

EDITORIAL: Big comeback for city center

William Barth | Posted: Monday, March 3, 2014 4:00 pm

What's next for central district that has become the envy of Wisconsin municipalities?

FOR THOSE WITH long enough memories, there was a time when just about all hope seemed lost for downtown Beloit.

In fact, that applied to most downtowns in most American cities. An increasingly mobile society was abandoning central city areas in favor of sprawling subdivisions expanding on the outer limits of communities.

In turn, that out-migration of population encouraged businesses to shift away from central commercial districts to build new retail corridors designed to serve commuters. The so-called "big box" store was born, springing up near interstate highways and heavily-trafficked corridors catering to cars.

THE RESULT was decay in downtown commercial districts, and city centers fell into disfavor and neglect.

Many readers may recall the dispiriting years from the mid-1970s through the 1980s when it seemed Beloit's downtown had become unrelentingly and depressingly in decline. Not only was the downtown area being abandoned to empty storefront after empty storefront, many of its once proud buildings were being ripped down with nothing left behind but vacant and unwanted land.

For the older generation at the time it was like a death in the family, for they could remember the days when parking was scarce and sidewalks were full. Downtowns were the social centers of the community as well as the commercial hub. Apparently, those days had become just a footnote in the history books.

FAST FORWARD to last Thursday night, when members and supporters of the Downtown Beloit Association gathered for the annual awards dinner. To say hope has returned is a gross understatement. Beloit's city center has become one of Wisconsin's best success stories.

The change is nothing short of astonishing.

Vacant storefronts are rare. Unique shops abound. Entertainment venues are hopping. Social events like the Farmers Market, BIFF and Holidazzle animate the district with big crowds of people. Employers have returned bringing hundreds and hundreds of employees back to the central commercial district. New investments like the Phoenix building are accelerating the pace

of growth. Upscale residential opportunities are drawing people back to live downtown. More projects valued in the tens of millions of dollars are under way or planned.

Now, visitors from far and wide come to Beloit to see what has been done to revitalize the city center.

Now, representatives from communities come here to renew hope.

Now, Beloit is an example of what can happen when people commit themselves and their resources to a vision of what they want their community to be, and refuse to accept the idea that difficulty is destiny.

THIS IS A SUCCESS STORY with many authors. Too many to list. Besides, they didn't do it for the recognition. They did it because Beloit is home, and home matters.

Neither is it a story whose final chapter has been written.

Truth is, there can be no final chapter. There's no such thing as sitting back, admiring one's work, feeling satisfied.

For if a community stops pressing to move forward, it will inevitably begin to slide backward.

In a year when so many exceptional improvements are coming to fruition, it is clear no one in Beloit's city center is resting on laurels. The movement continues.

So we stand and applaud the extraordinary efforts that have made Beloit's central commercial district what it is, and we eagerly await the next chapter. Hope is a wonderful thing. Confidence is even better.