

Downtown Report Card Summary

In May of 2003 the New Richmond Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau hired Professor Kent Robertson, Community Development Program, St. Cloud State University, to conduct a Downtown Report Card for New Richmond.

The twelve-page report card focused primarily on the physical, design-related, and aesthetic features of downtown, and the purpose of the report card was twofold: It assessed the relative strengths and weaknesses of downtown New Richmond, Wisconsin (pop. 6500) for three basic categories: 1) economic elements, 2) physical and design elements, and 3) transportation elements. This report card presents a series of recommendations for further strengthening downtown New Richmond and enhancing downtown's sense of place.

“Despite the fact that there are some negative economic indicators affecting downtown, the economy of downtown New Richmond still appears to be relatively healthy. One reason for this healthy economy is that downtown is multifunctional; in other words, there are a variety of economic anchors (functions) that continue to draw people downtown for a variety of purposes.”

Those anchors include three of the city's financial institutions, the post office, city government, the New Richmond Middle School, public library, several churches, the Gem Theater, a bowling alley and two grocery stores (one has since moved to the south edge of the city).

“As a result, there are many attractions that draw different types of people to downtown New Richmond for different reasons and at different times of day/week. This is definitely an asset that should not be overlooked.”

“An inventory of street-level businesses in the downtown revealed the following mix:

- 19 retailers (32.2% of 59 total storefronts)
- 13 personal services providers (22%) – law, UPS, Laundromat, massage, cleaners, dentists, hair, chiropractor
- 11 financial services providers (18.6%) – banks, mortgage, insurance, cash store
- 11 restaurants/bars (18.6%)
- 6 miscellaneous (10.2%) – theatre, bowling alley, chamber offices, library, city hall, newspaper
- 3 vacancies (5.1%)

“This business mix is fairly normal in small downtowns of the 21st Century. The increasing presence of service providers (over 40% of storefronts) is a common phenomenon today, and it is highly unlikely that retailing will ever dominate downtown economy in the foreseeable future. The low vacancy rate is also a positive sign that there remains demand for downtown space.”

“Similar to the majority of small city downtowns across the United States, downtown New Richmond has lost many retailers during the past decade . . . But rather than obsess on what has been lost, people should appreciate what downtown still offers. Despite the growth of strip retailers on the edge of town...(the) downtown still provides the greatest concentration of retailing in the local New Richmond trade area.”

“Moreover, a focus group conducted by Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College (2003) indicated that both new and long-time residents valued the local ownership and quality of service provided by downtown stores. For a city of under 7,000 people within easy driving distance of Twin Cities shopping opportunities, this constitutes a stronger than average retail mix.”

Retail Business Hours

“This can be a sensitive topic for independent business owners, many of which have few employees. However, it must be understood that the preferred shopping times for busy two-income households is during the evenings and on weekends, times during which downtown stores have very limited hours. If the majority of retailers would remain open until 8 p.m. on weeknights and 5 p.m. on Saturdays, downtown business will increase. If the hours are consistent, then shoppers will know that many shopping opportunities will be available when they head downtown after dinner, which will improve spillovers between businesses.”

“Staying open on Sundays would also help, but I realize that economically this might prove difficult for many small businesses. If staying open later during the evening is a hardship for the independent storeowners, perhaps they might consider opening one hour later in the morning--- how many customers do they currently serve between 10-11 in the morning? If hours are extended for a majority of businesses, this positive change must be heavily publicized not only by the individual business, but also for the downtown as a whole. And be patient. It will take time for people to become aware of these more convenient hours.”

Physical/Design Elements of Downtown

“The physical appearance of most downtown buildings does not do justice to the sound downtown economy. The buildings present a chaotic overall look that totally lacks cohesion and provides little evidence of widely applied principles of effective design and rehabilitation of older commercial buildings. When asked about the appearance of downtown, interview respondents used words such as “hodgepodge, plain, nothing special, sterile, beat up, and ugly.” Given that most of the buildings are at least 75 years old and constructed of brick (often covered today), this situation is very unfortunate and unnecessary.”

“There are, however, a few scattered examples of attractive building facades, most of which are located on the east side of the 100 block of South Knowles Avenue”:

- 116 S. Knowles-Old Gem Theater
- 122 S. Knowles-Traditions
- 126 S. Knowles-Remington Law Office
- 109 E. 2nd Street-The First National Bank
- 145 S. Knowles-The Old Saloon

“Unfortunately, the majority of buildings along South Knowles, especially on the 200 and 300 blocks, detract from the visual appeal of downtown. These buildings fall under several categories of poorly conceived design”:

The Swiss Chalet Look

The Badly Painted/Covered Brick Look

The 1950's Metallic Awning Look

Landmark Buildings in Waiting

Recommendations: Eleven key elements were evaluated and graded as compared to other small city downtowns throughout the country:

- Enhance the downtown's sense of place
- Make better use of the benches/planters
- Continue work on the design guidelines and increase financial incentives
- Create improved linkages between Glover Park and the river
- Take advantage of the area around the dam
- Make the alleys more inviting
- Insert more visible pedestrian crossings on South Knowles Avenue
- Add some color to the streetscape
- Look at the bypass as an opportunity
- Extend and unify retail business hours
- Promote the downtown

The full report is available at the Chamber office.
