Downtown Direction Study

A Collaborative & Incremental Approach to Downtown Revitalization

Downtown Directional Study
Final Recommendations

Recommendations Adopted January 8, 2002 by Downtown Task Force

Report Prepared by: John Gardner, City of Stevens Point
Brian Doudna, Portage County Business Council

Purpose

The Central Business District of Stevens Point is a healthy commercial area that has been impacted recently by several factors that has led to a higher percentage of vacancies than previously experienced. The Portage County Business Council and City of Stevens Point agreed to collaborate on a joint planning process that would involve a public/private partnership in planning and implementing a future direction for downtown.

The City and Business Council staff identified four specific areas of focus to seek outside technical assistance. These areas include: Market Data, Best and Highest Use of Downtown Real Estate/Sites, Parking and Traffic Management, and Urban Design.

The Downtown Directional Study has been designed to provide future guidance to the City, private developers, business owners, associations and community groups. The recommendations of the report will provide the City and Business Council a working framework that will provide community direction as various development opportunities present themselves in the future.

Process

The Downtown Directional Study started with a submission of a grant in the fall of 2000. Upon receiving funding for the project from the Wisconsin Department of Commerce – Community Based Economic Development Program, the Business Council and City of Stevens Point started the process of creating a taskforce to serve as the steering committee of the Downtown Directional Study. This process started in March of 2001. Downtown consultants were selected and eight Focus Groups were conducted of various groups including demographic ranges from high school students to area retirees. In addition, the Business Council and City held listening sessions on each component of the downtown directional study to gain local input prior to an outside consultant coming into the downtown to review and make recommendations on that particular area of the Directional Study.

The Parking and Traffic Management section required that a Parking Study be completed prior to the consultant on-site visit. This was completed in May of 2001. The site visit of the parking and traffic management report was conducted in June of 2001 to allow this input to be submitted to the Urban Design and Real Estate Consultants prior to their on-site visits. A separate report is available on just the parking and traffic management recommendations without taking into consideration the other components of the Downtown Directional Study.

The on-site visits by the real estate, urban design and general downtown professionals were conducted in late August. During their visit, a public meeting was held after their community tour to provide public input directly to the consultant's prior to their working on any recommendations. After three full days of meetings and research, the consultants presented their base recommendations at a public presentation. A question and answer session was held following the presentation to clarify recommendations and address specific questions.

The Downtown Task Force took these recommendations and reviewed them to place local value judgments on the recommendations based on their understanding of downtown issues and the general public input. The downtown taskforce took several meetings to define and clarify the recommendations prior to voting on which recommendations should be implemented. After the taskforce identified recommendations for implementation, the staff of the Business Council and City gave presentations to the general public, downtown merchants, downtown business association, Business Council Board of Directors, large employers in the downtown area, city and county representatives during the months of November and December 2001. During this process, several recommendations that had been supported by the Taskforce were deemed negatively during these the presentation reviewing the Downtown Directional Study's recommendations to be submitted to the City of Stevens Point. The Taskforce met in January of 2002 to review the feedback received during the community presentations. The taskforce reconsidered these recommendations and modified the Downtown Directional Study's recommendations to prepare for the presentation to City committees. Since the beginning of the project, the Taskforce has met 14 times to discuss and develop a new direction for downtown Stevens Point.

Introduction to Taskforce Recommendations

The Downtown Task Force, working with the Portage County Business Council, would like to submit this Report to the Stevens Point Common Council for their adoption and implementation.

The Business Council retained Downtown Professionals Network to prepare a series of recommendations for the improvement of Downtown Stevens Point. The Task Force prioritized the consultant recommendations. These recommendations were presented to a series of stakeholders including: the public, key property owners, City staff, County staff, County elected officials and the Portage County Business Council Board of Directors. Input from these stakeholders was reviewed to determine the amount of support, feasibility of implementation, cost, and implementation time frame. The Task Force made the final recommendations included in this report after considering all input. This report is being submitted to city committees and the city council for review and approval. This will start the implementation phase of the Downtown Directional Study.

The Task Force chose to retain all the consultant recommendations in the report submission. This provides the current and future readers the ability to understand all of the urban design and parking management projects that were being proposed by the consultants. Even though the downtown taskforce may not support these recommendations today, future downtown development groups may deem a recommendation/project appropriate and seek to implement based on future community and stakeholder support.

Final Recommendations are divided into the following principles:

- Access and Mobility in the Downtown
- Link to the Riverfront
- Integrate underdeveloped and vacant sites into downtown
- Beautify Main Street & Downtown
- Secure Downtown Employers
- Parking

Access and Mobility in the Downtown

The Consultant team and downtown taskforce observed that access to the downtown is difficult. Centerpoint Dr. is an effective bypass of the downtown. The Main St. and downtown is hidden behind the generally blank walls of the Centerpoint Marketplace and Shopko. The Task Force members and consultants want to make visual access of the downtown better and vehicle/pedestrian/bicycle access to the downtown easier.

The consultants also observed that the vehicle circulation in downtown is difficult. Main St. is one-way, Clark St. is one-way, Strongs Ave. is one-way. Vehicles are prevented from leaving Main St. to go south on Water St. Task Force members want to make vehicle circulation within the downtown easier, this will reduce a resident or visitor's confusion in navigating a maze of one-way streets and allow them easily to get back to open parking stalls or their final destination.

Recommended by Task Force

A. Open Main St on the East. Open the east end of Main St. at the Centerpoint Dr. juncture as a means of making downtown easier to access. This would give the downtown a straight access route from Hwy 10 W instead of having to take several turns to get to Main St.

B. Open Main St. to Water St. Construct a full intersection between Water St. and Main St. This action would allow vehicles to travel south on Water St. from the downtown. Currently, vehicles wishing to travel south must use Strongs Ave. or make several turns using a combination of Clark and Third Streets to leave the downtown.

C. Make Strongs Ave. Two-way traffic between Arlington and Main St. The creation of two-way traffic will make it easier for cars to move within the downtown. Approximately eight pakring stalls may be lost due to this modification. The City should attempt to limit the amount of parking lost due to this change. This will also require the installation of new traffic signals at the intersection of Strongs and Clark Streets.

D. Narrow Water Street Northbound. The Taskforce felt that to increase the pedestrian and bicycle access between downtown and the riverfront, Water Street should be narrowed. This street is not part of Highway 10 and doesn't require the same width and lane capacity of the Highway. The City should work with adjacent property owners and other parties to implement this recommendation.

Recommended by Consultant but not supported by Task Force for immediate implementation. Action may be revisited at a more appropriate time.

A. Main St. two-way traffic. The consultant recommended making Main St. two-way traffic between Water St. and Prentice St. as a means of improving circulation within the Downtown. Task Force members did not support the recommendation. Business owners and residents expressed concerns throughout the public input process. These some of theses concerns included: the width of the street, confusion such a change would create for the driver, and the conflicts between circulating traffic and vehicles unloading wares.

B. Loading zones on Main St. Not necessary if Main St. remains one-way. Third Court is already designated as an area for this activity.

C. Extend Briggs St. to meet Third St. Not necessary unless Centerpoint Dr. is relocated to Portage St.

D. Extend Main St. west of Water St. to Wisconsin River. Benefits did not exceed costs. Also, the taskforce didn't want to promote commercial development on the west side of Water Street.

E. Extend Third Court thru Centerpoint Marketplace to Centerpoint Dr. Benefits did not exceed costs. This project would disrupt Centerpoint Marketplace.

Strong Link to Riverfront

The Wisconsin River is the city's great attraction and powerful feature. Providing a better connection between the downtown and the River should be a priority.

Recommended by Task Force

A. Wisconsin Public Service site used as a park and parking lot. Expansion of Pioneer-Pfiffner Park onto the WPS land was supported. This also would be similar to the Riverfront plan adopted by the City in the 1990's.

Recommended by Consultant but not supported by Task Force for immediate implementation. Action may be revisited at a more appropriate time.

A. Extend Main St. west of Water St. to Wisconsin River. Recommended as a means to connect downtown to Riverfront. Benefits did not exceed costs.

B. Convert bank building along riverfront to a different, more public oriented use.

C. Establish retail, cultural/entertainment, and restaurant opportunities west of Water St. and east of Crosby Ave. as a means of ensuring activity on the river and create an extension of the downtown. Task Force members did not support "selling" off the Riverfront to private sector. The Task Force felt and public input confirmed that the Wisconsin Public Service site and the Crosby Ave. parking areas should be kept free of buildings to afford the public a view of the Wisconsin River from Water St.

Integrate underdeveloped and vacant sites into downtown

The presence of vacant sites and underutilized parcels is a negative image for the downtown and for the entire community. Those parcels are not contributing fully to the tax base. The challenge is to find a way for these sites to evolve so that they are a benefit to the entire downtown and integrate into the existing fabric of the downtown.

Recommended by Task Force

A. Rezone industrial-zoned properties to compatible zoning districts. Uses allowed on the sites currently zoned industrial are not compatible with the goals of downtown renovation or with the commercial and residential uses adjacent to the parcels. Down zoning these parcels will prevent these incompatible uses from being built.

B. Create residential development at the edges of downtown and upper floors of commercial properties. An active downtown results from a mix of uses. New development should offer street level retail, office, restaurants and entertainment uses with the upper floor providing housing. Residential uses will provide a 24-hour use of the downtown. New housing must address the amenity expectations plus parking requirements in order to be successful.

C. Redevelop Lullaby and Portesi Blocks. Redevelopment of these blocks will add to the tax base and add activity to the downtown. Redevelopment should be in a manner that is consistent with downtown; small setbacks, contiguous buildings, and multi-story.

D. Re-align Centerpoint Dr. to bring vacant industrial sites into the downtown. Re-aligning Centerpoint Dr. to Portage St. will allow expansion space for the downtown. Moving Centerpoint Dr. north will allow the Penney's and former Stage stores to expand and still have parking adjacent to their store fronts. Moving Centerpoint Dr. will allow the new street to be constructed as a parkway; a narrower street than it currently is with provisions made for sidewalks, boulevards, and a large number of street trees. A narrower street will allow for better pedestrian connections between the housing to the north and the downtown. The now-vacant industrial sites should be developed in a pattern that is consistent with downtown; small setbacks, contiguous buildings and multi-story. The street grid with the newly relocated Centerpoint Dr. and Briggs, Union, Meadow, Third and Second Streets should be re-established, consistent with parking needs of existing and future Marketplace stores. This development pattern will increase activity and investment downtown while creating a connection from the downtown with the residential housing to the north.

E. Acquire former gas station on SE corner of Clark and Third St. Remove abandoned building and combine space with parking to the south to create an efficient parking lot available to the public.

F. Redevelop former gas station on NE corner of Water St. and Clark St. into a higher use with better visual impact at the entrance to downtown. Due to existing tenant parking needs, additional landscaping could provide a visually pleasing entrance to the downtown while also enhancing this site.

G. Develop a parking structure to allow redevelopment of surface parking lots near retail and major employers. Implementation will be dependent upon demand and partnering the costs in an effective manner.

H. The Fox Theater is a building of physical and symbolic significance to the Main St. The Task Force recommended that the City, Business Council and Arts Council work with the Fox Theater owners in an effort to get the marquee operational and use it as a community sign.

Recommended by Consultant but not supported by Task Force for immediate implementation. Action may be revisited at a more appropriate time.

A. Convert city parking lot west of Water St. and north and east of Crosby Ave. to multi-story businesses and residential development. Task Force members felt the view to the Wisconsin River and public ownership were of primary importance and should not be changed.

B. Relocate leased public parking from "library lot" to former Clark St. gas station, SE corner of Clark and Third St. Some members felt the parking in the library lot should be reserved for customers and the current all-day leased parking consumed valuable customer spaces. Others felt the leased parking was critical to the operation of at least some of the businesses in the block.

Beautify Main Street & Downtown

Traditional downtown districts are necessarily places of pedestrian experiences. The physical environment should be one of the highlights of that pedestrian experience. To facilitate pedestrian activity, the downtown should be a beautiful place complementing the downtown architecture, the attractiveness of the river and the vitality of its commercial enterprises.

Recommended by Task Force

A. Create street edges by use of trees. Trees will help separate traffic from pedestrians. They will also add a "ceiling" to the pedestrian space creating a more human-scaled environment and will provide relief from the hard surfaces of a downtown. The Community Foundation may be a resource for assisting in implementing future plantings.

B. Institute a public art program. Public art in the downtown can add interest and highlight local culture. Public art may take many forms including the usual statues and paintings. Or it could be applied to necessary physical elements such as decorative man-hole covers.

C. Update downtown benches

D. Update downtown trash receptacles

E. Remove existing kiosks.

F. Implement new directional signs in the entire city including the downtown. This program would be intended to improve the visibility of sites of community-wide interest such as the hospital, ice arena, library, downtown, visitor center, and other sites. The current signage program is outdated and too small to be effective.

G. Enhance low interest loan program. A low interest loan program currently exists for downtown properties. Better marketing of that program may increase the number of properties that use the program.

H. Create a design assistance program that would provide technical assistance to property owners who wish to renovate their building. Many renovations are completed using contractors with limited design skills. The idea is to retain a designer who has training in historical projects. This design professional would be available to property owners at a reduced fee to help them realize the potential of their building. This would improve the value of the building and improve the historic character of the downtown.

I. Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on Main St. and Clark St. Pedestrian scale historic lighting brings the lighting element to a human scale compared to the 30 ft tall street lights. It also adds a decorative element to the street. Main Street would be the first priority. Clark St. the second priority. Church St. the third priority. Strongs Ave. the fourth priority.

J. Improve parking lots by enhancing the interior plantings and edge plantings. The current parking lot plantings have degraded over the years. Better maintenance and replacement of plants is warranted.

K. Redevelop the Market Square as a European plaza. The current market square is a parking lot with one quarter dedicated as open space. The open space area is visually separated from the remainder of the square by parked cars and by the canopy over the farmer's market area. While the open space is pleasant when a user is in it, the visual separation makes it difficult to see the farmer's market and to see the open space. A new design concept emphasizing the pedestrian qualities and the function of the farmers market and while slightly de-emphasizing the parking function would be an improvement. Parking is a necessary function for both the farmers market as well as the retail functions of the square area.

L. Reconstruct the public space near the bus transfer station at Strongs Ave. and Main St. The existing trees have not grown as expected. There is not enough seating area. A better design that reinforces the neighboring restaurants, bus transfer function, and improves the esthetics would be an improvement.

Recommended by Consultant but not supported by Task Force for immediate implementation. Action may be revisited at a more appropriate time.

A. Humanize parking lots by increasing the number of buildings along the edges of the ShopKo parking lots. The consultant had observed that parking lots lost the sense of building-next-to-sidewalk that downtowns are noted for. He recommended that new buildings be constructed next to sidewalks in areas where parking lots abutted sidewalks. The Task Force was concerned that the loss of parking spaces and the lack of visible parking would offset the advantages of more building space and reconstruction of the downtown facade. Replacement parking would need to be ramp parking, which is more expensive than surface parking.

B. Re-implement a fountain in the Market Square area. While a nice feature, the Task Force did not consider this a high priority. Concerns were expressed about the long-term maintenance of this type of improvement.

C. Create a public square near the River on Main St. next to the Arts Center. This recommendation is in conjunction with extending Main St. west to the river. The Task Force did not support the extension of Main St. to the Wisconsin River. The creation of a new square fell to a lower priority after the negative recommendation for the road extension. This area already has founders point and has been enhanced by the location of the Art Center.

D. Convert a portion of the Sentry Insurance parking lot bounded by Ellis, Strongs, Arlington, and Church Streets to a Court House Square. Parking is of prime concern to employers. Replacement of this parking was estimated to exceed $3,000,000. The Task Force felt this recommendation was very expensive to accomplish compared to the benefit of keeping existing parking for a major employer in downtown.

E. Create a Square atmosphere at Third St. and Briggs St. The Task Force was supportive of square concept. However, due to Third St not being extended through CenterPoint Marketplace and the unknown configuration and space needs of future developments located on the currently zoned industrial zoned properties and Centerpoint Marketplace, the project was viewed as a low priority.

Secure Downtown Employers

One of the keys to the long-term health of any downtown is the presence of a workforce that can populate the area during the day. Stevens Point is fortunate to have Sentry Insurance, Noel Group, Associated Bank, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and the County and City workforces already located in the downtown. One of the most important actions that the city can undertake is to ensure that they remain a part of the downtown.

Recommended by Task Force

A. Secure downtown employers and encourage the expansion of their operations in the downtown. The Task Force felt that ongoing contact should be maintained between the major employers and the city and the Business Council and between the employers themselves. Issues of common concern can be discussed and addressed.

B. Develop parking, including a parking structure if necessary, to serve major employers and the growth of businesses. Parking is the key to employee development and recruitment. Contacts should be developed to quantify the need for parking, identify the timing of that need, and to develop strategies to satisfy that need.

C. Advocate the continued presence of the county justice system in the downtown. The Task Force is aware of concerns about the expansion of any jail in the downtown area. The relocation of the jail and the potential to relocate the entire county government function away from the downtown was not viewed favorably acceptable. The Task Force advocated that the parties meet to seek solutions to the location of an expanded jail and courtroom facilities in the downtown area.

PHASED APPROACH TO
DOWNTOWN STEVENS POINT
DIRECTIONAL STUDY PROJECTS

DIRECTIONAL STUDY STRATEGIES

1. Facilitate access to and mobility within downtown.
2. Establish a strong link to the riverfront.
3. Integrate underdeveloped and vacant sites
4. Beautify Main Street and downtown
5. Secure downtown employers
6. Intensify development in downtown.
7. Keep downtown compact.

COST

A. $ 0 to $10,000
B. $ 10,001 to $50,000
C. $50,001 to $250,000
D. $250,001 +

TASK/ACTIVITY	COST	LEAD ENTITIES	FUNDING OPTIONS
PHASE 1 2002 – 2003			
Open Main St. on East end	C	City, DOT, ADB, PCBC	City
Strongs Ave. – two way traffic from Main to Arlington Street	B	City, ADB	City
Create street edges by use of trees. Work with Community Foundation	A	Foundation, Private City Forester	Private Sector Donations, City
Institute Public Art program	A	Art Council/John Jury	City – Donations
Update downtown benches - enhance historic atmosphere	A	DT Community Foundation	DT Business Donations
Update downtown trash receptacles	A	DT Community Foundation	DT Business Donations
Remove existing kiosks and replace signage (Theater as flyer location)	B	City ADB	City
Implement a new directional signage program	B	Municipal – CIEC	Gov't Funding – Spec
Enhance low interest loan program for façade enhancements – Brochure	A	City & PCBC	City
Wisconsin Public Service site used as park and parking lot	D	City and PCBC	Private Donation, City Parks
Research potential of narrowing Water St. near Main and Centerpoint Drive to enhance pedestrian crossing	C	City	City
Rezone industrial properties in downtown to compatible zoning districts	A	City/Gardner	N/A
Create residential development at edges of downtown and the upper floors of commercial buildings	A	City & PCBC, Apartment Owners	N/A
Acquire Gas Station on corner of Third St. and Clark St. to implement comprehensive parking. Optimize permit parking from Library parking lot to area.	C	City	City
Secure downtown employers through encouraging expansions of their operations in downtown	A	PCBC	N/A
Advocate county justice center expansion downtown	A	ABD – Business Owners	Private Sector
Fox Theater – Signage operational	A	Private Owners, City, PCBC	Private & special events
Design Technical Assistance Program	A	Historic Commission	City – matching funds

TASK/ACTIVITY	COST	LEAD ENTITIES	FUNDING OPTIONS
PHASE 2 2004 - 2007			
Open Main Street on West end (both directions)	D	City	City
Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on Main St.	C	ADB, City, Private	Private Sector, City
Humanize parking lots by enhancing the interior plantings and edge plantings	B	Master Gardeners, CIEC	City
Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on Clark St.	B	City Private	City Private
Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on Church St.	B	City-Private	City Private
Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on Strongs Ave.	B	City-Private	City Private
Create street edges by use of pedestrian scale historic lighting on other streets in the downtown area	B	City-Private	City Private
Market Square re-developed as European plaza	D	City	City
Construct a public square near the bus depot	C	City	City Private TIF

TASK/ACTIVITY	COST	LEAD ENTITIES	FUNDING OPTIONS
BASED ON PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT			
Provide space for the expansion of the J.C. Penneys and the vacant Stage stores	B	Dial Properties/City Developer	TIF – Private Sector
Relocate Centerpoint Dr. to Portage St. to incorporate the Lullabye and the Portesi Block into the downtown fabric	D	City	TIF
Develop Lullabye and Portesi blocks and lots in a downtown building manner, not a suburban mall manner. This would promote first floor retail/office and upper story residential use.	D	Private Sector, City, Dial	City, TIF, Private
Consider a parking structure to allow redevelopment of surface parking lots near retail and major employers	D	City, Business Owners	City, Private
Redevelop the former gas station on corner of Water and Clark St. into higher use with visual impact at entrance of downtown.	D	Private	
Develop a parking structure to serve major employment area and growth of businesses (Arlington)	D	PCBC	County, Private Sector, City

RECOMMENDATIONS NOT IMPLEMENTED	**COST**		
Main Street – two way traffic	A	Not implementing due to concerns by business and community during comment period	
Loading zones for truck delivery on Main St.	A		
Extend Main St. to the river and connect to Crosby Ave.	D		
Extend Briggs St. to meet Third St. and Water Street	D		
Extend Third Court to Third Street (thru mall)	D		
Convert river bank facility into different use (cultural center)	D		
Along Main St. extended near existing Bank One, permit buildings and businesses that entertain and attract people	D		
City parking lot west of Water and north of Crosby Ave. to be partially converted in to multi-story business and residential development	D		
Humanize parking lots by increasing the number of buildings along the edges of the lots	C		
Re-implement a fountain in the Market Square area as public art program	C		
Create a public square near the river on Main St. (Where Crosby and Main St)	D		
Convert portion of Sentry Ins surface parking lot into a courthouse square.	D		
Create a square atmosphere at Third St and Briggs St.	D		