

After 20 years, Beloit is still sprucing up downtown

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BELOIT — A Beloit resident from 20 years ago wouldn't recognize downtown today, Rod Gottfredsen said.

“Buildings actually, literally were boarded up, windows missing—it just looked kind of ugly,” he said.

Gottfredsen would know.

The owner of Austin's Barbershop, 316 State St., Beloit, sat down with a group of other business owners in the mid-1980s to talk about how they could make their downtown better.

Today, Gottfredsen and other community members see the fruits of those efforts. Hip new businesses, such as restaurants, coffee shops, a gallery and a bookstore, line downtown streets, with trendy housing units on the upper floors.

Storefronts that were once an eyesore have been renovated and restored, offering an attractive yet historical feel.

“It's just so great to see what has happened,” Gottfredsen said.

In some respects, Beloit could serve as a model for Janesville as it attempts to implement its newest downtown plan. Several aspects of the Janesville plan, including public-private partnerships, downtown housing and a Business Improvement District, already have been implemented successfully in Beloit, community leaders there say.

One of the first steps for the Beloit business owners was setting up a Business Improvement District, said Andrew Janke, who served as the first executive director of the Downtown Beloit Association from 1988 to 2002. He now is the city's economic development director and executive director of the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corp.

The district established a special assessment on downtown properties. It allowed the newly formed Downtown Beloit Association to focus on how to improve the downtown



Photo by Al Hoch

Rachel Schrader of Beloit uses the Pleasant Street Coffeehouse to enjoy her favorite brew and to surf the internet.



Photo by Al Hoch

Rod Gottfredsen, owner of Austin's Barber Shop at 316 State St., Beloit.



instead of fund raising, Janke said.

But the association had a lot of help.

Private organizations such as Beloit 2000 (now known as Beloit 2020), a group focused on riverfront development; the Greater Beloit Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corp. worked together with the city to create a vision for the downtown.

“What separates success from non-success is when there are entities or organizations that will champion those plans once they’re done,” Janke said.

Another huge step for Beloit was joining the Main Street program, Janke said. The program, run through the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, offers training and support for communities looking to create long-term revitalization plans for their downtowns.

The program focuses on four areas:

- Organization.
- Promotion.
- Design.
- Economic restructuring.

Through those four areas, Beloit has transformed its downtown, said Kathleen Braatz, director of the Downtown Beloit Association. The city now shows off its downtown with events such as ArtWalk, Fridays in the Park and a farmers market.

In the last four years, the farmers market has grown from 43 vendors to 86, Braatz said. Last year’s ArtWalk drew 115 artists to 30 downtown locations.

Jennifer Livingston, owner of Pleasant Street Coffee House, said she likes what she sees in the downtown.

She opened the business in December 2006 in the ground floor of Heritage View, a mixed-use building developed by the late Ken Hendricks at 604 Pleasant St.

The shop was packed on a recent Friday afternoon with

Photo by Al Hoch

Betsy Schmiechen at The Villager, 429 E. Grand Ave.



Photo by Al Hoch

The Turtle Creek Book Store occupies the building at 444 E. Grand Ave. in downtown Beloit.



Photo by Al Hoch

Shaughn Evans of McIntyre Concrete Inc. works on the renovation of the old Woolworth building at the corner of State St. and E. Public St., downtown Beloit. The building will be converted into a grocery store.

people chatting, reading and working on their computers. In summer, customers can sit on a back patio facing the river and a collection of murals on the Beloit Iron Works building.

“It’s right here on the river,” Livingston said. “It’s got the patio and the bike path, fabulous views.”

Rachel Schrader is a frequent customer at the coffee house. The 29-year-old lives nearby at 444 E. Grand Ave., site of the former Beloit Hilton Hotel.

Years ago, the historic building was crumbling and deteriorated, and the city at one point talked about tearing it down, Braatz said.

Instead, the city, the Downtown Beloit Association and Beloit College made an effort to save the building. Now, it houses Turtle Creek Bookstore on the ground floor and residential units above.

Schrader works in Rockton, Ill., but moved to downtown Beloit after a friend convinced her to spend some time there.

“Once I was introduced to it, I loved it,” she said.

But the downtown still faces challenges, Janke said. It still has some vacant space, and some storefronts could be made more attractive.

In fact, the city just approved a new downtown redevelopment plan last month that spans the next 20 years.

“We’ve accomplished a great deal in our community in the last 20 years,” Janke said, “but there’s still an opportunity to do more.”

A LOOK AT DOWNTOWNS

Downtowns have become a focus for many communities in Rock County.

Janesville, Edgerton, Milton and Evansville all are creating or implementing downtown revitalization plans, looking to attract locals and visitors to the heart of their cities in an age of strip malls and big-box stores.

But what can downtown plans do for a community? In a two-day series, The Janesville Gazette looks at

successful downtowns and what Rock County communities can learn from them.

Today: Many elements of Janesville's latest downtown plan, such as public-private partnerships and downtown housing, have been implemented in Beloit for years. Beloit has been transforming its downtown for 20 years, and the work isn't done yet.

Monday: Despite its small-town feel, the village of Cambridge in Dane County has a thriving downtown, attracting visitors to its artsy shops and charming bed-and-breakfasts.

Small communities have to decide whether they want to appeal to residents or visitors and then follow through on plans to attract their target audiences, experts say.