

SECTION 2 HISTORY

Before we develop a plan for our future, we should examine our past. Since Evansville's rich history is an important aspect of the community, it should be reflected in our master plan. The following is a brief history of development in Evansville.

LOCAL HISTORY

In the pioneer era, transportation was forced onto the inland river system by the dense, unbroken forest west of the Allegheny Mountains. By 1800, the region's aspiring cities were all located on the rivers - Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis. Growth was hampered, however, by an elemental fact of nature. It was very easy to move cargoes downstream; it was very difficult to bring other cargoes back upstream.

The first steamboat on the inland rivers journeyed from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in late 1811. Small and primitive though it was, compared to the later floating palaces, this steamboat heralded a transportation revolution. With its power exponentially greater than what could be provided by muscle or sail, it meant that, for the first time, it would be almost as easy to move people and merchandise upstream as down.

This new industry would guarantee wealth to those who were wise enough to acquire likely town sites on navigable streams. One of the many such individuals who made his way to the federal land office at Vincennes after the spring thaw of 1812 was Hugh McGary, Jr., a resident of Gibson County. On terms of \$2.00 per acre with four years to pay, McGary, on March 27, 1812, purchased just shy of 441 acres on a horseshoe bend of the Ohio River.

If the Ohio was the early 19th century equivalent of an interstate highway, Pigeon Creek would have been the equivalent of a county road. If McGary hoped to purchase land including the intersection of the Creek and the River, however, he was disappointed. That area had already been claimed by, General Washington Johnston, a land speculator from Vincennes. McGary's tract lay to the east, at the "one o'clock" position of the horseshoe bend. It was roughly bounded by present-day Fulton Avenue north to Lloyd Expressway, then east to Baker Avenue, then south along a line that becomes Parrett Street, and finally, west along the line of Washington Avenue to the riverbank.

Although McGary's land lacked the advantage of a waterway junction, it did possess a number of positive features. It was located up on a bluff, which McGary thought was high above all possible flood. Unfortunately, he has been proved wrong on several occasions, most notably in 1937 when 500 city blocks of Evansville were under water. It was more certain that the low-lying thumb of Kentucky across the Ohio was unsuitable for the location of a town that would directly compete for immigration and development. The nearest rival was Henderson, Kentucky, seven miles downstream.

Other towns, such as Newburgh, were being platted at the same time; therefore, McGary needed to persuade prospective land purchasers to buy their town lots from him, rather than from someone else. One way of doing this would be to have his new town designated the "permanent" seat of county government. With the help of a Gibson County legislator, Robert M. Evans, a new county of Warrick, named after a military man killed at the Battle of Tippecanoe, was authorized in 1813. It stretched along the river from the Harrison County line to the Wabash River.

In June, 1814, the newly selected county commissioners met at the mill of James Anthony, McGary's brother-in-law, on Pigeon Creek. McGary offered the county government 100 acres of his land if they would designate as the county seat the town he had chosen to name Evansville after the helpful legislator. They were pleased to accept his offer.

McGary had been doing a brisk business in lot sales on a money-back guarantee that Evansville would indeed become a county seat. Unfortunately, no sooner did that become a reality than the Indiana General Assembly shattered his hopes by creating Posey County with Pigeon Creek as its eastern boundary. With Evansville now on the extreme western edge of a smaller Warrick County, the county commission met again, returned McGary's 100 acres, and moved the Warrick County seat to the now defunct town of Darlington.

Despite having to refund the money of many lot purchasers, McGary managed to make the last of his four annual payments for his land in 1816. He was, however, "land poor." Robert M. Evans again entered the picture and with his brother-in-law, James W. Jones, alleviated McGary's cash-flow problem by purchasing one-third interest in the town-founding enterprise. They devised a new town plat on about 200 acres of McGary's original land, with streets running parallel to the river; that is, from northwest to southeast.

Evansville was incorporated in 1817 and again became a county seat when Vanderburgh County was organized on January 7, 1818. The county was named for Henry Vanderburgh, a deceased chief judge of the Indiana Territorial Supreme Court. A newspaper advertisement on April, 1818, touted Evansville's prospects "as a place of landing and deposit for the western part of the State of Indiana" which "certainly holds out a fairer prospect to become a considerable commercial town, than any other in the western part of the state. Merchants, mechanics, and men of enterprise are particularly invited to come and judge for themselves."

The town grew slowly until its economic "take-off" in the early 1830's. It was announced that the state would, as part of a mammoth internal improvement program, build the longest canal in the world, traversing over 400 miles to connect the Great Lakes at Toledo, Ohio, with the inland rivers at Evansville. The canal would not only open up the interior of Indiana to commerce, but it would create an inland transportation route from New Orleans to New York City via the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers; this new Wabash and Erie Canal; Lake Erie; New York State's Erie Canal; and the Hudson River.

The possibility that Evansville would be at the crossroads for the commerce of half a continent brought "merchants, mechanics, and men of enterprise" flooding in. Fortunately, they did not then know, as people have learned on several occasions since, that Indiana transportation projects often take twenty-years to build and are obsolete when completed. Such was the case with the Wabash and Erie Canal. Its construction bankrupted the state, and by the time it was completed in 1853, plans were already being made to build railroads parallel to its route.

Ironically, when the canal was finished, it did not terminate in Evansville after all. By 1837, General Washington Johnston's tract, which was split by Pigeon Creek, had come into the hands of four developers, two named Law, one named Macoll, and one named Scott. Combining the first portions of their names, they came up with "Lamasco" as the name of the new town they platted from First Avenue westward to St. Joseph Avenue. Unlike Evansville, Lamasco's streets were platted on the cardinal points, due north-south and east-west.

In 1847, the portion of Lamasco east of the Creek was incorporated, and by the 1850's, Lamasco had annexed land up to the Evansville corporate limits and was threatening to landlock its rival by annexing east of First Avenue. Had this situation continued, it would have resulted in a permanent state of competition for growth, similar to what happened up river at New Albany-Clarksville-Jeffersonville. Fortunately, the leaders of the two towns realized that a merger was in the best interests of all concerned.

The Indiana General Assembly authorized a merger in 1857, and by referendum, the citizens of the new City voted to continue being called Evansville. But, although the Lamasco name disappeared from the map, the Lamasco street grid did not. It was, in fact, extended and it eventually surrounded the original McGary-Evans-Jones grid. That meant that anyone entering or leaving downtown Evansville found that the street eventually made an oblique angle turn in one direction or another. This circumstance has been a continuing source of confusion to visitors and residents alike as they travel through and around the City.

The era of Evansville's greatest growth was the second half of the nineteenth century, following the disruption of the Civil War. At that time, the steamboat industry was at its height. Evansville was a major stop for through boats in Pittsburgh-New Orleans commerce, and it was the homeport for a number of steamboat companies engaged in local and regional, or "packet" trade. In 1870, the City annexed "Independence," the area west of Pigeon Creek that was not included when Lamasco incorporated.

Evansville was positioned geographically for commerce, and thanks to an abundance of nearby natural resources, it had something to sell. The products of the fertile farmland surrounding the City found their way to the Evansville wharf and were the basis for a growing flour and corn milling industry.

Coal mines began operating literally on Evansville's doorstep in the 1890's, and by the turn of the century, 10 mineshafts had been sunk within or near the City limits. These mines provided fuel for industry, steamboats and railroad locomotives, and commercial and household heating. Evansville began to thrive under a cloud of coal dust, smoke and soot.

Foundries were established to serve the mechanical needs of the steamboats but soon branched out into the manufacture of farm implements and household stoves. Hardwood lumber was rafted down the Green River from the heart of western Kentucky. The region's lumber supply fostered large-scale lumber and furniture manufacturing for the sawmills and factories which lined Pigeon Creek after 1870. By 1900, Evansville was one of the largest hardwood furniture centers in the world, with 41 factories employing approximately 2,000 workers. The fortunes that were made in mining, manufacturing and, particularly, the wholesale trade found an outlet in the construction of the imposing Victorian-era homes that have become an attraction for tourists in the Riverside Drive and First Street area.

Evansville grew with the steamboat industry but was not dependent upon it. The City became an important node in the nation's railroad network in 1887 when the Louisville and Nashville Railroad constructed a bridge across the Ohio River between Evansville and Henderson. This alleviated a major impediment to north-south rail transportation and resulted in construction of a major railyard southwest of Evansville, with the new town of Howell created to house railroad employees. In 1916, Evansville would annex Howell, completing the City's counter-clockwise march around the horseshoe bend.

The economic base underwent a change in the early twentieth century. Furniture manufacturing declined as nearby supplies of timber became exhausted, but several other major companies (Bucyrus Steam Shovel Plant, Graham Glass Works, Faultless Caster, Mead Johnson Company) moved in to fill the void. In the 1920's two important new industries were introduced, automobile manufacturing and refrigerator production. Major companies were the Graham Paige Automobile Company (later purchased by the Chrysler Corporation), Seeger Refrigerator Company, Servel Incorporated, and Sunbeam Electrical Manufacturing Company.

The Depression era was characterized by high unemployment and business failure, although the discovery of oil in the area in 1938 was a bright spot. Still, Evansville did not fully recover from the effects of the Depression until the advent of World War II. The war industry was a boon to the local economy with employment rising from 21,000 to 64,000 in just a few months.

After the war, many of these plants were successfully converted to peacetime production. Employment continued to climb, due to the high demand for automobiles, household appliances, and farm equipment. This prosperity continued through the Korean War period, with major industries still being refrigerator and automobile manufacturing. The local economy was dominated by four major firms: Servel, International Harvester, Seeger, and Chrysler. These firms accounted for sixty-three percent of total manufacturing employment and thirty-one percent of all employment by 1953.

The conclusion of the Korean War brought recession to the nation. The recession was particularly severe in the Evansville area, due to the fact that there was a heavy concentration of employment in the automobile and refrigerator manufacturing industries. Both of these industries were tied closely to defense contractors. From 1954 until 1962 the unemployment rate never dropped below five percent and even jumped to ten percent in 1958. During this period, the four leading firms underwent some major changes. Servel went out of business. International Harvester and Chrysler terminated their operations in Evansville, and the Seeger Corporation was reorganized and later became part of the Whirlpool Corporation.

In spite of the recession, twenty-eight new firms moved to the area between 1955 and 1963, thus saving the Evansville economy from total collapse. Some of these new firms were Whirlpool Corporation, Arkla Air Conditioning Corporation, Bendix-Westinghouse Corporation, Alcoa, Bucyrus-Erie Corporation, and General Electric Company. Not only were the new firms significant because of increased employment (12,000 new employees by 1963), but also because of the diversification that was brought to the local economy. Much of the increased employment represented a replacement of lost employment. The recession had demonstrated the danger of a non-diversified local economy and of relying too heavily on a small number of durable goods industries.

In the midst of the recession, the local community responded with efforts toward redeveloping its deteriorating capital facilities, especially those in the Central Business District. From 1958 to 1963 nearly \$30 million was spent on capital construction. This spending continued into the late 1960's and reached its peak with the completion of the \$25 million Civic Center Complex in 1968. This capital outlay for public facilities was partially responsible for the economic recovery in the 1960's, along with the attraction of some important new industries. Thus, by 1966 local economic performance was raised to the national average, and by 1969 the local economy had regained the level of the earlier peak in 1953.

Today, Evansville and Vanderburgh County have a sound and diversified economy. This goal has been obtained through the cooperation of City and County government, business, and civic organizations. The trend toward diversification of the economy has continued. Evansville has evolved into a major provider of health care services in the Tri-State area, and a regional retail center. Moreover, the manufacture of goods, such as plastics and pharmaceuticals, growth in wholesale trade, and the establishment of Evansville as the service center for Southwestern Indiana, Western Kentucky, and Southeastern Illinois have collectively created a stable local economy.

HISTORY OF LOCAL PLANNING

The following is a brief history of planning and zoning in the City of Evansville and Vanderburgh County:

- 1921 - The Evansville City Plan Commission was created under the authority of the State of Indiana Planning Act.
- 1924 - U.S. Department of Commerce issues a Standard State Zoning Enabling Act.
- 1925 - Adoption of the first City zoning ordinance and comprehensive plan element, "Plan for the Development of a System of Major Streets".
- 1926 - Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty
Constitutionality of zoning upheld by U.S. Supreme Court.
- 1927 - Other plan elements "Public Recreation Facilities In Evansville" and "The City's Appearance, Suggestions for Improving" were adopted.
- 1928 - U.S. Department of Commerce issues a Standard City Planning Enabling Act.
- 1940 - The Vanderburgh County Plan Commission was established.
- 1945 - First zoning code adopted for Vanderburgh County.
- 1955 - The Evansville-Vanderburgh Regional Plan Commission was established. This commission was organized with a joint city and county function.
- 1957 - Evansville-Vanderburgh Comprehensive Plan developed by Regional Plan Commission.
- 1963 - Evansville-Vanderburgh Regional Plan Commission renamed Evansville-Vanderburgh Metropolitan Plan Commission.
- 1968 - Evansville-Vanderburgh Metropolitan Plan Commission reorganized and named the Evansville-Vanderburgh County Area Plan Commission.
- 1979, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2000 - Evansville-Vanderburgh County Comprehensive Plans developed and/or revised by Area Plan Commission.