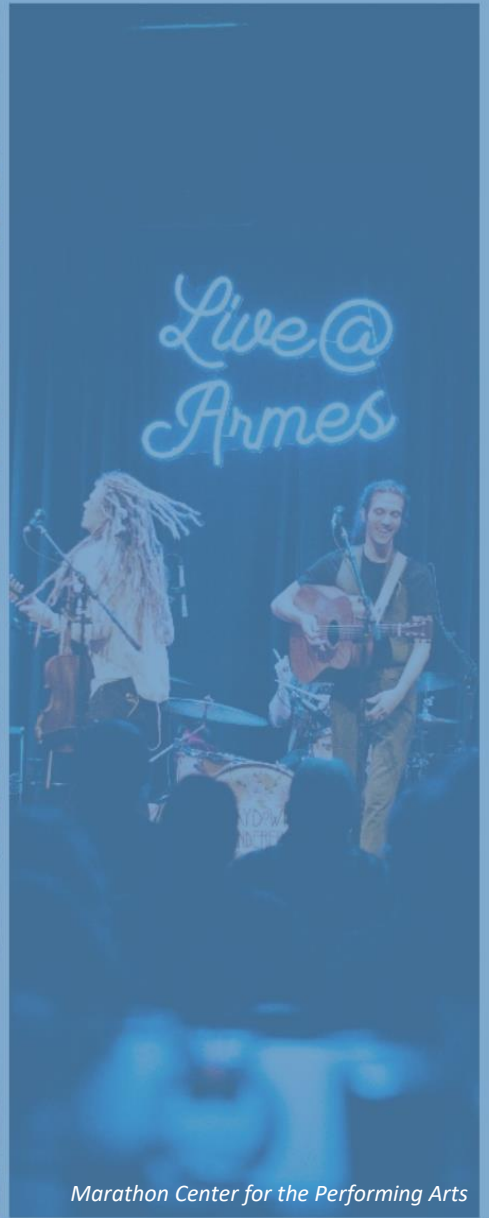
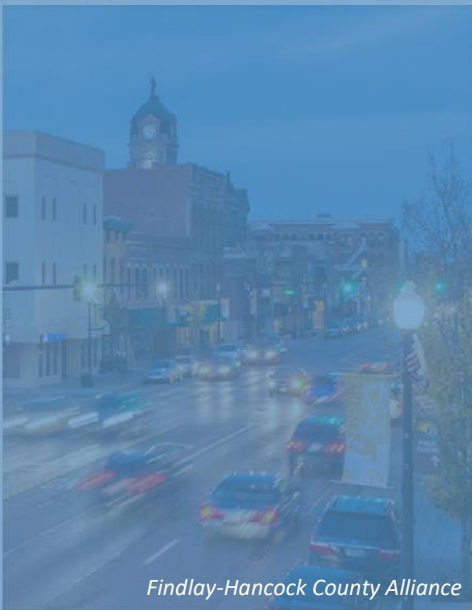




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Findlay-Hancock County Alliance

# A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force

Comprehensive Report  
*August 2023*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past year, the A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force has been meeting to collectively identify improvements that could be made in our community in order to increase attraction and retention rates among young professionals. The following summarizes some of the key takeaways.

- Young professionals experience low satisfaction with certain aspects of the Findlay community such as limited housing opportunities, a lack of accessible and safe infrastructure for various transportation modes, and community culture. The Findlay-Hancock County area also lacks entertainment opportunities geared towards young people that aren't centered around food and drinks.
- Retail offerings should be in walkable, vibrant corridors with greater diversity in the types of goods and price points. Restaurants need a greater variety of cuisines, improved atmospheres, and experiential components in order to capture young professionals.
- More entertainment opportunities need to be programmed for and marketed towards young professionals in order to retain them in the Findlay community.
- Findlay needs more downtown rental housing at price-points accessible for young talent. These units do not need to be larger than 1- or 2-bedroom apartments due to many young professionals relocating to Findlay alone and choosing not to have families until later in life, if at all.
- More opportunities for passive recreation such as walking or biking, and better awareness of recreational leagues and other organized recreation was desired by the group. The proposed Downtown Recreation Area also garnered immense excitement among the task force members.
- Non-automotive-focused infrastructure and public transportation services are a primary gap identified in the Findlay community that the task force would like to see addressed. Young professionals are also leaving the community for certain services such as specialty healthcare and professional services.
- Findlay's regional connectivity to larger urban areas with a greater number and variety of opportunities should be leveraged. That connectivity could be bolstered by organized transportation solutions.
- The community and employers must be open to change and growth if they want to create an environment that young professionals want to move to and stay in. Education, acceptance, and empathy must be embraced.

The remainder of this report explores these ideas and introduces others in more depth. We are proud to share our conversations with our fellow community members and look forward to seeing the progress we hope to provoke.

## MISSION STATEMENT

The A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force aims to challenge the status quo of our community in order to energize, modernize, and diversify the Findlay-Hancock area in a way that boosts the attraction and retention of young professionals.

## VISION STATEMENT

Atttracting Future Talent, Entertainment, and Resources

# TASK FORCE MEMBERS

The A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force is comprised of young professionals representing a range of local employers, industries, educational pathways, and interests. This diversity in backgrounds allows for well-rounded conversations regarding what opportunities and resources are desired in the Findlay area.

**TABITHA BURGIS** relocated from Anaheim, California to Findlay in January 2022 to continue her career with Hearthside Food Solutions as a Sr. CI Specialist. Prior to moving to California, she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Marine Science from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Tabitha is originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**JARED ENGLAND** is a life-long resident of Findlay. He is currently employed as the HR Business Partner for Student Employment for the Office of Human Resources at the University of Findlay. He completed his bachelor's degree in business administration in December of 2021 at Bowling Green State University and plans to pursue a master's degree at The University of Findlay beginning next year.

**MADELYNN GREENSLADE** is originally from Clyde, Ohio and moved to Findlay in the fall of 2018 to continue her education at the University of Findlay. She earned her bachelor's degree in marketing in 2021. Madelynn then worked at Rowmark as a Marketing Operations Analyst for one year before transitioning to the University of Findlay where she is the Director of Annual Giving.

**ELAINE GUTHRIE** graduated from Youngstown State University in May 2022 with a bachelor's degree in mathematics and a certification in Data Analytics. She moved to Findlay in June 2022 from Ravenna, Ohio to fill the role of Business Intelligence Analyst at GSW Manufacturing.

**RUTH GUY** moved to Findlay in April 2016 and currently works at Whirlpool Findlay Operations as an Industrial Engineer. She is originally from Frankenmuth, Michigan.

**ERICA JOHNSON** is a Project Engineer with One Energy Enterprises, Inc. and has lived in Findlay for five years. Prior to Findlay, she received a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Ohio State University. Erica is originally from Spring Grove, Illinois.

**SARAH PERRIGO** moved to Findlay in May 2022 to join Findlay-Hancock County Economic Development where she is currently a Project Specialist. Prior to that, she completed her master's degree in urban and regional planning with a graduate certificate in real estate development at The University of Michigan. Sarah is originally from Allegan, Michigan.

**LAUREN SCHMENK** moved to Findlay in June of 2022 to be closer to work at ACI Construction Co., Inc. Previously she lived in Ottawa, Ohio, which is where she grew up. Lauren went to Bowling Green State University where she received a bachelor's degree in both Architecture and Construction Management.

# INTRODUCTION

One of the primary focus areas of the Findlay-Hancock County Economic Development (ED) office is workforce development. That large, evolving matter is also a topic of concern for many of our employers as they seek to attract and retain employees. This issue prompted a discussion at the Economic Development Advisory Board meeting in June 2022. While workforce challenges are seen across all employment types and levels, this conversation centered upon the difficulties in retaining top entry-level talent. According to anecdotal evidence from area employers, young professionals are one of the hardest groups to attract and retain in Hancock County. They have different priorities and place value on different community experiences than established families and older professionals. The ED Advisory Board concluded that in order to understand what opportunities and resources are needed to keep young professionals in the community, they needed to ask the young professionals.

Sarah Perrigo joined the Economic Development team as Project Coordinator in May of 2022. She is 23 years old, from southwest Michigan, and had never heard of Findlay, Ohio before applying for her position. As such, she views Findlay through the eyes of a young professional and is in a position to identify gaps in our community that longstanding residents may not recognize. With the support of the ED Advisory Board, she was tasked with finding other young professionals. Top employers were asked to provide a voice to this task force. The request was that the individual was 28 years of age or under, four-year college educated, not originally from Findlay, but currently resides here. From this, a group of young professionals who are helping to shape and grow our business community were brought together.

The A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force was launched with a vision of “Atracting Future, Talent, Entertainment, and Resources” to the Findlay-Hancock community. The first task force meeting was held in September 2022. Since that time, these individuals have met monthly to collectively identify and work towards the opportunities and resources desired by young professionals in an attempt to boost employee retention rates. The task force members have approached this initiative with creativity and enthusiasm. They are excited to share their ideas with our employers, local businesses, and other economic stakeholders who share an interest in the potential of Findlay-Hancock County.

This report serves as a summary of what the task force discussed over the course of the past year. Monthly meetings were primarily organized around a particular topic. The kickoff meeting was centered on identifying the gaps in community offerings while the months following focused around retail and restaurants; entertainment and nightlife; housing; recreation; infrastructure and services; regional connectivity; and community and office culture. The task force has also served as a sounding board for community partners including VisitFindlay, the Marathon Center for Performing Arts, residential developers, and an area bank.

The remainder of this document is broken up into the topics discussed above. The ideas and suggestions in this report are that of the task force as a whole. This is not to suggest that the enclosed ideas are shared by *all* young professionals across Findlay, but rather are the product of thoughtful deliberation by a varied sample of this community. Local decision makers and economic development partners are encouraged to review these findings and consider how they can be involved in creating a community in which young professionals want to move to and stay.

# IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

In order to create solutions, the problem must first be identified. Consequently, the first A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force meeting in September focused on identifying the community gaps and weaknesses experienced by young professionals. Task force members were encouraged to have an open and honest conversation about shortcomings in the community. Common themes of this discussion included the following: community culture, retail and restaurants, housing, social opportunities, natural features and recreation, accessibility and parking, workplace culture, entertainment offerings, and student retention. While this list is not all-encompassing, it provides a snapshot of some of the largest obstacles to creating an inviting community for young professionals.

Themes that garnered significant attention during this conversation included community culture, housing, and accessibility and parking. A summary of these topics is included below:

## COMMUNITY CULTURE

Community culture is perhaps one of Findlay's greatest assets, as well as one of its greatest obstacles. Findlay prides itself on its small-town culture and atmosphere – as it should. However, the community can also present a culture of prejudice. Task force members collectively agreed that Findlay does not always present an accepting and welcoming open door to diverse groups, nor does it eagerly embrace new residents with no previous ties to the community.

Cultural change does not mean that Findlay must give up the endearing, close-knit atmosphere that we all enjoy. It is an opportunity for growth and community understanding that will allow us to gain new neighbors, new coworkers, and new friends with whom we can share all of Findlay's benefits.

## HOUSING

Communities all over the country are experiencing housing shortages – this is not an issue specific to Findlay. However, it is an issue that has the potential to negatively impact the retention of young professionals. The rental market in Findlay is particularly challenging in this regard. As of 2020, Findlay's renter vacancy rate was 1.4%. This is significantly lower than that of the State of Ohio and the United States, coming in at 5.1% and 5.8% respectively. This vacancy rate is also lower than that in other Ohio towns which have been attracting young professionals in higher numbers (Cleveland, 6.0%; Columbus, 4.5%; Cincinnati, 6.4%). This statistic could be seen as a good thing. It suggests that the community is a desirable place to live and that landlords are doing well. However, it also means that individuals looking to move into our community are severely limited in their housing options and may rethink their decision to relocate.

Four of the A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force members moved to Findlay during the 2022 calendar year. They all experienced significant challenges related to finding housing in this market. Common themes that emerged in the sharing of these stories included price, location, and timeline.

Approximately 35.3% of rental unit occupants in Findlay pay more than 30% of their income on rent each month. While that value reflects all Findlay renters, not just young professionals, it is still an important metric. More than 1 in 3 Findlay renters live in a unit that is not affordable for them based on their income. Young professionals in entry-level positions are often making entry-level income. They

are likely not in a position to spend \$1,000+ on an apartment. The absence of good quality, affordable housing units for young professionals introduces additional risk of low retention rates.

The issues surrounding location are tangentially tied to price. In Findlay, most of the more affordable housing is located on the periphery of the community, while several of the downtown units are generally more expensive. Additionally, there are not as many downtown housing units in general. Many of the upper levels of downtown buildings poised for residential development remain underutilized. For a demographic that tends to gravitate towards downtown, walkable living, the higher prices and lower inventory of downtown units reduce young professionals' ability to find quality housing in a location they desire.

Finally, the housing shortages in Findlay make it incredibly difficult for incoming residents to find housing in the timeframes required by their new employers. Task force members expressed needing to find temporary living situations, such as AirBnBs, while they searched for a longer-term option due to the short timeline they had to fully relocate within Findlay. All of these issues related to housing negatively impact the community's ability to attract and retain future talent.

### **ACCESSIBILITY & PARKING**

Findlay has seen tremendous growth and progress in its downtown with the addition of new restaurants, retailers, and other services. Our downtown is one of the first things that visitors or new community members look at. It is also the place where most of the entertainment offerings that young professionals desire are located. However, task force members indicated that the lack of accessibility and parking in downtown deters them from taking advantage of this resource. The lack of accessibility presents itself in various ways: no public transportation or rideshares, few walking or biking paths connecting downtown to residential areas, no posted overnight parking lots, heavy and slow-moving traffic on major roads, limited hours of operation, minimal downtown rental housing, etc.

The issues surrounding parking may not be a "lack" of parking in general, but rather a lack of safe, quality parking. Many of Findlay's public parking lots are tucked behind buildings with little visibility from Main Street and inadequate lighting. This is particularly concerning for young women in the evening hours. The lack of communication about parking regulations and when the 2-hour limit is in effect has also deterred individuals from enjoying time in the community. Finally, while there are plenty of parking spots available within the parking garage on Crawford Street, its lack of lighting, deteriorating structure, and unreliability of the pay system actively discourage people from utilizing it.

# I. RETAIL & RESTAURANTS

Perhaps the most visibly obvious assets in the community, particularly in Downtown Findlay, are the various retail and restaurant opportunities. These amenities drive much of the downtown traffic, as well as activity in the commercial corridors such as Tiffin Avenue and Trenton Avenue. While each of these businesses add value to the community, there are ways to improve upon this strong base of retail and restaurants.

When asked how often they frequented downtown businesses, most task force members indicated that they are likely to come downtown 1-2 times a week, with a couple members coming as infrequently as once a month. Alternatively, the majority of task force members said that they frequent businesses in the commercial corridors at least twice a week. The difference in where they choose to shop and eat could be due to a variety of factors including ease of access, open hours, and preferred products, but there also was a strong connection between where people lived and where they chose to shop – people who lived downtown, went downtown; people who didn't, didn't. In order to draw people to new destinations, farther from their place of residence or work, improvements should be made.

## RETAIL

Communities of all different sizes and in all different locations are experiencing challenges with retail. The rise of online shopping and two-day shipping have caused both local and national-chain storefronts to close their doors. While ecommerce has improved access to goods and services, many individuals still need or prefer to shop at a physical store. Conversations around retail opportunities focused on the overall development of downtown, the redevelopment of the mall, and specific categories of retail desired.

### [Downtown Findlay Retail](#)

Downtown Findlay is central to the success of the community as a whole and the retention of young professionals who enjoy spending time in walkable, urban areas. The task force expressed a great desire to see Downtown Findlay grow in retail offerings and open hours. Currently, most of the retailers in downtown are geared towards women's clothing and accessories at similar price points across the various stores. A variety of price points and offerings would be well-received and attract different groups of people to our downtown stores. Many of these stores have limited open hours past 5:00p which limits patronage by individuals with full-time jobs. Additionally, many of the pedestrian-level storefronts were described as "underutilized" by task force members. Underutilized in this context does not mean that the space is necessarily vacant, but that it is being filled by something other than the space's highest-and-best use and perhaps a use that does not require pedestrian-level visibility. It was agreed that street-level spaces would create greater pedestrian connectivity and downtown vibrancy if they were filled with retail or other uses that encourage foot traffic and commercial growth.

### [Findlay Village Mall](#)

Findlay residents and visitors alike feel and see the current gap that the Findlay Village Mall has created. Not only is it disappointing to lose the retailers, but it serves as an eyesore on one of Findlay's key commercial corridors. Recognizing the growing challenges of attracting new commercial retail to the traditional mall set-up, the task force discussed an openness to alternative redevelopment efforts

such as housing, recreation, and lifestyle hubs. Across the country, developers are taking increasingly unique approaches to the redevelopment of malls both within the physical footprint of the existing buildings and the expansive parking lots surrounding them. Multifamily housing is a popular trend currently that could help alleviate some of the housing shortages mentioned earlier. Additionally, empty big-box anchor spaces provide an opportunity for recreation, especially those with higher ceilings that could accommodate climbing or bouldering gyms. The mall as a lifestyle hub or community center is also gaining momentum but is a newer concept. Instead of being focused solely on retail, mall spaces can be repurposed to include education centers, fitness centers, libraries, medical clinics, and services such as banks, beauty and hair salons, and dog grooming. This idea of a one-stop shop in a walkable space is attractive for convenience and time-savings.

### Categories of Retail

Throughout the larger picture discussion of retail, very specific categories and store preferences also came up. Those included the following: men's clothing, shoes, business professional and casual clothing, beauty supplies (i.e., Ulta), bulk goods (i.e., Costco, Sam's Club), specialty foods (i.e., Trader Joe's, Whole Foods), and independent bookstores. While there are some existing stores within those categories, the consensus was that the group wanted options in addition to the current offerings for reasons such as price and variety of goods.

## RESTAURANTS

When asked about improvements in the restaurant-scene, most of the conversation centered on big picture topics. While these topics overlap with each other in certain aspects, they are most easily categorized as the following: Variety of Cuisine, Improved Atmosphere, Accessibility and Aesthetics, and Experiential Dining.

### Variety of Cuisine

As mentioned above, Findlay's restaurants are valuable assets to the community and drive a considerable amount of commercial activity. However, many of these restaurants, particularly the sit-down restaurants, provide similar cuisines. Findlay residents have numerous options when seeking out pub-type eats or Italian cuisine. Outside of that, there are few sit-down restaurants that add variety and diversity to our options. With the exception of Japan West, the restaurants that do provide different types of fare are more likely to be take-out oriented, such as Jack & Jin's, Circle of Friends, and The China.

The task force expressed a desire for quality, sit-down restaurants across a variety of cuisines. Examples include Mexican, Chinese, Greek, Cajun, Jamaican, and more.

### Improved Atmosphere

The atmosphere of a restaurant seems to matter as much as the food and drink offered for many of the young professionals in the task force. When asked to provide phrases that described a desired atmosphere, the following were offered: "calm," "casual," "simple menu," "happy hour," and "not overly loud." In general, people were unlikely to patronize restaurants which gave off an upscale feeling with the exception of special occasions. While upscale restaurants are a great asset to our downtown, the young professionals expressed a desire for a more "brewery-like" atmosphere due to the easy-going environment. Findlay Brewing Company was suggested as the ideal model.



Outdoor seating options such as the beer garden at Findlay Brewing Company or the rooftop bar at Alexandria's also received positive feedback. Tangential to the idea of more patio areas was a desire for dog-friendly eateries. Family dynamics are changing, and younger generations are having children later in life or not at all. However, they are adding pets to their families. The COVID-19 pandemic also saw an uptick in pet ownership. According to the ASPCA, more than 23 million households adopted a pet during the pandemic. For some individuals, being able to bring their dog with them for activities is important.

### Accessibility and Aesthetics

For individuals to visit a restaurant, they want to be able to access it easily and feel safe and secure both at, and travelling to and from, the business. One of the biggest aspects of accessibility is a restaurant's open hours. Restaurants in Findlay tend to follow similar trends in their open hours, but opportunities are being missed. Frustrations expressed by task force members included the lack of open restaurants on Sundays and Mondays, and the tendency of restaurants to open late on Saturday, leaving few options for people to have lunch while enjoying our downtown retailers. Having almost all Findlay restaurants closed on Sundays and Saturday afternoons is discouraging. People's tendency to enjoy free time on the weekends is hindered by this downtown-wide trend of being closed during these times.

Also tied to accessibility is an individual's need to travel to and receive service from a restaurant during their work breaks. While this is not often a problem after 5:00p, it can become challenging during the traditional workday. Many of the young professionals expressed past problems with navigating downtown, finding parking, and being able to have efficient service – this is especially true for people with non-flexible lunch hours. There is a need for quality food with efficient service that does not come from a fast-food restaurant.

The task force members also discussed the importance of outward appearance in the restaurants they choose to frequent. The façade should be clean and inviting. Unfortunately, the aesthetics of some establishments are turning people away. For example, there is a bar and grill in Findlay that seems ideal for young professionals on-paper – they offer pool tables, cornhole, sand volleyball, mini bowling, and arcade games. However, task force members expressed a feeling of apprehension around going there because of the aesthetics. Safety and security are not conveyed by the building. There are other examples of restaurants and bars in Findlay that could benefit from aesthetic improvements and funding such as a façade program.

### Experiential Dining

“If we just want food, we have DoorDash.” That quote from a task force member is the best way to emphasize the importance of experiential dining. With the rise of food delivery apps, it's increasingly important to give individuals a reason to come to your restaurant beyond the food. Some of that will take care of itself – people tend to meet in public with new friends or on a date. But some of that also needs to be created by the business owner. Examples of ways to add an experiential component include live music, themed events, and activity-partnerships such as RYSE Fitness courses at Findlay Brewing Company or Awakening Mind Arts sessions at False Chord Brewing. This is not to suggest that restaurant owners need an event every day of the week, only to promote thought on how the experiential component of dining can be improved in order to ensure repeat, in-person customers.

Perhaps the biggest gap in experiential dining expressed by young professionals is the lack of a DJ-type bar. Apart from Alexandria's second floor, there are next to no options for people to enjoy a night of eating, drinking, and dancing. Most of the seating arrangements and atmospheres in our restaurants, even our breweries, are very static and rigid. There is not an opportunity to mill about and socialize between enjoying bar grub and drinks. For many young professionals coming out of college, this type of experience is something that they have become accustomed to, they enjoy, and they would like to see in their new town.

## II. ENTERTAINMENT & NIGHTLIFE

Tangentially related and complimentary to retail and restaurants are entertainment and nightlife. Many of our bars, restaurants, and stores *are* providing entertainment to young professionals in the community. However, there is also room to expand upon these existing opportunities to ensure that individuals in our community have adequate opportunities to meet others and come to appreciate spending time in Findlay.

### Variety of Activity-Driven Opportunities

When asked what young professionals do for fun in Findlay, it's not uncommon to hear that there's nothing to do besides eat and drink. While part of that is just a misperception, there may also be some truth to it. A quick perusal of the community calendar on the VisitFindlay website will reveal many activities tailored to children and families, but not as many opportunities for young professionals. Some of those activities that are tailored to families may also be appealing to young professionals if there were different sessions for families and young children v. individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. Examples could include recreational events held by the Hancock Park District or City of Findlay Recreation Department, as well as educational events held by the Findlay-Hancock County Public Library.

Other types of activity-driven opportunities mentioned that could be provided by the private market include casual recreation such as putt-putt, Top Golf, or laser tag; an indie-movie theater or drive-in movie theater; open mic night or a dueling-piano bar; adult sports leagues; and art classes. In the case of adult sports leagues and art classes, there may already be existing events and organizations for this, but the messaging is not reaching the young professionals market. This gap in activity-driven opportunities allows for great flexibility within private enterprises to tap into this market that feels otherwise overlooked.

### Price Point

The Findlay community is fortunate to have many employee-oriented, well-paying companies in town. When wages are healthy, the local economy is healthy as these employees have more money to spend on both wants and needs. However, it can be easy to forget that young professionals in entry-level jobs are not making as much money and have additional constraints such as student loan payments, first car/house payments, the purchase of furniture and other large expenses that come with moving out on their own, etc. Within Hancock County, more than 50% of households where the householder is 25 years of age or younger make less than \$60,000 annually; 40% of those households make less than \$40,000. Even when considering the households where the householder is between the ages of 25 to 44, 45% make less than \$60,000 and 20% make less than \$40,000. These individuals are going to have a harder time accessing entertainment opportunities that are more cost prohibitive. If entertainment venues and providers want to tap into the young professionals market, they may wish to consider their pricing structure. Generally, the task force members were comfortable spending up to \$30 on a casual entertainment opportunity such as candle-making, a regional concert, a restaurant crawl, or an art class – obviously there are situations in which that amount would be higher. Entertainment providers may want to consider having a tiered pricing structure for individuals under a certain age that would not place undue burden on their bottom line but could gain a loyal following.

As these young professionals progress professionally (and in their wages) over the years, the existing loyalty to that entertainment provider or opportunity would retain these individuals as they aged into the more expensive price brackets.

### Corporate & Community Buy-In

Some of the feedback in this section may be frustrating for entertainment providers and other community stakeholders who feel that they are providing these opportunities for young professionals but not seeing the attendance numbers they would hope for. To fix that, the attention should likely be shifted towards the messaging and distribution of these opportunities. For the young professionals in the Task Force that moved to Findlay from elsewhere, most of their information, at least initially, came from their employers. Because of this, corporate buy-in to the community's entertainment opportunities could be crucial. Corporate and community buy-in could include placing an informational community packet with Findlay's "Top Ten..." recommendations in job offer packets, providing Downtown Gift Certificates in the onboarding process, businesses sponsoring experiential activities to lower the price-points for young professionals, or something more extravagant such as downtown businesses coming together to create an "Activity Passport" for companies to purchase for employees. Putting these opportunities directly into the hands of our young professionals could play a significant role in raising awareness and creating repeat consumers of these activities.

### III. HOUSING

Housing has been a common theme throughout many of the other sections and a prime discussion point during the “Identifying the Problem” exercise. Earlier in this report, concerns regarding the availability, affordability, and location of housing in the Findlay community were discussed. This conversation centers around the preferences of young professionals regarding those aspects. The majority of task force members stated that they located their living accommodation off of Zillow or Apartments.com, though one individual did call the local Chamber of Commerce. There is an opportunity for better community onboarding through partnerships between employers and residential builders and landlords to help ensure that young professionals are finding quality housing where they will want to stay.

#### Location

The location of housing is significant for young professionals, who often seek housing options that are closer to downtown areas and other urban clusters. One compelling reason for this preference is the greater access to amenities that downtown living offers. Young professionals are often drawn to vibrant social scenes that downtown areas provide, with various bars, restaurants, and retail establishments in close proximity. The convenience of having these amenities within walking distance or a short commute often complements their more social lifestyle and saves time.

Additionally, living in downtown areas puts young professionals near others in their age group, facilitating a sense of community and making it easier to assimilate into their new home. Downtown neighborhoods often attract a diverse population of young individuals, creating opportunities for networking, socializing, and building relationships. The presence of like-minded peers fosters a sense of belonging that is crucial for the retention of these individuals. Engaging in shared experiences, attending local events, and participating in group activities become more accessible when living near others in a similar stage of life. This social connectivity not only enriches personal lives but also presents professional opportunities through networking and collaboration, leading towards retention of young professionals.

#### Layout

The layout of apartments and housing also plays a role in the preferences of young professionals. With a more social and active lifestyle, they often desire larger communal spaces such as living rooms. These areas allow individuals to host gatherings, invite friends over, and enjoy leisure activities. The emphasis on open floor plans was also expressed, as it creates a natural flow between different living spaces, allowing for easy interaction and conversation when hosting friends and family. Young professionals, often without the need for multiple bedrooms due to being unmarried and without children, prioritize the size and functionality of these shared areas as opposed to sleeping spaces.

In addition to well-planned communal areas, young professionals also value features that create an illusion of space and enhance the overall ambiance of their living environment. Tall ceilings and large windows that let in ample natural light are highly sought after. These architectural elements contribute to an open and airy feel, making a space appear larger without requiring additional square footage. Natural light also positively impacts mood and productivity. A well-lit and inviting living space can make a significant difference in young professionals’ overall well-being and enjoyment of their home.

## Balancing Price Point v. Amenities

Many new residential developments are seeing a plethora of new amenities such as community gyms, dog parks, coworking spaces, and more. However, the Task Force members did not convey a strong preference for amenities beyond laundry, parking, and pet-friendly units. In fact, the group was very willing to sacrifice the amenities that residential developers are trying to attract them with for a reasonable price and convenient downtown location. This would suggest that instead of having highly-amenitized housing for \$1,250+, property owners looking to capitalize on the young professionals demographic would be better off providing quality housing with few frills closer to the \$1,000 or below range. This preference may be in part due to the fact that young professionals would rather spend time outside of their residences enjoying the amenities of downtown and elsewhere than the amenities within their apartment building. The balance of price-point v. amenities will be different for every individual, but for this group, price-point was the more important factor.

## IV. RECREATION

Findlay is at a disadvantage when it comes to recreation – there are no mountains or lakes. Of course, there are many cities that don't have these features and they find a way to market other opportunities and add value through other types of recreation. For many people in Findlay, their primary place for recreation may be the YMCA or the Findlay Country Club. As they currently exist, neither were intriguing for individuals in the task force either due to their offerings, their messaging, their pricing, or the perceptions held. Instead, the task force desired other amenities to fill their need for recreation and physical health.

### Recreational Amenities

One area that received attention is an area that the City of Findlay and Hancock Park District already do well – walking paths. The task force expressed excitement about the extension of the bike/walking path out towards Riverbend Park and wished that there was a more cohesive and comprehensive walking path system throughout our community. Some of the residential neighborhoods in Findlay are cut off from these amenities by major thoroughfares with unsafe pedestrian crossings (i.e., Tiffin Ave.) or are too far removed from the existing trails and require individuals to drive to them. Walking paths are a great, accessible form of recreation that allow people with different abilities and exercise preferences to use them in a non-structured fashion.

Another recreational amenity that spurred discussion was an indoor recreation center. Not only would this asset facilitate recreation in the winter when weather may otherwise prevent it, it would also provide a safe space to exercise in the summer as we see hotter and hotter temperatures that are hazardous to individuals' health.

Finally, sport equipment and bike rentals could help facilitate physical recreation and the use of public parks. Many young professionals live in smaller apartments and don't have the space required for equipment storage. Instead, it would be more convenient to be able to rent equipment such as bikes or kayaks, or even smaller items such as badminton sets, bocce ball, croquet equipment and more. These rentals of smaller items could be a great way to see further activation within open spaces such as Emory Adams park. It is worth noting that Zonta Landing currently offers kayak rentals, but the limited hours of operation and lack of credit card capability have deterred task force members from utilizing the service.

### Recreational Leagues

There are church softball leagues, company ultimate frisbee leagues, and neighborhood pick-up basketball games but finding them can be a challenge. Through the grapevine, individuals often hear about these various adult recreational leagues that exist within the Findlay community but are unsure how to get involved. The task force expressed interest in these leagues such as soccer and sand volleyball if they knew how to find them and become involved. If an entity would take charge in consolidating these opportunities and facilitating participation in them, these leagues could be extremely influential in the retention of young professionals. It would create a platform for building friendships which are critical to an individual's happiness in their community.

While not quite a “league,” structured outdoor fitness classes could be another great way to further utilize our existing parks and promote health within the community. This could be accomplished through partnerships with local fitness organizations and could include yoga, Zumba, and cardio drumming. If one fitness organization didn’t want to undertake regular programming, it could become a series with a different group hosting the event each month during the summer. These types of public-private partnerships could add a lot of value to our existing recreational opportunities.

### **Downtown Recreation Area**

When shown the concepts for the City of Findlay’s proposed Downtown Recreation Area, the task force was willing to forget about all their other suggestions if they could just have that park. In many of the cities that young professionals are flocking to, there are parks and riverwalks along water features downtown. The Downtown Recreation Area would create a space that individuals felt safe and happy to pass time in and would create pride in an area that is otherwise an eyesore. It would also create a very favorable entrance into our downtown and facilitate connectivity with areas north of the Blanchard River. The Downtown Recreation Area would be transformational for Findlay and the task force expressed their overwhelming support for this development.



## V. INFRASTRUCTURE & SERVICES

Perhaps the least exciting thing someone can do is put a group of people in their 20s in a room and tell them to talk about infrastructure and services, but it's important, nonetheless. While not an extensive conversation, the main topics are summarized succinctly below.

### Transportation & Infrastructure

Similar to conversations had above regarding walking paths, the desire for more bike lanes was expressed. Suggested locations included Bright Road and Crystal Avenue, as well as some of the less-traversed roads to provide connectivity with the residential neighborhoods. The widening of sidewalks, placement of additional streetlights, and addition of more signaled crosswalks such as those on Main Street were also discussed both in downtown and residential neighborhoods. In general, most concerns regarding infrastructure had to do with increasing safety for various modes of non-motorized traffic such as walking and biking. The addition of better lighting and opening of spaces is particularly relevant for young women who want to be in areas with high visibility, sightlines to main roads and areas that safety services and bystanders would be on, and enough physical space to eliminate the possibility of being cornered.

The lack of rideshare options or other forms of public transportation was also a recurring topic of discussion amongst many of the meetings but was particularly relevant here. Because there are few to no Uber or Lyft drivers operating within the Findlay community, young professionals who do not live downtown are less likely to go out with friends after work or on the weekends and partake in refreshments because there is not a way for them to safely get home. If they don't have a way to safely enjoy these downtown amenities, they will stay at their residence which could become isolating and cause unhappiness with the community. Since Uber and Lyft are private enterprises and thus difficult for government or nonprofit partners to facilitate, another option would be shuttle buses or some other form of transportation. This transportation would not have to run every day or with extensive routes. A Thursday through Saturday schedule with main lines running up and down Main Street and out major thoroughfares such as Tiffin and Trenton Avenues would be helpful in transporting individuals. It would also create more connectivity with the University of Findlay.

### Other Services

The task force also discussed gaps in other services that they seek out that would not be under the control of governmental agencies. Much of this comes down to personal preference and some people may be quite happy with the services they can access in Findlay. However, for the task force, people leave town for the following services: healthcare specialists, professional services (i.e., insurance agents, tax preparers, etc.), pet grooming, photography and other art specialties, car sales, and tattoos and piercings. These services represent dollars that are not being captured by the local economy and are requiring individuals to go out of their way to access them.

## VI. REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

Findlay stands in a unique regional location due to its proximity to several major urban areas. With Toledo, Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Detroit, and Pittsburgh all within a four-hour drive, Findlay possesses a valuable asset that can be leveraged to attract and retain young professionals. This is particularly significant because young professionals highly value the diversity and experiences found in urban environments. The Task Force indicated that while they enjoy the small-town feel of living in Findlay, they also appreciate the opportunity to visit bigger cities on weekends. A 2 to 3-hour drive was generally agreed to be reasonable for a weekend trip, although longer distances would likely require taking a day off work. Additionally, they expressed a greater likelihood of visiting the big cities during the summer, often up to twice a month.

To fully tap into the advantages of regional connectivity, organizations could play a role in facilitating transportation between Findlay and regional cities such as Toledo. While not a full-time service, periodic transportation arrangements, even as infrequent as once a month, would enhance the accessibility of urban experiences. By providing this transportation option, organizations can strengthen the connectivity between Findlay and the larger urban centers, making it more convenient for young professionals to plan day trips or weekend getaways. This initiative would demonstrate a commitment to supporting the work-life balance and leisure preferences of young professionals, ultimately contributing to their overall satisfaction and retention in the community.

In marketing the Findlay community to young professionals, employers should emphasize the regional connectivity that the town offers. Highlighting the diverse range of experiences available within a short drive can greatly enhance the appeal of living and working in Findlay. By promoting this regional connectivity and providing suggestions on what opportunities to take advantage of in these larger cities, employers can effectively market the Findlay community to young professionals, showcasing the best of both worlds: the low cost of living in Findlay and the option to visit larger urban areas when desired. By understanding and catering to these preferences, Findlay can effectively attract and retain young professionals. The regional connectivity is a key selling point that distinguishes Findlay from other locations and could position it as an appealing choice if marketed effectively.

## VII. COMMUNITY & OFFICE CULTURE

Findlay prides itself on its small-town culture and history – which can be a great asset. However, it can also lead to stagnation and prevent growth. This type of traditional thinking can also be found in some workplaces. The community and employers must find a way to achieve progress in this area while also maintaining the positive aspects of our culture that people enjoy.

### Office Culture

As employment preferences have changed across generations, and particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an increased expectation that employers leave behind more antiquated viewpoints and embrace flexibility in the workplace. Examples of the flexibility desired by young professionals include hybrid work environments, dress-for-your-day attire policies, summer hours, and the ability to leave work for medical or other appointments without having to take ½ a day of paid time off. It is worth noting that certain types of flexibility are more difficult to achieve in certain positions than others. For example, manufacturing line workers can't complete their tasks from home. However, employers could find other creative ways to allow for flexibility in those positions. Employers are also in a unique position to create a sense of community, especially for those individuals that moved to Findlay for their job. This would be particularly impactful if these efforts are led by mid- to upper management. By creating a sense of community around the workplace, individuals' job satisfaction is likely to be higher and they are less likely to feel out-of-place in the community, thus boosting retention rates.

### Community Culture

Findlay can feel unwelcoming to young professionals as well as non-Findlay natives in general due to community culture and perceptions. One example of this is the politically charged sidewalk banners placed on City-owned light poles in the commercial core. It can seem as if the City and entire community is endorsing polarizing viewpoints, thus creating a negative first impression when people visit or move to town. Another example that is also tied to office culture is “forced”, whether through incentives or peer-pressure, charitable donations to a company-designated cause. An individual may disagree with a certain charity's mission or would simply prefer to donate to a cause closer to their heart, but still feel obligated to give so that they can wear jeans to work or have extra days off. This does not create a culture where diverse ideas and values feel welcome. Centers of human capital and emerging talent are congregating in urban areas that have diversity and that embrace differing cultures, identities, ideas, and backgrounds. Findlay has wonderful opportunities to do this, such as celebrating our unique Japanese culture or our emerging migrant workforces. To create a welcoming community culture that young professionals want to be in, we should be willing to listen to others and learn new things from people different than us. Education, acceptance, and empathy are paramount.

General positivity will also breed a community of joy and contentment. Findlay, like many communities, has a small but loud collection of individuals who do not promote positive mindsets. This negativity is obvious on social media, in local newspapers, and in public meetings. Individuals considering moving to the community are discouraged from doing so when they discover this negativity on public platforms. The reluctance to change and progress has to stop if we want our community to be seen as a positive environment to live and work.

# CONCLUSION

For the past year, the A.F.T.E.R. Hours Task Force has eagerly worked to challenge the status quo of our community in order to energize, modernize, and diversify the Findlay-Hancock area in a way that boosts the attraction and retention of young professionals. It is our hope that the enclosed ideas and suggestions will be met with enthusiasm by employers, local businesses, and other economic stakeholders with the influence to enact change and create a community we are all proud to call home.

If you are interested in discussing these ideas more or have questions or suggestions, please reach out to Sarah Perrigo at [sperrigo@findlayecondev.com](mailto:sperrigo@findlayecondev.com). Thank you for your investment in the Findlay-Hancock County community.

