

Creating Livable Communities Off & Running

By: Gabrielle Biciunas

NIRPC awarded seven grants totaling \$402,000 to seven Northwest Indiana communities through its Creating Livable Communities (CLC) new funding program. The seven communities to receive grants were:

- Chesterton for their Calumet Connection/Dunes Kankakee Trail project, \$24,000
- Crown Point for their North Street Corridor Vision and Guideline Plan, connecting the Downtown Livable Center to the Broadway Corridor, \$72,000
- East Chicago for their East Chicago Transit-Oriented Development project for the Roxanna, South Side, and Calumet areas, \$60,000
- Gary for urban revitalization planning for the Downtown/Emerson and Horace Mann areas, \$150,000
- Highland for their Downtown Highland Kennedy Avenue Corridor Plan, \$24,000
- Porter for the design of sidewalk and streetscape improvements in Downtown Porter, \$32,000
- Winfield for a downtown master plan, \$40,000

“We are thrilled to take this major step in implementing NIRPC’s 2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan*,” said Eman Ibrahim, NIRPC’s Planning Manager. “This project has created better connections with the communities in our region and those who plan for their futures and the future of Northwest Indiana.” NIRPC worked with 40 local communities through intensive meetings with elected officials and other municipal staff to identify and map the geographic boundaries of each commu-



APA-IN Board Member Robert Thompson (left) presents the Hoosier Planning Award to NIRPC staff members (l-r): Gabrielle Biciunas, Sarah Geinosky, and Eman Ibrahim. Photo courtesy APA-IN

nity’s Livable Centers, producing a report featuring each community and its Livable Centers. Staff developed the CLC funding program in order to fund planning and transportation related projects within the identified transit areas and Livable Centers in the 40 communities. The CLC report is a strong model for organizing place-making resources that inform local planning decisions.

NIRPC’s CLC program is an innovative first step toward making a significant advancement in imple-

menting NIRPC’s award-winning 2040 *Comprehensive Regional Plan (CRP)*. The CRP strongly endorses a future pattern of focused growth based on the concept of Livable Centers. The Livable Centers model is to concentrate future growth within a defined perimeter around downtown and neighborhood areas. The CLC program promotes investment and redevelopment in the places where people already live and work to create an improved working and living environment that is supported by travel choices.

The CLC was also recently awarded the 2014 Hoosier Planning Award for “Outstanding Best Practice” from the Indiana Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA-IN). The APA-IN award came at the organization’s Spring Conference held mid-March at Ball State University in Muncie. The state’s annual awards honors a program, project, or process that has made a significant advancement in planning and demonstrates how innovative and state-of-the-art planning methods and practices helped to implement a plan. 

2014 NIRPC Executive Board

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Vice-Chair.....**Blair Milo**
Mayor of LaPorte

Treasurer.....**Jim Ton**
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Secretary.....**Roosevelt Allen, Jr.**
Lake County Commission

Executive Board.....**Anthony Copeland**
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Executive Board.....**Tom Schmitt**
Schererville Town Council

Executive Board.....**Nancy Adams**
Porter County Commission

Executive Board.....**Don Ensign**
Hebron Town Council

Executive Board.....**Rich Murphy**
Michigan City City Council

Executive Board.....**Dave Decker**
La Porte County Commission

Executive Board.....**Ed Soliday**
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Executive Director.....**Ty Warner**
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NIRPC Elects New Officers

Mayor Brian Snedecor New NIRPC Chair at January Meeting



By: Stephen Sostaric

At the January 30, 2014 full membership meeting of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC), Hobart Mayor Brian Snedecor was elected as the NIRPC Chair for the next year. Mayor Snedecor has previously served on the NIRPC Executive Board, most recently as Vice Chair.

The other officers who were elected at the January meeting were Vice Chair Blair Milo, Mayor of the City of LaPorte; Treasurer Jim Ton, Councilman of the Town of Chesterton; and Roosevelt Allen, Jr., Lake County Commissioner.

The other NIRPC Executive Board members who were chosen at the meeting were: Anthony Copeland, Mayor of East Chicago, Tom Schmitt, Councilman, Town of Schererville, Nancy Adams, Porter County Commissioner, Don Ensign, Councilman, Town of Hebron, Rich Murphy, Councilman, City of Michigan City, and Dave Decker, La Porte County Commissioner. Ed Soliday of Valparaiso will continue to serve on the Executive Board as the appointment of the Governor of Indiana. David Uran, Mayor of Crown Point, will serve in a non-voting capacity on the Board as the Immediate Past Chair. 

NARC & NIRPC Help Region Get Solar Ready

By: Kathy Luther

On April 1 and April 8 NIRPC held kick-off meetings for a new Solar Ready II NWI Project. NIRPC has received a US Department of Energy SunShot Initiative Rooftop Solar Challenge grant, in partnership with National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), and the Council of State Governments, 8 other Regional Councils, and internationally known Meister Consultants Group. Over the next 36 months, if we meet project benchmarks, NIRPC will receive up to \$90,000 in federal funding, as well as mentoring and technical support on how best to assist local jurisdictions to implement solar best management practices. During this time we will develop training materials, model documents, and other assistance requested by communities and stakeholders. The grant requires a \$40,000 match. NIRPC will be generating the needed \$40,000 in-kind services through the assistance of our local partner South Shore Clean Cities as well as the value of the stakeholders' and participants' time.

The U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative aims to dramatically decrease the total costs of solar energy at the utility, commercial, and residential levels before the end of the decade, making subsidy-free solar energy cost-competitive with conventional forms of electricity and enabling widespread solar energy deployment. The Rooftop Solar Challenge will spur power deployment by streamlining permitting processes and cutting red tape. Our NIRPC grant is part of the NARC led Solar Ready II is one of 22 regional projects funded through this challenge

The recent kickoff meetings had two dozen participants, including a wide variety of stakeholders such as local planners, two NIRPC commissioners, builders, and electricians, installers, NIPSCO, clean energy advocates and vendors.

As we move forward to learn more about the

best management practices for solar zoning, permitting, training, and financing, we look forward to seeing more of our municipalities participating. Local government participation is critical to our ability to reach benchmarks established in the grant, receive the full funding, and meet our match requirements. In the near future, staff will be contacting local planning and building department staff to complete a survey to establish our solar baseline.

This project is one way NIRPC can provide tools to implement the environment goals of the 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan, but there are many economic benefits as well. Jobs in the solar installation sector have increased 20% since the 2010 census.

This is 10 times faster than overall economic growth. The majority of this growth is occurring in states and locations with solar friendly policies and practices. Meister Consultants Group estimates that each new residential solar installation in Northwest Indiana creates almost \$30 in economic value. Studies in some markets have also shown that homes with installed solar sell faster and at a higher price. Also, the focus on streamlining red tape is a potential side benefit beyond solar.

One common reaction to the thought of solar being a worthwhile investment here is weather. Despite our northern latitude, we receive more solar rays here than Germany, the world leader in solar energy production. We receive the same amount as New Jersey, which has over 100 watts installed per capita in their state, compared with less than 1 for Indiana. Solar energy in the US costs twice what it does in Germany. Almost all of that difference is in "soft costs" such as zoning variances, permitting fees, and procedural delays, many of which are in the control of local governments. Many of the costs are associated with barriers built into planning and zoning practices and permitting processes that are not ready for this "new" 30 year old technology. 



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Meet the Commissioner. . .



State Representative Ed Soliday is the current Representative for House District 4 and is the Governor's appointee on NIRPC's commission.

A graduate of Indiana University, Representative Soliday joined United Airlines as a pilot immediately after college, eventually rising to Vice President of Safety, Quality Assurance, and Security. He flew attack helicopters in the Vietnam War, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Bronze Stars, and the Purple Heart.

Born and raised in Valparaiso, Mr. Soliday served on the Valparaiso Board of Parks and Recreation and the city's Planning Commission, and has testified before Congress, the Gore Commission, and the 9/11 Commission. He has completed his fifth study committee with the National Academy of Sciences, completing a ten-year review of NASA aeronautics research.

Representative Soliday currently serves on several non-profit boards of directors, including the Adler Planetarium. He and his wife Mary, a native of Hebron, live in Valparaiso. They have a son, Jason, and a daughter, Lindsay. 

Meet the NIRPC Staff. . .



Scott Weber is NIRPC's transportation engineer, having started with NIRPC in September 2013. He is responsible for conducting NIRPC's travel demand model, which demonstrates air quality conformity and helps with congestion management and transit planning, and leading NIRPC's Interagency Consultation Group on Air Quality Conformity.

Originally hailing from Kenilworth, Illinois, Scott is now a resident of Valparaiso. He completed his undergraduate degree at Bowdoin College in Maine, where he first encountered the planning field studying abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark, and his graduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania. While there, he gained a passion for regional governance structures and how they align with regional transportation systems. It was this interest that helped guide him to applying for his current position with NIRPC.

Outside of planning, Scott is involved with autism support and awareness, having grown up with a younger brother on the autism spectrum. He has run two Chicago Marathons in 2009 and 2012, raising money for Have Dreams, an autism charity. 

NIRPC Certification Review Final Report Released

A joint federal review of the regional transportation planning process in Northwestern Indiana has found that it not only complies with federal requirements, but serves as a model of best planning practices.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has issued its Certification Review Final Report of how the NIRPC, INDOT, Gary Public Transportation Corporation (GPTC), and the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) implement the federal transportation planning process.

NIRPC received four commendations in the report:

- Receiving the American Planning Association's 2013 Daniel Burnham Award for its *2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan (CRP)*.
- Its collaborative planning efforts that have led to construction of recreation trails in addition to integration of bicycle and pedestrian elements into roadway projects.
- Its Environmental Justice analysis in the *2040 CRP*.

- Its efforts to work cooperatively with both INDOT and FHWA to better understand Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The report also includes a variety of useful recommendations for further refinement and improvement in the planning process that is led by NIRPC in cooperation with INDOT and the public transit providers. In addition, the report issues a corrective action regarding NIRPC's Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) architecture, which will employ a variety of technologies to monitor, evaluate, and manage transportation systems to enhance efficiency and safety. "Given the amount of truck traffic and overall congestion in the region, an effective ITS would serve the area well," says NIRPC Deputy Director and Director of Planning, Steve Strains. "Many stakeholders will be asked to be involved in updating the ITS during 2014 for the overall transportation system as well as for individual projects."

The FHWA/FTA Certification Review Final Report can be found on NIRPC's website at www.nirpc.org. 