

Summary Memo

Round 2 of Public Engagement

April 5, 2021

This document summarizes the second round of public engagement for Form Whitley County, which was conducted between March 8 and March 21, 2021. Input was gathered in the following ways:

- Whitley County Community Choices “drop in” event (Saturday, March 13, 11 am-3 pm).
- Online activities that mimicked the in-person event (available March 8-21).

The memo includes the following:

1. Purpose
2. Outreach and Publicity
3. Approach
4. Results
5. Participation
6. Next Steps

1. Purpose

Whitley County launched a process to update its comprehensive plan, called Form Whitley County, in July 2020. The County’s last comprehensive plan was adopted in 2011. One of the key inputs to the comprehensive plan process is insight from the community.

Through the first round of public engagement, held in Fall 2020, multiple opportunities across in-person and online platforms were provided for anyone who cares about the future of Whitley County to help inform the plan. This second round of engagement, held in March 2021, was designed to provide an opportunity to comment on the plan’s goals and recommendations, as well as a Draft Future Character and Land Use Plan

“Overall, I appreciate the time and effort that has gone into developing this plan.”

Community Choices participant

2. Outreach and Publicity

The Team capitalized on the existing networks established during the first round of engagement, including community groups and organizations, for outreach and publicity about the engagement opportunity.

Outreach and publicity included the following:

- A press release was distributed to local media outlets.
- 1,000 printed rack cards were printed and distributed throughout the County.
- Over 100 groups, organizations or individuals connected to networks of interest were contacted about the opportunity, including schools, nonprofit organizations, interest groups (e.g. Farm Bureau, business groups, etc.), local governments and others.
- Individuals who participated in the first round of engagement or who signed up to join the project mailing list were notified.

3. Approach

Form Whitley County's second round of public input included a socially distanced, county-wide event, held on Saturday, March 13, in addition to a virtual engagement window, available from Monday, March 8 through Sunday, March 21 on the project web page (FormWhitleyCounty.com).

The Community Choices in-person event featured interactive engagement materials with planning staff and consultant team members on-site to answer any questions. Activities were designed to allow for social distancing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and recommended public health guidelines. Online engagement opportunities were made available from March 8 through March 21 and included the same opportunities for input as the in-person event.

Engagement at the workshops and the accompanying online opportunity included three main exercises:

- A set of draft Recommendations for the plan, organized under six goals, with the opportunity for open-ended comment on each.
- A series of questions related to the plan Goals with the opportunity for open-ended responses.
- A draft future Character and Land Use Plan and character type descriptions with the opportunity for comment.

4. Results

Every comment provided was recorded (in participants' own words) in a database and has been provided on the Form Whitley County web page. Following are key takeaways from the input.

Part 1: Draft Plan Recommendations

In person or online, participants were asked to provide feedback for each of the draft plan Recommendations. Based on review, following are comments that may warrant modifications to the draft recommendations. In addition to the comments below, many recommendations received considerable support. If comments are *not* summarized below either commenters were generally supportive or public input is less likely to warrant significant change. (However, changes may still be made based on further planning team and Steering Committee review). The majority of comments

pertained to Goal 1: Focus Growth.

Goal 1: Focus Growth

1.1 Encourage growth in municipalities, adjacent to municipalities, near municipalities, or in areas with existing public utilities, using water and/or sewer capacity as a criterion in evaluating new development.

- Many participants thought that this was an important issue to address, signaling this recommendation could be made a 'high priority.'

1.2 Pay reasonable regard to this Plan, especially the Future Character and Land Use Plan, in zoning decisions.

- Some participants did not understand why the term "reasonable regard" was utilized in this recommendation. Providing an explanation to the terminology used may warrant more understanding/support for this recommendation.

1.3 Minimize land use conflicts by strengthening requirements for modifying the scale and character of development at the edges of areas with different land uses and considering open space, landscaping or separations between areas.

- Some participants wanted additional clarity in defining this recommendation.

1.4 Initiate a countywide alternative energy policy and recommend standards for alternative energy generation facilities.

- Some participants did not agree that this recommendation should be considered a 'high' priority.
- Several participants wanted additional clarity about what this would entail (e.g. what is meant by "standards.")

1.5 Protect rural character and agricultural land from development that has a suburban or urban character, or that erodes farmers' rights to farm.

- The responses for this recommendation elicited a strong response from some participants with some feeling that agricultural interests are being given more weight than is warranted.
- Some were concerned about the phrase "right to farm," which may need to be clarified or reworded to better describe the overall intent of this recommendation.

1.11 Amend the Whitley County Zoning Ordinance and Zone Map, Subdivision Code, and/or other regulations to support these Goals and Recommendations.

- There was some concern from participants that community input won't be prioritized in this process.

1.12 Assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of alternative development regulations and tools to achieve the Plan recommendations, such as performance zoning, Transfer of Development Rights, Form-Based Codes, etc.

- Many participants were unfamiliar with several of the specific “tools” mentioned in this recommendation, indicating a need to clarify the exact use and specifics of these tools specifically, or generalize more broadly.

1.13 Prepare a housing study that includes both market analysis and qualitative input by government officials, real estate agents, builders, developers, and other community members to assess needs and opportunities for new housing in the County, especially middle-income housing units.

- Many participants indicated strong support for this recommendation, signaling that a change in priority (from ‘low’ to ‘medium’) may be warranted for the final plan.

1.14 Encourage industrial and business park development along US30 between Columbia City and the Allen County line with design and landscaping that minimizes visual impacts to surrounding areas.

- Some participants indicated that this recommendation should also include the Larwill TIF District.

Goal 3: Nurture the Environment

3.2 Develop and implement a countywide storm water management and erosion control ordinance.

- The scope of this recommendation was unclear to some (for example one participant recommended a change from “countywide” to “City and subdivision,” as many agricultural districts may already have regulations that cover this recommendation).

3.4 Amend the Whitley County Zoning Ordinance to regulate alternative energy facilities, both small- and utility-scale, to mitigate negative effects to surrounding properties while recognizing the emerging importance of alternative energy sources.

- Some participants noted that this recommendation may overlap/relate to recommendation 1.4. Providing clarity to both recommendations and solidifying linkages may be warranted.

3.6 Monitor Indiana’s list of impaired waterbodies for Whitley County to identify changes and examine possible causes.

- Some participants wanted to see greater clarity with this recommendation, especially what is meant by “monitoring.”
- Other participants mentioned partnering with environmental organizations in the area to determine more specific County-level actions that can be taken in regards to the goal of this recommendation.

3.7 Strengthen the countywide recycling program through service enhancements and by encouraging companies that can use recycled materials.

- Some participants indicated interest in adding additional specific services to this recommendation (such as hazardous waste pick-up).

Goal 4: Advance Economic Development

4.4 Support residential development in appropriate locations to attract and retain residents in the local workforce.

- Some participants indicated a strong desire to make this recommendation a higher priority, as many of the agricultural-related recommendations hold a medium or high priority.

Part 2: Additional Questions

The following input summaries reflect the “additional questions” section of the engagement material.

What does “rural character” mean to you? “Suburban character”?

- Many participants defined “rural” areas as places that are scenic, with expansive land/property lots, including farmland/farms, areas that are more quiet than urban areas with environmental features and wildlife.
- Some participants noted that farms, to them, did not include more industrial forms of agriculture.
- Subsequently, “suburban” areas were indicative of more city-like living, subdivisions with lots of housing close together (“more intense residential development”) and more noise.

What types of homes and housing do you feel are needed, or would you like to see, in unincorporated Whitley County? (See Recommendation 1.13)

- Participants had a variety of housing needs that they identified through this question.
- Some participants wanted more single-family homes for low- and moderate-income families clustered together, with open space conserved nearby. Other participants wanted more “farm houses” or only homes built near existing towns/infrastructure.
- Some wanted no additional housing in the County at all.
- Additionally, some participants wanted a focus on senior living/senior care housing options.

What types of road improvements are needed to improve safety and accessibility in the County?

- Participants had conflicting views on whether to maintain gravel/dirt roads as is, or pave them as asphalt.
- “Chip and seal” methods for road maintenance were repeatedly named as not sufficient.
- Several participants mentioned safety concerns with US 30 and their desire to see it become an Interstate.

Are there any “missing” connections in the County road network that you think should be planned to be made? (See Recommendation 2.13)

- This question was repeatedly skipped or simply written in as “unknown” or “none” for the majority of participants.
- For those who did answer this question, roadway safety was a primary concern.
- No intersections or roadways were specifically named in this answer section.

Should erosion control / stormwater management be required for small scale (e.g. home on a one acre lot) projects? (See Recommendation 3.2)

- Many participants were concerned or wanted to see action taken on erosion control/stormwater management, but wanted to see it be “encouraged” and not be made a government regulation, per se.
- Others simply wrote “Yes” in agreement with the question’s suggested outcomes, or simply “no” for not in favor.
- The management of runoff was mentioned by a few participants as being of concern for this question.

What opinions would you have about a large-scale solar installation if one were to be constructed about a half mile from your home? (See Recommendation 3.4)

- Some participants encouraged solar installation near their neighborhoods, citing the need to source energy from non-intensive fossil fuel production.
- Others thought a solar energy installation would be “unattractive” and some participants questioned if the benefits would outweigh the costs.
- There were some strongly held opinions against the installation of wind-energy/wind-mills in the area.

Should the County focus on development and expansion of the existing industrial areas, or are new, different, or additional areas needed? Where? What kind? (See Recommendation 4.5)

- There was a strong desire to see development take place in existing areas, particularly where utilities are already located.
- For those who were in support of additional development in existing areas, focusing development around US 30 was a repeated theme.
- A few participants wanted to see new industrial areas added to expand the economic development opportunities of the County.
- A few others did not want to see any new development plans at all. (“Enough already.”)

What, if any, conflicts are there currently between industrial/business uses and residences, or other uses? (See Recommendation 4.6)

- Participants either had specific conflicts in mind when answering this question, or simply stated “Unknown” or “None that I’m aware of.”
- Some of the conflicts named by participants involved Lakefront property development, more “industrial farming”/CFOs and nearby neighbors, and the County’s Micropulse expansion.

Are there any segments of the population (e.g. young people, families, older adults) that would benefit from additional amenities in the County and what kinds of amenities are most needed? (See Recommendations 5.7 and 5.12)

- Many participants mentioned that parks/trails and “good jobs” would attract families and younger demographics.
- Some participants noted that “everyone” could benefit from more Internet/broadband expansion.
- Public transport, senior facilities, and free library access were also repeated ideas.

What concerns do you have about being able to live in Whitley County as you (or your children) get older? (See Recommendation 5.9)

- There were a diverse range of answers for this question. Many participants highlighted key points to address throughout the County over the course of the next few decades.
- Some participants were concerned about the need to provide both senior care facilities and childcare facilities to ensure everyone’s needs are met.
- Others were concerned that the County may be “left behind” either in technological upgrades, economic development advancements, or overall quality of life initiatives.
- Additionally, some participants discussed their concerns that the rural character of the County may be jeopardized as new development takes place.

Part 3: Future Character and Land Use Mapping Exercise

Below is the summary of key themes that emerged from the future character and land use mapping exercise.

- The majority of comments received centered on where to distinguish between Mixed Rural, Rural-Conventional and Rural-Traditional. For example, specific recommendations were made in Jefferson Township both to increase the amount of Mixed Rural and to decrease it, with differing opinion on where the “line” between character areas should be drawn.
- Making clear distinctions between the character of Suburban Living and Mixed Rural as well as between the different Rural character types was stated by several people as important.
- Some participants pointed out places where existing residential development is not indicated on the map and should be.

- Several people commented about minimizing new development near the lakes.
- Some participants expressed concern about CFOs in certain parts of the County or in general.
- Some people commented that the colors on the map were hard to distinguish for some character types.
- Some participants expressed distrust in County government in taking resident input into consideration and using the character and land use map for decision-making in the future.
- Some participants simply indicated that the map generally looks appropriate to them.
- A few participants commented that they do not want any character or land use map for the County and are concerned about infringement on private property rights.

5. Participation

Between the two engagement periods, over 200 people were involved in the planning process with nearly 3,000 unique comments collected. For reference, the previous comprehensive plan process had 94 people who participated and the goal for this plan was to build upon that participation.

6. Next Steps

Following this final round of public engagement, the planning team will integrate the public's comments into a working draft plan. The plan will be released on the project website (www.FormWhitleyCounty.com) in late-Spring 2021.