



2011

GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARD PROFILE:

Beloit, Wisconsin

BY ANDREA L. DONO

GAMSA

TWO THOUSAND
AND ELEVEN

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 the 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 Loudenberg 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

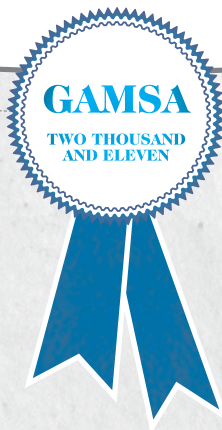
Year established:	1987
Net number of new jobs:	614
Net number of new businesses:	206
Number of building rehabilitations:	340
Number of new buildings:	9
Vacancy rate when the program began:	19%
Vacancy rate today:	7.6%
Dollar amount of public investment:	\$20,554,740.89
Dollar amount of private investment: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

2011

GREAT AMERICAN MAIN STREET AWARD PROFILE:

Fort Pierce, Florida

BY ANDREA L. DONO



People call the waters along the eastern shore of Florida, “Treasure Coast,” after a sunken Spanish fleet, but the real treasure is downtown Fort Pierce.

Twenty-three years ago, Main Street Fort Pierce (MSFP) began transforming a blighted Enterprise Zone into a tropical oasis filled with rehabbed 1920s buildings, new street trees (palms, of course), and waterfront trails. Incremental change turned people into believers when the program acted as a developer and rehabbed an eyesore, Old City Hall, and the community’s threatened Sunrise Theater in 1995.

After years of persuasion, the owner finally sold the shuttered 1925 silent movie house to Main Street Fort Pierce, which renovated it, doubled its size, and turned it over to the city debt free. The organization had many hurdles to jump as the five-year, \$13.5 million project experienced setbacks from two major hurricanes, but was ultimately rewarded for its hard work with an American Institute of Architects award and countless patrons who have been enjoying performances like Russian ballets and B.B. King since the theater opened in 2006—and spending money with other businesses nearby. The theater also gave the program a good reason to persuade business owners to start staying open after 5:00 p.m.—especially to capture theater-goers’ patronage on show nights.

John Ward, with the Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency, called this a Herculean undertaking that resulted in a “cultural cornerstone for the community and a true economic engine that has spun off financial benefits for every merchant downtown.” The Sunrise Theater is now a regional destination that annually attracts 50,000 people. John Wilkes, the theater’s executive director, surveyed the audience and found 40 percent of the people who attended performances had never been to Fort Pierce before. He also shared that the economic spin-off from the theater is 10 times the amount spent on tickets; the \$13 million in ticket sales has generated an economic impact of \$8-10 million.



Sunrise Theater, before and after

Early Main Street projects like the Sunrise Theater, Ward says, established a historic preservation ethic for the entire city. By the time the program finished its third rehab project, several other building owners had embarked on their own rehabs throughout the downtown, sparking local residents to take renewed pride in their homes.

While Fort Pierce is a major retirement destination and sunny wintertime stop for northern “snow birds,” the Main Street program and its partners are working hard to create a livable community year round.

The group has done a great job of engaging volunteers, new and long-time residents alike. A core group of 75 volunteers help drive the Main Street program, and thousands of volunteer hours are clocked in each year. When retiree Suzie Smith moved to the downtown, she quickly found that all the fun events and exciting projects were somehow associated with the Main Street program. Pretty soon she started volunteering for Plein Air, a three-day extravaganza that invites creative types to paint historic buildings and the riverfront, and then moved up the ranks to play a bigger role in the organization.

STRATEGIC REVITALIZATION

When looking at Main Street’s timeline, you can see that the community’s renaissance was a well-thought out affair. Studies, plans, and public input contributed to a measured, strategic approach to smart revitalization—a true model for all Main Street communities. Many attribute today’s bustling downtown to a charrette led by Main Street Fort Pierce in 1995; the event drew 300 participants eager to chart the downtown’s course.

“It was a watershed event for the city and Main Street,” says Michael Busha, executive director of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, the nonprofit group with which the Main Street program worked on the planning process. “[They] produced a Citizens’ Master Plan for Revitalization that has been used by Main Street as a blueprint for transforming a dying downtown area and its surrounding neighborhoods into a vibrant, world-class destination.”

Forging ahead with the resulting master plan and new ordinances and codes that helped protect historic assets, Main Street Fort Pierce was determined to make down-

town a great place to live and do business. The next step was looking at opportunities. Partnering with the city, MSFP commissioned a strategic marketing plan that led to the opening of an astonishing 60 businesses in six months!

Excitement continues to build with new projects, such as the first residential development since downtown’s 1920s hey-day. In 1999, the organization conducted a market analysis on housing development potential to see if becoming a small, urban village “where residents can have an urban experience in a small-town setting” was realistic.

Within an eight-mile radius of downtown there are 37,000 employees. The researcher was able to get 26 percent of the 3,000 workers surveyed to share their housing and shopping preferences. The survey showed high interest in downtown living. The downtown was seen as appealing to several different target groups—not just empty nesters and second-home buyers, but also artists, downtown business owners, and boat owners who want to be close to the marina. The survey results gave a green light for adding various new housing units to the downtown.



Winter Lights Walk



New downtown residences

PAVING THE WAY

MSFP has completed \$15 million in restoration and new construction projects. The restoration of the Sunrise was truly a shining star, but the Main Street program also rehabbed the historic Platts Backus House for its office and public space. One interesting aspect of this \$600,000 project is its use of multiple funding sources. The organization matched a \$50,000 grant from the Florida Historic Preservation Division and a \$350,000 grant from the Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency with several public and private donations from the National City Foundation, the St. Lucie Medical Center, Nunno Builders, a fund raiser at Archie's

Seabreeze Restaurant, and a group of Realtors. In-kind support, such as the police department offering to paint the building and others donating professional architectural services, made this project happen.

Many say it was the organization's restoration of Old City Hall, which created a much-needed events space downtown, that helped make believers out of naysayers. The City Hall rehab inspired the city to jump in with projects like replacing the 80-year-old streets, burying utilities, and repairing broken sidewalks. A library, public art, visitors center, and other amenities were added downtown.

The changes in Ft. Pierce have gone a long way to attract private-sector activity. For example, during an arts event,

three dilapidated but history rich buildings caught the eye of Philip Steel, an artist and architect who was encouraged to buy the property with a developer and launch into extensive rehab work.

"Business owners like us would not have considered this investment and move were it not for the accomplishments of Main Street Fort Pierce," says Steel. Both partners moved their offices into two of the spaces in Hill House, which is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A gallery and a museum space offering a tribute to Harry Hill, the artist after whom the building is named, are slated for the remaining spaces.

MSFP created a business clustering plan based on the marketing plan to help businesses determine the most appropriate locations so they could benefit from being near compatible businesses. When small business owners approach them, Main Street Fort Pierce can offer consumer-informed guidance about how to position their businesses so they can be as successful as possible. For example, when the owner of Brewer's Café first thought she'd open a sandwich shop, she was told that need was already being met, but that a coffee shop would satisfy an unmet need.

REINVESTMENT STATISTICS

Year established:	1988
Net number of new jobs:	404
Net number of new businesses:	88
Number of building rehabilitations:	136
Number of new buildings:	17
Vacancy rate when the program began:	40%
Vacancy rate today:	8%
Dollar amount of public investment:	\$14,575,000.00
Dollar amount of private investment:	\$25,020,000.00
Number of housing units:	176



Platts Backus House rehab

“BUSINESS OWNERS LIKE US WOULD NOT HAVE CONSIDERED THIS INVESTMENT AND MOVE WERE IT NOT FOR THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF MAIN STREET FORT PIERCE.”

- Philip Steel, an artist and architect



Fort Pierce festival



Waterfront at night

Entrepreneurs interested in opening a business downtown can go to MSFP—a one-stop shop that directs them to all of the agencies and departments that must approve their plans. The program also has a referral system with the Small Business Development Center and the Small Business Administration.

SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The future not only looks bright for Fort Pierce, it's looking pretty green as well. St. Lucie County and the City of Fort Pierce are working to become a national model for energy efficiency with the creation of the nation's first Green District. Working with the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the city will establish an energy efficiency zone downtown to benchmark building performance and experiment with ways to reduce energy usage.

Another cool sustainability project, the “Extreme Yard Makeover,” a collaborative effort involving the South Florida Water Management District and several community partners, transformed the Platts Backus House garden into a native-plant showcase demonstration site to teach visitors and residents about water conservation techniques. A seminar series ran in conjunction with the garden project to teach residents how to use these concepts in their own yards and reduce stormwater runoff.

In 1995, Fort Pierce was in such a state of decline that leadership didn't attend the community meetings that the Main Street program led. That meeting resulted in the city's master plan, which is still being followed today. A new streetscape, new zoning and codes, and a renewed enthusiasm among all stakeholders yielded a completely different downtown. It was no longer that scary place people avoided at night but a gorgeous waterfront Main Street with a new spirit and steady stream of events and artistic energy.

Fort Pierce Main Street's story is one of measured, strategic planning. Its success results from its strong leadership and willingness to be a catalyst and its ability to make informed decisions that bring it closer to its revitalization goals instead of simply moving from one project to the next. Bouncing back from two hurricanes in 2004, the Sunrise City has proven it is both a shining and resilient gem on the Treasure Coast.

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