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Lessons for Transform Rockford: Downtown revival boosts Beloit's image

Read more from the latest Transform Monthly section on Rockford's image at rrstar.com/news/transform-rockford and find it in this Sunday's print edition of the Register Star.

BELOIT, Wis. — Teala and Scott Lamoreux are Rockford natives who moved out of the area for 10 years and returned to be closer to family after a relative's death.

They own [Northwoods Premium Confections](#) and sold their sweets and other snacks for a few years at the downtown Rockford City Market while doing the same on Saturday mornings at the downtown Beloit Farmers Market. "It was a nice, clean ambiance, and customers (in Beloit) were very welcoming and appreciative," Teala said.

They kept their eyes on what was happening in downtown Beloit for three years and opened their fine-chocolate and candies business 2½ years ago at 314 State St., where their landlord had just updated the facade of their storefront. Business has been "wonderful. Momentum is strong with regular and new customers," she said.

The couple live above the store, walk mornings on a bike path along the Rock River and eat at downtown restaurants — except for Lucy's #7 Burger Bar, which opened in April on Grand Avenue, just around the corner.

"It's so busy," Teala said. A sushi bar will begin operations in August next door. It will be among other eateries, bars, boutiques and a barbershop within footsteps.

Beloit's downtown is looking good these days. As a result, the city's image is more vibrant than it has been in decades. "An awful lot of Beloit's critics have not been here for the past 25 years," said Jeff Adams. He is a retired Beloit College economics professor who has served on the boards of several development, business and tourism groups in the city of about 37,000 people a half-hour's drive north of Rockford.

His advice for [Transform Rockford](#) as it embarks on turning around the city's economic and social woes by 2025?

"What worked in Beloit was developing a plan to work with the business community, doing it step-by-step ... in small, incremental steps," he said, acknowledging, however, that the work "is never done."

It's hard to talk about Beloit's new face without noting the involvement and financial backing from Diane Hendricks, co-founder and chairman of Beloit-based ABC Supply Co., a wholesale distributor of roofing, window and siding materials. She also presides over Hendricks Holding Co. and the companies employ about 1,000 people in the area. Hendricks is a major sponsor of the annual [Beloit International Film Festival](#) and her name, "D.M. Hendricks," is embedded on the new four-story brick building that houses Lucy's.

But it would be an "injustice" to say that Hendricks is the only reason for improvements, said Rick Bastian, chairman/CEO of Blackhawk Bank, which also has locations in the Rock River Valley.

"They are certainly catalysts," Bastian said. "It's not their checkbook. It's their leadership," which has been inclusive while moving the city forward. "Beloit has been able to keep focus while bringing all people to the table. People can be engaged from whatever social status."

So what does Bastian think about Rockford's efforts over the years to move forward?

"Rockford still is trying to get its arms around alignment of government, business and nonprofits and focus on what is important," he said. Bastian, who lives in Rockford, led First National Bank & Trust and its successor, Bank One, in Rockford in the 1980s and early 1990s and has served on economic development groups in the Illinois city of 153,000 people.

Bastian said Beloit's Farmers Market had been a "magnet in bringing people downtown." And downtown is critical to a city's image: "A city lives or dies on its heart." In 2012, Beloit was listed No. 17 on Travel & Leisure's list of America's Greatest Main Streets. Figures distributed by the [Downtown Beloit Association](#) put the assessed valuation of downtown Beloit at \$54 million last year, up from \$49 million in 2007.

Yet the downtown isn't Beloit's only draw. Big, stable companies have operations that call Beloit home, including Kerry Group (a food company) and Regal Beloit, a motor-maker.

Andrew Janke, executive director of the [Greater Beloit Economic Development Corp.](#), said Beloit's remake "has been a journey that started in the late 1980s." That's when unemployment was particularly high in many manufacturing-based cities like Beloit and Rockford. In Rockford, 1 in 4 workers was out of a job in 1982.

Around that time, Beloit 2000 was formed to promote large-scale development along the Rock River. It has expanded its sights to become Beloit 2020. The group is "improving, through physical change, the image" of Beloit, Janke said. "I could give you a 180-page PowerPoint presentation based on 20 years" of



The assessed value of downtown Beloit, Wis., has outpaced the city as a whole.
SUNNY STRADER/RRSTAR.COM

improvements.

Yet, more work needs to be done, he said. "We continue to face all the challenges of urban environments."

For example, 1 in 4 residents lives below the poverty level, the same as in Rockford, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And your chances of becoming a victim of violent crime is 1 in 271 in Beloit, compared with 1 in 360 in Wisconsin, according to the data-analyzing website NeighborhoodScout.com. Even so, it's much less than for Rockford, where the chance is 1 in 71, compared with 1 in 263 in Illinois.

And while downtown Beloit's assessed value is up, the city's total assessed value dipped to \$1.4 billion last year from \$1.6 billion in 2007.

"The assessed valuation of Beloit (represents) very old" structures, Adams said. "We have a lot of older, smaller housing, and various expansions largely have occurred outside city limits." A challenge for the city is "how do you get new housing that is above the median value to be built?"

Yet Janke is confident that leaders and residents can continue to make improvements. "We are small enough that we can marshal all of our resources to find solutions to our problems."

Richard Larson agrees. He owns and manages apartments and homes and has lived in Beloit for 25 years.

"People in Beloit are movers and shakers, and they're willing to get involved," he said. "Beloit's downtown is revitalized. That's what happens when you have people who are willing to take chances and stick their necks out for a city.

"The image here has changed so much, and the city's people are proud of that."

Register Star photographer/reporter Sunny Strader contributed to this report.

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