

BELOIT'S STRATEGIES HAVE SCORED SUCCESSES

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Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News Shoppers walk through downtown Beloit on May 7. The city's downtown core has grown since the 2008-09 financial crisis, thanks in large part to redevelopment of existing properties.

BELOIT - Beloit may be on the losing end for large-scale retailing, but city efforts to attract business core growth have been successful and will continue to advance the community for decades to come.

So says Brian Morello, director of the Center for Entrepreneurship in Liberal Education at Beloit College (CELEB). The entrepreneurial center, located at 437 E. Grand Ave., helps give students the spark to attempt to grow their own businesses.

With more consumers shopping online and residents willing to export their retail dollars to larger nearby markets, Morello said the city's focus on attracting major job creators and fostering downtown growth is helping position Beloit on a path for growth even in an increasingly uncertain economic climate.

"The fight for the old days is not a realistic way to look at the world," Morello said. "That train left the station years ago. If you look at it in isolation it seems horrible, but with Beloit's industrial growth, we've gotten out in front of the curve on what will matter in the future."

Morello said the city's strategy was right in having attracted major businesses to the Gateway Business Park, recalling the days when Beloit's unemployment was at 18 percent, now sitting at around 4 percent.

According to data provided by the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation, the city has seen a growing trend toward successful business development. In 2009 Greater Beloit had 11 new economic development projects that added 120 jobs worth a total investment of \$74.2 million. Fast forward to last year, the area saw 23 new economic development projects that added 360 jobs worth a total investment of \$896.56 million. It should be noted, the Town of Beloit Alliant Energy project at the West Riverside Energy Center served as a \$700 million project that reached its halfway completion mark in September of last year.

Morello also pointed to the growth of the community as a technology hub, with 18 companies now based out of the Ironworks campus, formerly the Beloit Corp. site, positioning Beloit as a leader in small business technology-based enterprises.

"You have to address the job loss," Morello said. "We have a unique set of offerings and business opportunities with (Gateway) Business Park and Ironworks. We've created a physical city center with recreation and outdoors and utilization of city center and doesn't rely on big box stores or malls. We can see we are winning by seeing what businesses are coming in."

As online sales continue to shape the consumer market, Morello believes fears of the shift are overblown.

"But if you compare it on the other side with commercial building and the fact net job gain has been positive, accessibility through technology is massively better, improving the overall macro experience of price," he said.

To capture a better picture of the Beloit area's market demographics, multiple groups have commissioned studies along a "10-Mile City" concept developed to cross the arbitrary boundaries of state and municipal lines and illustrate a better representation of the area's spending power.

Last updated in 2017, the study connects two states, three counties, 14 zip codes along 37 census tracts all within 10 miles of Beloit's central city. Overall findings include average household income of \$71,209 and expenditures of \$61,523, with average home values of \$161,081 within the area that included a population of 112,343 residents.

"Just walking around downtown, I predict that it's a pretty clear tell that a lot of consumption is happening and a lot of people are coming to the city center," Morello said. "In other words, the game plan is really working. You are seeing less spill out of the community and the greater 10-Mile City."

Retired Beloit College Economics Professor Jeff Adams, who was instrumental with Beloit 200 and the development of the 10-Mile City concept, said the community needed to answer a simple question: What is the local economy?

"The distance is consistent with research on customers' willingness to travel that distance for goods and services," Adams said. "(10 Mile City) as a standard is also very useful for data collection purposes, using GIS software, which permits comparisons across other places."