest communities/regions: loss of major industries, then supporting/related businesses, overall economic decline and loss of population. But there were some community leaders and two great universities which refused to let pessimism rule. Now we have new industries and more to come. Hope, optimism, hard work, and cooperation have made a difference.

Since 2024, Grant County has been one of the biggest up-and-coming communities in Indiana because they have the smallest homeless population in Indiana. Since I started, we've been able to reduce the rate of food insecurity from 10.7% to 1.3%! Isn't that incredible! We've only been able to do all of this because we got the community to buy in to the change and encouraged them to view other community members as their friends and family! It's been great, and I hope you come and visit soon!

Our community has grown over the last decade. With a focus on quality of life and family. New parks and entertainment venues. Many of the rundown buildings downtown and along the river have been demolished with new development and market rate apartments. With the manufacturing boom in North Central Indiana, we have managed to attract good paying middle-class employees to the county and a few white-collar firms in downtown Marion. People are excited to live in Grant County and proud of our communities again.

Greetings from beautiful Grant County, Indiana. My wife and I are getting ready to take the boys to Matter Park to enjoy the weather and get them active and moving. It is great for the boys because there are always tons of people taking advantage of the Parks. My son has just started having conversations about his future with his school counselor, he wants to learn to be a pilot at GRCC. We need to schedule a time for you to visit because you have to see this community. Vibrant and Fun! So much going on for all ages.

I hope you're doing well. We just got home from an art fair where we got to see exhibits from local artists and participate

in workshops. It is always so exciting to see how diverse our community is and how involved they are at every event. Our county was ranked healthiest community by a national organization. Groups travel from all over the US to learn from us and how we improved our overall health. I can't wait until you move here. We'll catch a show at the Gas City Music Center and walk to Sophie's for ice cream. All the best.

You would not believe it! There has been so much funding that has come to the community in which I live, and it has made a huge difference! I think that is happening because all the communities in Grant County have been able to self-sustain to the point they are now able to focus on collaboration and shared visioning. Beyond just their own needs! County and city/town government is in sync, and I am proud of my community! Come see it soon!

The ideas presented in these selected postcards have one key theme in common: they focus on the power of local collaboration to make the community a better place to live and work. The key themes in the above postcards begin to paint a picture of the elements that should be included in an actionable vision statement, along with key objectives. In crafting this strategic vision for the county, we recommend that the vision and objectives must include/address the following:

- A strong focus on building community and a people-centric environment
- Collaboration and building trust are the vehicles to achieving a better Grant County
- Downtown revitalization and improvement should be a central theme
- Prosperity, progress, and economic sustainability and diversification are crucially important
- Education is the key to prosperity and progress
- Green spaces are essential to livability
- The community should be accessible to and enjoyed by a wide diversity of people of different backgrounds and faiths
- Grant County already possesses the agency and willpower to make it all happen

We therefore advance the following **vision statement** for Grant County, capturing these key themes:

Grant County is where integrity and collaboration drive progress and prosperity. By fostering strong leadership and community engagement, we will:

- **Revitalize our downtowns,**
- **Enhance our green spaces,**
- **Reduce poverty,**
- **Boost employment,**
- **Support a vibrant local economy, and**
- **Build a community where people with diverse beliefs, faiths, and senses of purpose can participate, lead, and flourish.**

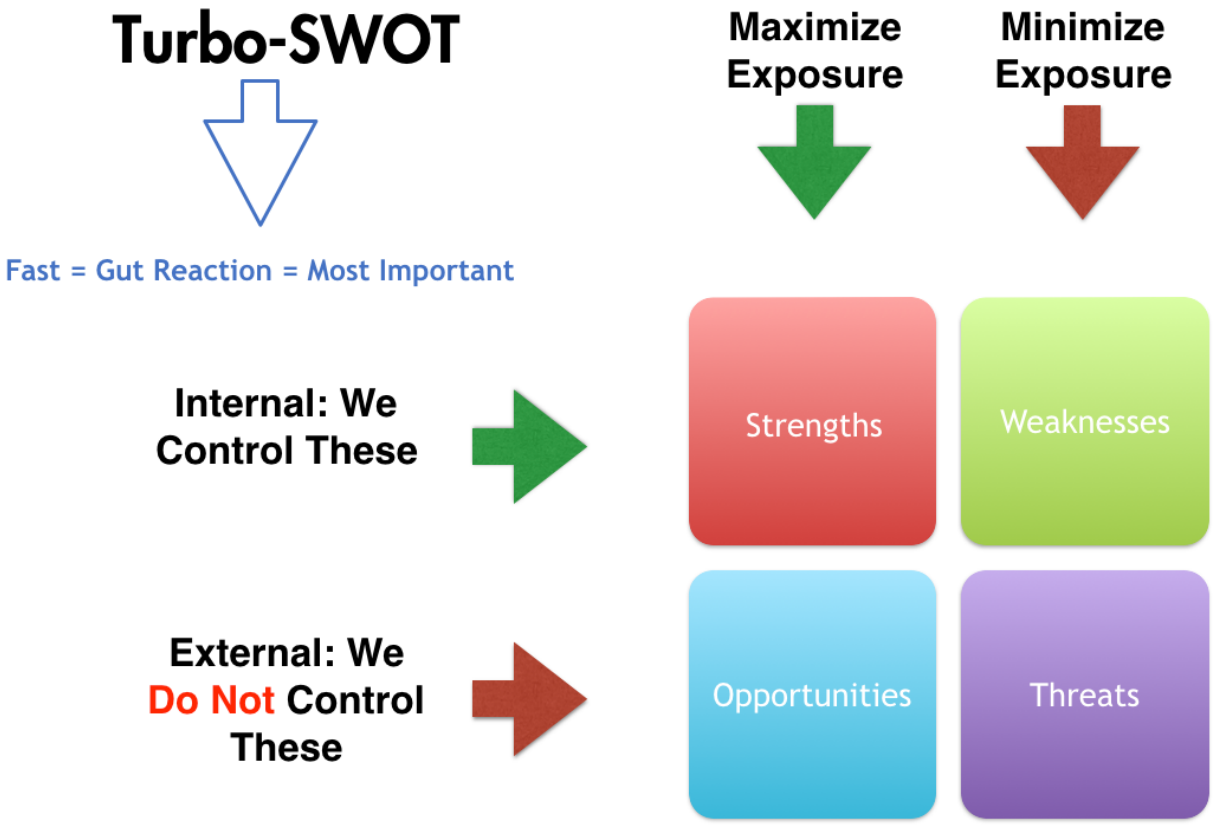
Grant County has the agency and willpower to thrive beginning with our abundant local talents and assets, sound strategic thinking, and commitment to building trust.

In the next section, we turn our focus to the results of the Turbo-SWOT analysis.

Results: Turbo-SWOT

In any SWOT analysis, ideas in any category can be a major priority. What differs from category to category is how communities deal with the identified issues.

- Strengths: Communities should maximize and focus on leveraging these important local assets, especially when they are unique to the community.
- Weaknesses: Communities should either improve upon these, or recognize that they are not core competencies, focusing instead on their unique strengths.
- Opportunities: These should become action items as quickly as possible.
- Threats: Efforts should be taken to minimize exposure to these instead of attempting to change them.



Grant County's overall strategy for future growth and development can be guided by applying these approaches to each category of the SWOT, beginning with the most important ideas in each category. Using the dots exercise, participants were given the opportunity to collectively "vote" for the issues that they felt were most important in the county. This enabled facilitators to prioritize these issues based on participant feedback by counting the number of dots next to each identified issue and then combining these tallies across each of the four sessions. The following table illustrates the top idea or issue in each of the SWOT categories by community, based on the number of dots.

COMMUNITY	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
GAS CITY	I-69, education, collaboration	Urban blight, lack of child care	Early childhood development	Retention of talent
MARION	Affordability	Lack of child care, community division	Downtown/ riverside development, IWU/Taylor partnerships	Healthcare system stretched
SWEETSER	Trails and walkways	Lack of jobs, retention of graduates, addiction	Child care, transportation systems	Drugs, inflation, job loss
UPLAND	Youth activities	Retention of graduates	Child care	Crime

In diverse counties, it is expected that different communities will have different priorities, and that is the case here. However, several common themes emerged across the five meetings in the four participant communities. Each community identified a different set of SWOT components shaping the community's future. On the positive side, Marion credited its affordability as its greatest strength, while Gas City noted its logistical proximity to a major highway, its strong schools, and its spirit of collaboration. Sweetser saw its trails and walkways as most attractive, while Upland has excellence in youth activities. Marion's greatest weakness was a lack of child care and heightened community division, politically and socially, while Gas City also noted that insufficient child care — along with urban blight — were troublesome features of the community. Both Sweetser and Upland noted challenges with retaining young, educated graduates as a major local weakness, with Sweetser adding a lack of jobs and problems with addiction as areas requiring attention. Strengths and weaknesses focus on the present state of the community. A positive finding from the data is the identified diversity in location-based strengths across the County. Taken together, these strengths are mutually reinforcing. Weaknesses tend to be more focused, with child care and retaining graduates emerging as major areas of improvement.

Opportunities and threats focus on positive and negative forces in the future. Marion envisages a future where the greatest opportunities involve downtown and riverside development and stronger partnerships with Indiana Wesleyan (IWU) and Taylor Universities, but an eye on shoring up a healthcare system that is beyond capacity. Gas City, Sweetser, and Upland all identified child care and early childhood development as major opportunities supporting working families, with Sweetser adding improved transportation systems as a potential area of growth. Both Upland and Sweetser are concerned about crime and drugs as major threats to their success, with Sweetser adding inflation and job losses as particularly concerning. Gas City identifies talent retention (i.e., graduate retention) as a future threat rather than a current weakness, and something to be avoided through collective effort.

The analysis above displays a diversity of responses across communities, but does not give us a sense of the relative importance of issues. To ascertain relative priorities, dots were combined across communities to examine the highest overall priorities in the county, whether they be strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats. Highly similar terms across communities were combined into more general categories. These combined totals can be found in the table below, focusing on those issues that received 30 or more dots across all five meetings.

Turbo SWOT Thematic Categories by Number of Votes	
Economic development, wealth creation, business infrastructure, small business support	116
Continuing education, youth activities, talent retention	96
Quality of place	92
Shift mindset from negativity and division toward resilience and collaboration	90
From social problems toward environment for human thriving	74
Child care/Youth development	44
Healthcare/mental health	42
Robust and collaborative nonprofit culture	38
Blight/redevelopment	32
Transportation access	32

Across all five meetings and four communities, issues of economic development, wealth creation, business infrastructure (like internet and highways), and small business support emerged as the top priority with 116 combined dots. Consistent with the vision statement, Grant County sees economic progress and prosperity as central to the County's continued vibrancy. The following three categories received a similar number of dots: continuing education, youth activities, and talent retention with 96; quality of place with 92; and shifting the local mindset from negativity and division toward resilience and collaboration with 90. Continuing education is directly tied to economic prosperity, particularly by connecting centers of educational excellence with the needs of local employers and economic interests. Quality of place is equally essential and commingled with economic development. The Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at Ball State University conducted research supporting the idea that jobs follow people, as site selectors often choose locations

based on finding a talent base that is increasingly motivated to live in highly livable communities[2]. Shifting the local cultural mindset from division toward collaboration is challenging, but essential for achieving collective goals and inspiring diverse groups and organizations to participate in complex, longer-term initiatives.

The next theme on the list was another mentality change, from a focus on social problems toward a focus on human thriving with 74 dots. This shift can be envisaged as a shift from a focus on problems and negativity toward a focus on solutions and positivity.

While a top issue in some communities, child care and youth development received 44 dots overall, positioning a focus on child care as a high priority issue impacting both quality of life and the capability of working parents to participate in the local economy. Healthcare and mental health followed at 42 dots, as this impacts both public health and is essential to overcoming persistent social problems like substance use disorder (SUD), housing and food insecurity, and workplace challenges. A robust and collaborative nonprofit culture, often involved in addressing social problems, was identified as a major strength in the County and a collective leadership opportunity with 38 dots. Finally, addressing issues of blight and downtown redevelopment — along with transportation access across the County — both received 32 dots.

Taken together, these priorities set the stage for collective action and strategic investment. The focus on economic and business development, along with wealth creation, is unsurprising in former industrial counties like Grant County. Many communities across the nation who have at some point seen the decline of their industrial base are now poised for an important shift into the modern economy. At the time of this writing, re-shoring of industries is occurring[3], particularly focused in places with excellent logistics and access to multimodal rail, air, and highway systems. Grant County falls squarely within this zone, and already possesses a complete set of infrastructure necessary for modern manufacturing. However, the jobs of the future are unlikely to be the "line jobs" of the past. While investing in the new manufacturing and tech economy of the 2020's is a sound strategy for Grant County, many basic jobs are automated in today's clean and green manufacturing facilities. Most high-wage jobs also require a high degree of specialization — typically a bachelor's degree, specialist associates degree, or extensive technical training. This synchronizes well with participants' identification of education and youth retention as top priorities, as advanced education and re-skilling will be necessary to create a talent pool that is desirable for specialized manufacturing and high-tech firms in specialty applications.

What else attracts a talent pool? Higher wage earners also want to live and raise their families in great communities with good amenities, plenty of opportunities for socialization,

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[2] For a recent article by CBER's Michael Hicks (2023), see "Economic Opportunity Now In High Quality of Life Places" at https://dailyjournal.net/2023/04/25/michael-hicks-economic-opportunity-now-in-high-quality-of-life-places/

[3] For a brief article discussing this trend, see Jim Vinoski (2024), "Covid is Fading, but Reshoring Isn't" at https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimvinoski/2024/01/25/covid-is-fading-but-reshoring-isnt/

exposure to the arts and culture, all capable on a budget that is affordable. Grant County has immense opportunities to create this environment given its current affordability and growing slate of cultural, natural, and social amenities supporting an active and connected lifestyle. To keep this momentum going, a shift in mentality from negativity and division toward collaboration and possibility is required. Culture shifts are not easy, but fast inroads can be made through enhanced opportunities for social interaction that are positive and inclusive. This is also true for organizations, who can continue their trend of collaboration and proactivity by meeting regularly to discuss strategy jointly. Nonprofits can play a central role as leaders, conveners, mentors, and educators in guiding public activities. They can also guide funding toward identified community priorities with others, and serve as guardians and champions for the County's strategic vision.

The role of youth in the community was a common theme. The future of Grant County, ensuring that young people are fundamentally connected to their community requires more than just having a job. It also means a holistic approach that cares for young people, from early child care and youth development through education through their entry into adult life. Young adults will have a greater propensity to stay in the County if there is space for their own culture, but also connection to the broader community through leadership opportunities and civic engagement.

On the topic of healthcare and mental health, it should also be recognized that healthy social interaction and a focus on green spaces, trails, walkability, and an active lifestyle are all contributors to a healthier Grant County, mentally and physically. In this sense, prevention is the best medicine, and can be synonymous and concurrent with other development initiatives beyond a focus on physical and mental healthcare provision. Improving transportation access in the County that does not involve the use of vehicles opens opportunities for low-income residents who may not have access to a car. Public transit, bikeways, and pedestrian corridors all enhance physical activity and provide access to common spaces where greater social interaction is possible — a cornerstone of mental health.

Setting the Table for Collaboration and Optimism

A major theme throughout the facilitation process was changing the local mindset from one of division and negativity toward resilience, optimism, and collaboration. A positive local mindset, combined with willpower and diverse talents, can be imagined as the cornerstone to accomplishing every identified area of local action. When mindset change occurs across a large number of people, we can think of this as culture change. Changing any culture is challenging and, if attempted in an ad hoc fashion, can be deeply offensive and insensitive to the people living and working in a community. For this reason, when attempting to address the community's sense of negativity and division, the first step is typically an open conversation about how to best address issues of opportunity, risk, and uncertainty into the future as a group. It is about asking, "what can we accomplish together that we cannot accomplish individually?" Fear of the unknown is often one of the biggest barriers to collaboration across local actors. It is important to recognize that continuing to do business as usual is, in fact, a strategic decision with consequences — and is just as risky as charting

new pathways forward, because the environment surrounding the community is constantly changing beyond the community's direct control.

Highly inclusive conversations can be very helpful here, as new ways of doing business feel far less risky when a broad base of citizens, organizations, and governments are sharing the risk together. Strategic networking events, shared learning experiences, and conversations about the future of the community can be very helpful in building the critical networks necessary for information sharing in such an environment. As such networks are built, information is shared more readily, and the entire community gains the necessary awareness to evaluate and identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats on an ongoing basis. When action is distributed across multiple groups and not the sole responsibility of one or two agencies, a far greater array of potential solutions is permitted to rise to the surface, creating opportunities for broad-based participation and buy-in on taking new actions collectively and with greater awareness and adaptability to changing circumstances. The conversation begins with the broad understanding that the community appreciates and respects its current leadership for their efforts, but also wants to see leaders move beyond issues framed as "pro/con" or "either/or," instead opening the doors to a multitude of solutions that are not currently on the table. It breaks conventional wisdom, but communities gain power and efficacy when everyone is not doing the same thing, focusing on diverse activities that are most suited to their unique capabilities, motivations, and interests. What holds the system together is a common strategic vision, routine communication, ongoing learning and professional development, and a commitment to doing these different things — together.

If governments and organizations across Grant County are successful at transitioning conversations from a focus on problems and issues toward a focus on solutions and collaborations, the identified areas of action may proceed far more smoothly. Top areas of action include physical development, including downtown revitalization, economic development, small business support, enhancing natural spaces, and providing essential services like child care. However, the most critical investments identified by citizens often have to do with collaboration and shifting mindsets. Solutions to these issues are unlikely to come from one particular group, but rather can be thought of as "opportunity sets" for distributed (but coordinated) action across many groups. Economic developers, educational institutions, local nonprofits, parks and recreation staff, youth groups, and service providers — along with many others — may find ways of building teams that address local issues in a variety of ways that include everything from traditional government and foundation investments, shared services for greater efficiency, and informal interest groups. Many of these natural partnerships can flow quite easily from strategic conversations and project funding may be as diversified as the teams comprising each initiative.

Shifting the local mindset can be accomplished beginning with small victories on these fronts, by simply taking action and communicating results broadly, and by being as inclusive as possible. This ensures maximum local buy-in and conveys the sense that diverse voices are taken seriously in crafting new strategies. When people feel that their voices have been included, they tend to support initiatives much more strongly, which leads to greater public

participation and a reduced probability of local conflict erupting around particular issues. Citizens and organizations across Grant County should take great care to broadly publicize community victories and to continue to invite more people and different solutions to the table on an ongoing basis. Also, it is important to take time to celebrate major milestones as a community, as this gets people involved and excited about positive changes in the County. It also builds relationships that encourage more people to get involved in the future.

Key Objectives and Recommendations

Key objectives and recommendations are a specific set of ideas that flow logically from the vision statement, and provide some more specific guidance on meaningful steps that Grant County can take to put the vision into action. These ideas are derived from the Turbo-SWOT analysis and were presented to the Community Foundation of Grant County and the general public for feedback at the member check meeting. This feedback has been used to improve the quality and relevance of the goals and recommendations. Like the vision statement, objectives are broad and flexible and may change over time, especially as objectives reach completion and local priorities move on to a new set of ideas. However, they are specific and concrete enough to guide action in the coming years.

Objective #1: Invest in economic development, wealth creation, infrastructure, and supports for a strong small business environment.

A strong Grant County begins with a bright economic future. This future is built up from a core of economic dependability and sustainability that builds upon local legacy and talent, which includes investments in high school training, higher education, talent retention, and creating high quality jobs among companies that have a connection to the region. Grant County should be selective in strategically attracting companies small and large that can provide economic security and benefits over time, helping to keep families intact and contributing to local resilience. Special efforts should be made to help existing companies to grow and expand their employment base whenever possible. Emphasis should be given to educating a high-quality talent pool over direct investment, as this is fuel for employer expansion in a time of employee scarcity.

A key to this future is the creation of a new economic development narrative that reinforces strategic investments and partnerships — both within and beyond the County — that support talent development, quality of life, educational relevance, and a diversified economy that raises employment wages and security based on changing economic realities. This includes a departure from a focus on the quantity of jobs and a mentality of "line work" toward embracing higher wage opportunities through targeted economic development efforts. According to the Manufacturing Institute (2018), there was an approximately 2.4 million worker shortfall for manufacturing in the United States, often due to a mismatch in skills — but

automation, AI, and digital technologies are making American re-shoring efforts cost effective and globally competitive in the first place[4]. Taking advantage of such trends will require a more educated workforce with skills using AI, digital technologies, modern systems processes, global logistics, and more.

Grant County is poised to take part in this escalating trend of manufacturing re-shoring and national logistics that are built upon higher-wage trades. Building out critical infrastructure like broadband, water, and road improvement, enhancing highway connectivity, and advertising affordable shovel-ready sites can help larger industries to expand and attract new ones. Small business development not only enhances local lifestyles for prospective workers, but diversifies the local economy across firms that are deeply connected to the region[5]. Partnerships between local education providers and regional employers can create a pipeline of talent with opportunities situated in place. And additional efforts in collaboration with local and state economic development agencies can lead to the creation of manufacturing and industrial spaces, training facilities, and inroads to the region's growing industrial plant.

- Recommendation 1: Begin by building on existing economic strengths with established local networks and talent pools, especially those poised for growth and development, like specialty manufacturing, healthcare, education, and agriculture, and others.
- Recommendation 2: Focus on educational partnerships between skills development and employment opportunities — over direct investment in industry.
- Recommendation 3: Create a new economic development narrative reinforcing economic diversity through large and small business.
- Recommendation 4: Invest in critical infrastructure investments for modern manufacturing and logistics businesses, including improved highways, multi-modal connectivity, and broadband access.
- Recommendation 5: Small business development and supports ensure investments in diverse, non-footloose[6] businesses deeply connected to the community.

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[4] For more on re-shoring trends, see The Manufacturing Institute (2018), "Manufacturing Industry Faces Unprecedented Employment Shortfall," at https://themanufacturinginstitute.org/press-releases/manufacturing-industry-faces-unprecedented-employment-shortfall-2-4-million-skilled-jobs-projected-to-go-unfilled-according-to-deloitte-and-the-manufacturing-institute/ and Deloitte Insight's (2023) analysis, "Powering Human Impact With Technology" at https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2023/human-capital-and-productivity.html . For a longer read on general re-shoring trends and the geopolitical conditions creating such trends, read Peter Zeihan's (2020), Disunited Nations: The Scramble for Power in an Ungoverned World.

[5] Supporting this idea, see Smart Growth America (2021), "The Power of Economic Diversification In Our Communities," and the SBA Office of Advocacy at https://advocacy.sba.gov/2019/01/30/small-businesses-generate-44-percent-of-u-s-economic-activity/

[6] "Non-footloose" refers to job creators that are unlikely to leave the community.

Objective #2: Place emphasis on continuing education, youth activities, and talent retention.

Related to the economic development in Objective 1, educational providers can lead the charge in developing a highly-skilled and adaptive young workforce — the biggest force in overcoming generational poverty and educational barriers. While local colleges have long done so, trade schools like Ivy Tech can step into a central role in getting existing youth to be more engaged with local employers. This should involve new programs including "The Academy at Slingshot" model of apprenticeships concurrent with Associates degrees and/or high school education[7]. It is not necessarily the school's responsibility to be a catalyst. A brand collaboration of local nonprofits, including economic development organizations, can take steps to build bridges to an educational system focused on developing the whole person. Investments should be made in new educational strategies and partnerships within and beyond traditional schools and universities, and beginning in high school. Effort must be made to remove barriers to education that lock young people into generational poverty.

Success in education requires a shift in mentality that prioritizes systems over programs, cultivating the whole person over narrow skills development, and new generational values and attitudes over older ones. Young people are more likely to stay local if they feel empowered and inspired to become leaders within and beyond their career[8], and also learn to overcome increasingly common self-oriented barriers to success through social and emotional learning (SEL)[9]. This mindset also places greater value on technical education than in the past, especially for high-wage jobs that require a specialized skill set. A holistic and viable future for the County's youth appears when emerging systems of education are joined with current workforce needs. And taking a holistic approach, Grant County's youth will also have the skills to promote and participate in community engagement and civic leadership.

Innovative partnerships will aid the retention and education of skilled youth for the jobs of tomorrow. By investing in trade-based education and creating collaborations with Indiana

[7] This model is already being advanced by The Academy in Marion, Indiana at https://www.theacademyedu.com/

[8] While more recent empirical data is needed on this relationship, but studies on programs such as the Youth Engaged Leadership and Learning Program (YELL) at Stanford University (see https://extension.psu.edu/youth-leadership-toward-community-development), along with studies from Hastings et al. (2011) at https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ955663.pdf and K.R. Jones (2008) at https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ955663.pdf — all suggest a strong link between youth leadership, relationships with adults, and community connectedness.

[9] Once called "soft skills," SEL focuses on the social skills necessary to thrive in highly interactive environments. For an overview and examples, see CASEL at https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/ and Penn State Cooperative Extension (2022), who shows the link between emotional intelligence and self- and community leadership through a compilation of research at https://extension.psu.edu/youth-leadership-toward-community-development

Wesleyan and Taylor Universities, Grant County can broker relationships between prospective employers and training programs, ensuring that young people get access to precision skills that create long-term employment and wealth creation[10]. This objective connects strongly to creating a competitive local economy and focusing on livability, as many young workers and entrepreneurs select where they live based on a mix of personal relationships and lifestyle amenities[11]. Special attention should also be given to the 30-45[12] age range, as many 18-30 year-olds commonly leave smaller towns to acquire an education. The key is recruiting them back and engaging them in local affairs when they have more capital, better networks, more leadership capacity, and bring children to the community — a place to live, learn, and lead.

- Recommendation 6: Rely on partners like Indiana Wesleyan and Taylor Universities to build relationships with industry, and create a more central role for Ivy Tech for job training and re-skilling purposes.
- Recommendation 7: Shift the mentality from educational programs to personal development systems — cultivate the whole person, as retention is bolstered by civic leadership opportunities for young people.
- Recommendation 8: Redefine "youth" by providing opportunities for "forgotten" young people age 30-45 who bring families, skills, and capital.

Objective #3: Support quality of place as an economic and social development strategy.

Enhancing local livability through amenities, activities, and green spaces simultaneously enhances the desirability of the community for both businesses and citizens, while promoting both physical and mental health. Livability is critical to attracting and retaining a high-value workforce, as communities are increasingly competing on being great places to live and work. Grant County already has many amenities upon which it can build, and efforts can be made to raise awareness of existing amenities. The Grant County Visitors' Bureau has a modern, engaging website highlighting

[10] For an innovative model connecting education and employment, see Manchester Craftsmen's Guild at https://www.mcgyouth.org/

[11] See Hicks (2023), "Economic Opportunity Now In High Quality of Life Places" at https://dailyjournal.net/2023/04/25/michael-hicks-economic-opportunity-now-in-high-quality-of-life-places/ and Auerswald (2015), "Enabling Entrepreneurial Ecosystems" at https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/enabling_entrepreneurial_ecosystems.pdf — and Audretsch et al. (2019) on how amenities, subculture, and the social capital arising from good cultural fit at https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/enabling_entrepreneurial_ecosystems.pdf

[12] For a link to research on this work, please see Ben Winchester's body of work on the rural "brain gain" and the "newcomers" phenomenon through Minnesota State Extension at https://extension.umn.edu/economic-development/rural-brain-gain-migration and Winchester's (2018) report "Rural Migration: The Brain Gain of the Newcomers" for specific statistics at https://umvrdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/BrainGain.pdf

many of the best amenities of Grant County for visitors, although these amenities are just as important to local residents.

New placemaking amenities can be cultivated over time including a River Front District[13], new trail systems, the Cardinal Greenway, and a creative small business sector that can synchronize its offerings and business models with amenity-based development (shopping, bike rental and repair, etc.). Organizations and initiatives may be created supporting lifestyle and tourism-oriented entrepreneurs and local businesses, helping them to stay up to date on best practices and chart a collective vision for a creative county. Creative and vibrant places have positive effects on mental and physical health, reduce crime, and create other important social spillover effects[14]. The same is true for blight elimination, which revitalizes historic structures into housing and commercial space that is safe, affordable, and dignified. Stated earlier in this report, jobs follow people — and this is also true for entrepreneurs, who often choose to live in their communities for years prior to starting a business as a way to build networks[15].

- Recommendation 9: Support strategic investments, planning, and policy that reinforce lifestyle amenities, green spaces, trails, and walkable areas.
- Recommendation 10: Promote affordability and livability as necessary to talent retention and attraction — in the current economy, jobs follow people.
- Recommendation 11: Create organizations and alliances supporting quality of place and lifestyle tourism, and also supporting diverse small businesses who engage in innovative practices.

Objective #4: Shift the local mindset toward resilience and development, and away from negativity and divisiveness.

Grant County can transform negative thinking and political divisiveness into a sense of optimism and collaboration by fostering positive, collective narratives, shared vision, and documented action. Cultural values of scarcity, territorialism, political division, and cliquishness can be reversed through effective, sustained community

[13] See https://cityofmarion.in.gov/news-events/marion-introduces-riverfront-district-to-accelerate-economic-growth

[14] Research from the Population Heath Institute at the University of Wisconsin shows that about 40 percent of human well-being factors come from economic conditions, but a full 30 come from social conditions. For more information, see the Project for Public Spaces at https://www.pps.org/article/placemaking-and-health . Low-income residents of cities and towns often have less access to parks and amenities, further reducing social well-being and impacting mental health. Uding et al. (2024), in "Violence, Place, and Health: A Review of the Literature," demonstrate that multiple studies show a correlation between violence and poor health, and this may coincide with variations in the built environment.

[15] See Auerswald's (2015) report on Enabling Entrepreneurial Ecosystems at https://www.kauffman.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/enabling_entrepreneurial_ecosystems.pdf

engagement efforts. Through such efforts, Grant County has the opportunity to write a new narrative — one that is positive, inclusive, and instills a sense of civic pride. When such efforts involve the input of many stakeholders, they are more likely to stick and proliferate on their own as stakeholders feel a sense of ownership over their contribution to making Grant County a truly great community[16]. Such activities can also reveal areas of agreement across political lines, changing the focus toward what can be accomplished together that cannot be done individually[17].

Fundamentally, achieving such change from the perspective of nonprofits is a call for board and (more generally) leadership development to deepen the bench of positive, proactive leaders in Grant County while creating a sustainable environment of civic engagement. The most effective leadership is likely to come from nonprofits and citizen groups themselves, not necessarily from formal government leaders — although this may change if there is a groundswell of optimism from the community. Local nonprofits have the platform and opportunity to spread positive messaging, promote positive "peer pressure" through their daily conduct, and shift away from purely emotion-driven messaging toward high-impact messaging that directly addresses local issues. The change begins with a cohesive story that local citizens and leaders can believe in. And like all stories, the story can evolve as the community evolves — the whole story is not necessary right from the start. Positive, impactful messaging is a form of strategic communication that routinely communicates goals and objectives to a broader audience, and builds engagement by demonstrating positive change.

- Recommendation 12: Nonprofits should rise to the position as community leaders and conveners, building on their collaborative spirit — while board development and leadership training can build skills for lifting positive voices and showcasing people and organizations who are already doing great work.
- Recommendation 13: Develop initiatives to spread good news, highlight community members, and lift up positive messaging through social and traditional media.
- Recommendation 14: Promote effective, action-oriented community engagement to find areas of agreement — across organizations, beliefs, political orientations, and citizen viewpoints.
- Recommendation 15: Create a collective strategic communications plan that serves as a "best practices" guide for nonprofits and leaders in communicating via positive,

[16] See the University of Kansas' Community Toolbox for a comprehensive analysis of stakeholder involvement and its effects at https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main

[17] Two classic resources on reframing for political discourse are Frank Fischer's (2003) Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices, and Harry Boyte's (2004) Everyday Politics.

high-impact messaging across multiple channels — and tells the story[18] of local initiatives and the community more broadly.

Objective #5: Foster a proactive mindset around creating an environment for human thriving.

Crime, substance use disorder, and generational poverty are common in many rural communities. Leverage the proactive nonprofit sector to address social problems compassionately, and using evidence-based approaches. New strategies are being tested across the country that have greater efficacy than previous programs[19]. Grant County could implement – and fund – such social innovations to reduce the harsh impact of rural social problems through bottom-up solutions.

Creating healthier environments that support genuine well-being requires an approach that is more proactive than reactive, and requires adaptability to changing circumstances and occasionally spontaneous collective action. Such an approach is related to the quality of place discussed in Objective 3, but goes beyond a solitary focus on the physical environment. Human thriving requires changes at the system level beyond programs and tactics that address symptoms, and not the underlying disease. Many social problems arise out of social and economic isolation and persistent neglect[20], but local nonprofits will need to work together to accurately diagnose which action steps will have the greatest impact using the least amount of resources.

- Recommendation 16: Engage nonprofits and the civic sector in professional development to learn evidence-based approaches for addressing crime, substance use, and housing and food insecurity with compassion.
- Recommendation 17: Create a fund for innovative new approaches for addressing social problems from the ground up, available to local groups and businesses.

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[18] For a compelling argument in favor of storytelling, see Fryer, Bronwyn (2003), "Storytelling that Moves People." Harvard Business Review, June 2003, at https://hbr.org/2003/06/storytelling-that-moves-people. The talk "The Magical Science of Storytelling" by presentation expert David J.P. Phillips is available for free on TED Talks at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nj-hdQMa3uA. Finally, the National Storytelling Network is indeed a real organization supporting the art and science of storytelling. Their resources are available at www.storynet.org.

[19] For a list, and helpful guidance, see the Rural Health Information Hub at https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/substance-abuse regarding substance use disorder (SUD). The Rural Justice Collaborative actively supports innovations in restorative justice, seen at https://www.sji.gov/rural-justice-collaborative-announces-new-rural-justice-innovation-sites/ , and the Restorative Justice Project has created a useful diversion toolkit at https://restorativejustice.ejusa.org/ to keep citizens out of jail and on the path to a healthy, productive, and law-abiding life.

[20] About the relationship between isolation, addiction, and poor health, see Gabor Maté's (2008), In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts and Bessel van der Kolk (2014), The Body Keeps the Score.

- Recommendation 18: Host public summits around approaches to critical issues, and invite experts and innovators experiencing success to stimulate ideas.
- Recommendation 19: Conduct asset mapping and gap analysis of social and mental health services to determine what is already being done, and where gaps exist that can be filled through existing organizations and partnerships with regional, state, and federal service providers.

Other Important Objectives

Five unique themes emerged from the facilitated meetings in Grant County that stand apart from the objectives mentioned above, although they are each likely to have important impacts on the top five identified objectives. These objectives did not receive as many dots, but represent important clusters of interest and concern, and point to initiatives that support a thriving Grant County.

Objective 6: Support Child Care Youth Development. Child care not only supports well-adjusted, well-educated young people – it is an economic driver for parents who otherwise could not work, giving many single-income or dependent families a pathway out of generational poverty[21]. Additionally, active, engaged children perform better in school and experience better mental and physical health[22]. According to the Washington Center for Equaitable Growth (2020), "High-quality early care and education promotes children's development and learning, and narrows socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic inequalities while promoting parental employment and family self-sufficiency, yet most existing programs in the United States are expensive and difficult for parents to juggle alongside their jobs.[23]" Healthy childhood development in the first seven years of life is already shaping the workforce and future leadership of Grant County in 15 years. Grant County currently has the physical, unused space available to support child care and youth development, but needs child care providers.

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[21] Families in poverty may spend above 30 percent of their income on child care just to sustain work. For a comprehensive analysis of this topic with relevant data, see the Washington Center for Equiatable Growth (2020) at https://equitablegrowth.org/addressing-the-need-for-affordable-high-quality-early-childhood-care-and-education-for-all-in-the-united-states/ .

[22] According to Brighter Futures Indiana, 90 percent of brain development happens before kindergarten. See more at https://brighterfuturesindiana.org/blog/top-five-benefits-of-early-childhood-education . The U.S. Department Health and Human Services provides an extensive review of research supporting early childhood education, child care, and physical activity and its positive impacts as part of its Healthy People 2030 initiative at https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/early-childhood-development-and-education

[23] According to the Century Foundation, 1 in 7 child care workers live in poverty, and their work is generally undervalued, despite their impact on positive mental health and school readiness. See https://tcf.org/content/commentary/case-child-care-early-learning-healthy-child-development-school-readiness/

- Recommendation 20: Explore public-private partnerships to support child care providers at a living wage, particularly in group settings at schools with extra space capacity.
- Recommendation 21: Utilize the existing strength of local nonprofits to create after-school programs supporting youth leadership, life skills, intramural sports, the arts, and other forms of experiential learning.

Objective 7: Invest in Healthcare and Mental Health Access. Grant County has its own hospital, but barriers exist in providing health services (including mental health) to the entire county, whether it be through a lack of access, insurance, culture, or knowledge about screening for health conditions. Addressing healthcare and mental health services makes Grant County safer, stronger, happier, and a great place to experience all stages of life[24]. This objective connects strongly to Grant County's goal of supporting human thriving, and is an essential precondition for well-being.

- Recommendation 22: Collaborate with the Federal Healthcare Marketplace (www.healthcare.gov) to create a plan for publicizing information about healthcare insurance options.
- Recommendation 23: Consider funding a mobile rural- and neighborhood-based health clinic in collaboration with the hospital for basic checkups and screenings like cancer, STIs, and routine blood tests, along with basic plans for treating common illnesses.
- Recommendation 24: Local charities may reach out to organizations like the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Indiana Department of Family and Social Services (IDFSS) — as well as local law enforcement — to collectively identify best practices for mental health access and provision, as well as addiction deterrents and alternatives to incarceration and recidivism.

Objective 8: Build On the Robust and Collaborative Nonprofit Culture. Grant County's greatest asset may be a nonprofit ecosystem that collaborates regularly, and is willing to fund and raise volunteers for local efforts. A robust nonprofit sector creates a legacy of care and collaboration over time, and a growing critical mass of action directed at the people and places who need it most. Some analysis is required to understand where gaps and overlaps are occurring, as overcrowding in the nonprofit space can be part of the challenge of delivering supportive services efficiently and effectively. Building on the culture of local collaboration and encouraging collective opportunities for strategic alignment and professional development (particularly board training and development) can enhance the efficacy and leadership capacity of organizations who can make an important difference.

[24] For a comprehensive look at healthcare disparities, uneven access, and their impacts, see NIH's National Library of Medicine at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK578537/ , and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services again provides an extensive literature review as part of their Healthy People 2030 initiative at https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/access-health-services

- Recommendation 25: Create a regular meetup for area nonprofits to share information, tour one another's facilities, invite speakers on current topics of interest, and spend some dedicated time discussing strategic alignment.
- Recommendation 26: Conduct a formal gap/opportunity analysis to understand missed opportunities for serving the public need, identifying overlaps in service, and pinpointing potential areas for collaboration and mutual support.
- Recommendation 27: Feature nonprofits who are making a difference in traditional and online media, complete with the services offered by the nonprofit and ways to get involved and/or make a donation.

Objective 9: Support Blight Remediation and Redevelopment. Blight tends to bring down land values across entire neighborhoods, reducing property taxes, raising crime, and affecting infrastructure and service provision[25]. However, an existing housing stock with pre-established infrastructure means that new housing can be created on existing infrastructure with little environmental impact and lower costs, providing a shortcut to creating naturally affordable and attainable housing while preserving the historic character of neighborhoods. Historic buildings that are brought back to life can also be an excellent asset for placemaking, and a means of overcoming social problems by boosting community pride and a sense of place[26]. Redevelopment efforts can create jobs and get local citizens involved in reimagining their classic neighborhoods and structures.

- Recommendation 28: Create a local database of vacant and available buildings (with special attention to those in designated historic districts) and publish them as opportunities, with collective targeting of high-vacancy areas that may include community land trusts (CLT's) and/or real estate cooperatives for the public good.
- Recommendation 29: Investigate and publicize information about redevelopment tax credits for those interested in becoming incremental developers, such as historic district tax credits through Indiana Landmarks and low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC) through IHCDA and HUD.

Objective 10: Build Transportation Access. Local transit is already considered a strength among participants for Grant County, but improved roads, intermodal connectivity, and promoting underutilized assets like the airport can support both local mobility and accessibility, as well as aiding business and industry. Continuing to improve access, including walkability and bike-ability along with traditional public transit, can assist lower-income

[25] According to South et al. (2015), resident heart rate and stress perception expanded in the presence of even non-green vacant lots, along with other health indicators, at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4386540/ . Apparently, blight even causes stress and reduces overall health!

[26] See Indiana Landmarks at https://www.indianalandmarks.org/

residents to access critical needs as well as promoting public health through exercise — all while improving livability and social interaction[27].

- Recommendation 30: Conduct a walkability, bike access, and transportation assessment and plan for Grant County that focuses on connecting residential areas with key amenities like grocery stores, medical centers, downtowns, and entertainment and shopping areas.
- Recommendation 31: Deepen relationships with the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) to assess the current capacity of highways, intermodal rail, and airports, particularly with economic expansion in mind.
- Recommendation 32: Consider investments in a rural shuttle service that connects smaller communities to Marion during peak hours.

Evaluation Efforts

A key point raised in the member check meeting was the need for effective evaluation of the above goals. Since each objective will require substantial input from key stakeholders related to such area, the same key stakeholders should be engaged to determine what "success" looks like for each objective. Good evaluation metrics should adhere to the following guidelines:

a) Good evaluation benchmarks and key performance indicators (KPI's) should be based on where the community wants to be in five to ten years — not based on the performance of other communities. Other communities often have specific situations and conditions that cannot be replicated locally, and mimicking other counties can lead to the dilution of what makes Grant County unique. Much like a personal trainer who asks, "what personal fitness goals will make you feel better?" Grant County should focus on what will make citizens, businesses, organizations, leaders, and employees happiest.
b) The suggestion in a) can only be achieved through effective community engagement, so an engagement strategy for each objective is critical.
c) Evaluation must be on the agenda of any planning meetings focused on local action.
d) Evaluate each goal to ensure that it is a "SMART" goal: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound. Often, it is the "Time-Bound" component that drives action.

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[27] For some resources supporting transportation development in rural areas, see:

- Transportation 4 America (T4A, t4america.org). T4A advocates for smart transportation policies and provides resources to help communities implement effective transportation solutions. They support rural communities in developing and implementing transportation plans that enhance connectivity and walkability, and work to influence national transportation policy in favor of sustainable and inclusive practices.
- Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT, in.gov/indot). State agency overseeing infrastructure development.
- U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT, transportation.gov). USDOT offers various programs and grants to support transportation projects in rural areas. Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) focuses on addressing the unique transportation infrastructure challenges faced by rural communities.

e) Evaluation metrics should be quantitative and qualitative to get a full picture of local performance. Quantitative metrics are excellent tools for setting specific goals (i.e., catalyzing the redevelopment of 20 downtown properties within two years), or they can take the form of a binary (i.e., the goal is met when a new mental health initiative is launched). But qualitative metrics can provide feedback on how local people feel about the projects in words (i.e., positive testimonials can validate local efforts and promote the initiatives, while negative feedback can provide insights into how to improve local efforts). Both kinds of evaluation data are extremely important.
f) KPI's should be revisited at least once a year, if not twice. Champions and leaders within each initiative should feel comfortable revising KPI's up and down once a more realistic idea of goal attainment is achieved.
g) KPI's should be as specific as possible, and should include a time frame for success.
h) New KPI's and benchmarks should be set once the first KPI's are achieved, unless it is determined that there is no need for further development.

Moving Forward

This strategic visioning plan is intended to serve as a guide for decision making and taking action around the issues that Grant County residents care about most. Overall, county entities including the county government, the Community Foundation of Grant County, and local governments and organizations should refer to this guide to create dialogues with citizens, businesses, and other organizations about taking meaningful steps toward making Grant County even better. Keeping this plan in plain view, regularly checking in on goals and strategic recommendations, and creating metrics and key performance indicators around each goal will ensure that progress is routinely made on each identified goal. And of course, as community developers, our highest recommendation is to keep dialogue and community interaction alive — both through in-person meetings and online — to continue to guide and refine progress along the way. Community members are your most valuable source of feedback and the greatest barometer of this plan's success. As the county succeeds at implementing this plan, we hope it will not only inspire the community to celebrate accomplishments but to continue to attract new energy to the process, touching off a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement and community spirit.

Respectfully submitted:

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Appendix A — Turbo-SWOT Results for Each Community, Ranked by Number of Participant Dots[28]

Gas City — February 8, 2024

Strengths	Dots	Opportunities	Dots
I-69	2	Early childhood development excellence	6
Education	2	New YMCA	2
Collaboration between organizations	2	Lots of grants	2
Hunger/passion (to improve)	1	Music center	2
Festivals/events	1	Bring college grads back home	2
Focus on arts	1	Technical and trade education	1
Trails	1	Room to grow — expansion	1
Parks	1	Sports complex	1
Affordability	1	Non-profit hospital/surgery center	0
Generous people	0	Roads bringing people in	0
Hospital	0	Family activities	0
Volunteers	0	Remote work opportunities	0
Sporting events	0	Opportunity to rewrite narrative	0
Notable historic figures	0	New restaurants	0
Family-oriented	0	Multiple businesses coming to county	0
Encouragement of entrepreneurship	0	New homes and condos	0
Geographic proximity (to other places)	0	Service jobs	0
Resurgence of quality of life	0	Scholarships for finishing college	0
Towns clustered	0	Riverfront development	0
Diverse population	0	Solar park	0
Nationwide manufacturing	0	Eastern corridor	0
Good infrastructure	0		

Weaknesses	Dots	Threats	Dots
Urban blight	4	Retention of talent	4
Lack of child care	4	Naysayers	1
Accessibility — transit/walking	2	Jealousy	1
Good old boys club	2	Population decline	1
Lack of municipal collaboration	2	Poor health outcomes — mental and physical	1
Siloed resources	1	Neighboring counties trying to duplicate	0
Scarcity mentality	1	Nationwide crime rates	0
Resistance to change	1	Fear of success	0
Lack of strategic plan	1	Toxic charity	0
Poverty	0	Drugs/jails/law enforcement	0
Inability to retain young people/brain drain	0	Stuck between regions	0
Territorial identity — rivalries	0	Lack of investment from state	0
Value past more than the future	0	Consumer spending elsewhere	0
Fast-food driven	0	Lack of trust	0
New people don't run for office	0	World is moving fast — we can't keep up pace	0
Inaccessible businesses	0	65+ population growth	0
Apathy	0	Wages lag inflation	0
Lack of living-wage jobs/careers	0		
Drugs	0		
Lack of respect for properties	0		

[28] Ideas that were raised in the listening sessions, but that later received no dots, are given a score of 0.

Marion I — February 15, 2024

Strengths	Dots
Arts scene	2
People	1
Caring community — coordinated	1
Lots of community/civic groups	1
Greenway/trails	1
Growing downtown	1
Quality child care providers	1
Two universities & Ivy Tech	0
Spirit of hospitality & kindness	0
Generous community — contributions per capita	0
Hospital & services	0
Libraries	0
Growth of home health services	0
Community events	0
Different faces running for office	0
A lot of churches	0
Restaurants	0
Young people	0

Opportunities	Dots
Early childhood development excellence	6
New YMCA	2
Lots of grants	2
Music center	2
Bring college grads back home	2
Technical and trade education	1
Room to grow — expansion	1
Sports complex	1
Non-profit hospital/surgery center	0
IWU & Taylor grads	2
Funding opportunities	1
Transportation systems and availability	1
Bring graduates back home	1
Tap into senior community	1
Small business	0
Land availability	0
More child care	0
Touching 9 counties	0
Increase broadband	0
Low cost of living	0
Building availability	0
Small communities available	0
HS & folks can finish college	0
Sports opportunities	0
Connect schools together	0
A lot of well-known people coming back	0

Weaknesses	Dots
Poor infrastructure — roads, sidewalks, water	3
Problem with public communications/inconsistent local media	2
People don't shop local	1
Political discourse — competitive D vs. R	1
Racial tensions/disunity	1
Lack of training centers	1
Poverty	0
Drug usage	0
Unemployment is high	0
Lack of mental health support	0
Competition with local resources — town vs. town	0
Competition among nonprofits	0
Need to help people become self-sufficient	0
Town/gown divide	0
Lack of county vision	0
Don't utilize the river	0
Overcrowded jails	0
Not enough housing (including affordable)	0
Homelessness	0
Low educational attainment	0
Negative narrative	0
Health/social detriments	0

Threats	Dots
Crime	1
Narrative about Marion	0
Drug use	0
Lack of quality jobs	0
Workforce shortage	0
Image of the community	0
Misinformation of community misrepresentation	0
Inflation	0
Stained past	0
Household debt	0
Political turmoil — national and local	0
Justice inconsistency	0
Mental health crisis — national	0
AI — rapid technology change	0
World is moving fast — we can't keep up pace	0
65+ population growth	0
Wages lag inflation	0

Sweetser — February 22, 2024

Strengths	Dots	Opportunities	Dots
Trails/walkways	4	Transportation systems and availability	3
Colleges	2	Child care	3
Cost of living	1	Festivals	2
Nonprofits	1	Mentoring/job training	2
Healthcare facilities	1	Revitalization	1
Airport	1	TV station	1
Religious opportunities	1	Health networking	1
Bus transportation	1	Partnering with colleges	1
Neighborhood associations	1	Self-sufficiency training	1
Good people	0	Regional collaboration	1
Proximity to cities	0	Remote workers	1
Good roads	0	Education	0
Parks	0	Bedroom community	0
HS athletics	0	Proximity to interstate	0
Nice big box stores	0	Expand walkways	0
Farms and agriculture	0	Grant funding in drug education	0
Creativity	0	Mental health	0
Libraries	0	Eclipse	0
Community pride	0	City/town collaboration	0
Arts	0	Green spaces	0
Historic buildings	0	Entertainment	0
Coming together (in crisis)	0	Empty space	0
GM	0	NBA collaboration	0
Philantropic	0	Young leaders	0
Boomerang residents (return migrants)	0	Collaboration space	0
Groceries giveaway	0		
Open spaces	0		
Towns clustered	0		
Easter pageant	0		
Collaboration between organizations	0		
Garfields	0		

Sweetser — February 22, 2024-1

Weaknesses	Dots	Threats	Dots
Addiction	2	Drugs	2
Lack of job opportunities	2	Loss of jobs	2
Retention of graduates	2	Inflation	2
Poverty	1	High taxes	1
Street signs missing	1	Loss of homes	1
Health	1	Change of culture	1
Roads	1	Homeless	1
Lack of recreational opportunities	1	Housing shortage	1
Low wages	1	Loss of manufacturing	1
Lack of transportation routes	1	Crime	0
Food deserts	1	Sex trafficking	0
Lack of pride	1	Other successful counties	0
Lack of broadband access	1	Firearms	0
Poor economic development	1	Healthcare legislation	0
Recidivism	0	Amazon facility	0
Jail overcrowding	0	Illegal immigration	0
Lack of child care	0	Food/insecurity	0
Vocational opportunities	0	Apathy	0
Lack of communication	0	Political division	0
Blight	0	Qualified workers	0
Mental illness	0	Online shopping	0
Communication with government	0	Educational regulations	0
Difficult to age in place	0	“Missing Middle” housing/services	0
Innovation phobia	0	Nuclear threat	0
Walkability	0		
Scarcity mentality	0		
Fragmentation of city/town	0		
Brain drain	0		

Marion II — February 29, 2024

Strengths	Dots	Opportunities	Dots
Affordable cost of living	5	Riverside development	6
Excess infrastructure (water/sewer)	3	Downtown development	5
Variety of social agencies	2	Relationships with colleges/schools	3
Growing healthcare	2	Summer internships	3
High quality child care	2	Trailways	3
Volunteering	2	mental health services	3
Good water resource	1	Grants opportunities	1
Park system	1	Talent attraction	1
Forward thinking government	1	Local arts scene	1
YMCA	1	Infrastructure	1
Generosity/kindness	1	Airport	1
Variety of education	0	Remote employment	1
Diversity	0	Partnerships w/ business and education	1
People	0	Rural internet	0
Location of transportation	0	Opportunity on city's west side	0
Local universities	0	Hiring	0
Community of churches	0	Mayor and elected officials	0
CSA (school of arts)	0	Proximity/geography	0
Museums	0	Usable real estate	0
Access to government	0	Diversity in businesses	0
Well-connected	0	Townhomes	0
Airport	0	Religious choices	0
Size (population)	0	Communities with special strengths	0
Riverwalk	0	Lower cost of living	0
Collaboration	0	Traffic reform/streetscapes	0
Addictions/Mental health services	0	Bringing back traditional events	0
Trucking companies	0	Sustainability	0
Free community events	0	Entrepreneurial opportunities	0
Traditions	0	Redevelopment of golf courses	0
Waterparks	0		
Climate (temperate)	0		
Variety of businesses	0		
Gas City efforts	0		
Small town renaissance	0		
Youth sports	0		
Local businesses	0		
School voucher programs	0		
New restaurants	0		
Wanting to grow	0		
Local celebs (James Dean, Garfield,etc)	0		
Job openings	0		
County seat has a square	0		
VA/National cemetery	0		
Great ice cream	0		

Marion II — February 29, 2024-1

Weaknesses	Dots	Threats	Dots
Lack of child care	9	Healthcare system is stretched	5
Negative mindset/division of communities	8	Drug culture	3
Blight	7	Lower state/federal funding	3
Lack of opportunities for families	6	Political power/posturing	2
Food deserts	6	Brain drain	2
Lack of higher paying jobs	4	Pull of workforce	1
Generational poverty	4	Division among community leaders	1
Affordability of higher education	3	Lack of vision/buzz	1
Drug activity/problems	2	Isolation of vulnerable	1
Lack of doctors	2	Negative mindset	1
Transportation accessibility	2	Jobs leaving	0
Homelessness of families	2	Imbalance of ages (demographics)	0
Slum lords	1	Misguided youth	0
Lack of mental health	1	Lack of acceptance of change	0
Lack of political diversity	1	Local infighting	0
Lack of transitional housing	0	Higher older population/senior healthcare	0
Scarcity mindset	0	Poor reputation (pervasive)	0
Prison/jail overcrowding	0	Fast pace tech change	0
Polarization	0	Weather events	0
Town/gown gap	0	unsafe areas	0
Lack of shopping opportunities	0	Losing graduates	0
Lack of trade education	0	Forgotten	0
Lack of population retention	0	Dwindling population	0
Old Narrative'	0	Spreading blight	0
High Cancer rates/poor health	0	Distance to trauma centers	0
Lack of community involvement	0	Cybersecurity	0
Lack of robust transportation	0	Not a destination	0
Crimes/guns	0		
Too much income-based housing	0		
Low literacy rates	0		
Lack of night life	0		
Lack of corporate headquarters	0		
Poor perception of the community (internal and external)	0		
Student mobility	0		
Lack of riverfront development	0		
Poor workforce ethic	0		
Poor cooperation	0		
Poor communication of success	0		

Upland — March 7, 2024

Strengths	Dots	Opportunities	Dots
Faith communities and service	7	Lilly community grant	3
Youth activities	4	Licensed Child care	3
Ag and farming	3	Tobacco/nicoteine-free county	2
Strong nonprofits	3	After school educational programs	2
Passionate, successful business	2	More internship opportunities	2
Entrepreneurial spirit	2	Local rehab for addiction	1
Cardinal Greenway	1	Historical push — sites & figures	1
Growing arts community	1	Green initiatives/space/way	1
People willing to volunteer	1	Grow the arts	1
Agribusiness	1	Train skilled workers	1
Colleges	0	Water trails/river development	1
Our own hospital	0	Restaurants	1
Good parks	0	College grad retention	1
Family involvement with kids	0	Use/growth of robotics	1
Proximity to cities	0	Filling gap on Cardinal Greenway	1
Small towns	0	Opportunities for business attraction	0
Location on interstate	0	Collaborate with neighboring counties	0
Low cost of living	0	Occupy vacant structures with business	0
Large employers/manufacturers	0	Exercise/nutrition programs	0
Excellent YMCA	0	More housing for middle income	0
Local celebrities	0	More access to mental health	0
Racial/ethnic diversity	0	New jobs with hospital	0
Great libraries	0	More activities for kids/families	0
Sports programs	0	Local shops	0
Rural restaurant destinations	0	Public transportation	0
Early childhood networking	0	More choices for healthcare	0
Leadership	0		

Upland — March 7, 2024-1

Weaknesses	Dots	Threats	Dots
Brain drain	5	Encroachment from solar/green energy	5
Childhood poverty	4	Crime	4
Good old boys club	4	Addictions	2
Small thinking/smaller dreaming	3	Drug/human trafficking	2
Teen/kids vaping	2	Media (social and mainstream)	2
Lack of attractions	2	Lack of personal purpose	2
Poor internet/broadband	2	Political division	1
Lack of career readiness	2	Lack of career readiness	1
People work here, don't live here (commuters	2	Not being quick to action	1
Lack of senior housing	1	Government handouts	1
Lack of cleanliness/blight	1	Misinformation	1
Lack of high-paying job opportunities	1	Government debt	1
Meth clinic	1	Electrical grid	0
Lack of local media	1	AI — rapid technology change	0
Lack of services/resources for new families	1	Geographic location/climate	0
Aging infrastructure	1	Healthcare facilities (external)	0
No honor guard for national cemetary	1	High cancer rate	0
Lack of awareness of poverty/related issues	1	Biz closure due to population loss	0
Crumbling VA facility	1	Civil unrest	0
Distance from airport	1	Losing small town identity	0
Lack of resources for addiction	0	Activities from neighboring counties	0
Volunteer groups do not collaborate	0	Flying monkeys	0
Losing medical professionals	0	Younger graduates leaving for work	0
Lack of child care	0	Economic shifts/inflation	0
Unequipped leaders	0	Job loss due to lack of education	0
Substance/drug abuse	0	Illegal immigration	0
Lack of racial diversity	0	Homelessness	0
Nay-sayers	0	Quality/safety of housing (rentals)	0
Poor public health indicators	0	Lack of financial education	0
Small replacement (youth) generation	0	Younger generation isn't marrying/having kids	0
Lack of funding for community projects	0	Another pandemic	0
Entrenched in past — path dependence	0		
SR 18 lacks development	0		
Lack of shopping opportunities	0		
Low test scores	0		
Weather	0		
Lack of market rate housing	0		