Goal: Positive perception

How area residents answer one simple question likely holds the key to improving public perception of Richmond and Wayne County.

Fill in the blank: "For me, this community is positively ...."

Steve Borchers, executive director of the Wayne County Foundation, said that from his perspective, one answer is "positively giving."

He said some might say the community is positively industrious, healthy, educational, creative or memorable, and others might say it is positively terrible or trashy.

"It's kind of a fun way to get you talking about what the problems are," Borchers said. "If it's positively awful, then what do you mean?"

At one time or another, many have heard negative comments about the community. Those comments, Borchers said, are sometimes inaccurate and definitely not helpful from a community building perspective.

Borchers is the leader of the Positive Place Initiative committee that aims to change the public perception of the area and to improve the community's self-esteem by redefining the conversation and how people work together.

"It's not at all any attempt to whitewash or gloss over or sidestep any of the challenges we face," Borchers said. "It's a way to help be more productive and positive and supportive of a vibrant economy and community."

The Positive Place Initiative is one of several efforts being undertaken by the Mayor's Council on Economic Vitality. The issue of raising the community's self-esteem and positively changing the conversation began in September 2010, said committee member Rob Zinkan, vice chancellor for external affairs at Indiana University East.

The initiative was spurred by a 2009 feasibility study relating to potential opportunities for the community in the life s ciences industry that said, "Despite its positive assets and depth of talent, a recurring theme suggested by the interviewees to the project team is that (Richmond/Wayne County) suffers from a self-esteem problem. This attitude

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suppresses the community's collective efforts and motivational spirit, and it creates a fear-of-failure culture that sometimes feeds on itself."

The reaction of committee members, Zinkan said, was "Let's address it head on in a structured, systematic way."

In their research, the committee learned that the Knight Foundation's "Soul of the Community" survey, which was conducted between 2008 and 2010, that communities with the highest level of "resident attachment" -- a person's passion for where he or she lives -- also had the highest rates of gross domestic product (GDP) growth. GDP per capita is often considered an indicator of an area's standard of living.

Fredrika Joyner, associate professor of business administration and organization behavior at IU East, said the community can be an important variable in attracting businesses that bring jobs and in attracting workers, such as professors and medical personnel, to a community.

The committee's research also looked at two Indiana projects: the "aspiration" project in Shelby County and the "Welcoming Community Project" in Columbus and Bartholomew County.

Joyner worked on the Columbus project, which focused on making the community more welcoming to potential employees of the area's large employers and is involved in the local initiative. In July 2011, she

received an Indiana Campus Compact Scholarship of Engagement Grant of $3,000 to help organize the effort and create a plan of action.

The next step is to learn more about the community from its residents, to hear what they think makes it special.

"A community is just full of stories. Our goal is to pull those positive stories to the foreground," Joyner said. "One of the ways people start connecting with each other is to share these experiences, understand one another's reality."

Committee members Mary Walker, executive director of the Wayne County Convention and Tourism Bureau, and Nancy Green, executive director for external relations at Ivy Tech Community College, are overseeing the story collecting.

"It's imperative to base any future strategies on real information and that's where story mining comes in," Walker said. "The only way we're going to change it is to

understand ... to get a sense of how people are feeling and why."

In seeking stories, a website has been established for input at www.iue.edu/ctl/survey/ppi.htm. There area residents of all ages are invited to fill in the blanks:

"For me, this community is positively .... because...". Participants will be invited to share a brief story that illustrates their statement and contribute some demographic information.

Residents, businesses and organizations are asked to share the link with everyone they know so that many people can participate.

"My hope is that we have thousands of these. Everyone has a voice," Walker said. "We want good, bad and indifferent. We want how they're really feeling.

"It should be amazing what we find out. Some of these things we may know. Some o f these things may be "Ah-hah!" moments. It'll be interesting to see what filters out of this," Walker said.

Borchers, too, is eager to see the results.

"It's a pretty creative way of assessing, getting people's thoughts and opinions without sending out a survey. It's providing c ontent for what we envisioned, this idea of creating a brand around 'positively ...'."

Joyner said communities can hire

consultants to tell them what their "brand" should be. This process honors the experience in the community and is more organic, she said.

Part of the information they seek is what stories people tell, what rituals have meaning for them and what are symbols of the community culture.

Once the stories are collected, Joyner said the group will analyze the information for common themes. She expects there to be areas for improvement and areas that are already positive. From there, the group and the community can move forward to create "an intentional culture" that brings out the positive.

"It's just amazing the power of attitude. If we don't feel good about ourselves, how can we get others to feel good about us?" Walker said. "Attitude has a tremendous effect on economic growth ... and we all need to be mindful of that. We all have the ability to be a part of the economic development team. It's all of us that makes

a difference."

Borchers said the "positively ..." idea is accessible to any organization or company in the community to adapt. He said that one of the United Way of the Whitewater V alley's vision councils that relates to education also is awaiting the information gathered by the Positive Place Initiative. He said that group wants to create clear standards to help guide healthy behaviors for children and youth and they think that some of those answers can be found amid the stories and data being gathered.

Additionally, the Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce on Monday will introduce a project called the Bright Side, w hich will focus on Wayne County's stories of success, past and present, publicizing the information through billboards, TV spots and a web page.

"It'll all fit together," Borchers said.

Positive Place

• The Positive Place Initiative is seeking area residents' answers to the question, "For me, this community is positively ... ."

• To participate, visit the website www.iue.edu/ctl/survey/ppi.htm .

• The Positive Place Initiative committee encourages all ages to offer their thoughts and hopes that individuals, businesses and groups will share the web address so everyone has an opportunity to have his or her voice heard.

More

Steve Borchers