

\$6M in READI funding for regional projects

Includes housing, preschool

BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG
lslong@fpccmedia.com

In what's expected to be the final presentations, over \$6 million in Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) grants were approved Dec. 6



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Shelby Bowen, owner of Rebar Development in Fishers, plans to invest in the Gatke Warehouse & Lofts in the city of Warsaw.

for a preschool, civic center, housing, and mixed-use downtown developments in Northeast Indiana.

The Northeast Indiana Regional Development Authority (RDA) approved the financial support during its meeting in Huntington.

The RDA's investment is expected to leverage nearly \$45 million in additional state, public, and private support.

• \$59,400 for Southern Wells Community Schools Preschool. Kim Conner, Southern Wells Junior/Senior High School principal, described how renovations inside the school would provide space for a much-needed early learning center that would open in August.

The project will require an additional teacher and aide, furniture for children, technology for an additional classroom, playground area at the high school, and safety measures installed for both the high school and preschoolers.

In addition to providing learning opportunities for 40 4- and 5-year-olds, the center would also give high school students interested in teaching some training in curriculum and socialization.

"We can also incorporate the early childhood education pathway into the high school curriculum for our students to have another option for a pathway for college, a pathway for graduation and to also help us get more kids into the teaching profession," Conner told RDA members.

The Southern Wells school district does not have any licensed preschool options currently.

Pamela Beckford, president and CEO of United Way of Wells County, said currently

about 54% of young children in the county are ready for kindergarten, but parents in Southern Wells must drive their children to preschool programs in Jay, Marion and Blackford counties.

The preschool would receive \$129.80 a week for families who qualify and receive On My Way vouchers, while families that don't receive vouchers will pay \$80 a month.

• \$500,000 for the Churubusco Civic Center, a construction project that will convert a vacant PNC Bank Building at the heart of downtown Churubusco into a civic center. The nearly 14,000-square-foot building will be the new home of the Churubusco Public Library, doubling its space, as well as an after-school program for at-risk youth that will include cooking classes once a full kitchen is installed, and a meeting room/classroom that will be used by Churubusco Chamber of Commerce, Small Business Administration, and Smith-Green Community Schools for entrepreneurship adult education opportunities.

Madalyn Sade-Bartl, clerk-treasurer for the town of Churubusco, said, "We wanted something that would be a community hub, because right now Churubusco lacks a community hub."

The \$2.4 million project, which not only will revitalize Churubusco's downtown, will also benefit residents of Allen, Noble and Whitley counties, as well as provide space for Churubusco's senior residents, she said.

Since PNC left the building about two years ago, several community events that previously were held in the parking lot have not been able to take place, she said.

The town is creating a 501(c)(3) so it can buy the building and be eligible for full grants and PNC can get tax benefits. The goal is to buy the building by the end of January, with construction bids going out around March and the library moving in in January 2024. The building would open to the public in February 2024.

• \$1.25 million for the Gatke Warehouse & Lofts in the city of Warsaw, a mixed-use development that will add nearly 27,000 square feet of office and retail space, entrepreneurship and research space, and more than 70 apartments in downtown Warsaw.

Shelby Bowen, owner of Rebar Development in Fishers, said he has been working on the project for about three years and his company would provide private investment in the project. "A hundred percent of the projects that I've been involved in since 2005, are public-private partnerships," Bowen said.

The Indiana Economic Development Corporation has awarded it redevelopment tax credits, he said. This \$19.5 million project on city-owned land will be a catalyst for transformation, Bowen said. Next to new construction of the lofts, which are expected to be ready in fall/winter of 2024, Rebar will renovate an existing warehouse for the commercial space.

"This has been an old historic site that the



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

Developer Kevan Biggs talks about an Ossian housing development.

city has held since 1991," Warsaw Mayor Joseph Thallerer said. "Environmental issues have created, obviously, significant problems in an old industrial area along the railroad track."

There is significant demolition work that will need to occur. "It's going to be a catalytic program for that (nearby) TIF district," he said.

• \$3 million for Ossian North Development, a workforce attainable housing project that includes 113 single-family homes and 48 single-family villa homes. Additionally, there will be new infrastructure including a lift station and increased size of water and sewer lines, which will allow for sustainable growth of the community at a lower cost for future development.

Josh Barkley, president of the Ossian Town Council, said it is a public-private partnership between the city of Ossian and the Biggs Group, the latter a longtime investor in Ossian.

Ossian, a town of 3,300 residents, enjoyed growth 20 years ago but has gone stagnant since then, Barkley said. It has seen a 2.68% decline in population in the past two years.

"One of the major things, industry in our town, are talking about is housing because a lot of the major employers in Ossian their employees are having to travel from 40 minutes away. And they're wanting them to be more centrally located," Barkley said.

The community had not had new housing since 2005 until this year when a national home builder bought all available lots in a development and put homes on each one. "Now we're back again to no available housing," Chad Kline, executive director at Wells County Economic Development Corporation. The city wants to ensure that multiple options exist.

Kevan Biggs said they're been searching about five years for available land and only within the last year was a Florida resident ready to sell. It will have a phased approach with 51 lots in the first phase. Construction on the \$17.66 million project would be completed in spring 2024.

• \$2.7 million for Little River Lofts, a downtown Huntington mixed-use development of 49,500 square feet, including the Annex building and Opera Block and 40-plus downtown housing units with retail and commercial spaces. The facilities are designed to create a western anchor complementing the

RCA-funded UB Block's eastern edge.

Huntington Mayor Richard Strick said this would be the second phase of downtown development. Dec. 6's meeting was being held in the 1889 Odd Fellows Hall, part of the three-building UB Block on Franklin Street that was saved from demolition and was a Phase 1 development, Strick pointed out, a testament to investment that started with Regional Cities and now is continuing through READI, with hopes that the Indiana General Assembly will fund a READI 2.0 when it meets in session at the start of the year.

The \$11.5 million Little River Lofts would contribute to downtown vibrancy and provide housing for workers and others, Strick said. The project would be in the former First National Bank, which has been vacant since 2015. The proposed design would pay homage to the early structure. The smaller footprints in the retail spaces will make it less risky for entrepreneurs entering the market, he said.

Since the Regional Cities investment in the UB Block, the city has seen 12 private acquisitions and redevelopment projects downtown, four public redevelopments and 12 new or relocated businesses, Strick said.

This new batch of READI funds comes just days after the RDA approved over \$15 million for five other catalytic projects for the region.

Through READI, 17 regions across the state that represent all 92 counties are moving forward with projects and programs designed to enhance Indiana's regions for current and future generations of Hoosiers. Collectively, the state's \$500 million investment is expected to yield an additional \$9.86 billion public, private, and nonprofit dollars invested (19.72:1 investment leverage ratio) in enhancing Indiana's quality of life, quality of place, and quality of opportunity.

"Northeast Indiana remains one of the most collaborative regions in the state, but what makes it so special is the communities that comprise it. This round of investments supports growth infrastructure and addresses key needs in a number of those communities to help advance our region's positive momentum," said Jeff Turner, board president of the RDA.



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

The former First National Bank building in Huntington would be the site of a lofts project.