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Hamilton County communities investing in projects to promote economic growth

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Written by
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A new town amphitheater in Fishers.

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So many things in Carmel.

In these days of tight public budgets, it's rare to see such a concentration of communities [investing](#) in projects designed to spur more growth and development. But it's happening on a grand scale in Hamilton County.

Today, Gov. Mitch Daniels will help break ground for a \$45 million Grand Park in Westfield. Earlier this week, the town of Fishers unveiled plans to spend up to \$5 million on a new outdoor amphitheater and trail system.

And Carmel continues to develop its new Carmel City Center, the Arts & Design District and a major new roundabout interchange at 96th and Keystone -- all public projects designed to spur private investment and make the city a destination point for visitors and employers looking for a new home for corporate headquarters.

"We feel strongly about quality of life, which is a huge factor in business retention and expansion," said Brenda Myers, executive director of the Hamilton County Visitors Bureau.

The north suburban county ranks as the third-most-visited county in Indiana, she said, behind Marion and Lake counties. Each year, Hamilton County averages 1.8 million visitors, who spend \$263.7 million when they come. The biggest attractions are shopping and dining, concerts at the Klipsch Music Center in Noblesville and



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Conner Prairie in Fishers.

But throughout the year, many more come for events such as this summer's National Softball Association Girls Fast Pitch World Series, which drew 4,000 athletes and 12,000 spectators to venues throughout the county.

Today's groundbreaking in Westfield is for a 350-acre project that will include 32 soccer fields and baseball and softball diamonds, to be built for \$45 million.

The city will issue bonds to finance the work, and Mayor Andy Cook has said he has no plans to raise local taxes. Instead, he says he thinks the park will draw thousands more athletes and their families, who will stay [overnight](#) for weekend tournaments and spend money at local restaurants.

Political opponents had criticized that plan during the recent election season. But Cook won re-election easily, indicating town residents support the idea.

Tourism officials agree.

"We think projects should benefit residents first and visitors second," said Myers, "but it's a win-win when everybody benefits."

Surveys of visitors have shown that those coming to Hamilton County are typically upper-scale in income, well-educated and loyal -- which means they come back many times, and not just to visit family.

"That's why all this development makes sense," Myers said. "Once we get them here, they are very pleased and they really like to visit."

The latest example is the news out of Fishers: a new outdoor amphitheater designed to draw thousands of people to musical and arts events in downtown Fishers.

The town plans to build it next year -- at an estimated cost of \$4 million to \$5 million -- along with a multipurpose trail to serve as a spark for future development in an area that has suffered from a sprawl-induced identity crisis.

The expanded trail will make it possible for many residents who live near the town complex along 116th Street to walk, jog or bike to community events.

"Just driving around Fishers, we have more people getting out of their [cars](#) and enjoying the outdoors," said Heike Baird, a 23-year-old resident who supports the plan. "An outdoor arts venue and an improved location to walk and run both sound right in line with what Fishers residents might enjoy."

In making the announcement Wednesday, Fishers is reversing a historic trend to hold back from major public investments, preferring to let the town grow at a pace dictated by the market for suburban

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"This really is a different philosophy for us. We are going from managing our growth to fostering it," said Fishers Town Manager Scott Fadness. "Financially, we are in good shape, and it's time for some investment."

Plans call for the amphitheater to be built on the north side of the elliptical-shaped property where the Fishers Town Hall is situated off 116th Street near the railroad tracks. The venue, which could be used for concerts and other artistic performances, would be designed as a gathering place for Fishers residents.

"In the past, the summer concert series has drawn close to 4,000 people to downtown," said Fishers Town Councilman David George. "It's obvious that residents enjoy being downtown, and the improvements we are making will make it the heartbeat of Fishers with year-round programming."

Additionally, the town plans to build a trail system that would meander through the immediate downtown area and connect with adjacent subdivisions. The idea would be to encourage more folks to walk or ride their bikes to a congested commercial district that has struggled to attract new business in the past.

The plan is like baby steps compared with the last grand idea to create a new Fishers downtown.

A few years ago, a Cleveland-based developer had proposed a massive reconstruction of the area around 116th Street, west of I-69 -- an elaborate plan to purchase existing homes (some of the oldest homes in town) and rebuild with a mix of new homes, townhomes, condos and businesses.

But the developer backed off when homeowners expressed a reluctance to sell their properties for the \$100 million idea and town officials were equally reluctant to use eminent [domain](#) to take the homes by force.

Plans call for construction on the amphitheater and the trail system to begin next year. The town recently received a \$500,000 grant from the Hamilton County Convention and Visitors Bureau to help fund the project. The rest will come from town surplus, and Fadness said there is no tax increase planned to pay for the projects.

"This sounds like a responsible plan," said Baird, an Anderson native who moved to Fishers to be closer to her job at Wiley Publishing. "Nobody's suggesting that Fishers is going to have the next Palladium here."

"Fishers residents won't experience a tax increase but will benefit from the addition of a nice outdoor arts venue and improved trails."

Call Star reporter Dan McFeely at (317) 444-6253.

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