



Executive Summary

Two decades into the 21st century Scott County, Indiana finds itself with the opportunity to capitalize on its location, natural beauty, and strong sense of community to build a prosperous future. Historically, agriculture and manufacturing provided a strong economic backbone able to support local small business: shops and restaurants. Economic restructuring of both agriculture and manufacturing left the community with too few economic opportunities, poor health and mental health, and the need to increase educational attainment to create and attract 21st century jobs. Farms and factories are still present but no longer provide the same economic base.

This story is not unique to Scott County, nor are the problems these changes have engendered. Scott County has “good bones,” as people often say of a house with a good structure in need of significant renovation. Strong social ties, a location with access to diverse occupational opportunities, a good and improving school system with nearby access to higher education, and natural beauty and rural character all position the community for a prosperous future. Prosperity will not just happen, however. Scott County needs to align its resources, and build on its strengths to plan for deliberate and sustainable development, from health, home building, and quality of place initiatives to workforce and small business development.

The Scott County Community Foundation worked with the Indiana University Southeast Applied Research and Education Center to

establish a baseline of data on the community and perceptions of strengths, priorities, and challenges to guide development efforts. The research team conducted individual interviews with a half dozen community leaders. These interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 2.5 hours and revolved around each respondent’s ideas about the community’s greatest assets and most significant challenges. The team distributed paper surveys throughout the community and sent a link out through mailing lists of local business and nonprofit organizations. Researchers hosted survey events to encourage completion of paper surveys and additional conversation on topics community members wanted to highlight. Community members completed 407 surveys.

Economy

Scott County maintains significant employment in manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, accommodation and food service, and retail.¹ The median household income of \$47,123 lags well behind state and national medians.² Median earnings for women are a low \$27,551 compared to \$42,993 for men and the county’s per capita income sits at a low \$22,688 compared to \$28,461 statewide.³ Women’s low earnings shape the prevalence of child poverty. While female-headed households comprise only 10.9% of Scott County households, they make up 33.2% of the community’s poor households.⁴ Poverty rates exceed state and national figures, with the largest gap among those aged five to seventeen with a

poverty rate of 24.3% compared to 18.7% statewide.⁵ The top priorities for personal finance are living wages and affordable housing.

While unemployment rates in Scott County do not appear to be drastically different from state rates, a closer look reveals a low employment ratio. A smaller share of Scott County's prime working age adult population (age 25-64) works for pay than for the state or country. This is true in every age group with the largest gaps among workers over age 55 and those age 30-34.⁶ The low employment rate and relatively low earnings, especially among those with little education, contribute to challenges in health, education and housing, and provide little discretionary income to help support small businesses like restaurants and shops. In addition, low incomes generate few public resources with which to build strong infrastructure and quality of place. The top priorities for economic development are living wages and sustainable development strategies that support families and protect the county's natural assets.

Health, Education, & Housing

Health, education, and housing are among the basic needs and precursors required for development. Productive engagement with the workforce and local decision-making requires wellness, literacy, and reasoning skills that promote effective problem solving.

Health

Scott County ranks 90 of 92 Indiana counties for health outcomes and 80 of 92 for health factors.⁷ With a clean environment, a local YMCA facility, and recently built multi-use paths, the community has some assets with which to work. However, residents report inadequate healthcare and for some, poor access to healthy food, opportunities for physical activity, and affordable medication. Respondents rate facilities for physical activity the top priority followed by access to healthy food and affordable health care.

Mental health drives physical well-being and ability to engage productively in school, work, recreation, and community building. Scott County has too few mental health providers, and with relatively high reported rates of childhood trauma, faces significant challenges in supporting mental

wellness and preventing substance abuse. The 2015 HIV outbreak, resulting from a high prevalence of injection drug use, along with high prescription and overdose rates, all point to a complex combination of factors shaping poor mental and physical health in the area.

Progress will require finding resources to support access to healthcare providers, and preventing and mitigating the effects of childhood trauma. Local government, business, and nonprofits all have roles to play in creating a trauma-informed community and in maximizing access to health and mental health care for Scott County residents. The local economy cannot flourish without a physically and mentally healthy population.

Education

The county has significant opportunities for growth in education from cradle to career. The county has only a handful of high quality early care and education spots and most children under the age of five with working parents are cared for through informal arrangements or providers not registered with the state. A majority of respondents rated the quality of birth to five childcare "poor" or "very poor" and access to it even worse. Lack of childcare options may limit workforce participation, decrease reliability of the labor force, and leave a large share of young children without developmentally appropriate sleep, nutrition, stimulation, or a language rich environment. The absence of these key elements of a quality early childhood experience leads children to show up for kindergarten already behind in pre-literacy and quantitative reasoning skills and, more importantly, in social emotional development. Educational attainment lags well behind state and national college attainment rates with 11.9% of adults holding a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 25.9% statewide and 31.5% nationally.⁸

The schools in Scott County are an institutional hub for social activity and community support. Youth and adults alike see high school sports as a great source of entertainment and social engagement. The majority of adults (58.8%) rate the quality of schools as "good" and another 5.4% "excellent." A majority "agree" or "strongly agree" (58.8% and 11.7% respectively) that they are satisfied with local schools. Objective measures

from the state note room for improvements in both Austin and Scottsburg. Austin's schools (graded a C by the state Department of Education) manage the challenges of a lower income student population with a high drop-out rate, but still manage to build strong community ties that are well reflected in the comments of high school students. Scottsburg is more affluent, but still, 56% of students are economically disadvantaged. A larger share of students take the honors track and graduate with college and career readiness credentials, but ACT and SAT performance falls short of benchmarks for college readiness.⁹ Respondents see trade certificates, high school completion, early care and education and after school programs as top priorities.

Housing

Homeownership rates are high in Scott County and according to public sources, but this fact masks a more complicated housing dynamic. A driving tour of the community and conversations with locals suggest that a portion of the housing stock is substandard and either vacant or rented out at prices that may be higher than their condition and safety warrant. The number of units may seem appropriate to the size of the community, but many of those units are uninhabited, creating scarcity in housing supply.

New housing developments appeal to young families with moderate to higher incomes, but they are in short supply. Locals explain that across all price points housing supply that is safe and habitable is limited. Many would like to see dilapidated homes removed from areas of Austin and Scottsburg and replaced with affordable new construction. Others hope to see more growth of new neighborhoods outside the town center, but recognize the need to take care to maintain natural amenities and rural character. Respondents expressed an interest in smart, intentional housing development.

Quality of Place

Quality of place refers to factors in the external environment such as programs, parks, trails, and natural amenities that contribute to quality of life (physical, mental, and social well-being). Sustainability refers to environmental and economic health, and social well-being. These categories necessarily overlap. The Forward

Together survey assessed a number of items related to quality of place and sustainability that provide the structures, opportunities, and relationships for quality of life. Respondents felt most positively about opportunities to volunteer. People believe Scott County is a beautiful and safe place to raise children, where people feel pride in the community's shared accomplishments and help each other out in times of need. The greatest dissatisfaction is with availability of recreational opportunities, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Still, a strong sense of community prevails among respondents across age groups.

Public Service and Infrastructure

Scott County residents rate a wide range of public services as "good" or "excellent". Strong social ties between community members and those who work in public service engender positive feelings. This small rural community is home to three public libraries! This is an enormous asset to the community, providing free access to information and public spaces for meetings and activities (including showcasing art and hosting cultural activities).

The community also shares consensus on where they need to do better in the area of public service. More than 50% of survey respondents rate the following public services "poor" or "very poor": code enforcement for private properties (70.7%), internet access (59.5%), road maintenance (59.0%), and crime prevention activities (58.9%).

From Youth to Old Age

While much of the economic and educational data refer to the prime working age population, a community's responses to youth and to the elderly are important bookends to generating strong quality of life and a thriving community. For so many families, social ties emerge from engagement in youth development activities from organized sports to 4-H and theater. As residents age, they look once again to the community for social ties, structured activities, and needed supports for health, well-being and quality of life.

The Forward Together study draws from conversations with youth and from respondents' perceptions of top priorities. More than 80% of respondents see prevention of youth drug or alcohol use as a top priority for supporting children and

youth, followed by preventing and responding to child physical and sexual abuse, treatment for youth drug or alcohol use, addressing bullying, and prevention of teen pregnancy.

Among the aging, affordable housing and assisted living options are a significant concern. In addition, caregiver support, access to daily meals, day programs, and access to low impact exercise options are among the top priorities.

Arts and Creativity

Across the life course, arts and opportunities for creative self-expression provide entertainment, support strong mental and physical health, and nurture the creativity necessary for entrepreneurship and innovation. Nurturing creativity is essential to developing strong critical thinking and problem solving skills essential to success across all fields and throughout the community.

Local youth enjoy school based theater and visual arts programs, but would like to see those programs expand into the community to serve younger kids and engage adults. Survey respondents recognize a dearth of opportunities to enjoy arts and cultural activities in the schools and more broadly. The community celebrates its history and culture and these activities may provide structures and venues for expanding opportunities for performance and craft.

Forward Together

Home to strong community ties and pride in its history and culture, Scott County offers benefits of small town rural life, but with ready access to amenities and opportunities in Columbus, Madison, Jeffersonville, and Louisville. A bedroom community alone does not produce a thriving community, however. A manufacturing base, good schools, and a regional hospital provide a foundation for growing more local economic activity. The Mid-America Science Park offers prime space for education, training, convening, and for nurturing small business development.

However, Scott County cannot grow its local economy without improving the health and education of the local population. Housing is essential to accomplishing both of these—safe and

affordable housing provides needed stability for health, well-being and consistent engagement in education. This report's snapshot of local resources, performance, and perceptions provides some guidance on potential leverage points for community and economic development in Scott County.

- Build public-private partnerships to bring more primary care physicians and behavioral health providers to Scott County (with clear plans for addressing the needs of the uninsured and underinsured).
- Expand public, nonprofit, and business partnerships to invest in high quality early care and education for every child from birth to age five.
- Pursue strategies to create a trauma informed community that can effectively prevent and mitigate the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).
- Increase safe housing supply across price points: tear down dilapidated housing and infill with new construction. Strategically add neighborhoods, taking care not to encroach too much on the natural assets of the County.
- Engage public and private resources, build on and expand school-based arts programs, and develop a community arts program that brings together people of all ages in a space that fosters creativity through visual and performing arts and activities.
- Develop public transportation (with plans and resources coming from all sectors) that facilitates engagement from youth to old age in education, recreation, and employment. In a rural community, transportation is a major barrier to making full use of existing amenities and services. As one respondent noted, "Transportation to medical appointments doesn't help much if you can't get to work."

These recommendations target major changes in key areas that can have strong direct impacts. Addressing the core issues of health, education, and housing in these and other ways, recommended throughout the report, will have ripple effects in other areas that will generate economic growth and support a thriving community.