VILLAGE OF BELLEVILLE, WISCONSIN
DOWNTOWN DESIGN WALKABOUT

FINAL REPORT
Accepted by the Village Board on November 19, 2007
INTRODUCTION

The Village of Belleville commissioned MSA Professional Services to conduct the following activities for the purpose of promoting the revitalization of downtown Belleville:

1. Establish a Community Development Authority (CDA). Assist the Village with setting up a CDA as a resource to implement downtown revitalization activities such as purchase of properties.


3. Conduct a Downtown Design Walkabout (Neighborhood Design Center, Inc.). Facilitate a design workshop that includes a walking evaluation of the downtown design, and discussion of downtown assets and opportunities.

4. Architectural Feasibility Study and Needs Assessment of the Public Works, Fire Station and Police Station Properties. Examine the space needs of each facility and identify the options for expanding existing facilities or relocating.

Items one through three were funded in part through a grant from the Dane County Better Urban Infill Development (BUILD) Program. The Village’s grant proposal to the BUILD Program identified the Neighborhood Design Center, Inc., as the entity to conduct the Neighborhood Design Walkabout.
These downtown revitalization activities were an outgrowth of earlier planning and feasibility work. In 2006 Village leaders engaged in a Strategic Leadership Workshop to examine the history, people, values, visions, goals and objectives for the Village. The workshop generated a “Top Ten” list of items to address. Downtown revitalization was included on the Top Ten list.

Also in 2006, MSA completed a feasibility study for relocation of the Landmark Services facility, and site plans for redevelopment of the Landmark Services properties. The study determined that relocation was feasible, and presented three redevelopment concept plans.

DOVTOWN DESIGN WALKABOUT

What is the character of a place like downtown Belleville? What places and features make it a special place? What opportunities exist to build on and enhance those places and features, to make downtown a vibrant economic and community center of the Village? These were the questions that the Downtown Design Walkabout sought to answer.

MSA hired the Neighborhood Design Center, Inc., (NDC) to conduct the walkabout. The NDC is a not-for-profit organization with the mission to educate and engage citizens to collaboratively design sustainable communities. Through experiential, visual and hands-on participation citizens and community leaders can guide growth and change to meet common goals and objectives. The design walkabout is one method by which citizens can engage in community design.

The goals of the walkabout, developed in consultation with Village officials, were:

- An easy, affordable, fun activity that engages community members in neighborhood design.
- A community-building activity by bringing community members together to share neighborhood experiences, thoughts and ideas.
- To increase community knowledge of urban design principles and concepts, and the capacity to apply that knowledge to neighborhood improvement.
- To provide a resource that community members can use to prepare for and positively participate in neighborhood change.

The walkabout consisted of four small groups walking two different downtown routes (see Figure 1). Participants were asked to address the following questions:

- What are the key downtown assets or special places? Try to identify the specific elements that make the items assets.
- What are the features or elements you see that define the downtown as a special or unique place?
- What are the key downtown challenges and opportunities? What do you see that could be improved?

Each group recorded their observations on photographs and in writing. After regrouping at the Village Hall, each group selected approximately 9 photographs that addressed those questions, and presented their observations to the rest of the participants. Common themes and general observations were discussed among the whole group.
**Figure 1: Downtown Design Walkabout Routes**

![Map of Downtown Design Walkabout Routes]

- **Star** = Village Hall
PARTICIPANT WALKABOUT OBSERVATIONS

Each of the four groups recorded their observations in photographs and in written comments. The observations are recorded below.

Group 1

A. Library Park Building

Comments:
- Registered historic site.
- Keep.
- Find other uses.
- 2nd floor needs a second escape route

B. Vet Building

Comments:
- Need to improve (repair or replace).
- Open to suggestions.
- Setback (from bike trail) issue: needs variance to replace in current location.
- Presents poor image for bike trail.
C. Coop Building

Comments:
- Develop as business incubator for start-up businesses.
- Could serve approx. 4-6 businesses.
- Add economic vitality.
- Would need renovation.

D. Bicycle Parking Lot

Comments:
A nice enhancement for the downtown.
E. Depot Building

Comments:
- Great potential.
- Keep.
- Remove buildings around it.
- Potential for landmark status.
- Options for reuse?

F. Cornice on Landmark Building

Comments:
- A piece of downtown history (old Ford dealership).
- Preserve and use?
G. Railroad Bridge

**Comments:**
- Love the bridge.
- Investment needed for paint and restoration.
- [other group comment: like the weathered look]

H. Behind Police, Fire Station & Public Works Buildings

**Comments:**
- Clean-up.
- Make open space for uses such as a hot dog hut.
- Don’t build, but improve.
I. Police & Fire Station

Comments:
- Preserve building.
- Potential re-use over time as space for antiques, artists, a mall.

J. Sign for Library Park

Comments:
- Mismatch for rest of park.
- Make more complimentary.
- Keep information up-to-date.
Group 2

A. Library and Post Office

Comments:
- These 2 functions are an asset and should stay downtown.
- They need more space – expand on site or new building.
- If the library moves the building could be kept for a community center.
- Library could be a 2-story mixed use building with residential or office above to generate revenues and increase activity downtown.

B. Vet Building

Comments:
- Improve or replace.
- Possible library space.
- Area in back used for landscaping material could serve as parking.
C. Depot Building

Comments:
- Asset.
- Keep.
- Possible use as Chamber of Commerce and/or providing amenities for trail users such as ice cream, rest rooms.
- Other Landmark buildings could be replaced with condos.
- Appropriate height is 2-story; 3 maximum.
- [Comment from outside group: keep Depot a stand-alone building].

D. Brick, Stone, Natural Materials

Comments:
- Historic brick a distinguishing feature of downtown.
- Preserve in existing buildings, make new buildings complimentary.
E. Coop Building

Comments:
- Reuse if feasible.

F. Area Behind Public Works & Fire & Police Station

Comments:
- Improve.
- Could provide parking for businesses that might locate in a redeveloped Fire Station building, or for access to the river.
G. Sugar River

Comments:
- Asset.
- Create a “riverwalk” to link to Sugar River Park.

H. Library Park

Comments:
- Distinguishing asset for Belleville.
Group 3

A. Bicyclist on Main Street

Comments:
- Portrays the combination of old and new that make downtown special.
- Shows downtown as a fun place, a destination.

B. Grocery Store Building

Comments:
- Shows the architecture of old buildings.
- A lack of consistency.
C. Police & Fire Station

- The building is nice.
- Make the entrance more inviting.

D. Behind “Gateway” Building Area

- Needs improvement as a gateway to the downtown.
E. Veteran’s Park

Comments:

- Small.
- It is the first thing one sees.
- Should be more prominent.
- Why no flags?

F. Billboard at Gateway to Downtown

Comments:

- Not a good first impression as people come into the downtown.
G. Streetscape

Comments:
- Things to help encourage street life:
  - Sidewalk cafes
  - Level sidewalks and tree grates
  - Better pedestrian crossings (can be a parking space issue)
  - More pedestrian-friendly amenities (e.g. benches)
  - Make intersection with 92 and Main Street more friendly

H. Landscaping

Comments:
- Well-maintained, looks good.
I. Stormwater & Landscaping

Comments:
- Absorbing the rainwater is a positive
- Good screening.

J. People in Front of Building

Comments:
- Like people on the street; encourage.
- Nice signage.
- Siding that covers beautiful buildings.
- Restoring the historical look is nice.

Discussion following Group 3:
- As a business owner, it is hard to find space downtown.
- Storm water mitigation funding is available for items such as rain gardens.
- Diagonal parking on Green Street?
Group 4

A. Nest Tavern Sign

Comments:
- Appealing, nicely painted, well maintained

Other large group sign comments:
- Signs:
  - Good signs – Belle Blue, Powell Computers, English Gardens, Main Street Salon, Laundromat.
  - Signs that stick out create clutter. Flush to the buildings and lower for people to see is better.
  - Need for signs that drivers can see also.
  - Signs that stick out are good if the right size.

B. Auto Body Shop

Comments:
- Nice looking, well maintained.
- Shows that non-retail businesses can be downtown assets.
C. Trees

Comments:
- Need trimming to see buildings and signs better. They make it hard to notice buildings.

D. Homes as Enter Downtown

Comments:
- Very well maintained.
- Present an appealing view as people enter the downtown.
E. House as Enter Downtown

Comments:
- Needs improvement.

F. Park Hotel

Comments:
- Historic building.
- The additions and rehabs have “thrown it off” from its historic character.
- Rehab to bring back historic character.
G. Short Electric/Gateway

Comments:
- Needs facelift as important entry to downtown.

H. Police & Fire Station

Comments:
- Preserve building.
- Potential re-use over time as space for antiques, artists, a mall.
Participant Themes

Following the presentations from the groups, participants identified common themes from the walkabout. These included:

- History is important
- Maintaining buildings and property is important (funding an issue)
- Accentuate natural resources and river
- Enhance amenities to attract newcomers
- Lake view is blocked from downtown
- Add signs that help people find their way to amenities
- Improve entrances (gateways) to downtown. Add identifying signage.

NDC OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the recorded photographs and comments, the Neighborhood Design Center prepared the following observations and recommendations for consideration by the Village.

Historic Preservation

OBSERVATION: The community values the downtown’s connection to the history and culture of Belleville. The historic nature of the downtown was identified as a key asset for the Village. Participants in all groups identified historic buildings and their attributes (architecture, materials, features) as assets to the Village. Significant historic buildings identified were the historic building in Library Park, the Depot building, and the Park Hotel. The historic features of other downtown buildings were also identified as assets (garage building, Belle Blue). The desire to restore buildings to their historical look, by removing false facades for example, was also repeated by participants (although concern was also expressed about the cost of restoration).

RECOMMENDATIONS: The historic architecture and features of downtown should be preserved and enhanced. A key identity and appeal of downtown Belleville is its unique historic character.

1. The Village should consider enhancing and expanding the use of key historic buildings for community uses; and should consider programs to assist property owners to rehab their buildings to their historic qualities.

The Library Park historic building and the Depot are key properties that connect Belleville to its past. They should be preserved and enhanced for use by the community and visitors. The depot was mentioned as a possible site for a Chamber of Commerce office, a coffee shop or ice cream shop, and/or a rest stop for trail users. The Library Park building could be used for community events, as a museum, or for special events such as weddings and private parties.

Other downtown buildings also have great historic significance. As noted by participants, historic aspects of some buildings have been diminished over time with projects that were not consistent with the historic architecture. An example
cited and photographed was the Park Hotel Building. Other buildings were mentioned as well.

2. The Village should consider providing financial assistance in the form of matching grants for façade improvement projects that restore the historic qualities of the downtown.

Other communities in Dane County that operate façade improvement grant programs are the cities of Madison, Stoughton and Sun Prairie, and the Villages of Oregon, Cambridge, and Waunakee. A typical program in Dane County provides up to $5,000 matching grants (some grants have been as high as $10,000) to property owners based on a qualifying application. Qualifying applications include detailed design drawings, and conform to established design guidelines. Grant funding should NOT be made available in the absence of design guidelines by which to evaluate applications. Without guidelines, the Village could find itself with no basis for denying applications that would degrade the historic quality of the downtown.

The Village could establish their own design guidelines or use the U.S. Department of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation (www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm).

Establishing individual guidelines for Belleville would require additional consulting work. The most comprehensive way to ensure consistency with the original architecture would be to commission a survey of the downtown buildings that identifies their existing facades and conditions, their historic facades and architecture, and design guidelines for each building for restoring historic appearances. Short of building by building survey, the Village could establish guidelines the types of buildings in downtown Belleville. Any general guidelines should be consistent with, and preferably reference, the U.S. Interior Department standards.

"Rehabilitation" is defined as "the process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values."

- U.S. Department of the Interior.

**Beautification**

**OBSERVATION:** It is important to participants that buildings and spaces be well maintained. Participants identified quality landscaping, properties and signs as evidence that owners were investing thought, energy and resources into making their properties an asset to the downtown. This investment, and the message it sends to community members and visitors was important to participants.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

3. Use positive approaches to encourage private property improvements.

The above-recommended façade improvement program is one way to offer incentives to private property owners for improving their property. Experience in other Dane County
communities has shown that property owners are more likely to invest in building improvements when they see other properties being rehabilitated. Another way to encourage maintenance and improvement is to showcase exemplary property improvements, and their owners, that contribute to the downtown. Showcasing can be done through awards, Village Board recognition, news stories, etc. In some cases, where properties violate building codes, the Village may need to enforce building codes to ensure properties meet health and safety standards.

4. Make improvements to public spaces and facilities.

Workshop participants made a number of observations about the downtown public spaces. Based on these comments the following recommendations are provided:

a. **Maintain sidewalk and tree grates.** Uneven surfaces are hazards for pedestrians, especially elderly, disabled and persons with strollers. A regular maintenance program should be established to ensure sidewalk and tree grate surfaces are attractive and do not present safety hazards.

b. **Trees should be maintained but also allowed to grow to a canopy height that is above the signage level of the street.** The observation was made on the walkabout that the trees block storefront signage. While signage visibility is important, the trees also play an important role in creating a welcoming, pedestrian-friendly environment. Trees provide needed shade in summer months, and the greenery adds to an inviting image. In time the trees will likely grow tall enough that the tree canopy will be above storefront signage. In the mean time, signage can be adjusted to be more visible at lower heights, and trees can be trimmed to increase visibility. Trimming should be done by qualified arborists to avoid damaging the trees. Damaged trees may not grow to their full height, or may need to be removed.

c. **The sign at Library Park should be upgraded.** A number of comments were made about the sign at Library Park. The general view was that the design (the style of display and lettering and the materials) was not a good fit for the park. The Village should consider a new sign for the park with a design that captures the themes of history and quality materials.

d. **Develop concept plans for improving the appearance and use of the public property behind the police/fire station and public works buildings.** Both groups that walked along the bicycle trail toward the river observed the need to improve this area. With the trail developed, this space becomes more a more visible and prominent part of the downtown. Being adjacent to both the trail and the river, however, the space offers an opportunity to serve as a downtown amenity and provide access to the river (which, as participants noted, is lacking in the downtown). The Village could work with a designer or design firm, engage the downtown community and village residents, and develop concept proposals and site plans for enhancing this space as an amenity, and to meet the needs of the downtown and village.
OBSERVATION: Quality signage can enhance the downtown.

Participants noted specific signs (Belle Blue, Powell Computers, English Gardens, Main Street Salon, Laundromat) that enhance the downtown. These signs use quality materials and have designs, size, proportions that show the business owners cared about their appearance, and were a good fit with the character of the downtown.

RECOMMENDATION:

5. Consider regulating downtown signage. Signage regulations are common in zoning codes. Regulations specific to the downtown should be adopted to ensure quality signage materials, sizes, proportions, and placement.

Pedestrian Comfort and Safety

OBSERVATION
Participants noted that pedestrian crossings should be improved downtown. It was felt that some crossings were unsafe. The intersection of Highway 92 and Main Street was identified as particularly unsafe. The suggestion of adding a cross walk was made, although this option could reduce needed on-street parking.

RECOMMENDATION:

6. Crosswalks should be enhanced through more prominent markings and curb “bulb-outs.”

a. Cross walk markings could be improved with more visible and prominent painted lines, with pedestrian crossing signage, or with stamped, colored concrete. Wider cross walk lines with added horizontal lines (a ladder look) is inexpensive and emphasizes the pedestrian right of way to motorists and pedestrians. A “Yield to Pedestrians” sign can be placed in the center line of the street. The cross walk surface can be replaced with a colored (typically a brick red color), stamped concrete surface to communicate the priority of pedestrian crossing.

b. Another option is to add curb “bulb-outs.” A curb bulb-out is an extension of the sidewalk at the corners of an intersection; so it “bulbs out” into the intersection. Bulb-outs improve pedestrian environments and safety by shortening the crossing distance, increasing the pedestrian space at corners, and slowing traffic (through tighter turning radii and narrower street width). Stoughton is an example of a community that installed curb bump-outs.

Gateways

OBSERVATION: Participants did not feel that some of the entrances, or “gateways,” to the downtown communicated the right impression.

The gateways into downtown from the north (as one crosses the river), the south (at School Street and along the bicycle path, the east (along the Coop property and the depot), and the west (from the residential area along Highway 69) were noted
by walkabout participants as in need of improvement. Entrances, or gateways, establish important and lasting first impressions in people – especially new visitors – as they enter the downtown. The existing gateways include billboards and properties that are in need of maintenance and improvement. Veteran’s Park along the northern gateway lacks features that are noticeable to travelers, and is easy to overlook.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

7. Design and install welcome signs at downtown gateways. Attractive, well designed signs made from quality materials consistent with the historic theme of the downtown would define the downtown district, and help create a positive image of the downtown, in people’s minds.

8. Prepare concept plans for downtown gateway improvements. Attractive signage alone will not create a positive impression if the rest of the view upon entering downtown is unappealing. Work with a designer or design firm to prepare concept site plans for each of the downtown gateways. Improvements to the northern gateway should include enhancing Veteran’s Park to make it more visible and prominent to travelers. One idea mentioned was to add a flagpole. Work with property owners to improve the landscaping and buildings at the gateways. Explore use of tools such as TIF, façade improvement grants, and Business Improvement Districts to fund gateway improvements.

**Natural Resources**

**OBSERVATION:** Participants felt the waterfront was an underutilized asset for the downtown.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

9. Develop long-range plans for connecting downtown to the waterfront, and enhancing the waterfront.

Waterfront access and views can significantly enhance a downtown as a destination and as an attractive place to visit and conduct business. Communities across the country are reclaiming waterfronts, historically used as industrial sites or otherwise separated from downtown districts, as vital amenities for the community. Reclaimed waterfronts allow residents to connect to their heritage, and create an amenity for residents and visitors that adds significant value to a downtown.

One option for establishing a connection from the downtown area to the waterfront is by using the property behind the police/fire station and public works buildings, as discussed above. A waterfront amenity at this site could also be connected to Sugar River Park by a trail along the river. Such a trail would increase access to and enjoyment of the river. While this option has potential to improve the downtown, the site along the bicycle trail is on the edge of the downtown, and would not create as prominent a connection to the water as a connection along the Main Street business district.

Connection to the Belleville waterfront from Main Street, however, has been significantly restricted by buildings in the rear lots of properties on the north side of Main Street (including recently a constructed building). Creating a connection between the Main Street business district and the
waterfront will require change in property uses, and establishing public rights-of-way.

A long-term plan could identify public rights-of-way and improvements along the waterfront and between Main Street and the waterfront. It could also include methods for increasing on-site infiltration of stormwater. The Village could, over time purchase easements along the planned right-of-way, as property owners become willing sellers. Public access and rights of way could include scenic overviews, trails, boat access, rain gardens, and other amenities. The timeline for this type of waterfront improvement plan is likely decades. Such long-term timelines can discourage people from embarking on them at all by engendering an attitude that “it will never happen.” Certain methods, however, can be used to increase the effectiveness of long-term planning.

First, broad community and stakeholder participation in the planning can increase the sense of community buy-in and investment in the resulting vision and plan. Broad community investment in a plan can yield an on-going constituency that advocates for and monitors the progress of plan implementation. Inadequate participation can have the opposite effect: lack of investment (and perhaps opposition) to plan implementation; and a plan that “sits on the shelf.”

Second, strategic initial purchases of rights-of-way that open a visible and attractive access to the waterfront from Main Street early in the process could help build support and momentum for implementation of a waterfront plan. Early improvements that demonstrate the potential for connecting Main Street to the waterfront could help maintain community focus on implementing the remainder of the plan.

The broader point of this recommendation is that long-term planning for waterfront improvements, while seemingly daunting, is never-the-less worthwhile. The potential value that the waterfront could add to downtown justifies the investment in long-term planning.

OBSERVATION: The water quality of the lake and river could be improved through stormwater management best practices.

It was observed that stormwater is channeled directly into the lake and river. One example of onsite infiltration was recorded as a positive improvement. Channeling stormwater directly to water bodies transports sudden and intermittent quantities of warmer, polluted water directly to the lake and river. These surges of warmer water that contains oils, dirt, and organic materials contributes to algae growth, increases erosion, decreases water quality, and reduces biodiversity and the overall health of the lake and river.

RECOMMENDATION:

10. Provide education to promote on-site infiltration of stormwater.

The health of the lake and river can be improved through stormwater management practices that encourage on-site capture and infiltration instead of channeling stormwater to water bodies along impervious surfaces. On-site infiltration through methods such as rain gardens or pervious surfaces

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1 Stakeholder definition: a person or group that has an investment, share, or interest in something.
allows water to slowly filter through the ground, recharging the aquifer and entering water bodies cooler, more gradually and cleaner. Educational materials about rain gardens, rain barrels and other stormwater management best practices are available through Dane County and other sources. These should be made available to local property owners.

**Redevelopment**

OBSERVATION: The near departure of Landmark Coop from the downtown offers a unique opportunity for redevelopment. Participants expressed a desire for redevelopment that compliments the existing building character (such as the building materials and architecture) and enhances the vitality of downtown. Participants wanted existing buildings – or even pieces of buildings (such as the original cornice from the former Ford dealership building) – preserved where feasible.

RECOMMENDATION: Explore the potential to reuse existing Coop buildings, and to ensure that new development compliments the downtown.

11. Examine the feasibility of preserving existing coop buildings for reuse. One idea presented was to convert one of the buildings to a business incubator. This type of re-use would add jobs and business vitality to the downtown, while also preserving and enhancing the historic quality of the downtown.

12. Design guidelines (see above #2) should also be developed for new construction.

Design guidelines can give the Village the ability to ensure that developments compliment the existing building character. While zoning laws regulate uses, they are less effective at guiding building and urban form. Guidelines for building heights, massing, placement, materials, facades, and other aspects of urban form are needed to address urban form. Guidelines can be adopted by the Village as an overlay zoning district, or as a condition for TIF assistance. In the absence of design guidelines, the Village may find itself with no option but to approve a development that conforms to zoning but would degrade the downtown character.

**Parking**

OBSERVATION: Participants expressed concerns about parking; that adequate downtown parking is vital for business.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

13. Preserve on-street parking. On-street parking is important both because it provides needed access to businesses, and because it provides a buffer between traffic and pedestrians, helping to create a safer pedestrian experience.

14. Conduct a parking study. Availability of sufficient parking is a common concern among downtown business owners. The ability for customers to conveniently park and enter businesses is critical to business success.

However, before plans to add parking lots are developed, the parking supply and demand downtown should be studied. The number and location of total parking stalls should be identified.
The likely demand for parking spaces for the types of businesses should be estimated, including the likely times of the day and week they would generate parking (i.e. an evening restaurant will generate parking at different times than an auto body shop). The utilization of existing parking spaces should be observed and recorded for different times of the day and week (including peak times).

Such a study can determine if additional parking spaces are needed or if parking needs can be met with improved directional and identifying signage. Addressing parking needs through signage will be much more cost effective than adding more parking. Besides being expensive, new parking lots can detract from the downtown character if done improperly.

A Mix of Activities

OBSERVATION: Participants expressed a desire for downtown to function as a lively, active place with streets and public spaces that attract people for a variety of activities. A number of images and comments dealt with the importance of maintaining and enhancing the vitality of the downtown. A number of participants recorded activity and people downtown as an asset and an area of opportunity. The presence of pedestrians and bicyclists on the street creates the sense that downtown is a welcome, engaging place. More people also means more business opportunities.

Participants also wanted to ensure that a variety of activities, such as the civic uses of the library and the post office remain in the downtown, even if they move to a different site.

RECOMMENDATION:

15. Promote a broad mix of activities in the downtown that draw people for different reasons during different parts of the day.

Walkabout observers recommended keeping the post office and library functions downtown even if they move out of their current facilities. Others identified the potential to add housing to Landmark Services redevelopments, and to restore the railroad depot as a facility serving trail users (such as a Chamber of Commerce office, rest facility or retail). These recommendations recognize the value of concentrating a mix of activities in the downtown. A downtown district that relies on a single function, such as retail, will not attract as many people as a range of activities, and will be more vulnerable to economic and market swings. A mix of retail, services, civic (local government, post office, library, community centers), housing, entertainment, and recreation will draw people for different purposes at different times of the day. The Village should consider opportunities to maintain uses downtown (library, post office) and to add new uses, such as those identified in the Landmark Feasibility Report: housing, senior center.