

## The affordable shore: Why Indiana living appeals to Chicago commuters



With a new track planned for the South Shore Line, Northwest Indiana's lakefront communities, already attracting commuting millennials, are poised to grow.

[Alison Bowen](#) Chicago Tribune, August 23, 2016

When Beth Doherty found her future home in Indiana, it was by mistake.

Visiting property her sister-in-law purchased in 2002, she discovered Beverly Shores, Ind., where she and her husband moved in 2010 after living in Bucktown for two decades.

"You can see the skyline from the shore, and there's all these really cool houses," she said.

Doherty, a real estate broker, said many clients have no idea that such lakeside gems are available.

**From Tribune Publishing's Real Estate Network**

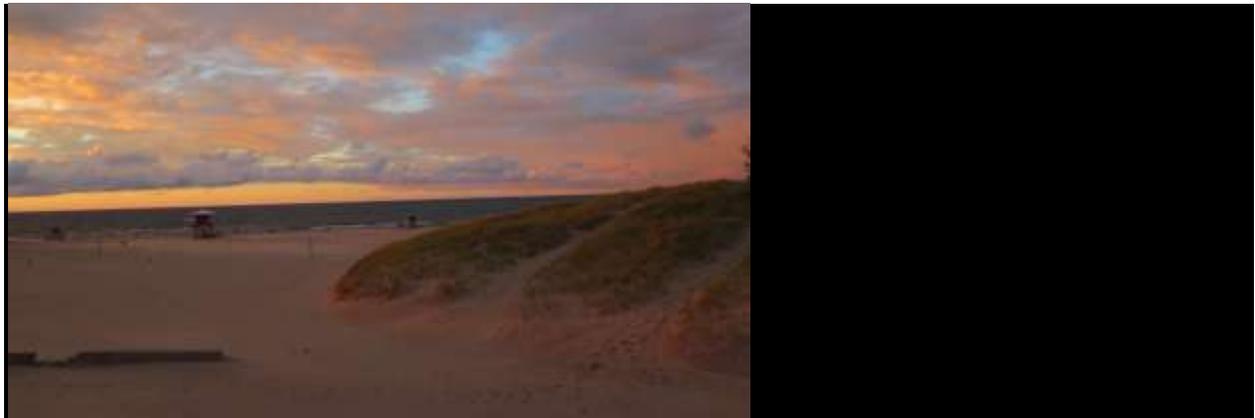
That might change soon.

Puzzled by why Indiana isn't drawing more people who work in Chicago, local officials are touting newly revitalized downtowns and pitching a new train track to slim commutes.

"This area is the best-kept secret," said Michael Noland, CEO of the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District.

Debbie Barkowski agrees. For her, the draws in leaving Chicago for Long Beach, Ind., were many — the lakeshore, where she and husband Brian see sunsets, and a leafy neighborhood where quaint houses sit back from winding, quiet streets.

They're grateful, too, for a network of young peers to meet for dune hikes or coffee at Beach Glass Cafe. Within eight months of moving in, they were invited to a wedding.



Northwest Indiana's serene lakefront is one of its selling points for officials pitching it to young working professionals should live. Aug. 23, 2016. (Alison Bowen/Chicago Tribune)

But some Chicago friends and family remain perplexed.

"We do still get that question about, 'What brought you to Indiana?'" she said.

With some millennials attracted to the area's beach access and low-key lifestyle, officials hope a new generation of residents will flow into town.

The linchpin in their plan to draw more people? Adding another track to a segment of the South Shore Line, which officials hope will slash the commute from Michigan City to Chicago to just one hour.

"The double tracking, I think, is going to be a huge game changer," said Leah Konrady, president of One Region, a group that promotes growth and quality of life in Northwest Indiana. She is 30, and says many friends in their 20s and 30s have moved to the area. She's monitoring the way other cities reach out to millennials, like Atlanta's New Voices campaign, with an advisory panel of millennials.

But making Chicago workplaces accessible is key. Right now, just one track runs between Gary and Michigan City. "We've got two-way traffic on a one-way street," Noland said.

Two tracks, Noland said, will allow trains to run more quickly — and with more options. He would love to see more rush-hour trains, for example.

Officials are in the process of finalizing details for the double tracking and received federal approval in May to hire engineers for preliminary planning. They plan to hold public meetings in October, and if all goes well, to see improved service by 2020.

Officials say Indiana is an obvious choice. Locals laud the lower cost of living. Billboards near Gary beckon Illinois residents with the boast, "Balanced State Budget."

But they acknowledge challenges — for many, the state brings to mind an industrial landscape, Konrady said, not lakeshore sunsets and a shops-lined downtown. And in a recent One Region survey, residents expressed concern about jobs and education.

Bringing in more young people would help boost population — according to a upcoming One Region report, the area's 4 percent rate of population growth between 2000 and 2014 was slower than both the state's and the nation's.

Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage broker Nick Landers often reminds clients that Illinois suburban sale prices can double or triple Indiana's. According to Zillow, the median home value in Porter County, which includes Chesterton, is \$166,200. In Lake County, it's \$121,600.

But just 15 percent of the workforce in Northwest Indiana commutes to Chicago, compared with 35 percent in Illinois counties near the city.

When Noland asks Chicago friends what it would take to make them move, "Frankly, it's simple. It's the commute."

Right now, it's a hefty one. The train from Michigan City to Millennium Station is about 1 hour and 40 minutes.

Narrowing that, Noland said, "We unlock the region, and we become the newest suburb of Chicago."

Of course, Indiana residents have long commuted to Chicago. Valparaiso's express commuter bus, ChicaGo DASH, carries about 130 riders to downtown and back daily. In Michigan City, commuters hop on the 5:52 a.m. train, returning on the 3:57 p.m. from Millennium Station.

Swifter trains, officials are confident, would advance both Michigan City and nearby communities like Portage.

"We think it's the new area to look at," said Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority President Bill Hanna. "This is the ground floor for a lot of these neighborhoods that will be anchored by these transit areas."

Revamped downtowns are elevating the region's appeal.

In Michigan City late Saturday night, a young couple strolled past lit storefronts like restaurant Mucho Mas, serving guacamole and enchiladas, and home decor shop Nest Number 4.

New shops in buildings that previously hosted empty storefronts softened Jenn Moser-Summers, initially reluctant to move here from Chicago to join her husband. Although still considering a move to the West Coast, she's encouraged by all the openings.

"I'm just now starting to appreciate Michigan City," said Moser-Summers, 34, who bar tends at Fire & Water, where people watch the sunset on the rooftop while sipping drinks half as expensive as they would be on Michigan Avenue.

The shore, also, is on locals' list of selling points. They point to places like Whiting Lakefront Park, where millions of dollars were invested in a winding, green area that attracted bikers and dog walkers on a recent weekend morning. The Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk, which opened in 2008, has a 3,500-square-foot public pavilion, used as a backdrop for wedding photos Saturday. Trails thread through dunes that nestle a beach filled with families.

"If you haven't seen our shoreline in the last three or four years, it would look completely different to you," Hanna said.

But first, Noland added, is convincing Chicagoans to come. He understands. Years ago, living in Lincoln Park, he and his wife decided on Glen Ellyn when they had children.

"I've told people around here, Northwest Indiana was not on my radar screen," he said.

Part of the pitch is promising people the area looks different than 20 years ago. After MSNBC political commentator Chris Matthews in 2015 called Michigan City "hollowed-out," local officials invited him to come back and see what's changed.

Recently, Konrady was shopping with her mother in Michigan City. Strolling by shops like Hoity Toity, where lamps and dressers fill the windows, her mom, 65, noted she hadn't ventured onto that stretch since she was 16.

"It was an unwalkable city," Konrady said. "When people see Michigan City now, they feel so different about it."

She, too, understands the challenges. After all, although her primary residence is Michigan City, she often stays at an apartment in River North, near city friends.

"I think the single people are scared to move back," she said.

Still, she points out that her brother met his fiancée in Michigan City, where both live.

And so many millennials have settled there that the Michigan City Area Chamber of Commerce last year launched the Lakefront Career Network, connecting young professionals for happy hours.

That's how Brian and Debbie Barkowski found new friends. They lived in the South Loop and Clarendon Hills before moving to Long Beach last September.

Knowing a move far from friends might be tough, they sought a destination. Pals now love to visit for days outdoors, walking the four blocks to the lake.

"I can't tell you how many people I've had come up and say, 'How are you liking it? We're really considering it,'" Brian Barkowski said.

Four days a week, he drives the hour to his job as vice president at Brother Rice High School in Mount Greenwood, decompressing during the return trip on tree-lined U.S. Highway 12.

State officials and brokers — and young people eager for more peers — hope the train transports people ready to hear their pitch. "People really want that small-town atmosphere," Landers said. "You're an hour from a world-class city. And from our house, we're a block away from the lake. We can walk down to the beach, and we can see Chicago."