

# Spotlight: Merrillville

## Technology park to fuel growth.



**by Rick A. Richards**

ALTHOUGH MERRILLVILLE lost the title of “Indiana’s largest town,” town manager Tim Brown isn’t worried. The town of Fishers in Hamilton County took the lead in the 2000 Census but Brown says a lot more than 35,000 people will be living in Merrillville after the next census.

Those new residents will come, he says, because of new development that will create not only new jobs but also a need for housing for the people taking those high-tech jobs.

Unlike jobs a generation ago that were directly connected to the steel mills across the southern shore of

Lake Michigan, these jobs are based on technology, science and research, not muscle.

But even with the transition from manufacturing to high tech, one thing about Merrillville has remained the same. “Merrillville has been known for umpteen years as the shopping district of northwest Indiana,” says

**AmeriPlex at the Crossroads** The \$400 million, 386-acre retail and commercial project includes the Purdue Technology Center of Northwest Indiana.

Brown. “We have several shopping centers and we are getting ready for a retail explosion.”

The town, which encompasses 31 square miles at the crossroads of Interstate 65 and U.S. 30, was incorporated in 1971. Growth along the U.S. 30/Interstate 65 corridor began a little more than a generation ago when entrepreneur Dean White, whose net worth is put at \$1.2 billion by *Forbes* magazine, built a hotel, entertainment and office complex there.

Brown says it was White’s Twin Towers office buildings that help spur growth in the community. “I can’t tell you the number of businesses that had offices in the Twin Towers, were able to grow there and have since moved

out and into their own building.”

The Twin Towers served as a sort of early business incubator for the town, a role now being taken over by the technology park and learning center being developed by Purdue University. The Purdue Technology Center of Northwest Indiana is part of a \$400 million, 386-acre retail and commercial project called AmeriPlex at the Crossroads.

Brown says that development has grown in Merrillville. In 2003, for instance, there was \$38 million worth of development, and in 2004, that figure ballooned to \$65 million. Last year, it nearly doubled to \$110 million.

“There are a variety of things fueling the growth,”

says Brown. “I think the market trend in Illinois has caught up here. It’s just taken awhile for the word to get out.”

John Hanak, director of the Purdue Technology Center, says the entrepreneurial

Since then, the technology center has been certified by the state, which Brown says allows the town to set up a tax increment financing district to give businesses a tax break in order to keep their start up costs down.

**“We think we have a good business market that has helped give Merrillville its own identity.”**

—Tim Brown, town manager, Merrillville

incubator is just starting to take off. He said the 48,000-square-foot building was made possible through a \$6.9 million grant won by U.S. Rep. Peter Visclosky in January 2005.

Tenants in the center will have access to high-speed telecommunications, videoconferencing, business mentors, technical assistance and access to experts at Purdue. The goal is to help

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startup companies get on their feet so that within a few years, they can leave the center and go out on their own.

The center now has 40 employees and is home to 13 tenants, Hanak says, adding that since the start up last year, the Purdue Research Foundation, which owns the land, has invested another \$1 million in the project.

“We’re at 35 to 40 percent of capacity,” says Hanak. “If we continue to meet our business plan, I show us hitting 85 percent capacity in three years.” At that point, he says, the center would like to start construction on a new building.

With Purdue concentrating on the technology park, it has been left to South Bend-based Holladay Partners to

develop the remainder of the mixed-use area that stretches from 93rd Avenue on the north to 101st Avenue on the south and between Broadway on the west and Interstate 65 on the east.

Larry Mudd, a vice president and project developer for Holladay, also manages AmeriPlex in nearby Portage, a 385-acre project that is home to several warehouse and distribution companies, a motel and soon, a Bass Pro Shop and an IMAX theater.

“We think our Merrillville project will have four types of users: Medical, office and education, retail and flex manufacturing,” says Mudd.

Holladay, established in 1952, has projects in 15 states valued at more than \$2 billion. In addition to building business parks, the company also manages assets and properties for more than 150 commercial locations throughout the United States.

“We’re bullish on Merrillville and northwest Indiana,” says Mudd. “We think there’s a lot of opportunity here, especially with the mix of users we envision in Merrillville.”

Once the Merrillville project is completed over the next several years, Mudd says there could be between 3 million and 4 million square feet under roof and more than 3,000 new jobs.

Brown says he expects the AmeriPlex project to spur residential growth in Merrillville, too. “That’s what we expect to happen. When (Holladay) advertises in places like *Site Selection* magazine, it helps get the word out about Merrillville.”

Even though Merrillville has only about 35,000 permanent residents, Brown says that number doubles during the day when people commute to jobs in town.

“We think we have a good business market that has helped give Merrillville its own identity,” Brown says, adding that’s important in a region with more than 600,000 people where town and city limits butt up against each other.

“We do blend in with other communities, and there’s nothing wrong with that,” says Brown. “It hasn’t hurt our business market.” ■