



2014 Executive Board

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NIRPC

2014 Year in Review

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission was first formed as an entity in 1965 and held its first meeting in 1966. NIRPC's enabling statute in Indiana State Code establishes NIRPC as the Council of Governments for Northwestern Indiana and scopes its functions along the three "domains" of *transportation, environment, and economic development*. Under the leadership of Mayor Brian Snedecor of Hobart, 2014's Chair of NIRPC, the year saw significant advances for regional planning in Northwest Indiana in all of these areas as well as in its general operations.

Northwest Indiana's Council of Governments is the Federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for regional transportation planning in the region. As such, these activities make up the bulk of NIRPC's efforts and the primary source of its operating budget.

Transportation

Creating Livable Communities

NIRPC's award-winning 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan recognized that successful transportation planning is part of a larger comprehensive planning framework. It established the contours for the *Creating Livable Communities (CLC) Program*, now fully implemented. NIRPC awarded seven grants to Northwest Indiana communities totaling \$402,000 in its inaugural implementation year.

NIRPC presented the Creating Livable Centers (CLC) program at the American Planning Association - Indiana Chapter's Spring Professional Development Conference in Muncie, at which time NIRPC also received the APA-IN State Award for Best Practices for the program - the seventh such award given to the *2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan*.

Continuing this commitment to enhancing livable places, NIRPC participated in a webinar and a charrette on transit oriented development (TOD) in the Roxana neighborhood of East Chicago. The TOD tour was coordinated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) staff and included three communities in suburban Chicago that are similar in size to East Chi-



Mayor Brian Snedecor of Hobart, 2014 NIRPC Commission Chairman

cago. NIRPC later participated in a charrette conducted by the City of Gary and the EPA team for the Neighborhoods of Horace Mann and University Park in Gary.

In Mid-Summer, NIRPC served on the "Strong Cities, Strong Communities, Strong Northwest Indiana" Symposium steering committee with the EPA, Legacy Foundation of Lake County, Michigan City, and the City of Gary. NIRPC handled registration, marketing, and local

logistics for the Symposium, sponsored by the the City of Gary, the EPA, and the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development. The event drew over 200 participants to learn about best practices, regional success stories, and next steps to strengthen urban core communities in our region.

In the Fall, NIRPC presented plenary sessions on the CLC program at the 2014 Indiana Metropolitan Planning Organization Conference in Columbus, IN. NIRPC's Executive Director also presented a plenary session on the topic of *Regional Implications for a Future of Autonomous Vehicles* on the effect of developing technologies on community planning, which he also presented at the National Association of Regional Councils' Annual Meeting in Louisville.

Developing Trail Networks

One of Northwest Indiana's great success stories is the development of over 130 mile of paved trails throughout the region, which was further enhanced and expanded in 2014.

Mid-Summer saw the awarding of funding of eight new projects and funding for three existing projects under the Transportation Alternatives Program for a total of \$8,242,000 for fiscal years 2015-21.

NIRPC also shared its experience on the opportunities and challenges of developing trails in the state at Purdue's "Road School" alongside Indiana trail stakeholders. NIRPC also presented at the Healthy Living Conference in Evansville in the summer on the quality of life benefits afforded by trail development, and presented keynote addresses at the Michigan Transportation Planning Association's Annual Conference in Port Huron, Michigan and at the Indiana Walk Summit on the importance of trails connecting communities. NIRPC staff also presented at the National Pro Walk/Pro Bike Conference in Pittsburgh, PA.

NIRPC began meeting with stakeholders in northern LaPorte County and in Southwest Berrien County, MI on a proposed route for the Marquette Greenway between Michigan City and New Buffalo. The "Marquette Greenway Michiana Partnership" intends to meet regularly to finalize a route and seek funding. NIRPC staff later presented at a Joint MPO Meeting in Berrien Springs, MI on non-motorized funding in the NIRPC region.

NIRPC attended the ribbon cutting of the Wolf Lake Bridge, a non-motorized boardwalk connecting a five-mile loop around the lake in Hammond. Three other bridge ribbon cuttings took place in Hammond, the first two involving overpasses at Columbia and 167th Avenues on the Erie-Lackawanna Trail, and at 165th Avenue on the Monon Trail. A new bridge was also opened over the Little Calumet River connecting the Monon Trail that links Hammond and Munster.

NIRPC's annual Cornucopia trail status event was held in the City of LaPorte, where all municipalities with non-motorized federal projects updated regional stakeholders on their plans.

NIRPC staff serves on the Board of the Greenways Foundation and presented

on a trail maintenance bill proposal, testifying before the Indiana Legislature's Agricultural and Natural Resources Interim Committee in Terre Haute.

Providing assistance to its communities, NIRPC presented a draft pedestrian and bicycle route plan to the Winfield Redevelopment Commission, aided the Town of Lowell in the preparation and adoption of their first pedestrian and bicycle plan, and participated in the formation of a citizens-based group to help implement the plan's recommendations. NIRPC also assisted Michigan City on negotiations with South Shore Freight on the proposed alignment of the Singing Sands, Phase 1 trail facility.

Working to connect northwest Indiana's trail network with economic development opportunities, the "Bikes on Trains" study got underway in 2014 with the engagement of a consultant. The study will assess the engineering aspects of possibly including bicycles on the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) South Shore line.

Funding Surface Transportation

In the past year, the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) announced changes in its Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) / Local Public Agency (LPA) Federal-Aid programs. In March, each Indiana MPO prepared and submitted a five-year spending plan to INDOT. NIRPC's plan covered the years 2015 through 2025. NIRPC reconciled all federal fund transactions from October 2003 through March 2014 (about \$223 million).

Changes to NIRPC's Federal-Aid Spending Plan were made for 2015 and this Plan was submitted to INDOT in May. The Plan identified \$35.9 million in spending in the Chicago urbanized area (UZA) and \$2.2 million in the Michigan City UZA. A presentation on the INDOT changes to the MPO/LPA Federal-Aid Program was made at the Transportation Policy Committee meeting.

INDOT disclosed additional details regarding its changes to the MPO/LPA Federal-Aid Program later in the year,

indicating that the 2014 carryover funds could not be used until July 2015. The 2015-2021 Spending Plan was updated to reflect this policy. Staff worked with INDOT Northwest District to ensure the changes were properly reflected in INDOT's Project Management System (SPMS).

NIRPC began reviewing the status of 136 local highway projects through INDOT's new electronic quarterly reporting system, LQR. NIRPC announced the expansion of its Federal-Aid project tracking system from twice-yearly to quarterly. Project tracking meetings (face-to-face meetings with the project sponsor, NIRPC, and INDOT) were held, discussing the status of each project and, where necessary, making changes to funding and construction schedules.



The new Cline Avenue Bridge was amended into the 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan in 2014.

A major Plan Amendment to the 2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan* was adopted, which included an added travel lanes Project on I-65 and replacement of the State Road 912 bridge over the Indiana Harbor Ship Canal. An updated Conformity Determination (an air quality analysis) was prepared and a Transportation Improvement Program amendment containing these projects was also adopted.

The NIRPC Board adopted a Federal Fund Exchange Program (FFEP) policy. This program, adopted by the Indiana General Assembly, permits LPA's with Federal-Aid projects to exchange their Federal funds for state funds.

NIRPC convened a team in mid-summer to begin working on the update to NIRPC's Functional Classification system,

eventually meeting with officials in each community and county.

NIRPC received delivery of 15 state-of-the-art traffic counters for NIRPC's traffic data collection program and assisted communities in their own local traffic counts.

A call for projects was issued this past fall, soliciting for Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) projects in all three counties and for Surface Transportation Program (STP) Group II (local highway) in LaPorte County.

NIRPC submitted the majority of the updated Northwest Indiana Regional Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) Architecture to the Federal transportation agencies, satisfying the only corrective action imposed on NIRPC by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as a result of the 2013 Federal Planning Certification Review of metropolitan area transportation planning in Northwest Indiana. NIRPC had otherwise received four commendations from the FHWA/FTA as a model of best practices for MPOs in Indiana for its *2040 Plan*, for trail development, for environmental justice, and for ADA compliance.

Promoting Public Transit

Four Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grants were filed for FY 2014 funds for Section 5307(2), Section 5317, and CMAQ. The Section 5307 grants covered the seven NIRPC transit sub-grantees and NIRPC's transit planning and oversight functions. The FTA's New Freedom grant covered the two operating projects in Lake and Porter Counties.

Staff facilitated the execution of the annual funding agreements with the Chicago Regional Transit Authority. The agreements govern distribution of the federal appropriations for transit funds under FTA Section 5307, Section 5310, Section 5317, Section 5339, and Section 5337 for the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD).

NIRPC participated in two public meetings sponsored by the Porter County public transit operators, including Porter

County Aging and Community Services, Opportunity Enterprises, and the City of Valparaiso.

NIRPC staff worked with the North Township (Lake County) Trustee on ideas for future funding of the Township's Dial-A-Ride service when the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Federal funds currently supporting the project end by the close of 2015. A permanent source of local match funds is needed.

Additional technical assistance in transit planning was provided to various communities exploring the provision of public transit and/or improving access to existing services, including meetings with Calumet Township, the Portage Senior Advisory Committee, and the Maria Reiner Center, a senior center in Hobart.

Working with NIRPC staff, the Cities of Hobart and Portage committed local match for conducting transit feasibility studies using FTA Section 5307 funds, making a significant step forward in the implementation of the *2040 Plan* regarding increasing transit service, as both communities are struggling with limited demand response service that cannot meet their growing needs.

NIRPC entered into a Settlement Agreement with Everybody Counts Inc. as a result of a motion filed by that organization just prior the expiration of an eight-year Consent Decree in December 2013. In addition to providing that organization additional input into NIRPC's draft Public Participation Plan, NIRPC also agreed to hold an afternoon and evening public meeting to solicit public comments on public transportation services in northwest Indiana. These meetings, held at Wicker Park Social Center in Highland on October 29, communicated the importance of seeking solutions to expanding transit service across the region. In addition to background information given by NIRPC on how transit is funded and where service presently exists, a public discussion was facilitated by Steve Walsh of Lakeshore Public Media on the need for expanded service. Steve Walsh later addressed the NIRPC Commission to report on and summa-

rize the results of the public meetings. The Commissioners received transcripts of the meetings that were also posted on NIRPC's website with video recordings. Though the consent decree is ended and the terms of the settlement have been fulfilled, NIRPC remains committed to seeking solutions to increase transit service across the region, as is stressed in the *2040 Plan*.

After years of effort on the parts of many people, the long-awaited Triangle Transit Service connecting Michigan City, LaPorte, and the Purdue North Central (PNC) campus has an agreed-upon a starting date, a signed Memorandum of Understanding, and a signed lease. The start-up of service is planned to coincide with the start of the spring semester at PNC. NIRPC Staff had an integral role in the development of this service, and will continue to be involved in the advisory committee.

The Triennial Review of NIRPC's financial and program oversight of its transit subgrantees was conducted by the Federal Transit Administration. The Final Triennial Review report was released in November with just three findings that required corrections in NIRPC oversight reporting and record keeping and the addition of language to the Public Participation Plan to ensure NIRPC's Plan also covered other transit systems in northwest Indiana. All of these corrections were addressed by NIRPC well ahead of FTA-imposed timeframes.

Planning for Rail, Freight, and Air

NIRPC was an active participant in a charrette on the topic of the Gary/Chicago International Airport to discuss future land use and transportation plans around this regional asset.

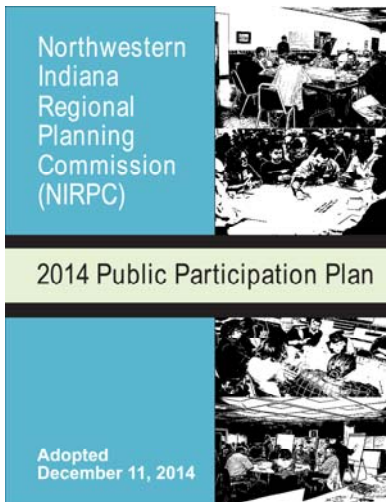
NIRPC staff met with officials from the Town of Ogden Dunes and representatives of the Federal Railroad Administration, a developer and NICTD to discuss the possibility of instituting a train horn "quiet zone" at the intersection of two railroads and the one road providing access to the Town.

NIRPC also delivered a presentation on the freight section of the *2040*

Comprehensive Regional Plan to Conexus Indiana's Northwest Indiana Regional Logistics Council.

Updating Regional Plans and Looking To The Future

Ensuring the relevance and utility of the 2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan*, NIRPC held a series of initial listening workshops throughout the region on roadway transportation, public transit, and the environment in order to have an



update to the *Plan* ready for NIRPC Board adoption in 2015. Nine of these meetings were on public transit alone; three highway component was the subject of three meetings, and two were focused on the environment.

NIRPC participated in the Indiana University Northwest Sustainable Civic and Community Engagement Conference, giving a presentation titled, "2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan*: How Public Engagement Guided the Formation of the Plan."

NIRPC staff also presented on planning topics and provided technical assistance, including keypad polling, to the City of Hobart during their *Comprehensive Plan Public Participation Process*.

The NIRPC Board adopted the new *Public Participation Plan* that will enhance public engagement and involvement in the regional planning process.

NIRPC kicked off a new *Regional Corridor Study* to improve connectivity, mo-

bility, and travel time in a selected number of corridors throughout the three counties. A two-year scope of work was established for this study.

NIRPC's Executive Director was asked by the NWI Times newspaper to submit a piece for a special section on "5 Ideas for a Better Northwest Indiana."

Continuing its partnership with One Region, NIRPC once again provided keypad polling and technical support to One Region's *Community Leaders Retreat*, helping to identify the region's more immediate priorities for action.

Environment

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 5 awarded NIRPC a \$64,000 *Urban Waters* grant to establish a permanent network of volunteer water quality and flow monitoring stations, train and supply local volunteers, and coordinate data collection from volunteers. The grant will be matched with in-kind contributions from local communities to install monitoring station signs and through volunteer participation in the program.

A focus group was hosted by NIRPC for NWI contributions to the *Millennium Reserve* and *Greater Calumet Region Guidebook*, created by Bluestem Communications with a grant from the Illinois Coastal Management Program.

A kick-off meeting was held by NIRPC for the *Deep River-Portage Burns Waterway Initiative*, a watershed planning effort funded by an Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) Federal Clean Water Act Section 319 *Watershed Planning Grant* at the Hobart Community Center.

NIRPC also held an *Illicit Discharge Detection and Elimination* workshop as the Northwest Indiana Partnership for Clean Water, an educational service provided for regional municipal separate storm sewer system operators.

The Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority (RDA) partnered with NIRPC in kicking off the *Northwest Indiana Brownfield Coalition*, which, in addition to the two regional agencies, includes the cities of Gary, Hammond, and East Chicago. Between 2013 and 2014 the Northwest Indiana Brownfield Coalition has successfully secured \$1.4 million from US EPA for the purposes of conducting brownfield assessments, and establishing a brownfield redevelopment revolving loan fund.

NIRPC held a *Post-Construction Erosion Control Best Practices* workshop as the Northwest Indiana Partnership for Clean Water, an educational service provided for regional municipal separate storm sewer system operators. NIRPC also held a *Municipal Good Housekeeping* workshop as the Northwest Indiana Partnership for Clean Water, an educational service provided for regional municipal separate storm sewer system operators, and sponsored a regional *Green Streets* technical workshop at the Hobart Community Center. The latter event was funded by an EPA Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant to the Lake Michigan Watershed Academy, a coalition of regional planning commissions around Lake Michigan.

The Partners for Clean Air and NIRPC held the 2nd Annual Fall Clean Air Tree Planting Event at Nunez Park in East Chicago. Trees were provided to the City to improve air quality through a variety of Partners for Clean Air sponsor donations.

NIRPC's *Marquette Plan* project team collaborated with Indiana Landmarks on drafting an update of the *Marquette Plan*, following multiple public workshops held across the project area. The *Marquette Plan* is a comprehensive revitalization strategy for Indiana's Lake Michigan shoreline. The plan identifies policies, strategies, and catalytic projects for protecting, restoring, and reactivating the land, ecosystems, and neighborhoods along Northwest Indiana's 45 miles of lakefront. The *Marquette Plan* "Phase III" effort updates the policies and projects identified from the plan's Phase I (2005) and Phase II (2008).

2014 saw the launch of the **Solar Ready Northwest Indiana project** with the first advisory group meetings. Solar Ready Northwest Indiana is funded by a subgrant NIRPC received from a National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) to participate in a larger, ten-region Department of Energy (DOE) grant to promote adoption of best practices for local governments to be ready for solar projects. The \$75,000-\$90,000 grant is being matched through in-kind contributions of time from advisory group participants as well as South Shore Clean Cities participation.

The first Northwest Indiana Solar Ready workshop was then held at NIRPC. Approximately 35 practitioners attended training sessions on solar-friendly zoning and permitting and a field trip to visit numerous rooftop solar installations throughout the region. Later in the year, NIRPC released a request for proposals for a Solar Installer to support the Solar Ready Northwest Indiana Solarize Initiative.

Economic Development

NIRPC has continued to partner with the Northwest Indiana Forum as well as entities such as One Region, the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority, the Center for Workforce innovations, the new Lake County Indiana Economic Alliance, and other area Economic Development Commissions in carrying out the Economic Development goals outlined in the 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan.

Northwest Indiana Economic Development District

NIRPC continued to provide staffing and accounting services throughout the year for the Northwest Indiana Economic Development District (NWIEDD), a separate, nonprofit entity established through a partnership between NIRPC and the Northwest Indiana Forum. The NWIEDD was created to maintain a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and secure economic development-related grant opportunities from the Economic Development Administration (EDA), a bureau of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The NWIEDD took the necessary steps in 2014 to apply for District status from the EDA. It also received an operational planning grant from the EDA and solicited a staffing entity to carry out the District’s activities. NIRPC is committed to seeing this effort succeed, and will be assisting in shaping the NWIEDD’s future organizational capacity for the purpose of enhancing other economic development activities in the region.

Alliance for Regional Development

NIRPC has been a lead participant in the Alliance for Regional Development, a 23-county regional partnership of Northwest Indiana, Northeast Illinois, and Southeast Wisconsin, through its “Transportation and Logistics” working team leading up to the Alliance’s Summit held in 2014.

NIRPC staff collaborated extensively with the Purdue Calumet Center for Innovation through Visualization and Simulation (CIVS) and Purdue West Lafayette Center for Regional Development (PCRD) to create a regional planning and economic development Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tool for showcasing regional infrastructure across the three-state region and leveling land use data for economic development purposes. NIRPC worked with its partner MPOs in Southeast Wisconsin and Northeast Chicago ~ co-signers (together with Southwest Michigan) of the four-state “Wingspread Accord” ~ to share and “level” data for seamless analysis across state lines to the use and benefit of the private sector.

General NIRPC Operations

NIRPC’s administrative functions provide support to the statutory activities above. NIRPC also lends its expertise to its member communities, and as the Council of Governments, serves as a general facilitator and convener to the municipalities and counties that make up its membership.

The Full Commission and Executive Board met twelve times in 2014. The NIRPC Commission heard presentations

on such topics as the Solar Ready project and the Beverly Shores’ Dark Sky initiative, received briefings on subjects such as a resource inventory for disaster management and the gaps in available commercial building affecting regional economic development, and was updated by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management and the Northern Indiana District United States Attorney.

Dave Shafer, former NIRPC representative from Munster, was presented with the Norman E. Tufford award for his outstanding service not only as a 22-year NIRPC Commissioner and 2005 NIRPC Chairman, but also for his service as President as the National Association of Regional Councils of which NIRPC has



Executive Director Ty Warner presents former NIRPC Commissioner Dave Shafer, Munster, with the Norman E. Tufford Award.

been an active participant.

NIRPC completed the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) and budget for FY 2015/2016. The two-year program describes NIRPC’s planning activities in transportation, the environment, and transit subgrantee administration.

Early in the year, NIRPC began integration of agency meeting notices and email distribution lists through *Constant Contact*, an on-line contact management tool, to better manage its large mailing list, communications, and meeting notices.

NIRPC developed thematic consistency across the agency’s website, letterhead, business cards, presentation templates, etc., moving toward better “brand identity” for the agency.

Following a public solicitation process held the previous year, NIRPC approved a new ten-year lease with the Portage Redevelopment Commission to remain at its current location. The new lease reduced the amount of space leased by NIRPC and decreases its rent payments and allows for a complete redesign of NIRPC's offices. The office remodeling is coordinated with related office space reconfigurations at the Northwest Indiana Forum, with whom NIRPC remains co-located.

NIRPC employee Terrell Waddell celebrated his 25th anniversary at NIRPC, and Kathleen Honl joined NIRPC staff as the new Accounting and Procurement Coordinator, bringing 12 years of professional experience in the areas of accounting and procurement to NIRPC from both government and the private sector. Executive Director Ty Warner was profiled as a "Professional to Watch" in Northwest Indiana Business Magazine, and Transportation Planning Manager/Active Transportation Planner Mitch Barloga was presented with the Distinguished Alumni Award from Purdue University's Landscape Architecture Department for his work in developing the regional trails network in Northwest Indiana.

NIRPC's Executive Director facilitated a panel on Executive leadership transitions at the National Association of Regional Councils' Executive Directors Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, based on the process NIRPC developed and undertook in the transition of its own Executive Director.

For the tenth consecutive year, the annual audit of NIRPC's accounting and financial management system resulted in no findings, comments or disallowed costs.

The Commission approved the purchase of AccuFund software for implementation in 2015, updating NIRPC's prior accounting system of 14 years.

In the fall, the Commission adopted the FY 2015 annual budget of \$8,982,062 of

which \$3,296,940 is for operating costs, a 5% reduction in operating costs from the previous year's final budget.

The Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) was completed for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2013. The CAFR replaces the standard State Board of Account's audit report, and has additional financial and background information about NIRPC, providing an overview of the agency and conveying NIRPC's commitment to openness and transparency in its operations. Once again, NIRPC qualified for a *Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting* - the highest form of recognition in governmental accounting and financial reporting, according to the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA).

The NIRPC "Committee on Committees of the Commission," under the leadership of NIRPC's 2014 Vice-Chair, LaPorte Mayor Blair Milo, began its work with commission members and staff to review and eventually revise the agency's committee structure.

The **Local Government Assistance Committee** continued to provide a forum for municipal and county collaborative opportunities, with presentations on energy conservation for municipalities by moving from light bulbs to LED lighting, and on solar power and how local communities can begin to adapt with ordinance changes. The Committee also heard a presentation from the Lake Co. Local Emergency Response Commission on a new technological hazard management plan being assembled for the region entitled APELL (Awareness and Preparedness for Emergencies at the Local Level). It also discussed the business personal property tax and how changes would affect local government, and discussed the upcoming legislative session and other topics of interest to local government the Indiana Association of Counties and Towns (IACT).

NIRPC again contracted with the **Kankakee River Basin Commission** (KRBC) for staff and office services.

NIRPC provided staff services for the **Lake Michigan Marina and Shoreline Development Commission** (LMMSDC) through June 2014 and contracted for an inventory assessment of assets and projects within the three counties. (The inventory was completed in July 2014; the LMMSDC is searching for funding to perform its legislated tasks.)

Legislative Initiatives

A NIRPC delegation comprised of Executive Director Ty Warner and Commissioners Brian Snedecor, Geof Benson, Blair Milo and Nancy Adams, as well as Dave Shafer as Past President of NARC, once again attended the National Association of Regional Council's annual *National Conference of Regions* in Washington, D.C. The delegation visited in person with Senator Coats and Senator Donnelly, as well as Congressman Visclosky and staff of Congresswoman Walorski, conveying the need for securing the Highway Trust Fund and other items of regional concern to north-west Indiana.

The NIRPC Board renewed Resolutions of Support for the Regional Development Authority (RDA), and NIRPC's Executive Director subsequently testified at an Indiana State Senate Budget Committee meeting regarding NIRPC's relationship with the RDA and the RDA's value to north-west Indiana.

The NIRPC Board also renewed a resolution of support for the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD)'s commuter rail and proposed West Lake Extension, and adopted a resolution to adjust NIRPC's state enabling statute to make current the Census year used for weighted voting.

2014 saw the resolution of outstanding challenges, the launch of new initiatives, and the laying of solid groundwork for the future of the agency. As NIRPC prepares to enter its 50th Year, the benefits from regional collaboration have clearly taken hold in Northwest Indiana, and NIRPC thanks its many, many partners for working with us to create our tomorrow...today.

Forty Years of Serving the Region

Steve Strains Reflects on His Time at NIRPC

How did your journey in regional planning begin?

It started in fourth grade when a special teacher, with whom I remain in contact, kindled my interest in maps and geography. That led to an undergraduate degree in geography followed by a master's in urban and regional planning. I grew up an hour from Milwaukee, Wis. and developed an interest in improving cities.

What led you to NIRPC as an intern?

I became acquainted with NIRPC (then the Lake-Porter County Regional Transportation and Planning Commission) from a guest speaker who spoke to an urban geography class of mine at Valparaiso University. The speaker was the agency's Deputy Director, Jim Ranfranz, also a VU graduate. The head of VU's geography department Ferencz Kallay encouraged me to attend graduate school at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, which led to an internship in the summer of 1973 at this agency, which was then in Highland.

What were your impressions of NIRPC when you first came to work here?

I thought that it was an impressive organization with an important job to do. The work was done by a diverse staff of hard-working people under fine leadership, and overseen by a board made up of notable people. It coordinated planning, primarily transportation, with adjacent areas, especially Northeast Illinois.

Did those impressions change over time?

Not very much. We still do significant, collaborative planning guided by able leaders.

What have been the most significant changes you've seen in Northwest Indiana over 40 years?

This region has been working harder to recapture much of the Lake Michigan shore for public use and enjoyment. The seed for the marinas that have been built along Lake Michigan, was planted and nurtured by NIRPC a few years after I arrived. NIRPC was instrumental in saving the South Shore commuter rail service from abandonment and establishing NICTD, the public agency that owns and operates the railroad. Not only was the South Shore saved, a push is now on to expand the service. NIRPC got the attention of the Indiana Department of Transportation, which made significant improvements to the Borman expressway over many years. There is more attention



being paid to slowing the disappearance of farmland and open space, while encouraging a greater awareness of the region's environment and better land use practices. We now have well over 130 miles of separated trails largely on abandoned rail rights-of-way, a system that was only an idea that I mapped when I began at NIRPC. I've seen the emergence of an agency (Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority) that has the ability to fund, and leverage even more money to help make vast, wonderful improvements that were only dreamt of and wished for, decades ago.

What do you see as the biggest challenges our region faces? How have those challenges shifted over 40 years?

A notable challenge is the absence of a connected, regional system of public transportation for lack of a sustaining, ample local source of funds. Unfortunately, that has not changed over the last four decades, although obviously many people do not have ready access to an automobile and would benefit by a decent transit system. Understanding the need for transit has increased, yet with a few notable exceptions, adequate funding is not politically supported. The long-time poor perception some people have of the area is lessening, given the region's many assets that are more vigorously being promoted. More people are realizing that this is indeed a great place to live, work and play.

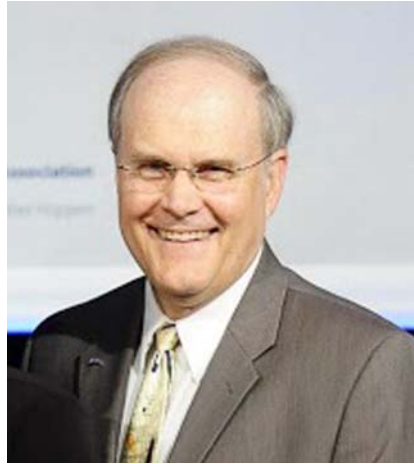
From the vantage point of your long tenure, what are NIRPC's biggest contributions to the region?

NIRPC has evolved into a more valuable "go-to" agency for information, research, ideas, and solutions, with many reasons to meet and work together cooperatively. Our planning in the mid-1970s initiated the program of buying buses and vans with federal funds, vastly adding to the fleets of agencies that transport people with mobility limitations. Very few regional planning agencies have taken their planning to that level of implementation. Federal money that is allocated to the region is spent on the finest, most needed projects, selected via criteria, which steadfastly implements the long-range plan. Our award-winning plan for 2040 is a comprehensive one that gives this region excellent ideas and a sound vision for the future.

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You're an accomplished trumpet player, playing in the Highland Community Band, the South Shore Brass Band, in your church, and at other venues. What analogies can you draw from your music playing to your work at NIRPC over these years?

I don't know how skilled I am, but I have a lot of fun with music. To be proficient at something one has to work at it - practice, learn the music, and develop confidence and endurance. Being part of a band, like a member of a staff team, contributes to the area's quality of life by: playing the



same song; doing our best individually while blending with others; and following the director (a good one is essential to a successful band or agency), and knowing that he/she wants each musician to do well. The result is a harmonious piece of music that is enjoyable to the audience. In planning, the outcome is satisfaction in working together, to form and implement the plan for a more successful, livable region.

NWI to Power Up with Solarize

By: Kathy Luther

As part of our Solar Ready II Partnership with the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), funded through the US Department of Energy's Sunshot Initiative, NIRPC is preparing to kick off a Solarize NWI Campaign. We are currently in the process of procuring qualified solar installation companies to implement the program this spring.

Solarize is an established method for increasing solar photovoltaic resource development in communities. Solarize NWI is based on the success of recent Solarize pilot programs in other parts of the county including Missouri, Massachusetts, Connecticut, North Carolina, Texas, and New York. NIRPC is following models established by others, adapted to Northwest Indiana. Solarize programs in some places have resulted in many solar installations, creating jobs and generating hundreds of MegaWatts of electricity. Solarize NWI will team up local communities with qualified and competitively selected solar photovoltaic (PV) installers to make solar energy more accessible and affordable for residents in our region.

Installation prices for residential solar PV systems are typically higher than per-watt prices for large-scale installations due to basic economies of scale. Solarize NWI is designed to overcome the greater costs associated with residential solar installations through methods that increase awareness of the program and reduces the typical expenses associated with trying to attract business and pay for solar PV installations independently.

NIRPC and the Solar Ready Stakeholder Advisory Group will select up to four communities or community partnerships within

Lake, Porter, and LaPorte Counties to participate in the Solarize NWI program. It is expected that community leaders and volunteers will be significantly involved in Solarize outreach in their community. NIRPC will assist the communities with recruiting volunteers from regional environmental organizations and universities.

Once selected, communities will work as a partner with NIRPC and the solar PV installer procured by NIRPC. The selected PV installer will provide, at a minimum, attractive and discounted tiered pricing, purchase and financing options, installation ser-

vices, community incentives, and technical support. Each community will have a 15-week community outreach campaign, with the goal of at least doubling the number of existing solar PV installations in each community.

A successful Solarize campaign is dependent on the community's commitment at all levels, including buy-in from municipal leadership, capacity of assigned project leaders,

creative use of local communication channels and networks, and coordination of local partners and volunteers. The selected Solarize Installer will offer incentives for successful community participation.

With the installer to be selected in January, and pilot communities to be selected in February, Solarize will be off to a big start in 2015. NIRPC will work with the communities and installers to develop and implement a strategy for collaboration and outreach during the 15-week program, which begins in mid-March. Stay tuned as we work to Solarize NWI!

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