

## *How Fishers Is Boosting Hamilton County Numbers*

By Ellen Collier

Hamilton County, Ind., has experienced growth in its overall number of paid employees, employee payroll amounts and its total number of establishments since 2008. Payroll has increased as much as 106 percent in the education sector, 33 percent in the healthcare sector and 30 percent in the management of companies and enterprises. In the forefront of this massive overall growth is the city of Fishers.

Ranked as the No. 1 city for families in the U.S. by the Learning Channel in 2011, Fishers has contributed to the overall growth of Hamilton County in the past decade through its focus on bringing in local and large corporate businesses.

Less than three years ago, Fishers began the “Launch Fishers” campaign in order to attract more business to the area. Since that time, a storage space in the basement of the city’s library now houses over 200 businesses consisting of more than 300 members.

According to John Weingardt, vice president of the city council and former president of the town council, businesses are flocking to Fishers and Hamilton county due to high tax abatements, public-private partnerships, and the generally high quality of life offered by the city.

“We’ve been nursing strategies to attract business, especially here in fishers, since I came on the council just because that’s my niche,” said Weingardt.

Downtown Fishers operates as a tax increments financing (TIF) district, meaning that future gains in taxes are used to subsidize current improvements. TIF districts allow governments to improve distressed areas by making improvements to existing structures such as roads, and they also give tax incentives to businesses. This strategy has turned green

space downtown into parking, retail and apartment space, and brought in businesses such as Sun King brewery and the Jarden Corporation, an international leader in consumer products.

Contrary to this growth in Hamilton County, however, a Ball State study found that TIF districts are “associated with less employment, less taxable income and slightly higher tax rates.” This, some argue, is due to new businesses coming in and disturbing the tax rates of existing businesses in the area.

Still, Fishers has the development boom to back up its strategy.

Weingardt explained that Fishers has \$16 million in its general fund due to “good conservative leadership” over the years, as well as “tremendous borrowing capacity.” Fishers has the lowest debt per capita in Hamilton County as well.

But even with steady growth over the past several years, certain sectors are experiencing inevitable leveling-off. After experiencing that 106 percent increase in payroll between 2008 and 2012, the education sector is now bringing up critical funding issues in Fishers.

Because the residential and housing market is maturing due to families staying for longer periods of time, fewer new families are moving to the area to attend schools. This leaves Fishers with less school funding.

“Regardless of whether you send your kids to a private school or not, your public school and its ability to serve the community is important to keep housing values high,” said Weingardt.

Even with the city purchasing \$1.2 million in land from the Hamilton Southeastern school district in order to prevent teacher layoffs, the school still has arguably the lowest per pupil funding in the state.

Weingardt and other integral members of the Launch Fishers campaign hope that bringing in these corporate businesses will help the housing and education sectors from leveling-off, but ultimately funding is determined by the statehouse.