Beloit’s Transformation

Lessons from a City on the Move

By Jon McGinty

ike many Midwestern industrial cities, Beloit, Wis., has come through some hard times. Faced with the social and economic impact of globalization and shifting markets, the city has managed to pull itself together in the past two decades and create an urban renaissance all its own. With a track record of successful reinvention, Beloit is making good things happen for itself, and is well-positioned to face ongoing challenges. It’s not surprising that leaders from other cities often visit Beloit to see just what it’s doing right.
The City Center Building is both a symbol and a marketing tool for Beloit’s economic future. Opened last December, the former Wisconsin Power & Light Building at 500 Public Ave. was renovated at a cost of $1.2 million, in part to house Vision Beloit, a showroom of ideas for the development of the Greater Beloit area, and a one-stop shop for visitors and potential investors.

**A Unified Voice**

Perhaps no other city in our region has done more to shape its own destiny over the past few decades, than Beloit, Wis. A proactive, unified vision, intent upon improving the quality of life for all residents, is helping the city to thrive, despite challenges posed by a shifting global economy.

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Mural-size photo exhibits and wide-screen plasma TVs within the restored vintage architecture show images of Beloit’s past, present and future projects, including Beloit 2020’s City Center Plan, an “ambitious program to develop Beloit’s City Center as the confluence of ideas, markets and cultural activities for the Greater Beloit Region.”

This plan is an update of Beloit 2000’s Master Plan, first implemented in 2004, and primarily responsible for many of the changes which have occurred along Beloit’s Rock River area in recent years. The update divides the 700 acres on both sides of the river into nine districts, and includes plans for land use, transportation, historic preservation, open space and visual character [see map].

The City Center Building also houses the offices of four civic organizations whose common goal is the consistent revitalization of Beloit: the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation, Greater Beloit Chamber of Commerce, Visit Beloit (convention/visitors’ bureau), and the Downtown Beloit Association.

“This building speaks to the fact that we are a unified voice,” says Martha Mitchell, executive director of Visit Beloit. “While we all have our separate visions, we still incorporate each other into our plans, and share in each other’s strategic planning. All of us seem to be able to check our egos at the door. We all agree we need to cooperate internally in order to compete externally.”

“While we are autonomous organizations, we’ve taken down the walls between us,” says Kathleen Braatz, executive director of the Downtown Beloit Association. “We do a lot of cross-referencing and make sure we’re communicating. We not only know each other’s plans, we also support them.”

“There are relatively few economic development dollars available in Wisconsin,” says Jeff Adams, professor of economics at Beloit College, and a member of Beloit 2020, “so we have to be smarter in our economic development efforts. Vision Beloit is a smart idea.”

A synergistic relationship between Beloit College and the city continues to play a role in Beloit’s revitalization efforts, as well. The College convened some of the first meetings in 1989 which introduced Beloit 2000’s redevelop-ment plans for the Rock River corridor to the public. Beloit College also was a key investor in the infrastructure construction of Gateway Business Park, and the college intends to move its Arts Department into the downtown public library building when the library moves to Eclipse Center, the former Beloit Mall.

“The College infuses this community with a spirit of progress, and encourages us to take on new ideas,” says Braatz.

“I think it’s not insignificant that the new science building purposely faces outward, toward the city and the river,” says Mitchell, “rather than inward on itself. It’s a major part of this city.”

The college and city each recognize that what’s good for one, is good for the other.

Civic Leadership
A major ingredient in Beloit’s success at reinventing itself is the role of civic leadership, primarily represented by the Beloit 2020 group, a consortium of CEOs and other leaders in business, government, civic organizations, non-profits and educational institutions. The group was formed, in 1988, as Beloit 2000, in response to multiple challenges facing the economic future of the city. Challenges included a decaying inner
Beloit 2000 financed the development of a design to renovate the Rock River area, led the way to educate the public and governmental leaders about its potential, and leveraged the funds to make it all happen. As a result, the community has become, over the past two decades, a showplace of an urban renaissance. Tangible results include new walkways, a new riverfront park, public banquet hall, children’s playground, visitors’ center, outdoor pavilion, a lagoon with a fountain, condominium complex, a hotel, several pieces of public art, and two new bridges over the river.

Critical to the success of the plan was the work of Diane Hendricks and her late husband, Ken, members of Beloit 2000 and founders/owners of ABC Supply Company. Their acquisitions of abandoned industrial property and subsequent renovations created the ABC Supply corporate headquarters, as well as the Ironworks Complex and many other crucial properties in Beloit.

“Ken was an authentic hero and a genius,” says Adams, “but he also was involved in Beloit to make a profit. His point was not just philanthropy, but to create value in the community.” The Beloit 2000 development along the river “ran parallel with the development of Ken’s business, and they reinforced each other tremendously.”

Current projects under the new City Center Plan are again focused on the Grand Parkway area along the Rock River. The Turtle Island Playground, a “destination location” for both tourists and locals, is being redesigned and renovated, for $750,000, with an exploration and discovery theme, based on local hero and Beloit College graduate, Roy Chapman Andrews.
“Andrews is a great spiritual figure in this community, with an international reputation as an explorer and adventurer,” says Adams. “Some say he was the inspiration for the Indiana Jones film character.”

The Ace Hardware store recently relocated to a new building in downtown Beloit, and the old structure near White Avenue is being torn down to provide more green space and walkways along the river. A three-mile strip of U.S. Hwy. 51 is being resurfaced and reconfigured with a boulevard, trees, widened parking and new lighting, based on a design financed by Beloit 2020.

Much of the vitality and animation seen in Beloit’s downtown corridor is nurtured by the leadership of the Downtown Beloit Association, which understands that employers prefer communities that offer their employees a healthy cultural life. The leaders also believe that a rich community event life, in every season, with ample access to the arts, simply makes Beloit a nicer place to live, and also draws tourists. As a result, events like Artwalk, Plein Air painting, a large farmer’s market, myriad dances, concerts, holiday parades, and much more, regularly attract visitors and shoppers to the downtown area.

Riverfest, a four-day, big-name summertime music festival with three stages along the river, brings upwards of 50,000 visitors from 37 states to Beloit each summer. The Beloit International Film Festival is a winter event that draws some of the top players in the film industry to Beloit. Civic leaders are supportive of standing attractions, as well, such as The Beloit Angel Museum, the largest privately held angel collection in the world, and Beloit Snappers Minor League Baseball, a Class A affiliate of the Minnesota Twins.

Many believe that a community’s art scene is a sign of its health and vitality. From live theater and visual art exhibits to ongoing music and dancing opportunities, Beloit’s art scene is thriving. The Beloit Public Art collection includes 20 pieces in and around Beloit’s city center. The Wright Museum of Fine Art at Beloit College offers more than a dozen exhibitions year round; the Beloit Fine Arts Incubator draws artists to the community by housing a co-op of artists’ studios and a gallery. The Beloit Janesville Symphony performs in the beautiful Beloit College Eaton Chapel; and live theater is found at Beloit Civic Theatre and on the Beloit College campus.

City Government

The Beloit city government plays a major role in fostering a unity of vision and spirit of civic cooperation in the community. Unlike most local governments, Beloit functions with an appointed city manager, rather than an elected mayor who must deal with elections every few years.

“Political stability is critical for economic development,” says Andrew Janke, economic development director for the City of Beloit. “Many of these projects can take decades to complete. And our city council members are elected at large, without party affiliation, so their loyalty is to the entire community, rather than to a ward or political party.”

“Beloit has a high level of cooperation and positive activism,” says Larry Arft, city manager since 2003. “Everybody seems to be on the same page, without a lot of infighting. I think..."
it’s a function of the local culture, as well as a response to the substantial economic downturn this city experienced in the 1970s and 1980s.

“We’re pleased and proud of what’s happened in Beloit, but we’re not entirely unique,” says Arft. “Lots of rustbelt industrial cities have turned themselves around. We may have bottomed out harder, so our improvements seem a bit more dramatic.”

“A lot of communities are stuck with the mindset that the megaproject is going to save them, and all their problems will be solved,” says Janke. “We have a different paradigm in Beloit. Our long-term success is based on continuous, incremental improvements – one project after another, large or small.”

Jim Fisher, current president of Beloit 2020, agrees. “There’s no magic ingredient that some other community can take back to their city to make things happen,” says Fisher. “It doesn’t happen that way. It takes leadership and direction, being consistent, and persevering over time.”

“Revitalization takes place on many different levels,” says Nancy Forbeck, president of the Greater Beloit Chamber of Commerce (GBCC). “There’s no one single thing that hits it out of the park. It takes a lot of work in many different areas.”

**Regionalism**

To that end, the GBCC has shifted its focus to a regional approach in marketing the area’s communities to the global economy. The Chamber includes members from the City of Beloit in Wisconsin, as well as South Beloit, Rockton and Roscoe in Illinois.

“We made a conscious decision to see that the differences in our communities are not things that separate us,” says Forbeck. “They are the things that increase people’s choices for how they want to live.”

One regional project expected to have long-term effects on Beloit’s future is the Stateline Career Technical Education Academy (SCTEA), scheduled to launch during the 2009-10 school year. According to Jim Fisher, chairman of the SCTEA Advisory Council, SCTEA is a consortium of seven school districts, six within Rock County (including Beloit), and South Beloit in Illinois, whose goal is to allow businesses to drive the curriculum for students interested in career education.

“Out of 100 freshmen in Wisconsin high schools today, only 24 will graduate from a two- or four-year college by the time they are 24,” says Fisher. “That means 76 don’t go on to college and must find a job. And that translates into about 1,340 students every year in Rock County coming into the workforce, many without the requisite skills to have a viable career. We want to change that.”

According to Fisher, high school juniors and seniors who join the SCTEA program in participating districts will attend regional “centers of excellence” for part of their school week. These centers will be other schools or institutions with proper state-of-the-art equipment and training methods in automotive technology, healthcare, business finance or whatever career path the student has chosen. The training will be aimed at reaching the standards of that particular industry or business.

“We hope SCTEA becomes a supply line to post-secondary educators and industries, by providing them with prerequisite-qualified students to enter their career programs,” says Fisher.

Another key ingredient to Beloit’s regional success is its location at the center of a bi-state region which includes 105,000 people within a 10-mile radius of the city center. With a city population just over 37,000, that puts two-thirds of these people outside the city limits. Beloit also is located near the half-way point of the Rock River, and at the confluence of two interstate highways, I-90/39 and I-43. It is 50 miles from Madison, 60 miles from Milwaukee, and 90 miles from...
Chicago – all cities with substantial markets for goods and services [see map].

According to Janke, the three most important industrial clusters in the Beloit economic picture are logistics/distribution, food processing and metal fabrication. The development of the state-of-the-art Gateway Business Park in 2000 on the east side of I-90/39 has attracted numerous companies to build their businesses in Beloit, including Staples Distribution Center, Morse Group, Menlo Industries, Specialty Tools and Kettle Foods.

Kettle Foods opened its new facility in Gateway Park last year, and its building won a national award of Gold Level Certification for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) from the U.S. Green Building Council. The Council recognized Kettle Foods’ use of wind turbines and the purchase of renewable power to offset a portion of its electricity use, converting used cooking oil to biodiesel fuel, and dedicating five acres of surrounding land to native prairie restoration.

Kerry Ingredients and Flavours recently moved its American headquarters to Beloit, bringing with it 800 jobs and the potential for 350 new ones.

Kerry Ingredients and Flavours, an Ireland-based company which manufactures food additives, has had a presence in Beloit since 1988. Last year the organization decided to relocate its American headquarters elsewhere, but fast action by Ken Hendricks and Beloit officials convinced the company to move to Gateway Park instead. The $44 million project is currently under construction, and will contain not only Kerry’s U.S. headquarters, but also major research and development facilities, meaning 800 jobs will be retained and 350 new ones will be created in the community.

“The cities that have become competitive in the 21st century economy are those which have developed a high quality of life for their residents,” says Arft. “Kerry could have gone anywhere, but it chose to stay here. It’s a measure of our success as a community.”