

New faces, new NIRPC

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Small communities now have a voice in planning this region's future.

And their votes will have the same weight as the votes of the region's largest cities, such as Hammond and Gary.

"But there's more than symbolism associated with inviting these communities to the table in Northwest Indiana. This, connected with the fact there can no longer be appointed officials, means there's a vesting of responsibility in collective, regional planning," said James Ranfranz, executive director of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission.

New state legislation, taking effect July 1, redefines the purpose, powers and duties of NIRPC as a coordinating agency in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties. The commission, created in the 1960s, now has been redefined into a governing body that includes representation of every single community within the three counties.

He called the legislative change a bold move.

"Whether the statute calls it or not, NIRPC is now a council of governments," Ranfranz said. "Before, it was a council of most of the governments."

Communities of Dyer, St. John, Cedar Lake, Winfield, Lowell, New Chicago and Schneider of Lake County will have one, newly elected appointee to the board. Other communities include Kingsbury, LaCrosse, Michiana Shores and Potawatomi Park in LaPorte County and Beverly Shores, Burns Harbor, Dune Acres and town of Pines in Porter County.

Pre-July 1, there were 41 appointees to the commission's executive board. Now, the number will rise to 51, with all members serving in elected positions, plus one governor appointee. Long-time commission appointees, Richard Comer and Paul Doherty, will not be eligible to serve on the executive board.

In the process, Gary and Hammond also lost two appointments. However, even though the legislation created a weighted voting system for the largest communities should they need it, Ranfranz said NIRPC has always been a consensus-building organization and he expects it to remain so.

Economist Morton Marcus, long-time advocate of a regional development authority to mend a fractious Northwest Indiana, called the changes a move in the right direction.

It leaves in place local government and gets them working together in a coordinated fashion.

"I think the most important change is that NIRPC now has an opportunity to be a major voice for economic development in Northwest Indiana," Marcus said.

He said he believes the change will open thinking to a more regional approach