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Updated Lake County Convention Center Study Released

A Lake County convention center would create jobs and economic growth while allowing the county to showcase itself as a hub of commerce, innovation and entertainment.

CROWN POINT, IN (March 14, 2024) – A new convention center in Lake County would inject nearly \$60 million annually into the local economy, according to a study presented today to the Board of Directors of the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority. Such a facility would also create over 1,300 full-time, part-time and temporary construction jobs, and boost local and state tax revenues by more than \$3.5 million a year.

Commissioned by the RDA at the instruction of the Indiana General Assembly, and conducted by Chicago-based Johnson Consulting, the study updates and expands upon a prior analysis done in 2018. It confirmed the continued viability of a convention center in Lake County and examined 14 potential locations for such a facility.

“Lake County – and Northwest Indiana as a whole – has a huge amount of momentum right now,” says Sherri Ziller, President and CEO of the RDA. “There’s the double track and West Lake commuter rail projects, which the RDA has been instrumental in funding. Those are already creating hundreds of millions of dollars in residential and commercial development. Then you have a billion-dollar industrial investment coming from the federal government in the Midwest Hydrogen Hub. A new, state-of-the-art convention center adding millions of dollars to the local economy every year would keep that momentum rolling and help cement The Region as the place to be.”

“In terms of economic development, a Lake County convention center is low-hanging fruit,” says Randy Palmateer, Vice Chairman of the RDA Board and Lake County’s representative on the RDA Board of Directors. “Not only would it provide an immediate boost to the local economy during construction, and a long-term boost through its operation, but the State of Indiana is offering up to \$100 million in matching funds to build it. Any way you look at it, it’s a winning opportunity for Lake County.”

The new study calls for a 145,000-square-foot convention center with 73,000 square feet of meeting and exhibition space, including a 40,000-square-foot exhibit hall, an 18,000-square-foot ballroom, and 15,000-square-feet of meeting space. For comparison’s sake, the former Radisson Hotel at Star Plaza in Merrillville, which served as Lake County’s primary venue for non-local events until its closing in 2016, had about 24,700 square feet of meeting and ballroom space.

“When the Radisson hotel and conference center closed, it left a gap in Lake County’s event space market which has yet to be filled” says Charles Johnson, President and CEO of Johnson Consulting. “With the meetings and hospitality industry continuing to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and little competition for larger spaces south of downtown Chicago outside of Tinley Park, the time is right for Indiana’s second most populous county to invest in its tourism infrastructure and take greater advantage of the activity occurring in the Chicagoland region as well as in the State of Indiana. This project could catalyze Lake County’s destination development while also providing an amenity for locals.”

Fourteen potential locations are presented in the study, including sites in Munster, Hammond, Gary, Merrillville, Hobart and Crown Point. Each site was scored by Johnson Consulting, with the result that the leading site was Patriot Park in Hobart, followed by the Hard Rock Casino in Gary and the Century Mall in Merrillville. The former Radisson Hotel at Star Plaza site at I-65 and U.S. 30, and Kennedy Ave. and I-94 in Hammond, rounded out the top five.



The study also examines the county's options for funding the construction, operations and maintenance of the convention center, as well as the expected annual revenues from events, estimated number and size of events and much more. A full copy of the study can be downloaded here:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/2gg4bnp5sobd6yf0k82to/NWI_FeasibilityStudyUpdate_2024.pdf?rlkey=hojgzxulb6pmzborvljegeij5&dl=0

The delivery of this update concludes the RDA's work in supporting the Lake County government in its consideration of a possible Lake County convention center. If the Lake County Commissioners find an acceptable proposal, and should they move forward with that proposal to the point of building the facility, then the RDA will have a statutory role in managing the state side of the financing of the convention center. Until that time, the process moves to the Lake County Commissioners to entertain proposals and move into a decision-making mode on this important initiative.

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About the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority

Established in 2006 through a bipartisan effort, the RDA is quasi-governmental development entity entrusted to make public investment decisions within a regional framework for supporting catalytic infrastructure projects and inducing private sector investment. Years of successful results have made it a trusted and tested partner for growth in Northwest Indiana. For more information, visit www.nwitdd.com or www.in.gov/rda.