



Friedman Park in Newburgh symbolizes Warrick County's ongoing quality of life enhancements. The park is not only a destination for exercise, music and events, but the attraction has spurred growth of home development in the area (*Brian Young photo*).

WARRICK COUNTY

COMING INTO ITS OWN

By Matt Ottinger

Evansville, the state's third largest city, gains most of the attention when the subject is southwestern Indiana. But Warrick County, its neighbor to the east, is emerging as more than just a complement as businesses are eyeing the area for its budding opportunities and ever-improving quality of life.

"Southern Indiana really is gorgeous," offers Rich Henderson, managing partner at Florida-based food packaging film supplier Phenix Specialty Films (PSF). "We're moving people in the company down there and are hiring. We think the area has some really smart people who would like really good careers."

PSF is in the process of opening a technical center, warehouse and office in the North Warrick Industrial Park in Elberfeld. Henderson adds the primary reason for building the operation is its proximity to prominent customers.

The 170-acre industrial park, owned by the Warrick County Redevelopment Commission, also features a new shell building with 100,000 square feet of space and currently houses operations for North American Lighting and Pepsi.

Back and forth

The StatsIndiana web site quantifies that, as of 2018, about 14,500 Warrick County residents commuted into Vanderburgh County, while just under 2,400 commuters made the reverse trip.

These numbers may gradually change in the future, however, as Warrick County's employment opportunities grow. (The county currently receives a share of commuters from Kentucky as well.)

Changes are already being observed by companies like Ciholas, an engineering consultancy with over 30 employees. Although it

originated in Evansville, the company moved to its current Newburgh location in 2014.

“A majority of our staff lives in Vanderburgh and Warrick counties, but Vanderburgh only outweighs Warrick by five people (16 in Vanderburgh; 11 in Warrick),” reveals Vicki McDonald, director of operations. “We’ve had some young people recently who have bought (homes) in Warrick County.”

She asserts that in the quest to attract talent from other parts of the country, Newburgh can compete as a desired location, especially if framed properly.

“We’re up against major cities where employers pay larger salaries,” McDonald says, touting a favorable cost-of-living comparison. “Although when folks come out of college, they may not understand that if they’re getting a big salary, they’ll put most of that salary toward housing (in larger cities).”

Old pictures

Talking with Tom Silliman, president of Chandler-based ERI, is like taking a step back in time. He relays the story of his father taking over the company, which was originally founded in 1943 to develop antennae for military aircraft. ERI now manufactures commercial broadcast equipment and provides broadcasting



While black and white pictures tell the tale of an ERI that has been in operation since World War II, its work is quite modern.

solutions for clients across the world.

Perhaps a well-kept secret in the area, ERI can boast of creating many a standard for the industry.

“We’re the only manufacturing plant in the U.S. for commercial broadcasting that has registered professional engineers on staff,” Silliman reveals in describing the company, which employs over 125. “Many standards of design that are used in the U.S. came from right here, like the program used to design broadcast towers.”

Silliman shares fascinating photos of the company’s storied history. He also readily presents pictures of himself casually going about his work – in what would be a white-knuckle situation for most – atop notable American structures, including the Empire State Building.

Silliman contrasts Warrick County with his younger days growing up near the company’s original location on the East Coast.

“We love it because it’s rural,” he says.



Electronic systems designer Ciholas (top), broadcasting equipment manufacturer ERI (right) and newcomer Phenix Specialty Films are among the organizations paving the way for a prosperous future.

Concerts are just one of the ways park enhancements are allowing Warrick County residents to gather and build community (*Brumley Photography*).



“There are parks, like Lynnville Park (and Campground). People here can relax.”

Silliman’s colleague, COO and vice president Kenny Brown, believes the county’s recent quality of life enhancements could pay dividends down the road.

“Putting in the trails has made it more friendly for folks to move into the area,” he contends. “People don’t like to commute much so it makes it a great place to move into.”

Walk it out

Warrick County’s increasing “walkability” is indeed becoming a welcomed amenity, according to McDonald.

“It’s not just in the trails but in the neighborhoods,” she clarifies. “I live (on a main thoroughfare) which has many new builds. . . . We’ll soon be able to walk downtown while staying on sidewalks. That’s something the county hasn’t had in the past.”

The recently added Friedman Park in Newburgh has changed the game for the area as well. Supported by over \$5 million in investment from the county, the 180-acre outlet features an amphitheater and picnic pavilions along with biking, nature and walking trails. It’s also connected to schools, neighborhoods and other parks.

“We’ve had over 1,300 single-family homes built or in process since Friedman Park was built (around five years ago),” quantifies Steve Roelle, executive director of the Success Warrick County economic development group.

A push toward a healthier community is clearly paramount. Roelle credits investments made by the Deaconess and Ascension health systems toward more hospitals and rehabilitation facilities in the tri-state area. These health care providers now feature “world class facilities” on what’s known as the Warrick Wellness Trail, the components of which serve 32 counties in three states and a population of over 800,000.

Working with Warrick

Part of becoming an emerging economic area is an ease of business. All interviewed point out local government officials were accommodating at critical inflection points for their companies.

“When we were building our building, we bought land that was agricultural, so we had to get rezoned and platted,” McDonald recalls. “The Warrick County system was incredible to work with. That can be a hard process, but both county government and the (economic development department) were very helpful. Our local chamber of commerce was helpful too.”

ERI has had multiple locations in Warrick County, coming close to leaving at one point. Silliman credits the county’s efforts in helping it stay as it moved to its Chandler location in the mid-1990s.

PSF recognizes both the county and Indiana Economic Development Corporation for expressing a strong desire to bring the company into the fold.

“They gave strong incentives and we’ll meet the original requirements pretty easily,” Henderson anticipates. “That does help and allows us to hire more people. Hiring people is a difficult process in our business.”

Warrick’s workforce

As far as potential improvement, McDonald hopes to see a continued emphasis on STEM training in schools, noting the company is involved in robotics classes.

PSF will bring in experienced staff from other parts of the Midwest, as well as hire and train some locally. For its technical positions, Henderson asserts that his industry requires extreme competence and precision.

“We don’t have the normal labor force . . . because when you’re packaging food, you can’t make mistakes,” he states. “It’s a diamond in the rough to find (people under 40) who can run this equipment. We hire and spend a lot of time training people to be great in this industry.”

Overall, ERI is pleased with the available talent but concedes there is always room for improvement.

“The only challenge is at certain times when trying to draw in a certain skill set,” Brown conveys. “We’ve found deficiencies. Evansville’s doing a pretty decent job in trying to address that, and I think if Warrick County steps up that will help us and companies like Alcoa and the trades.”

Alcoa indeed remains a major economic force in the area, although the company sold its Warrick Operations rolling mill business to

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Kaiser Aluminum Corporation in a deal valued at \$670 million. Alcoa continues to operate the smelter and the power plant, which together employed approximately 660 people at the time of the sale in early 2021.

Steady improvement

Infrastructure improvements are critical for all businesses, especially when it comes to the necessity of reliable broadband. McDonald notes the company currently uses two providers to ensure connectivity.

“We rely on being able to upload huge amounts of information, which is different than some residential areas (as they are focused on downloading),” she says, adding affordable broadband, sewage and utilities should be critical focuses for stakeholders in the near future.

The massive Fiber Backbone Project, undertaken by the county with the help of Mainstream Fiber Networks, features installation of 105 miles of fiber across the county and is nearing completion. Officials hope it will alleviate concerns of residents, businesses and

government agencies in the area. It’s complemented by a fixed wireless project through River City Wireless, Inc. to fill in gaps.

Roelle looks forward to measurable enhancements – both statistical and aesthetic – in the future.

“We’re excited about the upcoming Census numbers and expect to see continued growth – and new apartments, homes and executive housing,” he anticipates. “More assisted living facilities are also opening for those that need that to maintain independence.”

In addition, individual cities and towns are putting emphases on their community cores.

“Downtown Newburgh and Boonville have taken giant steps forward,” Roelle notes. “We’re seeing that in new business and investment.

“These are historic Indiana towns and they’re doing fantastic things,” he concludes. “More businesses and restaurants are opening – even during COVID-19. Those two main street areas are thriving, and both have a different flavor – yet both exemplify southern Indiana.”

RESOURCES: Kenny Brown and Tom Silliman, ERI, at www.eriinc.com | Rich Henderson, Phenix Specialty Films, at www.psfpackaging.com | Vicki McDonald, Ciholas, at www.ciholas.com | Steve Roelle, Success Warrick County, at www.successwarrickcounty.com