

GARY FIREFIGHTERS LOCAL 359 INCORPORATED

AFFILIATIONS

International Association of Fire Fighters
Professional Fire Fighters Union of Indiana
Indiana State AFL-CIO
Lake County Central Labor Union National
Safety Council



LOCAL#359
INCORPORATED

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March 5, 2025

Mayor Eddie Melton

Office of the Mayor of the City of Gary

401 Broadway

Gary, IN 46402

Re: Letter of Support – City of Gary & Hard Rock Northern Indiana Proposal
for Lake County Convention Center

Dear Mayor Melton,

On behalf of the Gary Firefighters Association IAFF Local 359, I want to express our full support for the proposal submitted by the City of Gary and Hard Rock Northern Indiana for the Lake County Convention Center.

As firefighters, our commitment to this city runs deep. Every day, we serve our citizens, protect our community, and answer the call whenever we're needed. But our dedication doesn't stop when we go off duty.

For the past couple of years, we've made it a priority to volunteer our own personal time—week after week, month after month—cleaning up our city. On our days off, we've hit the streets, rolled up our sleeves, and put in the work to restore and uplift our neighborhoods. This wasn't just a one-time thing—it is a real commitment because we believe in Gary.

I'm 55 years old now, and I've spent 25 years of my life serving on the Gary Fire Department. I've seen this city through its highs and lows, and for the longest time, it felt like Gary would never get its moment.

Now, for the first time, I see the dream taking shape. The energy is here. The momentum is real. For the first time in my life, it feels like everything is finally coming together. The right leadership is in place. The Hard Rock is here. And now, we have a real opportunity to bring in something Gary has never had before.

For years, this felt impossible, like something that would never happen in our lifetime. However, it's within our reach now. It is a blessing to witness it. I just wish my grandparents could have been here to see it. To see the city, they loved finally get its chance to rise again.

That momentum starts with Mayor Melton. Before he was our mayor, Eddie Melton did a wonderful job in the statehouse as a senator. He wasn't just respected, he was trusted. He worked hard, delivered results, and earned the confidence of his peers, rising to Ranking Minority Leader in the Indiana State Senate. They trusted him in the statehouse, as we do here in Gary. We trust him, and we trust his vision.

For too long, Gary has never had the chance to compete as a destination city. We haven't had a first-class venue to host major events, nor the infrastructures, i.e. hotels, restaurants, and entertainment to support it. Now, that's finally starting to change.

Every year, we travel across the state to attend the Professional Firefighters Union of Indiana (PFFUI) Convention. Last year, it was in Terre Haute. This year, we're heading to Fort Wayne. Every time we go, we see what it means for a city to host something special.

I have to be honest, every time we attend, I'm filled with admiration for our brothers and sisters in those cities. The way they welcome us, the way they showcase their hometown is incredible. I won't lie, there's always been just a small hint of jealousy.

Not in a bad way, I've always been happy for them. I'd be lying if I said I never thought, "I wish we could do this in Gary." The truth is, we've never

had that chance. We've never been able to welcome our fellow firefighters, host them in our hotels, showcase our restaurants, and proudly say, 'This is Gary.'

Now we finally can. Hard Rock is known all over the world. Everywhere they go, they bring business, jobs, and entertainment that help cities grow. Right here in Gary, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana has already proven itself as a major economic driver.

When it opened, everyone expected it to do well because of its prime location right off I-80/94, one of the most heavily traveled highways in the country. It's done more than just well, it's exceeding expectations, attracting visitors from across the region, and putting Gary back on the map as a destination.

With Hard Rock already bringing in thousands of visitors, the convention center is only going to add to that. This is the missing piece Gary has always needed. It's going to bring hotels, restaurants, and infrastructure back that we've had in the past. This has been missing for many decades.

This isn't just about Gary; this is about all of Northwest Indiana. For too long, this side of the region has been left behind while other cities have grown. We watch businesses, new developments, and major investments go up in other parts of Northwest Indiana. While Gary, sitting in the middle of it all, has gone without.

When Gary rises, the entire region benefits. This convention center is sitting right along I-80/94, connecting it to every surrounding city. What happens here doesn't just impact Gary, it impacts every city and town in Northwest Indiana.

More visitors mean more business, tourism, and dollars flowing into the entire region. Restaurants, hotels, and local businesses in surrounding cities will benefit from the increased traffic. When Gary grows, everyone grows.

Right now, we're the only missing piece. Every other city around us has something going, and we're sitting here with nothing. We can't fully compete as a region until Gary gets what it needs to be a full player in Northwest Indiana's success.

It's time to bring balance to the region. To make sure every city in Northwest Indiana has the tools to thrive. To finally come together and elevate as one.

We are all proud Hoosiers. This is bigger than just one city. This is about lifting up all of Northwest Indiana, strengthening our region, and contributing to the success of the entire state. When one of us wins, Indiana wins. A Greater Gary means a Greater Northwest Indiana. A Greater Northwest Indiana makes for a Greater Indiana.

The Lake County Board of Commissioners has a choice: invest in progress, opportunity, and economic growth, or let this moment pass us by. This is the right project, at the right time, with the right leadership to make it succeed. A vote for this convention center is a vote for real progress, lasting investment, and a Greater Gary, a Greater Northwest Indiana, and a Greater Indiana.

The time is now. The momentum is here. Let's make history.

If there are any questions, I'm happy to talk anytime.

Sincerely,

Kevin Benford

President

Gary Firefighters Association IAFF Local 359

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