

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2020

# Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and surrounding counties*

## Temporary solutions; new normal

*Business leaders expect some innovations  
during pandemic will likely stick around after crisis*

*Katie Eaton  
President, Michigan City  
Chamber of Commerce*

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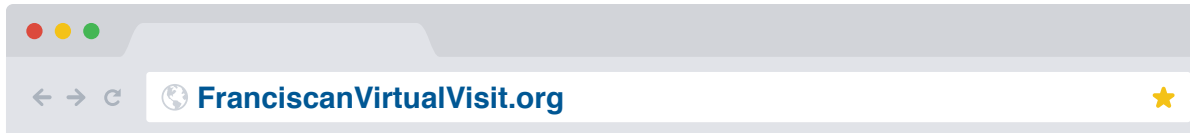
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► Cover photo of Katie Eaton by Michelle Hamstra.

GOOD BIT

**350,000**

The number of trucks that travel in and out of the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor annually.

Story on page 32

IN THIS ISSUE

**T**he year 2020 has been one unlike any other in recent history. While the pandemic has altered every facet of daily life, people have found ways to move forward. The crisis inspired innovations among small business owners as well as organizations. Manufacturers explored new avenues for automation. Local tax professionals helped small businesses navigate the long-term implications of quickly provided government assistance. The building and design industry revisited development projects in the works to accommodate requests for social distancing, and improve safety for workers and clients. As businesses found ways to continue operating, for many it was business as usual, including the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor. It hit its 50-year milestone this year. New leaders took over at Northern Indiana Public Service Co. and the University of Saint Francis. The pandemic inspired the launching of a new manufacturing company in Rensselaer, which makes personal protective equipment. And a new initiative in Gary is providing jobs and a service to clean up the city. *Enjoy the magazine!*

PICTURE PERFECT



Photo provided by Steve Bensing

Steve Bensing, a Valparaiso-based photographer, was among the winners of the 2020 Indiana Agriculture Photo Contest for this picture he took at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis. He won in the agritourism category. **Around the Region starts on Page 6.**

QUOTE TO REMEMBER

**“I just happened to think of the idea one day at lunch while opening up a ketchup packet.”**

— Clayton Geyer, Indiana Face Mask, discussing his inspiration for a new venture  
Story on page 38

LEADER PROFILE



LORRI FELDT

**Who she is:** Lorri Feldt, regional director, Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center

**Where she calls home:** Near La Porte

**What's best about NWI:** Urban, rural, nature, we have everything!

**What she's reading:** "The Emperor of the Maladies", a biography of cancer, by Siddhartha Mukherjee

**Favorite music:** '70s & '80s rock; classical

**Favorite movie:** So many!

**Favorite food:** Seafood, farm to table

**Favorite Pastime:** Anything outside, hiking, beach

**Favorite App:** MLB (I'm a Cubs fan)



# AROUND THE REGION

Learn about people, companies making difference at work and in their communities

LARRY AVILA

## Banking

**Scott McKee** was named the corporate social responsibility director for **First Merchants Corp.**, operator of **First Merchants Bank**. The organization also appointed **Scott Steinwart**, lakeshore regional chief sales officer; **Tom Ross**, market president, St. Joseph/Elkhart counties; and **Dale Clapp**, regional president, lakeshore and Northwest Indiana.

Ohio-based **KeyBank**, which has branch locations in Indiana, named **John Thurman** sales leader of commercial banking for its central and northern Indiana markets.

**Rochella Neely** was named branch manager at **Centier Bank**'s Highland location, 9701 Indianapolis Blvd.

## Business

**Kelly Webb Roberts**, co-owner of **Webb Hyundai** in Highland and **Webb Hyundai-Mitsubishi** in Merrillville, recently was elected to the executive board of the **Chicago Automobile Trade Association**. Webb Roberts, who was selected secretary, is the first woman to serve on CATA's executive board in the organization's 116-year history.

**Regina Emberton**, president and CEO, of the **South Bend - Elkhart Regional Partnership**, recently was presented with the **Certified Economic Development** designation from the **International Economic Development Council**.

**Daniel Buksa** of Munster, associate executive director, public affairs of the **Academy of General Dentistry** in Chicago, recently received renewal for his **Certified Association Executive** designation from the **American Society of Association Executives**.

**Robert Wright** recently was named president and CEO of Chicago-based **Potbelly Corp.**, which operates numerous **Potbelly Sandwich Shop** locations in Northwest Indiana. He succeeded **Alan Johnson**.

## Education

The **Rev. Dr. Eric Albert Zimmer** is the new president of **University of St. Francis**, which has campuses in Fort Wayne and Crown Point. He succeeds **Sister M. Elise Kriss** who retired June 30 after serving 27 years as president.

**Ivy Tech Community College** recently appointed **Kristen Schunk Moreland** senior vice president and chief strategy officer; **Jonathon**

**Barefoot** was named vice president for public safety and emergency preparedness; and **Matthew Etchison** was named senior vice president and chief information officer.

**Mia Johnson** recently was named interim chancellor for **Ivy Tech Community College**'s Anderson campus. She most recently served as vice chancellor for academic affairs at the college's Muncie campus. She takes over for **Jim Willey** who announced his retirement in the spring.

**Countance Anderson**, vice chancellor of student success at **Ivy Tech Community College**'s Valparaiso, Michigan City and La Porte campuses, was appointed to the Commission on Student Success of **The American Association of Community Colleges**.

**Niclas Erhardt** was appointed dean of the **Valparaiso University** College of Business. Erhardt previously served as associate dean of the Maine Business School at the **University of Maine**.

**Kenneth Christensen** will take over as Carol and Ed Kaplan Armour College Dean of Engineering at **Illinois Institute of Technology** Dec. 1. He currently serves as the Viola D. Hank professor and chair of the **University of Notre Dame**'s Department of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering.



**BANKING**  
Scott McKee



**BANKING**  
John Thurman



**BANKING**  
Rochella Neely



**BUSINESS**  
Kelly Webb Roberts





**EDUCATION**  
The Rev. Dr. Eric Albert Zimmer



**EDUCATION**  
Kristen Schunk Moreland



**EDUCATION**  
Jonathon Barefoot



**EDUCATION**  
Matthew Etchison

The **University of Notre Dame** recently elected three members to its board of trustees: **Justin Liu**, president of the **RM Liu Foundation**; **Michael O’Grady**, chairman and CEO of **Northern Trust**; and **Jennifer Scanlon**, president and CEO of **UL Inc.**

**Finance**

**Tina Patton** was named vice president, director of nonprofit and foundation engagement for **Indiana Trust Wealth Management** in Mishawaka.

**Harbour Trust & Investment Management Co.** of Michigan City named **Martha Wargo Oprea** vice president and chief compliance officer; promoted **Michael Hackett** to senior vice president and director of personal trust and marketing; and promoted **Dayna Pedzinski** to trust tax officer and operations manager.

**Government**

**Joe Hoage**, who earned a law degree from the **University of Valparaiso** School of Law in 2006, is the new commissioner of the **Indiana**

**Department of Labor.** Holcomb also appointed **Josh Martin** chief data officer at the Indiana Management Performance Hub.

**Matt Eckert** of Schnellville, president and CEO of **Holiday World & Splashin’ Safari**, was appointed by **Gov. Eric Holcomb** to the board of directors of the **Indiana Destination Development Corp.** His term runs through June 30, 2024.

**Patrick Lyp**, city attorney for the **city of Valparaiso**, recently was appointed by **Gov. Eric Holcomb** to the board of directors of the **Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority.**

**Dan Bortner** was appointed director of the **Indiana Department of Natural Resources** by **Gov. Eric Holcomb.** Bortner has served as DNR’s director of Indiana State Parks since 2005.

**Health Care**

**Matt Doyle** was named president and CEO of **Methodist Hospitals** in late July. He replaced **Ray Grady** who retired. The health system also appointed **Claire**

**O’Neill** director of system transformation and **Duane Seabourne** director of surgical services.

**Franciscan Health** recently hired: **Dr. Dana Elsherif**, Franciscan Physician Network St. John Health Center; **Dr. Zohair Ahmed**, Woodland Health Center in Michigan City and Valparaiso Specialty Health Center; and **Drs. Omar Nehme** and **Julia LeBlanc**, Franciscan Physician Network Gastroenterology Crown Point.

**Dr. Cristina Fox**, urologist, joined the medical staff of **Porter Health Care System** and **Porter Physician Group** in the **Porter Physician Group Urology** office at the **Porter Regional Hospital** campus in Valparaiso.

**Community Healthcare System** recently hired the following physicians to the **Community Care Network Inc.:** **Dr. Ali Al Khazaali**, endocrinologist; **Dr. Mark Fesenmyer**, gastroenterologist and hepatologist; **Dr. Peter Mavrelis**, gastroenterologist; **Dr. Ahmad Shughoury**, gastroenterologist; **Dr. LaChanda Dunlap-Wright**, obstetrics and gynecological; **Dr.**



**EDUCATION**  
Countance Anderson



**EDUCATION**  
Kenneth Christensen



**GOVERNMENT**  
Joe Hoage



**GOVERNMENT**  
Josh Martin



**GOVERNMENT**  
Dan Bortner



**HEALTH CARE**  
Dana Elsherif



**HEALTH CARE**  
Zohair Ahmed



**HEALTH CARE**  
Omar Nehme

**Wayne Larson**, obstetrics and gynecological; **Dr. Michael Knesek**, orthopedic surgeon; and **Dr. Venkat Kavuri**, orthopedic spine surgeon.

**Insurance**

**Beth Keyser** is the new president of **Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield** in Indiana. Keyser was most recently president of **Create** health plans in New York. She previously served several leadership roles with **Healthways**, where she was accountable for domestic

and international revenue growth, managed call center operations and established partnerships with health plans, employers, physician organizations and hospitals.

**Healy Group** of South Bend recently promoted **Carrie Urbanski** to chief operation officer; **Lujean Spencer**, director of finance; **Jenny Nijak**, director of information technology; **Ellen Crowe Finan**, director of marketing; and **Jerry Tarwacki**, director of facilities.

**Real Estate**

**Rich Deahl** has joined South Bend-based real estate private equity firm **Great Lakes Capital** as general counsel and principal.

**Media**

**Steve Bensing**, an award-winning Valparaiso-based photographer, was among the winners in the **2020 Indiana Agriculture Photo Contest**. Bensing won in the agritourism category for his photograph titled "Above the Fair."

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Cristina Fox



HEALTH CARE  
LaChanda Dunlap-Wright



HEALTH CARE  
Wayne Larson



HEALTH CARE  
Michael Knesek

**News**

After more than two years of construction and preparation, Merrillville-based **MonoSol** in July dedicated its new \$72 million Boone County production facility. In March 2018, MonoSol, a subsidiary of Japan-based Kuraray, announced plans for the 150,000-square-foot manufacturing facility at 155 S. Mount Zion Road in Lebanon. It will create up to 89 high-wage positions when fully operational by the end of 2020.

**Northwest Indiana Partners for Clean Air** presented its 2020 awards in early August to businesses and individuals taking voluntary actions to improve air quality. Honorees included: **Family Express Corp.** of Valparaiso, Business Award; **Praxair Inc.** of East Chicago, Industrial Award; city of Hammond, Municipal Award; Mark Siminski Bicycle Award was presented to **Dave Stokoski** of Crown Point.

The **Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission** was awarded

almost \$1 million through two grants from the **Economic Development Administration**. NIRPC received funds from the **EDA CARES Act Recovery Assistance Grant** totaling \$583,000 to capitalize and administer a revolving loan fund to provide loans to small businesses in Lake, Porter and La Porte counties that have been impacted by the pandemic. An additional \$400,000 was issued through the CARES Act to address short- and long-term economic development



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Carrie Urbanski



**INSURANCE**  
Lujean Spencer



**INSURANCE**  
Ellen Crowe Finan



**REAL ESTATE**  
Rich Deahl

impacts through the development of an economic resiliency plan and aid in the economic recovery for future pandemics and disasters. These funds can be used to hire staff to provide capacity-building and technical assistance.

**KPS Capital Partners** of New York is purchasing specialty vehicle maker **AM General** of South Bend. KPS is buying the company from an affiliate of **MacAndrews & Forbes Inc.** Terms of the deal were not disclosed. It is expected to close by December.

**Patrick Industries Inc.** of Elkhart, a maker and distributor of component products and building products used by the recreational, home furnishing and construction industries, announced in early August that it completed its purchase of Pontiac, Michigan-based **Inland Plywood Co.**, a supplier, laminator and wholesale distributor of treated, untreated and laminated plywood, medium density overlay panels, and other products, used in similar markets now served by Patrick.

The company's fiscal 2019 revenue was estimated at \$60 million, Patrick Industries said.

Texas-based **Corsicana Mattress** is investing \$8.6 million to open a new production facility at 755 S 500 West in La Porte, which will employ 350 people by 2023. The 165,000-square-foot facility, which was expected to open in December, will house the company's domestic boxed-bed manufacturing operations. The company operates 10 production facilities around the country. ■

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Unity Gardens sold plants and seeds to help people start private gardens.

Photo provided by Unity Gardens

# TEMPORARY SOLUTION

## BUSINESS LEADERS EXPECT SOME INNOVATIONS DURING

DOUG ROSS

**N**ecessity is the mother of invention, of course, which has kept its midwives busy during 2020.

The pandemic has forced businesses and organizations to adapt for survival. Examples abound in northern Indiana of business plans being rewritten on the fly to operate under dramatically changed conditions.

Some of the changes were temporary fixes, but many of them have become new paradigms likely to have staying power. Lorri Feldt, regional director for the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center, shared a few creative examples.

- Hoosier Daddy's Homemade Ice Cream in DeMotte opened in November 2019. It quickly faced difficult challenges. "I love how they've pivoted to serve from the window, and they post their regularly changing homemade flavors on the exterior wall," Feldt said. "Their place is too small to serve eat-in, so they've put out picnic tables."
- Sweet Home Indiana, a St. John gift shop, was closed for a time, as all businesses deemed non-essential were under Gov. Eric Holcomb's emergency order. "They started doing gift baskets that

they send to recipients, and this has gone well. It will continue," Feldt said. "Since people can't visit loved ones, they are liking being able to send the baskets."

- Provecho Latin Provisions in Crown Point was primarily a dine-in restaurant. It continues that service and added a market.
- HiTech Industrial in Valparaiso is a new industrial distributor. The company added several personal protective equipment offerings and is doing well with that, Feldt said.
- Busy Bee Potter & Arts Studio at Southlake Mall closed for a while. It began selling art kits



Scarpe's Chris and Katrina Shoemaker created take-and-bake options.



Sysco donated tons of food it no longer needed to local food banks.

Photos provided by Scarpe and the Salvation Army

# S; NEW NORMAL

## PANDEMIC WILL LIKELY STICK AROUND AFTER CRISIS

for individuals to do at home, at day camp, at school or at long-term care facilities. In addition to doing in-store parties and other workshops, the company has created a new market.

“From our point of view, the businesses that get creative and respond to changing circumstances are the ones most likely to make it through this and thrive,” Feldt said. “We worry about the businesses who still do not have much of a digital presence or who wait for things to ‘get back to normal.’”

She said the SBDC is providing resources and programs to help small businesses pivot to a more online

presence or tweak their business models to be more effective in today’s business environment.

### Offering guidance

The Michigan City Chamber of Commerce developed a Back in Business Toolkit, which was shared with its members and other local businesses. The kit is a quick reference guide for businesses and includes templates for communicating with employees and the public.

“During the pandemic, we have seen an increased need for direct communication and transparency about



what a business or organization is planning or changes that they need to make,” said Katie Eaton, chamber president.

“Because business as usual was changing daily, it was important to communicate those changes quickly and clearly, (and) for many businesses, enhanced communication will become a best practice even after the pandemic.”



Photo provided by Bamar Plastics

South Bend-based Bamar Plastics developed The Step Saver, an automated, customizable mobile cart outfitted with quality control instruments to shorten the inspection process from two hours to 45 minutes.



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Communication isn't the only area where pandemic-induced changes are likely to be permanent.

"New cleaning procedures and enhancements will become commonplace in most businesses," Eaton said. "While cleaning has always been a part of a business's facility maintenance, the standards have definitely been set to a higher level, (and) not only has this required additional staff in some instances but also an increase in expenses for the abundance of cleaning supplies needed."

She said another change that will likely stick around for some businesses is flexibility about employees' work location.

"With child care offerings and schools being disrupted, many families have had to adjust their work lives to care for young children," Eaton said. "Employers have had to offer work-from-home options in order to retain employees."

She said work-from-anywhere options only may be achievable in some industries, but it is becoming a trend.

"For some employers, it will increase their employee applicant pool, and they will gain access to more talent," Eaton said. "It will also decrease their need for physical space, which could result in businesses downsizing or holding off on expansion plans that may have been in the works prior to the pandemic."

### Spotlighting innovation

**S**outh Bend-based Teachers Credit Union also reached out to its small business clients, offering them help to find ways to adapt.

The TCU Innovate! Business Challenge provided a total of \$35,000 to five winning entries. Each of the winners was a small business that found creative ways to endure during the pandemic.

Anne Feferman, TCU's vice president of commercial and business services, was one of the judges.

The 60 entries were judged along four criteria: how innovative, the impact on the business, the impact on their clientele and community, and how unique their move was.

"There were a lot of people who had to make more of a transition electronically, including internet sales and a stronger web presence," Feferman said.

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## > SMALL BUSINESS

Some sought help with different ways to do business in person, including where to purchase and how to position and install plastic partitions, she said.

"Some of these were really just kind of nuances," Feferman said.

Choosing the winners was difficult.

"We actually gave more awards than what we originally planned," she said.

Another complication, from her standpoint, was that her team was immersed

in processing loan applications for the federal Paycheck Protection Program during the competition.

Feferman has seen the statistics on small businesses suffering during the pandemic. About a quarter of them have shuttered and not been able to recover, she said.

"Everyone who applied, they're all entrepreneurs, and they all have that entrepreneurial spirit," Feferman said.

"We're very resilient in the Midwest, and we definitely saw that with all of the applicants," she said.

South Bend-based manufacturer Bamar Plastics won \$5,000 in TCU's competition for development of The Step Saver, an automated, customizable mobile cart outfitted with quality-control instruments. The cart is intended to reduce the inspection process from a two-hour task to 45 minutes.

Scarpe, an upscale Italian restaurant in downtown Valparaiso, won \$5,000 for quickly developing "take-and-bake" options like lasagna and tiramisu. Scarpe also won new customers with a series of Facebook Live videos about making homemade pasta and mozzarella cheese.

Unity Gardens won \$5,000 for promoting physical, social and environmental health. The group's network of urban plots provides free, healthy food to people who need it.

Sales of Unity Gardens produce at the South Bend Farmers Market supports the nonprofit, but when the market closed, the nonprofit sold plants and seeds to help people start private gardens. Unity Gardens also posted online tutorials on gardening.

Sip & Share Wines, an Indianapolis business, won \$5,000 for hosting virtual wine tastings, with bottles shipped in advance.

Certell, an Indianapolis developer of online courses and educational materials, won \$15,000 after producing podcasts focused on helping teachers navigate the shift to online instruction. They also accelerated the production of products already in development.

### Learning to adapt

The Healthcare Foundation of La Porte quickly pivoted this year to create a grant program that helps provide healthy food to residents. In addition to purchasing food for pantries and soup kitchens, the foundation also helped Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church purchase an oven and freezer, as well as additional food.

The foundation also gave \$10,000 to Hoosiers Feeding the Hungry to cover the costs of processing and transporting meat donated to La Porte County food pantries.



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Access to meat is important for proper nutrition, said Maria Fruth, foundation president and CEO, and there were meat shortages during the early stages of the pandemic.

The foundation connected pork producers with meat processors in La Porte — Sims Meat Processing, I Street Meats and HRR Enterprises Inc. — to get the meat on the market for sale to the public.

Organizations throughout northern Indiana moved quickly to help neighbors. Nurses organized an effort to sew masks. Grocery stores donated food, while other organizations donated personal protective equipment.

At the Salvation Army's Lake County unit, a board member's contact with Sysco resulted in more food than the organization could ever need. Aaron McDermott knew that Sysco had large quantities of leftover perishable food to distribute because many of its customers were shut down by the pandemic. So, he made the call.

"They're the main supplier for the casinos in the area," said Kevin Feldman, the Salvation Army's Lake County director of development. The food needed to be donated before it spoiled.

Feldman was grateful for the donation, but his agency was not prepared for the 70 tons of food the company provided. The Salvation Army feeds a lot of people, but that was more than the agency could handle. So, they asked for help.

Strack & Van Til offered freezer and refrigerator space to help store the food, Feldman said. Other agencies helped distribute the excess food. Meals on Wheels and Tradewinds benefited.

Feldman also contacted smaller food pantries to offer excess food.

"We still get food from Sysco," Feldman said. "This is a relationship we plan on continuing."

The amount donated shrank when the casinos reopened, but Sysco remains generous, Feldman said.

"It really forced us in a good way to lean upon our existing partnerships to do things to help us," Feldman said, and to work with a new partner.

Feldman said, as bad as the pandemic has been, nonprofits have seen it as an opportunity to partner with other nonprofits. Plus, they helped people

whose organizations had to reduce services or close their doors.

"We've experienced really just the opposite of that," he said. "We haven't really changed what we do."

The types of services haven't changed, but the delivery of services has.

"We've had more than a 500% increase in the need for food," Feldman said.

Homeless shelters for women and children are in demand, but some have

closed during the pandemic, he said.

"When you do that, that's going to hurt," Feldman said. "Maybe they were thinking they're protecting their clients as well."

But when that happens, donors look elsewhere.

"We had some of our larger donors continue to keep giving," Feldman said. Foundations and corporations reallocated money toward COVID-19

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Photo provided by the Salvation Army

**Captain Brian Clark, the Salvation Army's Lake County coordinator, loads groceries into the trunk of a car. The Salvation Army has changed the way it interacts with clients too.**

relief because of the pandemic, (and) The Legacy Foundation and Lake Area United Way were “very generous with us,” he said.

“It’s really helped keep families and households stable,” Feldman said.

The way the Salvation Army interacts with clients has changed, too.

“To protect ourselves, we weren’t allowing clients into the building anymore,” Feldman said.

That meant the soup kitchen had to evolve. In East Chicago, food was still

prepared by volunteers in the community center’s kitchen, but the disaster services vehicle was pressed into service as a food truck. It kept meals hot until they could be served to clients lined up — socially distanced, of course — on the sidewalk alongside Chicago Avenue.

“You’re looking at a line of people that within the next 30 minutes will be served food,” Feldman said, and it goes on all day. “That’s a lot of people being fed.”

Processing applications no longer required an in-person interview, either.

“We now do everything by email and over the telephone and help them in very much the same way that we’ve helped them in many ways,” Feldman said.

That includes assistance with transitional housing, where the agency deals directly with the landlord.

“We never have to see the client because of the threat of COVID-19,” Feldman said.

At the food pantry, information is obtained first so the volunteers and clients aren’t physically in the same room.

Before the pandemic, clients selected groceries in the food pantry much like shopping in a store. That shifted to loading a box of donated food into their vehicles while waiting in line.

“It really was totally a different way of delivering for our food pantry,” Feldman said. “It seems to be working really, really well.”

“So many of the clients don’t wear masks,” Feldman said.

The pandemic could get worse before it ends, so the Salvation Army is preparing accordingly.

“We’ve already decided that we’re going to be expanding pretty much all the services,” he said. ■

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## MANUFACTURING

# Mass production forges ahead

Higher education works with companies as more automation creates need for specialized workforce



Dan Keller, right, sales manager for Tri-State Automation in Hammond, shows a customer a robotic welding system.

Photo provided by TSA Automation

### LAUREN CAGGIANO

In some economic development circles, Indiana has gained notoriety for its manufacturing prowess.

Experts say the reputation is well earned as institutions and advocacy groups take steps to preserve the sector and ensure it endures well into the future.

Technological adoption is one approach that has met with success, and with the pandemic, more emphasis has been placed on autonomous operations. Experts in the field lend insight into the past, present and future of such advances in manufacturing.

Dan Keller, sales manager for Tri-State Automation in Hammond, is one voice in the manufacturing community whose

no stranger to automation. Talk to him for a few minutes and you can hear the passion for his family businesses — Tri-State Industries and Tri-State Automation — shine through.

He said Tri-State Industries' legacy, which was founded four decades ago, is of an early adopter of automation. As the steel manufacturing industry became increasingly more competitive, the company pursued an advantage through lean manufacturing principles.

In that vein, the company examined internal processes with the goal of automating anything that made sense. Since welding was a substantial part of the work done on site, robotic welding was a natural place to start.

Ultimately, Tri-State Automation was born from that endeavor. They realized that many companies were encountering similar challenges in automating their processes.

Today, Tri-State Industries is a contract robotic welding manufacturing company serving the needs of small- to medium-sized manufacturers. According to Keller, the two companies' missions are related but distinctive.

"For example, if you wanted to outsource your welding and your manufacturing process to a company like Tri-State Industries to have it robotically welded, we can do that for you," Keller said. "Or if you're more interested in actually automating the



READ ON PHONE

process internally, that's where Tri-State Automation would come in."

To that end, he said Tri-State Automation has partnered with some large robotic manufacturers such as Yaskawa Motoman, OTC DAIHEN and FANUC. They also can do custom systems as well as refurbished units.

Keller credits Tri-State Automation's success to the early struggles of its sister company. They were trailblazers and visionaries in one respect.

"When we started (Tri-State Industries), there was no real robotic integration company in the Chicago area," he said. "We struggled to do it internally and learned a lot by utilizing used robots."

The company would purchase old robots and try to repurpose them.

"We first did that about 22 years ago, and now we're up to 17 different systems," Keller said.

To understand the big picture and how the company helps modernize facilities, Keller frames the story with some data and qualitative markers. For one, most customers see a return of investment in as little as 18 months.

"We can usually double or triple the output for customers," he said. "So, you know, it might take your average welder a minute and a half or three minutes to weld a part, where a robot can do that in 30 seconds because they move very, very quickly."

Other factors are at play, too. Repeatability is one. For example, a welder might be feeling good one day and not so great the next. In other words, a robot can ensure more predictability in terms of quality.

Keller said, in this way, humans — who are susceptible to infections like COVID-19 — are no match for robots in certain contexts. However, experts aren't suggesting the human element is or will be completely removed from the equation.

### Retraining workers

Ivy Tech Community College's Warsaw campus is skilling up the next generation of manufacturing workers with its vocational training options.

There is a shortage of skilled employees in manufacturing in Indiana, experts say.

The education provided by Ivy Tech gives students the knowledge needed to succeed in a modern manufacturing environment.

Enter Tom Till who is director of Ivy Tech Community College's Orthopedic and Advanced Manufacturing Training Center. It is a 20,000-square-foot facility in Warsaw, which is the self-proclaimed orthopedic capital of the world.

Ivy Tech's facility offers programs and training for individuals and organizations, and serves as a vital resource to the Region's students, employers and businesses.

Till is equipped to lead the charge, because he worked in the industry. As he explained, he and his peers saw the writing on the wall. Representatives from the Warsaw area's orthopedic giants came together with a singular focus about a decade ago.

"These companies that were normally competitors with one another worked as partners with OrthoWorx and Ivy Tech to develop a program to address a common problem: where do you get enough skilled help to fill the jobs and to keep the industry as a whole healthy," Till said.

take on much-needed roles as CNC operators," Till said. "We projected a shortage in the industry as far back as 2011 due to CNC retirement patterns and knew our community needed us to train a good base of people to backfill those positions."

Each student's academic path and goals will vary, and that's to be expected, Till said.

Some students may take a few classes and be on their way, while others may seek additional training and complete an associates degree. The classes are designed to be cumulative and provide a real-world education.

As manufacturing environments become more automated, Ivy Tech has evolved by offering its Advanced Automation and Robotics Technology program, which can lead to a certificate or a degree.

Either way, the job outlook is bright, given where the industry is headed.

"Our AART graduates program robots and develop automation systems," he said. "The cost of automation is coming down significantly, (and) the ability to have machine vision and for machines to be able to see and make decisions



Photo provided by Ivy Tech Community College

Ivy Tech Community College offers assorted courses in advanced manufacturing and gives hands-on experience in advanced automation labs.

He said Ivy Tech answered the call. "Ivy Tech Community College's Warsaw site started a noncredit, 200-contact-hour CNC machine training program so that we could get people skilled up and qualified to

based upon what they see is a whole lot better than the vision systems of years gone by."

La Porte Co. Career & Technical Education at the A.K. Smith Career Center is reaching students even



Photo provided by the A.K. Smith Career Center

**A student at the La Porte Co. Career & Technical Education's A.K. Smith Career Center works on a lathe. The program serves seven high schools within the state.**

younger. The program serves seven high schools within the state, providing educational opportunities within multiple disciplines.

The Modern Machine Technology program, a curriculum developed in consultation with regional business and industry, prepares students for entry-level employment in the metal working and manufacturing fields. High-tech laboratory experiences give students hands-on opportunities to work with engine lathes, milling and drilling

machines, and computer numerically controlled (CNC) machines.

The course work includes machining fundamentals, applied mathematics, introduction to print reading, assembly, pneumatics, and CAD and CAM. Additionally, students can earn dual college credits from Ivy Tech and leave high school qualified for an entry-level position in the high-demand precision machining and manufacturing industry.

Chris Smith, Modern Machine Technology instructor at the A.K. Smith

Career Center, is proud of the legacy they've built in the past decade. Smith worked in a machine shop before joining the center about eight years ago.

He said the program gives students a taste of the real world — a leg up, especially for indecisive high-schoolers. The two-year curriculum starts junior year in high school, and involves both lectures and practical applications. It produces about 20 graduates a year.

"We've grown the program to where we have industrial-sized CNC milling machines," he said "The idea is for them to be able to work in small groups, or individually — whatever the project calls for — and get familiar with the machines."

They want students to maximize their capabilities, Smith said.

Smith said the concepts really come alive in this environment. He attributes that to the project-based learning approach.

But the proof is really in the student success stories. According to Smith, it's all about timing.

"That's our priority ... to make sure every kid graduates first, and then, if everything is going well, then we can introduce them to the industry and get them out there and maybe give them some work experience," he said. "Our hope is that we can get them doing well enough at school that they can step away and work for a few hours a week in the industry."

Purdue University Northwest's College of Technology works with the manufacturing sectors in Northwest Indiana to provide no-cost training to those seeking to upskill. A grant received in late 2019 from the U.S. Department of Commerce makes the program possible.

"This mechatronics technician training provides incumbent workers with 16 weeks of training that covers electrical, mechanical, and PLC components and systems," said Niaz Latif, dean of Purdue University Northwest's College of Technology and executive director of the Commercialization and Manufacturing Excellence Center.

Additionally, the PNW College of Technology works directly with WorkOne and the Center of Workforce Innovations

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to train job seekers in advanced automation maintenance, through their Electrical Maintenance Technician Training. Latif said this training aids in building a pipeline of skilled workers who can troubleshoot and maintain advanced automation equipment.

In this way, Purdue is leaning into the future. The same can be said of its Commercialization and Manufacturing Excellence Center, which is assisting entrepreneurs with fundamental training, including robotics.

“By providing this early introduction to advanced automation, we feel the founders will be aligned with changes in industry towards automated systems,” Latif said.

### Advocacy partners

Advocates for manufacturers have worked in partnership with the education community to guide training programs to ensure they continue meeting the sector’s needs.

Andrew Berger, senior vice president of governmental affairs at the Indiana

Manufacturers Association, said the state has a vested interest in talent development.

Put simply, Indiana is a manufacturing powerhouse and that means there’s a lot to be gained, he said.

“It’s the largest employment sector (in the state) by (a) significant margin and that means we have a lot of eggs in the basket so to speak,” he said.

He also said Indiana has produced many home-grown successes and has attracted companies to locate their headquarters here.

However, while the manufacturing sector is robust, investment in technology can be lacking.

“We have a little bit of a tough tax code when it comes to capital investment, and we have personal property taxes that are high compared to other states,” Berger said.

The fact that Indiana lacks the workforce with the skills necessary to immediately work with or help develop new technologies only compounds those underlying issues, he said.

Berger said manufacturers who successfully attract and retain talent must also scale up their investment in innovations. He offers an assembly line as an example.

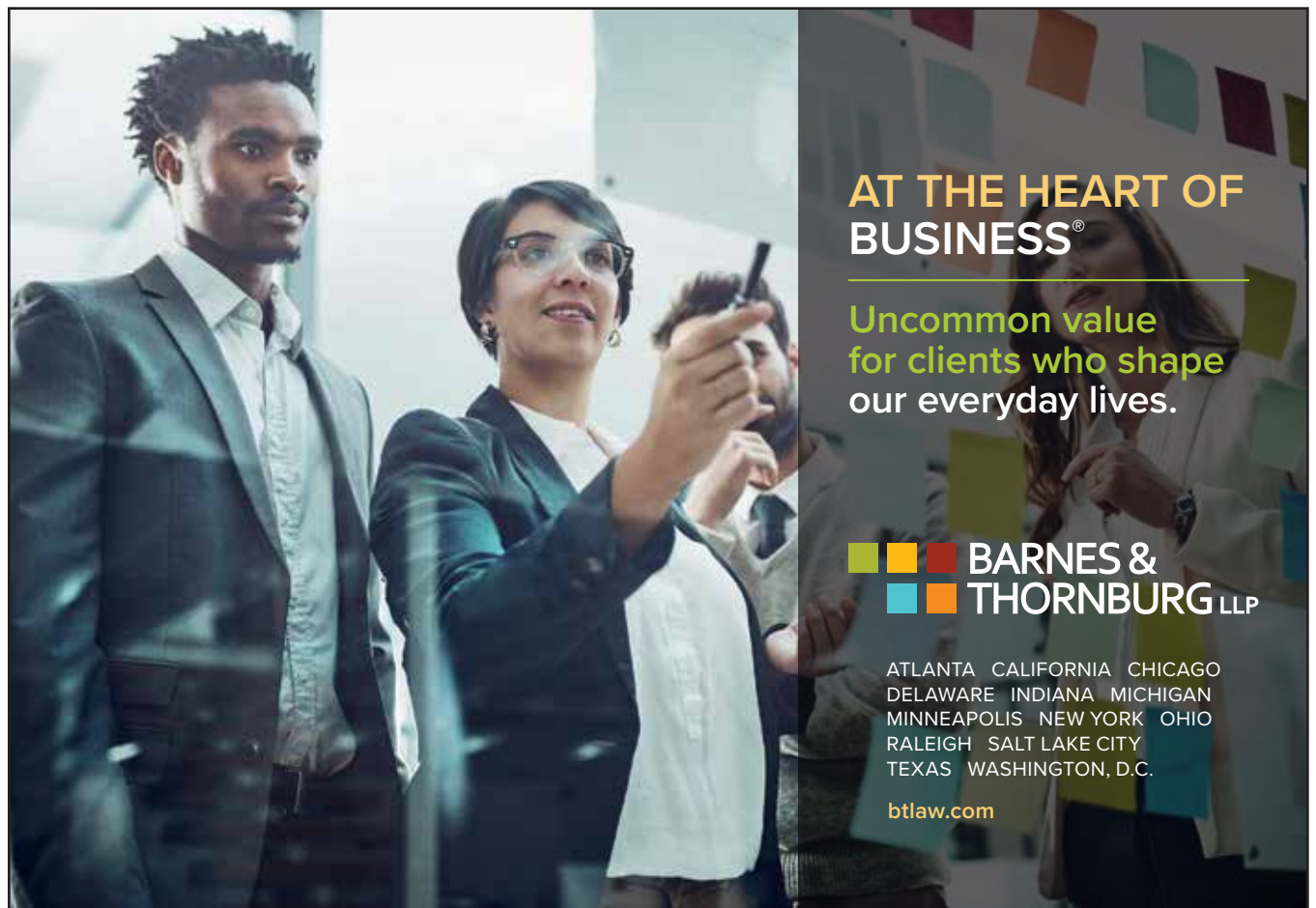
“Companies often have to comply with safety and environmental regulations, but automation also allows you to be more efficient,” he said.

This is especially true in the context of COVID-19. He’s heard from IMA members that the labor market is especially tight right now.

For instance, he said workers might need to self-quarantine because they’ve come in contact with a person who tested positive for the coronavirus or they don’t have reliable child care. These realities likely will continue to weigh on the industry, which makes automation even more essential to operations.

Although change does not come about overnight.

“These types of things take a lot of capital investment and a lot of planning,” Berger said. ■



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# CPAs SORT THROUGH RELIEF RULES



## EXPERTS SAY CARES ACT PROMPTED BY PANDEMIC PROVIDED SHORT-TERM AID BUT CREATED NEW TAX UNCERTAINTIES

LAUREN CAGGIANO

**B**usiness experts routinely suggest planning and developing contingency plans as the best ways to prepare for unexpected events.

However, 2020 is a year unlike any other as the world coped with a global pandemic. Civic leaders quickly passed the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and

Economic Security (CARES) Act and related legislation, which provided a range of assistance for people and businesses.

Earlier this year, the CARES Act introduced many tax breaks for businesses to get through the crisis. Quick passage of legislation meant businesses had little time to learn about new rules, so many turned to tax professionals for guidance.

### Offering answers

**L**indsay Peterson, a senior tax consultant and CPA with Rowley & Co. LLP in Michigan City, said the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan forgiveness element is top of mind for many business owners. The program was established by the CARES Act and implemented by the Small Business Administration with support from the



Qualified improvement property

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employee retention

CARES Act

home office

U.S. Department of the Treasury. The program provided small businesses with funds to pay up to eight weeks of payroll costs, including benefits, interest on mortgages, rent and utilities.

The dollars provided some relief, though help only was for the short term, and if all funds weren't used under rules of the program, those receiving loans may be required to repay all or some

portion of the loan. Peterson says PPP loan recipients should not panic.

"A lot of our clients are frantic about trying to get forgiveness on the PPP loan. They're like, 'I need to get it right now,'" Peterson said. "But we're telling them that they have more time, as banks are still trying to figure out how to proceed."

It also helps to understand the timeline outlined by the SBA.

"You have 10 months after your covered period ends to apply (for) forgiveness," Peterson explained. "The covered period is eight or 24 weeks, (and) most people are doing 24 weeks, so that brings us to the end of (2020), so they have some time."

Related to the PPP loan, Peterson said June's Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act sweetened the deal for some loan recipients. Among other things, the act made it easier for the millions of small businesses who used the funds to apply for forgiveness.

This means employers who received or will receive loan forgiveness can take advantage of the employer payroll tax deferral provision under section 2302 of the CARES Act through the end of 2020, regardless of whether they obtain a PPP loan or if they obtain forgiveness under a PPP loan.

Tax deferral might be one perk, but Peterson stresses that employers should take care not to overestimate their tax deductions or risk getting hit with a heavy, unforeseen burden in the future. As it stands, businesses cannot write off expenses paid with Paycheck Protection Program loan funds that have been forgiven.

Marisa Smoljan, a CPA with McMahon & Associates in Munster, said this could muddy the waters come the spring. While the program helped a lot of businesses in a bind, its fast-tracked nature means that some of the details are still being hammered out.

"So, we might be in a situation where you're paying the taxes next year, even though you had a pretty down year," she said. "So, clients might be in a situation when they have to plan on it being taxable and plan on paying those taxes come April."

The best-case scenario, according to Smoljan, is that legislation is passed that

retroactively gives a loan recipient the loan tax free. As of late August, it's a wait-and-see approach.

Peterson agrees, knowing that professional and trade groups have been lobbying Congress to amend this rule, so that loan recipients might have a lower tax bill come spring. In the meantime, Peterson said employers should exercise caution in their approach to corporate accounting.

That means due diligence such as keeping detailed bookkeeping and documentation.

"If those expenses are not deductible, that will cause more of a problem because we as tax professionals will have to add them back," Peterson said. "So, this calls for loan recipients to have a clear idea about what they spent the loan money on."

### Understanding the CARES Act

Ed Simokaitis, a CPA with CLH CPAs & Consultants in Michigan City, said the fact expenses might not be deductible "negates" some of the benefit of the loan. He also recommends taking it slow and steady with respect to applying for forgiveness.

"You could take advantage of the eight weeks ... and wait to file," he explained. "Or go ahead and file, but you might be duplicating work that you wouldn't otherwise have to do if we have a blanket forgiveness check."

Tim Anderson, a CPA with CliftonLarsonAllen's Schererville office, said the CARES Act has been dynamic and evolved during the last few months. While times have been tough for many of the PPP loan recipient businesses, he's feeling optimistic about the state of affairs with respect to the program.

Anderson said the CARES Act was a boon for the business community and the economy at large.

"It looks pretty favorable that a lot of businesses are going to get them forgiven," he said. "And as much as we (as tax professionals) all complained about vagueness and ambiguity in the rules, it's a good program (because it) was a shot in the arm for a lot of local businesses."

According to data released by the SBA in July, the PPP program supported 51.1

**“And as much as we (as tax professionals) all complained about vagueness and ambiguity in the (PPP) rules, it’s a good program (because it) was a shot in the arm for a lot of local businesses.”**

— Tim Anderson, CliftonLarsonAllen



gross receipts,” he said. “So that’s a little bit of a difference.”

**Tax planning**

Whether a business received a PPP loan or not, Anderson advises that businesses take a cautious and calculated approach to tax planning. For instance, the payroll tax deferral can be good for short-term cash flow purposes, but it must be paid eventually.

The CARES Act allows employers to defer deposits of their 6.2% share of the Social Security tax due from March 27, 2020, through Dec. 31, 2020. This targeted action applies to workers who generally make less than \$4,000 every two weeks, which works out to an annual salary of \$104,000.

Half of the deferred amount is due by Dec. 31, 2021, with the other half due by Dec. 31, 2022. There is no cap on the total amount of Social Security tax that can be deferred, but the Social Security taxes only apply to the first \$137,700 of an employee’s wages for 2020, experts said.

million jobs, as much as 84% of all small business employees. And small businesses, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, employ 59.9 million people across the country. The average loan size was \$107,000, and 86.5% of all loans were for less than \$150,000.

**Protecting jobs**

The Employee Retention Credit under the CARES Act encouraged businesses to keep employees on their payrolls. The refundable tax credit was 50% of up to \$10,000 in wages paid by an eligible employer whose business was financially impacted by COVID-19.

According to Paul Applegate with Applegate & Co., CPAs in Michigan

City, the credit applied to two thresholds of employers.

“One is employers who’ve had an average number of full-time employees in 2019, at 100 or fewer,” he explained. “And then there are employers that have over 100, and there is a little bit of difference in some of the credits (that) are available.”

Applegate said, for instance, employers who have 100 or fewer employees are eligible, regardless of whether the employee is furloughed.

“If it’s a larger employer that has (more than) 100 employees, those wages would only be applicable to employees who are furloughed or who face reduced hours as a result of the closure or the reduced

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Employers also may be entitled to credits against the employer's share of Social Security tax, including refundable tax credits for paid leave under Families First Coronavirus Response Act or for qualified wages under the employee retention credit.

Employers should look at this as a temporary reprieve — ultimately the liability is delayed but not erased. That's why Lisa Human, Simokaitis' colleague at CLH, recommends employers stay on top of their tax obligations rather than defer, if possible.

"If you don't have the funds now, chances are you don't want to get caught up with payroll taxes down the road," Human said. "This is a case when the IRS is certainly going to come knocking on your door, and the signer of those 940 forms has significant liability."

And just as this deferral might soften the blow temporarily, employers looking to improve or renovate the interior of their facilities might find relief from a clarification on previous legislation.

Qualified improvement property (QIP) placed in service in 2018 under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 is now a 15-year period and is eligible for 100% bonus depreciation. Without the technical correction, a 39-year recovery period applied previously. This change means employers might find savings opportunities and an incentive to invest in their physical space.

Examples of such qualifying improvements include installation or replacement of drywall, ceilings, interior doors, fire protection, mechanical, electrical and plumbing.

Anderson said, while the shortened 15-year recovery period is attractive, the provision's real significance is that most post-2017 QIP retroactively qualifies for the bonus depreciation deduction.

Because this is an evolving situation, new guidance from the federal government is issued regularly.

Tax professionals suggest business owners regularly check the IRS.gov website and news from industry organizations such as the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants for insight on these matters or consult with your tax professional. ■



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# OFFICE SPACE | PANDEM

DESIGN EXPERTS HELP COMPANIES IMPLEMENT NEW SAFETY PRECAUTIONS AS

CARRIE NAPOLEON

**D**e-densifying — that will be the trend for at least the near future as businesses try to adjust their existing workspaces to the realities of a world changed by the coronavirus.

Speros Valavanis, principal emeritus at architecture firm Shive-Hattery Inc., said clients are looking at reimagining their existing workspaces. They also are thinking about what steps must be taken to safely bring employees and clients back into the fold.

“We are not seeing anybody saying, ‘change our workplace,’” Valavanis said, whose Chicago-based firm has offices in Valparaiso and South Bend.

A building that once housed 800 workers might only have 450 moving forward to allow for the 6-foot social distancing requirements during the pandemic. Work from home and varied shifts help to de-densify workplaces for what is hopefully just a short-term situation.

“The whole trend in the ’70s and ’80s was densification,” Valavanis said. “From the ’90s on, we really wanted to create a work environment that supported collaboration and innovation with smaller work stations and more collaboration areas.”

Now clients are looking at raising panel heights and inserting plexiglass to create additional safety.

“People are modifying according to COVID,” he said. “They are not changing the entire concept of the workplace,

(so) it’s definitely not a one-size-fits all solution.”

Rita Bacevich, president of HDW Commercial Interiors in Merrillville, said the pandemic has hit the full spectrum of her clients — health care, hospitality, corporate and education — but there are definite nuances to the needs

and solutions for each of those applications. Clients’ concerns about their existing workspaces focus on configuration, distancing and cleanable surfaces.

“Our team has been called in to help reconfigure and modify individual work areas, teaming areas and public spaces,” Bacevich said.

Everyone loves open, light-filled spaces. Work and reception areas certainly have trended that way over the past several years as design has moved away from dividing walls, small reception desk windows and height-driven cubicle workstations.

“Areas now feature open-plan furniture, short-height panels and often no division at all to promote light-filled, productive engagement between team members and guest,” Bacevich said.



**“We are trying to stay in front of what we are hearing from professionals across the country, (and) we learn things every day in this pandemic.”**

— Troy Woodruff,  
Co-president and co-CEO  
RQAW

## Post-pandemic office

**M**oving forward, the preference is not to return to the previous claustrophobic solutions as reasonable divisions between users once again are added.

One solution is adding poly or glass screens to existing furniture or reception areas to create safe barriers. Furniture is being re-upholstered with fabrics that can withstand the rigors of strong, anti-bacterial cleaning agents.

Bacevich said they have reconfigured waiting and public areas by using planters, tables and screens and the rotation of seating clusters to enhance separation yet keep the goal of purposeful function and aesthetics.

Clients are seeking cost-effective temporary solutions that do not look temporary. Those solutions don’t leave permanent scars to the facility or furniture.

She said it also is important to ensure temporary solutions can be removed and reinstalled easily, if necessary, to deal with future crisis.

Hotel clients at Interior Image Group of Crown Point are seeking ways to reconfigure their spaces, including lobbies and check-in areas to be functional yet safe, said Patti Tritschler, company president.

Tritschler’s company recently relocated from Dyer to Crown Point, and the new spacious layout has helped make coping with social distancing in the workplace easier.

The design resembles a small hotel lobby like those IIG Design creates for its clients. Lounges with different seating areas, a large community table and smaller meeting spaces help limit the number of people working together while providing options to work both independently and with others.

In the hotel industry, the check-in process drastically has changed, Tritschler said. Plexiglass helps separate clerks from visitors.

More touchless lighting and bathroom fixtures are being installed or converted because of the pandemic. That change will push forward the yearslong trend toward energy efficiency and cost savings in commercial spaces, she said.

“Going forward that’s going to be really very important in how we design,” Tritschler said.

Hotels will take a more minimalist approach with design both in furniture



# IC STYLE

## THEY RETHINK WORK SPACES

and décor, and overall space planning to make their common areas safe.

“We will not be seeing many throw pillows around,” Tritschler said. But ways to bring the outdoors in through windows will help make indoor spaces more inviting.

Moving forward, designers need to take surfaces into consideration to ensure cleaning and sanitizing are both effective and efficient for hotels.

Fabric choices should be wipeable and bleachable with common areas that have hard, easy-to-clean surfaces. Even the cleanability of wall coverings needs to be considered as clients look to create spaces that can be made safe for travelers during the pandemic.

“I think those are the immediate things we are seeing,” Tritschler said.

### Remote working

Valavanis said clients are adjusting not only to the need for social distancing in the workplace but with the entire work-from-home trend, which has escalated during the crisis.

“COVID just kicked it in high gear,” Valavanis said. Heading into late summer, many businesses continued allowing almost all or 100% of their employees to work remotely.

Some of those employees, Valavanis said, likely will never return to a traditional workspace.

“That’s the trend,” Valavanis said. “Corporations will probably give space back to some degree, (and) if 25% of the people are no longer in the space, you don’t need all the space.”

Remote working may be the trend but giving up a company’s workspace could have ramifications such as the loss of corporate culture and the sharing of generational knowledge between employees.

“These things can’t be replaced when doing things virtually,” Valavanis said.



Interior Image Group's design library was created with work areas to allow for smaller groups.

Photo provided by Interior Image Group



HDW Commercial Interiors in Merrillville uses open spaces to create social distancing in the work space.

Photo provided by HDW Commercial Interiors



Shive-Hattery Inc. clients are looking to reimagine existing work spaces, making them safer for employees.

Photo provided by Shive-Hattery Inc.

### Back to the office

**B**acevich said there has been and will continue to be a significant return to the common workplace.

Most businesses will not be able to take on additional real estate to provide more distancing between team members, she said. The commercial furniture market is surging with solutions to respond to separation needs without adding space.

“It has taken a minute or two to ramp up ... but we need to be well-prepared in all aspects of life for a reoccurrence,” she said. “As we design, we must consciously take into account solutions that will allow us to adjust in a much quicker, safer and more comprehensive fashion.”

Mechanical system changes may be where the future is headed when it comes to making a safer workspace.

Troy Woodruff, co-president and

co-CEO of RQAW in Fishers, said ventilation will play an important role in design in the wake of the pandemic. RQAW focuses on municipal clients, including jails, where social distancing can be a challenge.

Those clients now must focus on how to keep inmates safe in common areas by supplying airflow.

Adjustments are being made to existing structures to make them as safe as possible during the pandemic and beyond. He expects new construction projects to begin incorporating these design elements that help with ventilation and airflow at the onset, when it is more cost effective, instead of moving to retrofit existing structures.

Facilities are looking at how to use ventilation to help minimize the dispersal of an airborne virus. He said mechanical, electrical and plumbing designs must be coordinated to make sure residents in the facility are kept safe and healthy.

“Those things (as) an industry we are all learning together,” Woodruff said.

For municipal clients, budget is a priority. Woodruff said a good use of limited funds is to start thinking about how safe a facility can be.

When talking to clients, it is important to bring up potential considerations for safety during the pandemic and beyond, he said.

As designers learn new techniques to help clients cope with the pandemic, they also must adapt to new information about how the virus spreads.

“What I say today may be totally different a month from now,” Woodruff said.

### Improvements to ventilation

**P**roper ventilation and air scrubbing may be the key to keeping people safe moving forward, according to Ken Christensen, owner of Earl’s Heating & Air Conditioning in Schererville. Christensen said air cleaners now on the market can help filter out unwanted germs. Air cleaners have been popular for some time among those with lung conditions like asthma and allergies. But they are moving into the mainstream as more people consider how to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus both in their homes and businesses.



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Christensen said he expected the demand for air cleaning units to skyrocket during the pandemic, but that has not happened. The pace of sales for these devices has only slightly increased since before the new virus, but that may change as more people learn about the option and as the situation continues.

"It's costly to do, but put a price on your health," Christensen said. His office has the system installed in its ducts. His staff has been working through the pandemic, and so far, there have been no health issues.

Another option is an air scrubber, which was designed by NASA for use in space.

The air scrubber works by making particles in the air heavier and essentially removing them from the air, Christensen said. These units could be effective in businesses, making them safer for the return to normal.

Air scrubbers employed in places like schools, businesses and even homes can help to stop the airborne spread of the virus, he said.

People have been focused on their air conditioning, especially those working at home in this summer's record heat, Christensen said. Installing the air cleaning system while updating the heating and air conditioning in your home or business is the most cost effective and efficient way, but retrofitting can be done.

Christensen said he has seen a lot of interest, but the cost has been a challenge.

### Future designs

Woodruff said some of the changes being made today to cope with the pandemic will, quite frankly, stay that way.

"Now that we know its capable for these viruses to come over, will this be something we will have to deal with again in a few years?" Woodruff said.

Right before the pandemic struck, the open-office concept was a big design idea.

"State agencies, local government, everybody was looking at the idea of an open-office concept and thinking how we readapt to an open office space," Woodruff said.

Adaptability will play an important role in design moving forward, experts

said. Work schedules are evolving to meet social distancing requirements, and companies are embracing remote work and staggering days of the week employees come into the office.

Designing for those changes will become important.

"There are going to be a lot of different changes, especially in architecture, (and) we are trying to keep up with it," Woodruff said. "We are trying to

stay in front of what we are hearing from professionals across the country, (and) we learn things every day in this pandemic."

Tritschler said she wonders whether the impact on design now to make spaces usable amid the pandemic will become permanent additions to future designs.

"That's the question of the hour. How permanent is this?" Tritschler said. ■

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Photos provided by Ports of Indiana

# GLOBAL SHIPPING HUB

## VISION FOR PORT OF INDIANA-BURNS HARBOR

### LEADS TO MULTI-BILLION-DOLLAR ECONOMIC POWERHOUSE

DOUG ROSS

**T**he 50th anniversary of the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor in 2020 was not marked by a big celebration.

The global pandemic derailed any formal event, but operators, businesses based at the port and economic development professionals recognize its importance as an international shipping hub. And they are sure the next half century will provide even greater opportunities as the facility undergoes \$20 million in upgrades.

The Lake County Indiana Economic Alliance knows the port is an effective business recruiting tool.

“It’s another highway for us,” said Don Koliboski, vice president of economic development at the alliance. Water

access to the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Gulf of Mexico adds to Northwest Indiana’s ability to serve as a gateway to the global marketplace.

#### The port’s role

**I**ndiana’s deep-water port on Lake Michigan connects bulk and liquid goods traveling by ship, barge, rail and truck to designations worldwide. It handles freight from the St. Lawrence Seaway, anywhere on the Great Lakes and from the inland waterway system.

Cargo can come up or go down the Mississippi River and its tributaries by barge, or it can come from Europe and elsewhere down the St. Lawrence River into the Great Lakes. Or goods can come from vessels that never leave the Great Lakes.

It’s big business. A 2015 study by Martin Associates on the economic impact of the Ports of Indiana determined the port was responsible for almost 30,000 jobs and indirectly created another 10,000 jobs.

The port was responsible for creating more than \$1 billion in local spending.

The total value of economic activity was almost \$4.9 billion, the study said.

The port is mostly full but does have some vacant land, including the 57 acres acquired in the early 2000s from National Steel when the Midwest plant in Portage, on the port’s western edge, was eager to shed land it didn’t need, said Ian Hirt, port director. U.S. Steel now owns that mill.

The port is home to a large Russian-owned mill, NMLK Indiana, formerly Beta



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Above: The 50th anniversary of Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor this year kicks off \$20 million in upgrades. Left: Construction of the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor, in Portage, was underway on Nov. 17, 1967.

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Steel. The mill uses an electric arc furnace to melt scrap metal and sometimes slabs to create new steel for its customers.

Frick Services is one of the oldest tenants at the port. Dan Frick, president of the Wawaka-based company, said the port works well for his business.

It's all about location, he said.

Karen Lauerman, CEO of the Lake County Economic Alliance, said bulk shipments are costly to send over the road.

"(The port) is an absolute sales tool," she said.

Koliboski said the modernization project at BP happened in part because of the ability to ship heavy parts by ship. Those materials could not have been transported by road.

Road salt and bulk material for primary metal manufacturers come through the port, Koliboski said. So do steel and steel coils, some of which is further processed at Northwest Indiana mills and some of which competes with domestic steel.

The port is a good example of how infrastructure drives private investment, Lauerman said.

"It is a regional asset to all seven counties," she said.

Among the advantages the port brings to Northwest Indiana is the ability to have a foreign trade zone, which offers tax benefits to companies.

"That inventory sits in a designated, gated area of your building, your yard," Lauerman said.

The trade zone benefits can extend beyond the port's physical footprint.

"That's something that quite often gets overlooked," Koliboski said. "They can get those parts shipped in right directly to their facility."

He said it's another marketing tool and another benefit to doing business in Lake County and Northwest Indiana.

"You have access to the world in Northwest Indiana with the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor, major rail lines, interstate highways and Gary/Chicago International Airport," Koliboski said.



**"We have a gem in our city that I think a lot of people don't even know exists."**

— Sue Lynch  
Portage mayor

## Port upgrades

The port's rail investments over the years include eight Class 1 railroads — which can accommodate the largest carriers, including Norfolk Southern and CSX — and two short-line railroads connecting to the port. There is access to Interstate 94, a short drive down Indiana 249 from the port. Then there are the ships and barges that offer access to the world.



Photo by Doug Ross

Heavy cargo is lifted by crane from ships at the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor in August. This ship carried 300 tons of parts for a new natural gas power plant in Elwood, Illinois. Carrying cargo by ship keeps a lot of trucks off the road.

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For Frick Services' dry and liquid commodities handled at the port, the site allows convenient access to markets within a 100-mile radius and sometimes farther, depending on market conditions, Frick said.

Frick's father was the visionary who started using the port for shipping operations. The company has expanded since its initial investment there, Frick said.

The port has plans to grow too. It is building two 100-car rail yards, one on each side of the port. It also will get 2,000 feet of new dock, which will make it easier to unload and store ships. That requires leveling land on the far side of an existing slip, Hirt said.

The new rail yards will be a major benefit to companies, including Frick, allowing customers' rail cars to be stored while others are being loaded.

It also will allow the creation of unit trains, which transport more than 90 rail cars of a single type of freight from a single customer to the port or from the port to a single customer. Unit trains can bypass intermediate rail yards. Goods typically shipped in unit trains include corn, wheat, sand, coal and rock, according to Union Pacific Railroad's website.

Rail lines abound at the port, as does truck traffic. Building a railroad track, as the port commission's contractor is doing now, requires sinking the rail bed lower than normal, so a truck can cross it anywhere. The rails can stick up only an inch above the surface, Hirt said.

Creating the right infrastructure is all in a day's work for the port commission.

"We built our roads to make them extra heavy duty," Hirt said.

In August, among the cargoes handled at the port were heavy components for a new natural gas power plant in Elwood, Illinois.

Semi-tractor trailers seen on the nation's roadways also are common features at the port; however, larger items require extreme transport. There are occasions when specialized trailers with 288 wheels are needed to carry 300-ton pieces of machinery, port officials said.

"We've got very easy infrastructure for oversize, overweight components," Hirt said.

That's compared to the Port of Toledo, which is in its downtown, where trucks must deal with several overpasses there. "We're an easy, straight shot to go to Indiana 249," Hirt said.

Carrying cargo by ship keeps a lot of trucks off the road. Each ship is worth roughly 1,000 trucks in terms of the cargo being transported, Hirt said.

It takes two or three days to unload each of the ships at the Port of Indiana.

## Green energy movement

As the nation shifts from coal for generating electricity, the port has found a role in that transition.

"This year, we're doing a whole bunch of wind turbine components," Hirt said.

The giant blades that require a police escort are heading toward wind farms in the Fowler area. Specialized components made in Europe also are sent by ship to the port.



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“The gearing mechanisms are bigger than a house,” Koliboski said.

Components for natural gas power plants in Niles, Michigan, and Elwood, Illinois, arrive at the port after being built offshore, Hirt said.

Over the years, large tanks for making beer also have come through the port, as have raw material for steel, finished steel and food cans produced in Europe, he said.

Most of the cargo coming to the port in Portage is headed to Northwest Indiana or the Chicago area, Hirt said.

Portage Mayor Sue Lynch is a big fan of the port.

“We have a gem in our city that I think a lot of people don’t even know exists,” Lynch said.

Access to the port requires a photo ID. A large “restricted area” sign leading to the port deters people who don’t belong there. Fishermen are welcome, however, at the public fishing access point.

“For years, we had a great relationship with the port,” Lynch said.

Since taking office in January, she has made a point to improve the city’s relationship with the port.

“It’s huge, huge business in our city,” Lynch said. She hoped to set up a tour of the port for City Council members to learn more about it. Lynch cited some of the statistics for the port. Each year, she said, it handles about:

- 75 ocean-going vessels
- 376 barges
- 300 lake vessels
- 9,000 rail cars
- 350,000 trucks

### Environmental impact

Hirt said another project at the port is to create a place for truckers to gather. The designated spot behind the port commission’s office keeps them from idling their engines while they wait in line for a load. That reconfiguration is among many environmental improvements there.

Another planned improvement is to build another warehouse.

“You need a place to physically put that cargo,” Hirt said.

The northwest corner of the port has been designated for space to put down materials. Traditionally, bulk cargoes

are stored outside, but putting them under a roof protects the environment, Hirt said.

Officials at the Ports of Indiana are concerned about the environment, and it shows, Lauerman and Koliboski said. That mindset goes back to the very beginnings of the port.

“I love the history of the port and how it started,” Lynch said.

The port is the result of a major bargain struck in Congress between environmental and business interests. With the creation of what is now Indiana Dunes National Park came the construction of the Port of Indiana, now Port of Indiana Burns-Harbor. Today it is one of three ports operated by the Ports of Indiana. The other two are on the Ohio River in southern Indiana.

The Port of Indiana Burns-Harbor concentrated future economic activity in that location rather than continuing to scatter across the shoreline. The National Park Service bought up property elsewhere along the shoreline to protect it from development or, in some cases, restore it to its natural state.

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One downside from the port's construction is the effect on the littoral flow of sand along the shoreline. That effect can starve beaches immediately west of the port, in Portage and Ogden Dunes.

"Sand is kind of constantly moving around," Hirt said.

The flow of sand also means that dredging is required every 10 to 15 years. Record-high water levels are followed by record lows.

Among the challenges facing the port is dealing with high water, which might seem easier for ships to navigate.

But it's more complicated than that.

Niagara Falls controls water levels of the four western Great Lakes, but Lake Ontario is regulated by a dam. When the water level is high, residents along Lake Ontario want the dam to send more water west to protect their homes. But those decisions affect residents along the rest of the lakes, including shipping interests.

"It's unsafe to navigate ships in water that is moving too rapidly," Hirt said.

### Remaining competitive

Another challenge is how to remain competitive as global shipping trends shift.

"We don't do a lot of containers," Hirt said.

Newer container ships have become too big for the St. Lawrence Seaway. Those goods from Asia typically arrive on the West Coast and are transported by rail to an intermodal hub nearer their destination. Then the containers are transferred onto semitrailers.

Those newer container ships can be twice as long as the locks on the St. Lawrence Seaway, and they require deeper water than at the port and the rest of the seaway. It's all a matter of the sea level, Hirt said. It would take a lot of dredging to make the port and the locks deep enough to handle the larger vessels.

And while the cargo heading to Portage typically stays within the Chicago/Northwest Indiana area, it can go farther.

New Orleans can unload container ships onto barges and rail cars for

shipment to the interior of the country. The newer ships offer economies of scale.

"We really compete with the coasts," Hirt said. With the Illinois International Port in Chicago about 18 miles away, the Indiana port offers proximity to Chicago at a lower cost.

As container shipping increases, it will become increasingly difficult to compete with New Orleans for goods sent to St. Louis, Hirt said.

But the freshwater lake the Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor calls home is a benefit.

The initial dock walls at the port were put in 50 years ago. That might seem like a long time, but keep in mind that lake-based vessels last longer than ocean-going vessels. Saltwater corrodes metal faster.

That makes 50 years in the life of a port just the beginning. Officials are sure, with continuing improvements, new tenants and ventures are on the horizon.

"They've been hitting records for years," Lauerma said. "They've got a bright future." ■

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## BUSINESS PROFILE

# Born from a crisis

Pandemic inspires Rensselaer family to launch PPE-making company



Clayton Geyer, 24, vice president of Indiana Face Mask in Rensselaer, inspects the shipment division of his family's new production venture launched in March 2020 to manufacture FDA-approved personal production equipment.

Photo by Phil Potempa

PHILIP POTEPA

Clayton Geyer hasn't had to rely on his 2018 marketing degree to sell his family's latest product: personal protective equipment or PPE.

"Everyone seems to be finding us during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Geyer, 24, vice president of Indiana Face Mask in Rensselaer.

Their PPE selection includes FDA approved surgical face masks. That's probably why they haven't had to finish their website at [IndianaFaceMask.com](http://IndianaFaceMask.com) or publicly share their phone number.

"I really haven't had to invest much yet for any marketing messages to let anyone know we are here," the Indiana University Bloomington graduate said.

He credits his parents, Fred and Stephanie Geyer, with coming up with

the company's name and logo. But he is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the company, which started in March. Largely, they have spent much of the past eight months fulfilling a contract purchase order for the state of Indiana. The state ordered 2 million surgical-quality pleated masks and 1 million N95 masks.

Indiana Face Mask, at 3300 W. Clark St. near the Jasper County Airport and Jasper County Fairgrounds, is a company born from necessity and sudden demand.

Previously, Clayton worked with his parents at the family's decade-old manufacturing business American Melt Blown & Filtration, which is also in Rensselaer. That company provides filtration components for clients around the country. Their cleaning tools do

everything from convert salt water to fresh water in Florida to treating crude oil for refineries.

"Originally, before COVID-19 hit, we had already purchased our repurposed 33,000-square-foot space with our plan being that we'd start a new company to make swimming pool filtration," said Stephanie Geyer, who serves as the treasurer for both Indiana Face Mask and American Melt Blown & Filtration.

"The demand for FDA-approved personal protective equipment inspired us to switch gears and create a mask-manufacturing operation with Clayton leading the project," she said. "Clayton had already worked hard helping us build up our original business."

It's the family's "original business," American Melt Blown & Filtration, that





READ ON PHONE

catapulted the idea of making masks as an answer to the state's shortage of protective coverings — the same dilemma facing the rest of the world.

"There were many startup businesses last spring who decided to quickly jump into the production of face masks as personal protection equipment, and they invested a great deal in the labor and the machinery needed to assemble what looked like surgical-grade face masks," Clayton Geyer said.

"However, what these other new company hopefuls were missing was the most important part of the mask production formula, and that's the inner layer created from melt blowing to filter out impurities."

Clayton said his family's anchor business, American Melt Blown & Filtration, is one of only four companies in the U.S. capable of manufacturing the inside filtration layers. It uses the "melt blowing" technique required to gain FDA approval. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration definition, "melt blowing" is a fabrication method that

combines a polymer with very small fibers to form a nonwoven sheet product used for filtration.

"At one point, we had the ambassador of South Korea at our production facility insisting we fulfill an order for much-needed masks for his country," Geyer said.

"Early on in the pandemic, there were multiple news reports about face masks being purchased from other countries, but the shipped product did not have the necessary filtration. Our mask designs had to be submitted and pass all of the FDA testing."

By August, Indiana Face Mask had a production line with 16 full-time employees working day shifts and five full-time employees working nights to operate the mostly automated assembly line. The machinery still requires overseeing and supervision by employees, as well

**At one point, we had the ambassador of South Korea at our production facility insisting we fulfill an order for much-needed masks for his country."**

— Clayton Geyer  
Vice president  
Indiana Face Mask

as quality control needs and counting and sorting duties.

Geyer said to meet demand, by this fall's production, Indiana Face Mask will ideally operate with a total of 30 full-time employees, including boxing and shipping needs.

Currently, Indiana Face Mask produces between 40,000 to 50,000 surgical face masks weekly.

Geyer said he's also working with his parents to expand on ideas to

help bring better and more convenient personal protective equipment to the masses.

"The latest division of our production company is now doing individual one-portion packaging of hand sanitizer, which are ideal for schools and businesses," Geyer said. "I just happened to think of the idea one day at lunch while opening up a ketchup packet." ■



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LEADER PROFILE

# Charged with energy's future

New president ready to lead NIPSCO into next phase of power generation

PHILIP POTEMPA

**N**IPSCO President Mike Hooper has a firm goal for himself and the utility's team of employees: 100% reliability.

"We realize Mother Nature can get in the way of our goal, but we will always

Sistovariv in a statement announcing Hooper's appointment said Hooper's experience made him the right choice for the role she served the past five years.

"As we look to further our efforts to enhance service and safety to the communities we serve, I am confident in Mike's experience and proven leadership to sustain our core commitments to customers," Sistovariv said.

Hooper joined NIPSCO in 2011 and previously served as the company's senior vice president of regulatory and legislative affairs and strategy. He said NIPSCO's roots can be traced back to Thomas Edison and his days in Indiana working on his discoveries with electricity.

"When you look at the history of power companies, we are proud to know that ours goes all the way back to the start of the transition to electricity coming into homes and businesses."

Before NIPSCO, Hooper, who is originally from Virginia, worked for American Electric Power in West Virginia and also in Ohio.

"Before being with NIPSCO, my previous company positions dealt with electric only, and now natural gas is part of the important equation," Hooper said. "I've also found being in Northern Indiana is very unique."

Before joining NIPSCO, his customer base in West Virginia mostly was individuals. Now he serves residential customers and major industrial users, including steel mills and refineries.

Hooper said one of the key projects he will oversee during the next decade is NIPSCO's transition from coal to other means of power, such as wind and solar, by the year 2028.

"This is a major process to make such an energy change when you consider that for 60 to 70 years, this is a company that has been driven by the use of coal," he said.

"We have a much broader view for going forward as we continue to modernize our goals, grow in our efficiency and emphasize the importance of how we communicate with our customers to keep everyone informed."

Hooper said NIPSCO is often treated as "a large company," but in comparison with the tasks and responsibilities the team of employees and management are charged with, he said NIPSCO is much smaller than what some realize.

"When you think about what it takes to keep everything operational and running smoothly just on a good weather day to assure the right result when a light switch gets flipped on, it's incredible, the scale and the needs 24/7, 365 days a year," Hooper said.

"Our teams are there with the police, firefighters and EMTs, always during the worst working conditions, to help others. We at NIPSCO are so connected to everything and everybody."

Hooper said he has created both internal and external company improvement plans focusing on better cost efficiencies and a promise to always learn from those around him, both co-workers and costumers.

"I love being part of the Northern Indiana community with the rural landscape reminding me

of being in West Virginia, thinking of myself as a gentleman farmer who enjoys raising a few cows and baling some hay in my spare time with family," said Hooper, who lives in the Valparaiso area.

"We also have a 7-year-old, which takes up a lot of my energy at home." ■



Mike Hooper, left, was named NIPSCO president in June 2020.

Photo courtesy of NIPSCO

push to achieve our highest standard to serve our customers," said Hooper, who began his new position June 1.

"This is a company with a long and impressive history."

Northern Indiana Public Service Co., the electrical and natural gas utility for much of Northern Indiana, has about 810,000 natural gas customers and 460,000 electrical costumers.

Hooper, 46, succeeds Violet Sistovariv, who served as president since 2015. She now has a larger role with NiSource, parent company of NIPSCO.

**"I love being part of the Northern Indiana community with the rural landscape reminding me of being in West Virginia."**

— Mike Hooper  
NIPSCO President



# MAKING DIFFERENCE

## One street at a time

Cleanslate initiative helps brighten Gary's streets, creates second-chance jobs

MICHAEL PUENTE

**W**hen Jerome Prince ran for mayor of Gary in 2019, one of his platform issues was to rid the city of debris and garbage.

Quite simply, he wanted to have a "clean" city.

"Right after the election last year, I started investigating ways to clean up. I came across a number of ideas," Prince said. "One initiative that we thought about was to hire a few goats to get out and chop down the weeds."

Kidding aside, Prince learned about a program that has been doing cleanup work in Chicago for more than a decade. It also gives its workers a new lease on life.

"I came across Cleanslate," Prince said. "I immediately knew this was the program for the city of Gary."

Started in 2005, Cleanslate is now in more than two dozen Chicago neighborhoods. It provides transitional job opportunities for those who have dealt with misfortunes like homelessness.

In Gary, Cleanslate is expected to create 15 to 25 jobs annually for residents while providing cleaner, safer streets.

"Cleanslate is much more than a cleanup organization or an entity. They are (an) entity that changes people's lives," Prince said during a press conference surrounded by piles of debris and overgrown weeds near Front and Virginia streets in Gary. Parked near Prince at the media event were large dump trucks ready to begin cleaning up the long-abandoned corner near downtown Gary.

Since launching in July in Gary, the program has hired 11 women to begin working in positions with the city's streets department.

"We've been assisting individuals to move out poverty and homelessness into employment," said Brady Gott, managing director of Cleanslate. "People end up in these situations either because of a misstep or a misfortune, (and) it's been great to take our work in what we've

been doing in Chicago for 15 years and partner with the city of Gary."

Gott said Gary has several abandoned buildings and vacant lots that have been neglected for years that need cleaning up. Right now, the focus is on neighborhoods in Gary, but it will soon move to the main streets such as Broadway.

"Our purpose is two-fold," Gott said. "One is to provide a valuable service to the city of Gary in helping keeping the arterial streets clean, to help the city workers and stay on top of fly dumping and other types of vandalism in the city (as well as) to work with Gary residents to help them take that next step in their career."

Gott said some of the people his program recruits might not be attrac-

chosen homelessness over a domestic violence situation."

Gott said those individuals often move on to employment with private firms.

Maria Kim, president and CEO of Cara, said the program got its start in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. She said she can see the difference in how the program is making communities better.

"We could recognize the neighborhood changed as a result of us being there," Kim said. "When streets are cleaner and safer, people walk with a little bit different swagger in their neighborhood, (and) we give pride back in the communities in which we live."

Each year, Cleanslate collects up to 2,200 tons of recycling material and



Photo provided by Cleanslate

**In Gary, Cleanslate is expected to create 15 to 25 jobs annually for residents while providing cleaner, safer streets.**

tive to private employers because of gaps in employment or issues with their backgrounds such as with substance or domestic abuse issues.

"The reality is there (are) issues that often overlap with homelessness and poverty," Gott said. "But sometimes people are in those situations not because of a misstep but a misfortune, (and) we've employed people who have

trash from Chicago neighborhoods, while providing some 400 jobs, Kim said.

Kim said the organization is honored to be part of the renaissance of the city of Gary. "We are so grateful for being a part of this journey," Kim said. "We're so looking forward to creating the same kind of momentum here in Gary, (and) we want to be part of the process of bringing back this city." ■

# Breathtaking views from bike

New University of Saint Francis president says cycling outlet for fun and connecting with others



Photo provided by University of Saint Francis

In 2003, the Rev. Dr. Eric Zimmer rode 4,000 miles cross-country for Project Rachel, a program designed to provide healing after an abortion.

## MICHAEL PUENTE

In Mark 11:1-11 in the New Testament, Jesus sent two of his disciples to fetch him a donkey. Upon their return, Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem where he was met by cheering crowds.

“He rode a donkey, so I’m imagining that he might have considered riding a bicycle if they had those things back then,” said the Rev. Dr. Eric Zimmer, president of the University of Saint Francis, with campuses in Fort Wayne and Crown Point.

Zimmer took over as president of the university July 1. He most recently served as a professor in the Mendoza

College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. There he directed the school’s interchange with the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education.

He worked previously in higher education at Creighton University, Georgetown University and the University of Washington. He also serves as pastor of Saint Patrick’s Church in Walkerton.

When he’s not studying, teaching or tending to his flock, Zimmer is an avid cyclist

“I like bicycling because I like the wind in my face,” Zimmer said. “I like

the exercise, (and) I like being able to see things at a slower pace than in a car.”

Zimmer has been biking for years. In 2003, he rode 4,000 miles cross-country for Project Rachel, a program designed to provide healing after an abortion.

When he worked at St. Xavier High School in Kathmandu in Nepal, he ran the bike club.

“We would take bike trips throughout the Kathmandu Valley, and on a couple of occasions, longer bike trips throughout the country,” Zimmer said.

Zimmer says biking allows him to see things he could not while walking or in an automobile.



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"I'm able to stop and wander around if I need to when I am bicycling through an interesting area," he said. "I like the mobility of that (it) is not dependent on having enough gas in your gas tank, (and it) allows me to see things I would not have otherwise seen."

Zimmer said he enjoys biking with other people.

"I like bicycling with other people, (and) I like the camaraderie," Zimmer said. "I find that when you approach people on a bicycle, they are more open and more welcoming than you would be in a car."

Zimmer said, for example, if you're out in North Dakota and you're bicycling along and you see a farmer stopped alongside the road, it's likely you'll stop and chat with him.

"If you were in a car, he probably wouldn't give you much of a glance," Zimmer said. "But seeing a bicyclist coming by in a rural area, people say, 'hey what's going on, what are you doing, where are you coming from?'"

In keeping with his deep educational training and background, Zimmer also

took courses on professionally repairing bicycles at the Barnett Bicycle Institute in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"It's (a) pretty well-known institute," he said. "It is their manual on how to repair bicycles that (is) used in many bicycle shops across the country."

There he learned to repair his bike and keep up with maintenance.

"I wanted to do longer trips (and) traveling through rural areas, I would be able to repair my bike," Zimmer said. "But I would also be less likely that I would need to repair it since I know how to keep my bicycle in good form."

During the pandemic, Zimmer said he has been doing more bike rides but locally, not long rides. That's in line with many Americans where bike riding has increased as alternatives to taking public transportation.

With bicycle inventories in short

supply in many retail stores, holding on to and repairing and fixing up any bike you have seems to be the way to go.

**"I find that when you approach people on a bicycle, they are more open and more welcoming than you would be in a car."**

— Rev. Dr. Eric Zimmer  
President  
University of Saint Francis

Zimmer said, while he might repair a friend's bike, it is difficult because of changes in bike technology and design.

"I occasionally repair other bicycles," he said. "What I find is that bicycles have changed on some level over the years, (and) the specifications in the building of the bicycles have changed."

Zimmer said repairing something from the 1970s might present more challenges than something built in the early 2000s or even today with higher-end bikes.

"They have electronic shifting now," he said. "My bikes are all 20 to 30 years old, (and) I don't know how to do electronic shifting, and I will probably will not learn." ■



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## VIEWPOINT

# Virus no excuse to litigate

## Indiana lawmakers must protect state's small businesses operating during pandemic

**T**he coronavirus's impact has reached every corner of the state, and there's no question it will take months, if not years, to recover from its devastating strength. Among the hardest hit from the pandemic are small business owners. Many were forced to shut their doors,

lay off longtime and valued employees, and watch helplessly as their customers, revenue and decades-long hard work slipped away.

We are, however, making progress. Indiana is slowly reopening, but the road to recovery will not be easy. The key to how fast our economy gets back on track lies with our small business owners. What they're telling me is clear: they are scared about getting slapped with a frivolous lawsuit. As

small business owners work to bring back their employees and the families they support and serve their customers in a safe way, they shouldn't have to worry about costly litigation that could put them out of business for good.

According to a recent National Federation of Independent Business survey, almost 70% of small business owners are concerned about increases in liability claims as they reopen. States across the country — both red and blue — already have passed important litigation reforms. It is time for Gov. Eric Holcomb and the Indiana legislature to follow suit. We need to stand up for Indiana small business owners who are doing everything they

can to balance reopening Indiana's economy with keeping their customers and employees safe.

The coronavirus has reached every age group in Indiana, but thankfully, it seems that most who are infected either display minor symptoms or none at all. Even though many others who contract it will feel like they've had symptoms similar to a severe cold or flu, there are those who will seize the opportunity to take advantage of small businesses by forcing them to choose between a fast settlement or a long expensive defense of a frivolous lawsuit.

Every year, millions of Americans get sick with colds, flus and other respiratory illnesses, yet these illnesses aren't a basis for litigation — neither should the new coronavirus. Small business owners don't have a team of lawyers on hand to guide them through the process of filing paperwork and arguing against predatory, self-serving lawsuits.

The legislature needs to act to protect small businesses that have taken responsible and guided steps to shield people who work and shop at their places of business from lawsuits. They should be protected from liability unless people can prove that the small business owner knowingly failed to develop and put a plan in place for reducing the risk of exposure to the coronavirus. In fact, Indiana law requires them to make a plan.

As part of Gov. Holcomb's Back on Track plan, all small businesses in Indiana are required, at a minimum, to institute:

- An employee health screening process

- Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting protocols
- Enhanced accessibility of products to wash hands or use hand sanitizer
- Compliance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention social distancing requirements.

This plan must be provided to employees and staff and posted publicly.

While these guidelines are instructive, for the most part, they are not legally binding. They shouldn't be used as a free pass for people to take advantage of small businesses that are following protocols and doing everything they can think of to keep their customers and employees safe.

Here's the thing: many Hoosier small business owners stay up at night worrying about these potentially business-ending lawsuits. They worry because it's impossible for them to disprove that a defendant contracted the coronavirus at their place of business. That's why it's so important that

the legislature take steps to protect responsible small business owners from this type of unnecessary litigation.

If Indiana lawmakers act, they will ensure Indiana's road to recovery is smoother. It won't be easy, but by shielding small business owners from frivolous lawsuits tied to an invisible virus spreading throughout our state, we can put Indiana's

economy back on track faster. Indiana small businesses already are struggling. Let's give them the peace of mind that, during this scary and unprecedented time, at the very least, they're protected against big lawsuits that threaten to close their doors for good. ■



► **Barbara Quandt Underwood** is the state director for the National Federation of Independent Business in Indiana, which has more than 10,000 members across Indiana.

**“The legislature needs to act to protect small businesses that have taken responsible and guided steps to shield people who work and shop at their places of business from lawsuits.”**



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