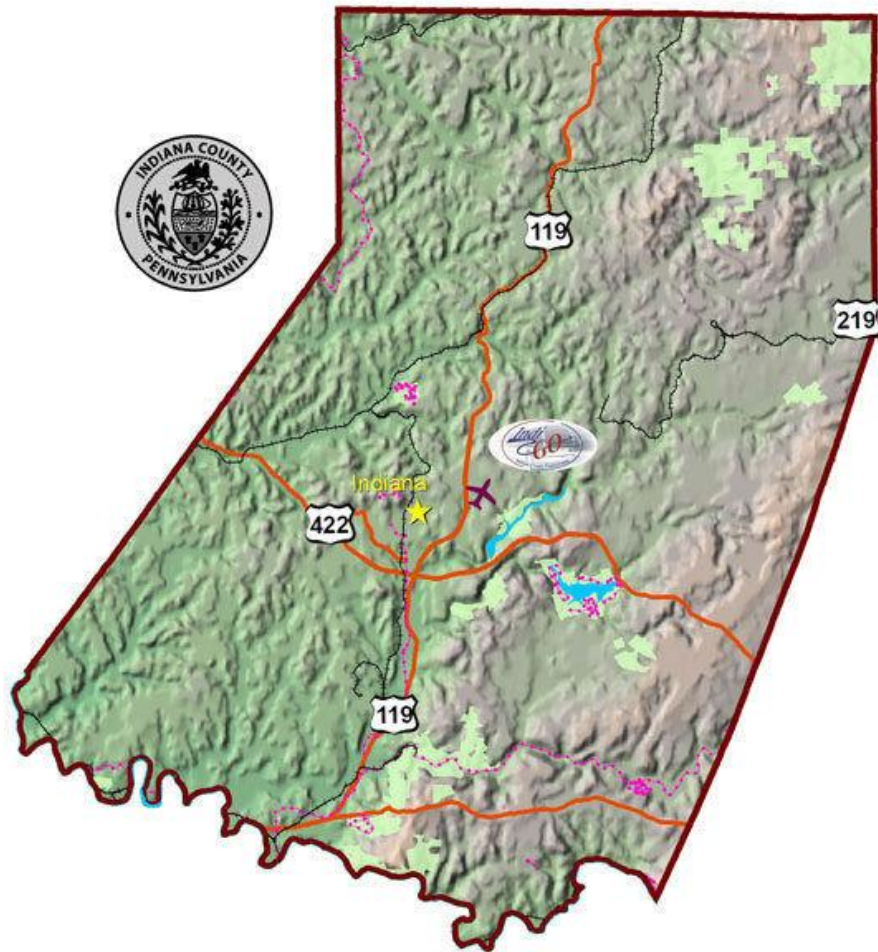


Regional needs aired in Zoom conference call

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Broadband, workforce development, infrastructure and human services were among topics broached by the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce in a First Friday Zoom conference call featuring three area county commissioners.

“When you invest in rural areas, we do better, and it helps everyone to do better,” said Indiana County Commissioner Sherene Hess, who was joined by counterparts Leslie Osche from Butler County and Diana Irey Vaughan from Washington County.

They first provided background about the situation in their respective counties, then engaged reporters in a brief question-and-answer session that covered such topics as plans for highways that cross multiple county lines and broadband expansion.

Vaughan said cooperation was necessary to accomplish such projects as the Southern Beltway, a highway also known as part of Interstate 376 that eventually will link the Monongahela Valley with the Pittsburgh International Airport corridor through southern Allegheny and northern Washington counties.

Osche, who also is Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission vice chair, said a similar effort is being made regarding a 40-mile corridor of Route 28 from Kittanning to Interstate 80 in the Brookville area.

Route 28 now is a limited-access highway from Pittsburgh up the Allegheny Valley to Route 422 in Kittanning.

In November, SPC, in partnership with the Northwest Pennsylvania Commission, North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission, officials in Armstrong, Clarion and Jefferson counties, and the suburban Indiana-based Pennsylvania Department of Transportation District 10, announced completion of a corridor study, outlining 40 multimodal improvements on Route 28 between Kittanning and Interstate 80.

“That will open up some other opportunities,” Osche said.

Hess said expanded broadband is crucial to have for a workforce, and “one thing we do have is a ready workforce. We have pad ready sites, and a development corporation.”

Sites include Windy Ridge, the complex in White Township where Urban Outfitters Inc. built a distribution center.

“You chose a good mix of counties and projects we are working on,” Vaughan said, of a program organized by the Pittsburgh chamber, an affiliate of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development.

A point made throughout the hour-long session was the importance of regional cooperation, in a state with multiple regions.

“We have to be the squeaky wheel,” Hess said.

“We’re producing a lot of tax revenue for the state here in Southwestern Pennsylvania,” the Butler commissioner said. “We’ve got to stick together.”

Vaughan said such issues as economic development and transportation do not stop at county borders, so on “all of these issues” the various counties have to work together.

Chamber President Matt Smith said the Pittsburgh region is well positioned for infrastructure funding as it is being discussed in Washington, D.C.

“Pittsburgh is so ready for that investment,” said Smith, who has family ties to Indiana County.

The conference in turn is a nonprofit, private sector leadership organization, established in 1944 amid increased public concern about the long-term future of the Pittsburgh region, in competition with other regions that were economically more diverse,

It today is dedicated to economic development and quality of life issues in Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Washington and Westmoreland counties in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Those same areas also come together as the SPC, which works together on goals of transportation, planning and development, and information systems in the southwest corner of the state.

And that work goes well beyond the 10-county Allegheny Conference/SPC region.

In April, the Allegheny Conference announced that the Power of 32 Site Development Fund had issued a Request for Proposals from developers, landowners and others who are interested in patient, below-market, private sector funding that supports economic and community development in a 32-county region.

It is a footprint that extends east to the Altoona and Bedford areas, north to Mercer County, and into parts of Maryland, Ohio and West Virginia.

That fund was created in 2014 under the direction of the Allegheny Conference and is managed by Callay Capital LLC, with funding by private sector investors desiring to accomplish important economic and community development goals.

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