

The Benefits of Parks and Riverwalks in Downtown: Watertown's Riverfront Plan

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Downtowns play a critical role in the health of most freestanding small cities. Watertown's riverfront is complementary as well as a key linkage to its Main Street, and in many ways this general area comprises the "heart and soul" of the community. Increasingly communities have recognized that there is a need to revitalize these traditional downtown commercial districts since a healthy, viable downtown district is fundamental to a city's economic health, heritage and civic pride.

Given the importance of downtowns in contributing to the livability of our communities, how do trails, riverwalks, riverfront plazas and urban parks fit in as key components of downtown revitalization? Researchers on the linkages of parks and economic development have concluded that there are no great cities in North America or elsewhere that do not have great park, recreation and cultural amenities. There are many intangible or subtle benefits that result from these amenities. For instance, riverwalks and trails connect people with places and enhance the beauty of urban centers. These "quality of life" features are increasingly seen as means for stabilizing and revitalizing even distressed areas of our communities. In many successful communities, parks, trails and walkway corridors are the primary organizing elements that shape development, create livability, preserve property values, and provide the infrastructure to promote health and fitness.

Research is now beginning to empirically document the positive economic impacts from quality of life resources such as riverwalks, trails and urban parks. A survey of commercial and real estate executives has reported that parks and recreation enhancements are very important in attracting new business. Small business owners in particular have made this point, and rank the proximity of riverwalks, trails and parks as one of the highest priorities in choosing a new location for their business. One reason for this trend is some emerging lifestyle changes in our new workforce. This younger workforce is looking for more quality of life features in the cities they choose to work in. Research has shown more demands for ready access to recreation on a "just-in-time" basis for many younger workers, and they want trails and parks to be close at hand. Cities that want to be successful in our "New Economy" are taking notice of some of these workforce tendencies.

Within Jefferson County, Fort Atkinson has been a leading community for riverfront revitalization:

- New downtown housing is being constructed adjacent to the new riverwalk and Glacial River Biketrail over the Rock River.
- New retail and commercial property redevelopment has occurred downtown since the addition of the new riverwalk.
- An old manufacturing plant is being redeveloped adjacent to the Glacial River Trail.

In conclusion, success in our downtown areas is strongly correlated with the downtown's ability to project a strong sense of place. Obviously, the strategies to keep downtown strong must be multi-faceted, and the provision of a riverwalk system, linkages with bike trails and urban plaza development alone cannot transform a community. However, almost all successful downtown vitality strategies require the community to make the downtown more pedestrian-friendly along with attractions which draw visitors and "tourists in their own town" to the recreation, entertainment, retail and other mixed-use activities. An editorial in the Watertown Daily Times summarized the status of the riverwalk project by saying, "Watertown needs to make the downtown section of the city as attractive to people as possible. Much has already been done, and the expansion of the walkway will be another great step forward."

References

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