

**COLUMBIA CITY/WHITLEY COUNTY
JOINT PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT**



**ANNUAL REPORT
2023**

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

This is the Annual Report of the:

Columbia City/Whitley County Joint Planning and Building Department
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Cover image:

The multi-jurisdictional training session held in July included a field trip to the Whitley County Sheriff Office and Detention Center construction site. In this photo, Project Manager Colton Derickson discusses construction details with the attendees.

Photos by Department staff unless noted

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Department Information	3
<i>Staff</i>	
<i>History and Purpose</i>	
<i>Joint Advisory Board</i>	
<i>Accomplishments of 2023</i>	
<i>On-going Projects</i>	
County-Wide Statistics	7
<i>Summary of Department Statistics</i>	
<i>Population</i>	
<i>School Enrollment</i>	
<i>Unemployment</i>	
Planning and Zoning Activities	11
<i>Churubusco</i>	
<i>Columbia City</i>	
<i>South Whitley</i>	
<i>Whitley County</i>	
Construction Activity	15
<i>Map of Residential Permits</i>	
<i>Map of Commercial Permits</i>	
<i>Churubusco</i>	
<i>Columbia City</i>	
<i>South Whitley</i>	
<i>Whitley County</i>	
Revenues and Expenditures	21
<i>Fees Collected</i>	
<i>Operating Expenses</i>	
<i>Fee Revenues vs. Expenses</i>	
Recommendations for 2024	24
Appendices	27
<i>Appendix A: County-wide Construction Activity Comparison</i>	
<i>Appendix B: Yearly Comparisons</i>	

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

After three years in a row of record-breaking numbers of permits, a break came in 2023, with only 889 permits being issued, compared to 927 in 2022. However, it was still the third-highest total permit number since 2008. The permits came in a steady stream throughout the year, with at least 50 permits issued each month (which *was* a record), which leveled out some of the high summer peaks seen since 2020.

Notably, the total construction value of projects in 2023 exceeded \$113 million, largely driven by a handful of high-value projects. The detention center (jail) by itself was 30% of total value, and seven new industrial projects contributed 15% to the total value. This was the highest total value of construction since 2017, when permits for the new high school and an SDI expansion were issued.

Even with the high total number of permits and value, the number of new single-family dwellings again fell for the second year. This was particularly true in the County, where the new home starts were 30% lower than in 2022. Columbia City had a slight increase in homes, although it was still lower than the other years since 2015. These decreases may reflect rising interest rates, among other causes.

Planning and development were quite active as well, with some 117 Plan Commission and BZA petitions filed. Once again this was the highest number of petitions filed since 2004. Among those cases were revisions to the County's solar regulations following a public response to the first proposed utility-scale solar facility, and continued work on the City's proposed Extraterritorial Jurisdiction expansion.

A notable success for the year was the regularly scheduled training sessions for Plan Commission and BZA members from all four jurisdictions. Three "Fifth Monday" sessions were held on a range of topics, with good participation at each one. Feedback on the topics was positive, but strengthening the relationships between communities was perhaps the bigger achievement. Sessions are again scheduled in 2024.

There are questions about what 2024 may bring, with interest rates, unemployment, school enrollment, and many other factors in states of flux. However, I am confident this Department will be ready to take on anything that comes up.

-Nathan Bilger, AICP, Executive Director



The July Fifth Monday training topic was site and building plan review. The session ended with a tour of the jail construction site.

DEPARTMENT INFORMATION

STAFF

Executive Director	Nathan Bilger, AICP
<i>Oversees department operations, administration, and planning activities for all jurisdictions</i>	
Chief Building Inspector	Craig W. Wagner, CBI
<i>Conducts building and code inspections, plan reviews, and unsafe building determinations</i>	
Planner/Office Manager	Amanda Thompson
<i>Responsible for three jurisdictions and administers office functions</i>	
Planner	Brent Bockelman
<i>Administers one jurisdiction and redevelopment commission activities</i>	
Building Inspector	Ernest Little
<i>Conducts building and code inspections</i>	
Planning & Permitting Technician	Michelle Sturtevant <i>through July</i>
<i>Processes permits and handles administrative procedures</i>	
	Tom Behm <i>starting in October</i>
Administrative Assistant (part-time)	Tricia Kilgore <i>starting in March</i>
<i>Provides customer service and assists daily operations</i>	
Building Inspector (part-time)	Daniel Bishop, CBI
<i>Performs building inspections as needed</i>	

The Joint Planning and Building Department’s eight-member staff is comprised of the positions shown above. Collectively, the staff has several decades of experience in land use, community development, and construction practice.

Continuing education, training, and certifications are essential for maintaining the stature of the Department with new and upcoming trends and changes. Notably, Craig Wagner is a Certified Building Inspector who has served as an Indiana Association of Building Officials officer and a code instructor. The other building inspectors are also certified or are working to be so. Nathan Bilger is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Other staff members take part in training throughout the year, through both formal opportunities and internal practices.



The department staff as of December.
From left: Ernie Little, Tom Behm, Tricia Kilgore, Dan Bishop, Brent Bockelman, Amanda Thompson, Craig Wagner, and Nathan Bilger

HISTORY AND PURPOSE

Columbia City established its first Plan Commission in 1947 and adopted its first zoning code and master plan in 1955. Whitley County created its first Plan Commission in 1965, with the first Comprehensive Plan

DEPARTMENT INFORMATION

being approved in 1969, and a zoning ordinance following in 1972. To benefit from not employing its own planning staff, the Town of Churubusco contracted with the County for planning services in the late 1960s.

In 1987, the Joint Planning and Building Department was created, combining the staff and offices of the Columbia City and Whitley County Plan Commissions, but still retaining separate Commissions, plans, and ordinances. In 2002, the Joint Department contracted with South Whitley for administration of their codes, thus making the Department the authority for planning and building throughout all of Whitley County.

The Joint Department also started to provide staff to the Whitley County and South Whitley Redevelopment Commissions in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Thus, the Department can be involved from a business or developer's initial inquiries and concept design, through the land entitlement process and building construction, all the way to their opening to the public.

Current responsibilities of the office, having planning/zoning/building jurisdiction over the City of Columbia City, unincorporated County, and the Towns of Churubusco, Larwill, and South Whitley, are:

- review all rezoning, special exception, variance, and subdivision applications that are filed - prepare staff reports, attend board and commission meetings to provide advice and recommendations
- prepare amendments to codes and ordinances to maintain compliance with state law, to expedite review of development proposals, and to improve the quality of life in the county
- review and issue building permits, schedule and complete inspections, prepare violation notices, complete re-inspections
- conduct unsafe building inspections, file orders, and enforce through the courts
- review development plan applications for all new commercial and industrial projects
- provide administrative support to the Whitley County and South Whitley Redevelopment Commissions
- assist Whitley County Economic Development on economic development activities
- administer the floodplain management program for the County and municipalities
- maintain files of all building permits, petitions, meeting minutes, and other Department records
- assist citizens, developers, attorneys, realtors on planning/zoning/building/development matters

JOINT ADVISORY BOARD

In creating the Joint Planning and Building Department in 1987, a Joint Budgetary Board was established to oversee the Department's budget and its activities. Since that time, the Board was renamed the Joint Advisory Board, but it continues as the managing body for the Department. The Board is made of seven members representing Columbia City and Whitley County. In 2023, the members were:

Nick Brewer, Vice chair	County Council
Ryan Daniel	Mayor
Thor Hodges	County Council
Kim Kurtz-Seslar	County Plan Commission
Don Langeloh, Chair	City Plan Commission
Jenny Middleton	City Council
Rob Schuman	County Commissioner

By ordinance, the Joint Advisory Board must meet at least twice per year: first to review the annual report and later to review the proposed budget. In 2023, the Board met on March 7th and May 8th.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF 2023

In addition to the accomplishments of the Commissions and Boards listed elsewhere herein, some of the notable achievements of the Department in the year included:

- Accepted the first commercial-scale solar facility rezoning petition under the County zoning code provisions adopted in 2022
- Worked with the County Plan Commission and County Commissioners to draft revisions to the solar energy collection systems ordinance, which were adopted in June
- Facilitated revisions to the Columbia City Plan Commission's proposed expansion of their Extraterritorial Jurisdiction, including holding a joint workshop with the County Plan Commission
- Conducted three "Fifth Monday" training sessions for plan commissions and BZA officials. Topics included planning and zoning basics, development and site plans, and findings of fact.
- Worked with the Town of Larwill to demolish an unsafe barn and to initiate significant repairs of a dwelling
- Prepared and presented a concept plan for a potential South Whitley housing TIF to a prospective builder/developer
- Held Development Plan meetings for commercial projects in Columbia City and the County
- Pursued enforcement of the Churubusco zoning code for a noncompliant dog breeding operation, culminating in its closure
- Met with INDOT officials and consultants as part of their ongoing *ProPEL 30* study on US 30 improvements
- Worked in conjunction with Columbia City Connect and the Whitley County Historical Museum to promote interest in historic downtown Columbia City
- In October, Nathan Bilger was a panelist discussing the Whitley County Comprehensive Plan at the Indiana Chapter of the American Planning Association conference
- Brent Bockelman, Amanda Thompson, and Nathan Bilger were invited to lead a class at Eagle Tech Academy in November, introducing students to the functions of zoning and building codes
- Reviewed permitting processes for efficiency and training, and reviewed and modified internal controls procedures to reduce errors and security gaps



A member of the public speaks about solar facilities during the County Plan Commission meeting in March. There were about 200 attendees in the Columbia City High School Performing Arts Center.

DEPARTMENT INFORMATION

- Craig Wagner served the Indiana Association of Building Officials (IABO) as chair of the bylaws and nominations committees
- Dan Bishop and Craig Wagner attended the annual IABO conference in October
- The building inspectors also attended three other code classes through the year
- The office staff participated in webinars on floodplain and sign regulations
- Hosted ten IABO District 4 monthly meetings/training classes, including a joint meeting and breakfast with the Northeast Indiana Planning Excellence Coalition in December.



The Department hosted a breakfast and meeting for the IABO and PEC in December. PEC members in this view include representatives from Huntington, Angola, New Haven, Fort Wayne/Allen County, and Wells County.

ON-GOING PROJECTS

Additionally, some projects, whether by their scale or longevity, are on-going efforts that span multiple years. Currently, these include:

- Actively participation in the Northeast Indiana Planning Excellence Coalition, formerly known as the Permitting Excellence Coalition, which has been an on-going endeavor since 2013.
- Assistance in implementation and tracking of Comprehensive Plan recommendations and goals for each jurisdiction
- Assisting in downtown improvement, historic preservation, and revitalization efforts for each municipality
- Continuing training of staff in current codes, best practices, and new trends and technologies
- Close coordination with county and municipal departments and utilities on proposed projects and plans
- Collaboration with other departments in the Parcel Committee to collectively review proposed property changes throughout the County for code compliance and acceptability
- Annual review of procedures, fees, and business operations
- Cooperation with the Whitley County Economic Development Corporation in business attraction and retention
- Membership on the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) to assist emergency response planning for the county
- Providing administrative support and topical expertise for the Whitley County and South Whitley Redevelopment Commissions
- Participating in U.S. 30 planning efforts with Columbia City, County, and INDOT officials

COUNTY-WIDE STATISTICS

SUMMARY OF DEPARTMENT STATISTICS

Building permits issued	759	New single-family permits	71
Inspections completed	3,311	New commercial building permits	14
Building department vehicle mileage	39,630	Demolition permits	10
Unsafe building violation notices	21	Unsafe building orders	4
Improvement location permits issued	566	Mobile home renewals	0
Pond permits issued	8	Permit/code violation notices	11
Plan Commission applications	44	BZA applications	73
Planning meetings held	51	Redevelopment Commission meetings	19
Total revenues collected	\$ 216,854.68	Total operating expenses	\$ 374,388.18

POPULATION

The population for Whitley County was estimated by the U.S. Census as 34,627 as of July 1, 2022, the most recent estimate available, a growth of 4.0% above the 2010 Census count and 1.3% since 2020. Over the past three years, only Columbia City and unincorporated County have grown, with the other municipalities having virtually no growth.

Due to the methodology used by the U.S. Census Bureau, each annual estimate also revises the preceding years, so comparisons can only be made when looking at the series in one estimate. In other words, these numbers do not match those in past reports. Because of this, the 2013-2019 estimates shown in the table below are based on 2010 and cannot be compared to the 2020-based later estimates. However, they are still useful for seeing general growth patterns (or the lack of growth).

POPULATION GROWTH ESTIMATES

	April 1 Censuses		July 1 Population Estimates*										Percent Change
	2010	2020	2013*	2014*	2015*	2016*	2017*	2018*	2019*	2020	2021	2022	'20-22
Whitley Co.	33,292	34,191	33,357	33,336	33,287	33,449	33,451	33,479	33,732	34,338	34,492	34,627	1.3%
Columbia City	8,750	9,901	8,865	8,864	8,842	8,884	8,911	8,917	9,069	9,949	9,998	10,086	1.9%
Churubusco	1,796	1,867	1,863	1,860	1,850	1,852	1,857	1,871	1,878	1,875	1,872	1,869	0.1%
South Whitley	1,751	1,818	1,774	1,768	1,762	1,759	1,749	1,746	1,743	1,822	1,818	1,818	0.0%
Larwill**	283	271	285	282	283	285	284	285	285	272	272	273	0.7%

* The 2012-19 estimates are shown for general reference only and will not align with the 2020 and later estimates

** Larwill is an incorporated town and so is included here for reference. Because the Town lacks its own Plan Commission, it is contained in County figures elsewhere in this report.

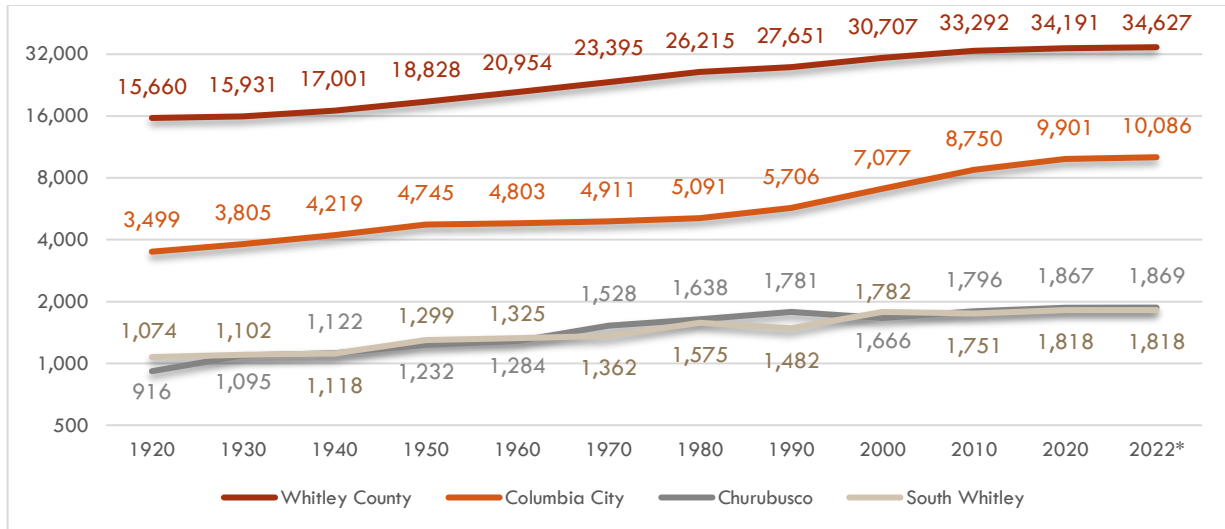
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

As discussed in prior reports, the population growth rates in the 2010s, and now the 2020s, are lower than those in each decade of the preceding century. From 1930 to 2010, the County had fairly steady population growth of around 10% per decade. Columbia City had a period of substantial growth from the late 1980s up to 2010, growing by some 50%. The towns of South Whitley and Churubusco have not had any periods of major increases over the past 25 years, although both have had decades that exceeded 10% growth.

COUNTY-WIDE STATISTICS

Columbia City did have a large uptick in population over the last three years of the 2010s, countering the stagnation of the first six years, although it was still the community's slowest growth since the 1970s. The City's growth in the first years of the 2020s may put it on track for around a 10% increase by 2030.

POPULATION GROWTH SINCE 1920



* July 1 estimate

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

As stated in previous reports, the overall growth for all of Whitley County for the 2010-2019 decade was 2.7%, making it the slowest decade since 1920-30 (1.7%). However, the 1.3% increase between 2020 and 2022, if simply extrapolated, would be about a 6% increase by 2030. If the lagging populations in the three towns could be countered, it may be possible to see a 10% or higher growth for the County as a whole.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

School enrollment is a key factor to consider in planning as it can be another indicator of the long-term vitality of our communities.



There were five two-family dwellings permitted in 2023; this one was in Columbia City. More two-family homes could further increase housing options, which in turn could attract more diverse populations.

Two of the three public school corporations in Whitley County have faced falling enrollment since at least the 2005/06 school year. At the beginning of the 2023/24 school year, Whitko Community Schools and Smith-Green Community Schools were at 60.3% and 83% of their 2005 enrollments, respectively. Meanwhile, Whitley County Consolidated Schools has been on a statistical plateau, with annual enrollments

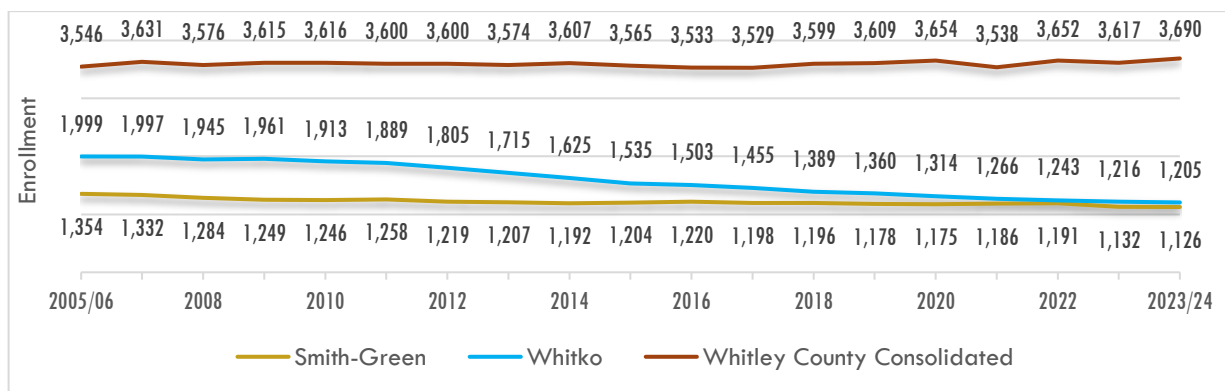
COUNTY-WIDE STATISTICS

consistently staying around 3,600 students with a few deviations. Even since the opening of the new high school in 2020, there does not seem to have been an influx of students. However, an upward trend may now be developing, and adjustments are being made at the high school to accommodate more students.

Looking at just the more recent past, since 2014 the enrollment for Smith-Green has slowly fallen from 1,200 to 1,100 students. Whitko's numbers fell by more than 34% since 2014, but the annual loss from 2022/23 was only 0.9%, likely owing to the popularity of the Career Academy.

Whitley County's only independent alternative school, TROY Center, had a continual increase in enrollment from 13 students in 2012 to a peak of 46 in 2019/20. Since then, the number of students has varied from 32 to 39 to 33 to 36 for the 2023/24 school year. This school's emphasis on specialized, individual-focused learning and vocational training shows the importance that our community places on diversification of education for all students.

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT SINCE 2006



Source: Indiana Department of Education

As has been mentioned in previous reports, it will be important for the communities and school corporations in the County to cooperate in finding ways to offset the decrease in students or otherwise stabilize the education systems. Planning longer-term, comprehensive solutions would be an ideal goal for all involved.

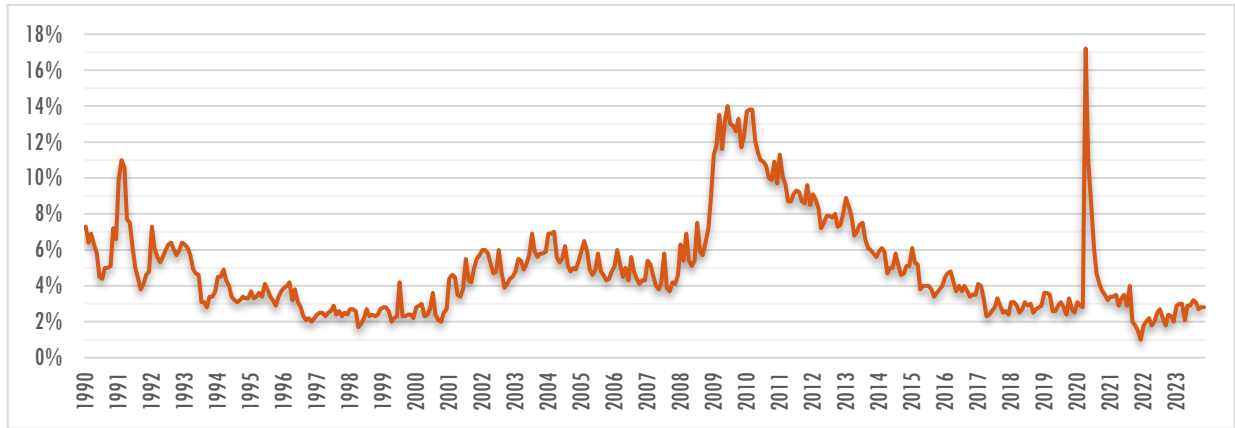
UNEMPLOYMENT

The unemployment rate is an important statistic for the Department and communities to utilize in planning efforts. In November 2023, the most recent data available, the County unemployment rate stood at a seasonally unadjusted 2.8%.

Throughout the year, the rate fluctuated between 2.0 and 3.2%, up considerably from the 1.0% seen in December 2021. Generally, employment in the year was similar to the three or so years preceding 2020, and the same concerns about low unemployment still apply. As stated in previous years, extended low unemployment below 3% can have drastic effects on the attractiveness of the community for new businesses to locate here and may deter expansions of existing businesses. However, the ready availability of jobs can be an attraction for new residents—but only if there are available places to live here.

COUNTY-WIDE STATISTICS

WHITLEY COUNTY UNEMPLOYMENT RATE SINCE 1990



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, through November 2023

Rather than directly courting new businesses or residents, improving the “quality of life” for current residents and working to address the needs of existing businesses may be the highest priorities in planning for the future. The concept of “quality of life” has been a constant refrain over the past decade or more, but it is becoming even more important as other means of differentiating our community from others are becoming less effective. Instead of it being a matter of working to make people happy to *come* here, the goal will be working to make people happy to *stay* here.



The first building in a new business park along 100 South was nearing completion in this photo from early December. This was a shell building, with the interior to be finished for the end user. (Photo by Rogers Markets, Inc.)

PLANNING AND ZONING ACTIVITIES

PLANNING AND ZONING ACTIVITIES

CHURUBUSCO

PETITIONS CONSIDERED

Rezoning	0	Subdivision plat	0	Variance	4
Zoning text amendment	0	Subdivision replat	1	Appeal	0
Development plan	0	Special exception	1	Other	1

PLAN COMMISSION

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Wayne Krider	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2024
Vivian Sade	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2026
Brenda Saggars, Vice president	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2026
Pat Stanford	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2026
Brandon Johnson	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2025
Ashley Wagner	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2024
Devin Keener	Official	Town Council	Elected official
Mark Pepple	Official	Town Council	Elected official
Madalyn Sade-Bartl, President	Official	Town Council	Elected official

Summary of Plan Commission actions

The Churubusco Plan Commission held 1 meeting in 2023, in which the Commission considered a Declaratory Resolution for a housing TIF district. Additionally, a replat request was scheduled for December, but it was continued to 2024 due to lack of a quorum.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Jason Bartl, Chair	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2024
Alan Malcolm	Citizen	Town Council	1/1/2027
Miles Wilson	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2027
Brandon Johnson (began Oct.)	PC-ETJ	Plan Commission	Biennial appointment
Ashley Wagner (through Sept.)	PC-ETJ	Plan Commission	Biennial appointment
Brenda Saggars, Vice chair	PC	Council President	1/1/2024

Summary of BZA actions

The Churubusco Board of Zoning Appeals held 4 meetings in 2023 and considered cases for an accessory garage use, a dog breeding operation, and variances of setbacks and minimum floor area.

PLANNING AND ZONING ACTIVITIES

COLUMBIA CITY

PETITIONS CONSIDERED

Rezoning	3	Subdivision plat	3	Variance	8
Zoning text amendment	0	Subdivision replat	2	Appeal	0
Development plan	7	Special exception	6	Other	0

PLAN COMMISSION

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Don Langeloh	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2027
Dennis Warnick	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2024
Larry Weiss, President	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2025
Patrick Zickgraf, Vice president	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2026
Jon Kissinger	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2025
Nicki Venable	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2027
Walt Crowder	Official	City Council	Elected official
Chip Hill	Official	City Council	Employee
Dan Weigold	Official	City Council	Elected official

Summary of Plan Commission actions

The Columbia City Plan Commission held 9 meetings and a workshop in 2023. The Commission considered development plans for Mission 25, the Whitley County detention center, Indiana Car Wash Holdings, and others; four minor plats/replats; one major subdivision plat; and three rezonings. Additionally, they continued work on a proposed Extraterritorial Jurisdiction expansion and a parking code amendment.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Cathy Gardner	Citizen	City Council	1/1/2027
Stacey Dumbacher	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2025
Anthony Romano, Vice chair	Citizen	Mayor	1/1/2026
Jon Kissinger, Chair	PC-ETJ	Plan Commission	Annual appointment
Dennis Warnick	PC	Mayor	1/1/2025

Summary of BZA actions

The Columbia City Board of Zoning Appeals held 8 meetings in 2023. The Board considered variances for signs, setbacks, and lot coverage; and special exceptions for two apartment sites, three outdoor storage requests, and a recovery residence.

PLANNING AND ZONING ACTIVITIES

SOUTH WHITLEY

PETITIONS CONSIDERED

Rezoning	0	Subdivision plat	1	Variance	2
Zoning text amendment	0	Subdivision replat	0	Appeal	0
Development plan	0	Special exception	0	Other	0

PLAN COMMISSION

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Braylynn Anderson	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2026
Wendy Bills, President	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2025
Ian Pherigo	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2027
Anna Simmons	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2027
Sherri Ayres	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2027
Timothy Gable	ETJ	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2024
Randy Cokl	Official	Town Council	Elected official
Jenna Reiff	Official	Town Council	Employee
Brock Waterson, Vice president	Official	Town Council	Elected official

Summary of Plan Commission actions

The South Whitley Plan Commission held 1 meeting in 2023. The Commission considered a minor subdivision plat.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Frank Baldridge, Chair	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2027
Rod Hardesty	Citizen	Council President	1/1/2025
Doug Morrissey	Citizen	Town Council	1/1/2027
Sherri Ayres	PC-ETJ	Plan Commission	Annual appointment
Anna Simmons, Vice chair	PC	Council President	1/1/2024

Summary of BZA actions

The South Whitley Board of Zoning Appeals held 2 meetings in 2023. The Board considered variances for an electronic message center sign and of a side setback.

PLANNING AND ZONING ACTIVITIES

WHITLEY COUNTY

PETITIONS CONSIDERED

Rezoning	2	Subdivision plat	13	Variance	27
Zoning text amendment	4	Subdivision replat	5	Appeal	0
Development plan	2	Special exception	25	Other	0

PLAN COMMISSION

Membership

	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>
Travis Baker	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2025
Jack Green	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2025
Mark Johnson, President	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2026
Kim Kurtz-Seslar	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2026
Troy Joe Wolf, Secretary	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2026
Dane Drew	County Surveyor		Duration of Office
Thor Hodges	County Council member		Annual appointment
Rob Schuman	County Commissioner member		Annual appointment
Brent Emerick, Vice president	Co. Ag. Ed. Representative		Annual appointment
John Woodmansee, nonvoting	County Agricultural Educator		Duration of Office

Summary of Plan Commission actions

The Whitley County Plan Commission held 11 meetings in 2023. The Commission considered 13 primary plats and five replats; made a recommendation on one rezoning request, with a second rezoning being withdrawn; adopted a moratorium on solar facilities; drafted revised regulations for solar energy collection systems; and forwarded miscellaneous code changes to the Commissioners.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS

Membership

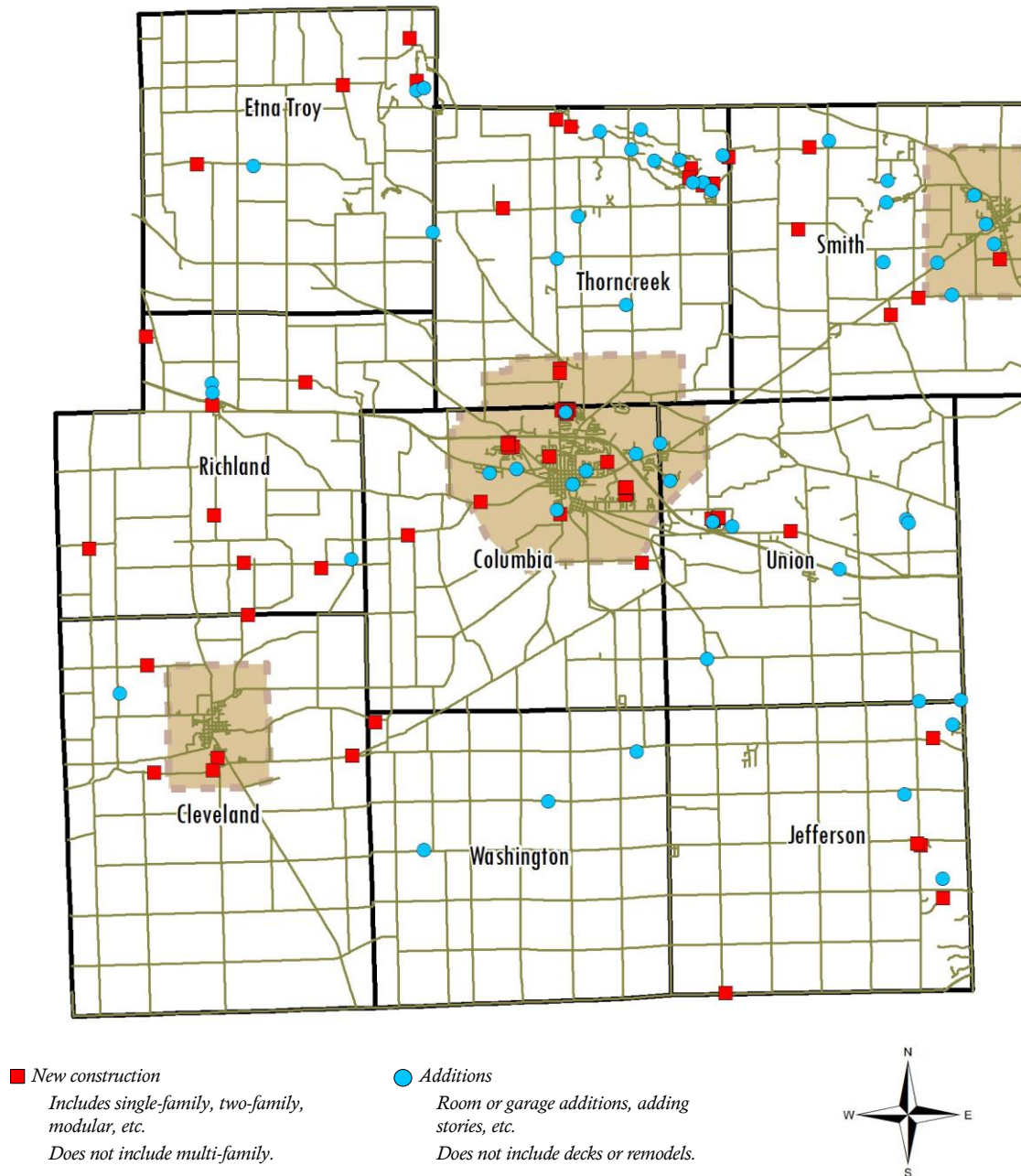
	<u>Seat</u>	<u>Appointing Body</u>	<u>Term Expiration</u>	<u>Alternate</u>
Kelley Sheiss	Citizen	Co. Council	1/1/2027	
Danny Wilkinson, Chair	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2027	
Doug Wright, Vice chair	Citizen	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2027	
Troy Joe Wolf	PC	Co. Commissioners	1/1/2024	
Jack Green	PC	Plan Commission	Annual appointment	

Summary of BZA actions

The County Board of Zoning Appeals held 12 meetings in 2023. Among the cases the Board considered were variances for setbacks, minimum floor area, and an EMC; special exceptions for a slaughterhouse, storage warehouse, secondary dwelling units, machine shops, and home occupations.

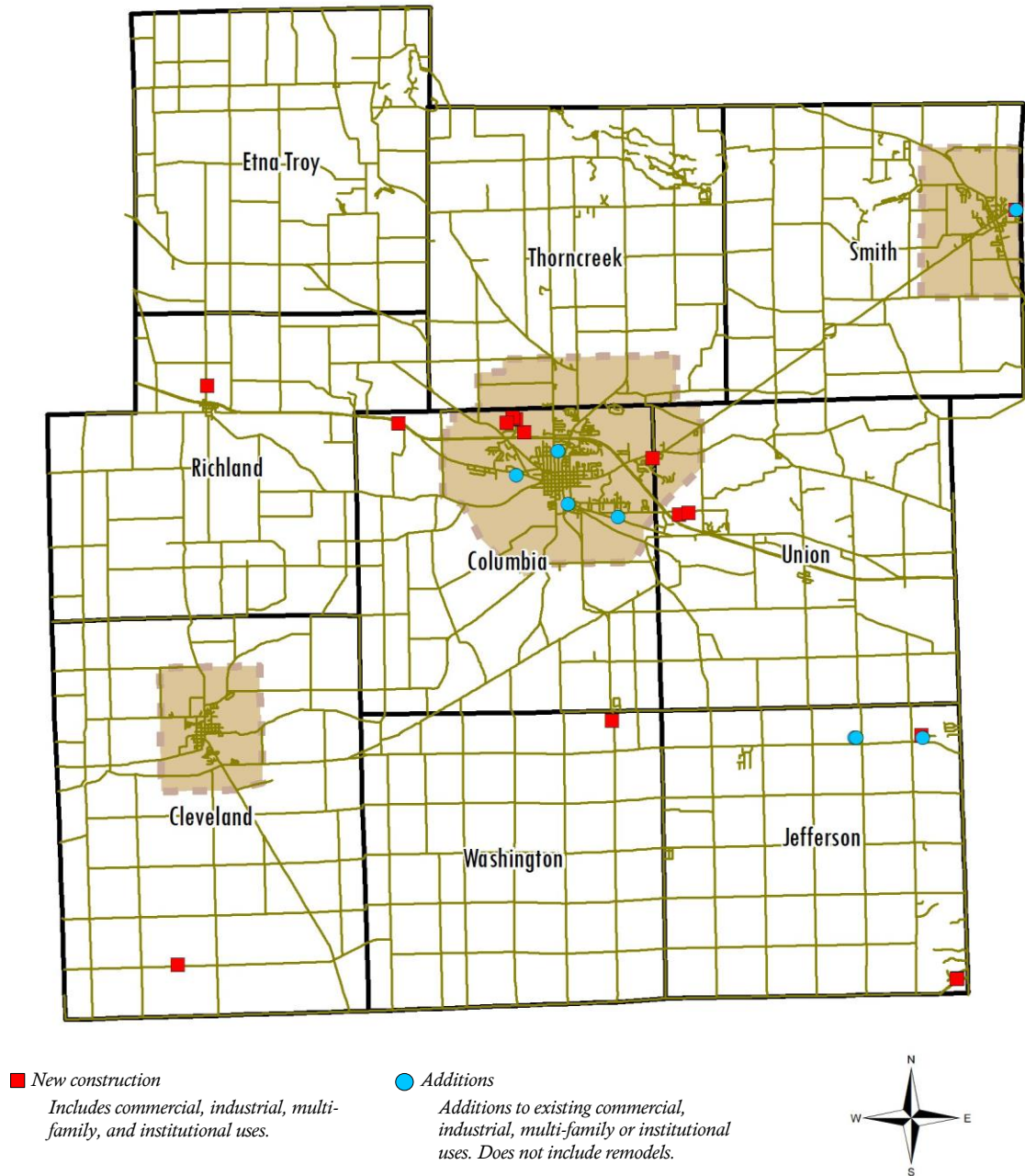
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

MAP OF RESIDENTIAL PERMITS



CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

MAP OF COMMERCIAL PERMITS



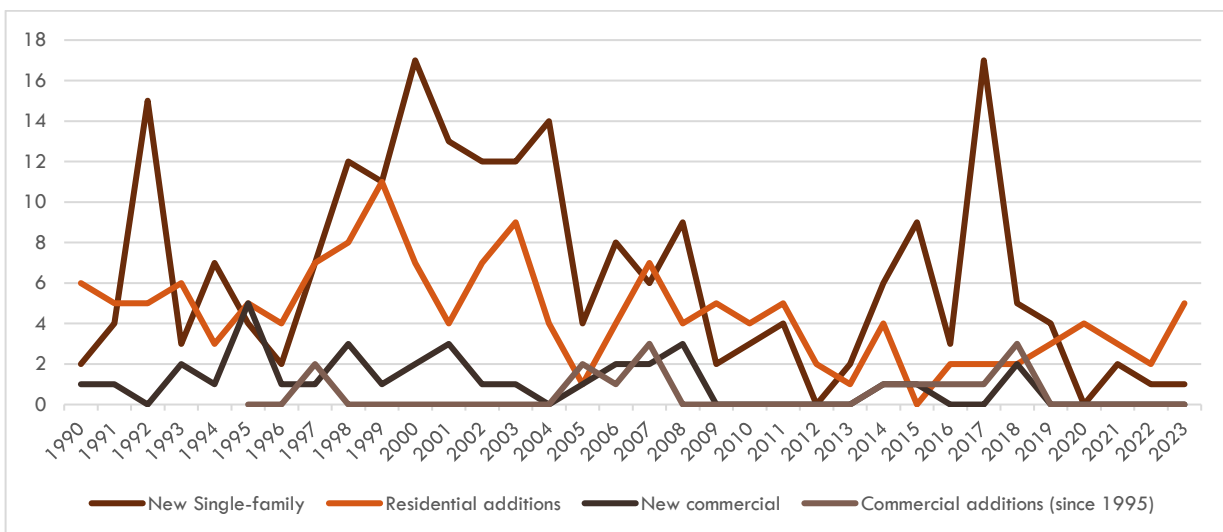
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

CHURUBUSCO

2023 BUILDING PERMITS

Type of Permit	Number of Permits	Est. Value of Construction
Single-family/Two-family dwellings	1	\$ 350,000
Multi-family dwellings	0	-
Manufactured/mobile homes	1	20,400
Residential additions	5	558,000
Residential accessory buildings	8	148,398
Agricultural buildings	0	-
Commercial/industrial	0	-
Commercial/industrial additions	0	-
Institutional	1	155,000
Institutional additions	1	255,000
Miscellaneous/remodels/ILP/other	41	483,373
TOTAL	58	\$ 1,970,171

PERMITS ISSUED SINCE 1990



HIGHEST CONSTRUCTION VALUES

Project	Construction Value	Project	Construction Value
Single-family residence	\$ 350,000	Wastewater treatment plant addition	\$ 255,000
Residential addition	280,000	Residential addition	168,000

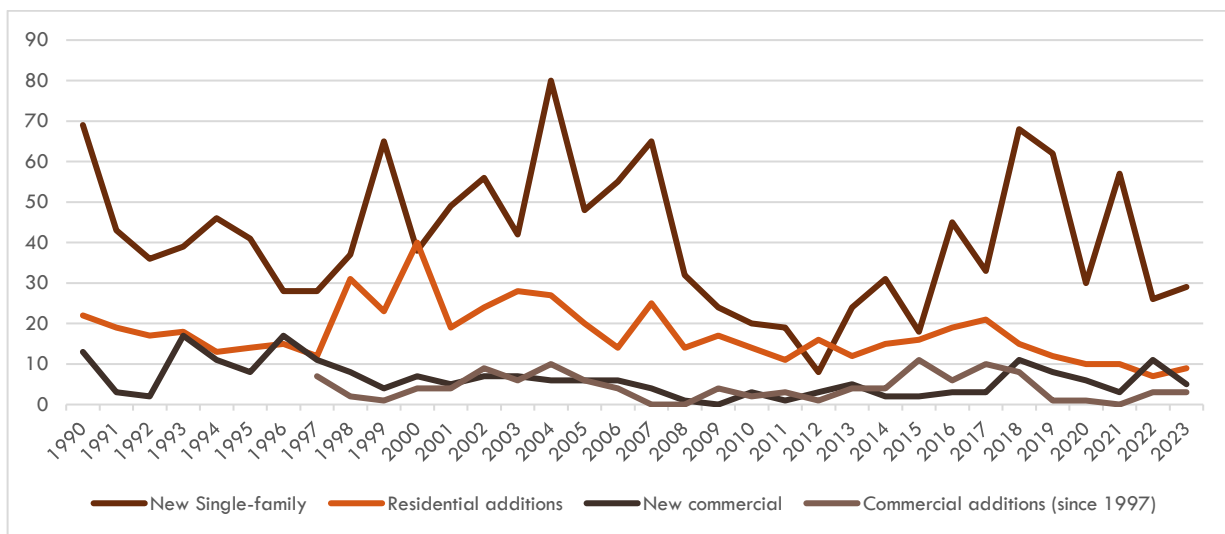
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

COLUMBIA CITY

2023 BUILDING PERMITS

Type of Permit	Number of Permits	Est. Value of Construction
Single-family/Two-family dwellings	30	\$ 10,392,364
Multi-family dwellings	0	-
Manufactured/mobile homes	1	3,000
Residential additions	9	254,760
Residential accessory buildings	33	709,925
Agricultural buildings	2	510,000
Commercial/industrial	5	2,181,227
Commercial/industrial additions	3	388,000
Institutional	1	34,900,000
Institutional additions	1	625,000
Miscellaneous/remodels/ILP/other	176	5,831,423
TOTAL	261	\$ 55,795,699

PERMITS ISSUED SINCE 1990



HIGHEST CONSTRUCTION VALUES

Project	Construction Value	Project	Construction Value
Whitley County Detention Center, jail and offices	\$ 34,900,000	Braun Pediatric Dental, medical office	\$ 1,600,000
Planet Fitness, remodel	2,000,000	Indian Springs Middle School, remodel	1,200,000

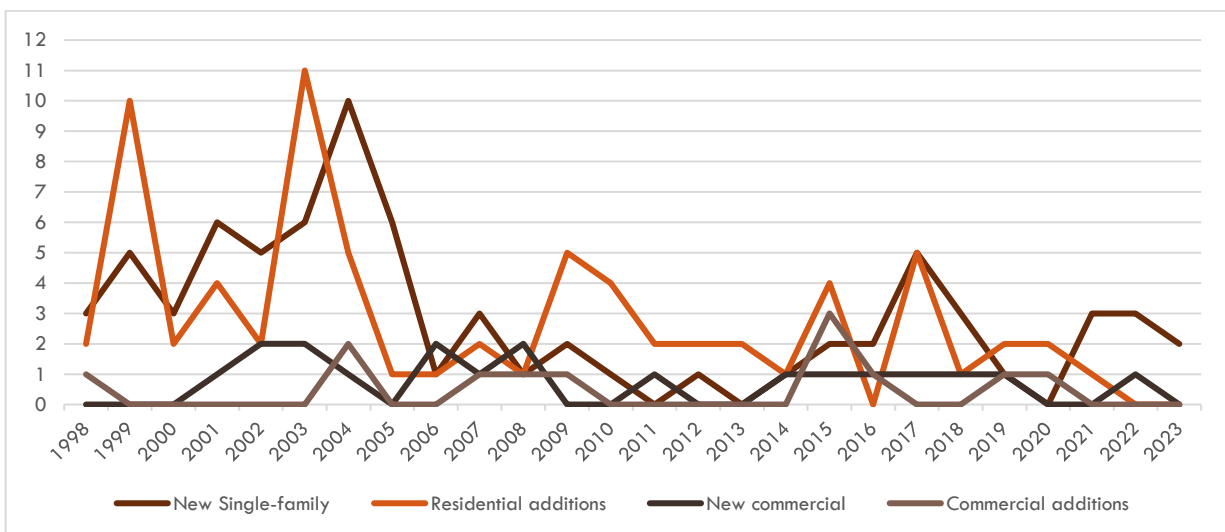
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

SOUTH WHITLEY

2023 BUILDING PERMITS

Type of Permit	Number of Permits	Est. Value of Construction
Single-family/Two-family dwellings	2	\$ 609,552
Multi-family dwellings	0	-
Manufactured/mobile homes	14	513,600
Residential additions	0	-
Residential accessory buildings	6	72,180
Agricultural buildings	0	-
Commercial/industrial	0	-
Commercial/industrial additions	0	-
Institutional	0	-
Institutional additions	0	-
Miscellaneous/remodels/ILP/other	17	246,193
TOTAL	39	\$ 1,441,525

PERMITS ISSUED SINCE 1998*



*Tracking for building permits started in 1998. The town fully joined the Department in 2002.

HIGHEST CONSTRUCTION VALUES

Project	Construction Value	Project	Construction Value
Single-family residence	\$ 409,552	Manufactured home	\$ 60,000
Single-family residence	200,000	The Press Room, commercial remodel	50,000

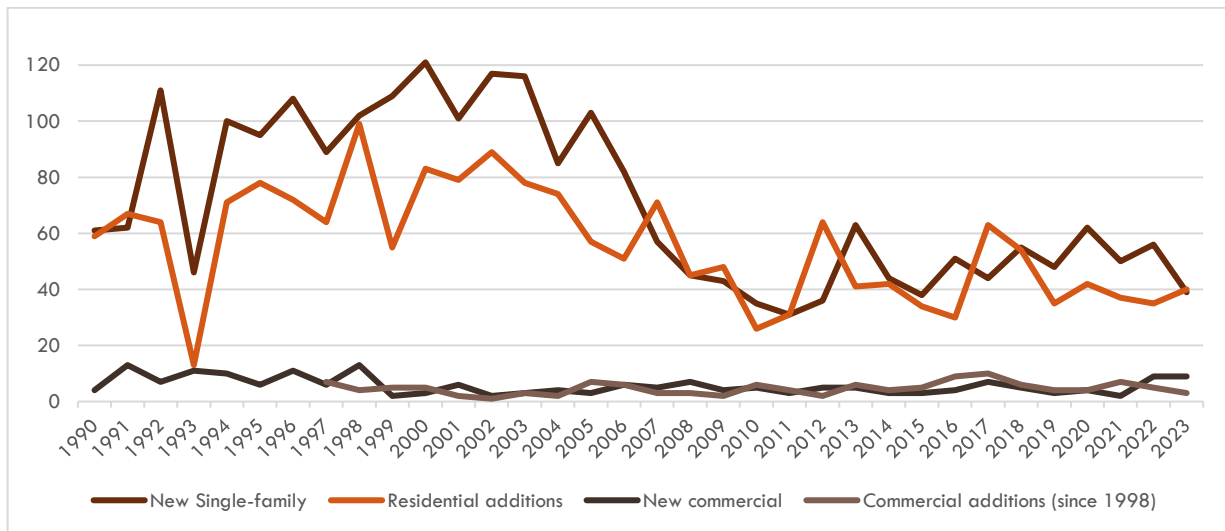
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY

WHITLEY COUNTY

2023 BUILDING PERMITS

Type of Permit	Number of Permits	Est. Value of Construction
Single-family/Two-family dwellings	43	\$ 14,369,365
Multi-family dwellings	0	-
Manufactured/mobile homes	5	502,000
Residential additions	40	4,639,500
Residential accessory buildings	130	6,936,056
Agricultural buildings	44	2,912,017
Commercial/industrial	9	5,210,267
Commercial/industrial additions	3	12,900,000
Institutional	0	-
Institutional additions	0	-
Miscellaneous/remodels/ILP/other	249	6,814,339
TOTAL	523	\$ 54,293,544

PERMITS ISSUED SINCE 1990



HIGHEST CONSTRUCTION VALUES

Project	Construction Value	Project	Construction Value
Micropulse, industrial addition	\$ 10,400,000	Red Star Contract Manf'g, industrial building	\$ 2,000,000
Micropulse, industrial addition	2,400,000	Rogers Markets Inc., industrial building	1,800,000

REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES

REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES

FEES COLLECTED

The Department primarily collects fees for building permits and for petitions to the Plan Commissions and BZAs. Building and Improvement Location permits make up nearly all the building fees collected. Planning fees include petition filing fees, reimbursements for legal notices, and fees for providing contractual services to South Whitley, Churubusco, and the Economic Development Corporation.

These are considered user fees, and they partially offset the time and expenses of performing the requested service (e.g. inspections, reviews, etc.). Owing to the joint nature of the Department, all fees are uniform throughout the County, which provides consistency for residents and businesses in any of the jurisdictions.

FEES COLLECTED, BY JURISDICTION

Jurisdiction	Planning fees	Building fees	Total	Share
Churubusco	\$ 7,397.65	\$ 6,348.00	\$ 13,745.65	6.34 %
Columbia City	10,750.25	34,333.00	45,083.25	20.79 %
South Whitley	6,700.50	4,465.16	11,165.66	5.15 %
County	45,122.50	101,737.62	146,860.12	67.72 %
TOTALS	\$ 69,970.90	\$ 146,883.78	\$ 216,854.68	

Court or attorney fees collected, joint expense reimbursements, and permit fee refunds are not shown on this table. Contract fees are included.

OPERATING EXPENSES

The tables below show the original approved budget, final appropriation after transfers and any additional appropriations, and the actual cash expenditures for 2023.

EXPENDITURES

Shared expenses	Appropriations		Expended	Percent of budget
	(Budget)	(Final)		
Salaries	\$ 358,012.00	\$ 358,012.00	\$ 339,607.58	94.9 %
Equipment	7,500.00	7,460.00	5,846.93	78.0 %
Travel & auto maintenance	6,000.00	6,000.00	5,566.96	92.8 %
Supplies	2,000.00	2,000.00	1,795.29	89.8 %
Printing	1,500.00	1,540.00	1,535.21	102.4 %
Training	1,000.00	1,000.00	266.06	26.6 %
Memberships	866.00	883.00	883.00	102.0 %
Dues & subscriptions	200.00	183.00	170.50	85.3 %
Telephone	500.00	500.00	460.28	92.1 %
Subtotal	\$ 377,578.00	\$ 377,578.00	\$ 356,131.81	94.3 %

REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES

Jurisdiction-specific expenses *	Appropriations		Expended	Percent of budget
	(Budget)	(Final)		
County PC/BZA member stipends	\$ 13,500.00	\$ 13,500.00	\$ 11,775.00	87.2 %
Professional services	10,500.00	10,500.00	6,481.37	61.7 %
Refunds	1,000.00	1,000.00	0.00	0.0 %
Subtotal	\$ 25,000.00	\$ 25,000.00	\$ 18,256.37	73.0 %
GRAND TOTAL	\$ 402,578.00	\$ 402,578.00	\$ 374,388.18	93.0 %

* These items are costs that are appropriated in the Department annual budget but are not operating expenses shared between the City and County. They are charged directly to the jurisdiction to which they apply.

As seen in the above tables, actual expenditures in 2023 came some \$28,000 under the original budget appropriation, or 93%. Here are some highlights and notes:

- Two periods of vacant positions reduced salary expenditures. The Planning and Permitting Tech had a two-month vacancy, and the part-time administrative assistant position was unfilled for almost three months at the beginning of the year. Together, the two positions had about \$13,250 in appropriated but unexpended funds.
- Training expenses were much lower than originally budgeted largely due to waived fees or delays in billing for building code classes. Additionally, free education opportunities were utilized as much as possible, further reducing expenses. Because staff training is an important aspect for the department, and since classes are not always cost-free, such shortfalls cannot be expected every year.
- For 2023, the County Plan Commission and BZA budget was increased from previous years to allow scheduling of training sessions throughout the year. Attendance at each training session was great, resulting in a total expenditure in excess of previous years.
- Travel and auto expenses decreased in 2023 from 2022 by about 15%. This was partly due to decreased fuel expenses, which fell from \$4,300 in 2022 to \$3,700 in 2023, a reflection of stabilizing fuel prices and reduced usage with the hybrid Maverick. Additionally, 2022 had several major vehicle maintenance expenses that were fortunately avoided in 2023.

FEE REVENUES VS. EXPENSES

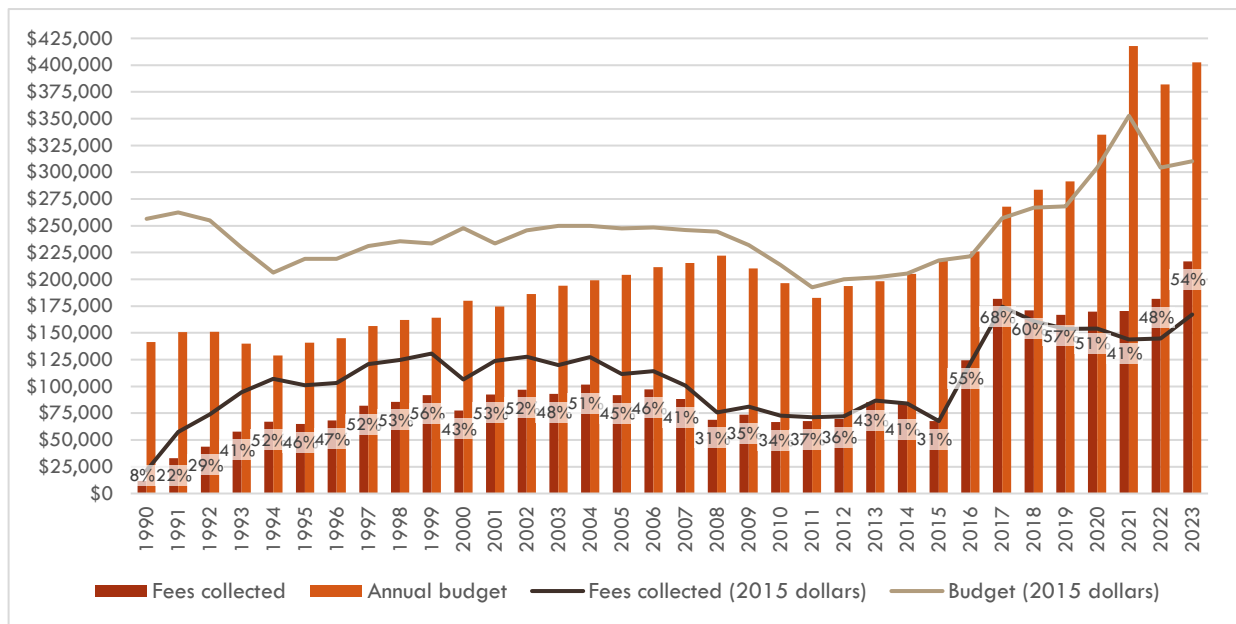
The Department is not a self-supporting agency. Its annual budget is supported by the two joint member jurisdictions, with Columbia City contributing \$32,571.76 directly to the County to defray part of the annual expenses. However, as mentioned above, building permit application fees, petition filing fees, service contracts, and so on are user fees intended to offset the cost of the Department to provide those services and products. These funds are received and deposited in the Department's own bank account, and then transferred each month to the County's General Fund.

It is a standing goal of the Department to have fee revenues cover approximately fifty percent of expenses, while maintaining affordability relative to the region. For this year, the year-end operating ratio of revenues collected to actual expenses was 57.9%, or revenue to original budget of 53.9% (this is the figure used for annual comparisons in the graph below). Prior to 2023, this ratio had been sliding downward since its peak in 2017, reflecting stagnant revenues and increasing operating costs. A fee increase implemented late in 2022,

REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES

combined with some higher-value projects and permit fees, pushed the ratio up in 2023, once again exceeding the fifty percent operating ratio goal.

FEES COLLECTED AS PERCENTAGE OF BUDGET



As seen in the chart above, the total fee revenue in 2023 was the department's all-time peak, at least in absolute figures. Much of this increase was due to a fee increase instituted in October 2022, along with a moderate rise in larger projects. When factored for inflation and converted to 2015 dollars, the year ranks second, just below 2017's exceptional year.

The continually rising budget, when adjusted for inflation, may be concerning, although actual expenditures generally fall well below the annual budgets. Still, ever-increasing salaries and personnel who are needed to pursue building, planning, quality of life, and economic development goals will mean escalating budgets, but the value of these services should not be considered merely in monetary terms.

Finally, while it may be tempting, the Department should not strive to be self-sufficient based entirely on fee revenues since construction and development industries are unpredictable. Nor should expenses outpace revenues unnecessarily. Rather, the Department should continue its history of reasonable expenditures while striving to balance the workload required by our communities with corresponding fee revenues.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2024

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2024

Based on the review of 2023 and future expectations, the following are recommendations for major goals for the Columbia City/Whitley County Joint Planning and Building Department in the coming year.

BALANCE GROWTH

As was first mentioned in the 2015 Annual Report, and repeated every year since, the continued slow population growth among all the jurisdictions over the past decade can lead to broader adverse community impacts. While it appears possible that the County's population growth for the decade following 2020 could approach the pre-2010 trends, this is a volatile figure that is contingent on continual land and housing unit availability, financial stability, and market appeal.



Primary plat for The Bluffs at Cider Mill, a major subdivision approved by the Columbia City Plan Commission in May. Development is expected to start in 2024.

Trying to account for all of these factors is an impossibility for our land use authorities and local governments, although each one may be partly dealt with. Continuing to build upon the recommendations of each comprehensive plan will be important to improve our communities for our current residents—which will help to attract new residents.

Doing so will also help to attract more businesses to invest in our strong neighborhoods. We have had decades of employment growth due to proactive effects, particularly in the TIF districts, but it will be important to have businesses truly invest in the community, versus simply locate here. This is especially critical for the three towns, where every new employer can have a significant impact on their long-term well-being.

As stated in previous reports, to the extent that it is possible, the Department should continue to assist the jurisdictions in preparing for and encouraging a diversity of quality residential developments. With the slowly but steadily increasing population, this is a crucial goal for both the Department and communities.

PLAN AND CODE CHANGES

In 2023, the County revised zoning regulations originally adopted in 2022 to address utility-scale solar installations. These changes should address one of the current “hot topics” for land use and development in Indiana for the foreseeable future. However, tweaks and clarifications may be expected as the code is applied.

The second current trend is regulating carbon sequestration, but the geology of Whitley County may not be as conducive for sequestration as areas farther south, such as the former natural gas belt in Central Indiana. So, the county may be able to defer adopting regulations until those counties, or the state, have established model regulations.

Columbia City has already started drafting changes to its parking code and subdivision codes, and these should be completed in 2024. The newly-adopted 2023 Downtown Revitalization Plan may spur some

historic- or downtown-specific regulations. Additionally, issues such as accessory dwelling units, solar facilities, temporary uses, and development standards for historic residences and electric vehicles, among others, may be prime to take on during the year.

Churubusco will likely pursue revalidating or revising its Comprehensive Plan, which will be a decade old in 2024. Doing so will evaluate its achievements and reestablish goals or set new ones, along with opening new grant opportunities.

South Whitley continues to work on methods to attract residential growth. While it now appears that their lack of growth is not a direct effect of the zoning regulations, it will be important to ensure that zoning and development regulations are not seen as obstacles to desirable development. In the meantime, the Town should focus on strengthening its quality of life for its current residents. Doing so will help to create a distinctive sense of place that could better attract new residents and businesses.

While the Town of Larwill is within the County's planning and zoning jurisdiction, it may be time to contemplate a finer-grained set of regulations that target the Town's needs and desires for the future. Similarly, a detailed plan and additional specific regulations for the lake areas could address some of the concerns found only in those areas. These projects are not going to be completed in 2024, but discussing goals and budgets may start in the year.

Any code updates or revisions of course will require the diligence of the Department, committees, Plan Commissions, legislative bodies, and citizens to develop, revise, and adopt.

ADAPTABILITY

As has been discussed before, this Department has had a long history of adaptability to changing situations and making use of available resources to achieve our mission. 2023 was not a record year for permits (barely), but it did have a record number of petitions. So, while the Department workload was slightly more diverse, and it was spread a bit more evenly throughout the year, the volume of requests being processed at peak times was again near the capacity of the staff.

If this repeats in 2024, it will be important to track both permit and petition volume and total activities to balance the needs of customers and capabilities of personnel to ensure our long-established high level of service.



An on-site public hearing notice sign at the South Whitley Community Library advertising a variance requested for an electronic message center sign in March. The variance was approved, and the sign was installed two months later.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: COUNTY-WIDE CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY COMPARISONS

	2021		2022		2023	
	Permits*	Est. Value	Permits*	Est. Value	Permits*	Est. Value
Single-family dwellings	112	\$ 34,316,406	86	\$ 30,393,022	71	\$ 24,725,274
Two-family	4	750,068	4	1,028,685	5	996,007
Multi-family	0	-	0	-	0	-
Manufactured homes	4	334,500	3	157,000	11	735,400
Mobile homes	10	192,436	15	130,000	10	303,600
Residential additions	51	3,144,103	44	2,790,303	54	5,452,260
Residential accessory buildings	162	5,229,846	157	6,084,020	177	7,866,559
Agricultural buildings	37	2,548,900	34	3,442,500	46	3,422,017
Commercial/industrial	5	1,876,246	21	13,898,542	14	7,391,494
Commercial/industrial additions	7	4,954,273	8	4,255,590	6	13,288,000
Institutional	3	578,232	3	115,894	2	35,055,000
Institutional additions	1	85,000	0	-	2	880,000
Miscellaneous/ILP only/Pond/other	501	12,706,801	552	9,286,086	491	13,516,629
TOTAL	897	\$ 66,716,811	927	\$ 71,581,642	889	\$ 113,632,240

* Note that this table includes both building permits and improvement location permits. Many projects have both, so totals here do not match the individual tables below.

APPENDIX B: YEARLY COMPARISONS

Building Permits	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	48	37	35	57	40	36	33	35	42	43
Columbia City	179	138	188	186	214	221	198	229	203	186
South Whitley	25	30	40	45	29	33	24	28	32	34
County	395	398	407	431	342	402	480	490	531	496
Total	647	603	670	719	625	693	735	782	808	759

Improvement Location Permits	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	28	31	22	41	42	36	29	22	28	33
Columbia City	158	112	166	154	195	189	193	198	159	182
South Whitley	19	22	24	38	23	29	22	14	23	14
County	289	301	300	327	258	298	350	349	350	337
Total	494	466	512	560	518	552	594	583	560	566

Receipts Written	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	842	792	882	986	876	895	993	1,025	1,058	1,045

Inspections	2014*	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco		190	123	229	180	109	130	87	83	122
Columbia City		704	1,036	982	1,116	1,142	942	913	993	940
South Whitley		140	111	181	127	86	129	82	116	113
County		1,935	1,774	1,841	1,641	1,697	2,443	1,981	2,033	2,136
Total	3,004	2,969	3,044	3,233	3,064	3,034	3,644	3,063	3,225	3,311

*Inspections per jurisdiction were not tracked prior to 2015

APPENDICES

New Single-Family Dwelling Permits	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	7	9	3	17	5	4	0	2	1	1
Columbia City	37	18	44	33	67	62	30	57	26	29
South Whitley	1	2	1	5	3	1	0	3	3	2
County	43	40	53	45	53	49	62	50	56	39
Total	88	69	101	100	128	116	92	112	86	71

Median Single-Family Dwelling Const. Cost	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	\$168,000	\$167,000	\$150,000	\$179,000	\$201,500	\$188,750	NA	\$262,450	\$633,000	\$350,000
Columbia City	\$163,500	\$160,500	\$170,000	\$191,800	\$174,000	\$199,053	\$264,900	\$285,000	\$323,024	\$336,500
South Whitley	\$350,000	\$105,000	\$121,500	\$162,000	\$80,000	\$150,000	NA	\$243,800	\$192,235	\$304,776
County	\$200,000	\$250,000	\$190,000	\$250,000	\$275,000	\$284,190	\$264,866	\$356,063	\$348,753	\$300,000
Overall	\$173,500	\$180,000	\$180,000	\$203,448	\$206,500	\$221,000	\$264,900	\$291,161	\$329,000	\$330,000

Floodplain Permits*	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019**	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Columbia City	0	0	2	2	2	7	12	14	13	10
South Whitley	0	0	3	2	5	6	3	3	4	12
County	12	3	9	24	20	44	52	74	77	93
Total	12	3	14	28	27	58	67	91	94	115

* Counted if any part of the parcel is located in regulatory floodplain; frequently the permitted improvement itself is not in the floodplain

** In 2019, DNR flood maps became available; these are more extensive than the FEMA flood maps adopted in 2015

Land Use Petitions	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Churubusco	3	4	3	5	8	6	5	5	10	7
Columbia City	10	10	18	22	33	16	22	26	29	29
South Whitley	1	5	4	9	6	3	3	3	2	3
County	45	44	53	74	50	60	50	65	69	78
Total	59	63	78	110	97	85	80	99	110	117