



**City of Burlington
Downtown Strategic Planning Report
August 24, 2008**



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Downtown Strategic Planning Session Report

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Introduction

The City of Burlington's Downtown has undergone significant changes over the course of its history. Ranging from its hey-day as the center of commerce for Western Racine and Eastern Walworth County, focused heavily on providing services to agricultural interests; to the industrialization of the downtown core which relied heavily on the city's proximity to the river; to today, after the completion of a significant redevelopment effort which relocated industries and redeveloped the city's picturesque shoreline. Downtown Burlington has held an important place in the city's history, and continues to be an important piece of the city's identity as we look toward the future.

With the major redevelopment efforts largely complete, the focus of city leaders is to determine how to continue to attract downtown redevelopment efforts, and improve upon the current mix of businesses and residential development in the downtown core. This question is significantly important at this point in time as two major factors play a direct role in the continued success of downtown – 1) the opening of the Burlington Bypass and 2) the migration of major retailers to the Highway 36 (Milwaukee Avenue) corridor. Additional challenges must also be addressed in the Downtown core, including a relatively high rate of absentee landlords, lack of convenient parking, and the current mix of businesses.

As a result, the Mayor, Common Council, downtown business owners, building owners and members of the Burlington Chamber of Commerce met to discuss goals and objectives for downtown, as well strategies to meet those targets.

The 2008 Downtown Strategic Planning Workshop builds upon previous planning studies and efforts focused on the Burlington Community as a whole. In July 2008, the Common Council and local leaders from across a wide spectrum of interests completed a workshop planning session focused on the future of the city as a whole. This builds upon a previous effort which was completed in 2002. Additionally, Mayor Robert Miller and Alderman Katie Simenson are currently serving on the Racine County Land Use Plan Committee, which is designed to develop the city's 2025 Land Use Plan and focus on future development activities.

Building off City's July 14, 2008 Strategic Planning Session:

It is important to note that the Downtown strategic planning session is building off of a previous effort that was completed in July of 2008 and focused on the entire community. An important aspect of the July 2008 planning session was a significant discussion of the future of Downtown. A summary of the items referencing Downtown include the creation of some key result areas, as discussed below:

Participants were very concerned about the future of downtown when the highway bypass was completed in 2009 and identified this as a key results area; this issue was also raised in the 2002 workshop. Proposed strategic objectives and possible tactics to accomplish the Key Result Area of maintaining the central business district as a city asset include:

1. **Objective: Gain control of land use in bypass area**
 - a. Tactic: Provide/withhold utility services within service basins and beyond
 - b. Tactic: Invoke extraterritorial planning control as allowed
 - c. Tactic: Find alternative means to control if necessary
2. **Objective: Fill empty downtown buildings with sustainable restaurants and retail businesses**
 - a. Tactic: Recruit/solicit restaurants/retail directly
 - b. Tactic: Grant money to support business and/or improve buildings
 - c. Tactic: Support/favor private sector efforts to establish restaurants/retail
 - d. Tactic: Analyze need and opportunities for redeveloping buildings
 - e. Tactic: Award revolving loan fund money to support businesses and/or improve buildings
3. **Objective: Energize a sustainable 24/7 downtown (live, work, and play)**
 - a. Tactic: Encourage development of a Main Street type of downtown improvement organization
 - b. Tactic: Encourage “industrial model” of city, Chamber, business coalition
 - c. Tactic: Encourage development of a business improvement district (BID)

As a result, the Downtown Strategic Planning session was intended to build off of the work of the previous session and bring more focus to the issue of a sustainable and vibrant downtown, as well as the tactics and strategies needed to achieve these goals.

Discussion of Planning Session

The strategic planning session included a series of brainstorming sessions facilitated by City Administrator Kevin Lahner. During the first part of the program, Mr. Lahner asked the participants to think about what attracted people to downtown today. (Appendix A) Additionally, individuals were asked to brainstorm about the advantages and disadvantages of the downtown as it exists in 2008 (Appendix B.) Following that process, the group worked together to determine a broad list of goals which asked the question “*As a community, what do we want the downtown to be?*” (Appendix C.) Through this exercise, workshop participants were encouraged to think about the way downtown would look in a fifteen to twenty year timeframe. Finally, from the list of broad goals and objectives, individuals were asked to rank

the top five most important elements of a successful downtown by answering the question: *“In order for downtown to be successful, we must...”* (Appendix D).

The top five goals and objectives were then to be translated into key strategies where responsibility was assigned to the appropriate partners, and measures were developed to help determine the success and/or failures of these strategies.

Four Key Focus Areas

The end result of the strategic planning discussion was a focus on five key areas that were critical to the future of Downtown Burlington. Workshop participants overwhelmingly indicated that five areas were the main issues of emphasis, and the key themes upon which a Downtown Burlington strategy should be built. Upon review of the workshop information, the list was pared down to four areas, as two of the themes were closely related. The four Key Focus Areas for Downtown Burlington are:

1. Increase/promote the availability of parking.
2. Capitalize on area and local tourism.
 - a. Ex: ChocolateFest, Lake Geneva tourism, local festivals)
3. Attract/retain more small retail and restaurants and destination locations to Downtown.
4. Continue to build upon historic charm and natural attributes through incentives for continued redevelopment and additional improvements.

Upon the creation of the list of focus areas, workshop participants indicated a need for more explicit objectives, as well as the need to assign responsible parties for each area. As a result a more detailed discussion of each item is included herein. It is interesting to note that the more focused Downtown workshop parallels the work that was conducted at a more macro level during the city-wide workshop a few months earlier. Due to the fact that both groups included a different set of people who contributed to the workshops, this information suggests that there is likely wide agreement regarding the key issues facing downtown throughout the leaders in the community.

1. Increase/promote the availability of parking. **Primary Responsible Party: City of Burlington**

The parking issue is one that has continually been an issue in Downtown Burlington for much of its history. Parking spaces tend to be located in inconvenient locations for some local businesses, and/or unavailable during peak times of the day. Additionally, if more residential spaces in downtown are desired, additional parking will be necessary in order to support more residents. Among the group there appeared to be wide support for additional parking lots and/or a parking garage that would accommodate additional parking spaces.

Key Objectives:

- A. *Create information for consumers on the availability of free parking spaces in order to encourage use of existing city lots that may be underutilized.*

Goal Date for Completion: March 2009

- B. *Build additional parking lots and/or a parking garage to create additional parking capacity in Downtown.*

Goal Date for Completion: December 2010 (Increase parking capacity by 30 percent).

2. **Capitalize on area and local tourism to increase Downtown Burlington's visibility and attract new visitors to the city.**

Primary Responsible Parties: Burlington Area Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants

The City of Burlington is uniquely situated in Southeastern Wisconsin in that it can take advantage of a wide variety of visitors to the region. Regional draws, such as ChocolateFest as well as tourist destinations such as Lake Geneva provide ideal avenues for promotion of Downtown merchants. Additional avenues for taking advantage of tourists in the Burlington area need to be explored to continue the viability of downtown businesses, as well as increase the attraction of local retail spaces.

Key Objectives:

- A. *Form a Downtown Burlington Association for the purpose of joint marketing and promotional efforts to include advertising, special events, festivals and other related activities. (Downtown Merchants)*

Goal Date for Completion: March 2009

- B. *Identify advertising and promotional activities employed by other communities and customize those activities to Downtown Burlington. (Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants)*

Goal Date for Completion: Ongoing

- C. *Begin advertising Burlington retailers and special events in Lake Geneva area publications and other media. (Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Merchants)*

Goal Date for Completion: Ongoing

- D. *Explore the increase of the Hotel/Motel occupancy tax in order to generate revenue specifically for the promotion of Downtown Burlington. (City of Burlington)*

Goal Date for Completion: December 2009

3. Attract/retain more small retail and restaurants and destination locations to Downtown.

Primary Responsible Parties: City of Burlington, Racine County Economic Development Corporation

Clearly one of the greatest challenges to the continued viability of Downtown Burlington is the ability to attract and retain quality retail and restaurant locations. These businesses serve as “anchors” to a viable downtown and contribute to a “24 hour” environment desired in the core business district. Notably the large retail chains have located along the Highway 36 (Milwaukee Avenue) corridor, creating the need for a more localized, niche-driven retailer that has the ability to attract significant numbers of customers. Successful programs in similarly situated communities should be explored so that they may be mirrored here in Burlington. Additionally, successful programs such as the Historical Preservation Committee’s façade redevelopment program should be continually evaluated to determine if they are creating additional value in Downtown and contributing to the retention/attraction of additional retailers or restaurants.

Key Objectives:

- A. *Create real-time development related data including demographic, tax climate, rental rate, property assessment and other related information and promote facts to potential retail and/or restaurant clients*

Goal Date for Completion: August 2009

- B. *Create marketing material related specifically to Downtown Burlington and distribute material to existing businesses that would contribute to the overall character and viability of Downtown.*

Goal Date for Completion: August 2009 (ongoing)

4. Continue to build upon historic charm and natural attributes through incentives for continued redevelopment and additional improvements.

Primary Responsible Parties: City of Burlington, Racine County Economic Development Corporation

- A. *Maximize the use of grant funds for the continued redevelopment of Downtown Burlington with a historic turn-of-the century theme. Seek new*

grant funds to encourage redevelopment of both the interior and exterior of existing buildings.

Goal Date for Completion: Ongoing

- B. Review the current Historic Preservation District boundaries and standards to ensure the historic nature of the downtown district is maintained and redevelopment is encouraged.*

Goal Date for Completion: July 2009

- C. Seek additional funding from the state and/or federal government for the continued improvement of downtown, including exploring such programs as the Main Street Program and additional Brownfield Redevelopment funds.*

Goal Date for Completion: Ongoing

Summary

As the character and distinguishing demographics of Burlington continues to change, the need for Downtown to respond to those changes is very important. The future of success of Downtown is dependent upon various groups and individuals working together to meet strategic goals. The above key areas should be the focus as we move forward, however additional issues will emerge in the future. The need to revisit these issues to create measures of success and for additional follow-up will be required in the future to ensure the success of these plans.

Appendix A – Why do people come to Downtown Burlington today?

(As recorded at workshop session)

- Relatively safe
- Use Government Services
- Library
- Shop at antique stores
- Proximity to metro areas

Appendix B – Positives and Negatives of Downtown as it exists today.

(As recorded at workshop session)

Positives

- Free parking
- Variety of stores/services
- High customer service
- Historic Buildings/Charm
- Visit non-chain restaurants
- Farmers Market
- Church
- Work
- Tourism (Parades, Museums, etc...)
- Unique Things
- Loyalty
- Time Savings
- Convenience

Negatives

- Traffic Flow
- Lack of Parking
- Cleanliness
- Empty – Limited Destinations
- No Bike Racks
- Only Seasonal
- Snow Removal Issues
- Street Signage
- Way finding Signs

Appendix C – “As a community, what do we want Downtown to be?”

(As recorded at workshop session)

- 24/7 Environment
- Restored Buildings
- More retail/storefronts and restaurants
- Self-supporting businesses
- Signage/decorations conformity
- Trolley/Transportation
- Less Noise
- More Landscaping
- Less Asphalt
- More Awnings
- Build on what we have
- Nice Hotels/Bed and Breakfasts
- Encourage retail
- More Events and more seasonal events
- Get Community involved
- Gear toward Baby Boomers (retail/residential mix)
- Incentives for 2nd story
- Capitalize on area tourism
- Business Liaisons/Communications
- Brick Streets
- Parking Lot(s)
- Downtown Merchant's website
- More Downtown Activities
- More Uniform Hours
- Street Patrol
- Bike Friendly
- Stop Signs/Slow Traffic
- More Art
- Uniform Upkeep
- Streetscape/Trashcans

Appendix D: “In order for Downtown to be successful we must:”

(As recorded at workshop session)

1. Increase the availability of parking.
2. Capitalize on area and local tourism.
3. Attract more retail/restaurants and destination locations to Downtown.
4. Continue to build on our historic charm, natural attributes and other improvements.
5. Provide Incentives for continued redevelopment and improvements.