

# Thriving Communities Thriving State

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE



## SUMMARY OF REGIONAL FORUMS – RURAL/SMALL TOWN

Staff from the Public Policy Institute conducted a series of five regional forums around the state in 2015 to gather feedback from local leaders and residents about the past, present, and future of their respective communities. As part of these events, attendees participated in roundtable discussions around five questions about their community (self-selected as either urban, mid-sized, or rural/small town). What follows is a summary of the recurring themes, common concerns, and general insights from those discussing their rural communities.

### 2015 Forum Locations:

Gary: February 5  
Evansville: February 10  
Indianapolis: February 17  
Columbus: February 26  
Ft. Wayne: March 2

### What are the best things about your community/region?

- Values, character, and attitudes
  - A strong sense of community
    - Close-knit and family oriented people
    - People have “roots” in the community; engaged in town life
  - Strong work ethic and pride in community history
    - Every small community has a unique identity
  - Culture of philanthropy and volunteerism (Columbus)
- Quality of place
  - Small town feel, but always close to big-city amenities;
    - The “best of both worlds”
    - Never too far away from something
    - Ability to connect to regional economic engines
  - Safe
    - Everyone knows and looks out for one another
    - Low crime
  - Clean
    - Pride in ownership – community takes care of its public spaces, sidewalks, etc.
  - Nature/recreation
    - Clean air and open spaces
    - Close to state and national parks
  - No traffic
  - Low cost of living compared to larger places
    - Affordable housing (Columbus)
- Economy
  - Great companies/employers committed to the region (Evansville)
  - Entrepreneurial spirit (Evansville)
  - Broad mix of industry (Columbus)

- Strong leadership
  - Lots of opportunities for people to get involved through public service
  - Leaders more accessible and visible in the community
  - Easier to mobilize people towards action
    - Fewer people groups to consult on important issues
    - Agile communities
- Great schools
  - Smaller, more close-knit student population
  - Excellent parental/community engagement and support
    - Schools as community institutions

## What are the key issues facing your community/region?

- Demographics
  - Young people leave for city life and urban amenities that appeal to millennials
    - “Brain drain” → can’t retain the best and brightest
    - Small towns/rural communities actively expect, support, and encourage their most promising young people to leave
      - Success and failure attached to those who leave and stay
- Leadership
  - Lack of cooperation between city and county government
  - Units of government are fragmented and not designed for collective action
  - Insufficient leadership development
    - No pathways for youth to participate in government/public service
  - Sense of parochialism and rivalry with nearby communities
- Housing
  - Lack of affordable/quality housing
    - Especially mid-range priced homes
  - Poor quality rental properties
    - Limited options for elderly and disabled persons
  - Much of the residential property is old/poorly maintained and needs to be rehabilitated
    - Leads to high utility costs as older homes are not energy efficient
- Infrastructure
  - Many roads are still gravel or poorly maintained
  - Water mains/sewer are over a century old (Evansville)
  - Very limited transportation options
    - Hard on poor/aged populations
    - Makes it difficult to attract young people
- Education
  - Too much emphasis on 4-yr. college degrees that don’t meet local workforce needs and burden students with student loans
  - Education system is not aligned to the needs of local employers
    - Need more job skills training (certifications, credentials)

- Connectivity
  - Some places are “islands” and not connected to other communities/rest of the state
    - Political, civic, and economically isolated communities
  - The problem of “the last mile” for many services
    - No return on investment for private enterprise and unsupported by public
  - Lack access to affordable broadband internet
- Economy
  - Limited job opportunities for those with only a high school diploma
  - Workforce lack soft skills necessary for career success
- Poverty
  - Food scarcity and inadequate housing
  - Social safety net strained to meet community needs
  - Inadequate/Limited child care options
  - Exacerbated by prevalence of single parenthood
    - Harder in rural/small towns as social services are less available and more dispersed
- Healthcare
  - Limited access to healthcare provider and facilities
    - Not nearly enough doctors
  - Prevalence of poor health behavior
    - Smoking, obesity common

### What does your community need to thrive in the next 10 years?

- Change in mindset/ways of thinking
  - Overcome fear of change and persistent complacency
    - Inertia of inaction
  - Slow to accept necessary change
    - The world is rapidly changing
  - Set realistic expectations and aspirations
    - Be ambitiously authentic
- Housing investment
  - More affordable/quality homes
    - Quality rental options for poor, elderly, disabled persons
    - Partnership with Habitat for Humanity, Section 8 program
- Infrastructure
  - Access to affordable broadband internet
  - Modernize water and sewer systems
  - Maintain roads; better connect to other communities
  - Connection to I-69/I-69 bridge (Evansville)

- Economy
  - Better job training to meet skills gap
  - Support and encourage entrepreneurs
  - Take steps to attract investment capital
  - Local businesses that are invested and engaged in the future of the community
    - Push back against “Wal-Martization” of rural Indiana
- Strategic planning
  - Create a development plan that covers zoning, land use, and quality of life issues (Indianapolis)
    - Many communities land-locked/expanding beyond their official borders
  - Encourage local colleges and universities to set common goals and reduce redundancy in course offerings
    - Make credit transfer easier
  - Regional collaboration to address broad problems
    - Problems don't respect lines on a map
- Civic engagement
  - Young people need to be engaged early to create strong connection to their communities
    - Encourage and develop youth leadership
- Education
  - Expand/fund early childhood education
  - Encourage college completion as part of a culture of “lifelong learning”
- Food
  - Support local agriculture/food production
  - Increase access to healthy food options
- Government/Leadership
  - More home rule → give local government more control
  - Local leadership development
  - Incentives for innovation
    - More carrots, fewer sticks
  - Incentivize/encourage cooperation by small communities

### What are the barriers to progress?

- Government/Politics/Leadership
  - Communities don't value visionary leadership
    - No incentives for bold action
  - General Assembly does not support rural Indiana
    - Indianapolis biased policies
    - Forced to compete with other small communities for grants (e.g., OCRA)
  - Too much “red tape”
    - Unfunded mandates combined with reduced budgets means doing more with less
  - State government in economic race-to-the-bottom
    - Cheap, not effective government

- Leadership gap among young people
  - Group of old, white-haired guys discussing what Millennials want
- State grants are too inflexible and come with too many strings
  - We don't need a "façade program", we need a "roofs program"
- Economic conditions/limited resources
  - Property tax caps, jobs losses have reduced tax base and strained budgets;
    - Geographic spread makes public services more costly to deliver
  - Small communities don't have economy of scale for delivery of public services;
  - Local economy is not diverse;
    - Too reliant on manufacturing (Fort Wayne)
  - Difficult to attract investment as size limits return on investment;
  - Too many resources committed to maintaining roads;
    - Encouraging commuting rather than local development
  - Funding is incredibly unstable from year to year;
    - Discourages bold action and incentives short-term management over long-term strategic planning
- Community attitudes
  - Fear of change by residents and elected officials
  - Community is risk averse and has no appetite for bold thinking
  - Residents are complacent and content with "good enough"
    - Biased towards the status quo → "we've always done it this way"
  - Myopic thinking that focuses on the short-term
  - Communities often closed to "outsiders"
    - Don't always attempt to integrate Hispanic community into community life
- Structural limits
  - Not really part of any region (Evansville)
    - Lack identity
  - Part-time county commissioners are not effective
    - Don't have time to fully grasp community issues
- Education/employment
  - Education system and labor force are not aligned
    - Supply and demand not meeting local needs
  - Underwhelming education attainment
    - Communities don't appreciate the value of education in emerging economic reality
  - Change perception about career/tech path → too often viewed as "fall back" or "failure" option
  - Workforce lacks soft skills
    - Poor work ethic
    - Lack of punctuality, accountability, ability to delay gratification
  - Limited employment opportunities

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## If you had unlimited funding, what would you do in your community to help it thrive?

- Invest in education
  - Fund full-day kindergarten for every child; expand preschool offerings
  - Provide every high school graduate with 2-yr. at local community college
  - Establish/expand career and technical curriculum and course in high school
    - Emphasize STEM fields
    - Fund transition coaches in high schools to improve postsecondary completion and retention rates
  - Free and reduced lunch application would automatically enroll student a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholar program
- Invest in infrastructure
  - Expand access to affordable high speed broadband internet
  - Upgrade and maintain road, water, and sewer systems
  - Improve transportation options
    - Trolley system (Ft. Wayne)
    - Upgrade/expand rail system (Columbus)
- Develop a Regional Economic Strategy
  - Focus on coloration and cooperation over competition with other communities
  - Facilitate downtown development and investment (Fort Wayne, Columbus, Evansville)
  - Utilize and develop waterfront district (Evansville)
  - Connect small communities to one another
- Build quality affordable housing
  - Focus on quality rental properties for disadvantaged populations
- Political/Governmental Reform
  - Takes steps to make government more proactive, rather than reactive
    - Instill a sense of urgency and a “call to action” within communities
  - Change to five part-time or three full-time county commissioners
  - Make state grant programs more flexible and able to meet each community’s unique circumstances and needs
- Expand access to healthcare services