The Role of Local Industries in Downtown Economic Revitalization

Downtowns have been forever changed over the last five decades. Warehouse shopping, strip malls, shopper mobility, and the internet have all contributed to downtown’s decline as a traditional retail center. Similarly, over the last decade, especially subsequent to the Great Recession, community development initiatives have been impacted by decreased public funding. Still, citizens long for a vibrant downtown and a lively community featuring social activities and a sense of place.

In his research and writings on the “rise of the creative class,” Richard Florida posits that tomorrow’s business, industry, and community leaders want to live and work in “cool” places. The Wisconsin Way research, led by a coalition of government and business groups including the Wisconsin Counties Association, as well as information obtained during the recent “Be Bold Wisconsin” economic development conferences also conclude that today’s young people and tomorrow’s business workers and leaders demand quality of life factors that are provided by both the public and private sectors and are often available in downtowns that have reinvented themselves. Combine this demand with the existing or pending labor shortages due to lack of skilled workers and overall demographic shifts, and it becomes clear that community and business development initiatives can play a role in workforce development, especially in rural communities.

Local industries including manufacturing often have a stake in maintaining a healthy community so that they can attract and retain a high quality workforce. Some companies have taken a special interest in downtown revitalization as it sets an image of prosperity for the entire community. Innovative downtown investments by local industries have occurred ranging from the construction of corporate office space, the creation of a corporate visitors center, to the opening of a factory outlet store.

This research project will:

- Increase knowledge of the role of various companies, including manufacturers, in downtown economic revitalization
- Increase understanding of the tools being used by various companies and industries to help revitalize downtowns
- Produce approximately 10 one-page case studies
- Develop an educational program available to colleagues that describes findings that can be used throughout Wisconsin

This project is being directed by Mike Koles, UW-Extension, Waupaca County with assistance from Bill Ryan of the UW-Extension Center for Community and Economic Development. Jessica Beckendorf will be leading the case study research. This study team is seeking examples of local companies that have invested in and are contributing to downtown economic vitality in their community. Please contact bill.ryan@uwex.edu