

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

The Future of Work in Erie County



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The Future of Work in Erie County, Pennsylvania

Introduction

From artificial intelligence (AI) and automation to education and infrastructure, many factors shape the future of work. It is a massive undertaking to predict precisely how it will look. However, it is essential for small cities and counties to try, especially for those already contending with economic challenges.

Despite its rich culture, vibrant neighborhoods, breathtaking natural assets, and a bustling entrepreneurial section, Erie County, Pennsylvania, continues to battle similar problems to its Rust Belt counterparts. For decades, the manufacturing sector has been steadily declining, and the population continues to wane.

As of January 2022, Erie County's unemployment and poverty rates were above the nation's average. In the same vein, an array of key health indicators, such as life expectancy, obesity, and opioid deaths, show the community heading for alarming territory.

Despite these challenges, local leaders and decision-makers have a variety of untapped assets in Erie County that can help it rebound and even become a hotbed for innovation, entrepreneurship, and next-generation employment.

After meeting with dozens of civic leaders, business owners, and economic developers, analyzing growth strategies from other economically disadvantaged communities, and reviewing scholarly sources, we have identified five critical areas of need:

1. Education
2. Industry
3. Infrastructure
4. Placemaking
5. Quality of Life

While national studies address the future of work, this report examines that subject in the context of Erie County. For this reason, it provides a more localized perspective than one might find through popular sources such as McKinsey & Company, Deloitte, or the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED).

The goal of this report on the future of work in Erie County is to highlight potential synergies between the public and private sectors, suggest meaningful changes to legislation, minimize misconceptions about the area, forecast Fourth Industrial Revolution occupations, and showcase regional assets that local leaders can leverage to increase talent attraction and retention. To become a destination for the next generations of entrepreneurs, business owners, and talent, decision-makers and community leaders will have to address the five critical areas of need listed above.

Erie County is at a crossroads, one that can lead to either prosperity or stagnation. Unfortunately, it's not always clear which direction leads to which outcome. This work aims to illuminate the path towards prosperity for our county and its many communities.

Education

Pennsylvania's K-12 Learning Standards

For Erie County to emerge as a leader for the future of work, students need to explore career options early in their schooling. Further, public and private sectors should collaborate to create industry-education pipelines to reduce brain drain, underemployment, and unemployment. The early exploration of career options and collaboration between industry and education would help ensure that the learning standards in Erie County schools align with employer requisites.

The Pennsylvania learning standards for kindergarten (K) through grade 12 students include the [Career Education and Work](#) Academic Standards that detail how educators should teach career readiness beginning in elementary school.¹ The Career Education and Work Standards focus on four key areas:

1. Career Awareness and Preparation
2. Career Acquisition (Getting a Job)
3. Career Retention and Advancement
4. Entrepreneurship

Of note, school districts began reporting student-level data for the Career Readiness Indicator during the 2017-2018 school year.² Prior, school districts did not collect and report data regarding this learning standard. This change came about due to the creation of the Pennsylvania Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Consolidated State Plan as Pennsylvania began looking at the need to "meet the challenge of competing in a rapidly changing, global economy."³ The State Board of Education approved a motion to support adopting a statewide postsecondary attainment goal for the commonwealth. By 2025, 60 percent of Pennsylvanians will have a postsecondary degree or credential.⁴ In order to address the skills gap and ensure the commonwealth's economic competitiveness in a global economy, Pennsylvania identified goals, opportunities, and initiatives to support meaningful college and career pathways for all.⁵

Beginning in kindergarten, students explore careers through various activities both in the classroom and virtually.⁶ However, the time allotted for this exploration is limited. For instance, Erie's Public Schools have created a Career Readiness Guide for teachers in the district.⁷ Yet, the time allotted for students to spend exploring careers is only two hours per quarter, for a total of eight hours out of the entire school year. As a guide to enhance Erie County's industry-education pipeline, school district decision-makers should consider looking at Allentown School District's career education and exploration classes. Allentown School District offers career education and exploration classes as high

¹ PA career standards. Department of Education. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

² PDE. (n.d.). *Career Readiness Indicator for the Future Ready PA Index and ESSA Accountability: Guidelines for Evidence Collection, Monitoring, and Reporting*. Pennsylvania Department of Education. Available [here](#).

³ PDE. (2019, May). *Pennsylvania ESSA Consolidated State Plan*. Pennsylvania Department of Education. Available [here](#).

⁴ PDE. (2019, May). *Pennsylvania ESSA Consolidated State Plan*. Pennsylvania Department of Education. Available [here](#).

⁵ PDE. (2019, May). *Pennsylvania ESSA Consolidated State Plan*. Pennsylvania Department of Education. Available [here](#).

⁶ View standards. SAS. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

⁷ Askins, P. Pundt, M. E., Sabol, T., Dolak, N., Szumigala, T., & Fiorelli, M. (n.d.). *Erie's Public Schools Career Readiness Guide*. Erie's Public Schools. Available [here](#).

school electives.⁸ Allentown's four middle schools also offer career exploration opportunities utilizing several different career exploration sites.⁹

What is missing from both of these school districts' career exploration plans are opportunities for students to connect with local businesses and manufacturers and explore secondary education opportunities. While both school districts have vocational-technical programs, students cannot participate until high school.^{10,11} Middle school students need the opportunity to explore both vocational careers and what the local colleges, universities, and trade schools have to offer. This exploration would allow them to make more informed choices about the numerous career pathways ahead of them as they continue their education. Erie County school districts must begin the conversation with the business community in the next two years to discuss how educational partnerships are vital to the growth of our community. Workforces are evolving nationally – the movement towards automation in industry and remote work is growing. To meet the needs of a rapidly evolving workforce, educational decision-makers must adapt their practices and standards to better align with the requirements of tomorrow.

If the school districts and business community come together to develop a framework to expand real-life opportunities for students as young as middle school, there is a greater chance that these students will envision and desire a future where they live and work in Erie County.

Middle School Opportunities in Erie County

Connecting middle school students to college campuses before they graduate high school enables them to explore career pathways earlier. In turn, these students can make more informed decisions about their future.

One of Erie County's strengths is that its universities actively promote early career exploration. For example, Gannon University partnered with the Erie School District to create the GO College. This program provides individual advising and group workshops that encourage academic, personal, and social skill-building.¹² GO College also places professional advisors at Erie High School, Collegiate Academy, and Strong Vincent Middle School. These advisors serve over 600 students yearly.¹³

Through GO College coordinated field trips, middle school students explore different career fields such as engineering, physical therapy, recreation and wellness, criminal justice, and theater.¹⁴ Additionally, GO College offers eighth-grade students a one-week summer intensive program to explore various careers, visit their future high schools, and prepare for high school. During the 2019-20 school year, Gannon's GO College served more than 600 students at Erie's Public Schools through tutoring, advising, workshops, and college visits.

Penn State Behrend also offers several avenues for career exploration geared towardss middle school students, including Math Options Career Day, FIRST LEGO League, Wabtec Girls Who

8 Allentown School District. (n.d.). *Allentown School District High School Program of Studies 2021-2022*. Allentown School District. Available [here](#).

9 Careers. Careers - Harrison-Morton Middle School. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

10 Career & Technical / Homepage. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

11 Lehigh Career and Technical Institute enrollment options. Go to Allentown School District. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

12 Go college program. Gannon University. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

13 Go college program. Gannon University. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

14 Gannon University. (n.d.). Gannon University | GO College Program. Available [here](#).

STEAM, and College for Kids. Math Options Career Day is open to seventh- and eighth-grade students in Erie County and exposes them to science, technology, engineering, math (STEM), and business careers.¹⁵ The FIRST LEGO League competition allows students ages 9 to 14 to work together in teams. The teams are presented with a real-world problem and work to build a fully autonomous robot to help solve it.^{16,17} These sports-like tournaments are held in the fall on Penn State Behrend's campus and provide an opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience utilizing STEM-based skills. Wabtec Girls Who STEAM is a week-long summer program geared for sixth- and seventh-grade girls interested in science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) to expose them to careers they had not previously considered.¹⁸ Each summer, Penn State Behrend also hosts a College for Kids program with numerous learning activities and events for children up to 14 years of age.¹⁹

While there are numerous programs for middle school students at the local universities, few collect publicly accessible long-term data. Without it, it is difficult for educational leaders and community stakeholders to determine what is and is not working for career readiness. Annual follow-up surveys may be an efficient way for educational leaders to gather data on how students perform long-term. This information would also help program directors and decision-makers to optimize and tailor programs for maximum success rates.

As part of career exploration in middle school, school districts should also consider hosting career and college fairs regularly. Events hosted by colleges in Erie County are helpful; however, they are not necessarily accessible to all students. For example, the Math Options program at Penn State Behrend requires students to meet specific academic requirements to participate in the event,¹⁹ so it is unlikely to serve underprivileged students who likely need the support the most. Other events require transportation to the college's campus, which is not feasible for all students and families. If middle schools hosted these events, more students would have access to these resources. By having this access, educational leaders could better equip students to make positively impacting decisions that better their future career trajectories.

Access to career-related events in middle school is critical for female students in particular because female students typically lose interest in STEM careers by middle school unless they receive ample encouragement and support.²¹ If universities and businesses developed programming for middle schools, young women would have more role models, support from teachers, and a better perception of STEM careers.

High School and Vocational Technology (Vo-Tech) Opportunities

Erie County residents benefit from a wide range of educational opportunities, from high school vo-tech and post-secondary trade programs to community colleges and universities. Young students who are not college-bound can learn a trade while in high school, whether in the city or the county. Erie

15 *Math options*. Penn State Behrend. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

16 *First Lego League*. Penn State Behrend. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

17 *Inspiring youth through hands-on STEM learning*. Home Page | FIRST LEGO League. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

18 *Wabtec girls who steam*. Penn State Behrend. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

19 *College for kids summer enrichment program*. Penn State Behrend. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

20 *Math options*. Penn State Behrend. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

21 Choney, S. (2018, May 13). *Why do girls lose interest in stem? new research has some answers - and what we can do about it*. Available [here](#).

High School, open to city residents, offers 18 programs at no additional cost to students.²² The programs available are healthcare, engineering, machining, education, criminal justice, cosmetology, information technology (IT), business, and automotive. Erie County Technical School, open to county residents, offers many of the same programs as Erie High, with the addition of exercise science, construction, or hospitality management.²³ Adaptability to the current industry sector should be a top priority for the school systems to provide skilled talent for growing areas.

There are many affordable dual-enrollment options for high school students in Erie County to begin earning credits towards a post-secondary degree. All four local universities offer students a wide array of intro-level courses. In addition, some universities have discounts for dual-enrolled students to increase affordability.²⁴

Gannon University's Go College program aims to provide unlimited dual-enrollment classes for juniors and seniors at target high schools, Collegiate Academy and Erie High School. They offer orientations, IT support, on-campus study space, tutoring, and textbooks. On a typical (non-Covid) semester, Gannon has approximately 50 GO College students taking one to two classes each. When students attend classes on campus, they accrue weighted credits, which add to their GPA. They also learn how to navigate a college campus and build study and behavioral skills to help them succeed at the college level. Students can graduate from high school with 20 or 30 credits.²⁵

High school students can take regular college classes at Penn State Behrend through the Dual Enrollment Program. This program is available during the school year as well as the summer. To be eligible, the student must have completed at least his or her sophomore year in high school; priority admission is for students who have completed their junior year. Students may take up to eight credits per semester and receive a Dual Enrollment scholarship covering 50 percent of the tuition.²⁶

Students in Erie County can get a head start on their college education with Mercyhurst University's Dual Enrollment program. Through Dual Enrollment, students at high schools in the Erie region now have the chance to take university-level courses on the Mercyhurst campus or online and earn transferable college credits. Several different courses from across the curriculum are open to high school students. Visiting high school students will have access to the same quality educational experiences as university students, benefiting from Mercyhurst's small classes in safe, comfortable learning environments with individualized attention from responsive faculty. Mercyhurst offers a highly discounted tuition rate for qualified high school students: \$100 per credit for most courses. Additional fees may apply for some students in specific courses.²⁷

As high school juniors or seniors, students have the opportunity to take up to 11 credits per semester through Edinboro University at a significantly reduced cost. The Dual Enrollment/Early Advantage program is possible through the Regional Choice Initiative, a program coordinated by the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit in cooperation with high schools in Erie and Crawford counties. High school students may be recommended for participation in the program or initiate the process by speaking with their school's guidance counselor. Most high school students enroll in one or two

²² Career Education/High School/Career Programs. Eriesd.org. (2021). Available [here](#).

²³ Career and Technical Education Programs. Ects.org. (2021). Available [here](#).

²⁴ Edinboro University. (n.d.). Dual Enrollment / Early Advantage | Admissions & Aid | Edinboro University. Available [here](#).

²⁵ Gannon University. (n.d.). Gannon University | GO College Program. Available [here](#).

²⁶ Dual Enrollment Students. (n.d.). Penn State Behrend. Available [here](#).

²⁷ Dual Enrollment for High School Students. (n.d.). Mercyhurst University. Available [here](#).

general education courses each semester of their junior and senior year.²⁸

Students will have the opportunity to learn how college courses are structured and potentially graduate early. Universities such as Edinboro have partnered with certain secondary schools and career centers to award college credit for SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR)-approved programs at the secondary level.²⁹ In addition, Corry Area Career & Technical Center, Erie County Technical School, and Erie High School are all currently partnering with Edinboro University to offer this opportunity to high school students.

Additionally, Erie County offers high school students who plan to attend college opportunities to seek internships, career-oriented exploration, and scholarships. Erie High School offers a summer exploratory program for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. This program allows them to explore different career fields and intern as a senior student.³⁰

Gannon University's Go College program aims to provide unlimited dual-enrollment classes for juniors and seniors at target high schools, Collegiate Academy and Erie High School. They offer orientations, IT support, on-campus study space, tutoring, and textbooks. On a typical (non-Covid) semester, Gannon has approximately 50 GO College students taking one to two classes each. When students attend classes on campus, they accrue weighted credits, which add to their GPA. They also learn how to navigate a college campus and build study and behavioral skills to help them succeed at the college level. Students can graduate from high school with 20 or 30 credits.²⁵

- **Millcreek School District** has a dedicated staff member who helps students pursue and earn an internship as an academic-track student.³¹
- **Girard School District** has an advisory council that meets twice a year to discuss ways to align its programs to meet industry needs, knowledge, and skills for work-based learning.³²
- **Fairview School District** supports academic-track students with educational organizations in Arts & Communications, Business, Health & Sciences, Human Services, and STEM.³³
- **Harbor Creek School District** offers 15 scholarship programs that will give out more than 500 individual scholarships to high school students who want to pursue post-secondary education.³⁴

Post-Secondary Opportunities and Education

The four local universities have been a staple in the Erie County community not only for educating high school graduates and adult learners, but also for assisting the community in upskilling the current workforce through graduate programs and certificates. Each school has regionally and nationally recognized programs that attract students from all over the country and world. More than 12,000 undergraduate students attended the four local universities in 2020.^{35,36}

28 Edinboro University. (n.d.). Dual Enrollment / Early Advantage | Admissions & Aid | Edinboro University. Available [here](#).

29 Edinboro University. (n.d.). Dual Enrollment / Early Advantage | Admissions & Aid | Edinboro University. Available [here](#).

30 *Internship search results*. Internship Search Results. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

31 College & Career Prep. Millcreek Township School District. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

32 *Career exploration page*. Home - Career Exploration Page. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

33 *Student clubs, Organizations, Athletics & Academics*. Student Clubs, Organizations, Athletics & Academies - Fairview School District. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

34 *Scholarships*. Harbor Creek Senior High. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

35 U.S. News Best Colleges. (2022). U.S. News & World Report. Available [here](#).

36 *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) home page, part of the U.S. Department of Education*. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

Businesses of all types should be interested in working with the local universities to foster, develop, and maintain strong relationships. It is imperative that our local business leaders and elected officials

have ongoing conversations with our educational institutions. These conversations will allow business leaders and, by extension, the business community to understand which fields of study students are enrolling in. Knowing this, the business community, in collaboration with our elected officials, can help ensure employment in those fields when students graduate. These conversations must also include what skills are the most needed in Erie County over the next five years. This information will allow the universities to recruit students with an interest or passion for that work and would transition from the college classroom to the workforce, all in Erie County. In addition, the local business community, school districts, community college, and universities should continue to collaborate on building a framework for internship opportunities. In addition, the framework for these opportunities should include a strategy for after-internship data collection to determine employment outcomes, salary, benefits, and career progression.

The four universities and community college offer a wide array of degree programs that can meet the demands of Erie County employers. Additionally, departments such as Gannon's Office of Career Exploration & Development manage relationships with more than 5,000 employer contacts across the county. Gannon also utilizes Handshake as its centralized career services portal. Students are encouraged to complete multiple internships during their time at Gannon. According to Erin Hart, Director of Career Exploration & Development at Gannon, "Internships lead to full-time job placement for many of our students."³⁷

Aside from the universities, students across Erie county may also decide to attend one of many for-profit institutions. However, due to their high costs and poor outcomes, many of these institutions have closed their doors leaving behind students who have spent thousands of dollars on education with no actual career path.^{38,39,40}

The for-profit institutions across the region include Great Lakes Institute of Technology⁴¹, Toni & Guy⁴², Erie Institute of Technology⁴³, and the Institute of Medical and Business Careers⁴⁴. There are similar programs offered at each institution, with tuition starting at around \$15,000. Many of the programs duplicate the vo-tech programs offered at the high school level, including cosmetology, healthcare, automotive, machining, and IT.

In the fall of 2021, the Erie County Community College (EC3PA) began its first semester, offering free tuition thanks to a grant program.⁴⁵ Through the support of Erie County Council's American Rescue Plan funding, Erie County residents who have resided in Erie County for more than one year will

37 Hudson, V. (2021, December 14). Career Exploration. Personal.

38 Newton, D. (2018). *20,000 More Reasons To Never Go To A For-Profit School*. Forbes. Available [here](#).

39 Roberts, J. (2018, July 18). *Erie's Fortis Institute to close its doors*. WJET/WFXP>YourErie.com. Available [here](#)

40 Roberts, J. (2018, July 18). *Erie's Fortis Institute to close its doors*. WJET/WFXP>YourErie.com. Available [here](#).

41 GLIT - Great Lakes Institute of Technology. (2021). Available [here](#).

42 T&G - Programs. Toni&Guy Cosmetology School. (2021). Available [here](#).

43 EIT - Training Programs | Erie Institute of Technology. Erie Institute of Technology | Train for a Technology Career. (2021). Available [here](#).

44 IMBC - Programs. Institute of Medical & Business Careers. (2021). Available [here](#).

45 Affordable and accessible Community College in Erie, PA. Erie County Community College. (2021, November 19). Available [here](#).

EC3PA is the first step in the right direction for Erie County students to access affordable education. The main campus of the community college is centrally located near downtown Erie, with satellite campuses throughout the region. One of those campuses is at the Corry Higher Education Council, whose mission is to bring adult education and workforce training to the rural community of Corry, Pennsylvania, located in southeastern Erie County.⁴⁷ Beyond community college courses, Corry Hi-Ed also offers programming for Mercyhurst University, the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College, Manufacturer & Business Association, Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit, and local businesses.

The Northern Pennsylvania Regional College is a publicly funded higher education institute serving nine counties, including Erie County.⁴⁸ The college was officially established in May 2017 after a year-long study from the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee. Gannon University was selected as the initial partner for NRPC and established the initial portfolio of degree programs. In January 2020, NRPC began operating as an independent institution no longer needing the support of Gannon University.⁴⁹ NRPC offers associate degrees, certificates, and workforce development training.⁵⁰ NRPC is not accredited yet; however, it is pursuing accreditation as of January 2020.⁵¹

In addition to Erie County Community College, NRPC, four universities, LECOM medical, dental, and pharmacy schools, and for-profit institutions, the Erie region has a few unique programs. The Erie County Technical School has an adult division, known as the Regional Career and Technical Center (RCTC), offering short, industry-specific training.⁵² It works with regional employers to determine industry demand and adapt program offerings. The RCTC also provides a continuous CDL program, and all programs are low-cost. Erie High School offers a similar setup, known as Tech After Hours, which includes machining, construction, and welding programs.⁵³ All programs through Tech After Hours are free of charge. The last unique offering in the Erie region that's important to highlight is the Jameson School of Nursing, which offers registered nursing programs, including bridge programs for LPN-RN and RN-BSN.⁵⁴

Recommendations

Pennsylvania's fair funding formula for education did not fund all 500 Pennsylvania school districts equitably until Governor Tom Wolf and the state Legislature came together in 2016 to overhaul the funding system.⁵⁵ Lawmakers, however, have been willing only to partially implement the formula, applying it to new education funding each year. They have been clinging to an old funding approach called "hold harmless,"⁵⁶ which means that "schools, once granted a certain share of funding, must continue receiving at least that share even if their enrollments decline, even if a thriving tax base can meet their needs, even if the needs of other schools far outpace theirs." In 2020-21, only 11 percent of state funding ran through the fair funding formula, which determines a district's share of state dollars based on factors such as enrollment, poverty, tax base, the number of students with limited

⁴⁷ About Corry Hi-Ed. Corry Higher Education Council. (n.d.). Available [here](#)

⁴⁸ Fast fact. Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. (2021, August 13). Available [here](#)

⁴⁹ Our Story. Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. (2020, September 23). Available [here](#).

⁵⁰ Fast fact. Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. (2021, August 13). Available [here](#).

⁵¹ Authorization. Northern Pennsylvania Regional College. (2021, August 30). Available [here](#).

⁵² Programs. Programs - Regional Career & Technical Center. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

⁵³ Adult Education / homepage. Adult Education / Homepage. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

⁵⁴ UPMC Jameson School of Nursing at UPMC Hamot: Erie, PA. UPMC. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

⁵⁵ Blog: How the Fair Funding Formula will work for Schools. Governor Tom Wolf. (2016, June 1). Available [here](#).

⁵⁶ Lohr, T. (2021, February 24). 'Hold harmless' isn't harmless at all. and students in growing school districts need equitable funding now. LancasterOnline. Available [here](#).

English proficiency, and median household income.⁵⁷

Moreover, the 2020-21 budget put Pennsylvania's basic education fair funding formula on hold. The move was not represented as a repudiation of the formula but rather an attempt to provide stability in uncertain economic times. Nevertheless, the decision establishes a concerning precedent. Basic education funding is PA's largest subsidy to school districts, and it is imperative to ensure that these resources are distributed predictably, accountably, transparently, and equitably. In 2022-23, the Basic Education Funding Commission (BEFC) is scheduled to be reconstituted to evaluate the implementation of the fair funding formula. The commission members will have to discuss important issues, potentially including whether "hold-harmless" is being handled in the right way, how to address the fluctuations in Census data, and the possibility of avoiding cliffs in the concentrated poverty factor.⁵⁸ Fair and equitable funding for schools across the commonwealth must be a high priority for lawmakers in 2022. Students are missing needed opportunities to explore their futures because their school districts cannot afford them. In Erie County, the disparity across the 13 school districts is evident when looking at how the fair funding formula works for or against each district.⁵⁹

Additionally, Governor Wolf announced a \$1.2 million investment in apprenticeship programs across the commonwealth on January 6, 2022.⁶⁰ This investment allows six programs the opportunity to train the next generation of in-demand apprentices. While this is a strong beginning for more funding to train our next-generation workforce, Erie County is not one of the communities in the commonwealth to receive funding. It is imperative that our local leaders and local legislators come together in the next two years to build a plan for Erie County to ensure our students and families have the same opportunities as others across the commonwealth.

Students need to explore career and post-secondary opportunities beginning in middle school. In collaboration with the vo-tech schools, school districts in Erie County should build a framework for students that encompasses career exploration, high school post-secondary options, internships, shadowing opportunities with the local business and manufacturing community, and earlier opportunities to explore career and college fairs. Internships with local companies allow students to gather much-needed work experience while supporting the business' needs. The local business community, school districts, and universities need to build a framework for internship opportunities. This collaboration not only brings everyone to the same table, but also enables students across the county to have the exact expectations regardless of where their internship placement is. This framework translates into a formalized partnership between all parties, and everyone benefits.

When discussing the future of work, one other key piece of thinking is ensuring the local business community has a seat at the table. Businesses also must be willing to offer opportunities for students to explore career opportunities within their companies. To succeed, the local business community must help build a robust career shadowing and internship framework with school districts and universities. The business community is a valuable voice in the conversation, whether through committee work or school boards. Its partnership and collaboration is needed to ensure students have every opportunity because they are the employers of the future workforce. Accountability is also key. It is imperative that data is collected on the outcomes of these industry-education programs to show

57 The Lnp | Lancasteronline Editorial Board. (2021, April 8). *Pa. lawmakers ought to implement the school fair funding formula fully before the court requires them to do so.* LancasterOnline. Available [here](#).

58 Brandon, S. (n.d.). *PA's Fair Funding Formula for Basic Education Explained.* House appropriations. Available [here](#).

59 Brandon, S. (n.d.). *PA's Fair Funding Formula for Basic Education: Dashboard.* House appropriations. Available [here](#).

60 Governor Wolf announces \$1.2 million investment in apprenticeship programs across Pennsylvania. Governor Tom Wolf. (2022, January 6). Available [here](#).

measurable results and to ensure efficacy.

This moment is an opportunity for Erie County to look at how other counties in the commonwealth utilize their Workforce Development Boards. The Workforce Development Board for the Pittsburgh Area, Partner 4 Work, has “key partnerships and a vibrant portfolio of programs and initiatives” to help build a thriving workforce in Pittsburgh.⁶¹ Partner 4 Work offers numerous programs for residents of Pittsburgh to explore, most notably their Young Adult Programs.⁶² The programs help young adults complete high school or receive a General Educational Development Test (GED), prepare for post-secondary education, receive industry-recognized credentials, and explore the possibilities that await.⁶³

There are in-school youth programs available and programs available for those students not attending school.^{64,65} The Pittsburgh Chapter of the German American Chamber of Commerce (GACC) is committed to driving economic development in the region while also addressing the ever-growing debate about a skill gap in Pittsburgh and beyond.⁶⁶ The GACC is working to achieve this mission by offering pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. The pre-apprenticeship program is geared to “seniors in high school and engages them with a paid internship and additional technical classroom education as a dual enrollment class.”⁶⁷ The apprenticeship program gives “high school graduates, but also employees already working in a company, the opportunity to benefit from the German-based dual-vocational training concept, which merges classroom training at a local community with hands-on work experiences at a company.”⁶⁸

Finally, universities, colleges, and school districts should continue including the community in their events. They should strive to make them more accessible by offering transportation and a virtual component. These events will likely help increase enrollment, foster a greater sense of community, and better help position Erie County as a leader in the future of work.

Industry

Challenges to Historical Industries

Erie County’s position in the global economy will depend on its ability to adapt to the age of artificial intelligence and automation. As technology phases out jobs in industries such as manufacturing and agriculture, the public and private sectors must work together to create new ones. By leveraging the current strengths of Erie County and exploring new opportunities, civic leaders and stakeholders can

61 The Workforce Development Board for the Pittsburgh Area. (2022, January). *Programs*. Partner4Work. Available [here](#).

62 The Workforce Development Board for the Pittsburgh Area. (2022, January). *Young adults programs*. Partner4Work. Available [here](#).

63 Ibid.

64 The Workforce Development Board for the Pittsburgh Area. (2022, January). *In-school youth programs*. Partner4Work. Available [here](#).

65 The Workforce Development Board for the Pittsburgh Area. (2022, January). *Out-of-school youth programs*. Partner4Work. Available [here](#).

66 *Workforce Development*. German American Chamber of Commerce, Pittsburgh Chapter. (2022, January). Available [here](#).

67 *Workforce Development*. German American Chamber of Commerce, Pittsburgh Chapter. (2022, January). Available [here](#).

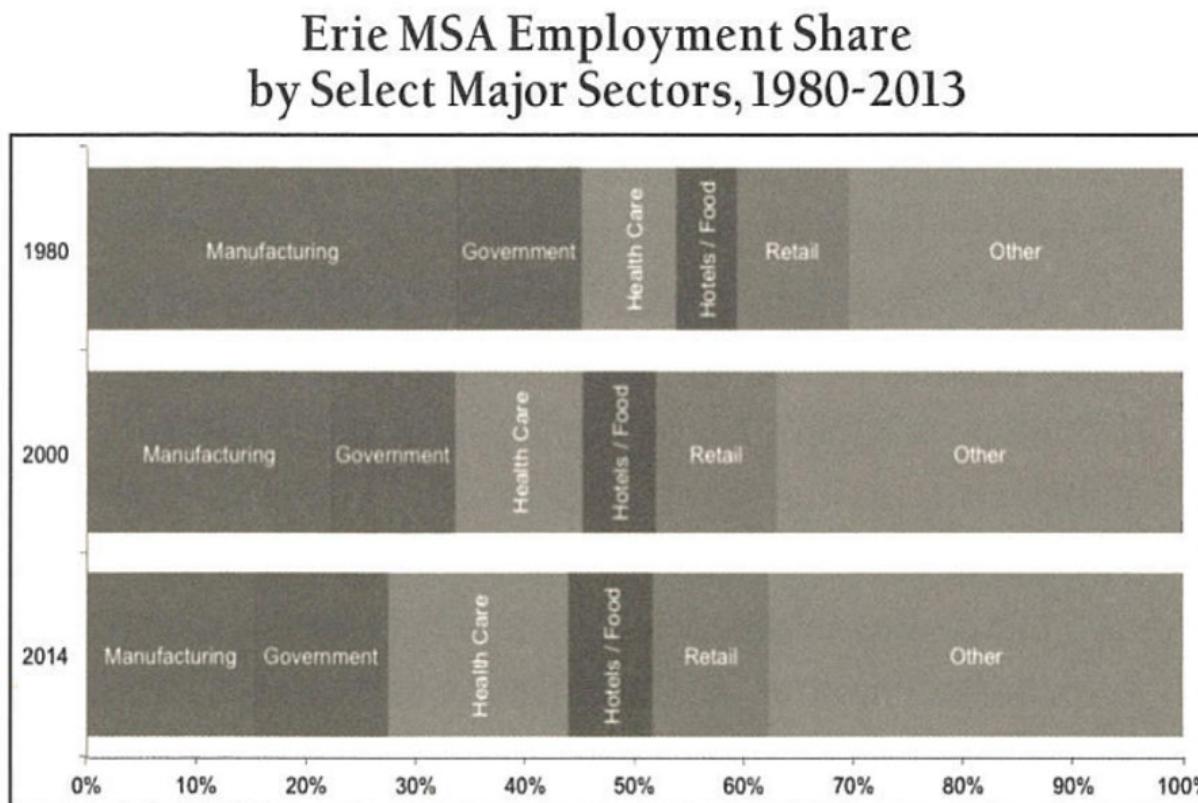
68 *Workforce Development*. German American Chamber of Commerce, Pittsburgh Chapter. (2022, January). Available [here](#).

reduce unemployment, revitalize distressed neighborhoods, and minimize brain drain.

Erie County, Pennsylvania, was created in 1800 and organized in 1803 amid America's Industrial Revolution. Industry in the area began with the necessities of daily living: food and shelter. Thus, grist mills and sawmills mark the first industries to emerge in the region. Schools, medical services, food and beverage, and local government followed closely behind.⁶⁹ A tile manufacturing facility was among the first to mass produce items for sale beyond Erie County. Because of the coal veins abundant in Pennsylvania, the steel industry rose to prominence in the Lake Erie region. It remained of key importance from pre-Civil War times until post-World War II.⁷⁰ Following World War II, the gradual decline in iron and steel production led to the emergence of non-manufacturing labor sectors, such as healthcare, retail, and service industries.⁷¹

Figure 1

Erie Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) Employment Share by Select Major Sectors, 1980-2013⁷²



Source: Brookings Institution Analysis of Moody's Analytics Data

According to the Brookings Institution (Figure 1), approximately 45,000 manufacturing jobs accounted for 40 percent of the region's private employment in 1980, with the sector declining to 26,000 jobs or 20 percent of employment in 2016.⁷³ Table 1 illustrates the continued growth of Erie County's

69 Fallows, J. M., Fallows, D., & Fallows, J. (2019). Erie, Pennsylvania. *In Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (pp. 376-391). essay, Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

70 Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co. (1884). *History of Erie Co., Pennsylvania*. 1884 history of Erie County, PA: Part 3. Available [here](#).

71 Wertz, J., & Wood, P. (2015). (rep.). *Erie's Advanced Industries* (Vol. 2, Ser. 2015, p. 9). Erie, PA: Jefferson Educational Society.

72 Wertz, J., & Wood, P. (2015). (rep.). *Erie's Advanced Industries* (Vol. 2, Ser. 2015, p. 9). Erie, PA: Jefferson Educational Society.

73 Muro, M. (2016, September 19). Erie's rust belt activism. Brookings. Available [here](#).

non-manufacturing industry sectors. Figure 2 identifies Erie County's top employers through 2021.

Table 1

Erie County 2018 Industry Specialization and Growth⁷⁴

Industry Sector	2013–2018 Employment Change	2018 Location Quotient	2018 Jobs
Competitive			
Health Care & Social Assistance	1,047	1.47	24,652
Accommodation & Food Services	714	1.02	11,658
Educational Services	67	1.72	5,871
Finance & Insurance	41	1.02	5,495
Emerging			
Administrative & Support, Waste Management & Remediation	556	0.73	6,074
Transportation & Warehousing	135	0.62	2,979
Real Estate, Rental & Leasing	84	0.56	1,246
Management of Companies & Enterprises	65	0.35	655
Utilities	25	0.92	421
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	23	0.43	3,692
At-Risk			
Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	-83	1.27	2,929
Other Services	-241	1.06	6,752
Retail Trade	-677	1.12	15,088
Manufacturing	-3,069	1.86	19,425
Declining			
Construction	-25	0.69	5,083
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	-46	0.44	697
Mining, Quarrying, Oil & Gas Extraction	-82	0.10	52
Information	-225	0.45	1,095
Wholesale Trade	-333	0.62	3,078
Government	-596	0.80	16,064

⁷⁴ Garner Economics, LLC. (2019). (rep.). A Competitive Realities Report & Target Industry Strategy for Erie County, Pennsylvania. Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

Figure 2

Erie County Profile: Top 10 Employers by Employment in Q2 of 2021⁷⁵

Top 10 Employers by Employment in Q2 of 2021
Erie Indemnity Co
UPMC Hamot
State Government
Wal-Mart Associates Inc
Saint Vincent Health Center
Wabtec US Rail Inc
Federal Government
School District of the City of Erie
Erie County
Dr. Gertrude A Barber Center Inc

Like many regions throughout the nation, Erie County has faced a variety of challenges to industries of the day. These challenges serve as a threat to its local workforce. Declining population, available labor, education attainment levels, and sustainable income are indicators that mark potential weaknesses in a less than robust workforce economy.⁷⁶

According to decennial census data provided by the US Census Bureau, Erie County's population declined 3.5 percent over the last decade, dropping by 9,690 people to 270,876.⁷⁷ Of the current population, estimates reveal that 8.7 percent of Erie County residents 25 and older have attained less than a high school diploma, and 27.9 percent have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.⁷⁸ Real median household income for Erie County residents lags far behind state and national averages (\$51,818), with nearly 35 percent of households earning less than \$35,000.⁷⁹ Factors such as the "Great Resignation" of Baby boomers and the Covid-19 pandemic have impacted workforce participation, leading to worker shortages in the local economy that has remained relatively stagnant for nearly two decades as compared to the national GDP growth.⁸⁰

75 Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry - Center for Workforce Information & Analysis. (2021). (rep.). *Erie County Combined Government Ownerships - 2nd Quarter*. Available [here](#).

76 Garner Economics, LLC. (2019). (rep.). *A Competitive Realities Report & Target Industry Strategy for Erie County, Pennsylvania*. Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

77 U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Erie County, Pennsylvania. US Census Bureau QuickFacts: Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

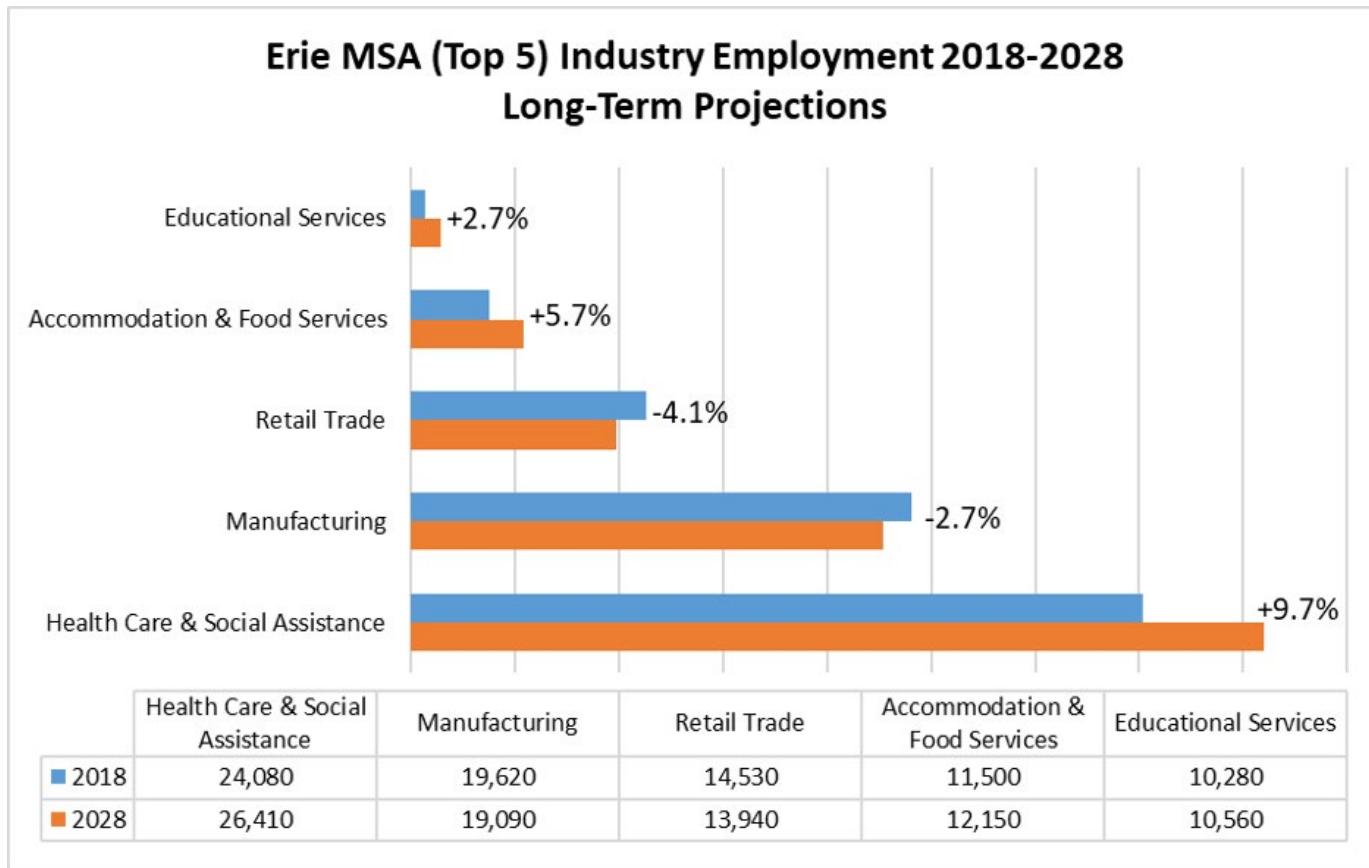
78 U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Erie County, Pennsylvania. US Census Bureau QuickFacts: Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

79 Louie, K. (2021). *The State of Erie's Economy & the Future of Work in Erie County*. Jefferson Educational Society Civic Leadership Academy.

80 Louie, K. (2021). *The State of Erie's Economy & the Future of Work in Erie County*. Jefferson Educational Society Civic Leadership Academy.

Figure 3

Erie MSA Industry Employment 2018-2028 Long-Term Projections⁸¹



The emergence of the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Industry 4.0), which the World Economic Forum defines as “a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres,”⁸² may directly threaten Erie County’s top industries. Long-term 20-year employment projections of the current top Erie County industries 2018-2028 (see Figure 3) from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry suggest a decline in manufacturing and retail trade, consistency for education, and an increased demand for healthcare, social assistance, accommodation, and food services.⁸³ Automation, Big Data, Internet of Things (IoT), and climate change will all play critical roles in transforming entire systems of production, management, and governance worldwide.⁸⁴

In a 2021 interview with the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy, urban policy expert Bruce Katz said he envisions “Another Erie,” in which the practice of leveraging local assets with nimble application towards sector-driven deployment would lead to industry advancement. “What’s happening in Erie is distinctly an American phenomenon,” Katz said. “A whole portion of our country has gone through, for the past 20 to 50 years, a brutal industrial transition without any significant support from the [federal] government.”

⁸¹ Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry - Center for Workforce Information & Analysis. (2018). (rep.). *Erie MSA Industry Employment 2018-2028 Long-Term Projections*. Available [here](#).

⁸² Schwab, K. (2016, January 16). *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means and how to respond*. World Economic Forum. Available [here](#).

⁸³ Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry - Center for Workforce Information & Analysis. (2018). (rep.). *Erie MSA Industry Employment 2018-2028 Long-Term Projections*. Available [here](#).

⁸⁴ Forum, W. E. (2016, January 14). *Strategic intelligence: World economic forum*. Strategic Intelligence - Fourth Industrial Revolution. Available [here](#).

The December 2021 Jefferson Educational Society publication, “How to Put Equitable Development to Work in Erie, Pennsylvania,” echoes Katz’s sentiment. Author Court Gould suggests Equitable Development, a positive development strategy that ensures everyone participates in and benefits from the region’s economic transformation, replacing traditional economic development practices.⁸⁵ The Equitable Development Plan, as Gould outlines, calls for an “all-in Erie” with an increase of public engagement at both the city and county levels, enhancing prospects of the region’s ability to compete and thrive. With these perspectives in mind, Erie County should consider new industries that combine public-private assets and embrace agile workforce development characteristics.

Other small cities have proven that this approach works. For example, Louisville, Kentucky, provides evidence of a well-rounded industry development plan. The plan demonstrates the potential of smaller-scale, higher-value, closer-to-the-customer “advanced manufacturing” as a source of business and employment.⁸⁶ These identified advanced manufacturing attributes present significant upside for Erie County, where in 2015 more than half of advanced industries in the United States were represented within the Erie economy.⁸⁷ Since 2016, Louisville has emerged as a Maker City, as outlined in the book *Maker City: A Practical Guide to Reinventing American Cities*. Maker Cities embrace entrepreneurship, build vocational skills through the enlistment of community colleges, and create pathways for individuals through new forms of training/upskilling credentials.⁸⁸ The practical guide playbook identifies workforce and economic development as a critical component for turning a city into a magnet for talent where one can attract the educated while simultaneously making the most of the talent pool they already have.⁸⁹

In 2019, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership (ERCGP) commissioned a Competitive Realities Report and Targeted Industry Strategies (TIS) for Erie County. A primary component of the study’s findings was to focus on the community’s enhancement of talent attraction, retention, and skills development.⁹⁰ Much like Gould’s Equitable Development plan, the ERCGP report recommended Erie County leverage its assets to strengthen the area’s production and market its value proposition to the (identified) targets, in which labor and industry play a leading role. “By taking a proactive leadership position, ERCGP can work to help transform Erie County into a place that attracts quality talent and companies while maintaining its character,” the report concludes.⁹¹ Harnessing the balance of existing/emerging industries, utilizing local assets for adaptive workplaces, and retaining talent through training and upskilling will determine the success of the future of work in Erie County.

85 Gould, C. (2021). How to Put Equitable Development to Work for Erie, Pennsylvania. Jefferson Educational Society. Available [here](#).

86 Fallows, J.M., Fallows, D., & Fallows, J. (2019). Louisville, Kentucky. *In Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (p. 167) essay, Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

87 Wertz, J., & Wood, P. (2015). (rep.). *Erie’s Advanced Industries* (Vol. 2, Ser. 2015, p. 5). Erie, PA: Jefferson Educational Society.

88 Hirshberg, P., Dougherty, D., & Kadanoff, M. (2017). Chapter 5: Workforce & Economic Development. *In Maker city a practical guide to reinventing our cities* (pp. 102–127). Maker Media.

89 Hirshberg, P., Dougherty, D., & Kadanoff, M. (2017). Chapter 5: Workforce & Economic Development. *In Maker city a practical guide to reinventing our cities* (pp. 102–127). Maker Media.

90 Garner Economics, LLC. (2019). (rep.). A Competitive Realities Report & Target Industry Strategy for Erie County, Pennsylvania. Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

91 Garner Economics, LLC. (2019). (rep.). A Competitive Realities Report & Target Industry Strategy for Erie County, Pennsylvania. Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

Future Industries

“2021 will be the year of transition. … (as) individuals, business, and society can start to look forward to shaping their futures rather than just grinding through the present.”⁹² These words from a January 2021 McKinsey Report were perhaps hoping for a brighter year regarding Covid-19, but it raged on. Industry, globally, is in the midst of one of the most substantial transitions in history. Regardless of the pandemic, the market is increasingly competitive and technologies are transforming how we work. In Erie County, it is no different. Erie is in transition and industry needs to be able to move with the market. While specific trends and data analytics are best represented in other more focused reports (ERCGP Garner Report⁹³, the Economic Research Institute of Erie⁹⁴, and Erie Vital Signs⁹⁵), there are common qualities that future-ready organizations should embrace.

Future industry is Connected.

The value of clusters and collaboration, even with competitors, is extraordinary. Industry clusters enhance common goals, improve supply chains, boost innovation, and have multiplicative job impacts. Erie’s prominent health cluster includes not only the hospitals but also nursing programs at multiple regional universities; medical research programs, such as the Magee Women’s Research Institute; medical product companies, such as Cybersonics; and the nation’s largest medical college, the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM). Each cluster can benefit from the others and vastly improve services.

Plastics manufacturing is another strong Erie cluster. This sector now includes more than 32 plastics manufacturers in addition to tooling shops, product designers, transportation jobs, and plastics research programs. In the mid-1980s, these businesses supported their own needs by collaborating with Penn State Behrend to develop the university’s plastics engineering program, and they continue to influence the program to this day. This cluster was a vital part of the decision by International Recycling Group (IRG) to choose Erie for its planned \$100 million plastics recycling plant.

To succeed in not just maintaining industry present today but in expanding it for the future, Erie needs to be intentional in its support for emerging clusters and build upon those that the county has already established. More recently, Erie has begun to grow a strong entrepreneurship cluster. Erie entrepreneurs can enjoy free business and engineering support from the Northwest PA Innovation Beehive Network, a collaboration of regional universities. They can co-work with other entrepreneurs and remote workers at Radius CoWork while going through one of Erie’s accelerator programs.

Erie boasts a pro-entrepreneur government with growing financial support for new businesses, a Small Business Development Center, a tech incubator at Gannon University, and numerous other services.

The largest value by far is the collaboration across the entrepreneurial community. The rapid growth of this cluster required intentional, concerted effort from many Erie organizations. Emerging clusters in Erie should consider this entrepreneurial ecosystem as a template for collaborative growth.

92 *The Next Normal: Business Trends for 2021* | McKinsey. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

93 Garner Economics, LLC. (2019). (rep.). *A Competitive Realities Report & Target Industry Strategy for Erie County, Pennsylvania*. Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

94 ERIE Data. (2015). *Economic Research Institute of Erie*. Available [here](#).

95 Erie Vital Signs. (2022). *A Leadership Initiative of The Erie Community Foundation*. Available [here](#).

Future industry is Smart

The “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Industry 4.0) is real and has arrived. Industry 4.0 includes a host of technologies and methods. In manufacturing, these technologies include sensor networks that collect data that smart software will use to make decisions and take action automatically. Software may alert a worker that a particular machine requires maintenance before it shows signs of wear; it may even order the part and prepare a work order. The efficiencies offered by Industry 4.0 technologies are quickly becoming essential, and Erie’s business leaders need to prepare for them.

“I’ve worked with a lot of Erie manufacturers over the years,” said Michelle Hartmann, Director of Community and Workforce Programs and one of the leaders of a new Industry 4.0 research and workforce training initiative at Penn State Behrend. “Many of them are starting to realize that using these new techniques and technologies is quickly becoming a necessity, but they’re still apprehensive. The expense can be high, they’re unclear on what the return on investment will be, and most importantly, they don’t know where to start.”

Erie County hosts several Industry 4.0 focused companies. Data Inventions, for example, helps mid-sized manufacturers outfit their legacy systems with connected sensor networks and technologies. Technology adoption services like this one will be of enormous value in aiding industry in the region moving into the coming years. As manufacturing remains a central component of Erie’s economy, this technological step forward is particularly important.

Future industry is Green

“The shift in consumer buying, with more consumers willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, reinforces the need for companies to increase their commitments to responsible business practices,” said Jessica Long in a report by Accenture in 2019.⁹⁶ Their survey found strong consumer demands for greener industry, particularly in products that they purchase. Plastics, in particular, was singled out as one of the industry sectors with the worst consumer perception in regard to environmental values. Additionally, consumers are also voters, and public policy can demand change when the market cannot. Inaction, under those circumstances, can result in loss of reputation, fines, and complete collapse, such as in the case of Erie Coke Corp., which chose to ignore required changes in favor of paying fines until the company was forced to cease operations. Taxpayers will be funding the cleanup.^{97,98}

With direct access to Lake Erie, a working port, Presque Isle State Park, and with lake research being done by organizations such as Pennsylvania Sea Grant, Erie is poised for green industry growth. The growth of HeroBX – a biodiesel manufacturer – and the commitment of IRG to building in Erie County represent large wins in this sector.

Several startups and small businesses are being born in Erie that show promise as well. Algeon Materials is developing an algae-derived plastic alternative. Accelerate Wind has a new wind turbine design for large buildings. PSNergy designs systems to reduce heat waste in furnaces. All three of these examples participated in Erie’s FIRE (Finding Innovative Recruits for Erie) Accelerator program and are strongly connected with Erie’s entrepreneurial resources while collaborating with Erie’s

⁹⁶ Accenture. (2019, July 1). *Accenture Chemicals Global Consumer Sustainability Survey 2019*. Available [here](#).

⁹⁷ Reader, E. (n.d.). *A Clear Lesson*. Available [here](#).

⁹⁸ Hold Erie Coke Accountable. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

universities.^{99,100}

A Hybrid Workplace

The workplace is not what it used to be. In reality, a lot of work does not happen in offices, boardrooms, and cubicles anymore. It happens at home, on the road with a mobile hotspot, in a coworking space, and just about anywhere else with an internet connection.

Remote work was already on the rise even before the pandemic. But now that nearly half (45 percent) of the workforce has had a chance to work from home at least part-time,¹⁰¹ this trend is likely here to stay – and that is OK. First, employees want it: 91 percent of workers in the U.S. working at least some of their hours remotely are hoping their ability to work at home persists after the pandemic.

Secondly, employers want talent. In the wake of the “Great Resignation,” it is imperative that business leaders meet people halfway if they want to grow their businesses. Halfway might be the perfect solution. A hybrid model (split time between working at home and in the office) is preferred most by employees. What’s more, if the option to work remotely was eliminated, more than 30 percent of employees would find a job that offered it.

Leaders who give their teams choices about where and when they work will ultimately be better able to attract and retain talent. Business owners in Erie County need to prepare for a workplace that goes against the grain of the traditional in-house, 9-to-5 position.

Talent and Training

Erie’s labor force has fallen by nearly 7 percent since its peak in 2007. Statistics show a reduction in the labor force since the 2008 recession, and the labor force has fallen gradually since.¹⁰² Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, several factors contributed to a shrinking local workforce. Discouraged workers ceasing to look for work, retirements, and population decline are likely the three most significant non-Covid-related reasons Erie County has experienced a decrease in the size of its labor force over the last decade, as indicated in Figure 4.¹⁰³ Compounded by the pandemic, Erie County is now faced with exploring collaborative training resources across its sector partnerships to address its brain drain and talent shortage.

99 Natalie, J. (2021, October 6). On location at Erie’s Homecoming 2021. *TalkErie.com*. Available [here](#).

100 Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. (2021). *Fireaccelerator - Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership*. Erie Chamber And Growth Partnership. Available [here](#).

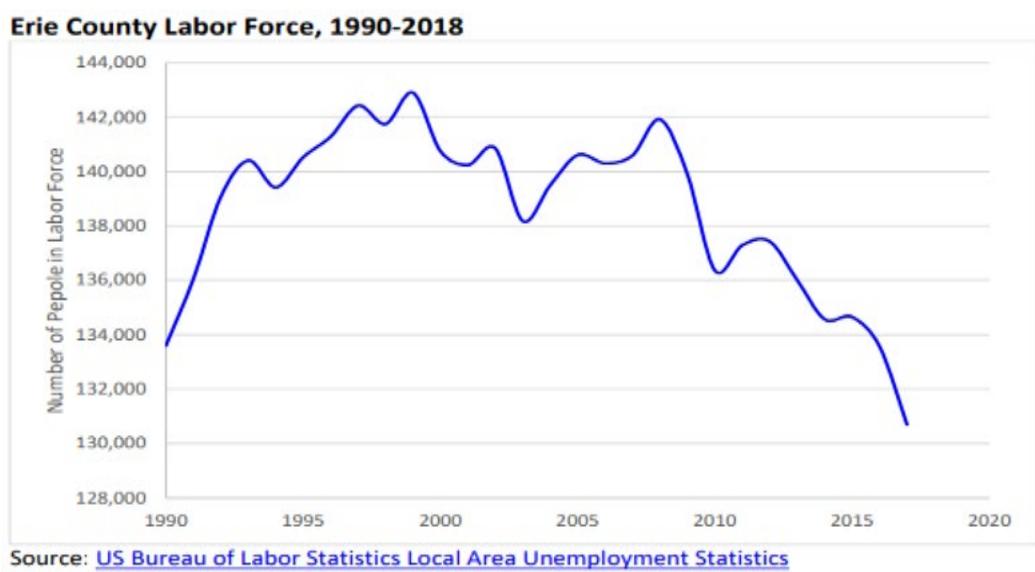
101 Lydia Saad and Ben Wigert, P. D. (2022, January 11). *Remote work persisting and trending permanent*. Gallup.com. Available [here](#).

102 Economic Research Institute of Erie. (2019). (rep.). *2019 Erie Guide - 7th Edition*. Economic Research Institute of Erie. Available [here](#).

103 Economic Research Institute of Erie. (2019). (rep.). *2019 Erie Guide - 7th Edition*. Economic Research Institute of Erie. Available [here](#).

Figure 4

Erie County Labor Force, 1990-2018¹⁰⁴



To support talent and training, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)¹⁰⁵ signed by President Obama in 2014 supports training individuals for tomorrow's job. According to WIOA, the Federal Government mandates the State government to provide relevant training for in-demand jobs in their respective workforce development areas. State training funding is allocated to the American Job Center Network to support talent and training on a local level.¹⁰⁶ The local American Job Center Network in Erie County is the PA CareerLink.

Erie County is one of 23 workforce development areas in Pennsylvania. WIOA requires a local workforce development area (WDB) to use innovative approaches to reach, teach, and prepare job seekers. In addition, the law mandates that specific state and federal agencies and programs work together to meet these requirements.¹⁰⁷

Partnerships are an important element and provide a holistic approach to attracting talent and training job seekers for jobs in Erie County. The American Job Centers (AJC), which the Department of Labor and Industry funds, is a one-stop-shop for talent and training. The AJC's partners provide employment services. Currently, the program partners include Title I: Adult, Dislocated Workers, Youth; Title II: Adult Education and Literacy; Title III: Unemployment Compensation (UC); and Title IV: Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) services.

To help support training for emerging jobs in Erie County, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry (PADOL) publishes a high-priority occupation (HPO) list.¹⁰⁸ The HPO list highlights

104 Economic Research Institute of Erie. (2019). (rep.). 2019 *Erie Guide - 7th Edition*. Economic Research Institute of Erie. Available [here](#).

105 House - Education and the Workforce; Judiciary; Agriculture; Veterans' Affairs; Energy and Commerce; Transportation and Infrastructure | Senate - Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. (2014). *H.R.803 - 113th congress (2013-2014): Workforce innovation ... Congress.gov*. Available [here](#).

106 Employment and Training Administration (2021, December 21) Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Available [here](#).

107 Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, & Gagliardi, A., Federal Register Volume 80, Issue 73 (April 16, 2015) (2015). Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration. Available [here](#).

108 Center for Information & Analysis (2021, December 21). *2021 High Priority Occupations for Northwest Workforce Development Area*. Available [here](#).

high-demand jobs providing family-sustaining wages to which the state of Pennsylvania allocates training dollars.¹⁰⁹ Progression to a life-sustaining wage is a crucial metric monitored by the commonwealth. In addition, workforce development funding supports career pathways for trainees and continues to help talent move and grow within their respective career pathways.

Policy Recommendations

Industry Leaders

- Design workplaces to be flexible, inclusive, and considerate of the whole employee (physical, cognitive, and emotional)
- Leverage mixed-managed and mix-use spaces for workplace optimization
- Eliminate industry sector silos that prevent cross-sector partnerships and collaboration, specifically in areas of education and workforce development
- Evaluate current training programs and overall alignment to local industry career pathways
- Form industry-recognized credentialing to be delivered by local colleges or training providers that are aligned with high-priority occupations

Local Government Officials (County/Municipal)

- Establish balance among existing and emerging industries through the utilization of supportive local assets
- Institute equitable development strategies that support local industry and meet demands of the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (Industry 4.0)
- Pursue small-scale, high-value, niche-based industries that embrace entrepreneurship, innovation, and collaboration
- Adopt future-ready industries that are adaptive and nimble to move with growing regional, national, and global markets
- Consider industry policies that champion connectivity, smart technology, and Green initiatives
- Educate employers on the benefits of sponsoring training for their employees to improve talent attraction and retention
- Cultivate relevant, on-demand training that is locally accessible and affordable

Infrastructure

Erie's infrastructure requires significant improvements to support the future of work in Erie County and to grow, sustain, and retain life-sustaining employment. From bridging the digital divide to user-friendly public transportation, Erie County, Pennsylvania is missing core elements to make it a destination for businesses and talent. By investing in Erie County's infrastructure, public and private leaders can minimize systemic barriers such as county and state tax structure and remove policies that disproportionately impact low-income areas and residents. This section will explore foundational questions, such as:

- What are exemplary examples of infrastructure plans from other communities that could guide planning in Erie County?
- How can local leaders foster political will for infrastructure projects?
- How will major federal investments steer infrastructure development in the region?

¹⁰⁹ Northwest Workforce Development Area. (2021, December 21). Available [here](#).

Necessary to any broad policy discussion are clear definitions and scope. Much public commentary has involved infrastructure in recent years, especially evident in President Joe Biden's economic recovery plans. In an April 2021 speech, President Biden remarked that infrastructure today is the foundation for working people "to live, to go to work, to raise their families with dignity, to ensure that good jobs will be there for their kids, no matter who they are or what ZIP code they live in."¹¹⁰

That foundation is broad, and all facets of it are worthy of attention when strategizing needs and opportunities involving the future of work. Harvard University scholars Larry Beeferman and Allan Wain, experts on public policy and labor, assert that infrastructure includes all "facilities, structure, equipment, or similar physical assets – and the enterprises that employ them – that are vitally important, if not essential, to people having the capabilities to thrive as individuals" as well as to participate "in social, economic, political, civic or communal, household or familial" life.¹¹¹ Faster internet for all, clean drinking water, and bike lanes are some of the many elements of this all-encompassing definition of infrastructure to fit life in the 21st century.

Strengthening Erie County's infrastructure is key for supporting the current and growing demands of the future of work. With rising nonstandard employment, including much of the gig economy and remote work, workers will be afforded fewer social protections (including various employer-provided insurances and benefits), which mitigate the impacts of unemployment, illness, disability, old age, and work-related injury. Along with rising automation and next-gen industries (e.g., fintech, cloud software, biotech, blockchain, green tech), local governments must prioritize innovative and community-building infrastructure to support all types of workers, employers, and industries.

Rapid changes to the workplace from the pandemic recovery through 2030 have the potential to destabilize much of civil society, making infrastructure investment essential to counter these effects. As asserted by Kevin DeGood, director of Infrastructure Policy at Center for American Progress, "the decisions that elected officials, planners, and the public make collectively will shape economic production, social mobility, and environmental health, among other outcomes, for many decades."¹¹²

Understanding historical trends in infrastructure spending on the micro (e.g., parks and green spaces) and macro (e.g., ports and airports) levels illuminates this dire need for transformational investments like the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), both of 2021. Unlike other Western nations that fund the majority of infrastructure spending, the federal government provides significantly less funding for infrastructure development, currently covering 25 percent of funding down from a peak of 38 percent in 1977.¹¹³ As the graph below (Figure 5) highlights, local and state governments have had to cover the majority of costs associated with infrastructure, including investment and maintenance. This division of spending exacerbates the decline and discrepancies of our nation's infrastructure but has also led to the development of innovations like public-private partnerships, to be discussed further in the following sections.

¹¹⁰ White House. (2021, April 7). *Remarks by President Biden on the American Jobs Plan*. Available [here](#).

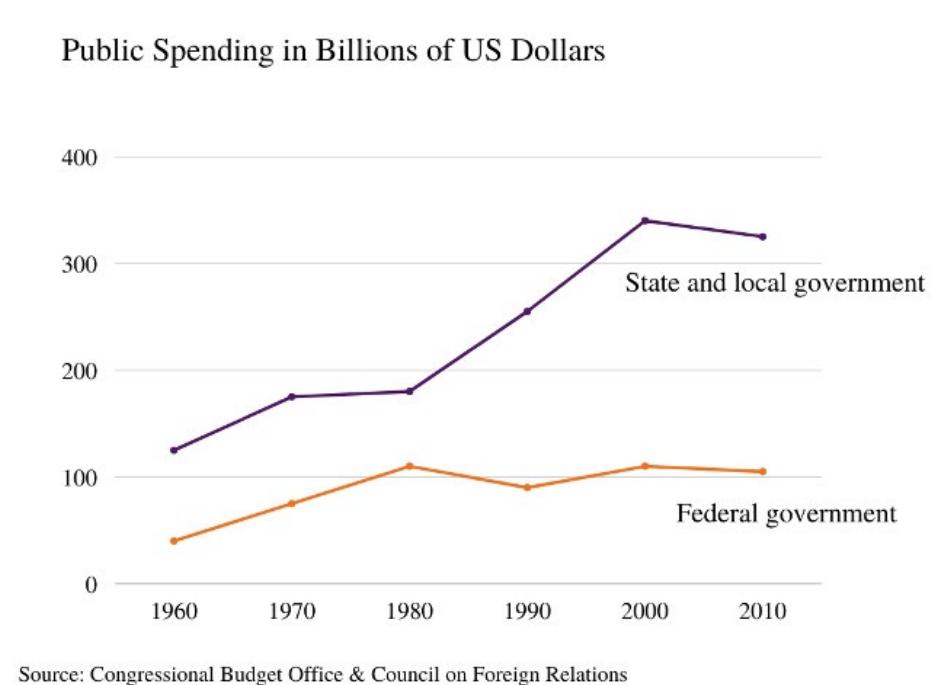
¹¹¹ Beeferman, L., & Wain, A. (2016, Jan 13). Infrastructure: Defining Matters. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. Available [here](#).

¹¹² DeGood, K. (2020, April 14). Infrastructure Investment Decisions Are Political, Not Technical. *Center for American Progress*. Available [here](#).

¹¹³ McBride, J. & Siripurapu, A. (2021, Nov 8). The State of U.S. Infrastructure. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available [here](#).

Figure 5

State and Local Governments Infrastructure Spending



Specifically for Pennsylvania, similar trends exist that mirror the rest of the country: inadequate funding through the state budget process has impeded much-needed repairs, expansion, and new developments in infrastructure. Over time, state infrastructure funding has stagnated despite consistent population growth and aging and outdated roads, technology, public transportation, water and sewer systems, and airports.

Pennsylvania has some of the oldest infrastructure in the country, as noted in the American Society of Civil Engineers' "2018 Report Card for Pennsylvania's Infrastructure." The state has the most combined sewer overflow incidents in the country, meaning "billions of gallons of untreated sewage enter into our streams every year." Additionally, the state holds the ninth-largest inventory of bridges in the nation, with around 18.3 percent (4,173 bridges) being classified as poor condition. Pennsylvania is also ranked ninth for the volume of goods that move through its three ports – Erie, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia.¹¹⁴

Even though Erie County ranks 15th in population size out of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, the region plays an elevated role in the state's infrastructure system. This position is mainly driven by its location as a port on the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence Seaway, and as an integral connector for transportation. Historically, infrastructure investments in Erie County have been piecemeal, at the will of state elected officials, or as a response to crisis. More recently, Governor Tom Wolf's administration has brought long-overdue funding, such as the 2017 \$330,000 state investment in a Presque Isle State Park study to improve transportation at the most visited park in the state and the 2018 \$2.7 million state investment in the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority to spur economic development at the port.^{115,116}

¹¹⁴ American Society of Civil Engineers. (2018). *Pennsylvania 2018 Report*. Available [here](#).

¹¹⁵ Salvatori, N. (2017, July 5). State announces sweeping plans to study peninsula, bayfront. *Erie Times-News*. Available [here](#).

¹¹⁶ Druga, M. (2018, Oct 10). State to invest \$2.7M in Erie Western PA Port Authority. *Pennsylvania Business Report*. Available [here](#).

Potentially Transformational Investments in 2020-2021

Erie County is one of the many counties at a critical juncture, and national leadership has risen to the occasion with a massive infrastructure investment. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), passed in November 2021, is a once-in-a-generation investment in the nation's infrastructure. It could lead to transformative development that will support transitions in the future of work and civil society on a macro level.

The bipartisan act was a core tenet of President Biden's campaign and will be delivered through state allocations, both competitive and non-competitive grants, and federal investments. According to Biden, it encompasses "the single largest investment in repairing and reconstructing our nation's bridges since the construction of the interstate highway system ... the largest federal investment in public transit in history ... (and) the largest investment in passenger rail since Amtrak's creation 50 years ago."¹¹⁷ Additionally, IIJA is the first of its kind in terms of investments addressing the growing climate crisis. The act is expansive, including the following new investments:

- Transportation: \$284 billion (U.S. Department of Transportation)
- Water: \$55 billion (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)
- Broadband: \$65 billion (U.S. Department of Commerce)
- Energy & Power: \$73 billion (U.S. Department of Energy)
- Environmental remediation: \$21 billion (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)
- Western water infrastructure: \$8.3 billion (U.S. Department of the Interior; U.S. Department of Agriculture - U.S. Forest Service)
- Resiliency: \$46 billion (U.S. Department of Homeland Security)¹¹⁸

While local and state governments "carry an even greater burden" than the federal government and coordinated agencies to deliver on these investments,¹¹⁹ all levels of government must work together to align this historic investment with rapidly changing industries and economies. Stakeholders agree that this investment is an exciting opportunity for Pennsylvania, as state infrastructure investments have plateaued over the past decade. Governor Wolf's prized second-term project "Restore PA" was promoted throughout 2019 with the plans to fund infrastructure works like flood prevention, broadband expansion, and blight reduction through a severance tax.¹²⁰ The plan was proposed in Wolf's 2020 budget but failed to pass the state Legislature and thus never came to fruition.¹²¹ IIJA checks all of the boxes proposed under infrastructure in "Restore PA" and expands on areas omitted:

Historic for its size, breadth and ambition, IIJA will mark a historic turning point in the nation's (long overdue) efforts to address climate change, water pollution, and environmental justice, while also rebuilding traditional infrastructure long overlooked, underfunded and under maintained. - Ezra Thrush, PennFuture, 2021¹²²

117 White House. (2021, Nov 6). *Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal*. Available [here](#).

118 National Association of Counties. (2021, Nov 7). Legislative Analysis for Counties: The Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act. Available [here](#).

119 Tomer, A. et al. (2021, Nov 9). America has an infrastructure bill. What happens next? *The Brookings Institution*. Available [here](#).

120 Gough, P. (2020, Feb 5). RestorePA's back in the budget, but it's anyone guess whether it will pass this time around. *Pittsburgh Business Times*. Available [here](#).

121 Thompson, C. (2021, Nov 16). How PA could benefit from federal infrastructure plan: Train stops, steamrollers and new fishing holes. *Centre Daily Times*. Available [here](#).

122 Thrush, E. (2021, Nov 23). Breaking Down the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. *PennFuture*. Available [here](#).

Pennsylvania will receive approximately \$1.6 billion for bridge replacement and repairs, \$11.3 billion for federal aid-apportioned highway programs, \$1.4 billion for water infrastructure improvement, and up to \$1 billion for broadband expansion over the next five years.¹²³ In Erie County, broadband expansion will be instrumental in meeting the needs of the future of work.

Today in Erie County, 99 percent of residents have access to broadband, yet only 70 percent are connected.¹²⁴ This disparity is highest among Black, Hispanic, and low-income households.¹²⁵

Municipalities within the county are leading the way in planning and implementing broadband developments, and a key recommendation is for all local governments to follow suit. For example, Corry's most recent Community Strategy Plan outlines three phases of broadband connectivity investments and developments through 2028.¹²⁶

The lack of broadband internet access throughout Erie County was quickly recognized after the pandemic forced many employees to shift to remote work. These upcoming infrastructure investments will help current residents and position Erie County as a destination for employers and employees looking to relocate with the option of remote work. Erie County has the potential to attract digital nomads – workers unattached to a specific location as long as there is reliable and fast internet access.

Between 2019 and 2020, there was a 49 percent rise in Americans identifying as digital nomads, largely driven by the pandemic.¹²⁷ The rest of the decade will see an explosion of workers transitioning into digital nomads. Harvard Business Review conducted research and found that 19 million adult Americans plan to become digital nomads within the next three years with an additional 45 million considering the leap away from traditional work settings.¹²⁸ To counter Erie's declining population, the region could offer an incentive program to attract digital nomads, similar to those offered in regions of West Virginia, Alabama, Kansas, Maine, and Vermont.¹²⁹

In addition to the enormous IIJA investment in the region, the county and the city are both set to receive generous funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Erie County will be receiving more than \$52.3 million, which must be spent by December 31, 2026. Of those funds, the county has set aside \$2.5 million to be used for water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure.¹³⁰ Of the \$76 million in ARPA funds being distributed to the city of Erie, the city has dedicated \$11.5 million to wastewater, stormwater, and digital infrastructure improvements.¹³¹

Erie International Airport received \$18 million of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security

123 Stier, M. (2021, Nov 7). What the infrastructure bill does for Pennsylvania. *The Pennsylvania Budget & Policy Center*. Available [here](#).

124 Federal Communications Commission. (2022) Fixed Broadband Deployment. Available [here](#).

125 Koehle, E. (2021, Nov 28). Erie Voice: How the infrastructure bill can close northwestern Pennsylvania's digital divide. *Erie Times-News*. Available [here](#).

126 czbLLC. (2021, Jan). #positively Corry Community Strategic Plan 2021-2031. *Impact Corry*. Available [here](#).

127 Everson, M., et al. (2021, July 12). Your Company Needs a Digital Nomad Policy. *Harvard Business Review*. Available [here](#).

128 Ibid.

129 Kelly, J. (2021, Nov 3). Small Towns And Cities Are Offering Up To \$20,000 For Remote Workers To Relocate. *Forbes*. Available [here](#).

130 Erie County, Pennsylvania. (2021). *American Rescue Plan Act*. Available [here](#).

131 Rink, M. (2021, Aug 20). Erie officials, with a \$76M allocation, still working on a plan to spend COVID relief funds. *Erie Times-News*. Available [here](#).

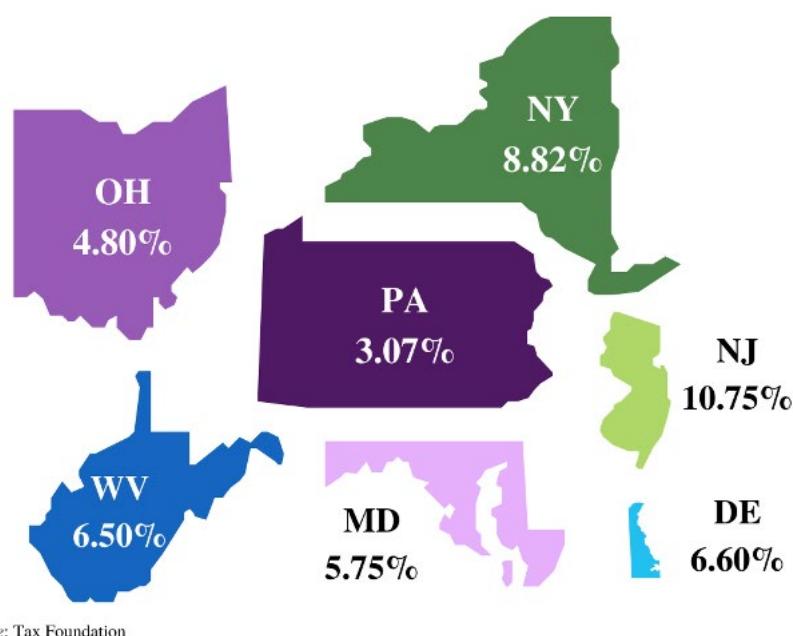
(CARES) Act funding in 2020 and is expected to receive IIJA funding from the state allotment of \$355 million for the state's airports over five years¹³² Planned investments will be to expand the runway area to make room for larger aircraft and construct a new jet bridge to help make travel more comfortable and accessible.¹³³ If the Erie International Airport can charter more direct flights in the future, it can be an attractive location for businesses to establish a presence in Erie, even more considering its access to the Great Lakes and major interstates 90, 79, and 86.

Key Barriers: Pennsylvania's Tax Structures

While Pennsylvania's individual income tax rate is exceedingly low compared to other states (see Figure 6 below), its taxes on businesses are higher than others (see Figure 7 below). Pennsylvania's corporate income tax rate of 9.9 percent ranks third highest, just after Iowa and New Jersey. Applied locally, in addition to state corporate income taxes, is a gross receipts tax. According to the Tax Foundation, the gross receipts tax is applied to a corporation's grand total of sales. It differs from a sales tax in that a gross receipts tax is assessed on businesses and applies to business-to-business transactions as well as final consumer purchases, thus creating the potential for tax pyramiding.¹³⁴

Figure 6

*Individual Income Tax Rate in 2021 for Pennsylvania and Neighboring States*¹³⁵



With a high corporate income tax rate coupled with the gross receipt tax, Pennsylvania offers fewer incentives for employers to relocate their established businesses or launch new start-ups. Fortunately, some incremental change is on the way. Built into Governor Wolf's 2021-22 state budget are annual adjustments to the corporate net income tax through 2026. Commencing January 1, 2022, the rate is reduced from 9.99 to 8.99 percent, with the goal of a total reduction to 5.99 percent by 2026.¹³⁶ This reduced tax rate could make Pennsylvania more attractive to businesses, especially considering the

¹³² Stier, M. (2021, Nov 7). What the infrastructure bill does for Pennsylvania. *The Pennsylvania Budget & Policy Center*. Available [here](#).

¹³³ Swift, C. (2021, Sept 13). Erie International Airport to see major upgrades. *Your Erie*. Available [here](#).

¹³⁴ Tax Foundation. (2021). *Taxes in Pennsylvania*. Available [here](#).

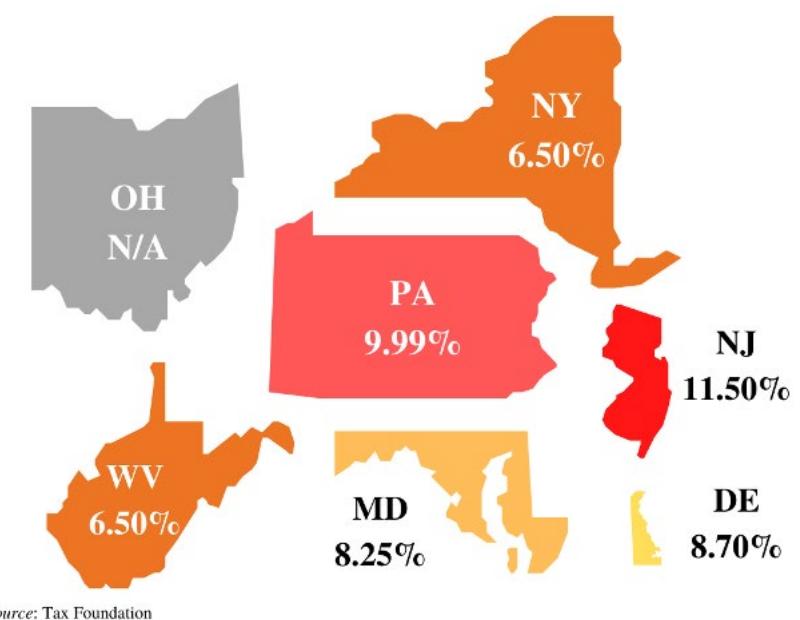
¹³⁵ Loughead, K. (2021, Feb 17). State Individual Income Tax Rates and Brackets for 2021. *Tax Foundation*. Available [here](#).

¹³⁶ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (2021, Feb 2). *Governor's Executive Budget 2021-2022*. Available [here](#).

2026 target rate will be lower than neighboring states.

Figure 7

Corporate Income Tax Rates in 2021 for Pennsylvania and Neighboring States¹³⁷



Diana Polson, a researcher and analyst for Third and State, a joint blog of the Keystone Research Center and Pennsylvania Budget & Policy Center, conveys that the blog's purpose is to "provide a progressive view of the state economy, budget, and other policy matters." Writing in 2019 from a perspective that connects PA tax structures to racial disparities, she argues that state and local income tax structures drive inequities and ultimately stunt growth, as the state relies heavily on low- to middle-income families to generate much of the necessary state revenue. This article notes low-income families making the bottom 20 percent of wages pay about 2.8 percent in state and local taxes, while the top 1 percent of PA's earners pay about 1.6 percent in state and local taxes.¹³⁸ This argument of stunted growth and racial inequity is essential for consideration when planning for the future of work in Erie County. Applying Polson's argument to Erie-specific data, Table 2 highlights the significantly higher incidence of poverty for people of color, specifically Black and Hispanic residents.

137 Loughead, K. (2021, Feb 17). State Individual Income Tax Rates and Brackets for 2021. *Tax Foundation*. Available [here](#).

138 Polson, D. (2019, March 26). Pennsylvania's tax structure worsens income inequality, the racial wealth gap and contributes to our revenue inadequacy. *Third and State*. Available [here](#).

Table 2Erie County, PA Poverty by Race¹³⁹

Race	Total	In Poverty	Poverty Rate
Asian	4,110	679	16.52%
Black	17,247	7,068	40.98%
Hispanic	10,870	4,487	41.28%
Islander	63	11	17.46%
Multiple	8,148	2,589	31.77%
Native	694	126	18.16%
Other	3,161	1,186	37.52%
White	221,687	27,585	12.44%

Despite decades of efforts from governments, agencies, and nonprofits to address poverty, it remains one of Erie County's most significant problems, especially regarding generational poverty. While data from ZIP code 16501 (a ZIP code in downtown Erie) makes this issue particularly evident in the city, it's also a major rural problem in the greater county. In fact, data from the United States Postal Service, U.S. Census Bureau, and UnitedStatesZipCodes.org documented that 16501 is the poorest ZIP code in Pennsylvania.¹⁴⁰ 16501 also ranked highest on the Community Poverty Index (CPI) in Erie County. CPI took into consideration median household income data, fair market rental prices, and food prices and availability, to create a community poverty index that reveals the variability in the cost of living from one ZIP code to another.¹⁴¹

Coordinated policy making and investments will be crucial to support the future of work, particularly focusing on expanding jobs with living wages and finding new pathways to long-term mobility in areas that need it most. Infrastructure workforce expansion offers potential for transformative shifts in employment and economic development. Another major way to tackle poverty is to leverage local businesses and community organizations to form new public-private partnerships for growth, reinvestment, and placemaking.

139 World Population Review. (2021). *Erie County, Pennsylvania Population 2021*. Available [here](#).

140 UnitedStatesZipCodes.org. (2021). Available [here](#).

141 Jefferson Educational Society. (2018). *Trapped in Poverty*. Available [here](#).

Opportunities for Erie County through Public-Private Partnerships

A public-private partnership is an arrangement between public agencies and private organizations. Typically this collaborative arrangement involves financing government projects and services. The public sector typically uses public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects such as constructing buildings, buying equipment, maintaining public assets (e.g., parks, schools, hospitals), and water and sewer systems. The private organizations then draw profits from taxpayers and users of the infrastructural projects. Public-private partnerships can expedite projects and put new ideas on the table – ideas that would not be possible without private financial backing.

Erie's east side has experienced a disproportionate amount of housing dilapidation, rusting infrastructure, crime, and poverty. However, among its greatest advantages is the network of easily accessible roads and streets that make it an attractive place for future redevelopment and infrastructure investment. Notably, its neighborhoods are taking serious interest in the future of the east side.

Because the needs are great and there are limited tax dollars available, public-private partnerships are ideal tools to reinvest in the east side, which has a proud history of manufacturing and industry. According to city of Erie Planner Katherine Wyrosdick, the east side is struggling with blight, crime, and high poverty. These three problems contribute to low housing value and high-crime neighborhoods, which in turn generate minimal taxes for reinvestment from the city and even less desire for businesses to stimulate growth.

Erie's strategic plan regarding the east side, from the East Bayfront Neighborhood Plan,¹⁴² details the near- and long-term vision the city has for redevelopment and reinvestment in the community. In this neighborhood plan, there is a desire to create a series of parks and recreational sites for improved livability. It includes an aspiration to make Parade Street the main business corridor of East Erie and eradicate blight by creating a Community Land Trust, a nonprofit organization that aims to preserve community assets by owning land on behalf of a community, to ensure maintenance, affordability, and livability.

While the east side is a multi-cultural and vibrant area, the issues confronting it are not unfamiliar throughout the country. The Crenshaw district of Los Angeles, California, the Rondo Community of St. Paul, Minnesota, and the downtown area of Eugene, Oregon, have found ways to overcome these same issues with varying degrees of success. These three locations have all employed public-private partnerships to attain their goals and fund ongoing projects.

The ReConnect Rondo and Destination Crenshaw initiatives have leveraged their public-private partnerships to bring about results, and what stands out from these two models is how they formed the collaboration. Traditional public-private partnerships are entities with some combination of a government body, a large corporation, or a non-governmental agency. These two neighborhood initiatives have redefined public-private partnerships in a way that could guide East Erie as it seeks more funding sources.

These community initiatives not only received the blessing and financial support of their cities and a range of philanthropic and corporate sponsors but these public-private partnerships were underwritten in large part due to the support of private citizens. For ReConnect Rondo, more than 45 percent of its funds raised as of June 2021 were from private individual donors with no corporate, NGO, or

¹⁴² 142 Bayfront Eastside Taskforce. (2020, Jan 15). *East Bayfront Neighborhood Plan*. Available [here](#).

government agency ties.¹⁴³

Destination Crenshaw provides an excellent model for the redevelopment of Parade Street as it is actively revitalizing Crenshaw Avenue with art installations, business investments, parks, and walkways that provide for safe recreational opportunities in the heart of the district. Through its capital campaign that raised more than \$100 million in 2021, mostly from citizens throughout the Los Angeles area, it has helped civic leaders reimagine public-private partnerships as tools to spark neighborhood interests and citizen reinvestment in their cities. Due to the large investment from private citizens to the new group, the organizers of Destination Crenshaw have made it their mission to hire only developers, contractors, artists, and workers from within and around the Crenshaw district.¹⁴⁴ Because the main stakeholders of Destination Crenshaw are its citizens, the decision-making and accountability are kept at the immediate local level with funds being maximized for the greatest impact and efficiency. The physical progress and installation of key buildings and works of art are quicker as decision-making avoids governmental bureaucratic hoops.

Unlike ReConnect Rondo and Destination Crenshaw, the Eugene Town Square Project is staying within the financial sector of its economy to underwrite its new downtown revitalization vision. The Eugene Town Square is Eugene, Oregon's answer to revitalizing a blighted section of downtown. It has been in development for more than a decade but in a way, it has been in constant development and redevelopment since 1958.¹⁴⁵

In 2019, the Town Square Project gained momentum and approval from its City Council. It was scheduled to open the next year with new municipal buildings and private businesses circling its perimeter. Within the Town Square are a Farmers Market, amphitheater, and seating areas, and a grassy and shaded green space for relaxation and recreation. This project is financed through partnerships between the city and its various agencies and multiple businesses. The various government agencies involved include the Urban Renewal Fund, which gets funding from a tax increment schedule. Also, the Riverfront Development oversees the technical administration and project implementation of the various aspects of the Town Square.

The private entities include corporations and small businesses that look to do business in and around the Town Square. The large corporations that will form a ring around the Town Square and adjacent to it are banks, The Woolworth office building, a high-end hotel, and a luxury apartment complex. These businesses are given tax incentives to build and invest next to the Town Square for a decade with the hope that these enterprises will provide the space and attractions that will draw tourists and visitors to the Square. Some of these businesses accepted low-interest loans from the city and are responsible for the construction and maintenance of its edifices. After a decade, they will be expected to start paying taxes.

Interestingly, much of the initial financing of the Town Square is expected to be offset by hotel occupancy and restaurant taxes along with the rent of stalls at the Farmers Market. Within 30 years, all costs of the project will be paid off through tax increment policies and business investments, and taxes. By considering the all-business approach to public-private partnership like the one in Eugene or a more community-based one, Erie has options to explore with significant potential to renew East Erie and increase the wealth and prosperity of its residents and neighborhoods.

143 ReConnect Rondo. (2021). *Take a genuine look back to ignite a great step forward*. Available [here](#).

144 Destination Crenshaw. (2021). *About Destination Crenshaw*. Available [here](#).

145 City of Eugene, Oregon. (2019). *Eugene Town Square Final Report*. Available [here](#).

Policy Recommendations

Erie County is well-suited to undertake the necessary changes, investments, and opportunities to enhance its infrastructure to align with the future of work. These recommendations can serve as a roadmap to policymakers, stakeholders, and community members to ensure growth. In our view, the future of work in Erie County needs the following:

- Develop municipality broadband plans using Impact Corry's Community Strategic Plan as a model
- Guarantee transparent documentation of allocations for ARPA and IIJA funds at city and county levels
- Create sustainable infrastructure funding streams and improve city and county outreach efforts to potential grantees
- Strengthen partnerships with the Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority and Erie International Airport to build capacity for attracting state and federal dollars to improve airport competitiveness
- Expand local incentives to businesses and industry to counter high corporate tax rates
- Develop and implement environmental indicators to evaluate all future infrastructure plans
- Empower and elevate potential core anchor institutions, like Gannon University, UPMC Hamot, and Erie Insurance, to enhance public-private partnerships
- Expand and diversify city and county advisory groups, boards, and committees
- Protect and preserve Presque Isle State Park through governmental and public support for Presque Isle Partnership and the Tom Ridge Environmental Center Foundation
- Increase the tax base in the city through expanded homeownership programs and outreach

Placemaking

In the scope of this report, placemaking will follow the definition provided by Project for Public Spaces as “a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value.”¹⁴⁶ Though we will acknowledge multiple methodologies of placemaking running concurrently within Erie County, Pennsylvania, the process can collectively be defined as one that “capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people’s health, happiness, and well being.”¹⁴⁷ There are various uses for different areas that public and private organizational leaders should consider when enhancing Erie County’s placemaking efforts, including:

- Regional use (whether critical spaces are used to their full potential)
- Climate (Erie County’s advantage of natural resources)
- Housing (quality and quantity of available properties to support a future workforce)
- Activities and marketing (access to recreation in a four-season environment and how the region is portrayed)
- Social environment (availability of cultural and social offerings that allow all individuals to find their community)

In this section, we will also combine the placemaking efforts outlined by various civic structures to find opportunities for collaboration that can have a greater impact on the region.

¹⁴⁶ What is Placemaking? (2020). *Project for Public Spaces*. Available [here](#).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Phil Myrick, chief executive of Partnership for Public Places, notes, “you can think of placemaking as the entire experience between the time you leave your home and arrive at your destination” in a [video segment](#) from Brookings Institution. The segment introduces a framework termed [Transformative Placemaking](#).¹⁴⁸ This approach is attractive in that it encourages activation in the variety of economic and activity centers found within Erie County, such as Presque Isle beaches, upper Peach Street, downtown Erie and Corry, the commercial corridor in Harborcreek, Girard’s Main Street, North East’s Gibson Park, and so forth. Neighborhood associations, policymakers, employers, and other community leaders can embrace the “transformative placemaking” framework to elevate their individual geographic spaces while collaborating to develop all public spaces in Erie County.

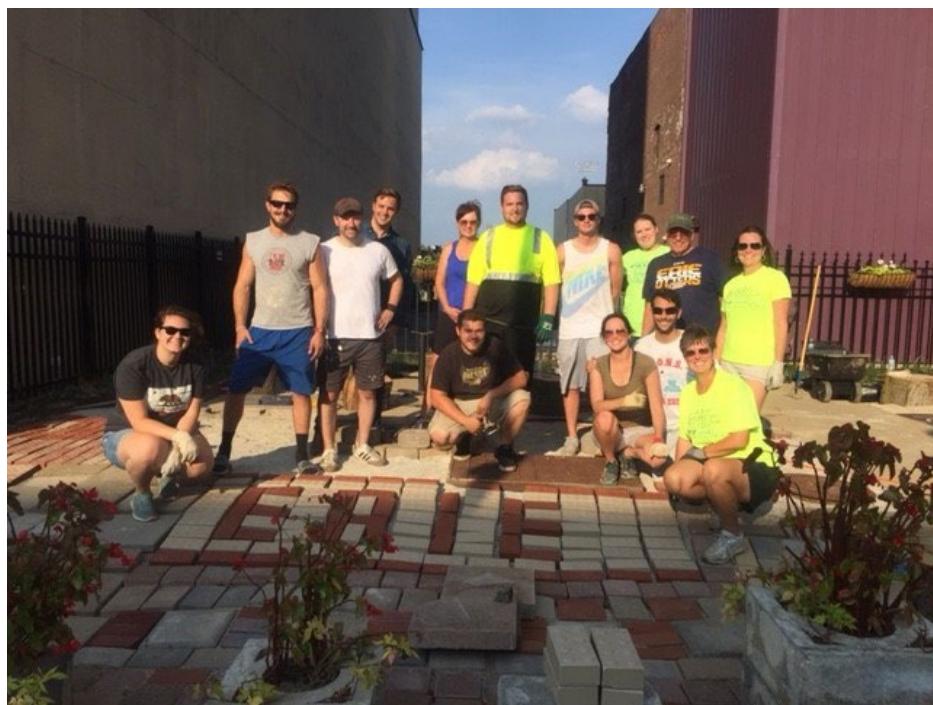
Placemaking in community planning

In recent years, Erie County municipalities, government agencies, and civic organizations have put together strategic plans and set goals. These plans highlight initiatives that will position Erie County as an excellent place for anyone to live, work, and play. This report reviews several of those plans: [Erie Refocused](#), [Embrace Millcreek](#), [Corry Strategic Plan](#), and [Edinboro Placemaking](#).

Each plan speaks to a common placemaking goal: make Erie County a place where everyone who visits can be healthy, happy, and inspired, allowing visitors and residents alike to experience our story and unique identity. As Erie Downtown Partnership states, “Buildings, streets, and fixtures become more than the sum of their parts when they become a place with purpose, like a symphony emerging from individual instruments aligned by harmony.”¹⁴⁹

Figure 8

Erie Downtown Partnership volunteers construct a brick “Erie” sign to help enhance a community green space.¹⁵⁰



148 Vey, J. S., & Love, H. (2019, November 18). Transformative placemaking: A framework to create connected, vibrant, and inclusive communities. *Brookings*. Available [here](#).

149 Placemaking. (2022). *Erie Downtown Partnership*. Available [here](#).

150 Ibid.

Several recurring placemaking themes appear within the above mentioned strategic plans:

- Define, activate, and create a more vibrant city/town center
- Invest in housing: neighborhood investment, housing opportunities, introduce more housing options
- Leverage Erie County's regional assets: access to nature and green spaces, trails, public parks, Presque Isle, Lake Erie, Lake Erie Coastal Zone, landmarks, historical buildings
- Increase access to arts & cultural amenities: public art, cultural institutions, arts and cultural events
- Create a more walkable/bikeable community

Figure 9

LifeThruMusic performs in downtown Erie.¹⁵¹



Though recurring themes appear in the plans, organizations have siloed their efforts within their geographic areas. Community leaders and those carrying out the strategic plans should embrace a collaborative spirit to make the most cohesive application of placemaking across our region. In fall 2021, a five-year update to the [Emerge 2040](#) plan, a 25-year strategy to create a more sustainable, resilient, and prosperous Erie County, showcased that progress can be made to benefit our region when leaders act as partners.

Erie Arts and Culture, a local organization that focuses on creative placemaking, advises “placemaking is most successful when it is embedded in a comprehensive plan that seeks to reverse

¹⁵¹ Placemaking. (2022). Erie Arts & Culture. Available [here](#).

community disinvestment by addressing broader issues of affordable housing, education, health and safety, and other matters of racial, social, environmental, and economic justice.”¹⁵² Though this sentiment pertains to Erie Arts and Culture’s approach of creative placemaking in the region’s renaissance, it illustrates the interconnectivity of the many factors needing to be addressed in totality and collaboratively by the aforementioned comprehensive plan creators.

Climate

Situated as the state’s gateway to Lake Erie and the Great Lakes, Erie County is an ideal place to live and work as an evolving climate brings hotter, more volatile weather conditions across the globe. As an increasing number of people can work remotely, Erie can serve as a climate haven; however, we must protect our freshwater resource and advertise effectively.

Erie County, along with the world, is experiencing effects of climate change. Currently, only 1 percent of the world is too hot for humans, yet that could rise to 19 percent by 2070, displacing millions.¹⁵³ Because of crop failures, about 8 million people have already begun to migrate, particularly to the Middle East, Europe, and North America.¹⁵⁴ Displaced people will need to relocate, which requires cities, counties, states, and countries to prepare now for the increased future arrival of climate refugees.

Erie County, which has become home to thousands of refugees and migrants, has experience in integrating people from other places and cultures; we can capitalize on those skills and organizations already in place. Additionally, the city of Erie became a Certified Welcoming place in 2020, a credential that indicates a place that offers “intentional, inclusive policies, practices, and norms that enable all residents to live, thrive, and contribute fully,”¹⁵⁵ further showcasing its capacity to accommodate more refugees and serve as a model to surrounding municipalities and agencies.

But the climate migrants will also be domestic. America is expected to experience a variety of climate shifts, making parts of the country less habitable or less desirable. Considering climate threats to other regions of the United States such as the Southwest’s decreased precipitation causing agricultural threats and wildfires,¹⁵⁶ the Great Plains’ uptick of extreme storms, reduced water, and increased strain on power sources,¹⁵⁷ and the Southeast’s loss of coastline and sources for drinking water,¹⁵⁸ cities across the Great Lakes region may become increasingly attractive. Considering that 84 percent of North America’s surface water comes from the Great Lakes, cities surrounding this natural resource will have a competitive advantage as climate crises continue to rise.¹⁵⁹ Erie can become a

152 Placemaking. (2022). *Erie Arts & Culture*. Available [here](#).

153 Lustgarten, A. (2020, July 23). The Great Climate Migration Has Begun. *The New York Times*. Available [here](#).

154 Ibid.

155 What is Welcoming? (2021, November 16). *Welcoming America*. Available [here](#).

156 Frisvold, G., Jackson, L. E., Pritchett, J. G., & Ritten, J. (2013). Assessment of Climate Change in the Southwest United States: A Report Prepared for the National Climate Assessment (pp. 218-239). Island Press.

157 Kunkel, K. E., Stevens, L. E., Stevens, S. E., Sun, L., Janssen, E., Wuebbles, D., Kruk, M. C., Thomas, D. P., Shulski, M., Umphlett, N., Hubbard, K., Robbins, K., Romolo, L., Akyuz, A., Pathak, T., Bergantino, T., & Dobson, J. G. (2013). Regional Climate Trends and Scenarios for the U.S. National Climate Assessment: Part 4. Climate of the U.S. Great Plains. NOAA Technical Report NESDIS 142-4. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service.

158 Kunkel, K., Stevens, L., Stevens, S., Sun, L., Janssen, E., Wuebbles, D., Konrad, C. E., Fuhrman, C. M., Keim, B. D., Kruk, M. C., Billet, A., Needham, H., Schafer, M., & Dobson, J. G. (2013). Regional Climate Trends and Scenarios for the U.S. National Climate Assessment: Part 2. Climate of the Southeast U.S. NOAA Technical Report 142-2. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service.

159 Facts and Figures about the Great Lakes | US EPA. (2015, September 18). *US EPA*. Available [here](#).

a popular destination for remote workers and for people who no longer want the daily threat of extreme heat and weather.

However, the Great Lakes face significant challenges: air temperature has increased by 2.3 degrees Fahrenheit, and precipitation has gone up 16 percent since 1951.¹⁶⁰ Rising temperatures and increased precipitation could mean more flooding. It is already challenging the management of Lake Erie's water quality as well as inland lakes and streams. Plus, these changes may cause water loss from evaporation. Therefore, we need to prepare our infrastructure for hotter conditions.¹⁶¹ While not ideal, these problems are more manageable here than in many places in the United States. Erie County needs more urgency in planning for water preservation and confronting serious and immediate problems such as algal blooms, sewer and stormwater issues, and making roads and bridges more secure. The region has been working for decades on water- and sewer-related issues, but much more work needs to be done to secure a promising future for current and incoming residents.

Erie County should pour energy and resources into effective advertisement that capitalizes on these advantages. In 2019, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown named his city a "Climate Refuge City" that is prepared to welcome climate migrants.¹⁶² Erie has the infrastructure to house more people and industry. Erie could begin marketing itself as a region for people impacted by climate.

Erie has an advantage in the future of work simply by virtue of its geography; the time to capitalize on that advantage is now. Erie County can be a regional model (if not a national one) if we prepare to welcome more people, both international and domestic climate migrants, by developing and implementing plans for the future of the lake's health and effectively advertising ourselves.

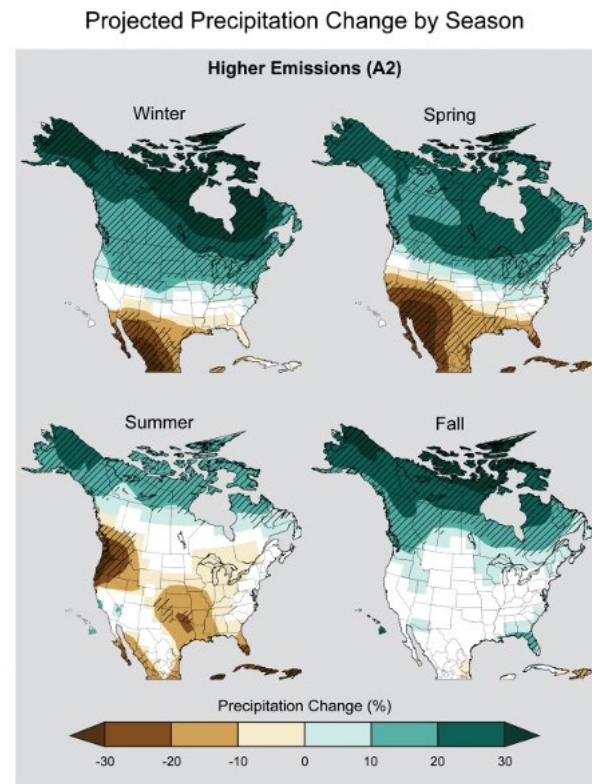
¹⁶⁰ Climate Change in the Great Lakes Region References | GLISA. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Will Buffalo Become a Climate Change Haven? (2019, December 5). Bloomberg.Com. Available [here](#).

Figure 10

Projected precipitation change by season¹⁶³



Activities & Marketing

Few regions can boast recreational opportunities as robust as Erie County. If promoted even more strategically, our four-season menu of activities could attract future workers. In addition to official marketing efforts by VisitErie and others, employers, local governments, and workforce development leaders should communicate more of these plentiful recreational opportunities to potential employees as they seek to attract workers to the region.

The [Erie County Community Health Needs Assessment](#) of 2018 summarizes Erie County's bountiful recreational offerings under its robust tourist industry. The seven miles of sandy beaches of Presque Isle, numerous biking and hiking trails at Presque Isle and countywide, and its "large number of religious, civic, and social organizations in the county provide opportunities for social engagement"¹⁶⁴ make the Erie region attractive for residents and a future workforce.

Proximity to three major metropolitan areas allows Erie County residents access to any desired activity within a short car ride. Additionally, there is an international airport in Millcreek, allowing for travel beyond. Professional minor league sports teams, world-class cultural institutions, and national forests and parks can all be found within a two-hour radius.

Erie County is Pennsylvania's gateway to Lake Erie, featuring Pennsylvania's only Great Lakes port. This resource grants residents access to two state parks, Presque Isle and Erie Bluffs, boating, swimming, and lakeside recreation as well as abundant sports fishing in the lake, connecting streams,

¹⁶³ Melillo, Jerry M., Terese (T.C.) Richmond, and Gary W. Yohe, Eds., 2014: Climate Change Impacts in the United States: The Third National Climate Assessment. *U.S. Global Change Research Program*.

¹⁶⁴ Bukowski, V., Quirk, J., & Erie County Department of Health. (2018). *Erie County Community Health Needs Assessment*. Available [here](#).

and inland waterways.

Major arenas for sporting events, concerts and other events include Erie Insurance Arena, UPMC Park, Warner Theatre, Bayfront Convention Center, Liberty Park, and Erie Veterans Stadium. Residents and visitors also attend affordable sporting events at newly renovated facilities:

- The Erie Otters are the area's minor junior ice hockey team, one of just three American teams in the Ontario Hockey League. The Erie Otters are hosted by Erie Insurance Arena, which opened in 1983 and recently underwent a \$47 million renovation and expansion, seating more than 9,000 fans.¹⁶⁵ The arena also hosts concerts, community events, and a variety of touring entertainment.

Figure 11



Fans cheer on the Erie Otters after a goal is scored at Erie Insurance Arena.¹⁶⁶

- Erie Seawolves, the region's Class AA Eastern League baseball team (Detroit Tigers affiliate), play at the beautifully renovated UPMC Park, which completed \$13.5 million in renovations and improvements as a result of two Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program awards in 2018 and 2021.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ About. (2022). Erie Insurance Arena. Available here.

¹⁶⁶ IMG_6248 – Erie Otters. (2022). Erie Otters. Available here.

¹⁶⁷ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (2022). RACP Funding History. Office of the Budget. Available here.

Figure 12



Thousands of fans enjoy a summer night baseball game at UPMC Park, home of the Erie Seawolves.¹⁶⁸

- Presque Isle Downs, a one-mile oval thoroughbred horse racing track, features 100 days of live racing yearly at Presque Isle Downs and Casino off Route 97, just south of Interstate 90. The facility also features simulcast racing daily from tracks throughout the country and Canada.
- [Lake Erie Speedway](#), a 3/8-mile, formerly NASCAR sanctioned race track, is located just south of North East, Pennsylvania on Route 89 at Interstate 86. The speedway features several styles of racing and events including: drifting, formula drift, crash-a-rama, modified races, monster trucks, and big air ATVs.
- Eriez Speedway, a 3/8-mile dirt oval race track, has been Erie's premier dirt track for decades. It is off Route 8 on Sampson Road, south of Erie's Parade Street exit of Interstate 90.
- Erie County also has a thriving high school and college sports scene. Local colleges and universities with (NCAA) sports programs are Edinboro University (soon to be Pennsylvania Western University at Edinboro), Gannon University, Mercyhurst University, and Penn State Behrend.
- Fans seeking the thrill of Major League sports and NCAA Division I sports can access sporting events from Erie County's three metropolitan neighbors, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. People can also follow eight professional baseball, basketball, football, and hockey teams within two-hour drives to the south, east, and west.

Beyond its numerous sports activities, the Erie region has a newly renovated gem in the Warner Theatre and a plethora of arts and cultural organizations such as the Erie Philharmonic, Erie Art Museum, Erie Playhouse, Erie Zoo, Hagen History Center, Experience Children's Museum, Erie Maritime Museum, Presque Isle Downs and Casino, nearby Peek'n Peak Resort, and many performance stages and spaces, including those at the region's universities. Family-owned Waldameer Park and Water World, Splash Lagoon, a national Cinemark movieplex, Waterford's Sunset Drive-In, and countless family establishments ensure a full schedule any night of the week.

Fan-favorite seasonal offerings include the Russian Festival, Greek Festival, St. Paul's Italian Festival, Zabawa Polish Heritage Festival, German Heritage Fest, St. Patrick's Irish Festival, St.

¹⁶⁸ Erie Seawolves. (2020, June 22). Facebook. Available [here](#).

Joseph's German Festival and others, municipal-centric anniversaries (We Love Erie Days, North East Cherry Festival, Girard's Dan Rice Days), agricultural fairs (Wattsburg-Erie County Fair, Waterford Heritage Days Albion Area Fair), and others.

Marketing of Erie County's Assets

Erie County is rich in natural amenities, cultural assets, and municipalities with established identities and growing vibrancies. The story being told by community leaders should reflect the attractiveness of our region.

Employers, public leaders, university spokespeople, workforce development leaders, and tourism agencies could better communicate the value of living, working, and visiting the Erie region. Part of making this message more impactful is fostering a new “conversation” around Erie County. As more stakeholders align to communicate its value, the county’s ability to attract and retain a new workforce increases. Through interviews with community leaders during the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy, many of them mentioned Erie County’s “self-esteem” problem. More specifically, those who live in Erie often downplay the multitude of assets this region has to offer. It is clear that leaders, whether civic, governmental, business, educational, or nonprofit, need to write the pages of Erie County’s new narrative.

In a meeting with Bruce Katz, co-founder of New Localism Advisors and no stranger to Erie, he explained that it does not take many people to make a difference, that 100 people who care and possess the capacity to effect change could shape the future of Erie County. Let those influencers change the reality, and that will change the narrative.

James and Deborah Fallows, co-authors of “Our Towns” and contributors to The Atlantic magazine, wrote an article, “[11 signs a city will succeed](#),”¹⁶⁹ that can be used to measure Erie County’s progress, guide future actions, and frame a narrative of success:

1. *Divisive national politics seem a distant concern.* Erie County was not immune to the political turmoil of the 2016 and 2020 elections, but with a voter turnout of just under 39 percent,¹⁷⁰ the issue points to civic engagement rather than a divide between the aisles.
2. *You can pick out the local patriots* The Fallows divulge that the quicker the response, the stronger the community. Erie County calls names of not only individuals but corporations that hold their communities fondly in their hearts and, often, wallets.
3. *“Public-private partnerships” are real.* Detailed examples on local efforts can be read under this report’s infrastructure section and, lately, in headlines featuring the named organizations Erie Events and Erie Downtown Development Corporation.
4. *People know the civic story.* Thanks to a growing number of local history aficionados, the common knowledge of Erie County’s history is increasing. Blogs and social media accounts like Old Erie on Foot, Erie Yesterday, and Rust & Dirt pair with institutional-sized efforts of the Hagen History Center, the Jefferson Educational Society, and the Journal of Erie Studies to preserve Erie’s story.

¹⁶⁹ Fallows, J. (2016, February 22). *James Fallows on Eleven Signs a City Will Succeed*. The Atlantic. Available [here](#).

¹⁷⁰ Erie County Government. (n.d.) Erie County November 2, 2021, Municipal General Election Final Official Results. Available [here](#).

5. *They have a downtown.* In the city of Erie, you can see the greatest example of private organizations enacting the change needed by public entities: Erie Downtown Development Corporation is leading positive change in downtown revitalization while tackling the blight and decline that have topped City Council's wishlist for years. Seeing the proof of concept, you can feel an optimism growing around Perry Square.
6. *They are near a research university.* Erie County is fortunate to host four universities but none are pure research institutions. Erie-born political scientist and international security expert Robert Pape advised at his closing Global Summit XIII lecture that Erie's universities could benefit from increasing partnerships with the surrounding major research centers to better assist industries and issues affecting Erie County.¹⁷¹
7. *They have, and care about, a community college.* Erie County Community College of Pennsylvania opened its doors just months ago and has ambitious goals to fill educational gaps specifically for the changing workforce and to give low-cost educational and vocational opportunities to city and county residents on a large scale.
8. *They have unusual schools.* Erie County does not have the headline-making schools mentioned in the Fallows article, but does offer a number of charter schools, two remaining vo tech schools, and newcomer Erie Arts & Technology. An increase in specialized courses of study, such as McDowell Manufacturing, point to the possibility of increased public-private partnerships to shape workforce development in the K-12 curriculum.
9. *They make themselves open.* As discussed in the section on regional climate, the city of Erie has achieved the designation of Certified Welcoming for its efforts in accepting immigrants from locations all over the world.
10. *They have big plans.* Execution aside, the sheer number of comprehensive plans put forth by municipalities, communities, and service organizations is indicative of the opportunistic mindset among Erie County's key influencers.
11. *They have craft breweries.* Not only is Erie County home to national award-winning breweries, it hosts the Lake Erie Ale Trail, Lake Erie Wine Country, regional beer and wine festivals, and an increasing number of distilleries of local spirits and mead.

The Fallows have showcased Erie through their platforms on several occasions, including recounting one of their visits in "Our Towns." The story being circulated in their articles is exactly the kind of narrative that Erie can build upon.

Social Environment

Erie County is home to many inclusive spaces and diverse cultural groups. Social connections ensure people feel welcomed and instill a sense of belonging, providing a support system that not only ties them to their community but helps them to thrive within it. Some of the existing social organizations and groups in Erie County are the Blue Zones Project, Performing Artists Collective Alliance (PACA), Erie City Moms, Athena Erie, Rotary Club of Erie, and The Women's Roundtable. According to a study completed by the Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics (2021), Erie County rates are higher

¹⁷¹ Pape, R. (2021, November 12). *Holding the Line: Political Violence in America and the Implications for Democracy*. [Lecture]. Global Summit XIII, Erie, Pennsylvania.

than the national average in most social connection categories. For example, 69 percent of people surveyed indicated that they were a member of a spiritual community. In addition to scores of social clubs, participation includes 31 percent in sports clubs or leagues, 35 percent in hobby or garden clubs, 41 percent in groups devoted to charity or social welfare, and 26 percent in professional activities organizations.¹⁷²

Additionally, Erie County is a region with many diverse social settings. These places and spaces include outdoor experiences and green spaces, bars and cafes, sports and recreation complexes, concert and performance venues, education facilities, churches, museums, and shopping centers. Specifically, the Erie County Gaming and Revenue Authority names nine lead assets that draw people to the area and create opportunities to socialize:¹⁷³

1. Erie Art Museum
2. Hagen History Center (Erie County Historical Society)
3. Erie Arts and Culture
4. Erie Philharmonic
5. Erie Playhouse
6. Erie Zoo
7. Experience Children's Museum
8. Flagship Niagara League and Erie Maritime Museum
9. Mercyhurst Institute for Arts and Culture.

A body of evidence indicates public spaces designed with input from community members increase social interaction, social capital, trust, cross-cultural exchange, and community-building.¹⁷⁴ Erie County leaders must ensure these social settings are inclusively developed to foster social connections. Having a robust social environment is an opportunity for Erie County to retain and attract people, which creates an increased economic benefit to businesses of having a larger workforce and customer base.

The social value of public space depends on what is provided to community members in terms of increasing attachment to their local life, interacting face to face with others, and people's memories of or emotional connections to sites.¹⁷⁵ Social spaces can promote use and encourage interactions among users when they are well designed. Project for Public Spaces, founded in 1975 and based in New York City, proposes such a design strategy in its Power of 10+ model, a strategy focused on the principle that places thrive when the people have a minimum of 10 reasons to be there, and "shows how paying attention to the human experience when building a city's destinations and districts can have immediate and widespread impacts."¹⁷⁶

171 Mercyhurst Center for Applied Politics. (2011). *Social Capital and Civic Engagement Benchmark Study*. Available [here](#).

172 Erie. (2012). Lead Assets & Endowment. *Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority*. Available [here](#).

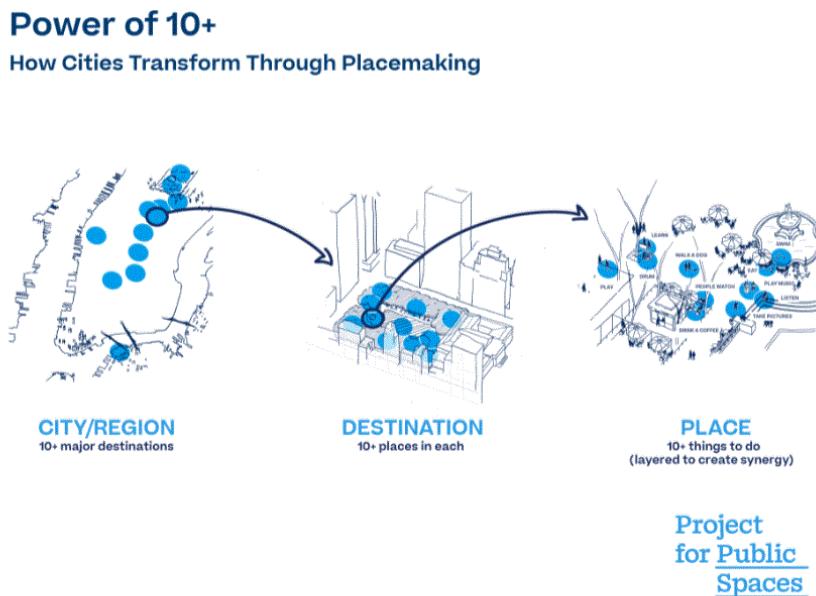
174 Love & Kok, Brookings Flint Buffalo Article. Available [here](#).

175 A. Alzahrani, et al., Int. J. Sus. Dev. Plann. Vol. 12, No. 4 (2017) 752–762

176 The Power of 10+. (2021). *Project for Public Spaces*. Available [here](#).

Figure 13

A visualization of the Power of 10+ concept, using the example of New York City and Bryant Park.¹⁷⁷



A visualization of the Power of 10+ concept, using the example of New York City and Bryant Park.

Power of 10+ provides a blueprint that assures any public spaces created in Erie County would maximize social interactions by allowing residents to explore Erie's diverse cultures and identify with their chosen community. The creation of engaging spaces has the power to assist Erie County residents in celebrating their sense of community.

In addition to promoting social interaction, spaces should be accessible with all community members in mind. This purposeful planning fosters the connection between groups and ensures equity. According to a 2021 Brookings article "Social networks and economic mobility," people struggle with moving beyond social networks of like people. Additionally, minority communities, specifically black males, tend to have smaller social networks.¹⁷⁸ These smaller networks provide less opportunity for occupational opportunities.

Erie County community planners must ensure their public spaces meet the needs of all residents and are inclusive of historically marginalized groups. Residents interviewed in the Love & Kok article described social tensions around investments in public space, specifically how new investment can increase divides between downtowns and adjacent, often disinvested neighborhoods and raise connectivity concerns about who accesses and benefits from the public space.¹⁷⁹ Poor connectivity to nearby neighborhoods and inadequate investments in public spaces can raise doubts about who investments are for, and such doubts may make people reluctant to visit the public space.¹⁸⁰

Those who use the space most should give input on the development of social spaces. Community collaboration will provide innovative solutions to address long-standing challenges that incorporate suggestions and plans from a variety of community representatives. It is also essential to engage existing civic organizations and communities to have a voice in public space redevelopment.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Nzau, S., Busette, C., Reeves, R. V., & Frimpong, K. (2021, March 9). *Social networks and economic mobility—what the findings reveal*. Brookings. Available [here](#).

¹⁷⁹ Love & Kok, Brookings Flint Buffalo Article. Available [here](#).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

The establishment of social spaces via strategic placemaking can attract people to the region and foster social connection and belonging, reversing the decline in population in Erie County. Erie County must convey the message of inclusiveness – that no matter who you are, you have a place here. Erie County leaders should actualize this by creating spaces that bring people together.

Restaurants

Erie County has had what some consider to be a renaissance in the restaurant scene over the past few years. Though pandemic-related challenges altered, stalled, or ruined some opening plans, it forced others to adapt by offering online ordering and take-out options. Now, as the region pivots out of year two of the pandemic, the renaissance resurges. New restaurants have opened across the county and provide a range of various fares, including barbecue, traditional American, Indian, Nepalese, Dominican, Southern, and more. The development of restaurants that reflect Erie County's rich cultural diversity is one model for continued economic and community growth. Leveraging regional farming industries by adding farm-to-table options at these restaurants would further drive this growth and create sustainable business synergies.

Sadly, several Erie County dining establishments have also closed over the past few years. Many that were just surviving were pushed to the edge of closure by the stresses of the initial months of the pandemic. Some establishments closed early on but were able to find a means to reopen. Federal funding in the form of \$10 million was earmarked for Erie County restaurants and was awarded to 42 local restaurants.¹⁸¹ As of a December 2021 article in the Erie Times-News, all but one of those that received aid remained open. Though outside the scope of this paper, a better understanding of the local factors that contribute to a restaurant's continued success, including location, would be a necessary evaluation.

In conversation with leaders in Harborcreek and Millcreek townships, it is clear these townships have prioritized revitalization plans that include restaurants. In North East Borough, downtown revitalization has included the Skunk and Goat Tavern. Its parent company, Red Letter Hospitality, has gone a step further and actively participates in the communities of North East, downtown Erie, and Millcreek Township.¹⁸² During the early months of the pandemic, Red Letter Hospitality prioritized its employees by allotting portions of gift card sales to those it laid off¹⁸³, and it paired with community members to provide meals to health-care workers across Erie County. This is an incredible example of showing how community collaboration can support those in a time of need and sustain a business. The energy created in that community by this work is palpable by those who visit and those who live there.

Restaurants in Erie County have the opportunity to reimagine their spaces post-pandemic (and even as it continues). Many added outdoor spaces through zoning exceptions, and some were able to keep them. Continuing to do so keeps the area up to speed with changes happening in surrounding larger cities. During conversations this cohort had with local leaders, zoning is one of the challenges for potential restaurateurs and the price to obtain and renovate existing structures. There is an opportunity for businesses and communities to support such updates and renovations.

Recently, downtown Erie has seen the opening of the Flagship City Food Hall and development along

¹⁸¹ Rao, A.J. (2021, December 14). Federal funds brought more than \$10M to Erie County restaurants. Here are the top 5 recipients. *Erie Times-News*. Available [here](#).

¹⁸² McDonald, H. (2020, April 9). More than just food: Local restaurant owners support employees and community during COVID-19. *Erie Reader*. Available [here](#).

¹⁸³ Your Erie. (2020, March 28). Red Letter Hospitality gives gift card sale proceeds directly to employees. Available [here](#).

the bayfront with the opening of Oliver's, Oliver's Beer Garden, Pier 6, and the Oyster Bar. These new restaurants have provided a sense of revitalization and pride to the downtown area from those living in proximity and outside Erie's urban core, adding to the quality of life for those throughout the region.

Patronizing locally owned and locally franchised restaurants helps the local economy. Much of the money spent stays local; about 67 cents of every dollar stays local when shopping at small businesses, including restaurants.¹⁸⁴ The area also needs to continue expanding local restaurants in areas most visited by out-of-towners so they can appreciate the local flare amid franchises (though many franchise restaurants are locally owned). There is a lack of local representation in one of the most visited places in Erie County, from West 38th and Peach streets to the Interstate 90 corridor. That stretch and the area near the Millcreek Mall is often the only representation people from out of town see of Erie when they visit, which is not necessarily adding to an enticement to return. Addressing this disconnect could make a difference in attracting new residents to the area.

Housing

The quality and quantity of housing in an area directly influences a person's perception of place and will become an essential asset to the future workforce of Erie County. Placemaking won't address the social programs that subsidize housing but rather the physical properties that exist.

This subsection aims to assess whether housing in Erie County is conducive to the existing and future workforce, of sufficient quantity to meet the shifting population, and of the quality to attract prospective residents. Additionally, municipal and private organizations assessing housing in their area of impact must consider the state of the property relative to its ability for reinvestment or future development.

As discovered through comparing strategic planning at the beginning of this section, many communities outline the need for both affordable housing and investing in neighborhoods that, to date, have suffered a lack of investment.

Erie County has a homeownership rate of 66.1 percent, which is only 3 percent less than the state average. Though this rate fluctuates by municipality, roughly one in three residents of Erie County rent their home.

Median household incomes have decreased 10 percent since 2000 while average household size has dropped only 4 percent, illustrating a need for housing that can support the same number of inhabitants on even less income, especially in a time of rising inflation, increasing vacancy, and decreasing homeownership.¹⁸⁵

What is most startling to the housing market in Erie County is the aging population of residents. Since 2000, an increase of 64 percent has occurred in the age bracket of 55 to 64. As these residents begin to leave the workforce in coming years, their housing needs often change. Adaptable housing, changing space requirements, and accessibility needs will likely shape the demands that Erie County's largest residential age group puts on the housing supply.

Edinboro discusses this very dilemma in its strategic plan, Edinboro Placemaking,¹⁸⁶ as it parses the

184 U.S. Chamber of Commerce. (2022). Support your local community by shopping small. Available [here](#).

185 Pennsylvania Comprehensive Housing Study. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

186 Atlas community studios. (2021). A placemaking action plan for the borough of Edinboro—Housing. Available [here](#).

idea of a “demonstration neighborhood” that meets many needs of its aging residents. Other Erie County municipalities could research collaborative, creative solutions like this one as the issue of aging residents is not unique to any one locale on its own.

Millcreek also acknowledges the impact of its aging population on the housing market:

Among homeowners, elderly households alone account for a little more than half of all cost-burdened households. Severe cost burden also heavily affects small related and elderly households. The former category represents 31.9 percent of cost-burdened renter households and 26.4 percent of cost-burdened homeowner households, while the latter makes up 28.3 percent of cost-burdened renters and 37.5 percent of cost-burdened homeowners.¹⁸⁷

Unless Erie County attracts and retains a younger workforce capable of earning more than their home-owning counterparts, much of the housing stock will become obsolete as units no longer offer the size and accessibility demanded of an aging population. Considering the county’s average year built for housing structures is 1962, the increasing maintenance demands of depreciating structures may quickly outpace the ability of Erie County’s aging residents to perform such maintenance. Factoring the increasing maintenance against a decreasing median income (again factored by a general inability of retirees to greatly increase their income as they age) means that homeowners will quickly have neither the physical means of performing maintenance themselves nor the financial means to outsource these needs.

Affordable Housing Availability

Like Pennsylvania and much of the country, Erie County is experiencing an increasing housing cost burden that disproportionately affects low-income households. Affordable housing is accepted in the industry as a housing cost that does not exceed 30 percent of a household’s income.¹⁸⁸ This cost burden influences the future housing market as low-cost rental units become more competitive to obtain by an increasing low-income pool of renters unable to become homeowners. According to this Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) chart, only 6 out of 10 of the lowest-income households can access an affordable rental unit. The supply of units appears to be right-sized as the household approaches the Housing and Urban Development’s Area Median Family Income (displayed as “HAMFI” in the chart). PHFA further presents an increase in vacant units within Erie County that can largely be attributed to its blighted state. As blighted structures are placed out of service, they are not replaced with an equally affordable housing option, further worsening the crisis of meeting low-income housing needs.

Millcreek outlines in their 2018 housing study¹⁸⁹ the greatest housing barriers to citizens:

The most common housing problem in Millcreek Township is cost burden, particularly for renters. There are 1,455 renter-occupied households with housing costs greater than 50 percent of their income, representing 22 percent of all renter households. By comparison, only 5.2 percent of owner-occupied households are severely cost-burdened. Renter households earning 50 percent of AMI or less represent 56.8 percent of total households with severe rent burden. ... After cost burden, overcrowding is the second most prevalent housing issue and primarily affects renter households earning between 50 percent and 100 percent of AMI.

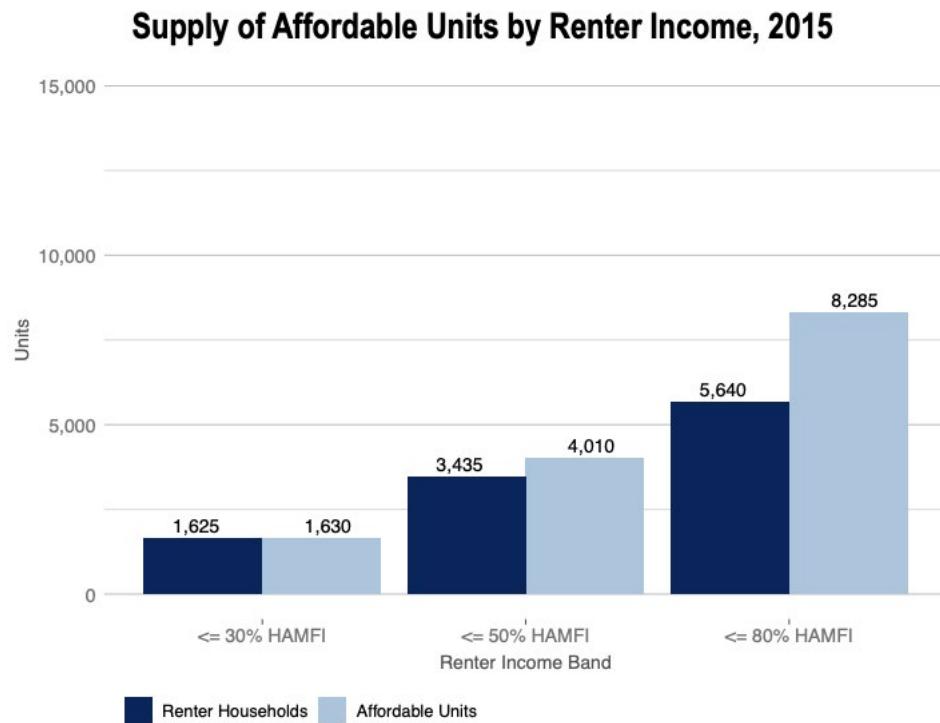
187 Consolidated Plan Millcreek Township 1. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

188 Yglesias, M. (2014, April 10). Everything you need to know about the affordable housing debate. Vox. Available [here](#).

189 Consolidated Plan Millcreek Township 1. (n.d.). Available [here](#).

Figure 14

Supply of Affordable Units by Renter Income, 2015¹⁹⁰



Regional Use Analysis

Erie County is positioned to further build the community by strategic placemaking through transitioning its many underutilized, vacant, and blighted properties into community assets. Addressing its aging built environment, Erie County should intentionally work to meet the changing needs of residents in the 21st century. Legacy cities and older suburban communities nationwide are making progress on reimagining their urban areas.¹⁹¹ This reimagining takes shape by repositioning underutilized sections of communities through investments in infrastructure, or aging infrastructure removal, brownfield remediation, waterfront reclamation, and transit-oriented development.¹⁹² For example, in an Erie Refocused recommendation, the city was urged to adopt new zoning that aligns with current standards of living.

Because zoning codes regulate land use and design, many municipalities in Erie County, including the city of Erie, are relying on outdated ordinances while trying to move forward. The recommendation countywide is to develop new ordinances that reflect today's best practices, including right-sizing and updating design guidelines.¹⁹³ New zoning would concentrate the goals for development into enhancing the health and vibrancy of the region while preserving open space and agricultural land.

As illustrated in Erie Refocused, one map shows the current zoning ordinance and the second map illustrates recommendations for vacant, underutilized, blighted, or illogical spaces.

190 Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. (2020, May). *County Profiles, Pennsylvania Comprehensive Housing Study*. Available [here](#).

191 Katz, B., & Wagner, J. (2014, May). *The Rise of Innovation Districts: A new geography of Innovation in America*. Brookings. Available [here](#).

192 Ibid.

193 Erie Refocused. (2016, March). *Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership*. Available [here](#).

Figure 15¹⁹⁴

Current Land Use Map

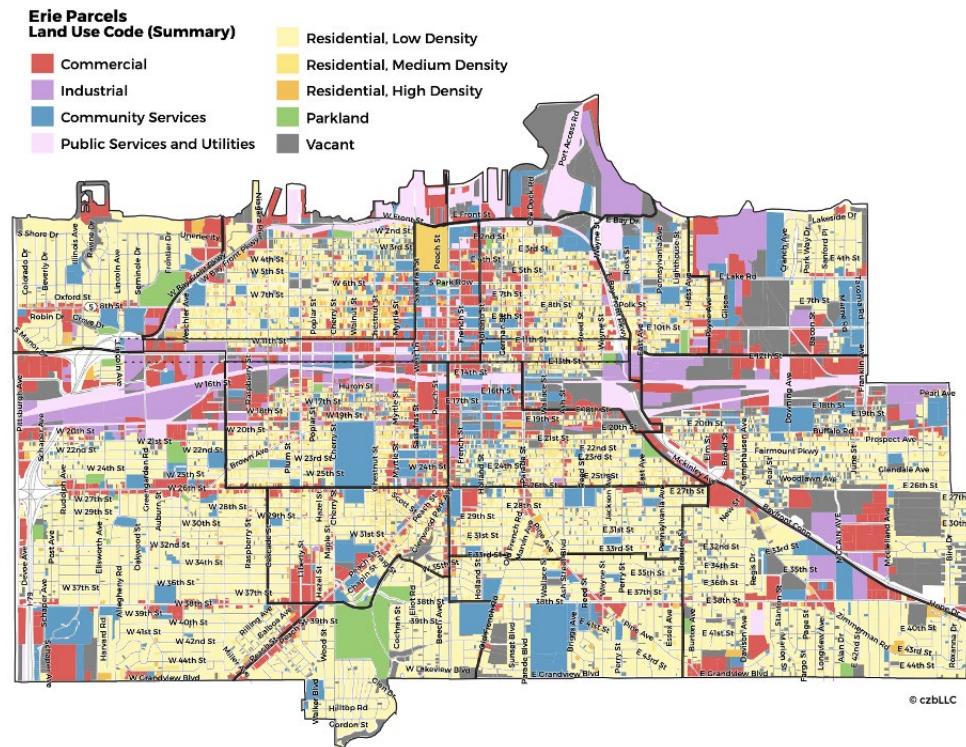
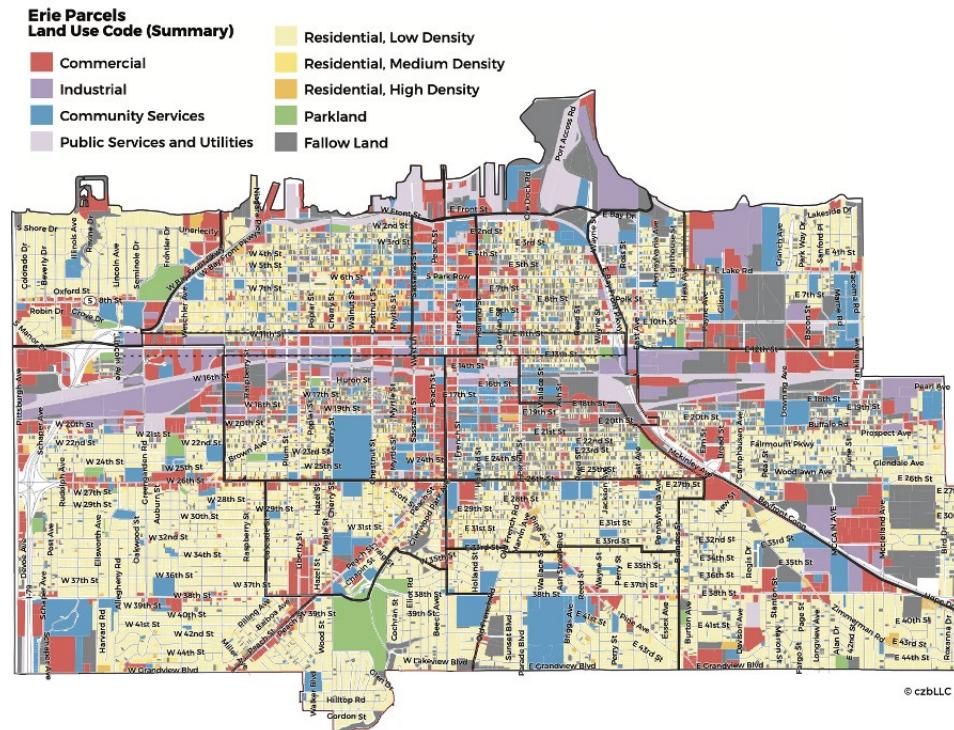


Figure 16¹⁹⁵

Future Land Uses: Current Trend Scenario



194 Erie Refocused. (2016, March). *Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership*. Available [here](#).

195 Erie Refocused. (2016, March). *Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership*. Available [here](#).

With zoning, successful placemaking, especially when reinventing historical spaces, is not done properly without community buy-in. In the publication, “How Wilmington, Del. is revitalizing vacant land to rebuild Community Trust,” Brookings scholar Laura Semmelroth outlines:

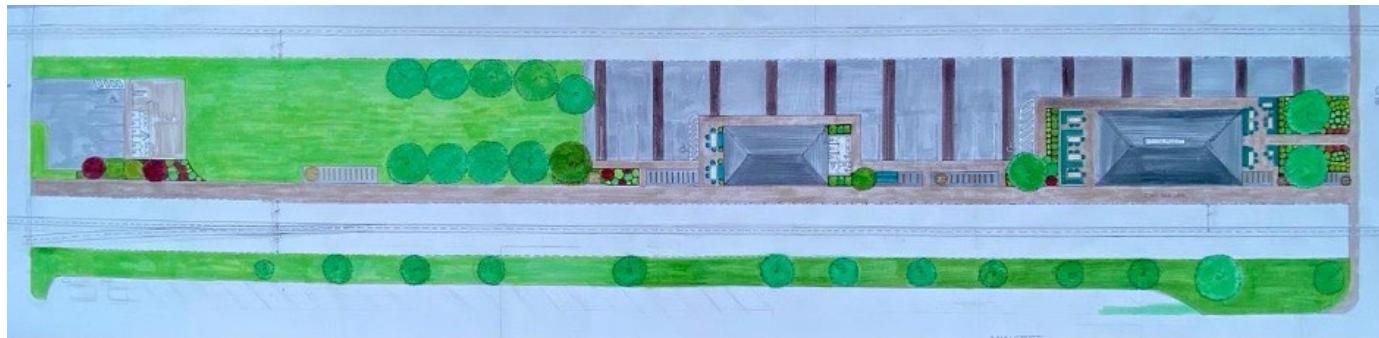
Rather than inviting residents to give input on public spaces, we are working in the long term to pivot our model to one that provides residents with the training and capacity they need to create and reimagine their own public spaces. This will involve adding capacity-building training to engagement sessions, presenting best-practice models, and facilitating community-led mapping exercises so residents can expand their demands for public spaces and own the process for creating them.¹⁹⁶

Through residents’ direct involvement, a reinvented space can flourish. Successful placemaking projects require public engagement and community investment and result in the activation of public and private spaces.¹⁹⁷ With community-led development of underutilized places, not only is there a revitalized space when the project is complete but there is also an energized social environment built as residents work together for the common good.

An example of this method within Erie County is through the *Corry Community Strategic Plan*.¹⁹⁸ While the plan encompasses multiple aspects to improve Corry, one of the most recognizable aspects is the revitalization of the railroad junction property into the Rail + Trail Park. As displayed in the figure below, the park will reinvent a highly visible, underutilized space in downtown Corry. Through a volunteer-led effort with the help of planning experts, new life will be in this otherwise vacant yet historical space, bringing a greater sense of community to the downtown.

Figure 17

*Draft, West End of Rail + Trail Park*¹⁹⁹



196 Semmelroth, L. (2021, October 12). How Wilmington, Del. is revitalizing vacant land to rebuild Community Trust. *Brookings*. Available [here](#).

197 ActiveErie Transportation Plan. (2021, February). *Active Erie*. Available [here](#).

198 Corry Community Strategic Plan. (2021, March). *Impact Corry*. Available [here](#).

199 Ibid.

Figure 18

Draft, End End of Trail + Trail Park²⁰⁰



Other successful regional examples include the [Perry Square](#) revival, Erie Arts & Culture's "[We the People](#)," [City of Corry's Adopt-A-Lot](#), the forthcoming [North East Borough Comprehensive Plan](#), and countywide [Mission Main Street](#) and [Renaissance Block](#) programs.

Our region is primed to combat the vacant, underutilized, and blighted properties that plague Erie County. Some organizations are already doing this work. By further partnering with the Erie County Redevelopment Authority or Corry Redevelopment Authority to reclaim these properties and through proper rezoning and community involvement, the entire county can bring a sense of place to the region. Strategic placemaking brings nonprofits, artists, city government, and volunteers together to transform spaces and remedy community challenges. It is in this work that successful placemaking is achieved.

Recommendations

Based on the above research, the Placemaking team recommends the following actions to prepare Erie County for a future workforce:

- Embrace a collaborative spirit in designing and executing comprehensive plans by including additional stakeholders
 - Take steps to ensure that Erie County's advantageous climate will endure and position the region as a climate refuge
 - Foster social connectivity by inclusively designing social settings following the PPS Power of 10+ model
 - Seek housing options that are transitional to meet the needs of aging and low-income populations
 - Update zoning ordinances to allow underutilized spaces to be put to a higher public use
 - Market Erie County more effectively and positively to attract and retain a desirable workforce
 - Each community in Erie County should support local restaurants that want to update or open, such as considering zoning ordinance exceptions, providing direct links to local business resources, and helping provide start-up and renovation funding. Additionally, the community should continue to support funding to assist with start-up and renovation costs.
 - Completing a restaurant per capita evaluation would be a recommended starting point to determine the challenges at hand.

200 Ibid.

Quality of Life

There are a number of ways to define “quality of life”. A simple approach defines it as how “good” people feel their lives are. A more expansive definition includes evaluating social, economic, and environmental aspects.²⁰¹ The World Health Organization defines quality of life as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.”²⁰²

Quality of life measurements are subjective and objective, making it difficult for community leaders to precisely determine what attracts people to a particular area. However, despite the challenges that come with measuring it, taking on an evaluative initiative can highlight unmet needs in the community. In the context of the future of work, it will be essential for leaders in the public and private sectors to determine how to reduce brain drain and increase talent attraction.

In January 2022, the Brookings Institute released a report evaluating the quality of life in several Midwestern cities. The authors chose to evaluate quality of life using extra housing costs that households were willing to pay to live in an area. They also combined increased housing costs with the quality of the business environment. The study highlighted that a higher quality of life in an area is associated with higher population and economic growth.²⁰³ Conversely, communities with lower quality of life scores have higher unemployment and poverty rates. Despite its many assets, Erie County, by these measures, shows signs associated with lower quality of life.

A review of the 2019-2022 Erie County Health Assessment²⁰⁴ also reveals through a community health perspective that Erie County has indicators of poor quality of life. The indicators explored in the study include mental health, physical health, health literacy, utilizing education, and earning a family-sustaining wage.

In evaluating a job or career, people often look for health insurance coverage, retirement plans, and paid time off in conjunction with a healthy wage. However, not every employer will offer these incentives. However, a lack of benefits does not necessarily mean that talent will not be attracted to a specific position. The quality of life in a community can be a significant factor in employee retention.

On the flipside, even if a business’ compensation and benefits are competitive, a high quality of life is still a requisite for long-term employee retention and attraction. For this reason, business leaders and community stakeholders should collaborate on developing and showcasing community assets. From advocating for adequate child care and health care to participating in social service agency events to supporting local food establishments, employers can do a lot to minimize brain drain and maximize talent attraction.

This section will start with that exploration of Erie’s wage problem. From there, we will try to identify how child care, social services, and health care all play a part in Erie County’s quality of life.

201 Chen.S., Cerin, E., Stimson, R. & Lai, P.C. (2016). An objective measure to assess urban quality of life based on land use characteristics. *Procedia Environmental Sciences*. 36: 50-53.

202 WHO. (2022). WHOQOL: Measuring quality of life. Available [here](#).

203 Austin, J.C., Weinstein, A., Hicks, M., & Wornell, E. (2022, January 26). Improving quality of life—not just business—is the best path to Midwestern rejuvenation. *The Brookings Institution*. Available [here](#).

204 Erie County Department of Health. (2019). Erie County community health improvement plan. *Erie County DOH*. Available [here](#).

Wages

As a function of overall quality of life, business leaders in Erie County must pay competitively. Not only will doing so attract talent, but it will increase the well-being of the people already working here. Drawing on 1,725,994 experience-sampling reports from 33,391 employed American adults, a 2021 study concluded that both experienced and evaluative well-being increased linearly with income. In other words, it's money first and everything else next. This study suggests that higher incomes are associated with feeling better day to day and being more satisfied with life overall.²⁰⁵

During the 2021-22 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy visits, many community leaders voiced concerns about the misnomer that living wages can be significantly lower in Erie County due to the low cost of living. In reality, the cost of living is only nominally lower here than in comparable cities. To understand how wages affect residents, it is useful to compare other Rust Belt cities and counties to Erie County.

Table 3

Comparison of County populations and their largest city population with average hourly wage, as of 2020 census²⁰⁶

County	County Population	City	City Population	Average Hourly Wage
Erie, PA ²⁰⁷	270,876	Erie	94,831	\$21.65
Montgomery, OH ²⁰⁸	537,309	Dayton	137,644	\$25.88
Lehigh, PA ²⁰⁹	370,000	Allentown	121,000	\$24.66
Monroe, NY ²¹⁰	759,443	Rochester	211,328	\$26.22

The table above shows that Erie has the lowest average hourly wage of \$21.65, or \$45,032 annually, for a full-time employee (2080 hours a year or 40 hours a week for 52 weeks). However, wages alone are not purely representative of financial comfort or independence. The cost of living must be evaluated for an accurate picture.

Living wage can be defined as the wage needed to cover basic family expenses and taxes on a basic needs budget and is under the assumption that an adult is working 2080 hours a year.²¹¹ A basic needs budget includes the cost of food, child care, housing, transportation, other necessities, civic engagement, and internet access.

205 Killingsworth, M. A. (2021, January 26). Experienced well-being rises with income, even above \$75,000 a year. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Available [here](#).

206 U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). *Explore Census Data*. Available [here](#).

207 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS). (2021, June 30). *Occupational employment and wages in Erie, May 2020*. Available [here](#).

208 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS) (2022, January 5). *Occupational employment and wages in Dayton, May 2022*. Available [here](#).

209 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS). (2022, January 7). *Occupational employment and wages in Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, May 2020*. Available [here](#)

210 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS). (2022, January 5). *Occupational employment and wages in Rochester, May 2020*. Available [here](#).

211 Nadeau, C.A. (n.d.). Living wage calculator. *User's guide/technical notes*. Available [here](#).

The Council for Community and Economic Research, a membership organization created in 1961 to promote excellence in community and economic research by working to improve data availability, enhance data quality, and foster learning about regional economic analytic methods, provides a cost of living index that was used in this comparison.

This Cost of Living Index provides numerical values for the cost in each municipality for certain spending categories, such as grocery and housing. The national average is represented by 100. Numbers above 100 mean the cost for that spending category is above the national average, and numbers below 100 show costs below the national average. Additionally, a composite of these spending categories shows the overall cost of living comparison. The table below compares the Cost of Living Index between representative cities in each of the chosen counties:

Table 4

*Comparison of Cost of Living Index between Erie, Pennsylvania and three cities. *National Average is 100 for all categories including the composite.^{212,213,214}*

	Erie, PA	Allentown, PA	Dayton, OH	Rochester, NY
Grocery	90.7	98.3	96.8	100.0
Housing	69.8	111.7	71.9	102.3
Utilities	112.3	104.7	97.7	93.4
Transportation	105.5	104.0	95.4	107.8
Healthcare	91.3	103.2	87.8	103.3
Miscellaneous	100	104.1	102.6	103.4
Composite	90.3	105.5	90.4	101.8

Diving deeper into the comparison of the numbers of Erie versus Dayton, there is a 0.11 percent higher cost of living in Dayton than in Erie. However, referring back to the pay chart, the average pay in Dayton is 17.8 percent higher. While employers could use the Cost of Living Index to argue that the cost of living is (marginally) lower in Erie compared to other cities, there is still a significant gap between the nominally lower cost of living and the average hourly wage.

212 The Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). (2013). Cost of Living index—Comparison of Erie, PA and Allentown, PA. C2ER

213 The Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). (2013). Cost of Living index—Comparison of Erie, PA and Dayton, OH. C2ER

214 The Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). (2013). Cost of Living index—Comparison of Erie, PA and Rochester, NY. C2ER

Table 5

Living hourly wage, per worker, for families of up to 1 child, in Erie County²¹⁵

	Living Wage
1 adult, employed 0 children	\$12.57
1 adult, employed 1 child	\$25.84
2 adults, 1 employed 0 children	\$20.17
2 adults, 1 employed 1 child	\$24.20
2 adults, both employed 0 children	\$10.09
2 adults, both employed 1 child	\$14.26

Notably, the precise dollar amount for a living wage fluctuates significantly when children and families are involved in the calculation, as seen in Table 5. With such a low average hourly wage, certain living family arrangements will become untenable. For example, if the average wage in the city of Erie is \$21.65, a single parent with one child risks not having their basic needs met.

Employers should collaboratively evaluate these factors as a big picture: average wage, cost of living, and an actual living wage. While it may be challenging for many business owners to raise their wages, they should look at how they can adapt their business to compete with other counties, attract talent, and retain current workers. Whether it means raising product and service prices or finding ways to cut non-payroll expenses, private sector leaders need to adapt.

Ultimately, these adaptations can make a business more robust as consumers will likely view it more favorably. Ninety-four percent of Americans consider if a company is “being a good employer” in their purchasing decisions.²¹⁶ Further, 88 percent of Americans are willing to pay more for products from “purpose-driven companies.”²¹⁷ Therefore, businesses should prioritize fairly compensating their workers, and they’ll likely be rewarded by consumers.

215 Glasmeier, A.K. (2022). Living wage calculation for Erie, County, Pennsylvania. *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Available [here](#).

216 Cone Communications, LLC. (2017 May 17). *Americans willing to buy or boycott companies based on corporate values*, according to new research by Cone Communications. Available [here](#).

217 Cone Communications, LLC. (2018, May 30). *Americans more loyal and willing to defend purpose-driven brands*, according to new research by Cone. Available [here](#).

Child Care

Child care is a priority for people starting new jobs and those hoping to stay in their current job.^{218,219} If companies want to continue to be successful, they must recognize how important child care is to many of their employees, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which presented new challenges involving child care. When child care facilities and schools closed early in the pandemic (and even as they reopened), businesses had to navigate the challenges of many parents needing to stay home.

There is a temporary fix for the child care problem, with funds available from the American Rescue Plan that has allotted \$655 million for eligible child care providers throughout the state.²²⁰ This funding is available to cover everything from operational costs and added expenses for items such as personal protective equipment to providing pay raises to retain and attract employees. Pennsylvania is also investing in its subsidies program, Child Care Works, using another \$352 million from the American Rescue Plan. This funding will lower copays for families from a maximum of 11 percent of their income to 7 percent. It also will ramp up the base rate of subsidies for child care providers and include additional incentives for those who offer services during nontraditional hours. These nontraditional hours are essential as eight of the top ten employers in Erie County provide services that are staffed at all hours of the day.²²¹

An online review of Erie County's child care facilities indicates many are open only during the traditional workweek and work hours. These hours leave employees seeking child care with few options for weekend and shift work. Further, fewer child care options mean fewer openings for children, which then creates less work options for parents. According to data from Child Care Aware of America in 2019, there was already a decrease in child care availability and this was exacerbated by the pandemic.²²² In the future of work, counties that fail to prioritize childcare will fall behind those that have prioritized it.

With the population of Erie seeing a steady decline since 2010 (280,566 to 270,876),²²³ it would be advantageous to address the child care issue with more money and resources and become an example for the nation. The American Rescue Plan funds are a starting place, as it can lead to positive changes in this stressed system and create an impetus for finding more permanent solutions. Longer-term solutions will need to include financial support of subsidized child care and ensure high-quality care by well-qualified providers.²²⁴

When employers incorporate child care with workforce compensation, they will likely decrease employee turnover and absences, ultimately improving business success. In a recent piece by Court Gould, written for the Jefferson Educational Society and reprinted by the Erie Times-News, he states,

218 DeSmet, A., Downling, B., Mugayar-Baldocchi, & Talloen, J. (2021, December 3). Married to the job no more: Craving flexibility, parents are quitting to get it. *McKinsey & Company*. Available [here](#).

219 Malik, R. (2021, January 13). Saving child care means preserving jobs supporting working families and small businesses. *Center for American Progress*. Available [here](#).

220 PA Department of Human Services. (2021, September 27). *Wolf Administration announces plan to distribute \$655 million in American Rescue plan funds to Pennsylvania Child Care Providers*. Available [here](#).

221 PA Department of Labor & Industry. (2021, November) *Erie County combined government ownerships. 2nd quarter, 2021*. Available [here](#).

222 Child Care Aware America. (2021). *Picking up the pieces: Building a better child care system post COVID-19*. Available [here](#).

223 United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Quick facts, Erie County, Pennsylvania*. Available [here](#).

224 Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. (2022). *Our vision and policy goals*. Available [here](#).

"Some cities are dangling cash to attract new residents. More sustainable than a one-time incentive would be institutionalizing a child care system that pays forward multiple dividends. Invest in kids. Grow a prosperous community."²²⁵

To summarize the importance of child care in Erie County consider a quote from Child Care Aware of America: "When their young children attend a quality child care program, parents are able to work. Their income benefits their families, and in turn businesses benefit because they have a steady workforce."

Social Services

Another standard indicator of a high quality of life is access to social services. The importance of these resources has been emphasized during the current pandemic. However, even pre-pandemic, challenges such as loss of income, change in physical health, family stresses, poor mental health, evictions, mortgage defaults, utility suspensions, and food shortages were still present in Erie County.

Erie County has many social service agencies covering housing, mental health, advocacy, and other needs.^{226,227} The lessons of the pandemic have shown us that the humanistic aspects of work are essential and that employees want to feel valued as a person by their employer. There is an opportunity for employers to recognize the pandemic-related challenges and then provide support to their workers.²²⁸ A community-centric way that they can do so is by helping their employees access social services.

Awareness of community resources and employee needs allows employees to feel that their personal experiences are recognized as impacting their roles in the workplace. Employers should additionally have some active means of directing employees to these services. Even something as simple as flyers and brochures in a shared space is a reasonable start. However, employers should strive to create a means of streamlined outreach as well. In Erie County, a valuable resource for employers to refer their workers to would be the Northwest 211,²²⁹ an internet and phone-accessible resource that can direct people to various social services close to where they live.

In order to support this process, business leaders, public figures, and policymakers must recognize that without the continuity of these services, people at their companies and organizations will either not be able to work or not be able to work as well. Thus, when the opportunity arises to provide sponsorship of these agencies, the majority of which are nonprofits, businesses should also strive to sponsor and participate in events that raise funding.

In a 2020 survey of employees, the McKinsey Center for Societal Benefit through Healthcare looked at actions employers could utilize to support workforce mental health.²³⁰ The priorities noted from those surveyed were that employers could support their staff by making mental health wellness

225 Gould, C. (2021, July). Caring for Erie's economy. Childcare is economic development. *Jefferson Educational Society*.

226 Erie Sprout. (2021, November). *An Erie County resource guide of services & supports related to: Drug and alcohol, early intervention, housing, intellectual and developmental differences, mental health*. Available [here](#).

227 United Way PA 2-1-1 Northwest. (n.d.). *Find the help you need*. PA 211. Available [here](#).

228 Emmett, J., Komm, A., Moritz, S., & Schultz, F. (2021, September 30). This time it's personal: shaping the new possible through employee experience. *McKinsey & Company*. Available [here](#).

229 United Way PA 2-1-1 Northwest. (n.d.). *Find the help you need*. PA 211. Available [here](#).

230 Coe., E. Cordinia, J., Enomoto, K., Mandel, Al. & Stueland, J. (2021, April 1). National survey reveals disconnect between employees and employers around mental health need. *McKinsey & Company*. Available [here](#).

a priority, enhancing the available support, and measuring and meeting staff needs. Additional outcomes from this survey showed that many employees do not even know what resources are available. Lastly, the survey found that employees who felt supported and guided to use these social services had higher employee satisfaction.

While speaking to community leaders during the JCLA program, there were a few themes that came forward that should be considered:

- The majority of social services agencies have a robust presence in the city of Erie, but the access is limited outside of the city limits.
- The pandemic has allowed our society to realize the benefit of virtual visits for many scenarios, but that requires an internet connection or access to consistent cellular coverage, which rural communities often lack.

The Crime Victim Center of Erie is one agency that has utilized both expansion and virtual visits.²³¹ They currently have satellite offices in Corry, Edinboro, Union City, North East, and Girard. Given the vital nature of the services they provide, they utilized video call services for many of their visits shortly after the pandemic started and continue to have this as an option. However, in conversation with some of their staff (and staff of other similar agencies), they have seen the challenge with connectivity due to poor cellular signal and internet access issues in some more remote areas.

To combat the lack of physical access and provide comprehensive access, service entities have allowed for shared space for some of these services in Corry, including the CVC and the Erie County Office of Children and Youth. In Union City, the Family Support Center is a place where local residents can access myriad services and where programs such as Parents as Teachers are brought to the people who need them.²³² Such collaborative spaces are working and well-received in these communities. Other communities in Erie County should strongly consider following suit. This model not only provides community service and keeps people in the community, but it also allows for everyone in a community to come together to support those in a time of need.

It should be a priority for employers to keep their workforce happy and safe in a sustainable manner. As communities and employers create a new standard during and post-pandemic, there is opportunity to adjust business practices related to the need for social services.²³³

Health

Employee health plays a crucial role in the overall quality of the workplace and thus the quality of life in a community. “An employee who is in a work environment that supports nutrition, stress relief, or group fitness is going to have a greater work ethic.”²³⁴ Provisions can include access to healthier foods, on-site access to fitness spaces or time allotted for movement, alternative workspaces, such as standing desks, and open spaces with natural lighting.

The Blue Zones project is a comprehensive approach to improving the well-being of those in a community. In the Corry area, this project saw the benefit of large entities such as UPMC, Highmark,

231 Crime Victim Center. (2021). Services. Available [here](#).

232 Union City Family Support Center. (2022) Services. Available [here](#).

233 Coe, E., Cordina, J., Enomoto, K., & Seshan, N. (2021, July 3). Overcoming stigma: Three strategies toward better mental health in the workplace. *McKinsey & Company*. Available here.

234 Hill, W. (2020, November 30). How to improve the quality of life in the workplace. Available [here](#).

and LECOM coming together with local entities such as schools, grocery stores, restaurants, and civic organizations.²³⁵ Some of the objectives in the Corry area were to increase the well-being score (which was falling below the state and national level), reduce the rate of obesity (16 percent higher than the national average), and provide tools for tobacco cessation.²³⁶

The Blue Zones project is a prime example of a community-supported, community-driven approach. In addition to improving the health and well-being of those living and working in the Corry area, there is a realized and anticipated financial benefit from decreased healthcare expenditures and improved work productivity. There has been a projection analysis for the urban core and Erie County as a whole. In looking at the county benefit, 10-year medical and productivity savings are projected to be \$1.24 billion.²³⁷ Erie County or individual communities within the county can utilize this as an advertising opportunity showing they care about the health and wellness of those living and working there.

The 2019-2022 Erie County Community Health Improvement Plan provided three priorities for improving health in Erie County, one of which was “mental health and quality of life.”²³⁸ As noted in this report, the model focused on improving health infrastructure. Some of the key elements to achieving improved health are strong leadership and workforce, strategic partnerships, and flexible and sustainable funding.

Long-term strategies listed in this plan include:

- Public health partners will develop a countywide healthy worksite program to assist worksites in implementing healthy options for employees.
- Develop a countywide healthy worksite program to assist worksites in implementing healthy options for employees, including mental health strategies (education at work site, flexible schedules, access to an employee assistance program).

Healthcare employers in Erie County also have a unique opportunity to address brain drain in the healthcare realm. There are now five nursing schools in Erie County, LECOM medical and dental schools, and a variety of other programs for both technical and clinical-based healthcare jobs. However, these are fields in which Erie County is experiencing brain drain, with people getting their education and completing their initial training here and then leaving. Though this attrition is felt and anecdotally reported by schools and healthcare organizations alike, there is no readily available data on the percentages of graduates who stay locally for their first job after medical school, how many are still here, or how many return. Ample opportunity then exists to understand trends better and address this problem.

Recommendations

A company can improve retention and decrease “brain drain” by reinforcing the right reasons for staying. To do so, it needs to have a pulse on what is essential to its employees. If business leaders see quality of life needs not being met, they should explore how to work with the community to meet those needs.

235 Sharecare, Inc. (2020). *Corry Blue Zones Project*. Available [here](#).

236 Sharecare, Inc. (2019). *A healthier Corry* [Infographic].

237 Sharecare, Inc. (2021, June 8). Blue Zones Project Erie County expansion. [PowerPoint]. *Blue Zones Project by ShareCare*.

238 Erie County Department of Health. (2019). Erie County community health improvement plan. *Erie County DOH*. Available [here](#).

As noted at the beginning of this section, wages are often at the forefront of the conversation. However, the actual cost of living in Erie County needs to be considered in compensation.

As was noted in the section about wages, the average pay in the city of Erie is several dollars lower than Dayton, a similar Rust Belt city. The average salary is not enough to provide a living wage for a single parent and many other family structures. Employers and community leaders in Erie County must find and adjust salaries and hourly wages to help attract and retain talent.

When employers cannot match wages in other locations for similar positions, they should consider the other bargaining chips for retention such as providing child care, access to social services, and health care.

The pandemic has shown us that work-life balance is as important as how much money we make. "It is widely recognized that good quality of life for workers correlates with happier, healthier, more productive associates. They are less likely to miss work or leave the company if all their human needs are being met in and outside of the workplace – something that can happen only if work policies and culture are wellness-centric."²³⁹

Erie County has the opportunity to break ground on exploring this further and solidify itself as a destination for the future of work. Obtaining this data can start with employers, government agencies, and educational institutions investing time and resources into determining what is essential to their workers.

Further exploration for Erie County stakeholders should include:

- Helping business owners discover how to offer more competitive wages
- Reaching out to local social services organizations to understand their offerings and foster support for their continued work
- Creating supplemental support for employer child care options
- Erie County businesses should create health incentives for employees via nonprofits.

Meeting the Challenges Ahead

All of Erie County's leaders should start preparing for the future of work immediately. To do so, they should leverage synergies between the public and private sectors. The intersections that stakeholders must address fit into five critical areas of need:

1. Education
2. Industry
3. Infrastructure
4. Placemaking
5. Quality of Life

These leaders should consider how the future of work is evolving on a national and global scale and tailor it to Erie County's strongest assets. By creating more robust education-industry pipelines, changing local and state legislation, fostering next-generation industries, creating a stronger community brand through strategic placemaking, and cultivating a high quality of life, Erie County can become a model for the nation.

²³⁹ Landau, J. (2018, November 19). Why prioritizing quality of life will help your business thrive. *Forbes*. Available [here](#).

By the strategic promotion of its future of work initiatives, Erie County could reduce brain drain and attract talent through its diverse culture, established and up-and-coming neighborhoods, picturesque state parks, and thriving entrepreneurial community.

There is no doubt that challenges lie ahead. But, with their roots in the Rust Belt, Erie County residents have cultivated a community with economic and social grit. It is this fortitude that will help Erie County thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. With the guidance of this report we hope local decision-makers and leaders can see a path to success, one that ignites innovation, entrepreneurship, and next-generation industries.

Editor's note: Earlier versions of this report did not include appropriate references to Erie Together, a countywide movement formed in 2009 to establish career exploration and pathways development.

At the community's request in 2014, Erie Together launched a unique program to connect employers with educators to provide career exploration experiences for students in grades K-12. This program, called "[Career Street](#)," has facilitated more than 43,000 student experiences since its inception. It was made possible through collaborative work by educators and employers for students in elementary through senior high school, with Erie Together staff managing the program.

In 2016, Erie Together further elevated local career exploration efforts by forming the "[Erie County Career Pathways Alliance \(ECCPA\)](#)." Its work centers on (1) developing experiences aligned with PA State Standards for K-12 students and (2) creating a countywide career pathways system that will better prepare students and help meet employers' needs. The ECCPA is considered a model across PA and beyond.

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