

Boosting downtown economic development in Wisconsin communities



“UW-Extension's role in boosting downtown economic development in Wisconsin has been priceless. Many Main Street communities and downtowns have used Extension's assistance with market analysis and the webinar series to start successful business development projects.”

*—Jim Engle, Director
Wisconsin Main Street Program*

Situation

Wisconsin's downtowns reigned as the centers of business and economic activity for many years. But beginning in the 1960s, competition from large discount stores and regional shopping centers began drawing consumers and residents away, leaving downtowns vulnerable to the hazards of vacant buildings and a poor business mix.

Downtowns continue to face other challenges.

- Chains and large-format stores tend to bypass downtowns when they move into a community.
- Maintaining public facilities downtown can be problematic.
- Residents sometimes perceive downtown areas as unsafe.
- Lifestyle and new town centers continue to spring up far from downtown areas.

Overall, the combined effects of ailing downtowns, a struggling economy and reduced tourism have resulted in a loss of vitality in many Wisconsin communities.

Yet when downtowns can obtain the resources and support they need to flourish, they play a fundamental role in a community's identity. Downtowns often serve as centers of local government and can provide a significant tax base, representing both public and private investments. They are frequently the community's historic core and home to unique shops and services. Tourists are often drawn to downtowns, which offer a glimpse into the community's character and sense of place.

Response

As cities cope with less-than-robust downtowns and fewer tourist dollars, Cooperative Extension community development specialists from the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) have provided ongoing help through educational programs and resources designed to bring people back to Wisconsin's downtowns.

Based on their research, Extension specialists have found compelling reasons for optimism about business districts' ability to rebound from the economy. For example:

- Many downtowns have recession-proof draws. While high-priced restaurants and live theatre might bring fewer customers in a recession, farmers' markets and children's



museums will still be on the list of local outings. Numerous downtowns focus on education, health care and government services, which are more insulated from consumer spending swings.

- Downtowns will benefit from a growing interest in supporting the local economy. "Buy local" is becoming a nationwide theme.
- Downtown development often goes hand-in-hand with the desire for a "green" economy. People can often simply walk downtown, rather than drive. And there are environmental benefits to reusing and improving older downtown structures using green technology.
- Downtowns support entrepreneurship, becoming a location of choice for many small-business people. They yield social and business interaction, diversity, authenticity and amenities that appeal to people with different talents. The downtown can also offer a variety of quality spaces from lofts to storefronts.
- Downtowns provide a sense of place that is increasingly important to residents. Renewed interest in quality of life means increased value in what makes the local community special.

Armed with knowledge and the right tools, communities can take advantage of consumer, economic and environmental trends that steer activity back to their central business districts. CCED specialists, working with partners such as the Wisconsin Main Street Program and the Wisconsin Downtown Action Council, advise communities and economic development professionals on ways to take full advantage of their downtowns' competitive strengths. Some of the

resources they've developed include:

- **Downtown and Business District Market Analysis Toolbox.** Tools and techniques for understanding the market, identifying business opportunities and developing market-driven strategies.
- **Innovative Downtown Businesses Clearinghouse.** Information from a group of unique retail and service businesses that are successfully bringing people back downtown.
- **Tourism Business Development Toolbox.** Business planning resources to assist restaurant, lodging and retail entrepreneurs.
- **Downtown Economics e-Newsletter.** Monthly electronic newsletter with articles about downtown business and economic development topics.
- **Revitalizing Wisconsin's Downtowns monthly webinar (web-based) series.** A learning and networking series conducted with partners Wisconsin Downtown Action Council and Wisconsin Main Street Program.

Outcomes

CCED educational programs increase people's ability to build business relationships and put data about their communities to work. Here are a few examples:

- CCED faculty and staff have assisted over 50 cities in the state, including Main Street and non-Main Street communities from Milwaukee to New Holstein to Superior, in assembling information on their local markets to support downtown economic development. Working with Extension county educators, CCED has assisted local study groups in each community in their efforts to gather meaningful data that supports business retention, expansion and recruitment.

- The "Revitalizing Wisconsin's Downtowns" webinar series, with partners Wisconsin Downtown Action Council and Wisconsin Main Street Program, was held at 17 sites around the state in one year alone. Approximately 175 business leaders participated. Besides gaining valuable information, those who attended reported that they valued the professional relationships they had developed at the webinars.
- CCED specialists gave presentations at the International Downtowns Association Conference, the national Main Streets Conference, UW-Madison classes and various community events and programs.

CCED specialists provide resources and information that guide residents in answering the question: *What can we do to make our community better?*

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For more on CCED's work to support and revitalize Wisconsin's downtowns and tourism industry, go to: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/downtowns/index.cfm>