

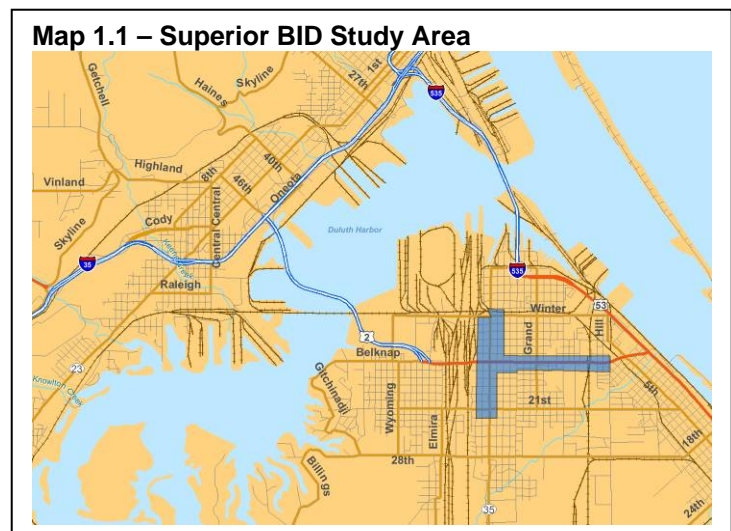
# Introduction and Historical Background on the Superior BID

*This section provides background information for the market analysis including the purpose of the study, a description of the Superior Business Improvement District (BID), a history of downtown Superior, and current physical characteristics and issues facing the district. The study's components are also summarized.*

The Superior Business Improvement District (BID) is the business, government and educational center of Douglas County and Northwest Wisconsin. It is the geographic center and historic downtown of Superior and an important commercial center in the combined “Twin Ports” area that includes Duluth, MN. Map 1.1 illustrates the central location and size of the BID relative to the City of Superior

The BID is comprised of over 80 square blocks in Downtown Superior, primarily along Tower Avenue (North-South corridor) and Belknap Street (East-West corridor).

The Superior BID faces a number of key economic restructuring challenges. Strong retail competition south of downtown, a limited business mix downtown, a less affluent population base, physical deterioration of buildings, and negative public perceptions about downtown Superior are several on-going issues that need to be addressed.



The Superior BID as an organization has developed a strong partnership with business operators, property owners, downtown organizations, government entities and other downtown stakeholders. Recognizing the need to serve the economic development interests of these groups, the BID initiated this market analysis with the intent of providing a market-based plan for the BID and a foundation to support business retention, expansion and recruitment efforts.

The City of Superior’s vision statement addresses the City’s shopping areas and downtown with a theme and connectivity to the community. The portion of the vision statement most relevant to the BID and downtown reads:

*“...What we mean by this is a redeveloped downtown, which captures a unique market niche such as professional offices, service businesses, entertainment and recreation with upscale restaurants and bars, and specialty shops. We see convenient parking and enclosed walkways or connections between shops. We see a downtown, which utilizes its historic features, green spaces, parks and central points of interest to create a unique shopping area.”*

*Source: City of Superior, Comprehensive Plan, October 1998*

While parts of this vision may have changed since 1998, it provides a portrait of economic vitality upon which market opportunities can be examined more fully.

## Study Purpose

Business retention, expansion and recruitment efforts require addressing the needs of business operators, property owners and customers. However, downtown revitalization also involves educating and building the capacity of these stakeholders, as well as policy makers and economic development organizations.

Given these objectives, the Superior BID Market Analysis was designed to provide market information needed for economic development efforts, while also developing the capacity and knowledge of individuals and organizations engaged in downtown revitalization. Accordingly, this market analysis may differ from other studies as it has an educational focus. Specific goals included:

- Determine the size and shape of the Superior BID's trade areas;
- Examine the trade area's resident demographic and lifestyle characteristics;
- Understand the regional economic position of the Superior BID;
- Explore the needs and perspectives of business operators;
- Explore the needs and perspectives of trade area consumers;
- Analyze success factors of comparable city downtowns;
- Use the above and additional information to study business and real estate opportunities; and
- Engage the BID board in developing recommendations for the analysis to enhance and guide the BID's economic future.

This study involved a BID market analysis study group, which provided essential local insight. They were involved in drawing conclusions and making recommendations from the data presented in this analysis.

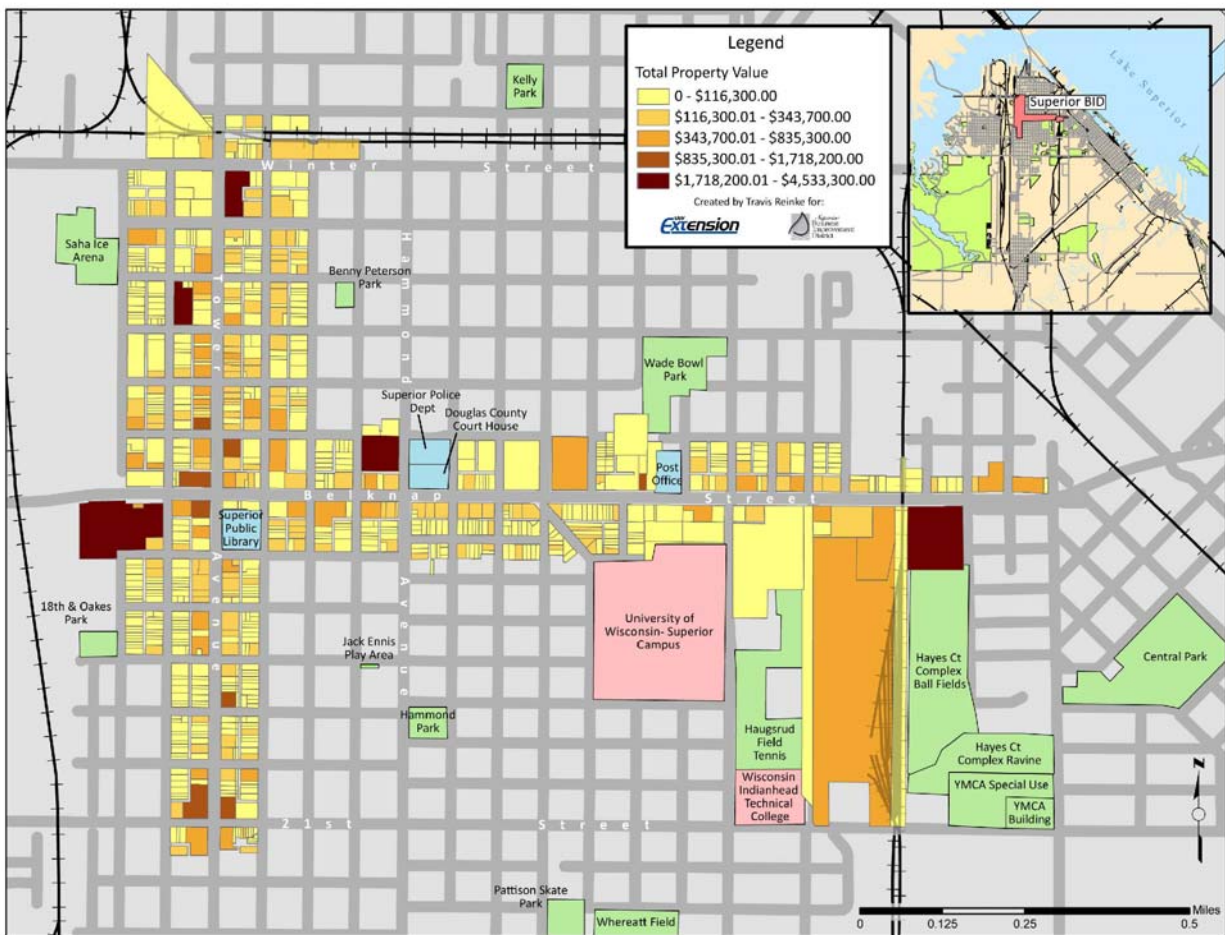
# Characteristics of the Superior BID Study Area

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis was used to explore several measures of economic and business health in the Superior BID including property/land value, building assessments, business sectors, land class, and vacancies. This information was provided by the City of Superior and reflects 2007 data.

## Total Property Value

Total property value was categorized based on 2007 city property assessment data at the parcel level and presented in Map 1.2.

Map 1.2 – Total Property Value - 2007

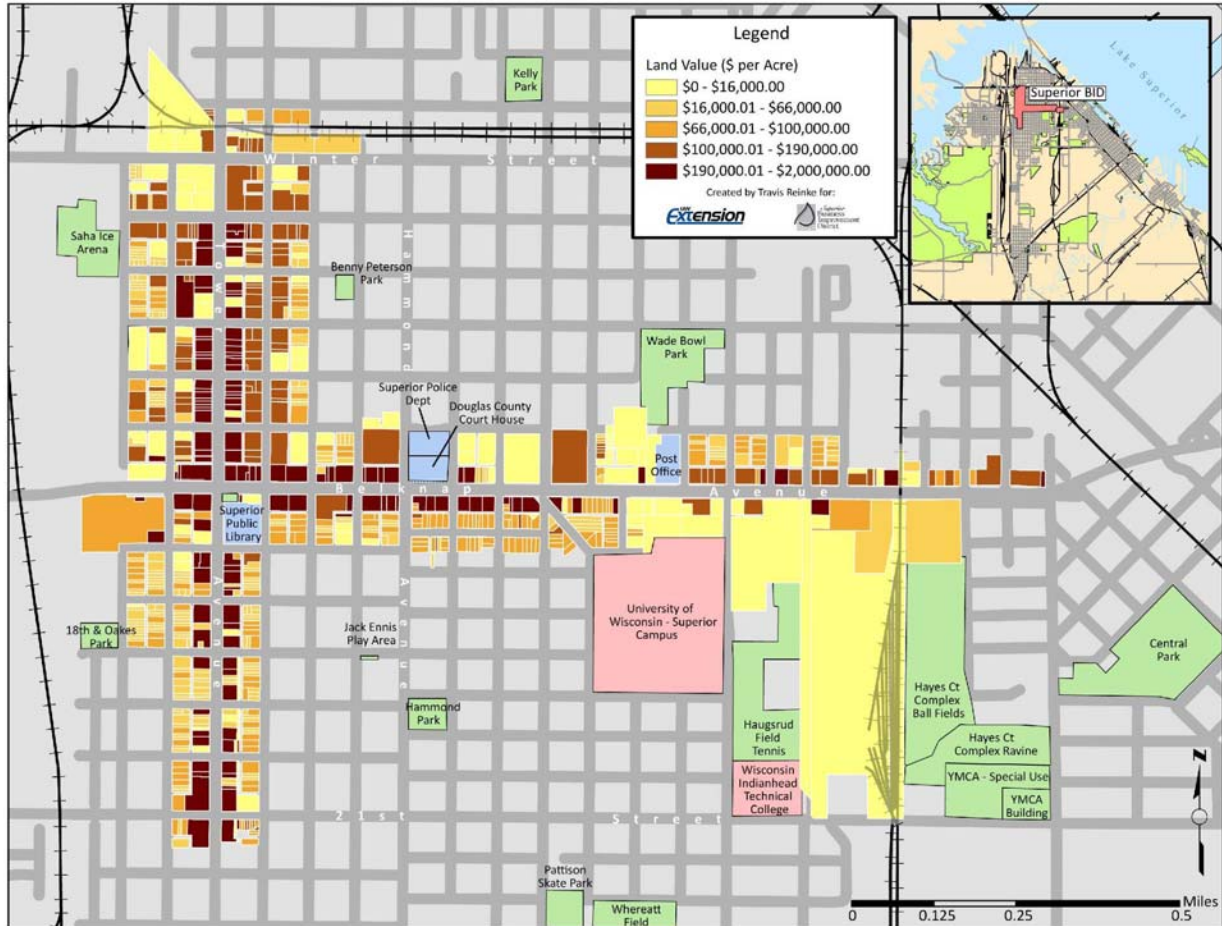


The map illustrates that those properties in the highest property value classes were generally larger parcels and included industrial businesses, banks, a private apartment building and the Superior City Center.

## Land Value

Land value as illustrated in Map 1.3 was calculated from 2007 city property assessment data and categorized by dollars per acre at the parcel level.

Map 1.3 – Land Value - 2007

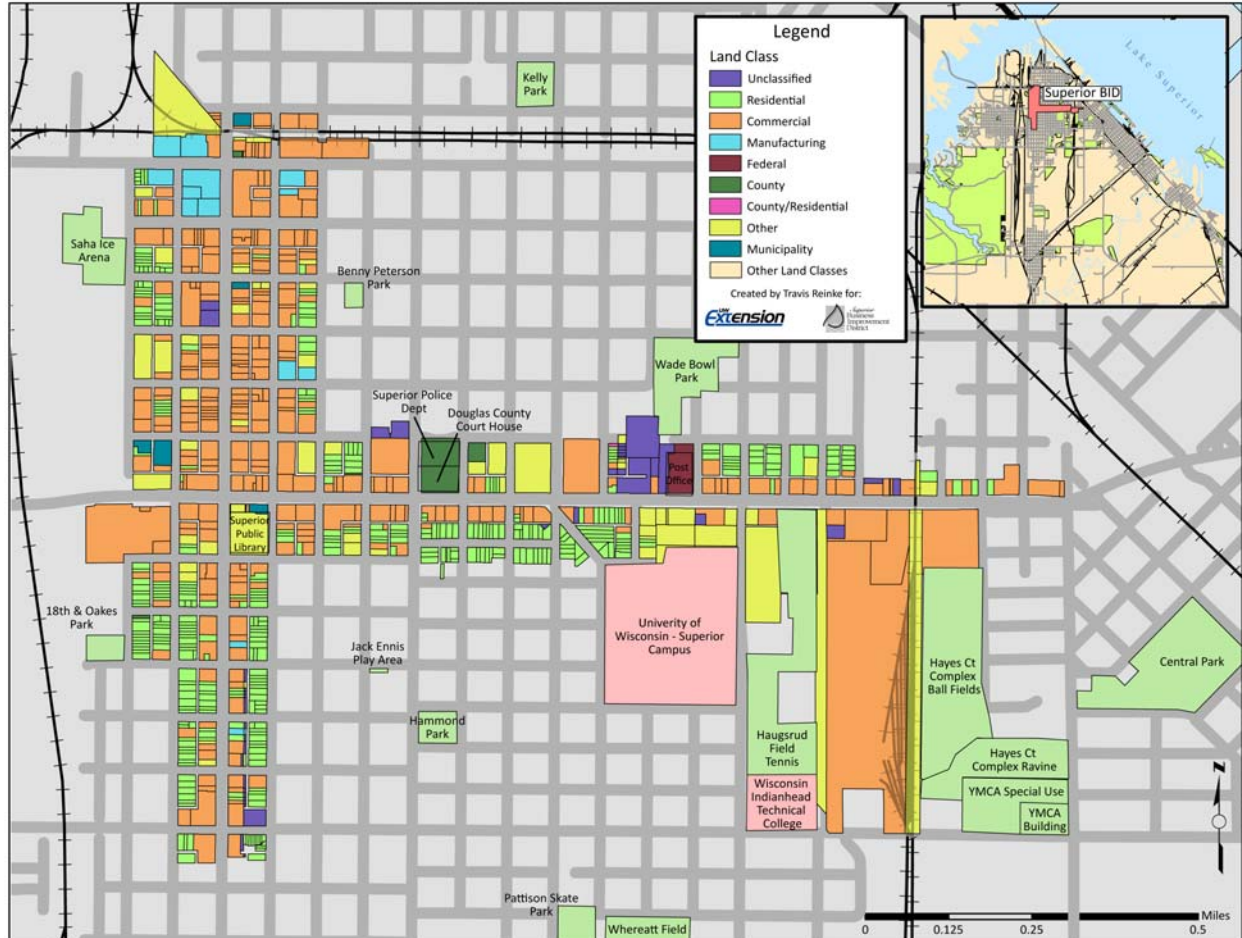


Land values are highest along Tower Avenue and Belknap Street, the primary commercial corridors in the Superior BID that receive the most traffic. Nearly all parcels fit in the highest value classes. Land values appear to decrease fairly uniformly with each half block away from Tower and Belknap as traffic and desirability also decreases.

## Land Class

Land Class as illustrated in Map 1.4 refers to a valuation class assigned by Douglas County to all parcels for taxation purposes.

Map 1.4 – Land Class – 2007

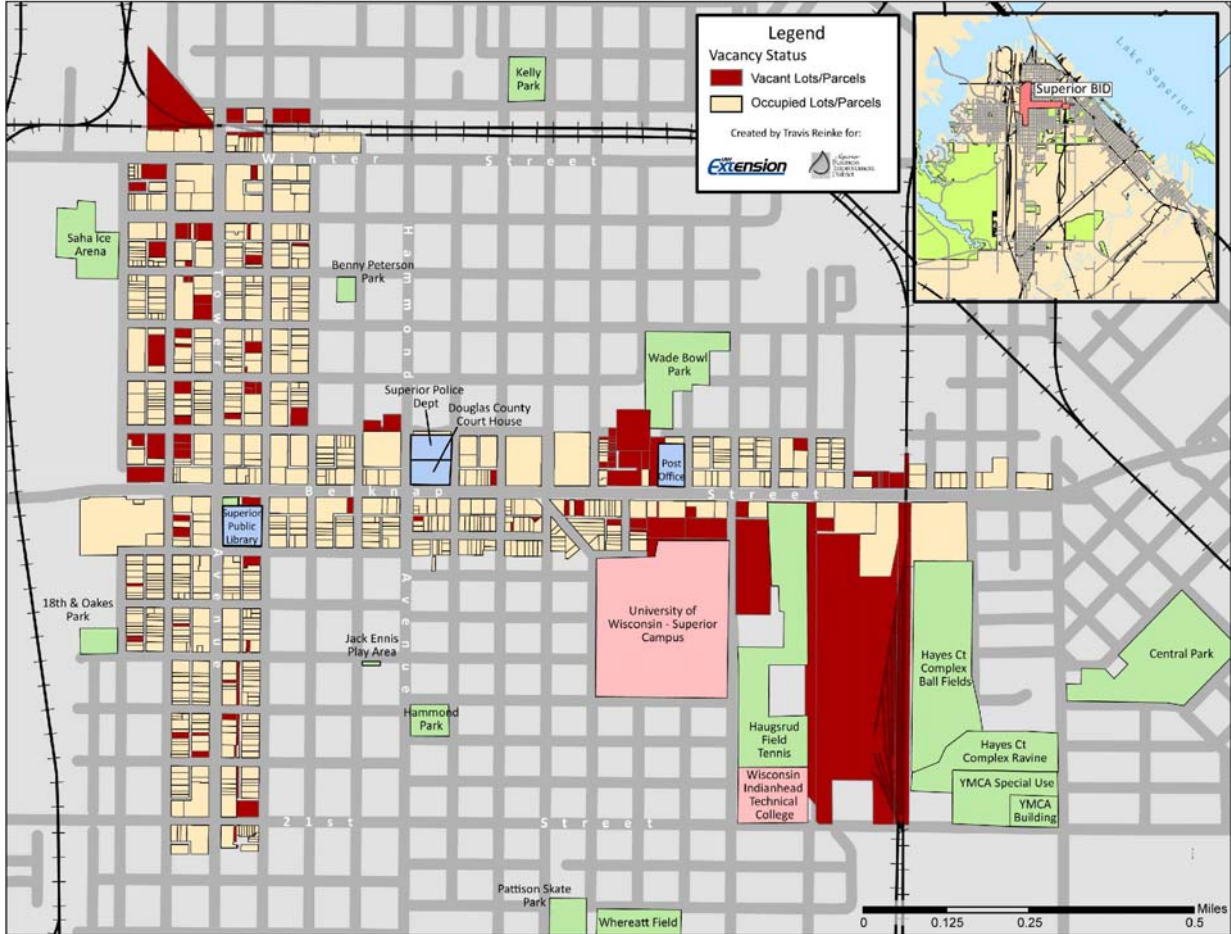


The majority of parcels on Tower Avenue and Belknap Street fall into the commercial land class. The remainder of the BID largely falls into the residential and manufacturing classes. Residential is more prevalent on the south side of Belknap Street.

## Vacant Parcels and Parking Lots

Of the 810 parcels in the Superior BID, 122 were categorized as vacant or used for parking in 2007 according to data provided by the City of Superior. This results in a vacancy rate of 15.1% for the BID.

Map 1.5 – Vacant Parcels Status - 2007



The majority of these parcels do not face Tower Avenue or Belknop Street, but rather the adjacent Banks and Ogden Avenues which are comprised of mostly industrial and automotive business sectors and private residences.

## History of Downtown Superior and the BID

Superior, Wisconsin is located on one of the most popular tourist routes into the mid-west and the largest of the Great Lakes, Lake Superior. Early inhabitants were drawn to the area for the same reason as today's inhabitants – its natural attributes. Commercial development was tied to the region's lakes, rivers, woodlands and other natural resources, and that tie still exists.

### **Downtown**

Superior's downtown moved as the community grew. In the 1850s, the Bay of Superior was increasingly recognized as a natural harbor at the mouth of the Nemadji River. Investors and land speculators visualized the establishment of a substantial community on Lake Superior. East End (E. 2nd Street) became the downtown for the fledgling community with its borders expanding from 19th Avenue to 25th Avenue and up to 5th Street. The East End District remains a neighborhood commercial district today.

The Land and River Improvement Company purchased 137 acres of what would become the next downtown. Commercial buildings were built from the harbor on Tower to East 16th Street during the 1890s. Large commercial buildings with great architectural features were built containing luxury apartments above. Financial crisis brought a halt to the large building construction but in the 1920s smaller commercial structures were built to create a fuller downtown. While many of the structures closer to the waterfront are gone, most of the buildings in the core downtown still stand and house businesses today. This area became the hub of Superior's retail, service and social activities for the next sixty years. However, the advent of the mall and big box retailers began to draw business away from downtown as it has in other cities.

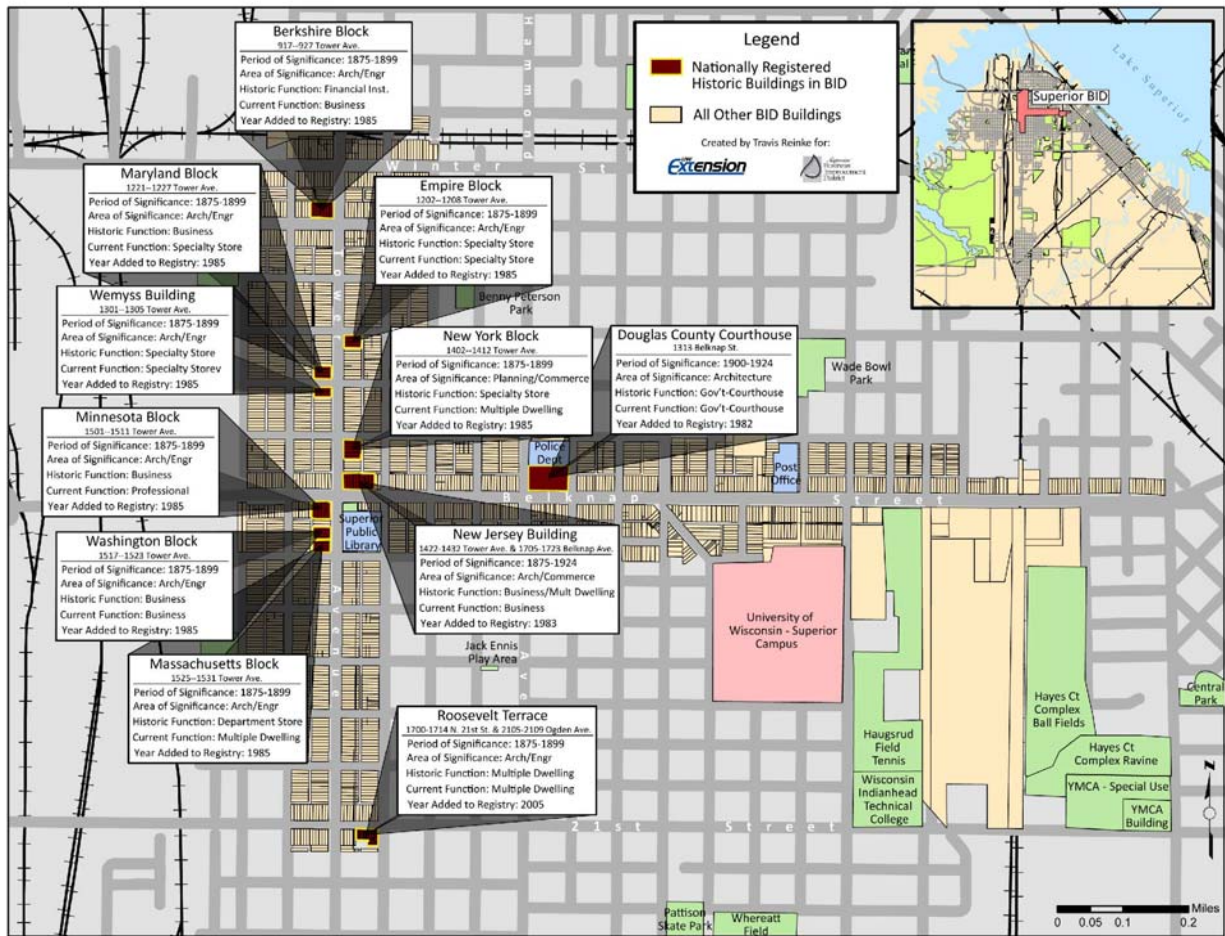
The current Superior BID is home to eleven buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. Ten of the eleven are in the Tower Avenue corridor. The other is the Douglas County Courthouse on Belknap Street. The Tower Avenue buildings were all historically businesses, predominantly retail specialty stores. Most remain active businesses while three have been converted to multiple residence dwellings. Superior has five other registered historic buildings outside of the BID. Map 1.6 illustrates the locations of these eleven Buildings in the BID that are on the Register

### **Superior BID**

In mid 1987, the Downtown Revitalization Council was formed. This group of concerned business and property owners were committed to defining a path for the redevelopment of Superior's downtown. They reached out to the community and over 100 participants gathered to identify the strengths, weaknesses and challenges facing the downtown. In 1988, the property owners and the City of Superior agreed to establish a Business Improvement District (BID).

The BID was formed in 1989 with the original boundaries encompassing the downtown area. The BID has undergone three boundary expansions and now encompasses the Central Business District containing 89 blocks and over 400 businesses. Services, retail, restaurants, entertainment and the public sector are housed within the area.

**Map 1.6 – Superior BID Buildings on the National Register of Historic Places**



The BID has been able to expand its grant programs for building and property owners from a single small grant program to five programs. Currently the organization provides grants for Commercial Building Renovation, Architectural Assistance, Signs, New Construction and Landscaping. The local financial institutions, as they have from the BID's formation, provide a BID Reinvestment Loan program to assist with property improvements. The financial assistance continues to generate investment in the BID.

There have been challenges with bridge and road construction and the expansion of retail around the big boxes, but there is a change in the air. Investment through new construction, a major remodeling of a strip mall, the conversion of a school building and a vacated city/county complex into state of the art office and retail spaces, the restoration of a historic building into apartments with commercial below, and the expansion and remodeling of many buildings within the district are bringing people back to the area.

The mission of the BID has remained the same: to promote, enhance, recruit and advocate for the property and business owners within its boundaries.

## Physical Characteristics and Issues of the BID Today

During the course of this study, Chuck Law, Ph.D., a Community and Design Specialist with the University of Wisconsin – Extension, visited Superior to offer some general observations about the layout and appearance of the downtown business district and the broader BID area. In an open letter to the Douglas County community development educator, he presented his findings. These findings are summarized here.

### ***Explanatory Note from Chuck Law, Ph.D., Community and Design Specialist***

*During my visit to Superior in January of 2007, I had an opportunity to form some initial impressions about the physical layout and appearance of the downtown that may be worth sharing as a means of initiating some type of community response. As an Extension educator, I would not normally share such views since I can cite numerous examples of where an "expert" or "outsiders" approach to strategy development and issue identification resulted in little action or community buy-in. My commentary (which follows) will also reference other ways in which the community can invite similar feedback from a broader group of experts and community members. CL*

Chuck Law, Ph.D. commentary:

It appears that downtown Superior is not perceived as a particularly attractive or welcoming part of the community. A quick visit to related websites (i.e., Chamber of Commerce, BID, etc.) resulted in few photographs of the spaces, buildings, or aerial views of the downtown. This appears to be supported by the comments recorded during a "community input" exercise completed on July 17, 2001 in which community residents offered their own reactions to the planning and design of Tower Avenue. This is somewhat unusual when compared to many Wisconsin communities where images and perceptions of their downtown are often used in marketing and promotion materials. With this in mind, opportunities for improvement are significant.

### *Automobile Orientation*

Unfortunately, the design and layout of many Wisconsin downtowns has shifted to accommodate the smooth movement of automobile traffic though and around its traditional core. Superior's downtown is not unique in this regard. The photograph below shows a somewhat typical view of the downtown and clearly illustrates the emphasis on car traffic.



Despite this emphasis, the downtown streets appear unending. There are few physical elements signifying a sense of arrival for the motorist. This makes it difficult for the newcomer to know whether he/she is in the early stages, the middle, or nearing the end of the downtown area. Absent are strong visual cues suggesting the location of business entryways or off street parking. Few commercial signs are positioned to be read by a pedestrian. The "street" appears to function more like a suburban commercial strip rather than a

mixed use of commercial, industrial, retail and hospitality businesses.

### *Lack of Pedestrian Friendliness*

This orientation toward the automobile inhibits pedestrian "friendliness." Wide streets make them difficult to cross and likely force visitors back into their cars to move from one stop to another. This is underscored by the geographic size of the downtown (once you figure out how large it is), as well as the scale of its buildings and the associated design elements. The multi-story buildings give the downtown a "canyon like" appearance and make it difficult to orient oneself. Few of the design features are pedestrian-scale. Overhead light fixtures are designed for highway standards and lack consistency in color, style and material. The overall lack of vegetation and green spaces gives the downtown area a cold appearance even on the warmest of days.

### *Lack of Strong Architectural Identity (in both buildings and the associated streetscape)*

The building blocks which make up the downtown miss a strong sense of architectural identity. Many downtown buildings have undergone typical façade changes, significantly changing their original architectural design. These range from the application of aluminum siding or awnings, to the covering of window areas, the addition of plastic signs, and the addition of artificial cedar shake mansard roofs (see photo below).

There is little complementary in building materials from building to building, but also within buildings as well. The use of stone in one building and brick in another gives a disjointed appearance to the setting. Side-by-side you see almost every material being incorporated into a business as a means of attracting a slice of the visual "pie." Within a single building, first floor commercial operations are divorced from the upper floors because of the colors and materials employed.



While this is a common challenge in most downtowns because of the difficulty in directing personal choices, whenever possible, property owners should be encouraged to incorporate only those façade changes that respect the original historic character of their building.



Another strategy to address this challenge is to rely on a strong streetscape design to provide the needed visual consistency. Looking at the streetscape elements used in downtown Superior, they appear dated and out of character with their surroundings. The accompanying photographs not only show the rather barren treatments but also the deteriorating quality of the paving and walking surfaces. Combined, these characteristics do not communicate an environment conducive to foot traffic.

## Summary

The preceding comments from Chuck Law provide important background information to begin the examination of market opportunities in the BID. While the remaining sections of this study focus on the economics of the BID, the physical and design issues must also be addressed as part of a balanced and comprehensive revitalization approach.

### **Additional Tools and Opportunities for Gathering Input**

For many years, UW-Extension has utilized the First Impressions program as one of the more typical ways for a community to gather input on its physical appearance. Superior undertook such an exercise over a decade ago in October of 1996. Several comments made by the visiting panel members from Ashland likely relate to the appearance of the downtown. It might be appropriate to revisit the elements of that report or even initiate another exchange visit with a nearby community to reaffirm or discover some new findings about the downtown.

A less used, but often effective technique used by UW-Extension for soliciting public perceptions about a physical setting is known as "Participatory Photography." This tool invites volunteers from the community to walk through an area (in this case the downtown) and use disposable cameras to photograph both attractive, unattractive and valued places and spaces. The camera becomes a convenient pointing device and volunteers are asked to record their reasons for their photographs on a survey form.

These findings can be useful in not only highlighting the areas of the community warranting attention, but supporting protection and preservation of previously under-valued community elements. Participatory Photography focuses on how community residents themselves perceive and feel about their community, which compliments a First Impressions exercise that emphasizes an "outsider's" perception of the community. It also serves as an effective way to get young people involved in thinking about and planning for the future of their community.

## Acknowledgements

The Superior BID Market Analysis was developed as a grassroots educational effort with the assistance and support of the following organizations and individuals:

- The Superior BID market analysis committee;
- Kaye Tenerelli and Jodi Rochon of the Superior BID;
- Bill Ryan, UW-Extension, Center for Community and Economic Development (Madison) in collaboration with colleagues Chuck Law, Matt Kures, and Jerry Hembd;
- Fariba Pendleton, UW-Extension Douglas County;
- City of Superior;
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- Superior residents who completed the consumer survey;
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