DEKALB COUNTY STRATEGIC VISIONING PLAN

Creating a strategic vision for DeKalb County, from the ground up.

Final Report — December 16, 2022

Photo Credit: DeKalb County Convention & Visitors Bureau

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community development

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Executive Summary

In the late winter of 2022, the Ball State Indiana Communities Institute (ICI), along with consulting firm Creative Insight Community Development (CICD), entered discussions with the DeKalb County Community Foundation ("The Foundation") to work with stakeholders across DeKalb County to create a strategic vision to guide the county's future. The goal of the project facilitators, ICI and CICD, was to create a strategic vision that maximized citizen and stakeholder input. This input would then be given equal priority to the goals of formal leaders within the county, as citizens, employees, business owners, youth, and retirees often see their community through a different perspective than traditional leadership.

Through a series of listening sessions held across DeKalb County, facilitators used a variety of creative and constrained brainstorming methods to identify and prioritize the most important issues facing DeKalb County, and the best ways to address those issues given the unique culture and context of DeKalb County. Facilitators then took the citizen data received during the sessions and analyzed it, developing key themes that were used to create a strategic vision statement and six key objectives to guide DeKalb County's development from 2023 onward.

In the final stages of the project, facilitators worked with The Foundation along with community leaders and stakeholders to interpret the data created during the five listening sessions to develop a) a vision statement for DeKalb County that incorporates public sentiment, and b) a set of key goals and recommendations that the county may pursue in the future. To do this, ICI and CICD personnel met with The Foundation on October 25 to discuss future directions. A "member checking" session was held in a public forum on December 6 where a broad group of community stakeholders — many of whom participated in the listening sessions — had a chance to review the final plan first, correcting any inaccuracies or adjusting any interpretations of the data to ensure that the plan is maximally representative of public input. The final plan with the refined vision statement, key recommendations, and any additional input was delivered to The Foundation no later than December 19, 2022.

Project Summary

In late winter of 2022, the Ball State Indiana Communities Institute (ICI), along with consulting firm Creative Insight Community Development (CICD), entered discussions with the DeKalb County Community Foundation ("The Foundation") to work with stakeholders across DeKalb County to create a strategic vision to guide the county's future. This strategic vision is intended to capture both the aspirations of the people who live and work in DeKalb County, as well as some concrete goals to be accomplished over the next ten years. The final deliverable for the project is a cohesive strategic visioning plan that originates with citizen perspectives about what is important to them in the places they live and work, and that can be used to guide decision making well into the future.

Methods Overview

The goal of the project facilitators, ICI and CICD, was to create a strategic vision that maximized citizen and stakeholder input. This input would then be given equal priority to the goals of formal leaders within the county, as citizens, employees, business owners, youth, and retirees often see their community through a different perspective than traditional leadership. Our methods are designed to give balanced weighting to both formal and citizen expertise to create a final product that citizens of the county feel that they had a hand in creating. A successful plan is one in which citizens can see their input and ideas come to life on the plan's pages. It should represent a creative process that is conscious of what is feasible — an optimistic approach to planning with citizen-driven ideas about how to best overcome constraints. And, it should include opportunities for action across the county and across diverse stakeholder groups, not just by the county government.

ICI and CICD have taken/will take following steps to gather data for the strategic vision plan:

a) Hosted initial planning discussions to coordinate action among the facilitation team and clients in spring of 2022.
b) Created a basic community profile with a selection of important community-level socioeconomic trend data to provide a context for the visioning exercises. Data from this profile was presented at each strategic visioning session in each community.
c) Five town hall-style strategic visioning sessions were conducted at five strategic points across DeKalb County: Ashley on June 16, 2022; Butler on June 17, 2022; Spencerville (including nearby St. Joe) on June 23, 2022; Garrett (including nearby Altona) on July 14, 2022; and finally Auburn (including nearby Waterloo) on July 23, 2022. County residents were encouraged to attend any session that was convenient for them, and some participants attended multiple sessions.
d) A data analysis stage that compiles and simplifies data from each town hall meeting was conducted, organizing diverse responses into a cohesive set of data that will be used to craft the vision/goals across all five sites.
e) Analysis of key participants and potential collaborations/partnerships that emerge from the process, which will be evaluated in the final plan.
f) A "member check" was conducted on December 6, 2022 to ensure that the vision and strategic action goals are relevant and representative to all members, and to gain valuable feedback prior to completing the final report.

g) Delivery of the final vision and action plan occurred on December 19, 2022 for one final revision by the Foundation and key stakeholders.

Strategic Visioning Sessions

The visioning process selected for DeKalb County was designed to gather data from a wide range of stakeholders in a short amount of time using an expansion-alignment-compression-prioritization methodology facilitated brainstorming sequence. The facilitation began before each session with a challenge to The Foundation to invite as diverse a population as possible from each community. The Foundation accomplished this by using multimodal advertising for the event, including social media, newspaper advertising, inviting journalists to write about the sessions, and physical mailers. Participant diversity is absolutely necessary to ensure that a full range of perspectives is gathered from various parts of the county and from diverse groups facing different circumstances across the county.
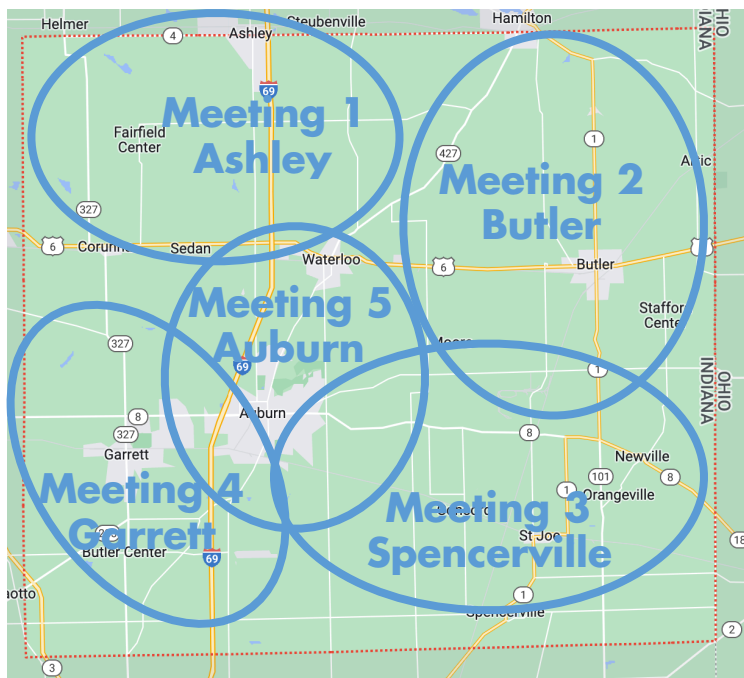
Since the population of DeKalb County is heavily concentrated in the city of Auburn, the facilitation team took great care to avoid making the strategic visioning process seem like an Auburn City-focused exercise. To do this, separate visioning sessions were held sequentially in Ashley, Butler, Spencerville, Garrett, and Auburn, with Auburn being held last on purpose to avoid the perception that other communities were "follow-ons." Across all five sites, approximately 150 citizens and leaders from the community participated. The geographic diversity across these meeting sites was found to be very important, as different communities within DeKalb County have different histories and aspirations. The sequence of meetings and the areas served can be seen in the map at left.

Visioning sessions included these steps:

1) Recruitment of diverse participant groups
2) Introduction of the facilitation team
3) Expansion: "Postcard From The Future" exercise
4) Alignment: Presentation of Community Profile and Socioeconomic Data
5) Compression: Turbo-SWOT exercise
6) Prioritization: Dots exercise

This series of exercises ensures that participants first gain a level of comfort with the facilitators. They then use the "Postcard From The Future" exercise to imagine DeKalb County in 10 years, whether good, bad,

or neutral. By writing a postcard to a friend who lives out of town, participants enter a more positive, imaginative frame of mind that removes them from thinking about their community in technical terms, or in terms of tasks they would like to see accomplished. Instead, they are able to paint a broad, creative vision of the future they would like to see — not for the facilitators, but for a friend. This expansion step widens the sphere of ideas about the community beyond common "issues" and issues-related language and focuses in on what participants really care about. Participants were asked to share their postcards with the group as a means of sharing diverse perspectives with others but were not forced to do so, as this exercise can be quite personal in nature.

At this point, participants were given a data-driven community profile presentation. This presentation included data on economic, population, educational, healthcare, and housing trends. The purpose of this step was to create a sense of collective understanding about some of the objective forces acting on the community. Attention was given to drawing out any "surprises" in the data, such as the size and scope of the agricultural sector (smaller than many participants realize, but culturally and economically important), or the fact that DeKalb County currently outperforms many similar rural communities in terms of basic measures of health, well-being, and housing availability (pointing to areas of strategic advantage for the county). This alignment step explicitly follows the expansion step as a way to "get everyone to the same table" after being expansive in exploring big-picture ideas and aspirations. It is also a way to improve the situational awareness of the county among participants.

Next, participants took part in an exercise we call the "Turbo-SWOT." SWOT is a standard "Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Threats" exercise, which is still a superior method for encouraging participants to think in terms of both needs (a deficit-focused approach) and opportunities (a solutions-oriented approach) with both an internal and external locus of control (i.e., strengths and weaknesses are controlled by the community, opportunities and threats are not). Both deficits and solutions, along with internal and external situational understanding are important in identifying future directions for action. The "Turbo" refers to the speed at which the exercise is conducted. In only about half an hour, participants are taken through the entire exercise, which forces participants to think viscerally about the greatest SWOT components, and to decide on the top two or three most important ideas in each SWOT category as a table (generally 4-8 people). This ensures that participants do not over-think the situations they face but respond with their most urgent and pressing answers instead of relying on slow thinking about past conversations or complicating factors. While both fast and slow thinking are important to crafting strategies, at this stage we are seeking the most viscerally important ideas about what matters most to participants. The Turbo-SWOT introduces important, realistic constraints and compression into the analysis about the real and perceived situations facing the community. Following the open-ended postcard exercise, this step ensures that the big-picture ideas explored earlier are appropriately feasible and viewed in the light of the real weaknesses and threats facing the community.

The results of the Turbo-SWOT (all identified SWOT components) are recorded table-by-table in real time and posted for all participants to see. Redundant answers are simplified by either identifying repeated answers publicly or by modifying existing answers to capture related ideas as well. Facilitators utilized a round-robin style report-out of SWOT components. Each table had one spokesperson who would report out one SWOT component, and this would continue around the room until no new SWOT components emerged (i.e., spokespeople would "pass" if they had nothing new to contribute from their table).

Finally, participants engage in a "dots exercise." Each participant is given three dot stickers. Participants are asked to walk up to the results of the Turbo-SWOT exercise and to place one dot on the three <u>most important</u> ideas anywhere on the SWOT. This helps to identify the relative importance of each idea on the SWOT to each individual person in the community — giving each participant an opportunity to break from the group and <u>prioritize</u> the issues and ideas they feel are most important and require the most immediate attention.

The process of idea generation through expansion, alignment, compression, and prioritization can be seen in the figure below:
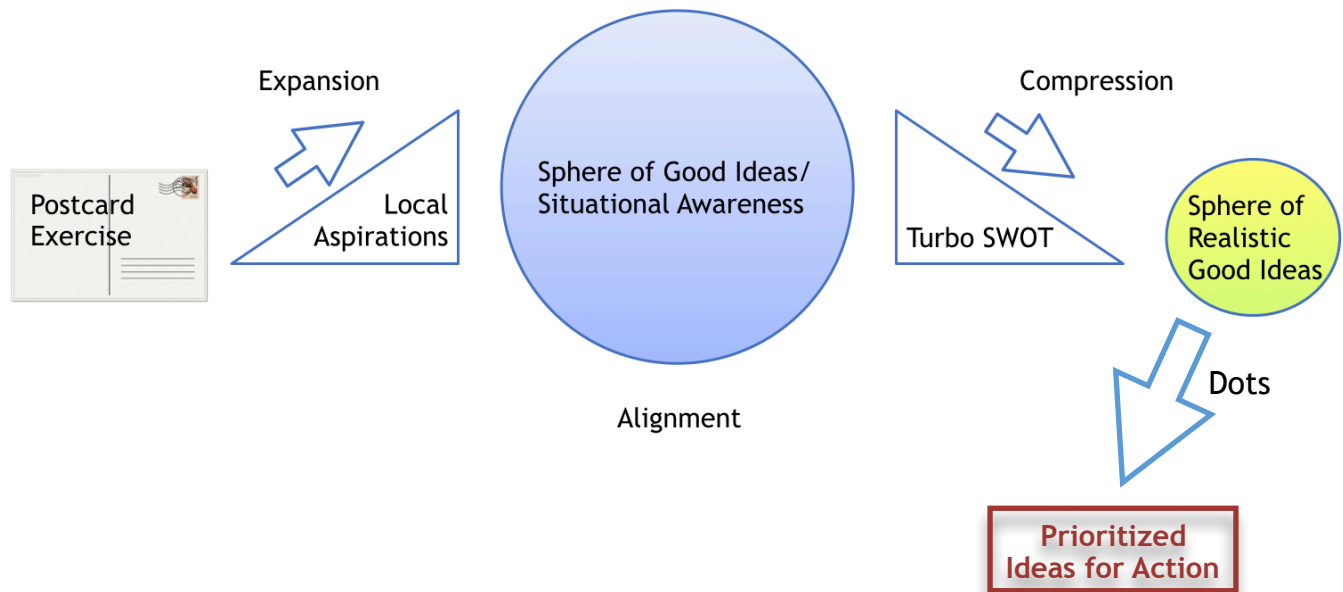
Data Analysis Methods

The community visioning sessions described in the previous section produced a large amount of data that must be simplified and streamlined, without omitting important and unique ideas that may belong to marginalized and oppositional voices. As we would do in a rigorous case study analysis, the facilitation team analyzed all data acquired from the strategic visioning sessions using thematic coding, case-based triangulation, and pattern matching techniques to identify key themes for the strategic vision, and prioritized the most important ideas for local action. Facilitators used as much data as is available to create a comprehensive picture of the goals identified by participants and to create a broad vision that captures as much public sentiment as possible. The facilitation team did not omit unique viewpoints that may differ from the mainstream for the sake of simplicity, and it is noted when there is county-wide disagreement on a particular topic.

Additionally, the facilitators identified patterns across all four sessions where there may be mutual interest in addressing certain goals. This can be the seedbed of future collaborations, especially during future action-based planning efforts.

The postcard exercise was analyzed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software to create word frequency tables, a word cloud visual representation of results, and to conduct a data reduction step by combining

synonyms for similar ideas. This exercise revealed the top key words, phrases, and ideas that should be used in any comprehensive vision statement, capturing the highest ideals expressed by the community for the future they would like to see in the county. These key words and ideas are also quantified and prioritized later in the report.

The Turbo-SWOT results were also compiled on a community-by-community basis. Ideas are ranked and prioritized based on feedback from the dots exercise. These ideas are then combined across communities to determine the most important ideas and issues facing the entire county. Presentation of both sets of data enables decision makers to isolate and address issues that are important to each community within DeKalb County, while also understanding their priority in the broader context of the needs and opportunities facing the county as a whole. This analysis is followed by key observations identifying integrated patterns that emerged from the data.

Member Check and Final Draft

This report is a draft of the final report that will be presented at two separate meetings: A meeting with the The Foundation on October 25, 2022 to refine final goals and recommendations, and one last, centrally-located meeting in DeKalb County on December 6, 2022 with former participants, local leaders, and members of the general public that will contain the refined goals, vision statement, and key recommendations. The facilitation team will present the analyzed data, draft strategic vision, and identified county-wide goals in person at a two-hour workshop. This will give participants the opportunity to ask questions about the results and to clarify any issues that may be unclear to the group or identify areas that the facilitators may have missed in the data analysis phase. This stage, known to researchers as "member checking," is critical for ensuring the validity of the data and that all data were captured accurately by the facilitation team doing the study. Facilitators will encourage "brutal feedback," as this is important to ensuring an honest and transparent interpretation of the data. It also provides an opportunity for participants to interact with the findings prior to the final release, which may generate new perspectives that are important in catalyzing action.

ICI and CICD will then incorporate this feedback into the final report. Facilitation will be used to resolve any discrepancies where possible. Where differences in opinion occur, these differences will be noted along with a management strategy for maximizing the benefit for all parties. CICD and Ball State ICI will remain available for feedback via e-mail, if further questions or concerns remain.

In this report, ICI and CICD will provide strategic recommendations on taking quick, collective action on the issues identified in the strategic visioning exercises. These recommendations can be used by local leaders and proactive citizens alike. Strategies that worked well in other communities facing similar issues may be presented if relevant, although these "best practices" are only suggestions for action, and will only be considered in the context of feedback received by the community as to their potential efficacy. The final plan will be delivered in both electronic (.pdf) and hard copy forms to The Foundation on or before the agreed upon end date.

The next section of the report presents key results, findings, and observations prior to the member check meeting and creation of the final draft.

Results: Postcards

The postcard exercise provided facilitators with a wealth of information about what is most important to DeKalb County residents, and which key themes they focused on when thinking about an ideal future. The following is a "word cloud," or a graphical depiction of the raw ideas that emerged in terms of their importance and relative frequency in the exercises. The closer words appear to the center of the cloud (with the most important words in red), the more common the theme was during the postcard exercise.

**Word Cloud of common themes
in the postcard exercise**

As seen above, the word cloud gives a helpful idea of relevance, but also contains a great deal of "noise," or common words that do not relate strongly to the vision of the community. To overcome this, a frequency analysis was conducted on the central, most relevant themes found in the postcard exercise. Common words like "DeKalb," "just," and "really" were dropped, and highly similar themes were combined. The results presented here include all ideas relevant to the community plan that were mentioned more than 30 times. The frequency analysis of top thematic words can be found in the chart on the following page:

Top words by Frequency from Postcards from the Future (excluding words like "dear," "DeKalb," "County," etc.)	
great/amazing/wonderful/better/love	126
community	94
businesses/shops	54
homes/housing/apartments	50
school/education	48
people	45
trails/walking/paths	44
families	41
roads/street/bike/connected	40
downtown/city	37
beautiful/looks/attractive	37
visit	36
parks/outdoor	36

The frequency analysis shows a high concentration of optimistic language, including "great," "amazing," "wonderful," "better," and "love." This is promising news from a development perspective, as a more rosy view of the future is not always guaranteed among postcard exercise participants. Social and humanistic elements (compared to physical amenities) were deemed to be very important to study participants, with "community" mentioned 94 times, "people" 45 times, and "families" 41 times. A cluster of amenities were also popular, with participants envisioning more and better businesses and shops 54 times, and adequate housing 50 times. Local schools were mentioned as an important asset 48 times. Elements related to connectivity were frequently mentioned: trails, walkable downtowns and connectors, and paths were mentioned 44 times, while roads, streets, and bike paths were mentioned 40 times. Related to this, parks and outdoor amenities (which may include trails) were mentioned 36 times. The exercise had somewhat of a town-based focus, with the downtown or city being mentioned 37 times, and aesthetics were important to participants, being mentioned 37 times. Finally, tourism may play a role in the county's future, as visitation was mentioned 36 times. Dozens of other ideas were mentioned, but were not nearly as common as those listed here and had less consensus across communities and individuals.

The following text represents a small sampling of postcard responses that are intended to demonstrate the diversity of visions and interests represented across the county. There are a few noteworthy findings across this sample: a) Participants focused on a wide range of issues and amenities that shape their view of the future, b) Responses represent a range of both optimistic (most common) and cautious/pessimistic (less common but instructive) views of the future, and c) While response diversity was high, certain common themes had higher recurring frequency, as demonstrated in the table above. The sample below is not exhaustive, but provides a good idea of response diversity.

Jul 2032, Dear Friend, I just spent an awesome week-end in Auburn. It was lovely to see all the land marks form my youth still standing and thriving. The downtown was full of people, food and activity. I did notice that we now have less cars on the road and more bikes and pedestrians. The streets they closed to cars have really opened up the street life. The green spaces and community gardens have really brought needed healthy foods to people. We've managed to honor our history and continue to innovate.

Hello from Auburn and DeKalb County! The schools here are absolutely amazing. So many opportunities and the trailways system has become the best in the state. All the communities connected and thriving with an economic prosperity never seen before. The people are so kind. Everyone looks out for each other and genuinely cares for the well-being of the entire community. Did I mention the schools? Just incredible. Anyway, see you soon and take care!

What I thought was my small town of Garrett, when I left, wasn't so small once I returned. There's no space between Auburn and Fort Wayne now. Once a small town, no we're a suburb of Fort Wayne and it's all meshed together.

Hello, Life in Garrett (DeKalb County) is fantastic! We are growing so fast. New cultural/arts/quality of place features are popping up every day. Trails are being built, museums, and boutiques and theaters are now in every town and city. Many needs are now also being met, particularly in the area of mental health. People from all walks of life are now getting the help they need. Our population, particularly our younger generation, find DeKalb County is a great place to raise a family. Please come visit us soon, you won't believe how many fantastic changes are happening!

Hello from Garrett and DeKalb County. Things are going well here. There have been many changes over the years. While a small town area, there's been a lot of growth. New homes, new businesses, and opportunities to stretch one's horizons. It's a place where a person can pitch in to be part of the community. There's acceptance for people who consider themselves to be doers. It's easy to make friends, be a friend, and contribute to the community's welfare.

Hey! Sadly, I am writing to let you know more amazing families have left the Eastern side of DeKalb County. They hated being surrounded by solar panels. The roads are so rough they are impossible and because the bridges were never replaced you can't ever get around a train track. It is so sad because in 2022 we had great schools, nice greenways and amazing people who had hoped to see their kids raised here. Take care & I hope you enjoy your memories of a rural community.

Greetings, I am writing from the best kept secret in DeKalb County, Spencerville. This little hamlet is the most vibrant, community-oriented village you will find. Their passion for their historic Covered Bridge spilled over to the Highway 1 Commerce Corridor with complimentary shops and nice little cafes. It is a great place to spend the day when you want to get away from the busy, larger cities around.

Dear, I know you want to come back to this area. Now here's your excuse. The area around the covered bridge has developed into a nature preserve with bald eagles nesting near-by and coin-operated binoculars to see them. The county established a permanent fund for future bridge maintenance and is dedicated to keeping it for future generations. We have all sorts of new housing developments throughout the county, but especially Butler, St. Joe and Spencerville, to the point each town now has at least one traffic light if not more.

Dear Friend – I am so excited about the restoration efforts happening with all of the downtowns throughout DeKalb County. The building show the history of our great communities but also create a feeling of pride and safety. The public transportation system has really improved community members ability to get to where people need to go (work, doctor, counseling, grocery). The community has a social work response team that works with law enforcement to deal with mental health and addiction issues. Northeastern Center has really been a big part of the solution! They have wanted to help for a long time. DeKalb has become a trauma responsive community is a model for communities across the country. The other really cool thing is that community partners are working really well together. No one is shutting out or blaming others but a much more collaborative approach to impact real change. Everyone is at the table!

The key themes in the above postcards begin to paint a picture of the elements that should be included in an actionable vision statement, along with key objectives. In crafting this strategic vision for the county, we recommend that the vision and objectives must include/address the following:

- A strong focus on building community and a family-friendly environment
- Supporting business development and diversification, especially shopping in downtown areas
- Greater housing availability and affordability
- A focus on schools and education as a critical asset and opportunity for continuous improvement
- County-wide connectivity and accessibility by car, biking, and hiking
- Walkable and aesthetically-pleasing cities and towns
- Opportunities for tourism and outdoor recreation development

Results: Turbo-SWOT

In any SWOT analysis, ideas in any category can be a major priority. What differs from category to category is how communities deal with the identified issues.

- Strengths: Communities should maximize and focus on leveraging these important local assets, especially when they are unique to the community.
- Weaknesses: Communities should either improve upon these, or recognize that they are not core competencies, focusing instead on their unique strengths.
- Opportunities: These should become action items as quickly as possible.
- Threats: Efforts should be taken to minimize exposure to these instead of attempting to change them.

Top Overall Turbo SWOT Responses	Votes	Type
Affordable housing/housing diversity (price/type)	47	Weakness/Opportunity
Lack of child care/single parent support	40	Weakness/Opportunity
Lack of broadband (high speed)	33	Weakness/Opportunity
Schools and libraries	33	Strength
Mental health/addiction recovery services/professionals	28	Weakness/Opportunity
Trails development/expansion	18	Opportunity
Proximity to Fort Wayne and other communities/ marketing and promoting proximity	16	Opportunity
Job-oriented and trade instruction (certification/GED)	15	Opportunity
Politics — federal, state, local	14	Weakness/Threat
Lack of vision (status quo mindset)	14	Weakness
Other areas organizing and surpassing DeKalb County (failing to unify for success)/brain drain	13	Opportunity/Threat
Lack of diversity (people/thought)	13	Weakness
Lack of police presence/security/EMS	12	Weakness/Opportunity

Turbo-SWOT

Fast = Gut Reaction = Most Important

Maximize Exposure

Minimize Exposure

Internal: We Control These

External: We Do Not Control These

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

DeKalb County's overall strategy for future growth and development can be guided by applying these approaches to each category of the SWOT, beginning with the most important ideas in each category. Using the dots exercise, participants were given the opportunity to collectively "vote" for the issues that they felt were most important in the county. This enabled facilitators to prioritize these issues based on participant feedback by counting the number of dots next to each identified issue and then combining these tallies across each of the four sessions. The following table illustrates the top idea or issue in each of the SWOT categories by community, based on the number of dots.

COMMUNITY	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
ASHLEY	Good schools, safety, accessible highways	Broadband access	Affordable housing, job training	Day-to-day politics
BUTLER	Strong library	Lack of child care	Trail development	Trains as a public safety issue
SPENCERVILLE	4-star school	Broadband access	Trail development	Demographic impact on land use/taxation
GARRETT	Schools and library	Lack of child care	Mental health/ addiction recovery services	Failing to unify for our success
AUBURN	School System	Lack of child care	Mental health/ addiction recovery services	Federal, state, and local politics

In diverse counties, it is typically expected that different communities will have different priorities, and that is the case to an extent here. However, several common themes emerged across the five participant communities. On a very positive note, schools and libraries across the county are viewed consistently as the most important strength, providing a good base to build on for education and well-being in the county. Two common weaknesses emerged, with a lack of broadband access affecting primarily Ashley and Spencerville (and surrounding communities), both in more rural parts of the county — and a lack of child care in the larger communities of Butler, Garrett, and Auburn. Such weaknesses may also be reframed as opportunities for future development. When asked directly about opportunity, both Butler and Spencerville (both East of the county median) mentioned trail development and connectivity as the most important opportunity, while Garrett and Auburn (larger communities central in the county) listed the creation of mental health and addiction recovery services as clear and important opportunities. Ashley stood alone in mentioning affordable housing development and job training as core opportunities.

In terms of threats, there was less consensus across communities. Both Ashley and Auburn viewed politics — particularly conflict around local politics and day-to-day decision making — as critical issues to guard against. Butler mentioned challenges around trains most often, given the high concentration of rail lines in that community. Participants in Spencerville and surrounding communities were concerned about how changing demographics (i.e., aging out of the community, in- and out-migration into these smaller communities for work) could potentially affect land use (especially if population change is positive) and local revenues derived from taxation (especially if population change is negative). Garrett took the most meta-level perspective, with the most common threat being a failure to unify as a county and organize to achieve development, the consequence being that surrounding counties could prosper disproportionately while DeKalb County fails to take advantage of opportunities for its own growth and development.

The analysis above shows the diversity of responses across communities, but does not give us a sense of the overall importance of issues. Dots were thus combined across communities to examine the highest overall priorities in the county, whether they be strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats. Highly

similar terms across communities were combined. These combined totals can be found in the table below, focusing on those issues that received 10 or more dots across all five sites.

Through this lens, we can see that housing and a lack of housing diversity was the top issue raised across the entire county, and was commonly raised as both a weakness and an opportunity for future development. Housing diversity (in terms of housing type and price point) was more commonly raised than availability, but these two elements are related. Second was a lack of child care and support for single parents, followed by a lack of high-speed broadband access. Similarly, both are framed by participants as weaknesses and opportunities for future development in the county. Schools and libraries were a consistent strength, and an excellent asset for the future development of the community. Finally, a lack of mental health services and addiction recovery services, including the attraction of professionals to the county who work in that field, was considered a "top 5" priority issue with 28 votes.

Further down the list but still consistently important are issues relating primarily to economic strategy, politics, and diversity. A popular suggestion was improving destination marketing for DeKalb County, not only for tourism but also because the county (paired with its excellent schools and libraries) is a livable alternative to Fort Wayne that is still an easy commute away. Similarly, plentiful opportunities for job training, learning a specialized craft, and completing a high-school level education will not only improve education levels locally, but also grow a workforce who may stay locally, or live in DeKalb County while working in Allen County. The idea of crossing institutional and governmental boundaries for the purpose of keeping DeKalb County competitive arose profoundly in Garrett, but was echoed by similar ideas of moving beyond insulated and isolated governments and nonprofits by deliberately working toward common goals. This is one of the end goals of this strategic visioning plan — to create a platform and strategy for precisely that sort of interaction.

Politics is a more complex issue. Seen as both a weakness and an opportunity — and potentially a threat when changes arise from outside the area — DeKalb County residents are concerned about local government squabbling, resistance to embracing change, and making decisions peaceably. Furthermore, state and federal politics may create divisions at the local level that are difficult to overcome. A "status quo" mindset may create an environment where new ideas get "stuck" in favor of preserving the current state of the community, when active involvement by government and nonprofits could be a major boost for ideas that can benefit the community. A lack of diversity, both in terms of public participation across race and gender groups and more basically in terms of ideas and backgrounds, may contribute to this stagnation. Better and more inclusive participation that is representative of many groups from across the community can help to stimulate a more open environment for change and the empowerment of a plurality of groups. Finally, insufficient funding of police and EMS are likely due to constrained budgets that can only be expanded if the community begins to act strategically, finding efficiencies, sharing services, and expanding tax revenues.

There is one remaining issue with this analysis — it only examines individual line-item issues that were raised by participants, but ignores broader themes of issues and their relative importance. While the analysis above is excellent for identifying specific projects and development goals, a thematic analysis provides an idea of clusters of issues that hang together and their relative importance. This is an important consideration when launching programs or initiatives that go beyond one specific issue. For example, "affordable housing" received 47 votes across the entire community, making it one of the most

important single issues in our dataset. However, when combined into a common theme, all housing issues only received a total of 50 votes. No one issue within a theme we call the "community culture of angst" received more than 14 votes, but taken together, the theme received 75 total votes, demonstrating that cultural and political issues may be weighing more heavily on the minds of local residents in their day to day lives than housing. Both, of course, warrant close attention.

The facilitators have combined together all responses from all five sites into thematic categories, that are listed here by importance. A full list of the components of each category (i.e., the specific issues raised by participants that make up the category) can be found in Appendix B. These categories and their implications are discussed following the next figure.

In terms of overall category strength, mental, social, and physical health issues combined were the most common feature of the Turbo SWOT analysis. This demonstrates a high priority for addressing issues of human well-being above all others, and often times leveraging existing assets or easily-accessible opportunities to do so. Several opportunities within this category may be classified as "low hanging fruit" for making large improvements in local quality of life using relatively small amounts of effort. Second to health, the community needs to address a term we have called the "community culture of angst." Responses in this category relate to a collection of related ideas pertaining to the community's future specifically: concerns about disagreements within local politics, challenges with overcoming the status quo and outmoded ways of thinking, missing key opportunities due to a lack of organization and communication across local entities, and concerns that other communities will "pass by" DeKalb County if action is not taken. This angst represents a warning sign that DeKalb County could remain "stuck" if it is unable to move beyond ways of interacting that no longer serve the county's highest and best ideals.

Third, a focus on infrastructure is unsurprising in most American communities, as much of the infrastructure, particularly in smaller counties, is aging. However, infrastructure issues also include a focus on future-oriented opportunities to build the necessary infrastructure for a changing, virtual business environment, including reliable county-wide broadband access and better connectivity within and between towns via bicycle and pedestrian access. Immediately behind infrastructure is local economic development, which includes a broad array of small business development, targeted industrial recruitment, and investing in more tourism-based activities. Housing is seen as the fifth-strongest category, including an increase in both housing diversity (i.e., types of homes available, including both rentals and properties for purchase) and in price points, addressing local income diversity. Somewhat related to infrastructure are issues of quality of life, recreation, and amenities, which includes a focus on parks but also a strong focus on county-wide connectivity via trails for practical transportation, outdoor recreation, as a tourism draw, and a means to improved public health — connecting this category firmly to priorities in the Mental, Social, and Physical Health category as well.

Finally, while somewhat "lesser" goals, there was still a substantive amount of emphasis placed on investing in the county's "sense of community," which broadly includes local pride, heritage, community engagement, historic preservation, and community events and gatherings. Immediately behind this is public safety, which is largely seen as a local asset (i.e., having safe communities already), although there is an opportunity to invest in enhanced EMS and public services with more uniform reach across the county.

Turbo SWOT Thematic Categories by Number of Votes	
Mental/Social/Physical Health	100
Community Culture of Angst	75
Infrastructure (Roads, Broadband, Water/Sewer)	64
Local Economic Development (Including Tourism)	62
Housing	51
Education/Training Issues	50
Quality of Life/Recreation/Amenities	40
Sense of Community — Pride/Heritage/Engagement	27
Public Safety	20

These broader categories are intended to show more general areas of concern and interest across DeKalb County, and can be used to guide the overall vision of the county. The county's vision is intended to serve as a guidepost for future investment and action in the broadest sense. Taken together, strategic and allied investments in building a healthier DeKalb County are seen as the highest priority for action. Since mental, physical, and social health are closely related, strategic action components should focus on potential alliances across different service providers and interested citizens and groups to address these issues as holistically as possible, paving the way for shared services, shared information, and structural efficiencies. We often refer to this idea as "spilling silos" between disconnected groups that could be working together more efficiently and effectively to solve a complex problem, beginning with unrealized efficiencies that may make important contributions to the current state of health in the county. Simple actions such as improved inter-agency communication, reducing duplicated efforts, and finding simple collaborations that avoid (when possible) the involvement of state- and federal-level agencies, or that avoid costly new initiatives and infrastructure that are duplicative in nature, can lead to major steps forward on this action area while minimizing costs and effort. Such collaborations begin by building a vision that is specific to this area in which regional service providers can agree on a set of goals and priorities that are inclusive across the domains of mental, physical, and social well-being.

Changing any culture is challenging and, if attempted in an ad hoc fashion, can be deeply offensive and insensitive to the people living and working in a community. For this reason, when attempting to address the community's "culture of angst," the first step is typically an open conversation about how to best address issues of opportunity, risk, and uncertainty into the future. It is important to recognize that continuing to do business as usual is, in fact, a strategic decision with consequences — and is just as risky as charting new pathways forward, because the environment surrounding the community is constantly changing beyond the community's direct control. Highly inclusive conversations can be very helpful here, as new ways of doing business feel far less risky when a broad base of citizens, organizations, and governments are sharing the risk together. Strategic networking events, shared learning experiences, and conversations about the future of the community can be very helpful in building the critical networks necessary for information sharing in such an environment. As such networks are built, information is shared more readily, and the entire community gains the necessary awareness to evaluate and identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats on an ongoing basis. When action is distributed across multiple groups and not the sole responsibility of one or two agencies, a far

greater array of potential solutions is permitted to rise to the surface, creating opportunities for broad-based participation and buy-in on taking new actions collectively and with greater awareness and adaptability to changing circumstances. The conversation begins with the broad understanding that the community appreciates and respects its current leadership for their efforts, but also wants to see leaders move beyond issues framed as "pro/con" or "either/or," instead opening the doors to a multitude of solutions that are not currently on the table.

If governments and organizations across DeKalb County are successful at transitioning conversations from a focus on problems and issues toward a focus on solutions and collaborations, the following five areas of action (infrastructure, economic development, housing, education, and recreation) may proceed far more smoothly. These areas of action are focused on the creation of "new things," whether it be greater connectivity, a more solid and diversified local economic base, an expanded and diversified housing market, or more opportunities for enhancing quality of life. Solutions to these issues are unlikely to come from one particular group, but rather can be thought of as "opportunity sets" for distributed (but coordinated) action across many groups. Housing developers, trail proponents, small businesses, parent-teacher groups, local governments, libraries, outdoor buffs, entrepreneurs, and local companies — along with many others — may find ways of building teams that address local issues in a variety of ways that include everything from traditional government and foundation investment to new businesses, pop-up and citizen-driven initiatives, and informal interest groups. Many of these natural partnerships can flow quite easily from strategic conversations held to address the first two action areas, and project funding may be as diversified as the teams comprising each initiative.

Action in the last two areas may look somewhat different from the rest but are no less important. For community pride and engagement, much progress can be made on these fronts by simply taking action collectively on other action areas, and by being as inclusive as possible to ensure maximum local buy-in and that diverse voices are taken seriously in crafting new strategies. When people feel that their voices have been included, they tend to support initiatives much more strongly, which leads to greater public participation and a reduced probability of local conflict erupting around particular issues. Actors across DeKalb County should take great care to broadly publicize community victories and to continue to invite more people and different solutions to the table on an ongoing basis. Also, it is important to take time to celebrate major milestones as a community, as this gets people involved and excited about positive changes in their county. It also builds relationships that encourage more people to get involved in the future. When it comes to public safety, improvements are likely to follow the more traditional path of government investment, but highly engaged citizens can be an important resource for identifying the areas of greatest need and impact. Already viewed as a local strength, the prioritization of public safety issues and access can be addressed piece-by-piece beginning with services and areas most likely to make the greatest impact from the perspective of local citizens and businesses.

Draft Proposed Vision Statement

The vision statement is intended as a general set of goals and guiding principles, broadly agreed upon by the community, to help guide action in the future. It is a "litmus test" for future decision making, as all major county decisions should contribute in some way to furthering local progress according to the vision statement. It also represents those categories of things that are the highest priorities for local citizens. Because it is derived from citizen data, it also broadly represents the views of where the community

would like to see the county headed in the coming years. The vision statement is intended to represent the current views of DeKalb County residents at this moment across the entire county and to be flexible and adaptable over time.

Flowing from the postcard exercise, facilitators compiled key words and ideas thematically in order to determine the major themes that mattered most to participants. This draft vision statement will be presented to the DeKalb County Foundation and to the general public for feedback. This feedback will be incorporated to improve the quality and relevance of the statement.

DeKalb County's vision statement for 2022 and beyond is:

DeKalb County is a community-engaged county that focuses foremost on the well-being of its families, citizens, and workers — mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. We seek to create progressive and welcoming hometowns and communities of excellence that set the standard for a high quality of life, work, and local society.

Key Goals and Recommendations

Key goals and recommendations are a specific set of ideas that flow logically from the vision statement, and provide some more specific guidance on meaningful steps that DeKalb County can take to put the vision into action. These ideas are derived from the Turbo-SWOT analysis and will be presented to both the DeKalb County Community Foundation and the general public for feedback. This feedback will be used to improve the quality and relevance of the goals and recommendations. Like the vision statement, goals are broad and flexible and may change over time, especially as goals reach completion and local priorities move on to a new set of ideas. However, they are specific and concrete enough to guide action in the coming years.

o **Objective #1: Collaborate to build a robust regional mental health delivery system that promotes understanding and acceptance; will be readily accessible; and will support both immediate needs and systemic healing.**

Mental health and substance addiction are major problems facing a wide range of communities across the United States, both rural and urban. In challenging times, many of these issues rise to the surface, and can be especially evident in smaller counties like DeKalb where population centers are smaller and treatment options are less concentrated. Participants in the visioning process have emphasized the need for treatment options that are compassionate, humanistic, and holistic in nature. This involves seeing the links between good mental health and other aspects of local life that impact human health and well-being, including a

positive and uplifting local environment where genuine healing is possible. Local leadership can go several different directions, several of which are expressed in the following recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Connect mental health and addiction services to other organizations that impact mental health, including physical and social health.
- Recommendation 2: Find new partnerships across existing organizations that can fill gaps and solve problems without duplicating efforts (i.e., "low hanging fruit"), utilizing existing personnel and capabilities jointly.
- Recommendation 3: Formally identify areas of need and opportunity through a gap/opportunity analysis, and map the regional ecosystem of mental health, addiction services, and other groups that enhance local social and community well-being.
- Recommendation 4: Develop an engagement strategy for outreach to people in need and the general public more broadly.
- Recommendation 5: Identify county-wide gaps in broadband service and contact local providers with RFP's for service expansion.

o **Objective #2: Build a county-wide community where cities and towns, community leaders, organizations, and residents have developed a culture of collaboration and trust.**

Participants in the visioning process expressed some concern that local politics can too easily get bogged down in "status quo" thinking and a failure to embrace risk. Decision making may at times feel disconnected from citizens, and too narrow a focus on local issues may prevent broader, beneficial coalitions and collaborations from being formed across government and organizational entities in the region. Building a culture of trust and collaboration is important in any community and region, and it is an ongoing process that takes time and patience beyond political and leadership cycles. But such efforts must begin somewhere, and there are clear priorities that can be set across the counties to begin the process:

- Recommendation 6: Collaboration and connection across local and county organizations should be prioritized whenever possible — especially when seeking funding for new initiatives — as this can raise the probability of success and mutual benefit for the county.
- Recommendation 7: Create an engagement strategy around local political issues that includes listening sessions on important topics and joint public meetings to share information around local issues — all with a focus on citizen feedback, ideas, and regionally-sourced solutions.
- Recommendation 8: Host inclusive co-learning events by inviting experts with different perspectives to share potential solutions to — and best practices for addressing — local problems, and utilize such events as an opportunity for networking, social interaction, and trust-building.
- Recommendation 9: Commit to pulling talent, resources, and solutions to local issues from every community in the county.

- <u>Recommendation 10:</u> Develop clear evaluation plans, best practices, and goal assessments for each local issue, especially when such evaluation metrics are co-designed by local citizens and organizations.

o **Objective #3: Invest in amenity-driven infrastructure improvements (including broadband and trails) that promote connectivity, well-being, economic development, recreation and human interaction.**

The topic of "connectivity" was a popular theme in the visioning process. Viewed broadly, connectivity not only refers to the physical connection across communities, but also connectivity to the digital world. Such connections can take the form of pragmatic infrastructure improvements, like roads and fiber. But they can also be hybrid initiatives with placemaking, public health, and community well-being initiatives such as recreational trails and walkable downtowns. A holistic approach to connectivity not only holds the promise of enabling free-flowing travel across the county, but also improving public health, mental wellness, enhanced business opportunities, and increased tourism and recreation. Many of these holistic initiatives can be energized through new and existing partnerships across county governments and organizations.

- <u>Recommendation 11:</u> Utilize partnerships from Objective 2 to create cross-institutional action teams and joint applicants for funds.
- <u>Recommendation 12:</u> Create multi-lateral champion teams representing multiple local governments, organizations, and citizens for spearheading new initiatives that are regional in scope and address multiple local issues at once (i.e., connectivity, recreation, and health).
- <u>Recommendation 13:</u> Identify and catalogue every possible funding source that could contribute to connectivity (i.e., for infrastructure, health, broadband, recreation, tourism, business, etc.) and prioritize by project fit and by likelihood of success.
- <u>Recommendation 14:</u> Sponsor feasibility studies for new infrastructure to maximize the value of consultant and contractor services.
- <u>Recommendation 15:</u> Develop a consistent county-wide RFP process, and encourage innovative ideas by prioritizing creativity, addressing multiple county-wide objectives at once, and value-addition as criteria for selection.

o **Objective #4: Promote the creation and rejuvenation of an abundance of housing options that are diverse in both form and price points, and meet the unique needs of each community.**

Visioning process participants recognized the need for more housing in DeKalb County, which is a common issue in many American communities with growth potential. Common among participants was the view

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that a diverse housing supply is necessary to address workers and families in different stages of their lives, and at different income levels, resulting in a desired housing portfolio that is diverse in terms of housing price and type.

- Recommendation 16: Hire experts and/or consulting firms specializing in housing mix and diversity that can provide insights into the ideal housing mix for DeKalb County and its communities.
- Recommendation 17: Conduct a market study that analyzes the current housing mix on a county-by-county basis and compare that to the ideal mix provided in Recommendation 15.
- Recommendation 18: Develop a multi-organizational public/private initiative around housing including diverse local organizations, developers, and other real estate interests to provide incentives for and remove barriers to housing creation.

o **Objective #5: Commit to the prioritization of child care as a key to healthy kids and a productive, enabled workforce.**

Child care was viewed as a major need in DeKalb County by participants in the visioning process. Child care is not only important for the well-being of children, but also empowers and enables the local workforce by ensuring that two parents and single parents can pursue employment opportunities. Child care at public meetings and community events can also encourage greater participation in civic life by providing an outlet for children while their parents are engaged in community affairs. Effective child care can take the form of traditional day care and babysitting services, but can also take the form of kid-friendly public, meeting, and play spaces with adequate supervision. Many of these services may already exist and can be expanded without duplication of efforts.

- Recommendation 19: Commit to the fair payment of child care workers to attract and retain these essential services.
- Recommendation 20: Hold a community-wide discussion on the value of childcare, including learning events with the latest rural strategies.
- Recommendation 21: Coordinate with pre-K and elementary education providers and existing nonprofits to expand rather than recreate services.
- Recommendation 22: Conduct asset mapping and gap analysis of child care services that already exist in the county, with an eye to expansion of existing services and opportunities to create public kid-friendly spaces close to where services are needed most.

Source: Auburn Main Street

Objective #6: Reimagine and create our downtowns to be inviting, diverse and vibrant, attracting residents and visitors alike.

Downtowns are a focal point of any community, and DeKalb County has several small communities with functioning downtowns where local commerce is either thriving or has the opportunity to thrive. DeKalb County's downtowns are in a range of conditions, from polished avenues to blocks with good bones requiring investment and rejuvenation. Some communities are a mix, with pocketed areas of investment and room to grow. Addressing the redevelopment of downtowns can provide opportunities for new housing, new businesses, walkability, and a range of new amenities for the county.

- Recommendation 23: Explore best practices on community reinvestment in buildings as a community co-learning opportunity.
- Recommendation 24: Strengthen partnerships, lending, and grant programs alongside organizations like Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Small Business Administration (SBA), Federal Home Lending Board (FHLB), local colleges and universities, and other organizations — to provide technical assistance and capital for downtown redevelopment.
- Recommendation 25: Expand and optimize the Main Street program beyond Auburn to other communities in the county.
- Recommendation 26: Incorporate 2nd-story housing in downtown planning and zoning efforts.
- Recommendation 27: Adopt a mixed-use redevelopment ethic tailored to local market needs and walkable communities to ensure the internal diversification of land uses.
- Recommendation 28: Identify in-town infill opportunities (i.e., vacant lots and building stock) and available properties for development into a centralized county database as a strategy to promote infill development and prevent suburban sprawl.

o **Other Important Recommendations**

Three other important ideas were raised during the course of the visioning process. The strength of local schools and libraries was repeatedly cited as a local strength. These organizations can provide leadership and mentorship within each objective, and can be viewed as valuable collaborators and a pool of talent — even service providers within each initiative. The goal of any good planning effort is to leverage existing strengths when possible. Local pride and heritage were deemed to be important, so promoting the successes that result from the visioning process is an excellent way to generate increased enthusiasm for local collaborations. It is expected that ongoing engagement efforts, paired with good publicity, will help to foster a sense that people are proud to live in DeKalb County. Finally, public safety is both a strength and an area for ongoing investment. While DeKalb County is a safe place to live and work, ongoing investment should be made to ensure that public services are equally distributed across the county, especially police, fire, and EMS.

- <u>Recommendation 29:</u> Reach out to local schools and libraries as key participants in achieving the objectives set forth in this vision plan whenever possible, and promote the involvement and accomplishments of area schools and libraries.
- <u>Recommendation 30:</u> Create a relationship with local, state, and national media outlets to promote the success of the county as a way to bolster local pride and attract others to the county.
- <u>Recommendation 31:</u> Develop an interactive social marketing strategy around local pride, positivity, and the accomplishments of stakeholder groups engaged in the objectives outlined in this plan.
- <u>Recommendation 32:</u> Be sure that the community is holding regular, engaged, inclusive events aimed at building relationships across the county — especially across diverse citizen groups.
- <u>Recommendation 33:</u> Ensure that public safety funding is held consistent or increased, with special attention aimed at filling public service gaps in the county.
- <u>Recommendation 34:</u> Conduct a gap analysis to identify public safety service gaps across the county.

o **Evaluation Efforts**

A key point raised in the member check meeting was the need for effective evaluation of the above goals. Since each objective will require substantial input from key stakeholders related to such area, the same key stakeholders should be engaged to determine what "success" looks like for each objective. Good evaluation metrics should adhere to the following guidelines:

a) Good evaluation benchmarks and key performance indicators (KPI's) should be based on where the community wants to be in five to ten years — not based on the performance of other communities. Other communities often have specific situations and conditions that cannot be replicated locally, and mimicking other counties can lead to the dilution of what makes DeKalb County unique. Much like a personal trainer who asks, "what personal fitness goals will make you feel better?" DeKalb County should focus on what will make citizens, businesses, organizations, leaders, and employees happiest.
b) The suggestion in a) can only be achieved through effective community engagement, so an engagement strategy for each objective is critical.
c) Evaluation <u>must</u> be on the agenda of any planning meetings focused on local action.
d) Evaluate each goal to ensure that it is a "SMART" goal: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound. Often, it is the "Time-Bound" component that drives action.
e) Evaluation metrics should be quantitative <u>and</u> qualitative to get a full picture of local performance. Quantitative metrics are excellent tools for setting specific goals (i.e., catalyzing the redevelopment of 20 downtown properties within two years), or they can take the form of a binary (i.e., the goal is met when a new mental health initiative is launched). But qualitative metrics can provide feedback on how local people feel about the projects in words (i.e., positive testimonials can validate local efforts and promote the initiatives, while negative feedback can provide insights into how to improve local efforts). Both kinds of evaluation data are extremely important.
f) KPI's should be revisited at least once a year, if not twice. Champions and leaders within each initiative should feel comfortable revising KPI's up and down once a more realistic idea of goal attainment is achieved.
g) KPI's should be as specific as possible, and should include a time frame for success.

h) New KPI's and benchmarks should be set once the first KPI's are achieved, unless it is determined that there is no need for further development.

Moving Forward

This strategic visioning plan is intended to serve as a guide for decision making and taking action around the issues that DeKalb County residents care about most. Overall, county entities including the county government, the DeKalb County Community Foundation, and local governments and organizations should refer to this guide to create dialogues with citizens, businesses, and other organizations about taking meaningful steps toward making DeKalb County even better. Keeping this plan in plain view, regularly checking in on goals and strategic recommendations, and creating metrics and key performance indicators around each goal will ensure that progress is routinely made on each identified goal. And of course, as community developers, our highest recommendation is to keep dialogue and community interaction alive — both through in-person meetings and online — to continue to guide and refine progress along the way. Community members are your most valuable source of feedback and the greatest barometer of this plan's success. As the county succeeds at implementing this plan, we hope it will not only inspire the community to celebrate accomplishments but to continue to attract new energy to the process, touching off a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement and community spirit.

Respectfully submitted:

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BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY

CREATIVE INSIGHT 25
community development

Appendix A — Turbo-SWOT Results for Each Community, Ranked by Number of Participant Dots[1]

Ashley, June 16

Strengths		Weaknesses	
1	Good schools	11	Broadband
1	Safety (public)	7	Sidewalks/curb appeal
1	Accessibility to highways (I-69)	5	Access to healthy foods
0	Employment	3	Lack of childcare
0	Railroads	2	Housing diversity availability vs. Need
0	Manufacturing	2	NIMBY related housing developments
0	Cost of living (low)	1	Infrastructure (sewer and water)
0	Midwest values – giving community	0	Life skills/poverty
0	Museums and Tourism		
0	Philanthropy		

Opportunities		Threats	
8	Affordable housing	3	Little 'p' politics
8	More Impact instruction (trade certification/GED)	2	Lack of housing price diversity
1	Mass transportation – DART, etc.	1	Drugs
0	More trade opportunities	0	Lack of diversity across the board
0	Proximity to Allen County	0	Conflict over alternative energy development
0	Post High School opportunity (Freedom Academy)	0	Lack of community pride
0	Free health clinic	0	Big "P" politics
0	Develop more housing	0	Lack of employment diversity
0	Diversity and inclusion		

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[1] Ideas that were raised in the listening sessions, but that later received no dots, are given a score of 0.

Strengths		Weaknesses	
4	Strong library	9	Lack of childcare
3	Faith-based community	6	Broadband
2	Community events	5	Housing diversity options
1	Non-profit resources	4	Thought diversity
1	Partnerships between organizations	3	Lack of public transportation
1	family values	3	Housing (not enough, also aesthetics)
1	Community collaboration	2	Roads need improvements (Railroad crossing, county roads)
0	Volunteerism		
0	Engaged leadership	2	Downtown shopping options
0	Philanthropy	2	Available mental health facilities inadequate
0	Location – proximity to roads/highways		
0	Jobs – good paying	2	Willingness to work/pandemic recovery
0	Proximity to Ohio	2	High drop-out rate – students unprepared for higher education
0	Culture – commitment to community		
0	Schools (fits students' needs)	1	Need more young people interaction
0	Expansion of greenspace	1	Brain Drain
0	Strong towns	1	Wages inequity
0	Opportunity for youth leadership	1	Lack of diversity
		0	Access to medical care
		0	Drainage/erosion

Opportunities		Threats	
7	Trail Expansion	7	Trains are a public safety issue
5	Housing	4	Convincing people to seek change
3	Entrepreneurship development	3	Regional shortage of mental health professionals
2	Parks		
2	Health opportunities	3	People/youth moving away to work in healthier communities
2	Infrastructure development		
2	Focus on 24-45 age group	3	Potential economic downturn
1	Assisted living	3	Climate change
1	Connectivity across the county	3	Illegal drug availability
1	Connect to local colleges	1	Transient community
1	2nd Story Living	1	Declining mental health
1	Tax Abatement/TIF	1	Current job market
1	Grants for restoration	1	Outdated policies/philosophies
1	Foster community collaboration (momentum)	1	Low public (citizen) participation
		1	Politics at the federal/state levels
1	Market DeKalb County as a destination	0	Lack of transportation for elderly causes higher mortality
0	Business Recruitment		
0	Centralizing utilities	0	Cultural differences over land uses
0	Job fairs	0	Construction costs/land costs
0	More funding sources for downtown vacancy	0	Decaying infrastructure
		0	Large employers may leave – too focused on one company
0	Support and encourage low income residents/homeless		
		0	Declining public health
		0	Inflation

Spencerville, June 23

Strengths		Weaknesses	
6	4-Star School	12	Lack of Broadband (high speed)
4	Emergency personnel support	11	Lack of police presence/security/EMS
2	Potential in young leaders	4	Lack of childcare
1	Covered Bridge	4	County road conditions
1	Rural environment	4	Lack of single family housing
1	Quality of investors/Philanthropy	3	Loss of farmland for solar development
1	Tightness of the community	1	Shortage of leadership education & opportunities
0	Have jobs	1	No options for public transportation
0	Strong work ethic	0	Need Farmers' Markets/Grocery stores
0	Strong Civic Groups	0	No way around Railroad tracks
0	Community events	0	Few eating establishments & short hours of operation
0	Access to State Road 1	0	Need banks/ATMs

Opportunities		Threats	
9	Trails/Greenway development (Blueways?)	7	Demographic impacts on land-use and taxation
6	Proximity to Fort Wayne and other communities – market this	2	Aging infrastructure
6	Capturing the growth from Allen Co./ attract people to live in DeKalb County & work in Allen Co.	1	Drug and Alcohol addiction
		0	Droughts/weather impacts
4	Market our heritage	0	County Zoning process
1	Skilled trades	0	Cost of technology investment
1	Local government funding for the southeastern portion of the county	0	Access to developers is limited
0	Grants – not always eligible, or available, also need a grant writer		
0	Outside developers for housing		
0	Aldi's		
0	Capitalize on the 24-45 age group moving in		

Strengths		Weaknesses	
12	Schools & Library	7	Not enough childcare
4	Low home prices/affordable housing	5	Lack of diversity
4	Caring/giving community	4	Not enough mental health resources
3	Family oriented environment	3	Lack of access to health care
1	Low crime	3	Access to broadband/poor cellular service
1	Good transportation	2	Path dependency ("we've always done it that way")
1	Population growth	1	Access to public transportation
1	Fire services are good	1	Government supported housing is insufficient
0	Railroads/accessibility to highways (I-69)	0	No parks & rec. department (in Garrett)
0	Growth/business development	0	Money leaving the community
0	High paying jobs	0	Local marketing
0	Proximity to metro areas	0	Lack of tourism opportunities
		0	Growing too quickly causes stress on infrastructure
		0	Slow to collaborate/resistance to change/siloed interaction

Opportunities		Threats	
7	Increase mental health resources	6	Other areas organizing and surpassing DeKalb County (failing to unify for success)
6	Create inter-generational opportunities, such as senior living with childcare	4	Young adults leaving for opportunities outside of DeKalb County (brain drain)
4	Small Business Support – keep it local	2	Possibility of losing volunteers
4	Retirement housing	2	Higher wages outside of DeKalb County – people go there to work
4	Need more skilled workforce development	1	Mental health crisis
2	Trail development/connectivity	1	Seen as a "pass through" county (drive through on the way to the lake, etc.)
2	Tourism expansion/development	1	The way funding works – complex, gets away from local decision-making
1	Increase wages for civil servants (and teachers)	1	Infrastructure maintenance/power grid capacity
1	Park revitalization	1	National economic trends
1	Improve housing mix (more and better)	0	Long EMS response times
0	Get more young people to pursue Higher Education	0	Lower educational attainment leads to crime and victimization
0	Prepare for neighboring expansion (growth in Allen County)	0	Politicians having a personal agenda (lobby for legislation/hidden agendas)
0	Access to vocational training (youth retention) opportunities		
0	Extra territorial jurisdiction		
0	Proximity to post-secondary opportunities (connect to)		
0	Support population growth		

Auburn, July 21

Strengths	Weaknesses
10 School systems 4 Park and pathway development 2 Homelessness is decreasing 2 Growth in families moving in 1 Industry and employers 1 Strong support of the arts 0 Safe community 0 Philanthropic foundations and other community organizations 0 Proximity to major highways 0 Strong support of our heritage 0 Community involvement and drive for improvement 0 Promotion of tourism and economic development 0 Quality medical services	16 Lack of childcare 9 Lack of affordable housing 7 Lack of vision (status quo mindset) 4 Lack of mental health resources 3 Lack of diversity (in all areas) 2 Food insecurity 2 Lack of amenities 1 Lack of adaptability to change 1 Veterans services slow to provide support 1 Lack of public transportation 0 Lack of parking 0 Siloed communities
Opportunities	Threats
9 Mental health/addiction recovery services 6 Development of Cedar Creek 5 Interstate gateways 3 Development of Sports Complex (south side) 2 Close to Fort Wayne (embrace opportunity) 1 we can improve single parent support systems 1 Broadband development 1 Partnerships between schools and employers 0 Winter family fun activities 0 Partnerships with colleges 0 Increase recreation activities 0 High Tech skills training	9 Politics – Federal, State and Local 5 Decline in manufacturing employment 2 Lack of a living wage 1 Economic downturn 1 Unintended consequences of laws (within the court system) 0 Lack of available workforce 0 Climate change – impacts on the farming community 0 Drug abuse/Recovery 0 Snow 0 High school graduates leaving 0 Cost of living increasing 0 Disasters/Pandemics

Appendix B — Revised Thematic Categories by Number of Dots

Mental/Social/Physical Health

40	Lack of childcare/single parent support
28	Mental health/addiction recovery services/professionals
7	Lack of public transportation
7	Access to healthy foods
6	Create inter-generational opportunities, such as senior living with childcare
5	Lack of access to health care/healthy living options
3	Illegal drug availability
2	Homelessness is decreasing
1	Veterans services slow to provide support
1	Life skills/poverty
100	Total

Community Culture of Angst

14	Politics – Federal, State and Local
14	Lack of vision (status quo mindset)
13	Other areas organizing and surpassing DeKalb County (failing to unify for success)/brain drain
13	Lack of diversity (people/thought)
7	Demographic impacts on land-use and taxation
3	Focus on interaction with young people (especially 25-45)
2	Possibility of losing volunteers
2	Siloed communities/collaboration
1	Shortage of leadership education & opportunities
1	Local government funding for the southeastern portion of the county
1	Unintended consequences of laws (within the court system)
1	Transient community
1	Outdated policies/philosophies
1	Low public (citizen) participation
1	The way funding works – complex, gets away from local decision-making
75	Total

Infrastructure (roads, broadband, water/sewer)

33	Lack of Broadband (high speed)
8	Trains are a public safety issue
7	Sidewalks/curb appeal
6	County road conditions
5	Interstate gateways
2	Aging infrastructure (overall)
1	Need for connectivity across the county
1	Infrastructure (maintenance/power grid capacity)
1	Infrastructure (sewer and water)
64	Total

Local Economic Development (including Tourism)

16   Proximity to Fort Wayne and other communities/marketing and promoting proximity
7   Small Business/Entrepreneurship Support – keep it local
6   National economic/employment trends
5   Decline in manufacturing employment
4   Tourism expansion/development/destination marketing
3   Climate change
3   Loss of farmland for solar development
2   Downtown shopping options
2   Willingness to work/pandemic recovery
2   Lack of a living wage
2   Lack of parking
2   Proximity to major highways
2   Grants for restoration
1   Good transportation
1   Industry and employers
1   Brain Drain
1   Wages inequity
1   Tax Abatement/TIF
1   Increase wages for civil servants (and teachers)
62   Total

Housing

47   Affordable housing/housing diversity (price/type)
2   NIMBY related housing developments
1   Assisted living
1   Government supported housing is insufficient
51   Total

Education/Training issues

33   Schools & Library
15   More Impact instruction (trade certification/GED)
1   Need to connect to local colleges
1   Partnerships between schools and employers
50   Total

Quality of Life/Recreation/Amenities

18	Trails development/expansion
7	Park and pathway development
6	Development of Cedar Creek
3	Development of Sports Complex (south side)
2	Lack of amenities
2	Community events
1	Strong support of the arts
1	Covered Bridge
40	Total

Sense of Community – Pride/Heritage/Engagement/Assets

5	Family oriented environment
4	Caring/giving community
4	Market our heritage
3	Faith-based community
3	Growth in families moving in
2	Potential in young leaders
1	Partnerships between organizations
1	Community collaboration
1	Non-profit resources
1	Rural environment
1	Quality of investors/Philanthropy
1	Tightness of the community
27	Total

Public Safety

12	Lack of police presence/security/EMS
4	Emergency personnel support is good
4	Safety (public) is good/low crime
20	Total