



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
**ENVISION**  
LAGRANGE COUNTY

*A Visioning Initiative  
of the*



**BECKER  
CONSULTING**

February 2020



## BACKGROUND

In 1990, Lilly Endowment Inc. launched the *Giving Indiana Funds for Tomorrow (GIFT) Initiative* to help establish and further develop community foundations throughout Indiana. The Endowment supported various GIFT initiatives since 1990, all designed to strengthen community foundations and their ability to meet needs in their communities.

In October 2018, Lilly Endowment Inc. announced the GIFT VII Initiative, which included a Community Leadership Planning Grant to community foundations, based on population size. The LaGrange County Community Foundation (LCCF) was awarded a \$50,000 Community Leadership Planning Grant to:

- **Lead a community visioning effort** designed to develop a strategy to improve the quality of life in LaGrange County
- **Strengthen the internal capacity of the Foundation** through implementation of new financial management software
- **Strengthen the internal knowledge of Foundation staff** through access to training required to lead the growth and expanding role of the Foundation

To guide the visioning effort, LCCF engaged Becker Consulting to conduct several “Community Conversations”, inviting citizens to share perspective on opportunities and challenges facing their communities. In addition, LCCF organized a Steering Committee of community leaders to oversee the visioning project and hosted a county-wide luncheon to report on key findings from the Conversations; seek additional validation of priorities and; receive input toward development of a compelling vision statement. Branded **ENVISION LAGRANGE COUNTY**, the visioning effort engaged more than 200 residents in a conversation about the future of LaGrange County.

The input received through these meetings will be used to inform LCCF’s grant making and strategic priorities and is presented in this Executive Summary document.



## LAGRANGE POPULATION: UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

LaGrange County is unique among counties in the region and state due to the presence of a significant Amish population. *LaGrange County is home to the third largest Amish community in the United States.* This cultural reality creates challenges in analyzing available census data, as the Amish are not “footnoted” in data related to educational attainment, family profiles or employment. Without an understanding of the significant and growing Amish presence in the County, one can inadvertently misrepresent the vitality of the community. A few statistics that illustrate how the County’s Amish population impacts data that, if not explained, can create confusion in trying to make comparisons with other communities in the region and state:

- **Amish = 37% of total County population** (estimated at 14,521 in 2018)
- **47% of school-age children not enrolled in public schools**  
(2018-19 enrollment = 53% or 5,391 of 10,113)
- **63.3% adults 25+ with high school diploma** vs 88.3% in Indiana; **9.9% with B.A. degree or higher** vs 25.3% in Indiana
- **68.4% married** vs 48.8% in Indiana
- **30.5% of married couples have children** vs 18.8% in Indiana
- **10.4% employed on farms** vs 1.6% in Indiana
- **35.7% employed in manufacturing** vs 14.2% in Indiana (Represents 51.5% of total County earnings!)

SOURCE: Indiana Business Resource Center, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, May 2018

The Amish population in LaGrange County is *estimated* to be approximately 37% of the total county population. As shown in the statewide maps that follow, LaGrange County is one of the few counties in Indiana that is growing in population - increasing faster than the northeast Indiana region and Indiana overall. This growth, however, is occurring through a natural increase in the Amish community, not through higher birth rates or in-migration in the county overall. As shown above, the Amish culture is reflected in higher marriage rates and a higher percentage of married couples with children when compared with the Non-Amish population.

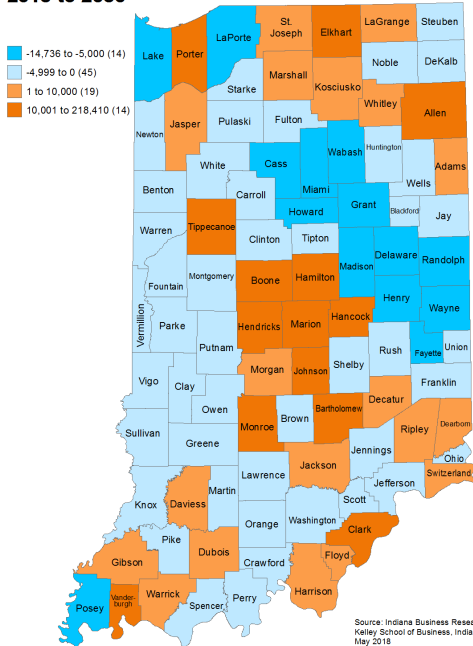


The data also reflects the fact that the majority of school-age children in the Amish community are enrolled in Amish schools, not in one of the three public school systems in the county. Amish schools require attendance through the 8th grade, after which Amish children typically enter the workforce - again, impacting the interpretation and understanding of data related to high school completion and college degree attainment.

LaGrange County is fortunate to have the Amish culture strongly represented in the community - the Amish contribute significantly to the vitality and rich heritage of the county. Throughout the Community Conversations hosted by the Community Foundation, participants expressed a desire for the Amish and Non-Amish cultures to work more closely together toward achieving shared goals. The opportunity to do this is, in part, dependent on the community's understanding of demographic and economic trends impacting the county. A better understanding of key data will help inform decision making and will enable the county to do a more effective job in telling its story.

Population Projections

**Numeric Change in Total Population, 2015 to 2050**



**LaGrange**

2020: **39,848**  
 2050: **44,067**  
**+10.6%**

**Northeast IN**

2020: **789,958**  
 2050: **840,941**  
**+6.5%**

**Indiana**

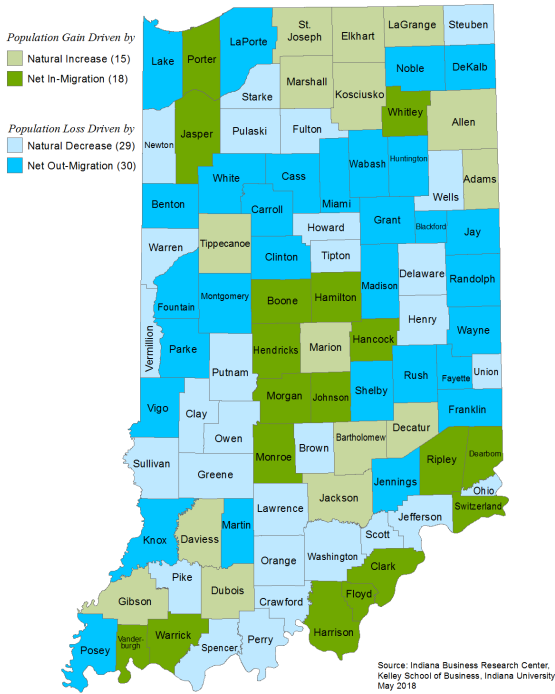
2020: **6,738,573**  
 2050: **7,272,579**  
**+7.9%**

Source: Indiana Business Research Center, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, May 2018



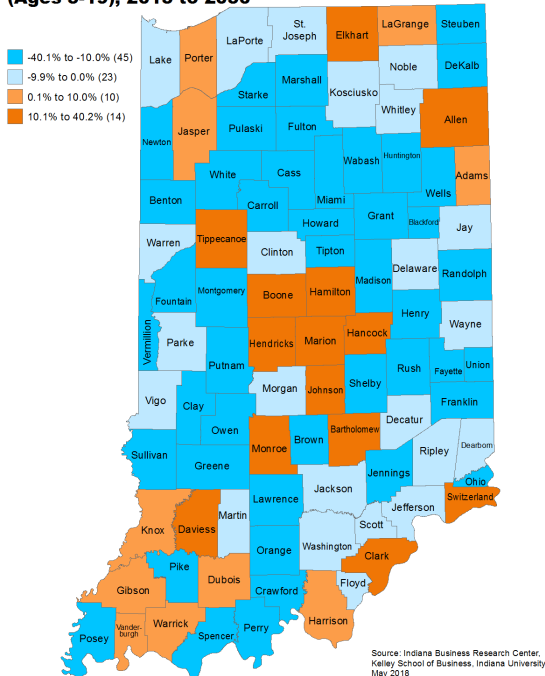
Population Projections

**Components of Change, 2015 to 2050**



Population Projections

**Percent Change in School-Age Population (Ages 5-19), 2015 to 2050**



**LaGrange**

2020: **25.4%** (10,113)  
 2050: **24.5%** (10,781)

**Northeast IN**

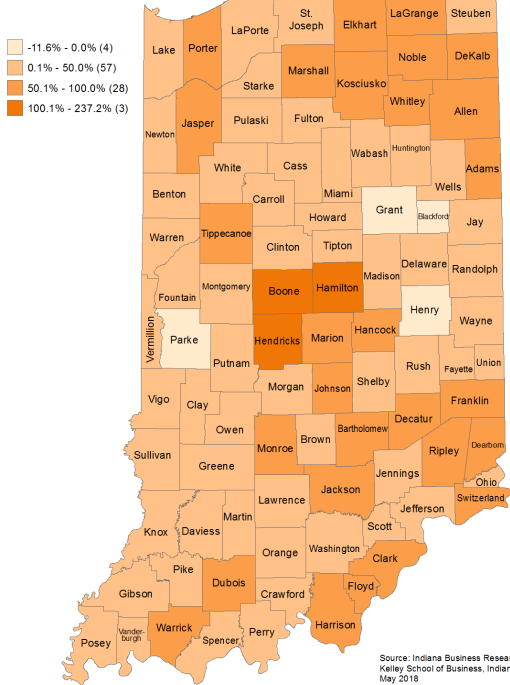
2020: **20.6%** (162,704)  
 2050: **20.1%** (168,717)

**Indiana**

2020: **19.7%** (1,326,596)  
 2050: **19.3%** (1,405,200)

Population Projections

**Percent Change in Population Ages 65 and Older, 2015 to 2050**



**LaGrange**

2020: **14.6%** (5,804)

2050: **20.2%** (8,901)

**Northeast IN**

2020: **16.8%** (132,768)

2050: **21.8%** (183,068)

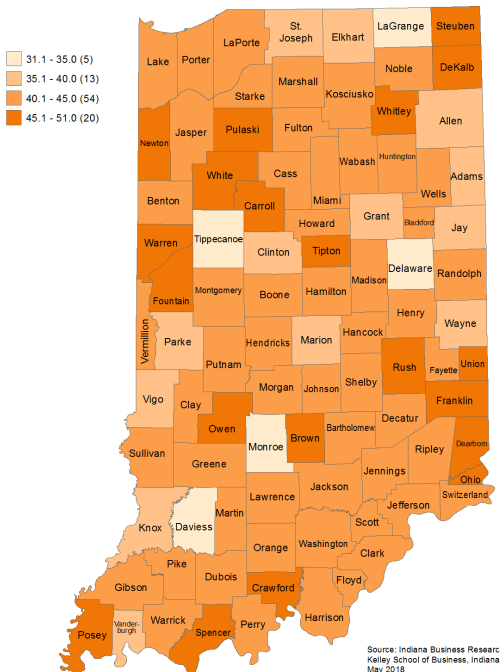
**Indiana**

2020: **16.5%** (1,114,466)

2050: **20.9%** (1,518,607)

Population Projections

**Median Age of Population in 2050**





## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

- 4** Community Conversations in towns across the county  
*LaGrange, Shipshewana, Topeka and Stroh*
- 1** County-wide luncheon
- 1** Community Conversation with young leaders  
*Emerging Leaders of LaGrange County*
- 1** Community Conversation with Amish representatives
- 3** Steering Committee meetings

**200+** Total Attendees

The LaGrange County Community Foundation hosted *Community Conversations* to encourage citizen participation from all areas of LaGrange County. Local media, social media and close coordination with local leadership were utilized to promote citizen interest and attendance. A total of 90 residents attended four meetings in the Towns of LaGrange, Shipshewana, Topeka and Stroh. These town meetings were initiated on October 8, 2019 and concluded on November 7, 2019. In addition, a Steering Committee of 13 community leaders was organized to oversee the project, and that committee met to provide insight and guidance on September 9 and 23, 2019. A county-wide luncheon was hosted on November 13, 2019 to report on “what we heard” through the initial four Town Conversations and the two meetings of the Steering Committee. Eighty people attended this county-wide meeting, helping to validate priorities and provide input toward development of a vision statement for LaGrange County.



LCCF organized two additional Community Conversations to ensure input from important segments of the community who were underrepresented in the four Town Conversations — with the Young Professionals of LaGrange County and with representatives of the Amish community. The meeting with Young Professionals was held on December 18, 2019 with 10 people attending. On January 8, 2020, LCCF hosted a conversation with 7 representatives of the Amish community. Finally, the Steering Committee met again on January 13, 2020 to review a summary of input received across all six Community Conversations, the county-wide luncheon and prior meetings of its committee. This meeting was organized to gain consensus regarding the highest priority issues and recommendations to be made to the Board of Directors of the LaGrange County Community Foundation at its January 2020 Board meeting.

## **WHAT WE HEARD**

Attendees at each Community Conversation were asked 4 questions: 1) What are you most proud of regarding your hometown community and LaGrange County? 2) What are the most promising opportunities facing your hometown community and LaGrange County? 3) What are the most pressing challenges facing your hometown community and LaGrange County? and 4) If you had a “magic wand”, what one bold change would you make happen?

### **What We Heard: Residents Are Most Proud Of**

- Lakes in LaGrange County, the natural environment and the County Park System
- Forward looking... but honor our heritage and “where we came from”
- Family oriented, friendly, hometown feel
- Biking and hiking trails
- County Library system, Parkview LaGrange and public school systems
- Collaboration between organizations, businesses and the community
- Diversity of things to do
- A community that comes together in time of need... we take care of each other





## **What We Heard: Priority Issues Across All Meetings**

In the final exercise of each Community Conversation - and at the County-wide luncheon - attendees were asked to vote for their top three opportunities and their top three challenges. Following is a summary of the top opportunities and challenges identified in rank order of total votes, with the top three priorities shown in red.

*It is important to mention here that a key theme was reinforced across all these Community Conversations: **The citizens of LaGrange County want to work together to achieve shared goals!*** It was the hope of the Steering Committee and many involved throughout the meetings that this visioning effort could help establish community consensus on priorities and goals and a path forward to achieve them.

### **Top Opportunities**

- **#1 Focus on downtown revitalization** in LaGrange and all communities in the county. *47 votes*
- **#2 Develop and support entrepreneurial spirit** to create restaurants, brew pubs and boutique retail. (tie vote) *43 votes*
- **#2 Biking/Hiking Trails** - continue to develop trails for recreation *and safer transportation for the Amish.* (tie vote) *43 votes*
- **#3 County-wide community center** with programming and exercise for youth and adults. *33 votes*
- **#4 Cultural collaboration between the Amish and Non-Amish cultures** - focus on areas where there is an alignment of interest and shared benefit. *26 votes*
- **#5 The County Park system and the lakes** - leverage the assets that everyone is most proud of! (tie vote) *25 votes*
- **#5 LaGrange and Shipshewana** - work together to leverage and complement the established tourism market in Shipshewana. (tie vote) *25 votes*
- **#6 Strategic use of Redevelopment powers** - strategic investment of tax increment finance (TIF) resources. *21 votes*



## Top Challenges

- **#1 Need a housing strategy** - need housing of *all types*. *87 votes*
- **#2 Eliminate drug abuse/addiction** and the systemic challenges that result. *50 votes*
- **#3 Workforce education/job training/skill development in trades, soft skills in K12, trade schools, IVY Tech.** *49 votes*
- **#4 Improve traffic/road safety** to ensure the safe movement of citizens, visitors and commerce within the county. *44 votes*
- **#5 Develop a “LaGrange County Brand”** - focus on what makes us special... market our story! Residents are proud of County Parks, lakes, trails, natural environment, schools, Library, Parkview LaGrange, caring community, strong cultural heritage. *43 votes*
- **#6 Leadership development** - progressive leadership to engage young people and be more accepting of new ideas. *41 votes*
- **#7 Access to affordable childcare and early childhood education.** *31 votes*
- **#8 Update LaGrange County website** to strengthen county-wide communication. (tie vote) *16 votes*
- **#8 Improve public transportation** to strengthen access to services and employment, especially after 5:00 p.m. (tie vote) *16 votes*
- **#9 Comprehensive community planning and visioning** - locally controlled decisions for planned growth. *14 votes*
- **#10 Work together to develop shared goals** - focus on civic engagement and collaboration versus what divides us. *8 votes*



**Across all Community Conversations, more than 390 issues were identified.** 128 of these issues received votes signifying a priority. Only 9 issues received more than 40 votes. Looking across both opportunities and challenges, following is a rank order of issues receiving more than 40 votes, with the top three highlighted in red:

- **#1 Need a housing strategy. 87 votes**
- **#2 Eliminate drug abuse/addiction. 50 votes**
- **#3 Workforce education/job training/skill development in trades, soft skills. 49 votes**
- **#4 Focus on downtown revitalization. 47 votes**
- **#5 Improve traffic and road safety. 44 votes**
- **#6 Develop and support entrepreneurial spirit. (tie vote) 43 votes**
- **#6 Biking/hiking trails. (tie vote) 43 votes**
- **#6 Develop a “LaGrange County Brand”. (tie vote) 43 votes**
- **#7 Leadership development. 41 votes**





### **What We Heard: Young Professionals and the Amish**

While the priorities identified in meetings with Young Professionals and the Amish are included in the above rankings, as stated earlier, these two groups were underrepresented in the Community Conversations and the county-wide luncheon. In addition, because of the timing of meetings with these two groups, their priority issues could not be included in the top priorities reported out and voted on at the luncheon. Recognizing that the perspective of Young Professionals and the Amish are important to setting priorities for the future of the community, it is appropriate here to highlight those issues that were ranked high by these two groups:

#### **Top Issues Among Young Professionals**

- Civic engagement: need to increase the number of people who participate in events and programs
- Lack of progressive leadership and engagement of young leaders; more acceptance of young people and new ideas; opportunities for mentoring
- Need improved internet and WiFi access and capacity
- Create a thriving downtown

#### **Top Issues Among the Amish**

- Traffic and road safety - opportunity to convene roundtable discussion with County leadership, Amish and Non-Amish community leaders to identify viable solutions
- Improve and expand public transportation
- Expand and connect the trail system
- Need more responsive and positive attitudes from career government employees



## SETTING PRIORITIES FOR THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Looking strategically at the priorities identified through the Community Conversations, it is important for the LaGrange County Community Foundation to assess its ability to impact a given issue. What role should the Foundation play? Is there another, more appropriate organization that should lead? Is a convener needed to advance progress? Is funding needed? What activities would have the greatest county-wide impact? These and other questions are all appropriate considerations for the Community Foundation in determining its level of engagement.

In conversations with the Steering Committee and Foundation staff, it was acknowledged that the top 2 priorities identified are already being addressed by capable leadership:

- **Need a housing strategy.** A collaboration between County and Town government, the LaGrange County Economic Development Corporation and other partners is overseeing development of a housing strategy. A steering committee representing key stakeholders has raised funding, engaged a strong consulting team and is well underway in creation of a market-based strategy to expand housing development throughout the county. It is appropriate here for LCCF to consider a supporting role, including the potential for financial investment as the strategy comes into focus.
- **Eliminate drug abuse/addiction.** Parkview LaGrange, in collaboration with Parkview Behavioral Health and local partners, is the appropriate organization to take the lead in developing a strategy to address this complex priority. Parkview LaGrange recently updated its local Community Health Assessment and is best-positioned to convene a strong team to define effective solutions. Again, LCCF should be open to playing an appropriate support role if one is identified through Parkview's effort.

### Steering Committee Recommendation

Looking at the remaining priorities identified, ***the Steering Committee was unanimous in recommending that a county-wide comprehensive plan be developed as a vehicle for aligning strategies across multiple priorities.*** The Steering Committee felt strongly that, if each of the other priorities were addressed independently, they would likely result in inefficient, disconnected strategies with competing goals and competing demands for limited resources.

*One plan* that evaluates priorities, establishes shared goals and aligns strategies, funding and leadership would greatly ***advance the community's stated desire to work together to achieve shared goals!***



## Key Considerations

In making this recommendation to the Board of the LaGrange County Community Foundation, the following considerations were made:

- In its proposal to the Lilly Endowment for GIFT VII Planning Grant funds, LCCF stated “... in recent years there has been no county-wide visioning or strategic planning process.” Further, the proposal states “There has been no county-wide comprehensive planning effort since... 2001.” *It should be noted here that competitive communities don’t plan on 20-year cycles! Comprehensive plans should consider no more than a 10-year horizon and be validated on a 5-year cycle.*
- *Most of the priorities identified through the Community Conversations relate to the physical development of the county (trails, roads, parks, downtowns, public transportation), or activities/tools to improve outcomes (collaboration between Amish and Non-Amish cultures, collaboration between Shipshewana and LaGrange, use of TIF). By law, a comprehensive plan is the primary vehicle for counties and towns to advance a shared vision for the future development of their jurisdiction.*
- Collaboration on the development of one unified comprehensive plan would *address challenges and opportunities across the entire county.*
- One unified plan would *align and prioritize multiple competing needs.*
- The comprehensive plan would establish a plan of action that *guides LaGrange County and each town in the investment of limited public resources.*
- One plan would provide *direction to LCCF in future grant making across the county.*
- *LCCF is recognized as an appropriate convener and a strong partner in development of one unified county comprehensive plan.*
- Leading on the development of a comprehensive plan would *strengthen LCCF’s role and influence as a community convener.*
- The planning process will *strengthen civic engagement and community ownership in one plan* for the future of the county.
- *Existing work to develop a housing strategy (as well as other efforts that may be underway) should continue;* these efforts should both inform and be incorporated into the new comprehensive plan as it is developed.



## **A COMMUNITY VISION STATEMENT**

As part of ENVISION LAGRANGE COUNTY, input was sought during the county-wide luncheon on November 13, 2019 regarding key words that should be incorporated into a proposed vision statement for the community. These words were utilized to draft 4 “straw-man” vision statements for consideration by the Steering Committee and, ultimately, the LCCF Board of Directors. This work is ongoing, but following are the statements that were shared with the Steering Committee at their meeting on January 13, 2020. It is planned for the Steering Committee to meet again to consider a vision recommendation to the LCCF Board.

### **What is a Vision Statement?**

The **vision statement** is a guidepost to keep the organization/community focused on what it wants to achieve and create. The vision should be aspirational and require significant effort to achieve. It should be bold - maybe a bit scary - and should inspire momentum toward the desired future state of the organization/community.

Versus... a **mission statement**, which defines an organization’s/community’s purpose for existence and helps identify and drive the strategies and tactics that guide and inspire progress toward the vision.

### **Straw-Man Vision Statements for Consideration**

- LaGrange County will grow economically, educationally and recreationally to ensure the success and health of residents while preserving our heritage and natural landscape.
- LaGrange County will be recognized as a culturally diverse, family friendly community that values innovation, collaboration, education, economic success and strong families.
- LaGrange County will preserve its heritage, natural environment and family-friendliness, and grow economically and culturally by being collaborative and inclusive.
- LaGrange County will continue to grow and prosper by being a safe, attractive, business-friendly and healthy community, while preserving our family-friendly appeal, unique heritage and natural environment.





- LaGrange County will work with residents and business partners to enhance the quality of life, improve our public spaces and roadways, and create a safe, vibrant community to live, work, play and visit.

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**NOTE:** A complete summary of all comments and input received across all six Community Conversations is available upon request from the LaGrange County Community Foundation.