



2011

GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARD PROFILE:

Beloit, Wisconsin

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A

stroll through downtown Beloit, Wisconsin, reveals a historic town brimming with flowers and a scenic river filled with kayakers. Recovering from a tough reputation and a weak business mix, this Main Street has been able to cut its 19 percent vacancy rate to 7 percent and contribute to a 192 percent boost in property values.

Twenty-three years ago, the Downtown Beloit Association (DBA) formed to reshape the town's destiny. Unique pieces of industrial art and industrial buildings that now house mixed-use projects provide clues to a city that had to chart a new course when manufacturing jobs disappeared and malls lured businesses away. DBA set out to create a sustainable funding base through a business improvement district and to become a Wisconsin Main Street community. The district today is devoid of chains and filled with contributors to a strong local arts economy, which has been a strong catalyst in Beloit's comeback.



Downtown Beloit



Art Walk



Ironworks Building

ARTS AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Beloit's downtown has reinvented itself as an arts destination, evidenced by abundant public art, galleries, theaters, and, as locals will boast, live music every night of the week. From business recruitment to the master plan to events—the arts are part of the comprehensive approach and a true driver of the new economy. The arts business mix ranges from the Beloit Fine Arts Incubator to a framing shop. Even private-sector projects fit into the creative theme. For example, when the Beloit Corporation shut down its campus along the banks of the Rock River in 1999, the developer rehabbed the 750,000 square-foot property in 2001 to create loft offices, an art gallery, and manufacturing space. Now called “Ironworks,” the historic charm and character of the 150-year-old structures fit together with a larger-than-life mural that celebrates industrial heritage through preservation and the new arts economy.

With more than 40 events, Beloit has one of the largest promotional calendars in Wisconsin—from the Art Walk to Holidazzle, something fun is always happening. On a Saturday, you can mingle with 3,000 other people who flock to the weekly farmers market, which many consider one of best in the Midwest. Marketing in the form of advertisements and signage helps shuttle shoppers from the farmers market to adjacent businesses, boosting foot traffic and building awareness of the many great establishments downtown.

While the arts are a strong force in the local economy, the collection of 120 shops, restaurants, and other businesses represents a balance of unique boutiques, florists, and salons that serve both day-trippers and residents. Helping this effort is the DBA's quest for business prospects to fill vacancies as well as business outreach efforts like its Business 101 Seminar Series. A strong partnership, too, with the Greater Beloit Chamber of Commerce, Visit Beloit, and the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation helps support local business owners.

FINDING NEW ECONOMIC USES FOR COOL, OLD BUILDINGS

One particular success story highlights how the DBA helped recruit a new entrepreneur that fit into the community's market position. The ownership group of Paddle and Trail, an outdoor sports outfitter, connected with the DBA to bring together various interested stakeholders. “This convinced the Paddle and Trail ownership group that Beloit possessed the right political and collaborative spirit that would lead to a successful full-service retail and outfitter operation,” says Walter Loos, the managing owner.

DBA pointed the group to a vacant Italianate building next to the then newly constructed canoe-kayak launch. The spot was perfect and the façade improvement design assistance sealed the deal.

Leading by example, the organization assumed the role of a developer and saved the Woolworth Building and the old Hotel Hilton to welcome an independent grocer and a university bookstore to the downtown. The Woolworth Building was slated for demolition in 2003 when the city purchased it with plans to put up a parking lot. The DBA stepped in to advocate for restoring the building to its former glory and getting it back on the tax rolls instead.

At the time, the organization's farmers market had doubled in size, and the demand for local foods also shot up. Seeing an opportunity for a specialty grocery store with a strong local bent, the city issued an RFP, and the owners of Grass Is Greener Gardens, who were vendors at the farmers market, quickly responded. Bushel & Peck opened in 2008, bringing 12 new jobs, along with fresh prepared foods, local and regionally produced foods, and a café. Restaurants as far away as Chicago and Madison get meats and produce delivered by the company, too. This anchor business has been a boon for the community—boosting investor confidence that helped bring



Woolworth Building before (above) and after



Beloit College Arts Center

additional projects to fruition; providing fresh food downtown all year long; and, through a community-initiated development project, saving an important historic building.

Bringing together goals of the community's Downtown Redevelopment Plan and its comprehensive plan, DBA worked with the city to create a financial incentive for private investment through a Tax Increment District (TID). To support goals for mixed-use development and improved storefront appearance, TID money goes toward equity grant funding for upper-floor housing projects and façade rehabilitations. In 2009, the city allocated \$80,000 in TID funds and then increased the funding a year later.

Working with Wisconsin Main Street, the Design and Economic Restructuring (ER) Committees developed two grant funds. The ER Committee administers the funds, reviews applications, and makes sure that applicants follow the downtown design guidelines in order to be eligible for funding. (You can download the façade improvement application and program description from our Solution Center at <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/resources/>). In its initial phase, the façade program gave out \$50,000 to five project recipients; 80 percent of the

money was used for historic restorations, and total investment for the five projects came to \$150,000. The local return is \$2.76 in private investment for every public dollar invested.

A SHARED VISION

In the case of Beloit," says Representative Amy Loudbeck of Wisconsin's 45th Assembly District, "the difference between what a municipality aspires to and what a community can do is the Downtown Beloit Association."

The Main Street program, adept at partnership building, shares offices with the tourism bureau, economic development association, and the chamber in a place called Vision Beloit. The groups work together to fulfill the Beloit 2020 vision (the community-driven vision adopted by the city) and market the city center to potential residents, business owners, visitors, and investors.

The Old Wisconsin Power & Light building, which houses the three organizations, is not just an office but a showcase for the projects that are transforming the city center and a place that lets people dream together about the future. Scenic photos of Beloit decorate the walls, dry-erase boards

encourage collaboration, and transparent displays and a plasma TV exhibit current and completed projects.

Beloit College also shares the dream of creating a better place and has opened an entrepreneurship center, broadcast studio, and college bookstore in the former Hilton Hotel, and a 58,000-square-foot arts center in the former library—all downtown. Its Gallery ABBA occupies two downtown storefronts and gives students a crack at entrepreneurship by operating under a student-ownership structure.

The college administration is not the only group that loves downtown, although bringing elements of the school, such as the bookstore and TV studio, onto Main Street was deliberate and lets the institute benefit from its proximity to the district. The students and their families also spend time away from campus, soaking up the many downtown amenities.

"I am thrilled but not surprised that they, like me, clearly like what they see," says Scott Bierman, president of Beloit College. "Our strong enrollments prove it. But so does their behavior. I see them in Bushel and Pecks on a Thursday night for trivia, buying fruit at the farmers market, and sipping coffee at Nikki's Café along the waterfront."



Memorial Day in Beloit

QUALITY OF LIFE

Downtown truly has been transformed, with collaboration, the arts, and historic preservation at the center of it all. You can see that the riverfront has been visually reclaimed with 120 hanging flower baskets and 31 planters, pocket parks, a bike trail, sculptures and murals, mixed-use projects, and the canoe/kayak launch (which replaced a waterfront parking deck that was removed. People who live in Beloit can feel the difference everyday thanks to the city's commitment to enhancing quality of life.

"You can sit on the patio of a café overlooking Rock River on a Saturday morning," says Beloit resident Rick McGrath. "Walk along the river and visit friends on the street at a bustling farmers market. There are great galleries and a bookstore all right there! My wife and I are music lovers and the accessibility of live music here is unparalleled in the area, indoors and out!"

Together, DBA and its partners have created a vibrant college town that is exciting 365 days a year.

REINVESTMENT STATISTICS

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|---|-----------------|
| Year established: | 1987 |
| Net number of new jobs: | 614 |
| Net number of new businesses: | 206 |
| Number of building rehabilitations: | 340 |
| Number of new buildings: | 9 |
| Vacancy rate when the program began: | 19% |
| Vacancy rate today: | 7.6% |
| Dollar amount of public investment: | \$20,554,740.89 |
| Dollar amount of private investment: | \$54,417,718.50 |
| Number of housing units: | 76 |