

*empower* the PAST,

*embrace* the FUTURE.

Downtown Strategic Plan For  
**BELVIDERE, ILLINOIS**



Peoples  
Economic Development Corporation



## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	2
Introduction .....	3
Process.....	4
Vision.....	5
Issues	
Vision for Downtown Belvidere	
Benchmarks for Success	
The Big Idea	
Downtown Belvidere Master Plan & Warehouse District Re-use Plan .....	8
Economic Structure .....	14
Objective 2.1 – Retain and Support Existing Businesses	
Objective 2.2 – Recruit Desirable Retail Businesses	
Objective 2.3 – Promote Entrepreneurship	
Objective 2.4 – Encourage Land Use Patterns and Design Strategies that Foster Business Success	
Objective 2.5 – Create Daytime/Nighttime and Weekend Activity Downtown	
Promotion.....	22
Objective 3.1 – Develop Marketing Strategy and Materials	
Objective 3.2 – Create Joint Advertising and Promotional Program	
Objective 3.3 – Develop a Variety of Downtown Community Events	
Organization.....	26
Objective 4.1 – Form a Non-profit Downtown Organization	
Objective 4.2 – Develop Funding, Work Programs, and Volunteer-base	
Conclusion .....	32

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Development of the plan was overseen by the Mayor, City Council and the Belvidere – Boone County Planning Department as well as a Steering Committee assembled by the City Council.

### **Mayor and City Council**

Frederic Brereton, Mayor	Clayton Stevens
Clinton Morris	Daniel Snow
Robert Bowley	Karen Schrader
Mike Chamberlin	Ronald Brooks
George Crawford	John Sander
Mike Sanderson	

### **Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee**

Becky Tobin	Mark Williams
Kelly Galluzzo	Kris Bryan
John Sanders	Kathy J Miller
Christina Conrad	Jerry Hernandez
Frederic Brereton	Jarid Funderburg
Dave Rickabaugh	Filitsa Platopoulos
David Larson	Robert Cantrell
Ed Marx	Millie Priem
David Deckert	Paul Ollmann
George Williams	Arthur Hyland
Josie Kotsioris	Bonnie Heimbach
David Palmer	Ken Redeker
Andrew Racz	Rich Weigel

## INTRODUCTION

This Revitalization Strategic Plan is intended to be used as a guide by both the public and private sectors in their efforts to physically and economically enhance and sustain Downtown Belvidere. The plan establishes a vision, built on the community's aspirations for the historic downtown area. A coordinated, comprehensive strategy lays out the path(s) the community will follow in achieving its vision. The strategy addresses five essential components of revitalization:

**Design** represents the function and form of Downtown and how all of its physical parts work together to create the best possible experience for visitors.

**Economic Structure** is the recipe for Downtown's business success—placing the right economic ingredients in the right proportions in the right places.

**Promotion** raises awareness of Downtown's economic, governmental and cultural assets. Promotion includes marketing Downtown to locals, out-of-towners and potential investors.

**Organization** is the assembly of diverse organizations and individuals, all with different types of authority and influence, in order to carry out revitalization tasks in a coordinated manner.

**Community Connections** is, in essence, a pledge to look for and understand the impacts of decisions, that may not appear to relate to Downtown, but that will ultimately have an effect on its future.

### **Project Area**

The project includes two study areas.

The primary area is the downtown core including approximately eight blocks of State Street and its tributary streets both south and north of the Kishwaukee River. This area contains the bulk of Downtown Belvidere's historic building stock with traditional storefronts.

The secondary area is the warehouse district, anchored by the remaining structures of the National Sewing Machine Company and its potential connections to the Downtown via Meadow Street and the riverfront.

## **PROCESS**

The plan was developed beginning in the Summer of 2011 and through June of 2012 by the Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee, the City of Belvidere and consultants Peoples Economic Development Corporation (PEDC), Kennedy Hutson Associates, and Dorochoff Consulting LLC.

Public meetings were held to collect information from downtown stakeholders and to discuss emerging plan recommendations with the community. The Steering Committee met with the consultant team in advance of the public meetings to review and refine plan components. In an effort to keep stakeholders involved, the planning team developed a contact list from meeting sign-in sheets and sent email updates on the developing plan and reminders about upcoming meetings.

The plan was released in two installments during the course of the public involvement process. Each release was posted in the City's website and emailed to members of the steering committee. A hard copy was made available for public review at City Hall. Following the third public meeting, the planning team prepared a complete draft of the plan and then met with the Steering Committee and the Planning Department for a work session prior to a public hearing on the plan. The planning team then revised the plan and the Steering Committee and Council held public hearings to officially adopt the plan on behalf of the City which will now begin to implement the plan.

## **VISION**

In the Summer of 2011, the City of Belvidere embarked upon a journey to revitalize its historic downtown. This plan is the first step in that journey. As in any planning effort, to understand the subsequent steps it was essential to evaluate present conditions and to envision the end goal or destination.

To fully explore the community's expectations for revitalization, city officials, merchants, property owners and residents gathered at City Hall for the first in a series of interactive discussions on the future of Downtown Belvidere. During the course of the meeting, participants elaborated on their own desires for revitalizing the downtown area. After examining Downtown Belvidere's assets and issues, the planning team asked everyone to imagine Downtown Belvidere in a decade or so—as they would like it to be. After a few moments to think about this, the planning team engaged the crowd in a series of questions to help bring those individual visions to light. The following is a summary of the discussions from both that evening and from the stakeholder interviews conducted throughout the process.

### **Issues**

Participants described several areas in which work must be done to improve Downtown Belvidere. Building vacancies and limited business hours are issues confronting downtown. Additionally, the "Overlay Business District" and its implementation process, and mandates coupled with license fees, have diminished the growth of the Downtown area.

### **Visions for Downtown Belvidere**

Participants envisioned an economically vital downtown with more retail, personal service and dining options.

New businesses and activities would appeal to people of all ages and generate nighttime and weekend activity. Downtown Belvidere would be a safe, attractive, and unique shopping environment, in which visitors would window-shop and stay longer.

Participants noted that improved parking arrangements and walkability would be key to business development.

More housing in or adjacent to Downtown would increase foot traffic and the customer base for downtown merchants.

### **Benchmarks for Success**

Finally, the participants were asked to offer a few benchmarks as a way to measure the success of revitalization efforts and to add a sense of priority during the next several years of plan implementation. Responses included:

*Well-designed and maintained streetscapes, signage and parking areas will create a safe, attractive environment for motorists and pedestrians.*

*Downtown buildings will be occupied with diverse businesses that attract customers both day and night and on weekends.*

*Downtown will have open spaces and cultural and civic facilities in which the community gathers and connects.*

*A well-preserved historic district(s), interpretive features and events will tell the story of the community.*

### **The Big Idea**

Downtown—unlike conventional shopping centers or business districts that tend to serve either one or a very few purposes—is expected to serve many roles within the community. This was evidenced by the visions expressed by the community in revitalization meetings.

Downtown serves as a center for:

*government*

*business*

*shopping*

*dining and entertainment*

*residential*

*community interaction*

*culture and history*

Obviously, to effectively serve so many functions, Downtown Belvidere must be well planned, properly designed and carefully maintained. And, because it serves many groups, its care must be in the hands of more than just city government. Citizen and business groups and county government must also assume responsibility for and take an active part in Downtown's revitalization.

Early in the planning process, a strategic concept, or "Big Idea," was devised to capture and build upon Downtown's assets and existing conditions, to respond to the community's expectations and to set out a coordinated foundation on which detailed revitalization actions are planned. This Big Idea primarily addresses the physical condition/organization and enhancement of Downtown Belvidere but also involves fine-tuning Downtown's economic structure.

**The Big Idea includes:**

**Establishing community-oriented destinations** to bring residents Downtown frequently for a variety of civic, cultural and social activities.

**Preserving the historic charm and uniqueness** of Downtown Belvidere through continued use, reuse and renovation of historic buildings and by encouraging compatible redevelopment and the nomination of two National Register Commercial Districts.

**Concentrating retail, dining and personal services** in the Downtown Core flanked by compatible business uses, institutions and housing.

**Adaptive reuse of the National Sewing Center Company Warehouse District and Riverfront as an extension of the Downtown** to serve as a magnet for local and regional tourism and to provide a critical mass of downtown housing.



Historic Downtown Belvidere

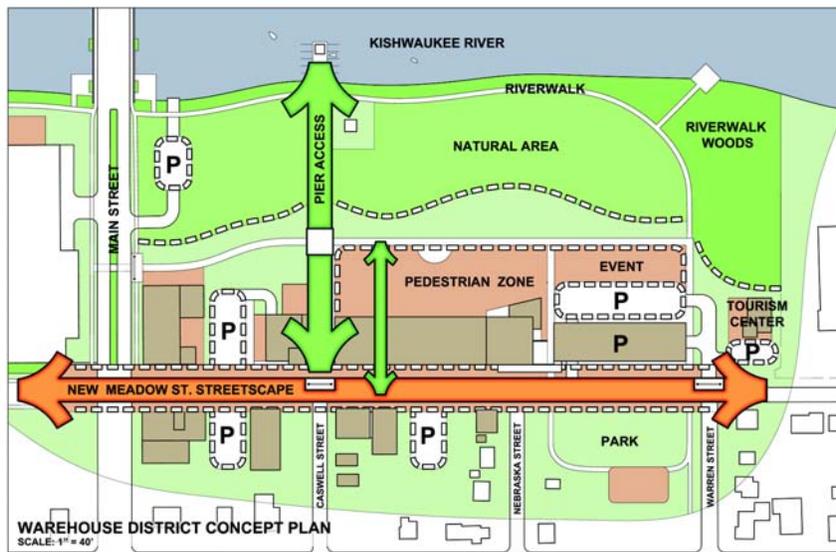
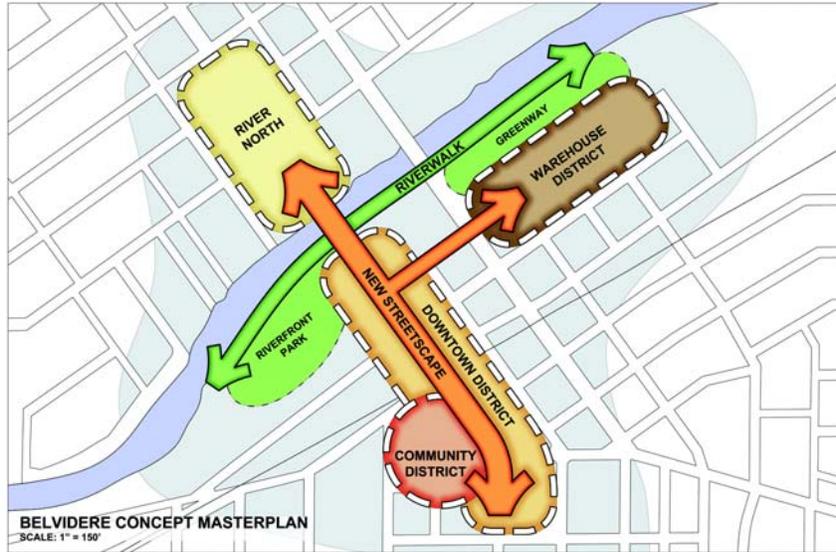
## **DOWNTOWN BELVIDERE MASTER PLAN & WAREHOUSE DISTRICT RE-USE PLAN**

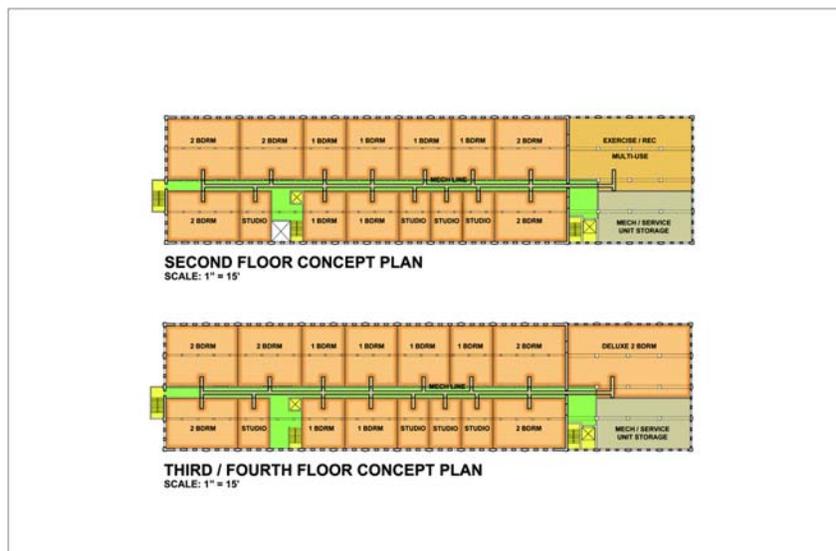
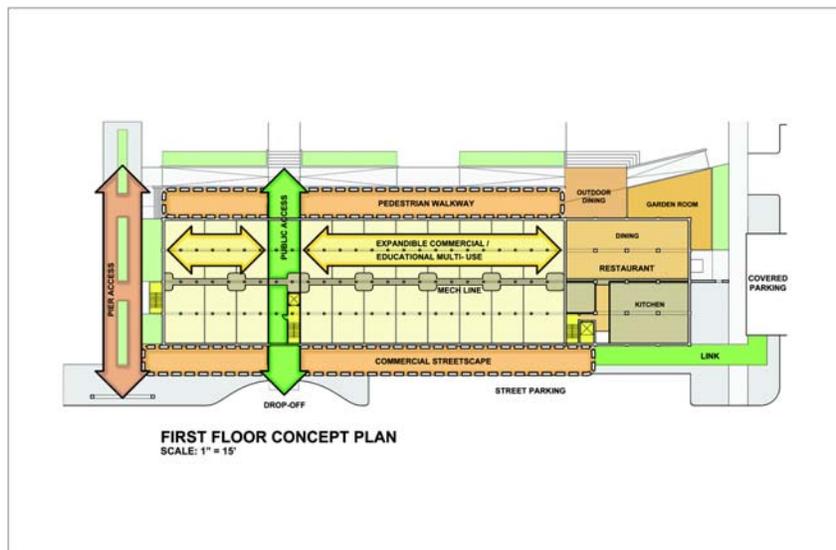
Downtown Belvidere is the City's traditional central business district. The majority of the buildings were constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Downtown suffered the typical flight of business to the city periphery in the middle of the twentieth century and has never fully recovered. As in most communities, Downtown Belvidere must now reinvent itself to viably serve contemporary purposes and markets.

Downtown Belvidere is fortunate to possess many inherent attributes. The historic downtown stretches generally in a north-south direction along State Street and its tributary streets. The building stock is good with many fine examples of commercial vernacular architecture along with a few outstanding landmark quality structures. Downtown is bisected by the Kishwaukee River, with the primary business district extending to the south and a secondary, but important, business district to the north. In addition to being a visual amenity, the riverfront has seen some redevelopment with the Kishwaukee Riverfront Trail and associated parks.

The downtown is flanked by two additional potential magnet areas. West of the south end of the State Street business corridor, the landmark Community Building and the former Belvidere High School together form a National Register anchor for this gateway to the downtown. The extensively used Community Building along with the residential re-use of the school contribute greatly to the stability and vibrancy of Downtown Belvidere. The second area with much potential to benefit the downtown is the "Warehouse District", dominated by the remnant buildings of the National Sewing Machine Company complex. A scant two blocks east of the State Street Business District, these locally significant historic structures and their surrounding blocks have enormous potential as part of a mixed-use redevelopment incorporating retail, recreation, civic, educational and residential components. The Warehouse District is well located along several blocks of the Kishwaukee River and ties into the existing downtown via Meadow Street. Incremental development and extensions of the proposed Downtown Belvidere Streetscape and the Kishwaukee Riverfront Path and Parkway can serve as a catalyst for the realization of the Warehouse District Redevelopment.

The following Master Plan and Warehouse District Development Study examines linkages throughout the downtown area and proposes features, elements and uses to make up a diverse and contributing addition to the downtown. The plan is intended to act as a guide for future decision making and development. As in all working plans, it is intended to be flexible, allowing for change as new opportunities present themselves. Elements of the Master Plan are already being adopted, notably regarding the Riverfront Path extension, and can serve to unite the various entities within the community toward a common goal.



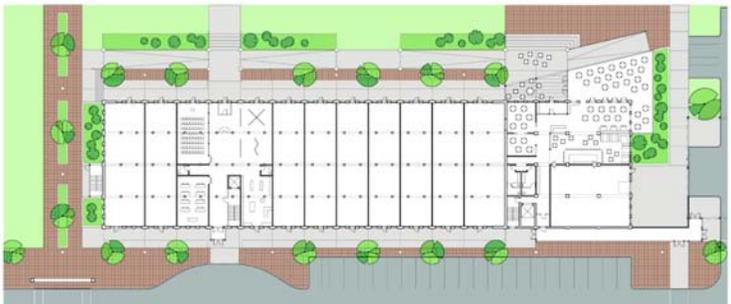




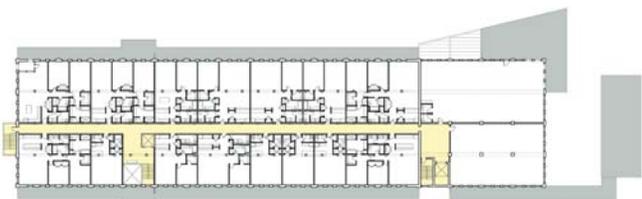
**SOUTH ELEVATION**  
SCALE: 1" = 15'



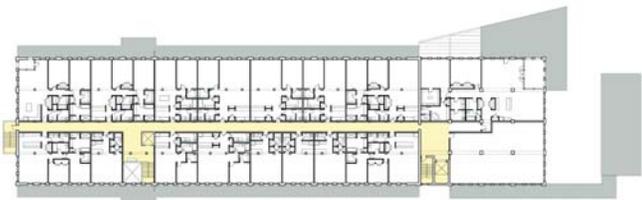
**NORTH ELEVATION**  
SCALE: 1" = 15'



**FIRST FLOOR PLAN**  
SCALE: 1" = 15'

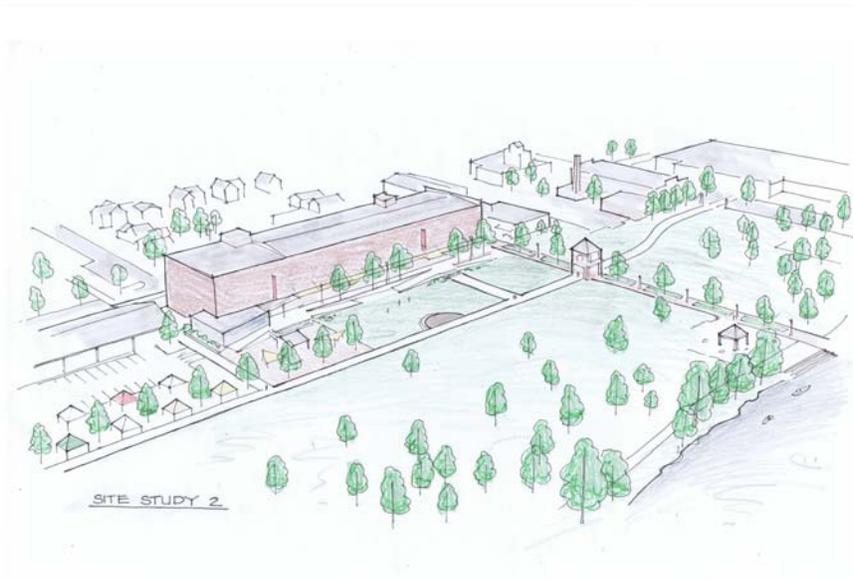


**SECOND FLOOR PLAN**  
SCALE: 1" = 15'



**THIRD / FOURTH FLOOR PLAN**  
SCALE: 1" = 15'





## ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

### GOAL:

#### *Assemble an appropriate mix of uses to give downtown a competitive advantage*

To improve and sustain Downtown Belvidere as a center of business, the right mix of businesses and other complementary uses must be assembled and properly arrayed—the location of each type of business or other land use is important.

To further define retail opportunities available *and* appropriate to Downtown Belvidere, the community should consider more specific business types that have been successful in revitalizing downtowns with similar retail gaps. This qualitative analysis also identifies business types that could draw travelers from the interstate by creating a “downtown draw” a combination of related or compatible businesses that could not only attract first time visitors, but turn them into repeat customers of Downtown Belvidere.

#### *Retail Recommendations*

- *additional locally-owned lunch and dinner restaurant(s)*
- *artist studios and workspaces with retail sales and classroom space*
- *multiple antiques and architectural collectibles stores*
- *“nostalgic” general or mercantile store*
- *regional offerings store specializing in locally-made art or regionally-made food*
- *products, unique gifts, candies, and clothing*
- *bookstore*
- *hardware-type store (tie-in existing Ace)*
- *downtown market*

A number of the downtown buildings are already occupied with interesting, viable businesses. However, there is not enough coordinated development to have reached the critical mass necessary for creating a downtown draw. More importantly, there is little currently in Downtown Belvidere to satisfy anything more than specialty shopping needs of *occasional* visitors. Perhaps more critical in the long run, there is nothing unique to attract visitors to Downtown Belvidere from the Interstate/Shopping Area.

The corridors leading into Downtown Belvidere offer the standard types of food related and fuel-related products and services

which typically appeal to travelers. Future Interstate visitors have no reason to drive past the existing entry corridor businesses to downtown if it does not offer a unique draw.

The following objectives highlight the multiple efforts necessary to achieve the economic goal for Downtown Belvidere. Each objective includes one or more specific tasks to be taken on by a variety of parties, such as the City Council, downtown merchants, property owners, Chamber of Commerce, Growth Dimensions, etc.

**Objective 2.1.** Retain and support existing businesses

**Objective 2.2.** Recruit desirable retail businesses

**Objective 2.3.** Promote entrepreneurship

**Objective 2.4.** Encourage land use patterns and design strategies that foster business success

**Objective 2.5.** Create daytime/nighttime and weekend activity  
Downtown

### **2.1. Retain and Support Existing Businesses**

Business retention and expansion activities are essential to any economic development effort. This is often a priority for local Chambers of Commerce and can include a variety of activities such as “buy local” promotions and business awards programs. And locally, a program can be created to provide funding for building improvements in the form of low-interest loans or grants. Also, through a chamber or merchant’s organization, the needs of the (existing) business community can be collectively addressed with the city, county, or other entities.

#### *Tasks:*

- *Continue and improve upon current Chamber of Commerce retention and expansion programs*
- *Host special events Downtown in coordination with retailers*



## **2.2. Recruit Desirable Retail Businesses**

National chains, anchor stores, shopping center developers, and large corporations are common business recruitment targets. However, business recruitment for Downtown should seek different targets. Belvidere's economic development representatives, including its real estate professionals, should seek out successful independent businesses in other locales, particularly downtown businesses, and suggest expanding into Belvidere's market. An already successful merchant opening a business in a new market generally is more likely to thrive than a start-up, because of their past experience (however, supporting entrepreneurs will also be an important business development strategy).

A similar tactic is to recruit businesses from other parts of the Belvidere area into downtown, either by relocating or opening a new location. But to attract such a use, both the City and the business community must also be reinvesting in Downtown, improving parking, walkability and other physical conditions. Finally, landlords must also be discerning of prospective tenants to support the right mix of businesses Downtown. Low rents attract good and bad tenants equally. While realtors and building owners may be focused on filling vacancies, shortsighted decisions can delay Downtown's economic revitalization.

### *Tasks:*

- *Schedule visits for economic development representatives to successful downtowns*
- *Contact successful businesses in the Belvidere area and in nearby communities regarding possible Downtown location*
- *Maintain inventory of available properties and tenant spaces*

## **2.3. Promote Entrepreneurship**

Independent businesses are often the foundation of downtown economies. Small, local startups are often less glamorous than recruiting a large chain store but they can be much more important to the local economy. Local businesses employ local accountants and other personnel that national chains centralize in a single headquarters. They also make more of their own purchases locally and more of their profits are kept within the community rather than the locale of a chain's corporate office. And for downtown, local businesses are a part of the potential draw to visitors. It is unlikely that out-of-towners will plan a trip to Downtown Belvidere specifically to visit a chain store (they will likely be able to find the same chain store in their own area).

All independent businesses start as entrepreneurial efforts and so the City and business community should support entrepreneurialism.

Many smaller size communities across Illinois and the Midwest have had success with business incubators -- programs in which several start-up businesses operate out of one location with shared resources. Some incubator programs also include mentoring and support services to help accelerate entrepreneurial development. Given the wealth of local artists in the region, an incubator program might begin in the form of a studio, where multiple artists can produce work and collectively display and sell it. An incubator may house different types of businesses, simultaneously. An incubator will need public or private seed money to get started—for building space, utilities costs, office equipment, etc. There are sites available in Downtown Belvidere to house such a program. Finally, an important benchmark for a business incubator, like the businesses it hopes to help along, is to become self-sustaining, with rent, utilities, and other bills being paid by the profits generated within it.

*Tasks:*

- *Identify local entrepreneurs/potential entrepreneurs*
- *Research business incubator organizational and funding models*
- *Develop a public and/or privately funded business incubator*
- *Recruit a group or certain sector of business*



The Eldredge Runabout – an early example of Belvidere Entrepreneurship

## 2.4. Encourage Land Use Patterns and Design Strategies that Foster Business Success

The most important thing in real estate is, as they say, location, location, location. The location of various types of uses—offices, retail, services, government facilities and private institutions, and housing are all located in and around Downtown—is important to the viability of those uses. To assure that future investments fully enhance economic growth potential, there are a few important principles that should be recognized when decisions are made regarding future uses in the Downtown Area:

### Downtown Land Use Principles

- **Retail, dining and entertainment businesses** should be clustered tightly together in the Downtown Core to create a walkable, active shopping environment. These types of businesses feed off of one another's foot traffic. With limited parking downtown, retail, restaurants and similar businesses need to be located where the heaviest foot traffic is.

- **Offices, government facilities and private institutions** are important activities. They bring people into Downtown, and their employees may frequent downtown shops. However, a large concentration of offices and institutions in the Downtown Core can displace retail businesses and eateries to the edges of downtown where they are less likely to thrive. These uses are destinations to which people travel intentionally rather than on impulse. They do not require a central location in the same way as retail or dining. Future offices and institutions should locate at the edges of and around the Downtown Core. Offices and some types of institutions may also locate in upper floors of buildings that are shared with another use on the ground floor.

- **Personal and professional services** are beneficial to Downtown in the same way that offices are. They increase traffic. And, personal services can be highly complementary to retail and dining uses, because patrons of personal service establishments are apt to be interested in other downtown offerings. However, these services require a lot of parking. Generally, new professional services and larger personal service establishments should be located at the edges of the Downtown Core.

- **Housing** once was a frequent component of downtowns—small business owners often lived above their shops—but became less common during the 20th Century partly due to zoning regulations that prohibited housing in business districts. In the last twenty years there has been an increase in downtown living. Housing is a supportive, beneficial use for downtown, both at its edges and above it, in the upper floors of buildings. Downtown living creates a "captive" market for businesses and increases activity at night, which then helps keep downtown safe. There are limitations to downtown living, however: 1) downtown dwelling units should

generally not be located at ground level and, 2) housing requires parking either on-site or within the same block. Like personal services, too much housing can absorb parking quickly, although that parking is used mostly at night and little during the day.

- **Parks and open space** located downtown provide locations for visitors to relax and for the community to gather for special events. A downtown park with areas for outdoor dining or just sitting and relaxing is a great amenity for a downtown shopping district. Such spaces should be used sparingly and be placed in visible locations with a lot of activity.

Following these principles will also support greater activity at all times. Uses that support nighttime and weekend activity tend to be retail, dining, entertainment uses, personal services and housing. Offices, professional services and institutional uses do not typically operate in the evenings and are open only for a limited time on weekends, if at all. Churches may be busy on Wednesday evenings and on Sundays but are mostly inactive for all other parts of the week. A large concentration of offices and institutions in the Downtown Core, which pushes retail, dining and services to the edges, would limit Downtown Belvidere from achieving greater activity.

The City should evaluate the linkages of the Warehouse District Master Plan to Downtown Belvidere via both Meadow Street and the Kishwaukee Riverfront. Tying the downtown together with potential retail, cultural, residential and recreational uses will help to incrementally create additional vibrant adjacencies, which in turn will become amenities and additional markets for the existing downtown. The development of public infrastructure, notably streetscape amenities and recreational trails/green spaces can help spur civic pride and in turn, the result in private investment.

The desired pattern of land use investments can be fostered through downtown-specific zoning standards specifically written to reflect the downtown land use principles. Care should be taken in the development of such regulations. It is not the intent of the land use principles to prohibit secondary uses within the Downtown Core, but that they be the exception rather than the rule. This flexibility can be built-in to the standards by providing regulatory incentives for the most desired uses or by treating secondary uses as "special uses" or "conditional uses," requiring review and approval to determine that such uses are needed or beneficial in the Downtown.

*Tasks:*

- *Continue to re-assess the downtown zoning standards that reflect the Downtown Plan's land use principles and design strategies*
- *Recruit or support development of desired new businesses in appropriate locations*
- *Continue to pursue the linkages of the Downtown Core to the Warehouse District/River Front Area Master Plan*



Baltic Mill at Belvidere Park

### **2.5. Create Daytime/Nighttime and Weekend Activity Downtown**

Another strategy to bolster business success in Downtown Belvidere is to extend business hours or bring in new businesses that would logically be open later, such as restaurants that are open for lunch and dinner. This effort should also include weekend business activity. In this way, Downtown's retail businesses should emulate the shopping center model. Most would agree that it would be illogical for a shopping center to close at 5:00 PM on weekdays and not be open on weekends. Such operating hours would surely cause the demise of a shopping center. Most families today are two-income households; meaning mom and dad are at work on weekdays and only have time for shopping after 5:00 PM or during the weekend.

Limiting retail hours to weekdays (and Saturday mornings possibly) is a practice that is all but extinct except in downtowns that have failed to evolve with the times and are thus...failing. Coordinating and extending business hours should be done incrementally, not all at once. Until there is a critical mass of the right businesses downtown, associated costs (additional employees, higher utility

bills, etc.) may not outweigh returns to fully extend business hours. One way to begin extending hours would be for a group of merchants to open—or stay open longer—on Saturdays in concert with special promotions to make the community aware. Community or merchant sponsored events can also increase traffic, when coordinated with newly extended business hours.

Increasing overall activity Downtown is not just a business strategy, it is also a community building strategy. For Downtown to be “open” at night and on the weekends means that residents have a place to go to eat, shop, and see and be seen. Unlike a shopping center, Downtown is public; it is the community’s common ground. Many people feel more at home strolling the sidewalks and parks of an active, interesting downtown than in a shopping center. And so it must be properly lighted (including storefront windows) to be perceived as a safe place to walk. In most towns, parades, Christmas tree lightings and similar outdoor community events happen downtown. When businesses are open at night and on the weekends, it encourages more such events to happen downtown. Then the businesses can benefit from the presence of those attending community functions downtown.

*Tasks:*

- *Coordinate and extend retail business hours incrementally*
- *Recruit new businesses with nighttime and weekend hours*



Historic Leland Hotel

## PROMOTION

### **Goal: *Promote Downtown Belvidere***

Promotion is essential to improving business activity downtown as well as instilling community confidence in the revitalization process. The following objectives highlight the steps needed to create a positive reputation for Downtown Belvidere. Each objective includes one or more specific tasks to be taken on by a variety of parties, such as the City Council, downtown merchants, property owners, Chamber of Commerce, Growth Dimensions, etc.

*Promotion takes many forms, but the goal is to create a positive image that will rekindle community pride and improve consumer and investor confidence in your commercial district. Advertising, retail promotions, special events, and marketing campaigns help sell the image and promise of Main Street to the community and surrounding region. Promotions communicate your commercial district's unique characteristics, business establishments, and activities to shoppers, investors, potential business and property owners, and visitors.*

*-National Trust for Historic Preservation*

**Objective 3.1.** Develop marketing strategy and materials

**Objective 3.2.** Create joint advertising and promotional program

**Objective 3.3.** Develop a variety of Downtown community events



Examples of Belvidere Murals

### **3.1 Develop Marketing Strategy and Materials**

#### *Branding Downtown Belvidere*

The first effort to promote Downtown Belvidere should focus on publicizing the overall revitalization strategic plan effort, rallying community support for the long road ahead. A useful tool in this endeavor will be an identifiable brand or image. A graphic logo and a short slogan or catchphrase can be used to promote the revitalization effort and also to advertise the community, its downtown and its unique businesses and history in many different contexts: banners and signage (including downtown gateway signs), brochures and print advertisements, and website placements.

Care should be taken in developing the downtown brand as it will represent many stakeholders, will be used over and over again, and will be seen by many different audiences. Ideally, Downtown Belvidere's marketing materials will capture the essence of downtown, its best assets and reflect to viewers that downtown is more than just a business district, that it is unique and indivisible from the community.

The process of developing these materials can be an exercise in promotion as well by involving individuals within the community in a design competition. Whatever process is followed to generate the basic concept, it should be handed off to a capable graphic designer to develop the necessary artwork for use in different media.

#### *Print Materials*

Marketing materials, such as brochures, will also be useful in getting word out about the renaissance of Downtown Belvidere. Brochures will be most helpful once the revitalization effort has gathered some steam—once physical improvements have begun, new businesses have opened, or other exciting or transformative events have occurred. These, and all other marketing materials, should be well-designed—fashioned around the unifying downtown brand—and professionally printed. Brochures can be distributed in a variety of locations: downtown shops, city hall, the county courthouse, area hotels, businesses at interstate interchanges, rest areas throughout the state and other locations where out-of-town visitors are likely to stop.

In the near term, pamphlets may be crafted to promote the revitalization effort/master plan itself. These would be distributed locally in an effort to raise awareness, recruit volunteers, attract donors, and to celebrate revitalization successes. These materials could be combined with joint advertising for downtown merchants or developed in a newsletter format published multiple times throughout the year. While brochures aimed at an out-of-town audience should be professional and polished, newsletters and pamphlets generated locally can be more casual in tone.

#### *Tasks:*

- *Develop logo/branding materials*
- *Establish website links to downtown*
- *Create and distribute marketing materials*

### **3.2 Create Joint Advertising and Promotions Program**

One of the inherent assets of a downtown business district is the variety of goods, services and other activities available. To take advantage of this, local merchants, service providers and institutions may develop a joint advertising campaign, including recurring, seasonal and/or special event-oriented advertisements

for print, radio and/or television. As previously mentioned, joint advertising can also be included in marketing materials prepared by a Downtown Organization. For the individual merchant, there are two benefits in taking part in joint advertising: 1) the cost of the ad is shared with others and a larger (or longer, for radio and TV) advertisement becomes financially more feasible, and 2) joint advertising can generate more visits to downtown, increasing opportunities for window shoppers to notice each of the different businesses in the vicinity.

Joint retail sales events are another opportunity to generate additional visits to downtown and its businesses. These involve multiple businesses hosting and promoting special sales days to bring a combined customer base downtown. Downtown merchants currently hold a "Customer Appreciation Day" event each summer. This event should be continued and improved upon each year and similar events held at other times of the year. Food vendors, entertainment, exhibits and other interesting elements can keep visitors downtown longer so that they experience more than the one or two businesses they originally had in mind as destinations. For greatest success these events need to be properly advertised and activities should be included to lengthen visits.

*Tasks:*

- *Develop joint advertising strategy for Downtown merchants*
- *Organize and hold joint retail events*

### **3.3 Develop a Variety of Downtown Community Events**

Similar in approach to joint retail sales events are downtown community events. While joint retail sales events are focused primarily on downtown merchants, community events are focused on bringing people together downtown to socialize, celebrate and enjoy various activities—with downtown shopping and dining a secondary, but intended, consequence. The point is to give people a reason to visit downtown and stay for a while. For those who are less familiar with downtown, these events can create a good impression and encourage visitors to come back regardless of special events.

There are two types of community events that the Downtown Organization should focus on: annual events and recurring events.

*Annual Events*

Annual events have the potential of bringing visitors downtown from within and outside of Belvidere. Because they occur only once each year, there is considerable time for planning and coordinating a variety of activities to entertain visitors.

### *Recurring Events*

Smaller in scope, but equally effective in bringing people downtown, are recurring monthly or seasonal events. These are designed to bring local people downtown again and again throughout the year. Several downtowns host a monthly downtown gathering such as a "First Friday." These events often include food vendors, some form of entertainment and various activities to engage visitors. They can either be quite simple affairs that take place for just a couple hours around lunch or at the end of the workday or they can be more elaborate and last a full day.

#### *Tasks:*

- *Organize and host annual community events*
- *Organize and host recurring (monthly, quarterly, etc.) downtown events*



Boone County Fair

## ORGANIZATION

To implement downtown revitalization, the right people and organizations and the right resources must be aligned behind a clear, yet flexible strategy. This is particularly important given that revitalization is complex and takes time. And even when a certain level of success is achieved, maintaining that success requires continuous management. An effective downtown organization requires a real downtown champion and a core of committed volunteers. Most successful downtown revitalization programs start as grassroots operations—local people who are willing to take the lead.

The following objectives highlight the major steps needed to coordinate Downtown supporters.

**Objective 4.1.** Form a non-profit Downtown Organization

**Objective 4.2.** Develop funding, work programs and volunteer-base

During steering committee interviews participants discussed various individuals, businesses, and organizations that might be advantageous to tap into when forming a downtown organization. The intent was to begin a list from which to form an organization that has a vested interest in Downtown and that includes the community's "movers and shakers." The following are individuals and organizations that were mentioned during this discussion:

- *Local Civic organizations*
- *Historical Society and Belvidere Historic Preservation Commission*
- *Mural Mile Committee*
- *Downtown merchants and property owners*
- *Local media*
- *City of Belvidere, Boone County Board, Commission Members & Staff*
- *Chamber of Commerce, Growth Dimensions*
- *Local banks, attorneys and realtors*
- *Local Schools*
- *Community College*
- *Regional Tourism Development Office*

Downtown Belvidere is too important to wait around trying to build unanimous support or even consensus behind either the downtown plan or the organization that should spearhead plan implementation. There will be a lot of people in favor of it once they know what it is and how it works.

As with most grassroots ventures, the "20-60-20 Rule" applies to downtown revitalization, especially in its early years. No matter how good your ideas, no matter how good your organization and promotions, there will still be 20% of downtown people absolutely convinced that nothing good is going to come of your efforts, 20% convinced this is the best thing that's ever happened to Downtown Belvidere and another 60% just hanging around, waiting to see if you succeed or fail before committing one way or the other.

#### **4.1. Form a Non-profit Downtown Organization**

For greatest advantage, Downtown Belvidere needs a freestanding, non-profit organization of volunteers who are exclusively committed to overseeing revitalization efforts. Existing community organizations have their own focuses and agendas. The new organization should consist of volunteers who are willing to give of their time and talents toward its physical, social, economic and political health. The organization will require an operational structure, which can initially be fairly simple. At a minimum, there should be several offices created (chairperson or president, secretary, treasurer, etc.) and at least four committees—Design, Economic Structure, Promotion, and Organization. Each would then pursue plan tasks pertinent to that committee and work with other committees as appropriate where there is overlap.

When it comes to successful downtown revitalization programs, most resources are local. There are very few grants of any significant size to support the kind of work needed to transform downtown's economy. In any case, this task is too important to wait for someone else to pay for it or to negatively influence it by attaching strings to relatively small amounts of money.

#### **Principles of Success**

The National Trust Main Street Center has years of experience helping communities revitalize commercial centers of all sizes. Success has shown eight principles to be essential to success:

1. *Avoid single-focus solutions.* Downtown is complex and serves many roles in the community. A comprehensive approach is critical.
2. *Start with basic, simple activities.* Even small accomplishments early on demonstrate that "new things are happening." This incremental change leads to much longer-lasting and dramatic positive change.

3. *Mobilize local resources and talent.* Only local leaders can produce long-term success by fostering and demonstrating community involvement and commitment to the revitalization effort.
4. *Combine public and private resources.* Both the public and private sectors have a vital interest in Downtown and must work together to achieve common goals. Each sector has a role to play and each must understand the other's strengths and limitations in order to forge an effective partnership.
5. *Capitalize on Downtown's unique assets.* These assets—distinctive buildings, a mix of activities, community history and a sense of belonging—give Downtown a competitive advantage over other commercial districts.
6. *Emphasize quality.* In every aspect of the revitalization program, from storefront design to promotional campaigns, Downtown must reflect a strong, quality image. While the budget for a particular effort may be tight, "cut and paste" efforts can convey a negative image.
7. *Change attitudes and practices.* Engaging in better business practices, altering ways of thinking, and improving the physical appearance of Downtown Belvidere should be taken on slowly but deliberately. A carefully planned program will help shift public perceptions and practices to support and sustain revitalization.
8. *Make frequent, visible changes.* Constant improvements, even small ones, will be a reminder that the revitalization effort is underway—and succeeding. Small projects at the beginning pave the way for larger ones as the effort matures. Constant revitalization activity creates confidence and greater levels of participation.

#### *Responsibilities of the Downtown Organization*

The Downtown Organization will serve several purposes: initiating action on plan items, engaging others in support of downtown revitalization, fundraising, promoting Downtown Belvidere and monitoring and managing continued downtown improvement. Tasks that the Downtown Organization (as well as other entities) will be responsible for are described in the following section, "Implementation Strategy."

Several revitalization tasks can be taken on with the Downtown Organization taking the lead with others taking on supporting—yet, essential—roles. Among others these include business

recruitment, planning and holding special events, developing downtown marketing materials (logo, website, brochures, etc.) and campaigns and maintaining and analyzing a variety of information relative to downtown and the revitalization process.

For certain revitalization tasks the organization will play a secondary role—encouraging and supporting other parties in accomplishing work beyond its ability or authority. The Downtown Organization will also be important in supporting changes that are more directly undertaken by businesses and property owners, such as coordinating business hours. These changes must inevitably be made by the individual merchants, but the organization will be essential in getting the merchants together to explore ways this can be accomplished and apply pressure, as needed, to see that the changes are made.

*Tasks:*

- *Identify and recruit individuals to form Downtown Organization*
- *Establish organizational structure*
- *Apply for 501c3 (non-profit) status*

#### **4.2. Develop Funding, Work Programs and Volunteers**

*Fundraising*

To help pay for downtown revitalization activities, the Downtown Organization will need to raise funds for *projects*, which have “one-time” costs, and for *programs* that appear in the organization’s annual budget and have recurring costs. Having tax-exempt (501C-3) status is essential to fundraising because donations to a tax-exempt organization are deductible. Project fundraising is generally more glamorous than raising money for the organization. Several projects identified in the plan may be funded completely or in part through monies raised by the Downtown Organization.

To raise money for its annual budget, Downtown Organizations seek private donations as well as yearly allotments from the local government. Special events work as fundraisers for the organization while promoting downtown and generating downtown activity and, ideally, more business activity for merchants. While less exciting than project fundraising, getting the seed money for the organizational budget is essential and allows the organization to continue year after year. A strong annual budget would enable the organization to take on larger programs (i.e., a façade improvements loan pool) to buy or lease property or to hire a staff person.

### *Work Programs and Volunteers*

To be effective the Downtown Organization must distribute its workload among its committees; and each committee should develop and utilize a pool of willing volunteers. Like many small towns, the organization is likely to include members and volunteers who also serve in some capacity with other community organizations. For this reason it is particularly important to have reasonable and clear expectations for members and volunteers—so that they are not overworked, given too little to do, or given work that is not personally fulfilling. A well-run program that strategically uses its personal resources is more likely to retain members and volunteers. In this way, it is able to accomplish more and therefore attract new supporters, both volunteers and donors. Volunteers' unique talents and interests should be aligned with the various tasks to be accomplished.

In a traditional structure, an Organization Committee will be responsible for making sure that volunteers are involved in work programs that best suit them. The Promotions work program requires the most volunteers and the greatest range of talents. Promotion involves recurring work throughout each year, whereas the largest projects undertaken by a Design Committee will happen only once—though they may take a long time to achieve. An Economic Structure committee may require few personnel but will continuously invest its time in business enhancement and recruitment. The work program for each committee should use the following Implementation Strategy as a guide.

#### *Tasks:*

- *Establish an annual fundraising strategy and budget*
- *Develop fundraising activities for specific projects*
- *Develop committees and work programs*
- *Recruit and organize volunteers*

### **Community Connections**

Every influence the community has should somehow be positioned to support downtown revitalization. Downtown decline or revitalization does not occur solely due to downtown influences. This is why it is advantageous to consider downtown revitalization in the context of a citywide growth and investment policies—such as through a Comprehensive Plan.

It is essential to recognize and account for the effects that different types of public and private decisions can have on downtown's sustainability. Likewise, private development decisions outside downtown can affect revitalization efforts.

Citywide policies and regulations can have effects, sometimes unrecognized, on efforts to revitalize downtown.

The following are a few ways the community may better coordinate citywide issues with downtown revitalization:

- The Chamber of Commerce is concerned for all of its members and acts generally in its business promotion efforts. Good communication with the Downtown Organization can help ensure that Chamber activities support, or at least, do no harm to downtown improvement activities.
- The City and the Downtown Organization should work with Growth Dimensions to address Downtown Belvidere's unique economic structuring objectives within the context of the county effort of economic development.
- The City's capital improvements plan and annual budgets should reflect a continued level of commitment to downtown revitalization. If the community is serious, then local tax dollars should help carry out plans for revitalization, or at least not interfere with them.

## CONCLUSION

This plan is designed to build on the spirit of the people of Belvidere and their commitment to downtown as the historic heart of the community. The intent is to capitalize on:

- *the physical charm of Belvidere's traditional, historic downtown*
- *the many functions that Downtown Belvidere serves for the community and surrounding county*
- *the residents' desire for downtown to serve as a center for community interaction*
- *the downtown's central role within the natural, political, and artistic heritage of Belvidere*

Revitalization efforts must be organized and must be a grassroots effort *led* by merchants and property owners, residents and other interested parties and *supported* by the City. Success of these efforts will rely on a comprehensive approach consistent with the National Trust's "Four Point Approach" to Main Street revitalization; physical improvements to make downtown a more attractive, welcoming place; economic changes to bring together the most appropriate and desirable activities; organization of stakeholders and volunteers to carry out both short and long-term revitalization tasks; and touting Downtown Belvidere and its revitalization accomplishments, both within and outside of the community. And finally, the City of Belvidere, Boone County and a host of private sector decision-makers must acknowledge and improve downtown's connections to the broader community and region.