



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN INDIANA

## **Huntingburg, IN and Bedford, IN: STELLAR COMMUNITIES Enhance the Radius Region**

What makes a community “stellar”? The question is one that residents of rural Indiana ask when they evaluate their own communities. What could be done to improve the cities and towns where they work and live? They ask because they feel empowered to add a Stellar shine to their hometowns through the aid of an ongoing State program, Stellar Communities.

The State of Indiana runs a unique program of integrated quality of place grant and assistance programs called the Stellar Communities Program. Through competitive selection as a Stellar Community, a city can coordinate grants and assistance from three state agencies: the Indiana Housing and Community Economic Development Authority, the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs and the Indiana Department of Transportation. The state assistance, combined with local government investments and private sector involvement, leads to dramatic improvements in the quality of place for cities outside the urban centers of the state.

The citizens of two communities in the Radius region, Huntingburg and Bedford, thought deeply about the question of how to improve their cities, and developed individual and imaginative proposals to be considered as stellar communities—and they made it happen, becoming two of just 12 cities with designation.

The more recent of the two Radius winners of the Stellar tag is Huntingburg, which promoted its “A Stellar City Like No Other” plan and has turned the campaign into the city’s tagline and brand.

Since being awarded the designation in 2014, much of the work on Huntingburg’s nine community improvement projects has been planning, but the city has unleashed a great deal of activity in 2016.

Once it had the Stellar Communities designation in hand, Huntingburg Mayor Denny Spinner said the city secured “a strong commitment from the private sector” for additional investments. “We’ll be able to turn a \$10 million investment from the state into nearly \$40 million in projects,” the mayor said.

Those projects include a pedestrian/bicycle Heritage Trail; housing for local workers and senior citizens; downtown festival spaces; and other improvements.

Huntingburg is bisected by railroad lines that divide the city of 6,600 residents. On average, Spinner said, 24-30 trains a day pass through Huntingburg, creating a physical “disconnect” between different parts of town.

Huntingburg was already planning an overpass that would route traffic over the tracks, the mayor said. But with Stellar Communities funding, the city can enhance the overpass to accommodate the city’s biking and walking route; the Heritage Trail. Improvements will allow walkers and cyclists a safe way to cross the tracks.

Stellar plans also call for workforce housing to address a local housing shortage.

Huntingburg’s home, Dubois County, traditionally has low unemployment because of a robust manufacturing base. Huntingburg plans to add about 40 rental units and another 40 single-family homes, providing affordable housing options for additional local employees. Further housing will be added in a second phase later.

Elsewhere in the Radius region, the City of Bedford created a “Stellar Foundation, Stellar Future!” concept which was awarded funding through Indiana’s Stellar Program.

Bedford’s proposal centers on the downtown area and includes improved gateways, murals, streetscapes and parking as well as the addition of a Limestone Trail, façade renovations and downtown business development. The total cost estimate for the proposal is \$19.8 million.

"Our focus is on the downtown area," Mayor Shawn Girgis has emphasized. "We want to see it be a destination where people want to be."

Girgis says the Stellar money will: ensure Bedford and Lawrence County are attractive to a trained and ready workforce; promote economic development; cultivate a vibrant downtown district; and enhance the city's quality of life.

The mayor added that the grant will transform the city's hub into a popular gathering place. The plans are to refashion the old JC Penney Building into the Stonegate Arts & Education Center.

With the help of the Indiana Department of Transportation, the old, dormant Milwaukee Depot has already been moved, and the renovated rail station will serve as a trailhead leading to an urban trail, public plaza, festival space, and senior rental housing.

The city has already completed new senior apartments, with facade restoration and downtown business development in the works to renovate retail space and

offer it to businesses at below-market lease rates that will gradually increase over time and allow for the purchase of the building.