

## Forging a new future

VISION BY GEORGE BABCOKE

Recently, as I was traveling on business and sitting in an airport waiting for a plane, I struck up a conversation with another traveler and he quickly remarked "You must be from "da region. You all sound the same."

This struck me as unusual. I guess I didn't realize that we from the region had such a distinctly recognizable dialect, but apparently we do.

Taking that thought process a step farther, wouldn't it be nice if those of us from "the region" could once again take pride in our region and look forward to a future of sustained economic growth and an improved quality of life for our children and our children's children?

I think the critical point in this thought process is looking ahead, long-term thinking and more important, long-term planning.

All too often, we get caught up in the short-term, quick fix, blame others view of the world. Without a vision of what we want our region to look like 10, 20 or 30 years from now and setting a systematic road map to get there, it is hard to have a cohesive regional perspective.

So, as we move into a new year, 2003, I'd like to take a shot at my view of the Northwest Indiana of the future.

In my future, Northwest Indiana is a place where businesses want to be located because of the excellent location, a progressive tax structure, great infrastructure and a well-trained, well- educated workforce to draw from. We will be creating jobs in diverse fields. Our children will want to stay and work in the area.

Northwest Indiana will be looked at as an asset by the state of Indiana and we will be a force to be reckoned with in the Statehouse.

There will be one park system, a metro park system that will rival the city of Chicago or Cleveland Metro Parks as the best in the nation with green spans on the lakefront, public access and intricate systems of biking and running trails that connect the region together.

You'll be able to ride your bike or run from Chicago to Michigan on a contiguous trail. There will be one park board that is responsible for the entire system. People will want to relocate here because of the recreational opportunities.

There will be one regional transportation system with one transportation authority and state of the art bus and train systems that will give all us access to affordable mass transportation and effectively connect us with our sister city, Chicago.

We will have an effective governmental network. We won't hear about cities versus county, north versus south, Lake versus Porter.

We'll have much fewer taxing authorities and our political leaders will be judged by how efficiently they run their piece of the network. There probably won't be township government. There will be one library system and one system for promoting economic development.

Our regional colleges and universities will be run collaboratively, not in competition with each other. We will educate our children for the opportunities that will exist in Northwest Indiana.

Business, industry, academia and the state/federal agencies will work together to improve the environment. There will be economic incentives to return once-used industrial land to new innovative uses. These new uses will fuel the engine of economic growth along with expansion and regional support of the Gary/Chicago Airport.

While this vision of the future may seem pie in the sky, I believe it is possible and has been done in other areas of the country.

There has already been progress made in the regional approach. Under the guidance of the Quality of Life Council and the Northwest Indiana Initiative, plans for the future are being laid and everyone has a seat at the table. As we look toward that future, we should hold each other accountable to sticking to that plan.

No action should be taken that jeopardizes the future in favor of short-term or parochial issues. Let's look ahead and forge this new future. Our children are depending on us.

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