

## AT A GLANCE: What to do with White River Township

### White River Township: How things are now

**Population and assessed valuation:** White River Township is unique because it has a population of between 30,000 and 40,000 people, yet is not part of a city or town. The township makes up about 39 percent of Johnson County's total assessed valuation and 29 percent of the county's total population.

**Government representation:** Three county commissioners represent the entire county, and one commissioner represents nearly 70 percent of the county's total population, a large chunk of which is in White River Township.

By comparison, Greenwood also is represented on the board of commissioners, but the city has an elected seven-member city council and a mayor who make decisions about roadwork and police protection.

Since the unincorporated area of the township is not a part of a city or town, it has no government of its own except for a three-member township advisory board, trustee and assessor. The township's duties include providing poor relief to residents and fire protection.

**State funding:** Not being a city or town means that 16 sources of state taxes collected from Center Grove area residents go to the county government to be divided among the county's nine townships. White River Township generates about \$2.6 million in state taxes, such as fuel and alcohol taxes.

**Services:** The Center Grove area gets most of its service, such as police protection and street maintenance, from the county government.

**Becoming a city or town:** The pros and cons and how it would work:

#### Pros

- Gives township residents the most control over tax dollars and services.
- The township would get to maintain its unique identity and culture and have a fresh start in terms of forming a government.
- Center Grove area residents would have their own government accountable to them.

#### Cons

- Becoming a city or town is the most expensive option for the area because of costs that come with creating a new government. If incorporated, the town-

ship would need to pay attorneys to draft legal documents, develop a police department, form departments such as planning and zoning, find a place for the new offices and elect a city or town council.

- Area residents would have to pay a new property tax to fund the new government.
- Lack of local leadership to direct the process.

#### How it would work

**Steering committee:** Residents would need to form a group to lead efforts to incorporate.

**What the committee would do:** Determine the exact area to be incorporated, decide on the ser-

VICES to be provided, determine the cost of the services, estimate the amount of state tax money the new town or city will get, find out the assessed valuation for the area and determine the tax rate and obtain signatures from at least 50 property owners.

**Signed petitions:** The committee would submit petitions to county commissioners along with a survey of the area and statements of the number of residents, assessed valuation, provided services and estimated costs.

**County planners:** County commissioners would forward plans to the county plan commission for

review. The plan commission would make a recommendation within 10 days.

**Public hearing:** Commissioners would organize a public hearing within 60 to 90 days.

**Consent:** Commissioners would need the permission of any neighboring city within three miles, which would be Greenwood.

**Approval and elections:** Commissioners could vote on whether to approve the incorporation after the public hearing. People interested in running for elected offices would file petitions with the county clerk by Aug. 1 for the proceeding November election.

**Merging with Greenwood or Bargersville:** The pros and cons and how it would work:

#### Pros

- Merging is more cost effective than incorporating because the township would combine with a town or city that already has a government in place.
- A merger would have the same result as annexation, but the merger process works differently and gives the public final say.
- Involves existing governments to study a merger before the public has final say.

#### Cons

- Center Grove area residents would have to pay an additional town or city tax if the township merged with Bargersville or Greenwood.
- The amount of effort needed to educate the public about the process.

#### How it would work

**Study committees:** Bargersville or Greenwood and the township advisory board

would pass joint resolutions to form a reorganization committee. Each government would appoint three members to the committee, which would form subcommittees to study various aspects of a merger, including finances, governance, health and safety, planning, parks and transportation.

**Reorganization plan:** The committee would put together a plan for the city or town and town-

ship board to review. The city or town and township board would both have to approve the plan.

**Voter approval:** If Greenwood or Bargersville approved the plan, the issue would go onto a ballot for public vote during the closest November election. The question on the ballot would read like this: "Shall (Greenwood or Bargersville) and (unincorporated White River Township) reorganize as a single political subdivision?"

**Annexation:** The pros and cons and how it would work:

#### Pros

- Quicker to achieve improved services, because existing governments and infrastructure are in place.
- Property tax increases can be phased in as land is annexed.
- Better representation in what is being done locally, redistricting.

#### Cons

- Potentially adversarial process. For example, Greenwood has filed a lawsuit against the town of Bargersville's plans to annex 3.5 square miles in the Center Grove area.
- Expensive.
- Limited. A town or city can only annex land that touches its borders. At least one-eighth of an

annexation area's borders must touch the town or city's existing borders.

#### How it would work

**Two main types of annexation:** Involuntary, meaning it is initiated by the city or town, and voluntary, meaning it is initiated by property owners or agreed to by property owners. Every property owner agrees to annexation for it to be totally vol-

untary. At least 51 percent of property owners must agree for the annexation to be majority voluntary.

**Final say:** The public does not get a say in whether an annexation is approved. However, property owners in annexation areas are allowed to legally remonstrate against annexation plans by gathering signatures on petitions.

**Doing nothing:** The pros and cons and how it would work:

#### Pros

- Easiest option and requires no effort.
- Cheapest option. Residents would not have to pay an additional town or city property tax unless annexed into Greenwood or Bargersville. Residents in unincorporated White River Township get most of their services from county government, based in Franklin, which is responsible for providing services to all unincorporated areas of the county.

#### Cons

- If Greenwood or Bargersville continue to annex into White River Township along State Road 135, County Road 144 and State Road 37, it would leave out a large chunk of land in the Center Grove area.
- Greenwood and Bargersville would surround unincorporated areas of White River Township and take property taxes from businesses along the township's major corridors. The communities

would not be responsible for providing services for residents in the unincorporated area.

As a result, property values would drop, roads would continue to deteriorate, and no leadership would exist to plan for the future of the township and its residents, according to former Indiana University professor Paul Friga. He and some of his graduate students studied the impact of Greenwood annexing or incorporating White River Township into a city or town. If they do noth-

ing, White River Township residents would lose their ability to control continued growth, he said.

• Annexations are typically initiated by the town, and although property owners can petition against an annexation, they do not have a say in its approval. For instance, property owners in Greenwood are being annexed because they live in pockets of unincorporated land surrounded city borders. Many have spoken out against the annexation, but the city council has voted to approve the plans.

SOURCES: White River Citizens United Inc. and Crowe Horwath