



Focus Group Sessions

In order to better understand opinions and attitudes about Downtown Manitowoc from downtown users, Mainly Manitowoc convened three focus group sessions to discuss issues. These groups consisted of downtown workers, downtown shoppers, and new residents to the City. The following section provides a summary of the focus groups' discussions.¹

The three focus group sessions were conducted in November, 2010. The groups consisted of downtown workers, downtown shoppers, and new residents.

Participants were assembled after various promotional messages were released. These included press releases issued by Mainly Manitowoc, customer solicitation from several businesses with connections to Mainly Manitowoc committees, and mailings to new resident listings as supplied by local realtors.

Prompts from a recently completed Milwaukee market analysis were reviewed for use in Manitowoc. The following discussion prompt questions were used for the three focus groups:

1. What kind of physical environment provides you with your ideal downtown experience?
2. Consider the amenities that most contribute to your quality of life. Of these amenities, what would improve Downtown Manitowoc as a place to visit?
3. Consider the future of Downtown Manitowoc. From your perspective as a downtown employee, what could be done in Downtown Manitowoc to create your ideal workplace? (for Downtown Worker focus group)
4. Collectively, what image do you think Downtown Manitowoc conveys?
5. What do you like best about Downtown Manitowoc?
6. What do you think are some reasons why people do not come to Downtown Manitowoc?
7. How important is it to have retail stores in downtown Manitowoc?
8. In your opinion, what would encourage you to come to Downtown Manitowoc?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?
10. Of all that we discussed today, what stands out as being the most important to you?

¹ This section was written Angie Tackaberry, a graduate student in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, working with Bill Ryan, Center for Community & Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Background

A request for focus group research was submitted to UW-Extension by the Executive Director of Mainly Manitowoc, Inc, a WI Main Street Program. The purpose of the research was to help the Mainly Manitowoc's Economic Restructuring Committee make informed decisions for revitalizing the downtown area. Typically, this type of request is handled by UW-Extension's county-based Community Resource Development (CRD) educator. Since Manitowoc County does not have a CRD educator, it was handled by the County's Family Living educator.

Bill Ryan, UW-Extension Community Development Specialist, had previously worked with Mainly Manitowoc, Inc. in the development of a survey for downtown business owners. He contacted Faye Malek, Manitowoc County Department Head and Family Living Educator, with this information and also with the request by Jamie Zastrow, Mainly Manitowoc, Inc. Director, to conduct focus group sessions. Ms. Malek contacted Ms. Zastrow in May 2010 and indicated her interest in assisting the Economic Restructuring Committee in both understanding the focus group process and in the development of focus groups since what would be accomplished would have a positive impact the lives of families across the county. After initial meetings with the Economic Restructuring Committee, Ms. Malek contacted Mary Kohrell, Calumet County UW-Extension CRD Educator, to ask of her interest as a resource because of her expertise in community development. Accordingly, cross-programming with this project brought insights from two program areas of UW-Extension.

Ms. Malek's focus group training and assistance from UW-Extension evaluation specialist Ellen Taylor Powell also contributed to question writing.

Ms. Malek facilitated the focus group questions. Ms. Kohrell recorded all responses and reviewed the responses in each of the three focus groups to be sure participants had an additional opportunity to respond.

Focus Group Responses

Business Hours

The overall consensus from participants toward current downtown business hours was that businesses needed to adjust their operation hours with greater consideration to customers' needs.

- Downtown stores need to have consistent hours of operation. Suggested closing times included a regular closing time of 7 pm, or having all stores open as late as 9 pm for one or two nights a week.
- Encourage coffee shops to open earlier to accommodate workers' needs.
- Make sure businesses are open after the Farmer's Market ends to encourage customers to stay downtown.
- Encourage stores to have Sunday hours, as there were complaints of nothing to do downtown on Sunday's.
- Extend hours during the holiday season.
- Make sure complementary businesses are open when attractions are occurring. For example, have restaurants in operation while shows are running downtown to encourage patrons to take in multiple downtown activities.

Consistency in Aesthetics and Facades

The importance of a cohesive look for the downtown was noted as a means of improving overall appearance.

- Encourage a cohesive architectural look for the downtown.
- Encourage all businesses to properly maintain their storefronts to demonstrate responsibility and pride in the City. Clean windows were specifically mentioned as a way of improving overall downtown appearance.

Cooperative Programs

There are many opportunities to improve business to business relationships. Implementing cooperative programs would help increase collaboration and should lead to increased economic activity.

- Encourage businesses to support each other for overall downtown economic success. Suggest cross marketing in businesses by showcasing when nearby restaurants/shows are open.
- Train downtown employees to be knowledgeable of neighboring businesses in order to keep customers downtown longer.
- Implement a group promotion program in which downtown businesses would validate customer cards which would provide discounts at participating businesses. Additionally, programs should be marketed with enough lead time to effectively reach targeted audiences.
- Special programs or Saturday specials throughout the downtown could be instituted by collaborating businesses.
- Implement partnerships with other similar entities such as educational institutions, businesses, and cultural groups.

- Enhance customer service levels in downtown businesses to be more responsive to out of the ordinary customer needs.

Transportation and Parking Design

Altering traffic patterns and parking features could help the downtown attract more people due to greater attention to safety, visibility, and consumer access to amenities.

- Change traffic patterns from one way streets to two way streets to improve safety by slowing traffic. This will give car riders greater visibility of the downtown, and help carferry travelers navigate the downtown.
- Widening streets was also suggested to improve safety.
- Pedestrian traffic is important. It would be beneficial for the downtown to accommodate walkers' comforts. For example, the Minneapolis Skyway permits travelers to visit multiple businesses without weather effects. The idea of encouraging citation enforcement for drivers who do not stop for pedestrians was also noted.
- Add more bike racks and dog tie ups. Free bicycles or free trolleys were also suggested.
- Make parking less cumbersome. Suggestions include allowing visitors to park for longer than two hours, making sure snow is cleared in a timely manner and overgrown plants are trimmed by implementing a volunteer group to manage maintenance of plants, and acknowledging that parallel parking may be a deterrent for some people.

Aesthetic Appeal

Improving the image of downtown will entice new visitors and returning patrons by creating an enjoyable environment to shop, dine, and recreate in.

- Clean up current visual deterrents located downtown by removing the coal pile, replacing the Bud bottles with a Budweiser historic mural or artwork depicting the Clydesdale horses, and improving degraded areas such as around the corner from the courthouse.
- Fill empty storefronts with artwork or other fillers so that shoppers are encouraged to continue walking down streets to other open stores.
- Create more parks and utilize the façade grant to encourage storefront renovation. Downtown should be designed for the human scale for people instead of cars.
- Use banners and lighting to create a uniform look.
- Encourage public art such as sculptures, water fountains, murals, and mosaics. Also, have landmarks to explain why certain places are unique and significant.
- Highlight the strengths of Manitowoc, specifically the historic nature of downtown. Do this by preserving historic architecture. For instance, the Dempsey Building and Timeless Treasure Building, which are historic buildings, are currently covered with other materials.
- Focus group participants who were shoppers and new residents highlighted the need to have a central gathering space such as a town square. Incorporating greenspace, outdoor seating, and an amphitheater for music and dining was also suggested.

Water Access and Features

The presence of both a river and a lake in the City of Manitowoc provides opportunities for popular water activities and attractive destinations. Participants wished to capitalize on these opportunities by focusing on waterfront development and activities.

- Build up the waterfront with nice shops to take advantage of the outdoor environment. A walkway with signage would assist in this effort. The lake trail should be extended down the lakeshore with additional shops. It could also extend along the river to create a river corridor and perhaps a river promenade.
- Amenities should be connected. Port Washington was referenced as an example. The idea is to connect elements such as a park, a running trail, a boardwalk, shops, and restaurants. Participants liked bike trails existing in Minneapolis and Stevens Point.
- Provide opportunities for people to access both the lake and river.
- Create an Ice Bar, which is popular in Scandinavian countries, to cater to a variety of audiences. Consider converting the area at the corner of 8th and Maritime into a yacht pool which could be a skating rink in the winter.

Desired New Businesses

Participants are interested in attracting a variety of new high-quality businesses to the downtown for increased economic development. Below are specific retailers and types of businesses mentioned in discussions:

- Encourage businesses catering toward outdoor activities such as jet skis, bike, and kayak rentals/sales.
- Attract good anchor tenant stores to the downtown. This would bring people to the city center.
- Would like stores that specialize in clothing, both men's and ladies' warehouse. Examples include Acute Angle and Lands' End.
- Shoe store (to cater to white collar people who might forget good clothing at home).
- Outlet stores
- Kitchen stores such as Cooks Corners and a wine store.
- Offices supplies.
- Encourage an influx of mid range restaurants. Participants identified a lack of variety in food choices and would like to see more ethnic restaurants, which will help the level of diversity in Manitowoc.
- Have family oriented amenities, such as mini golf.
- The existing movie theaters need to be maintained. Currently movies arrive a week late and this is most likely hurting sales.

New Design to Stores

Store layout should be altered to accommodate shoppers' needs. Easy access in terms of distance and weather elements, continuous storefront activity, and enjoyable views of the water while shopping are all design enhancement elements identified as advantageous for the downtown.

- Ensure empty storefronts are filled so that streets become pedestrian friendly. This would encourage shoppers to walk from store to store.
- Encourage facilities that allow customers a view of the river.
- Make downtown more usable for shoppers by having a recognized department store. This would encourage them to come downtown instead of shopping on the outskirts.
- Have a marketplace or small shopping mall downtown with outlet stores.
- Attract a variety of small shops to go into buildings currently used for one purpose. For example, convert the Schuette building into smaller shops.

- Place a high end restaurant in the new building. This would attract people with white collar jobs instead of just catering to blue collar workers.
- Try to entice Manitowoc retailers currently residing outside of the city center to relocate downtown.

Adaptive Reuse

Manitowoc's current character of an older factory town could transform into a livelier city center by refurbishing vacant facilities and investing in attractive architecture and public art. This alteration would presumably attract a greater number of customers and businesses.

- Clean up the old manufacturing facilities along the river.
- Enhance the attractiveness of downtown to a younger crowd. Create a nightlife for 20 somethings. Ideas include increasing the variety in restaurants and having lounges instead of just regular bars.
- Place an art focus on revitalization efforts, similar to what was done in Paducah, KY and Roanoke, VA. This can be initiated by having an outlet for artists such as a gallery and space to purchase artwork. Artists could utilize empty store fronts to display their pieces.
- Investment could be put into current buildings to attract business besides retail. For example, software engineer companies might be interested in moving into redesigned factory buildings and consulting corporations into refurbished lofts. It was noted that the Dermatology Associates office could be further developed. The downtown strategic plan should be connected to the EDC in order to go beyond retail opportunities to grow the economy of the overall community.

Marketing

Downtown Manitowoc would benefit from greater attention to public relations. This could be done through increased signage and downtown employee knowledge of amenities.

- Create signage that identifies downtown amenities. Also, improve advertising of amenities. One suggestion was to develop a satellite VCB site manned by a student to provide information on the downtown.
- People need to be able to become familiar with downtown opportunities available to them through city marketing.
- Create a reference guide for downtown employees to enable them to guide consumers to other businesses. A "you are here" map or booklet of amenities could be useful to visitors and shoppers as well.
- Currently, travelers disembarking from the carferry are directed to Dewey and are bypassing the downtown. Changing this pattern could help market the downtown to a greater number of people.
- Downtown is competing with Harbor Town instead of offering a unique experience.
- In order to be more welcoming, the downtown needs to do a better job of integrating new people, especially the highly educated, young professionals and those who look different from the existing demographics in the City (ex. Hospital employees).

Events

The downtown could gain from a greater number of public and commercial events to attract visitors. Music, food, and shopping themed events were suggested for activities.

- The Lake could become more of a public resource and could be marketed through music festivals. Having a marina like in Sheboygan was also suggested.
- In addition to music festivals, have evening concerts with food available.
- Have seasonal shopping events such as a Christmas theme night for the downtown, and involve kids and adults in planning the theme. This unifying theme would encourage people to browse from shop to shop and would help bring people downtown. Stores could showcase themselves seasonally and bring in customers/audiences. This idea would be similar to Women's Night Out in West Bend. The name for Manitowoc could be something like "Celebrate the Seasons" which would cater to all of Manitowoc audiences.
- Activities that take advantage of all the seasons should be promoted. This would help to keep the downtown active at all times of the year, instead of just the summer months.

Overall Image

Participants were asked to voice their overall image of downtown Manitowoc. The following images and characteristics were shared:

- Ghost town, dying factory town
- Disarray
- Not enough going on, boring
- Beautiful architecture is currently hidden
- The 8th Street Bridge is nice, but the 10th Street Bridge looks much like a prison tower
- Sluggish economy; the number and impact of job losses needs to be validated and analyzed
- Poor customer service
- Small town feel with the corn stalks and other decorations, and Christmas lights
- Pockets of good, seeking out new identity
- In 10 years the downtown will either be really nice or gone
- Ranked #2 by Forbes Survey as a family-friendly community

Best Things about Downtown

Participants were then asked to describe what they liked best about the current state of Manitowoc's downtown. Below are positively viewed natural and built features of the downtown shared by the participants:

- Clean, good place to raise a family
- River and Lake
- Farmer's Market
- Architecture
- Rahr West Art Museum, Library, Capital Civic Center, Manitowoc Maritime Museum.
- Specific businesses – Beerntsen's, (and area from Courthouse Pub to Beerntsen's), Heart and Homestead, Courthouse Pub, Trek Store, live theater, movie theater, Maretti's Deli, coffee shop, farmers market, winter market, and Modern by Megean
- River Rendezvous should continue and offer consistency
- Manitowoc Coffee puts chairs outside which is a nice touch
- Proximity to water
- Mainly Manitowoc Valentine's Day punch card challenge activity
- Accessibility to larger communities which are reachable by a quick day trip
- We have a core of attractive amenities

Conclusions

While many suggestions were generated through the three focus group sessions, a few core ideas and themes were reiterated throughout the course of discussions. The following main issues were prominently featured in conversations regarding how to improve downtown Manitowoc:

- Capitalize on the proximity of downtown to the lake and river. This can be done by extending water front walking paths, having music festivals along the water, and encouraging development at the shores of the lake and river to highlight the natural features and attract visitors.
- Improve auto and pedestrian safety as well as the downtown viewing experience by slowing traffic. The best way to do this was thought to be by changing one way traffic streets to two way traffic streets and/or widening streets.
- Current businesses could improve their image and attraction to customers by working together to create a cohesive look for the downtown. Consistent and similar store hours as well as employee familiarity with downtown amenities would further help encourage a steadier customer base.
- A variety of restaurants and retail stores should be sought out and pursued in order to improve shopping and nightlife downtown. An anchor department store coupled with smaller retail outlets to create a downtown mall is thought to be beneficial as a design enhancement to downtown commerce.
- Highlight the uniqueness of Manitowoc, especially its historic nature to attract consumers instead of trying to compete with other nearby downtowns. Downtown Manitowoc has many revered historical buildings and facades, which are currently not being showcased to their best ability. Façade grants, public art, and a focus toward preserving historic architecture could help the downtown move in this direction.

Though the three groups identified many of the same downtown issues, there were some differences in emphasis and perspective. Below are specific characteristics from each focus group:

- New residents pointed out barriers faced when entering the community. An attitude among life-long residents that is resistant to change and accepting of new residents, especially minorities and highly educated people was highlighted. Diversifying Manitowoc's restaurant choices by including ethnic cuisine was viewed as a potential first step toward greater acceptance. This group also acknowledged the need for the downtown to cater toward current communal desires and to create downtown events that would please the entire community.
- Downtown workers focused on the need for businesses to work together in terms of joint programming, marketing, and enhanced customer service. Publishing a pamphlet or section of the newspaper to announce special downtown events was suggested. In addition to cooperative efforts among businesses for joint ventures such as the

Valentine's Day stamp card activity, appropriate and timely notification to city residents is needed to generate awareness and participation.

- Downtown shoppers concentrated on the need for downtown to uniquely identify itself, both for aesthetic appeal and to ensure its sustainability. The downtown cannot compete with stores on the outskirts of town, and instead must offer a different product and appeal. Shoppers suggested enhancing the downtown's nightlife and upscale shopping to create more of a cultural center to Manitowoc.