



## HOW DOES DECATUR FIGURE INTO THE REGIONAL LANDSCAPE?

The Regional Cities Initiative is essential to developing our local and regional economies. Seeking to develop vibrant communities through coordinated regional efforts and leveraging collective resources is the logical next step toward growing our economies. This is especially true in our rural communities where resources are often sparse. While we can and should offer the most business friendly climate and competitive economic incentives for the purpose of business development, if the talent isn't available or attracted to our area as well to fill the jobs, the incentives and business climate is of little value. Certainly we should do all that we can to assist in developing the talent that already exists in our communities, but what are we offering as an incentive for them to stay? What quality of life awaits them? And if we can't manage to keep our own talent, how can we reasonably think we could attract talent from outside our region?

Like many communities throughout Northeast Indiana, Decatur is attempting to address these questions. We have realized for some time that attracting and retaining talent is vital to our community's economic vitality and quality of life. To begin to answer this all-important question, a few years ago Mayor John Schultz wisely brought together a group of young professionals and entrepreneurs who either chose to remain in or return to our community. Each of the members understands the value of living in and raising a family in Decatur. However, through our research and conversations, it became evident that the similarity of our experiences and reasons for remaining in or returning to Decatur (schools, churches, families, and family business opportunities) are values that are seldom understood or articulated clearly. Moreover, a non-native to the area does not have the benefit of personal experience of growing up in Decatur to understand the unique and desirable attributes of our community. We quickly came to the following conclusion:

*In order to develop a family-oriented community full of opportunity and pride, we must attract, retain, and engage citizens through enhanced quality of life and economic prosperity. Quality of life and economic prosperity are complementing outcomes, equally dependent on and advancing one another. To this end, we must focus our efforts on revitalizing our community's appearance and recreational opportunities, encouraging personal skills and knowledge advancement, promoting the growth and development of new and existing businesses, and effectively market our strengths to our citizens and to those in surrounding communities. These efforts naturally support and enhance one another.*

One of the most poignant lessons from our early meetings was that we needed to market our community – first to ourselves – then to the region and beyond. What is authentic about Decatur? What is unique about Decatur? What is desirable about Decatur? Why should one consider Decatur as a place to visit, live, or establish a business? These are the questions we must be able to answer. These are the questions that we must all be able to articulate.



Decatur has made what we feel to be significant progress over the past few years toward answering some of these questions. Our experience with the state's Stellar Communities program has largely influenced our ability to do so, and we look forward to the opportunities that lie ahead. One of our goals through the process is to provide a sustainable and repeatable model for successful community revitalization that other rural communities in our region may be able to utilize (not in content, but rather in construct and concept), because we understand the challenges smaller communities like us are experiencing. Once vibrant and viable, we now wrestle with relevance when it comes to attracting or retaining talent of any age. But it isn't about reinvention. It's about identifying strengths and leveraging resources within our community. To this end, Decatur's current efforts highlight our past successes in art and innovation as well as leverage the momentum of our thriving Decatur Sculpture Tour. Marketing our community as one of ***Artistically Inspired Innovation***, Decatur looks to draw others to our downtown as a center for creative engagement. Success will absolutely require partnerships. How much more impactful could Decatur's initiatives be if we could harness the power of the resources available throughout our region?

As we've developed our strategic investment plan over the past few years, I'm struck at how often other communities in the region have established goals similar to our own. In retrospect, it should probably not come as a surprise that neighboring communities would share similar strengths and assets; it only makes sense to build on these. And if we have similar goals, it likewise makes sense that we should cooperate in our planning and share in available resources instead of competing for them. We should champion and support one another's success. In today's mobile society, who's to say that we can't choose to work in one community within our region but live in another? Isn't this a win-win for both communities?

As we move forward, let us consider the efficiencies and overall impact of regional planning. Consider Decatur's desire to build upon the asset of the St. Mary's River that runs through our downtown and north to Fort Wayne. For years, we've seen this feature as a liability instead of the asset that it is. There is a fantastic recreational opportunity right beneath our very nose. And while our future plans may be much smaller in scale, the concept is really no different than the riverfront development planning currently underway by Fort Wayne. The biggest difference is Decatur's ability (or inability) to adequately develop and act on our plan due to our limited resources. How can we better tie in to what Fort Wayne is conducting just 20 miles to the north? Other communities in the region are asking the same question.