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Regional Development Authority Lays Out Vision for Growth in New Strategic Plan

A new Land Development Entity dedicated to restoring brownfields for redevelopment and a push to modernize shoreline infrastructure are among initiatives announced today.

CROWN POINT, IN (June 12, 2025) – A new Land Development Entity (LDE) dedicated to cleaning up environmentally contaminated and difficult to redevelop brownfield properties, and an initiative to designate a portion of U.S. 12 a National Scenic Byway were among the plans outlined today by Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority President and CEO Sherri Ziller as part of the organization’s updated strategic plan.

“For the past 18 months, a multi-disciplinary team has been at work crafting the 2025 update to our strategic plan,” Ziller said. “On one level, the job was straightforward: the RDA was initially conceived to address specific issues, all of which were laid out in our enabling legislation. These include rail and bus transit, airport development and shoreline redevelopment. So those areas of focus were not going to change. But within, and adjacent to, them were a great many options that the RDA could pursue.”

To determine where the RDA should focus its attention, and what projects would provide the “biggest bang for our buck,” RDA assembled a team with expertise in land use, engineering and transportation. They in turn talked to more than 100 local civic and business leaders, elected officials and region-oriented organizations to find ways to apply these ideas in actionable, local ways that would positively impact the economy and raise the Region to even greater heights.

One need that emerged in this process was for a more aggressive approach to cleaning up environmentally contaminated properties in Northwest Indiana. Municipalities in the Region sometimes struggle with the challenges of redeveloping larger, possibly formerly industrial, or simply key strategic sites. The challenges come in the form of environmental cleanup, assembling the requisite number of parcels, or finding the sources of grant funding to get started. To address this, the RDA will create a Land Development Entity, or LDE, that will assemble, acquire and remediate properties to make them suitable for private sector investment and redevelopment. The LDE will be able to work hand in hand with local communities in tandem with their own land assembly efforts to maximize tax base through private sector investment.

“While this LDE will work with agencies and municipalities to identify properties and procure grant funding for cleanup, the RDA is committing an initial \$5 million in seed money from its own funds so that this entity can get down to business as soon as possible,” Ziller said.

ENHANCING THE SHORELINE

The Indiana Dunes National Park has only been an official national park for six years, and the RDA is eager to leverage that still-new designation for the benefit of shoreline communities and the Region at large. According to the National Park Service, the Indiana Dunes National Park saw more than 2.7 million recreational visits in 2024, and studies have pegged its economic impact on local communities at more than \$200 million annually. A great deal has already been done along the shoreline by the park service, public organizations like NIRPC, local municipalities and private groups, to improve access, expand amenities and otherwise bolster the visitor experience. The RDA’s updated strategic plan proposes to build on that work by pursuing a National Scenic Byway designation for portions of U.S. 12.

To be designated as a National Scenic Byway, a byway must meet the criteria for at least one of six intrinsic qualities: archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and scenic. “We are eager to get started on this effort and in fact already have secured the support of Lake, Porter and LaPorte county tourism agencies for the creation of a scenic byway,” Ziller said. “We have also had preliminary conversations with INDOT and they are receptive to the idea as well.”



A scenic byway designation will provide another tool for shoreline communities to bolster tourism and local economies through coordinated efforts and investments that enhance the visitor experience, and expand access to and use of the lakeshore and the state and national parks.

Other shoreline initiatives envisioned by the updated plan include supporting infrastructure improvements such as sanitary sewer connections for lakefront communities still on septic, and acquisition and cleanup of industrial properties as they become available to expand public lakefront amenities. The RDA will also continue to pursue Transit-Oriented Development in the shoreline communities served by the South Shore, including Portage, Porter, Beverly Shores and Pines.

RAIL, AIRPORTS NOT FORGOTTEN

The RDA will continue to explore further commuter rail expansion in Northwest Indiana. “Commuter rail continues to provide a strong return on investment, and we now have a proven model for funding and construction of rail projects in the Region,” Ziller said.

The 2025 update identifies several candidates, most of which have been discussed as possible next steps before, such as an extension of the West Lake line further south, or a branch off the main line to Valparaiso and the Porter County Airport. It also suggests that an extension to Crown Point is worthy of additional study.

Over its first decade of existence, the RDA invested \$50 million in the runway extension and rail relocation project at the Gary/Chicago International Airport, an investment that has triggered tens of millions of dollars of investment at the facility since the runway’s completion in 2015. “We want to continue to work with the airport to develop new revenue strategies and flesh out both passenger and cargo services,” Ziller said.

“Our 2025 vision has also identified the Porter County Airport as an underutilized asset for the Region. We believe there are extensive development opportunities here and I look forward to working with the airport to capitalize on them,” she added.

More details about the 2025 update to the RDA’s comprehensive strategic plan can be found at <https://www.nwitdd.com/rda-strategic-plan>

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About the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority

Established in 2006 through a bipartisan effort including former Governor Mitchell E. Daniels, Congressman Peter J. Visclosky, key state legislators, and local elected officials, 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