



Griffith Neighborhood Spotlight

Residents, civic and faith based organizations, businesses, schools and government... working together as 'One Neighborhood' to improve our Quality of Life.

Our Give Back and Kick-off Report

Introduction and Background:

The Griffith Neighborhood Spotlight (GNS) initiative was organized in early December of last year after the community of Griffith received a community building grant in November from the Legacy Foundation based in Lake County, Northwest Indiana. The GNS initiative was convened and supported by our ‘backbone’ organization, the Crossroads YMCA, after a start-up Steering Committee of (6) Griffith resident volunteers was formed. This of individuals had been initially trained and had participated in the development of the original grant application and submittal in September of 2014, and also in their second awarding submittal in September of 2015.

A Community Builder was hired in early January, 2016, to organize, facilitate, and support the work of the Steering Committee, with additional community based volunteer members interviewed and added to support the front-end ‘Engagement’ and information gathering phase of the Collective Impact Program Development process. The goal of this process and its team of dedicated members through December of this year, is to develop a “Quality of Life Plan” for our town and community residents. Early in our organization and development, the committee as a whole, recognized the town’s one basic unique unifying quality, which was that we are at our core, **one Town... ..one Community....., and ‘One Neighborhood’** - Griffith, Indiana 46319.

Over the last five months, within its *Organize, Decide, and Act* activities, our GNS Committee was able to complete a total of 187 one-on-one interviews with a combination of residents and leaders from our town government, schools, community businesses, civic, volunteer, and faith-based organizations who were invited to ‘Join the Conversation’. These ‘conversations’ were hosted and completed in a variety of in-town settings to include restaurants, coffee shops, our parks, over the phone, and in our YMCA office. These very special relationship building contacts resulted in (2064) individual

representative comments regarding our interviewee’s current perspective of the town’s Quality of Life within our ‘Neighborhood’ of nearly 17,000 residents, as presented and listed in this report as its perceived **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT’s)**.

Within this presentation a total of twelve topical themes emerged that were included in most every area of the four SWOT groupings, and that were characteristic as common threads contributing to the resulting overall ‘point of view’ provided in this report. The themes with their comment counts included are:

THEMED TOPIC AREAS	STRENGTHS		WEAKNESSES		OPPORTUNITIES		THREATS		TOTALS	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
1. BUSINESS & COMMERCE - TOWN SOUTH	72	7%	56	9%	67	21%	6	6%	201	10%
2. BUSINESS & COMMERCE - NORTH TOWN	3	0%	69	11%	44	14%	13	12%	129	6%
3. THE MANSARDS APARTMENTS COMPLEX	4	0%	34	6%	6	2%	15	14%	59	3%
4. SCHOOLS AND OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM	66	6%	47	8%	6	2%	12	11%	131	6%
5. SOCIAL PROGRAMMING FOR OUR YOUTH	12	1%	30	5%	19	6%	2	2%	63	3%
6. TOWN GOVERNMENT AND OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES	332	32%	46	8%	48	15%	10	10%	436	21%
7. SENIORS & SPECIAL NEEDS CITIZENS SUPPORT SERVICES	0	0%	12	2%	9	3%	0	0%	21	1%
8. HOUSING, TAXES/ CODE ENFORCEMENT	31	3%	65	11%	14	4%	11	10%	121	6%
9. YOUNG ADULT SOCIAL PROGRAMS	0	0%	2	0%	4	1%	0	0%	6	0%
10. PARK SYSTEMS, STREETS & RECREATIONAL VENUES	142	14%	186	30%	69	22%	0	0%	397	19%
11. TOWN OF GRIFFITH - AREA CONTEXT	371	36%	43	7%	25	8%	33	31%	472	23%
12. INFRASTRUCTURE and MAJOR PROJECTS	3	0%	20	3%	2	1%	3	3%	28	1%
Totals Comment Counts and % of Totals	1036	100%	610	100%	313	100%	105	100%	2064	100%
		50%		30%		15%		5%	2064	

General Area Context:

Our town was characterized as being clean, not too big / not too small with a good sense of town pride and safe quiet areas to live – “It’s my kind of town”. Opinions also given characterized a diverse population that is close knit while having each other’s back, and pulling together in times of need. Griffith was said to be appealing to millennials with ‘hipster’ year-round festivals and events; respectful of its Seniors; mindful of its history; with a fresh, progressive business environment. People also said that the town had good leadership and community services, a diverse selection of churches with a united group of clergy, and a great network of community volunteers where residents can get involved and get things done. Other general comments about our ‘neighborhood’ included the fact that Griffith is close to Chicago, with easy access to nearby expressways leading to Chicago’s downtown amenities and Lake Michigan.

Strengths:

- Positive tangible and intangible attributes, internal to our town’s overall characteristics and organization, and within its control.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE - TOWN SOUTH : Our report contributors described Griffith being a great town in which to live. They agreed that we had a beautiful downtown with an old fashioned and ‘eclectic’ feel, especially after the extensive street renovations. And with the new businesses coming to town, they feel that we have a progressive eye toward a growing younger population and additional business opportunities for all types of businesses and potential owners. They also

expressed their confidence in our Town's continued commitment to business development and additional revitalization resulting in opportunities for an even growing number and variety of new businesses.

SCHOOLS AND OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM: Even with opinions divided on our schools and school system operations, our contributors felt that we have good school facilities, and that they were working to improve. The fact that our schools were basically small was felt to be a mostly positive, while representing a commitment to the children, good teachers and a history of family involvement. They like that the teachers take time to talk to the parents and that the teachers know their kids. They are pleased that the teachers are able to collaborate among themselves, even though they felt that teachers were not always given adequate tools. In addition they felt that strong school sports programs are a quality that brings the town and our children together.

TOWN GOVERNMENT AND OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES: Concerning our Town Government, contributors strongly agreed that our Town Council displayed great vision and leadership, progressive thinking, while being helpful to new businesses with a positive and properly directed momentum. They specifically expressed their appreciation of our Town Council President and our Town's Clerk / Treasurer. Our Griffith Police Department has been described as exemplary with a track record of helping families, being proactive, and reducing the crime rate - especially within the Mansards -, with our Police Chief doing a great job and being very visible. These positive comments extend down and throughout the entire police force with the community having a feeling of safety. In addition, our Griffith Fire Department was cited as having strong volunteers with excellent training for its people. Our contributors also stated that they feel that the town is financially sound and that property values are on the rise with a base of affordable housing and currently stable taxes. Examples of appreciation were also given to our "awesome volunteers in Griffith" along with other community services like the Senior Center and its

recreational services, our beautiful seasonal streetscapes , and the façade program that has provided additional renovations to a growing business environment.

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING FOR OUR YOUTH: Youth programs like our League Baseball programs - although not as active in past years -, Girls on the Run, Girls League softball, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and a variety of good on-going Church youth programs always get high marks for what they do to provide quality activities for our kids, as does the free-style competitive activity supported by our ever-popular public mid-town basketball courts.

PARK SYSTEMS, STREETS & RECREATIONAL VENUES: People especially love our parks and open spaces and their contribution over the spring and summer months, and have provided a major portion of their comments in this area.

Our contributors (also citing their families and friends) expressed agreement that our festivals, family events and street celebration venues throughout the year are ‘great’ and a signature of our Town’s character. This includes the Central Market, the anticipated new Blues Festival , 4th of July, Rock N’ Rail Festival, Winterfest, and our Christmas activities.

People like the fact that the former Franklin School was converted to a Town Center / YMCA and are supportive of its programs. They also like the free-standing libraries around town, the public art, kids events – like ‘Creepy Crawlers’, the Easter Egg Drop and Santa and Mrs. Claus at the Depot at Christmas. In addition, they feel the Street Public Works Department does a very good job keeping streets clean and well maintained in all seasons.

Weaknesses

- Factors that are within our town's control or ability to influence or that detract from its character or ability to attain its desired goals and objectives. May also may include areas or issues of concern that the town may want or need to improve.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE - TOWN SOUTH : Our conversation contributors feel that the shopping and parking is limited downtown and needs more variety to make improvements. They also feel that there are too many bars and pizza businesses, and too many strip malls in town. They would like to see more upscale businesses, with the town being cautious of too many breweries, too many adult 'things' in town, and wanting more 'things' for kids to do. In addition, they expressed a need for larger businesses with opportunities to employ higher numbers of residents.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE – TOWN NORTH : Most all of our contributors expressed their regret that the intersection of Ridge Road and Cline Avenue is significant eyesore, especially since it is the first thing you see coming in or going out of Griffith on the North end. This opinion extends to the Ridge Road business corridor from Cline Avenue to Colfax that was felt to be going downhill, with fewer North side business opportunities, and also with its perception of being crime ridden. With many underdeveloped or unoccupied buildings in the area, a few existing businesses showing signs of deterioration, people felt that we have too many building owners and not enough business owners. They also felt a contributing factor to the decline was the Griffith Chamber of Commerce losing its identity and not being enough involved.

THE MANSARDS APARTMENTS COMPLEX: Many of our contributors expressed as weaknesses, the fears and rumors about the Mansards Apartments and its perception of being a segregated area of town prone to crime and drugs. There is also the

perception that the ‘renters’ there do not care enough about their property, and that they tend to build walls between themselves and the other areas of Griffith.

SCHOOLS AND OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM: Although not in significant numbers, perceptions were shared that the School administration and community relations are not good and needed to improve. There were concerns that our school administration is not responsive to parents concerns, with divisions between faculty and itself, and between the Town and the School Administration. In addition, open enrollment is considered to be a problem, along with too many transient students, too many large classrooms and the need for a better anti-bullying program. Concerns also emerged that the Schools were not doing enough to prepare High Schools students for taking the American College Tests (ACT’s), along with concerns about our ranking among the schools in the state (295 out of 531).

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING FOR OUR YOUTH: Other weaknesses expressed as a concern included the decline of youth programs in town due to lack of volunteer support to run them. This included the lack of available park sponsored summer or downtown activities for our youth. A repeating strong example was the concern that our youth baseball league programs – with their proud history - were barely staying alive, needed more volunteers and financial support, or possibly a transition to fee based operations to keep them alive and viable into the future. Another suggestion was the need for a liaison to youth organizations to provide connectivity , with the eventual goal of having a larger youth center with many more diversified activities, and increased / improved after-school programs. In addition, areas like the Mansards need even more help as the children there do not have much to do outside in their community , especially in the summer when school is out.

TOWN GOVERNMENT AND OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES: People talked about the current government structure as being inadequate, in need of a town manager to manage daily affairs, and also needing to develop a proper identity for the town. Comments were also made that there is not enough town workers, and no people of color. Contributors to this report also

expressed a need to do a better job of telling citizens what is going on in the town, with improved communications required from the Town Council to include better and more frequent broadcasting of its achievements. And although there was a lack of negative critique of our Police Department, the topic of inadequate and ineffective code enforcement was very much an issue with most people interviewed. There were also expressions of a lack of cohesiveness between the town boards and commissions, and the lack of appreciation for the amount of volunteer work done in town. In a couple of isolated comments, it was felt that the Town needed better public works leadership, and a capital program for the YMCA to keep it properly maintained and functioning into the future.

SENIORS & SPECIAL NEEDS CITIZENS SUPPORT SERVICES: Regarding our Seniors, it was expressed that there needs to be more assistance and attention provided our Seniors and special needs residents, with more focused programs and better communication and marketing of our Griffith Senior Center. Several opinions stated that the YMCA is too expensive for the Seniors, and that additional handicapped parking was needed at Franklin Center. An improved out-reach program, more care-givers, better transportation assistance and help with home maintenance needs for our Seniors and special needs residents were also cited as important areas of support and assistance. In addition, statements were made regarding the initial requirement to clarify the various classification and levels of Senior and Special needs, since there is a naturally wide variation of capabilities and disabilities that should first be understood.

Opportunities

- External factors that represent opportunities to make improvements that will help promote the town's agenda or contribute to positive changes for the Quality of Life for its residents.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE - TOWN SOUTH: Overall , our report contributors expressed the need for the town to maintain its economic growth and stability through more revitalization to include the creation of a master plan for the town’s combined North and South end business growth and future. More varieties and types of businesses in the downtown area were recommended to include better signage, along with more advertising and greenery at all the entrances to the town making them more attractive and inviting. Other opportunities expressed included more family and /or up-scaled dining establishments and an improved integration of the North and South business areas with unified advertising & marketing to succeed as ‘one neighborhood’. Included along with better utilization and marketing of the airport, other specific recommendations included; a bigger bowling alley, a bakery, a deli, a big box store on north side, a fabric store, a quality women’s clothing store, a theatre with a stage for plays, a mini-golf course, a ‘make space’ facility, areas for sidewalk sales, a bed & breakfast, a quality dining establishment like ‘54 bistro’ in Hobart, a high end food store, and up-scale places for ‘brunch’.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE – TOWN NORTH : All who commented about the business environment agreed that changes were desperately needed in the Ridge Road Plaza complex, the Golf Course area and Ridge road corridor. - all of which have deteriorated creating the image of a very depressed area, and thereby creating a tremendous opportunity for its turn-around. Specific recommendations included a ‘grand’ hotel with indoor waterpark; quality name brand stores; a combined shopping and business district with a movie complex; a high-end corporate or medical office complex; or maybe some high-end multi-level residential areas within the mixture .

THE MANSARDS APARTMENTS COMPLEX: People who commented suggested that the Mansards could be cleaned-up and attitudes changed with some dedicated efforts. Additional recommendations included having the Mansards residents gain more exposure to Griffith and Griffith residents more understanding and familiarity to the Mansards. Further , people

commenting agreed that posting of rules and regulations within the Mansards buildings could create better adherence to stated policies, the leasing rules and guidelines.

SCHOOLS AND OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM: Most importantly, as expressed by a wide variety of contributors, was the need to find opportunities for improved communications between the school administration , its schools and teachers , and with the town government and residents. People suggested the creation of a High School Parents Teachers Council, along with opportunities to upgrade the teacher’s curriculum and ultimately improve the levels of achievement to be at par academically. Opportunities like the stated weaknesses concerning the schools also communicated a need for a separate Middle school and High School – but agreed that there is not enough room.

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING FOR OUR YOUTH: Additional comments cited an opportunity to develop more resources for youth programming, and to find more ways for youth volunteers and parents to get involved, getting back to a greater sense of Panther pride in our schools and increasing attendance at school sporting events. Other specific suggestions included; a boys softball league; creation of new park programs; part-time jobs for High School students; added YMCA programs; more volunteer work in the community; possible internships with businesses; youth run scavenger hunt and monthly events; more running teams like Girls on the Run; bicycle clubs; photography clubs; other hobby clubs; or a Police Camp.

TOWN GOVERNMENT AND OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES: Within the Town Government, development of more internal resources was recommended, along with the need to define the long term vision for the town, and establish more collaboration between municipalities. Getting out of Calumet township was cited often as an opportunity for the Town, along with better communication within town – like an expanded ‘Informer’ to provide the public more ‘inside’ information. More blending of volunteer groups; more parking downtown; a Welcome Wagon for new residents; better Safety Day publicity; and an

expanded use of library for in-town events, and public speaking engagements; were among the many suggestions offered by our contributors.

SENIORS & SPECIAL NEEDS CITIZENS SUPPORT SERVICES: Regarding opportunities for our Seniors, people suggested the development of more activities for Seniors – maybe a gardening club – along with consideration for better Senior housing, better transportation for Seniors to and from scheduled appointments, and an organized program for year-round well-being checks.

HOUSING, TAXES/ CODE ENFORCEMENT: When talking about housing and property in our community, people discussed the need to lower taxes, making more homes available for rental properties, better use of underdeveloped land, and making older more affordable homes available to younger buyers. Other opportunities included offering incentives to buy homes; creating a home rehabilitation program like Habitat for Humanity; making the old bank into a restaurant with an art museum inside was also offered as an idea– perhaps with a welcome center or art gallery for the town; adding living spaces above stores; and the conversion of the old church across from Franklin Center to a play house, movie theatre, or maybe a separate youth center.

PARK SYSTEMS, STREETS & RECREATIONAL VENUES: Opportunities for increased and expanded use of our parks was as noted above as favorite topic and theme with our contributors. Our contributors mentioned broader and more diversified advertising for our Parks and recreational areas to include the ‘promotion’ of our many popular festivals in State travel books and brochures. They wanted to have more places for people to meet and greet, with music venues for kids and an early spring festival, more public art and art projects with free/low cost art supplies and resources available for projects and programs for people of all ages as a way to bring ‘creative’ types together. And how about a statuary in town with bronze statues, or local artists provided grants to do work for town displays? And some of our town history buffs also suggested

capitalizing more on Griffith's history with trains by construction of a train viewing station at the Depot site, or perhaps a train-themed park for kids on the property at the tracks – all of which would be very unique to Griffith.

Multiple mentions included yearly fireworks at St. Mary's, and more town and park flower gardens. Yearly Christmas tree burnings, and public garage sales in the parks were suggested along with events at Oak Ridge Prairie. Even a 'Walk bridge' over Broad Street was interesting to one individual. Other specific ideas included: a dog friendly park; bike rental kiosks on the bike trail; Skate park for the teens; Ice Skating in the winter; Mini golf course; Where's Waldo Yearly classic event; Bicycle themed events; Family park camping outing events or activities; or a Community meditational park area. And finally, with our proximity to Chicago and expressways, how about a bus service to and from Chicago from our Central Park -with a theme of " Everyone is welcome here", connecting us more to tourism and making Griffith a destination with a positive impact theme like "the town that came to the tracks".

Threats

- External factors, sometimes beyond the town's direct control, which could place it or its goals and objectives at risk. Should typically have contingency plans to address should they occur and cannot be changed.

BUSINESS & COMMERCE : Our contributors feared the town moving forward too fast and leaving our small town values behind. And with the growing number of 'eyesore' buildings in and around town, they were concerned about popular businesses moving out as they grow and see greater opportunities elsewhere without these areas being addressed. Obviously the K-Mart Plaza condition and development of the golf course land was a very much talked about concern with the perception that not much was being done about this situation. This together with the negative image of the Mansards, suggests a need and opportunity to communicate more effectively about the many changing dynamics of this 'threat'.

SCHOOLS AND OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM: People stated their fear of Charter schools moving in, their perceived lowering of the quality of our school system, and it also having a downward effect on home values and potential new buyers. Another perception was the lack of effective school system leadership, and not enabling a progressive school board to help fix the problems, address diversity within our schools, and show enough achievement in our schools without it resulting in the lowering of expectations.

HOUSING, TAXES/CODE ENFORCEMENT: Finally, having no land to develop within town boundaries was expressed as a concern for the Town's future growth. This together with the opinion that most homes in town are older, a perception of an increased amount of vacant homes and section 8 housing, along with very little observable new construction created the fear that property values may decline. People were concerned about the 12-35 trains that traveled through the town each day, not knowing what they were transporting. The chemical plant on Colfax and the Enbridge oil farm were also mentioned as potential threats. In addition people felt threatened by empty homes not being maintained, people getting not involved in their own property maintenance, and the need for better, more effective Code enforcement to bring properties into compliance with a set of improved and more progressive standards for keeping our 'neighborhood' up to date and viable for years to come. Also cited was the aging infrastructure, mainly sewers, that could be an issue in the future and require a significant investment.

Summary and Next Steps

In conclusion , it should be remembered that the information contained in this report represents (2064) independent comments from a wide cross-section of (187) Griffith “Neighborhood’ residents, communicating their perception of our Quality of Life at this moment in time. Hopefully, it be will accepted and understood for what it is, an opportunity to learn and make those lives - our lives together- even better- making the weaknesses, opportunities; the opportunities, strengths and then minimizing the threats to weaknesses – and so it goes!

The community of Griffith, with its many assets and challenges has an immense amount of opportunity and is poised for neighborhood growth and development. Our volunteer Griffith Neighborhood Spotlight group is an agent of supportive change to help visualize what those changes could look like in three, five and ten years, and then working to develop projects that together fit together as a “Quality of Life Plan” for our Neighborhood. Helping with those changes are a host of other volunteer groups like Imagine Griffith, the Griffith Special Events Committee, and the Griffith Historical Society along with the many civic and Town Council led event activity groups in Griffith who work behind the scenes to make this town great.

But there is more to do to help us create this Quality of Life Plan that we all can accept and work toward. A plan that will help to establish the bridges of trust and improved communications we need to build on the strengths and address the weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to develop the future of our town.

In approximately (5) weeks from today, around the week of June 18, we will be hosting a Visioning Session to create a formal Vision for the Town. This Vision will be based on the information that you heard here today , together with your individual input regarding what should be our focus and direction for creating project work groups of improvement for our ‘neighborhood’. The invitation is open to all of you who contributed your voice to our ‘Conversations’ and to all of you who would also like to ‘add’ your voice.

Report Submittal by: Ken Karlstedt, Sr,
Community Builder, Griffith Neighborhood Spotlight
May 14, 2016.

**Background Description of Griffith, Indiana:
as provided in
the 2015 Legacy Foundation / Neighborhood Spotlight Grant Application, Letter of Intent**

The town of Griffith, Indiana is located in the Calumet Lacustrine Plain of former glacial Lake Chicago. Many major roadways surround and service Griffith. Interstate 80/94 borders the town on the north side, Cline Avenue, a major north/south thoroughfare runs along the western edge of the town, Colfax Avenue borders the town on the east side, and Avenue H and the Turkey Creek Ditch lie on the southern edge.

According to the most recent census (2010), Griffith is comprised of 16,900 residents from diverse backgrounds. The town of Griffith's dedication to fostering a cohesive, healthy neighborhood is evident in its design; unlike towns of similar or larger sizes, Griffith does not segment its town into smaller communities, thus creating an inclusive environment for all of its residents. Not only are the residents diverse in age (64.52% are between the age 18 and 64), race (1 out of 4 residents are non-white), and education attainment levels (1 out of 10 residents over the age of 25 do not hold a high school diploma), they share a diverse set of assets, a unique history, culture, and community challenges. Among its assets are a vibrant downtown area comprised of thriving small businesses and specialty shops unique in the region (e.g., American Natural Resources, G&G Hobbies, Wild Rose Brewing Company), a former school that was renovated and now serves as a community center/YMCA, the Erie Lackawanna Trail and Oak Savannah Trail, the Griffith Historical Society/Rail Road Museum, an airport, proximity to the City of Chicago and affordable housing stock. Griffith's unique history and culture is one that is openly acknowledged, embraced and celebrated by the town's residents as is evidenced by year-round music, art, and other community festivals. The town's history is honored by the historical society's successful efforts at housing many pieces of memorabilia pertaining to the town's development over time.

The town's challenges and opportunities are centered in its response to workforce diversity (race and industry composition). In the last decade, the town has seen increases in its Latino and African American populations (53% and 62%, respectively). Currently, only 13% of small businesses in Griffith are owned by non-white owners. The community, while it embraces diversity, is challenged with looking for and attracting diverse businesses that are highly technical and sophisticated in nature. This is not an industrial town, thus it has low manufacturing and shipment production. For example, in 2007, the town's businesses manufactured and shipped only one unit valued at over \$1000; the state of Indiana aggregate total for that year was 221,877,814 units.

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