

# ZONING in on OPPORTUNITY

## Zionsville Providing Business Connections

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Outside, the sky is dark as rain falls on the historic firehouse building in downtown Zionsville. What a contrast to the brightness and brilliance within.

Spanning 3,200 square feet, the structure houses the zWORKS entrepreneurial and co-working center. The membership-based nonprofit consists of diverse work zones. Among them are team/small group collaboration, “heads down” solo work, reserved desks, casual meetings and a conference room. It offers secure 24/7 access via fingerprint recognition.

Community volunteers and leaders started zWORKS in 2015. Kate Swanson became its first executive director earlier this year.

“There’s a real community feel here,” she comments. “Everyone has that in common, which is a nice thing. The personal attention we’re able to give our companies (it has approximately 170 members) is really special. I love that we’re nestled right into the heart of the town and right along Main Street. That’s also a real draw to our companies.”

### Our town

Swanson is passionate about bringing emerging and existing businesses together.

“This was a little bit different (approach) that I brought to the table when I came on. I love this community and the people around us, and I felt like if I can connect our Main Street merchants with these companies that are here and these start-ups, those are relationships and connections that are going to keep companies here. They’ll be that much more invested in the town.”

During a subsequent phone call with Zionsville Mayor Tim Haak, he emphasized location as a trait that sets zWORKS apart from similar models and calls it “a little economic engine for downtown.”

“We’ve taken an effort to help promote this and foster it because we (Zionsville) were a largely residential tax base and the (property) tax caps put quite a huge impact on us, on our budget. We like these home-grown businesses. They’re stickier; they tend to stay around longer.

“If someone can live here and work here, they’re a much more engaged business. They’re going to be more in tune with the non-profits, the kids’ sports leagues, the schools. So they’re a much more engaged partner.”

### Expect the unexpected

It’s impossible not to observe the camaraderie between Swanson and members. She eagerly stops at Venue Intelligence.

Launched in 2014, it specializes in crowd planning technology for the security, marketing and operations of large venues. It’s led by founder and president Jim Martin.

“Let me see if I can introduce you,” Swanson whispers, knocking on the office door.

“We focus on event organizers who are able to take all of their plans and move them out of paper, out of binders and into a web-based format – ideally a mobile-based format,” Martin explains. “One of the things we say is, ‘When minutes matter, don’t send people chasing for a binder.’”

Instead, the Playbook app, allows customers to create, distribute and manage event and emergency plans. They also can update strategies, communicate with authorized users (staff, volunteers and first responders) and build a library of best practices.

“I have 15 plans right here,” Martin indicates, holding up his mobile phone. “I can tell you, right now, who the event director is tomorrow for the Pittsburgh Marathon (*BizVoice*® spoke



A tale of two trios: Individual work opportunities and team huddles are all part of the mix at zWORKS.

with Martin in May) as well as the Mardi Gras Mambo as well as (any number of events). It can be this diverse kind of platform that frankly, without overusing a cliched term, becomes a little bit more of an ecosystem.

“Because when you think about those three audiences (staff, volunteers and first responders), you just can’t assume that everybody has the critical information (e.g., how to operate under the threat of an active shooter, dangerous weather or a missing child). It may be written down somewhere, but if there’s only one person who has it, you’ve got to find that person.”

### Seeking solutions

“Can I get you a water?” Swanson inquires on the way to a cozy lounge. “There’s always snacks on hand. We’ve got coffee. Beer on tap.”

Jazz softly plays. Gus, Swanson’s beloved golden retriever, looks up contentedly from his fluffy bed. In the center of the room, a wall of fame applauds zWORKS graduates.

“We’re really excited when we get one that graduates – when they grow out of their space and move on,” Swanson remarks. “The whole place cheers and roots for them. And we have a big celebration.”

Examples include Clear Software and Boosterville. Both remained in Zionsville.

“Boosterville (an offers and loyalty platform that connects merchants with cause-driven buyers) came here from Indianapolis,” Swanson notes. “They were able to secure their funding and hire. . . . Then, when it was time for them to move on, it was hard to find space. That’s something Zionsville is working on: finding the middle space.

“We’ve got great space to build huge headquarters over at Creekside (Corporate) Park, which will eventually take off . . . but it’s that middle ground (we’re lacking). Finding that space. We help do that because we want to keep them (zWORKS graduates) here. And they want to stay here too because they’ve made these roots.

“So, the mayor (Haak) said, ‘We’ve got the bank building at the end of the street that literally will be torn down eventually. Why don’t they just work out of there?’

“I go down there and visit them. They’re doing awesome and growing so fast!”

### Testing the waters

Jason Brown sits at a table across from private “booths” available for phone calls and web conferences. He’s a solutions consultant at Five9, a provider of cloud contact center software.

He offers a comical motivation for utilizing space at zWORKS.

“I originally did it because my wife is a teacher and I have two small children. So just to be able to get out of the house.”

In all seriousness, he adds that he appreciates the interaction the non-profit facilitates.

“I’ve actually made connections with (businesses such as) Clear Software, who used to be in here. We’re looking at doing a partnership with them.”

Through a door at the back of the building is 120WaterAudit. And it’s overflowing with opportunity.

The water quality technology and testing company serves public water systems and facilities (specifically schools).

“We’re trying to basically take, ‘Here are the lessons learned from the tragedies around Flint, Chicago (and others), and build them into a software as a service licensed platform that all water quality managers can use to be on the same playing field,’ ” reveals CEO and co-founder Megan Glover.

Swimming in packages, employees are hard at work.

“We’ll be sending 1,700 kits within the next three days to



120WaterAudit – which conducts tests for lead, copper and other harmful contaminants – is growing at a rapid pace.



Pittsburgh!” Glover declares, referring to 120WaterAudit’s first major client: the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority.

When 120WaterAudit outgrew its initial home, Glover was thrilled to discover space at zWORKS.

“I honestly think we would have been operating out of my house,” she discloses. “I don’t know what else we would have done. Or we might have had to say no to the Pittsburgh contract if we wouldn’t have been able to secure this space.

“(In addition), this has been the No. 1 introduction to investors. We’re getting ready to do a round of funding to hire on more sales folks, and hopefully graduate and take that next zWORKS leap. They’ve been fantastic about introduction to investors and other entrepreneurs. I have conversations daily with other members – pain points – because you’re in the same trenches.”

In May, 120WaterAudit was selected as the technology and laboratory coordination provider to assist with drinking water testing in more than 700 public schools throughout Indiana.

Swanson can’t wait to see what the future holds for Zionsville.

“I feel like there’s change in the air around here,” she asserts. “It’s been a long time coming and there’s been a lot of different factors in town that have caused it. There’s a real excitement because we haven’t had the opportunity to recruit and get business here, but now we can. It’s fun to see.”

**RESOURCES:** Kate Swanson, zWORKS, at [www.zworks.org](http://www.zworks.org) | Jim Martin, Venue Intelligence, at [www.venueintel.com](http://www.venueintel.com) | Megan Glover, 120WaterAudit, at [www.120wateraudit.com](http://www.120wateraudit.com) | Mayor Tim Haak, city of Zionsville, at [www.zionsville-in.gov](http://www.zionsville-in.gov)