

Sprucing up downtown districts

By **DEBRA JENSEN-DE HART** Special to Stateline Business Journal | Posted: Tuesday, December 29, 2015 2:15 pm

Downtowns were once the hub of most communities.

Then times changed and thriving business and commercial areas began to migrate to the outskirts of town or to the malls.

Welcome to the 2000s, however, an era when increased interest in downtowns is continuing to breathe new life into core commercial areas.

That goes for the Stateline Area as well where funding sources are helping downtown businesses improve their facades with special programs.

Take the Village of Rockton, for example, which has always had its charms.

But renewed synergy is apparent within the downtown borders where most storefronts are filled and village officials continue to work to provide the means for downtown improvements in keeping with their long-range vision. One such opportunity for property/building owners is the Downtown Façade Grant Program.

Approved property owners who undertake at least \$1,000 in improvements to the outside of their business can receive a grant for half of the total cost of the work, up to a maximum of \$10,000 per storefront, according to the façade grant guidelines. Plus, corner lots may also qualify for an additional \$5,000.

One such corner lot business is Whiskey's Rockton Inn, at the corner of Main Street and Blackhawk Boulevard. Owner Kristie Frye is one recipient of the façade program.

"We heard about the program; we wanted to add the outdoor patio," Frye said. As a result of the application being approved, Frye was able to obtain grant monies and the patio was constructed in the fall of 2014, she said.

"It's nice to sit out there and watch the traffic. It's a nice, vintage village," she said.

Other improvements made at the site included painting the exterior of the building and placement of a new awning, Frye said.

The façade program was begun in Rockton more than two years ago, said Village President Dale Adams. It is offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Available is a total of \$20,000 annually. The

façade program is currently funded from the village's general obligation fund, meaning it's money that comes from the village's portion of real estate taxes. It gets renewed every June.

Cyndy Fogarty, owner of Country Cottage, 122 S. Prairie St., also benefited from the program.

Recently, "We sided the whole outside of our building," she said. They applied for and received \$5,000 towards the project.

"We were really grateful to get it," Fogarty said.

The Fogartys bought the building 12 years ago and had installed new windows, wiring, furnaces, air conditioning and more out of their own monies and the siding was the last thing they needed to finish, she said.

"We had been saving for a while until we could afford to do it."

After hearing about the grant façade program from another business owner, they applied and were pleased by the outcome.

"We were tickled to death to get it," she said.

Applications are chosen by the Rockton Village Board and must meet the objectives of the program and conform to zoning, building code and Rockton's design review guidelines. Those selected must complete their project within a 12-month period following project approval unless extended by the village board.

The grant money is paid out after the project has been completed, inspected and approved in the form of a reimbursement for costs.

Examples of eligible improvements are:

- Replacement or repair of brickwork, plaster or wood siding, painting, cleaning and repainting.
- Replacing, repairing or relocating storefronts, doors, windows, parapets or cornices, including the removal of incompatible exterior finishes or materials.
- Changes in or additions to lighting.
- Repairs, addition or installation of awnings.
- Addition of a patio or outdoor eating space.
- Pavement improvements to areas along the front public right of way.

The grant façade program is part of the long-range plans for overall streetscape and parking improvements, Adams said.

"We are partnering with Beloit to do a parking needs study through the Stateline Area Transit Study,"

Adams added.

During his 45 years as a Rockton resident and 15 years as mayor, Adams says the population has grown from about 2,200 to about 7,700. The downtown improvements not only help draw visitors to the businesses, it draws people in for events such as the holiday parade, Old Settlers Days, Midwest Oktoberfest and Hahn's Beer Fest.

Planning and Development Administrator Patricia Diduch calls downtown Rockton "an experience." The experience is a more leisurely shopping outing going from store to store as patrons explore what the village has to offer.

"Hopefully, we are recovering from the economic downturn and business owners are getting on board," Adams said.

In Roscoe, a revolving loan program exists but there are no grants available for façade improvement.

Roscoe Village President David Krienke said the loan funds can be used for a variety of needs such as façade improvement but the money also is tied to job creation. To be eligible, a business must be creating more part-time or full-time jobs and follow other requirements to obtain funds, Krienke said.

In Beloit, a downtown façade program has existed for years, with varying degrees of money available depending on funding sources.

"For some time up until the end of 2012, grants were awarded in larger amounts due to funds being available in the Tax Incremental Finance District, which is now unavailable," said Shauna El-Amin, executive director of the Downtown Business Association. "Those funds were used to do some major repairs throughout downtown including total makeovers and tuck pointing and were given on a 50 percent matching basis up to \$10,000."

During that time, about five years ago, at Bagels & More, 324 State St., owner Dave Siekierski applied for and received a \$10,000 grant, he said. The funds covered about one-third of the cost he had to expand the restaurant's dining area and add six or seven more tables inside for patrons.

Pleased with the grant and resulting aesthetics and patronage, Siekierski said, "It helped defer a lot of the cost and it increased our business by 15 to 20 percent."

Presently, however, grants made through the Beloit program are more limited. They must be at least \$500 and not more than \$1,000 per building. The applicant provides at least a 50 percent cash match to the total project cost. Grant projects must have a minimum investment of \$1,000 per building. Grant funds are distributed upon successful completion of the project.

"The matching grant program has an annual budget and is funded primarily through the Business Improvement District via the Downtown Beloit Association," El-Amin said.

“The DBA budgets \$4,500 per year for these grants and grants are awarded on a first-come basis.”

The grants target improvements that contribute to the overall streetscape aesthetic of the downtown business district and aim to improve individual building image and functionality for business/building owners, El-Amin said.

Recipients in 2014 received grants for new awnings, paint and repairs for front facades and paint for front and rear sections of buildings.

In 2015, Rod Gottfredsen of Austin’s Barbershop, 316 State St., received a grant for paint for both front and rear doors. The long-time barber, located in the iconic shop, said he was grateful for the funds.

The City of Janesville, which is undertaking long-range revitalization of its downtown, created a downtown revolving loan fund in 2014 which includes façade improvements. The program does not offer grants but does offer loans for business owners or businesses wishing to improve the exterior appearance of their buildings, according to Dayna Sarver, economic development coordinator.

The City of South Beloit does not have a grant facade improvement program, but it does have a revolving loan program and a Tax Incremental Funded District. Business owners can apply for funds through those means and obtain money if they meet criteria, said City Clerk Tracy Patrick.