



COMMUNITY OF THE YEAR  
**VALPARAISO**

**J**ulie Gaskell, an assistant vice president at the Greater Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, has a 23-year-old son who left the city to go to college and now lives out of state. “It’s amazing to me. When he comes to town, he always comments on what’s new in Valparaiso. He remembers when we moved here 16 years ago and what it was like. He compliments the changes and how neat it looks.” To make such an impact on any young person is impressive, she adds.

Dale Clapp, an executive vice president for Citizens Financial Bank, grew up in nearby Hobart before attending Valparaiso University. Like many young people, the last place he planned on beginning his life after college was in that same community. Thus, he lived and worked in neighboring LaPorte County – before returning more than a decade ago.

“Dramatic is probably an understatement,” Clapp offers in describing the changes. “So much has happened in the last five, six years. For the business community, it really is about cooperation. The volunteerism and the true commitment you get from people is just above and beyond. There is a true sense of commitment and caring.”

Gaskell’s boss, local chamber president Rex Richards, lived in Valparaiso throughout much of the 1990s and commuted to another community. He was already a fan, but admitted, “When I left, I thought I would never come back to Northwest Indiana. Six years later, I got a call and the person said ‘you have to come back and look at Valparaiso.’”

“When I did, I was absolutely shocked. There was a whole new east side of town, a vibrancy, new subdivisions, new homes. When I came back, it was like a whole new city. I wanted to be a part of this.”

### **Regaining the momentum**

Mayor Jon Costas grew up in Valparaiso. While we talk in the downtown chamber office (an office supply house and department store were among its former uses), he reminisces about taking piano lessons there many years ago with his brother. Today, he sings and plays guitar in a band and competes in marathons and triathlons, but reserves most of his energies for making his hometown the best it can be.

Costas lost his first bid for mayor in 1999 by less than 200 votes. The Costas Plan that he used during his successful 2003 run against a 20-year incumbent was adapted into the city’s strategic blueprint.

“The community got kind of sleepy. Nothing was changing; we weren’t moving ahead,” he recalls. “When I ran the second time, I was very specific about what I thought needed to change. The roads were a mess. Eastgate (the eastern gateway into the community and Valparaiso University) was an embarrassment to the city. The shopping center on the north side of town was 60% vacant. When we put it into a document, that really hit a lot of chords with people saying, ‘Now I see what really needs to be done.’”

A starting point was a 127-year-old police station that had a closet serving as the evidence locker. One option was to spend \$9 million to construct a new headquarters in the middle of a green space. The alternative chosen was to purchase an older building in the downtown area for \$4 million and renovate it to meet the community’s needs for decades.

“We kept it in the downtown and got rid of an old building that was very visible,” Costas explains. “We were all about making the old new again; that is the highest priority. It is the hardest thing to do, and the most important thing to do. If you do that well, you will have natural growth. You cannot let the old drag you down, because you’re only as strong as your weakest point.”

Creatively frugal is one of the five core values guiding the mayor and his administration. (Also listed on the back of his business card are honestly accountable, surprisingly responsive, boldly proactive and respectfully compassionate.) “Creatively frugal,” he says, “means you’re financially and fiscally responsible, but you dream big.”



**Mayor Jon Costas says the city has been able to move forward through the combined efforts of many people in both the public and private sectors.**



**Expansion of this Valparaiso church is just one sign of the continued growth in the community.**

### **Cleaning up the corridors**

Gateway is commonly defined as something that serves as an entrance or means of access. In the minds of Valparaiso leaders, several of those gateways to the community were at least partially closed. The goal: create inviting entryways into the rest of the city.

The aforementioned Eastgate area featured an awkward triangle intersection that led to long lines of traffic. City officials say the roundabout that opened in 2007 was the first in the region. A grant (one of many the city has secured from state and federal sources) from the Indiana Department of Transportation covered two-thirds of the costs, with the Valparaiso Redevelopment Commission paying the rest. Improved traffic flow and safety have been the results.

The redevelopment group also purchased additional property, constructing a roadway that connects with a new university entrance. Design and building standards along the corridor will help ensure a consistent and pleasing look for years to come.

As has been the case on many projects, private sector development followed the public investment (which also included tax abatements to local businesses). A \$34 million apartment/retail complex, Uptown East, was 100% pre-leased prior to its opening this fall. A new hotel and bank are among the other business additions.

“When you have good government leadership, the private dollars follow the infrastructure improvements,” Richards relates. Forty million dollars (\$32 million from grants) in public infrastructure investment has led to nearly \$700 million in private funding and the creation of an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 jobs.

A strong indicator of the progress is reflected in Clapp’s banking industry. When he was working out of Michigan City, his employer looked at potential Porter County/Valparaiso expansion and determined “it just didn’t make any sense” at that time.

“We’ve had several new banks in town over the last five years – in a timeframe in which a lot of banks were stopping

bricks and sticks and going to leased facilities, online banking,” Clapp adds. “They see that excitement, that adrenalin, that growth opportunity happening here in this market.”

### **Northern exposure**

While Valparaiso serves as the county seat for Porter, that same designation was also given to a dated strip mall along the northern entrance to the community. The city partnered with a local developer on a three-year project that evolved into Cumberland Crossing – a retail center with a village-style environment that includes walking paths, seating areas and patios.

The Urschel family – longtime residents and a major employer with its nearby Urschel Laboratories facility (a global leader in manufacturing precision food processing equipment) – elevated an already successful undertaking with a multimillion dollar contribution to a new \$15 million YMCA. Serving as the Cumberland Crossing anchor, the facility has attracted an amazing 11,000 members in a community of just under 30,000 residents.

Costas notes, “Sometimes you go out to solve problems (removing the old and revitalizing with the new), but the net result is even better than you ever expected, and that’s clearly what happened here.”

### **Come on down(town)**

Downtown may be less of an entry into the city, but certainly serves as a focal point for businesses, residents and visitors. Infrastructure investments were critical in helping upgrade the look, while still maintaining a historical feel. Extensive streetscaping, a façade incentive program, new sidewalks, decorative brickwork and streetlights, and enhancements to electrical, sound and water systems were among the many improvements.

Popular locally owned restaurants came into existence

**Task Force Tips, which recently moved into this new headquarters, is among many local business success stories.**





**Surgical tech classes are just one of the focuses at a rapidly growing Ivy Tech Community College campus.**

**The partnership between Valparaiso University and the city is carried out in many forms. Large numbers of students and faculty are active in the community.**



after the addition of 10 new downtown liquor licenses. Other businesses have located in the central part of the city and existing operations have updated their buildings. There is an energy present that Costas and others were seeking.

“Downtown is the heart of the city, the heart of the county,” the mayor shares. “It must be vibrant; it must be inviting. We must make it a destination place.”

Another partnership will produce a new downtown park that will host the farmers’ market, summer movie nights and much more. A special events director for the city is solely focused on the downtown area.

Richards offers that some beautiful homes near downtown bring more people into the area to shop and eat. Costas foresees more high-density developments, with town homes and condominiums

evolving out of some existing buildings in the next few years.

### **Healthy opportunities**

The health care industry is attracting investment and jobs. A new 225-bed Porter Hospital along Indiana 49 will be a \$210 million replacement for the existing downtown location. South Bend’s Memorial Hospital announced and recently reaffirmed its commitment to a new entry into the market with a \$100 million facility and 900 new jobs. Meanwhile, the Entech Innovation Center is an incubator focused on IV diagnostic testing.

“We want to create an environment where entrepreneurs have access to the medical devices pipeline,” says Matt Murphy, the city’s economic development manager. They can use the platform of the incubator to grow their businesses.” Costas believes that the narrow focus is the right fit for a city the size of Valparaiso.

Helping supply current and future medical workers is part of the mission at the new Ivy Tech Community College campus. Cindy Hall, executive director of resource development, enthusiastically details some of the recent developments.

“The state invested \$30 million to build a new campus because they saw the growth in Valparaiso. The students were busting out of the seams at the old, renovated racquetball club,” she says. “In addition, there has been the financial support of the community. Ivy Tech went up and everything started popping up all around it.

“We’ve got a waiting list for the nursing program, and surgery tech (which used to be housed at the Michigan City campus) is also now at capacity. Every health care facility takes in our students for clinicals,” Hall adds.

### **University leadership**

As in many communities, Ivy Tech is playing an ever-increasing critical role. The longtime standard bearer in education and close interaction with the community is Valparaiso University.

From its signatures facilities – the \$80 million Harre Union (honoring longtime university president Alan Harre) that observed its grand opening earlier this year being the latest example – to its distinguished programs in law, liberal arts and more, the 4,000-plus students and more than 800 faculty and staff become entwined with the city.

The following is quickly offered when asked to describe the



As of early October, the new YMCA in Valparaiso boasted nearly 11,000 members. The facility on the north side of the city, made possible by a large private donation, features amenities for residents of all ages.

relationship:

Murphy: "It's immeasurable. The university is part of the fabric of our community. It attracts great quality students from all over the country."

Richards: "When people get transferred to Northwest Indiana to work at major corporations, they look at the quality of life. I'm prejudiced, but we have the finest quality of life and the university is one of the major components of that."

Costas, who earned his law degree there: "There are so many facets. Financially, it creates durability and stability. The university brings resources, particularly when I think of the many people who serve on our boards. It brings a lot of energy, diversity of thought, people and cultures. It helps us grow."

Clapp: "The campus has changed and progressed so much (since his graduation in the mid-1980s). Alumni continue to remember what it was like when they were in school. The most recent campaign raised \$220 million. It's the gift that just doesn't stop giving."

And in a true example of education collaboration for the betterment of all, Hall tells of a unique opportunity for students. Because of the dramatic nursing shortage, Ivy Tech nursing graduates can transition automatically to Valparaiso University – and still pay the Ivy Tech tuition rates. The state participates in making up the difference.

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Improving the infrastructure was one of the keys for enhancing downtown and several entryways into the city.

### Success stories

Business diversity is another strength. In addition to some of the companies already cited:

- Task Force Tips, a manufacturer and distributor of high-performance, fire-suppression equipment, started with a napkin drawing of an automatic nozzle. The company recently completed a \$10 million, 60,000-square-foot expansion
- Family Express is a regional convenience store and fueling center operation, with 52 locations and 475 employees
- Two companies – Livermercial (online sales and marketing) and Omnitech Systems (medical devices) – were recently named to the second annual Indiana Companies to Watch list

There are many other organizations to tout, but Clapp clarifies that it's the people behind those businesses that make a difference. "Our boards and civic organizations never have to worry about finding people who are active and want to give back. They include so many business members. I think that's pretty special."

### Dollars and sense

From the public sector perspective, all of this has been accomplished without adding new taxes. Assessed value has increased by 31% since 2004 through strategic annexations and the additional business developments. There is the previously mentioned \$32 million in grants secured in a most competitive atmosphere. And, the city has a rainy day fund of approximately \$2.6 million.

***Congratulations, Valparaiso!  
We are proud to be a part of the  
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Mr. Mayor, how do you do that?

“When you have a plan and identify the projects you want to do, you’re more aggressive.” He provides the example of work needed on a fire station and some stimulus funds that would be a proper fit. “We jumped on it. We have a good track record. We know what they wanted to see, and we were very responsive.

“Because we have a plan, we go after projects that fit the plan,” Costas continues. “It’s a sense of urgency and being results focused.”

The rainy day proceeds, Costas points out, come primarily from unappropriated local Economic Development Income Tax funds. The money is not going to be spent simply because it is there, when other means can be found to pay for necessary projects.

Richards states that while the counties surrounding Indianapolis have seen the largest share of population growth and income expansion, Porter County has the fifth highest per capita income in the state.

No one is resting, however, on past accomplishments or current honors.

Costas has established a top priority over the next five years as “improving the corridor along Route 30 (southern part of the city). A lot of people, that is all they see of Valparaiso. It needs to change significantly. We need to come up with a

comprehensive plan so that those people who just pass by will say, ‘Wow, there’s something special about this city.’ ”

## Taking care of the people

Costas talks often about the five pillars of the community – business, education, faith, government and nonprofit. City administrator Bill Oeding summarizes how they work together in forming a strong unit.

His example: a situation in a redevelopment area on the east side of town in which an apartment complex was going to be bought and some people with disabilities and low incomes were going to be displaced.

“There was a call on Thursday afternoon; a meeting was set up on Friday; at 7 a.m. Monday, there were 22 people sitting around a table (the table, incidentally, was not big enough to handle the turnout of various agency representatives), and they started solving the problem. Within three weeks, they had the problem solved (with funding and alternative housing for all impacted).

“It was an amazing process for me, and I was lucky to be a part of it. People came together with this can-do attitude,” he concludes. “People normally competing to some degree for non-profit dollars came together and said ‘we’re going to solve this problem.’ I sat there and was grateful to be a part of this community.”



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