

# WHAT WE HEARD

## Hometown Chats



Kosciusko County  
**COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

*Where Donor Dreams Shine.*

**BECKER  
CONSULTING**

October, 2019

KOSCIUSKO

## **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. The Kosciusko County Community Foundation (KCCF) successfully completed the first six GIFT initiatives.

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. KCCF was awarded a \$75,000 Community Leadership Planning Grant in March 2019 to:

- Benchmark best practices in child care/early learning and workforce development
- Initiate development of a county-wide housing strategy
- Undertake county-wide citizen outreach
- Identify data to be used in a future community needs dashboard
- Complete training in civic engagement
- Strengthen internal capacity

As part of the planning process, KCCF hired Becker Consulting to conduct 11 Hometown Chats, inviting citizens to share concerns and aspirations for their communities and compare broad community input with issues previously identified by KCCF's board and community leaders. In addition, KCCF staff facilitated a chat with the Chamber of Commerce's Young Adult Professionals members to solicit input from young community leaders.

The input received through these meetings will be used to inform KCCF's grantmaking and strategic priorities and is presented in this Executive Summary document.



# 11 Hometown Chats

## 1 “YAP” Chat

**Total Attendees: 228**

### Hometown Chats

The Kosciusko County Community Foundation hosted Hometown Chats to encourage citizen participation from all areas of Kosciusko County. Local media outlets, press releases, social media and coordination with local communities were utilized to promote citizen interest and attendance. A total of 211 residents attended the eleven meetings, which were held in Warsaw, Pierceton, Syracuse, North Webster, Winona Lake, Silver Lake, Milford, Claypool, Mentone, Leesburg and Etna Green. The meetings commenced on July 11, 2019 and concluded on August 21, 2019. One additional meeting was added to gain input from the Young Adult Professionals (YAP) of the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce on September 12, 2019. 17 YAP members attended this additional meeting.

Attendees were asked what they loved about their hometown community and Kosciusko County (assets/appreciative inquiry); what they felt was missing from their community (challenges); and, if they had a “magic wand,” what one big bold change would they make happen (opportunities)?

### **What We Heard... Frequently-Mentioned Comments Across all Hometown Chats**

Participants in each of the Hometown Chats expressed sincere satisfaction, pride and support for their communities. The most frequently heard comments across all eleven meetings include:

- Lakes in Kosciusko County (and related recreation/entertainment) are valued and appreciated
- The school systems serving the County are recognized as doing a good job
- The communities throughout the County are good places to raise a family
- Communities across the County are characterized as: *safe, supportive, having small-town charm and family values, caring, sense of community, “home”, compassionate, friendly, welcoming*

- Kosciusko County is conveniently located with access to regional assets and larger metro areas
- Parks and trail/bike systems are valued and need investment
- Residents in communities across the County are willing to volunteer to help improve the quality of life - but often don't know how to engage
- There is a need for additional new retail investment - especially grocery stores, pharmacies and restaurants in small towns in the County
- Public transportation needs strengthened to improve access to employment and social services
- There is a need for more activities and programs designed to engage youth of all ages
- Sidewalks and streetscapes need improved and expanded in commercial areas to promote pedestrian access and safety and support commerce



## **What We Heard...**

### **The top 4 issues:**

**Community Planning/Visioning - 141 Votes**

**128 Votes - Housing**

**Childcare - 87 Votes**

**53 Votes - Workforce Preparation**

In the final exercise of each Hometown Chat, attendees were asked to vote for their top three priorities among all the issues and topics shared during the course of the meeting. Following is a summary of the top four issues, based on votes received:

#### **Community Planning and Visioning**

141 attendees across all 11 communities voted the need for stronger planning and visioning as the number one priority. The planning and visioning discussion in each of the Hometown Chats highlighted many interests, including: expanding parks, sidewalks, trails and quality of life initiatives; developing or expanding library facilities; building new or expanding existing community centers and strengthening use and financial sustainability of the centers; development of a county-wide park network/system and expanding activities for youth; addressing and expanding sewer systems for the benefit of the environment (lakes) and surrounding communities; expanded/improved internet access (raised as a particular challenge in three of the Hometown Chats in the southern part of the County), and; strengthening non-profit collaboration and outreach beyond Warsaw. It was noted that OCRA grants require communities to have a long-range plan as a prerequisite for eligibility and; that OCRA can assist eligible communities with resources for planning. The issues most frequently recognized include:

- Need for long range and comprehensive community planning
- Expand sewer and water systems and strengthen infrastructure planning
- Need for stronger community collaboration to support growth

## **Housing**

128 attendees across all 11 communities voted housing as a top priority. The county-wide shortage of available starter homes, rental homes or senior housing is described as a barrier to community growth and talent attraction. All but four communities cited a lack of housing guidelines and code enforcement as barriers. Land availability for building was identified as a barrier in some communities while other communities wanted enforceable guidelines around the age and occupancy of unsafe or old mobile homes. It should be noted that the Kosciusko County Community Foundation, along with the City of Warsaw and Kosciusko County have engaged HPG Network to develop a county-wide housing strategy. The most often-cited issues affecting housing during the Hometown Chats included:

- Need housing guidelines and building code enforcement
- Rehabilitation of existing homes
- Need *all types of housing*; rental, senior, affordable, first-time buyers and infill

## **Childcare**

87 attendees in 8 of the communities voted access to affordable childcare as a major challenge. The following issues were cited most often:

- Adequate childcare is not available in most locations - and where it is, it is not affordable
- Poor compensation leads to a childcare worker shortage and high turnover

## **Workforce Preparation**

53 attendees in 10 of the communities voted workforce preparation as a priority issue. Overall, citizens felt positive about K-12 school systems, educational institutions and programs related to workforce development, citing internships, job fairs and dual credit opportunities as positive elements of workforce development. Living wages and skills that provide good job opportunities along with certification programs were discussed and seen as needs in all but 4 of the communities. The top issue identified:

- Strengthen emphasis on trade skill development programs and certifications

## **“Magic Wand” Ideas**

Hometown Chat attendees were asked to imagine “one big, bold, lasting change” they would like to achieve in their community if they had the miracle of a magic wand. Attendees in all communities had specific thoughts on community centers, expanded and or new library facilities, planning and housing. Several ideas emerged:

- Create a family resource center with early childhood education
- Eliminate the opioid crisis
- Improve civic engagement and leadership
- Expand sidewalks and trails

- Resources for affordable housing
- Benchmark “Best in Class” cities and towns through inter-city visits
- Match people with passion with action

### **Young Adult Professionals (YAP)**

Staff of the Kosciusko County Community Foundation met with 17 members of the Young Adult Professionals (YAP) of the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce on September 12, 2019 to ask for their perspectives regarding challenges and opportunities facing the community.

### **What We Heard...What Do You Like Most?**

- The community is forward thinking
- Safe and family friendly
- Village at Winona
- The lakes
- Restaurants

### **What is Missing?**

- Event center
- More diverse political representation
- Night life
- Affordable housing
- Affordable extracurricular activities
- Non-Christian houses of worship
- Concert venue
- Expansive community pride
- Expand trails throughout the County

### **“Magic Wand” Ideas**

- Gathering space
- Easier way to meet people of similar age

- US 30 congestion (eliminated)
- Affordable housing
- Resources for schools/funding
- Childcare
- Rock climbing

#### **Community Planning and Visioning - 9 Votes**

- Reach all communities
- Engage in and support Clearly Kosciusko - a branding campaign for the County
- Collaboration

#### **Housing - 4 Votes**

- Affordable housing
- Apartments/studios

#### **Workforce Preparation - 3 Votes**

- Generation segregation - bridge gaps between generations
- Maker space

#### **Childcare - 1 Vote**

- Raise standards of care

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**Note:** A complete summary of all comments and input received across all eleven Hometown Chats and the meeting with Young Adult Professionals (YAP) is available upon request from the Kosciusko County Community Foundation.