

Porter County, Indiana

A Coastal Community Smart Growth Case Study

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Porter County is one of Indiana's three coastal counties that hug the shores of Lake Michigan and is located about 50 miles east of Chicago. During the late 1900s and early 2000s housing boom, Porter County experienced pressure to convert its farmland and open spaces to urbanized development. Between 1990 and 2000, nearly 45 percent of residential unit constructed in the county were in unincorporated areas.



contributed to a regional waterfront plan in 2005 and streamlined its codes and regulations to position the county to better achieve the goals set forth in both plans.

Comprehensive Plan

The 2001 *Porter County Land Use & Thoroughfare Plan* guides the county's growth into the future by creating a framework for communities to implement smart growth elements

Around the same time, residential and commercial development strained the county's transportation infrastructure as traffic volumes on the region's highways rose by 50 percent from 1980 to 2000¹. In 2006, nearly 33.6 percent of the county residents—about 35,000 people—commuted outside the county for work. Of that, 6.5 percent (6,800) commuted daily to Illinois, and 21 percent (21,900) commuted to neighboring Lake County, Indiana. This increased dependence on automobile travel has placed an increased demand on the existing transportation infrastructure as localities, counties and states struggle with maintaining and improving roads, highways and bridges to keep up with increased vehicular travel needs.

related to mixed land uses and compact building design as well as preserving and protecting the county's existing character. The comprehensive plan was developed with significant public and stakeholder input. Five focus groups representing economic, development, agricultural and environmental interests in the community, met to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) within Porter County. The Plan aims to:

"continue a commitment to preserve and enhance the unique and diverse character of the County... emphasize a compact urban form while recognizing that adequate infrastructure is imperative for guiding growth."

In light of these trends and in anticipation that they would continue, Porter County embarked on developing a comprehensive plan in 2001,

The Plan also promotes intergovernmental cooperation and efficiency to preserve open space, agriculture and natural resources, provide additional recreation opportunities and ensure an efficient transportation and infrastructure network.

¹ Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. 2007. 2030 Regional Transportation Plan. <http://nirpc.org/transportation/2030.htm>



Porter County Shoreline
Source: Porter County Tourism

Marquette Plan

The Marquette Plan: The Lakeshore Reinvestment Strategy, sets forth a regional vision for Indiana’s Lake including Lake and Porter counties. The plan outlines opportunities for industrial land no longer in use that could be converted to public parkland and a continuous pedestrian and bicycle trail along the shoreline. The goals are to recapture 75 percent of the shoreline for free public access; establish a minimum setback of at least 200 feet for any new structures not associated with public access; and establish a continuous pedestrian/bike trail. The Regional Development Authority (RDA), a quasi-state agency created in 2006 to implement the Marquette Plan as one of its four primary missions, administers funds to projects proposed under the plan.

Phase II of the Marquette Plan focuses on the lakeshore from the Port of Indiana to the Michigan-Indiana state line including Porter and LaPorte counties. Phase II sets forth a vision that identifies and protects land (“greenways”) and possible water trails (“blueways”) in the region and addresses the planning and redevelopment related needs of smaller communities.

Streamlining Codes and Regulations

Indiana is a home rule state in which authority is given to local units of governments (e.g., counties, cities, towns and villages) to make land use decisions through the creation and enforcement of codes and regulations. Porter County implements its comprehensive land use plan through its codes and regulations which apply to all land within the county

Michigan waterfront as a livable, sustainable waterfront to work, play and stay. The Plan covers Indiana’s three coastal counties: Lake, LaPorte and Porter. To help realize this vision, the Marquette Plan establishes comprehensive land use goals for the larger Indiana Lake Michigan watershed area. The Marquette Plan was developed in two phases, with Phase I released in 2005 and Phase II in 2008. Funding to develop both phases was provided through a grant from the Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources Lake Michigan Coastal Program with matching funds from local communities.

Initiated by First District Congressman Peter Visclosky, the first phase of the plan addresses public access and redevelopment of the lakeshore from the Illinois state line to the Port of Indiana,

limit, except for incorporated cities and towns, which develop their own land use plans and regulations.

From 2006 to 2007, Porter County underwent the process of streamlining zoning codes, subdivision regulations and development standards into one document called a *Unified Development Ordinance* (UDO). This process helped county officials address their growth concerns. It provided the opportunity to review existing codes and standards and modify them to be consistent with smart growth principles and objectives. Specifically, the county was interested in how the UDO could promote traditional neighborhood development (TND)—a planning approach at the neighborhood level that aims to reduce traffic and eliminate sprawl by placing homes, businesses, schools, parks and other important services within easy walking distance. Accordingly, the County developed the UDO which articulates the goals and objectives of TND and includes design guidance to support TND implementation. The table below summarizes the smart growth elements that are contained in planning documents and UDO of Porter County and the related factors that led to their implementation.

Table 1: Coastal & Waterfront Smart Growth Element and Related Drivers in Porter County, Indiana

	Smart Growth Implementation	Comp Plan	(Marquette) Waterfront Plan	Public Will	Local Initiative	Local Regulation	State Regs/Program	Federal Program
1. Mixed land uses	✓	X	X			X		X
2. Compact building design	✓					X		X
3. Range of housing opportunities	✓	X			X	X		X
4. Walkable waterfronts & public access	✓		X			X	X	
5. Distinctive, disaster-resilient communities	✓					X		
6. Preserve open space	✓		X			X		
7. Directed development & revitalization	✓		X			X		
8. Variety of transportation choices	✓				X			
9. Consistent polices & coordinated permitting	✓				X			
10. Stakeholder collaboration in decisions	✓	X	X		X			

The process of adopting these smart growth elements varied from federal and university support to county priorities to local interests. The importance of partnerships for pooling technical and financial resources cannot be overstated. This was particularly the case in adopting TND concept into county codes, regulations and standards.

Partnerships

The county, in partnership with the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant Program, was awarded financial and technical assistance through the Smart Growth Implementation Assistance for Coastal Communities program -a joint initiative with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The purpose of this federal program was to help communities develop in ways that meet environmental and other community goals.

Planning with POWER (Protecting Our Water and Environmental Resources), a project at Purdue University that is funded and coordinated by the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant College Program and Purdue University Extension, was also an important partner. Planning with POWER provided substantial assistance to Porter County to obtain the federal grant to support the Porter County Smart Growth Implementation Assistance for Coastal Communities Project. At local level,

project partners included Porter County Planning Department and Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC).

SMART GROWTH ELEMENTS

In addition to the TND concepts adopted into the UDO described above, the County’s comprehensive plan and the regional waterfront (Marquette) plan contain a variety of other smart growth elements.

Wildlife Corridors and Flood Protection

The County made the creation of wildlife corridors and the moderate floods protection a priority which was the underlying driver for the development of the watershed ordinance in the form of a *Watershed Overlay District*. This district was established to maintain water quality, moderate floods, and provide a variety of other protections for the County’s water resources. No construction is permitted in a floodplain and any development adjacent to a floodplain requires a permit. The watershed ordinance requires adjacent developments to manage storm water runoff. This ordinance is in part designed to create disaster-resilient communities. The watershed ordinance was adopted by the county in 2007 along with the TND guidelines.

Open Space Protection

Driven by the comprehensive plan, an open space standard was adopted in 2005 and incorporated into the UDO that requires all proposed developments provide open space. The open space protection standard provides a framework to:

1. Encourage wise use and management of natural resource,
2. Preserve the integrity and value of land,
3. Preserve environmentally sensitive areas, and Provide recreational opportunities.

Developers are required to set aside at minimum 15 percent of the site for open space where sites do not have existing environmental features. Where environmental features do exist such as floodplains, at least 20 percent must be set aside. The requirements of the *Watershed Overlay District* count toward the minimum open space requirements of the project site. Since 2005, all proposed projects before the Porter County Plan Commission (ten projects in total), contain the open space standard; a few projects out of those ten preserve 60 percent of the site in open space. At least one of these projects is in the construction phase as of 2008.



Indiana Dunes State Park Walkers
Source: Porter County Tourism

Walkable Waterfronts and Public Access

Related to open space and also driven by the comprehensive plan is the county code that requires a 75 foot buffer along all waterways, lakes, streams, rivers and wetlands that is designated as open space and for residential recreational purposes.

An example of the public access policy in action is the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. It is one of the first projects implemented under the Marquette Plan and the Northside Master Plan of Portage, Indiana.

Dedicated in November 2008, the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk provides access to a fishing pier, a pedestrian walkway along the river, trails, recreational paths and a 1,200 square foot pavilion. Formerly the site of a National Steel sanitary sewage plant and hazardous waste processing area, the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk is a shining example of how neglected and degraded areas can be cleaned up a redeveloped to showcase their natural beauty for all to enjoy and protect.



Portage Lakefront Pavilion
Source: Purdue University

Directed Development and Revitalization

Another priority that emerged from the comprehensive plan development process is the need to direct development in existing urbanized areas. Integrated into the UDO is an ordinance requiring proposed commercial and industrial developments to connect to municipal water and sewer. Prior to the ordinance adoption, businesses and industry were developing primarily on unincorporated greenfields in the county. With this ordinance in place, developers are required to go to the cities and towns first for approval. An ancillary consequence of the ordinance is that cities and towns are beginning to annex small portions of the county into their local jurisdiction to accommodate the needs of industry.

Variety of Transportation Choices

Many regional, county and municipal initiatives are underway in Porter County to provide transportation choices to its residence to peddle, paddle or walk.

On the three-county regional level, the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission completed the *Blueways and Greenways Plan* in 2008. The plan is a resource for local and county jurisdictions to utilize as they develop their own visions and plans for open space corridors and build upon their existing network of greenway and blueway recreational trails. The plan recognizes that greenways add to the experience of bicycling and walking, and blueways provide opportunities for canoeing and kayaking. This plan calls for a network of land based and water based alternative transportation options in Porter, Lake and LaPorte Counties. More specifically, it recommends that each local and county jurisdiction assess the proposed open space and water trails in the *Regional Blueways and Greenways Plan* and incorporate locally pertinent aspects into their comprehensive plans, and subdivision and zoning codes.

On the county level, Porter County's bikeway system has been developed to provide recreational and alternative transportation opportunities. It consists of nine looping trails with over 100 miles that connect with one another and five rails-to-trails pathways.

Additionally, in the planning phase as of 2009, is an initiative to construct a multi-use trail along State Road (SR) 49, a major transportation artery in the county. The proposed Dunes Kankakee Trail starts at the Indiana Dunes State Park and heads south along the SR 49 corridor to the Kankakee River. The intent is to create a green lineal park that provides a transportation alternative to driving as well as additional recreational opportunities. The proposed trail will connect communities in Porter County with a major trail network that is being constructed connecting Chicago with Southwestern Michigan. The Dunes Kankakee Trail engineering feasibility study and final study will be conducted over 2009-2010. The Indiana Dunes State Park will kick-off construction of the first leg in 2010. Figure 1 depicts the proposed trail.

Figure 1



State Route 49 Trail Route Study

Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission & Porter County Recreation, Convention and Visitors Commission
September 2008

Overview Map

On the municipal level, the city of Portage's *Northside Master Plan* features a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) with mixed use, pedestrian-friendly access, and lakeshore green infrastructure connected to the Ogden Dunes/Portage commuter South Shore Rail station serving the Chicago Metro Station. Also included in the Northside Plan are two marinas and the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk, all with access to the Lake Michigan waterfront. As of winter of 2009, a few of the commercial developments outlined in the plan are under construction.

Consistent Policies and Coordinated Permitting Processes

For development projects proposed in unincorporated areas, Porter County is attempting to coordinate permitting among its agencies with a new permit tracking software. The software allows for a 5-day turnaround time for the county planning department.

A Range of Housing Opportunities

Local interest groups in Porter County supported a housing needs assessment in 2005 which examined needs related to rehabilitation of rental housing and allowing more rental housing with an emphasis on addressing homelessness in the region. The final report of the needs assessment concludes with 20 recommendations to the Porter County Commissioners and municipalities. Most recommendations focus on the need to build federal, state and local partnerships that would facilitate the development of affordable housing.

THE BENEFITS

The various plans, guidelines and updates to county codes and regulations described in this case study have only been developed relatively recently (2004-2009). Most on-the-ground projects are in the beginning construction phase. Therefore, the benefits of these planning activities will most likely appear in subsequent years.

Trend analyses will need to be conducted to measure the benefits of projects implemented under the new comprehensive plan and waterfront plan with an eye on comparing outcomes based on smart growth principles. Future analyses of this kind will also need to consider the context of the global economic crisis which began in late 2007. That said, the draft Corridor Plan for Porter, Indiana, released in March 2009, provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the impacts and benefits of smart growth planning. This framework includes:

- Comparison of the growth of residential development in unincorporated areas to residential development in incorporated areas (e.g., cities, towns or villages within the county).
- Growth in the number of jobs. Over the last 10 years, Porter County has gained 6,000 jobs in private employment, despite major losses in manufacturing employment totaling over 2,000. The 2008 national and global economic crisis must be considered in any future analysis.

- Change in greenfield land area (e.g., wetlands, forests, prime agriculture farmland, parks and recreation areas).
- Change in air quality. U.S. EPA designated Porter County as a non-attainment area for 8-hour Ozone and PM 2.5. NIRPC has documented progress toward attainment for 1-hour Ozone by 2010.
- Change in water quality. Water quality could be tracked by the annual number of beach closures and/or the number of combined sewer overflows.

While is too early to do any meaningful analysis of the impacts of smart growth planning in Porter County, a few socio-economic and environmental indicators are worth noting.

Economic Growth

Over the past 4 years (2003-2007), new jobs have been created in the county at a rate of 9.6 percent. According to STATS Indiana, the industry sectors that grew the most were business management (62.8%), administrative and waste services (61.6%), transportation and warehousing (34%) and information services and construction (32.5%). During that same time, the average unemployment rate fell from 5.1 to 4.6 percent.²

Transportation

As of early 2009, the private automobile remains the dominant form of transportation in Northwest Indiana. Vehicle miles traveled has remained stable from 2000 to 2006. However, public transportation increased slightly by 0.4 percent from 2000 to 2007 among Porter County residents.

Public Access

Miles of recreational trails are one indicator of increased public access to parkland and open space. In its 2008 report, the Northwest Indiana Quality of Life Council notes that between 1990 and 2008, trail miles increased from 12.7 to 74.1 in Northwest Indiana which includes Porter County.

² Source: Labor Market Information Unit, Indiana Dept of Workforce Development

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