

Recovery Plan for Downtown Rushford

October 29, 2008

"Rushford as we knew it is gone."

Tri-County Record, August 27, 2007

Introduction

Yes, the flood of 2007 changed the physical environment of Rushford in many, many ways. That's what floods do. But with these changes comes the opportunity to plan how the community will rebuild for the future.

Throughout the planning process, it became apparent that the devastation created by the flood had not washed away the proud history of Rushford or the significance of the downtown as the place to conduct business, to socialize and to recreate. Given the historical importance of the downtown to Rushford, preservation and restoration of the commercial core became a critical focus of the planning program. Preservation is not meant to suggest that the downtown simply be reconstructed to that which had existed before the flood. Rather, preservation efforts should be designed to re-establish the historical importance of the downtown and in fact improve it beyond that which had existed before the flood.

Community Partners, Inc. ("CPI") has been engaged by the Rushford Community Foundation ("RCF") to develop a strategy, plan and development program to help guide flood recovery efforts within and adjacent to the central business district.

Planning Program

The planning program began in earnest in August of 2008. Considerable research was completed as a means to better understand the flood event, the damage it created and the progress realized during the past year. In addition to the assembly and review of background data, personal interviews were conducted with more than twenty (20) individuals that were impacted in one way or another by the flood. All of the information that was generated and considered by CPI was evaluated along with the comments, concerns and suggestions that were recorded through the interview process. The products resulting from the planning program include the “*General Project Concept Plan*” (“*Concept Plan*”) and the “*Near-term Implementation Strategy*.”

General Project Concept Plan

Several principles have significantly influenced and guided development of a plan for downtown Rushford. To better understand the perspective and thoughts that are represented by the *Concept Plan* it is important to disclose these underlying principles at the outset. They are:

1. Plan and develop to enhance assets and to diminish/eliminate liabilities.
2. Leverage and maximize all available sources of funding, public and private.
3. When economically feasible, emphasize redevelopment and revitalization.
4. Given a “limited market,” customer convenience is of utmost importance.

While each of the principles may be subject to interpretation, it is true that should one or more of the four be abandoned, the *Concept Plan* becomes less defensible and consequently diminishes in value.

Map One and *Map Two* identify multiple “Project Areas” and suggested land use concepts. It must be noted that the *Concept Plan* recognizes that many decisions and investments have already been made in the downtown area prior to initiating the planning program. The land use concepts that are graphically identified are meant to offer ideas for a specific parcel or parcels of land as well as to convey an overall development program for the entire commercial core.

Map One includes the following components:

1. Job Center. Tri-County Electric owns a significant “industrial” facility that is now available for purchase and use by others. The approximately 30,000 s.f. warehouse has been substantially improved since the flood making it immediately available for reuse by one or more businesses. Typically, this type of project would become the responsibility of an Economic Development Authority working in partnership with Tri-County Electric.

2. Medical Center. Winona Health, Witt Pharmacy and Dr. Marcoux are proceeding with plans to operate a number of medical services in and adjacent to the Norsquare Building.

This location is centrally located, accessible and provides an abundance of off-street and on-street parking. The opportunity may exist for Dr. Marcoux's facility to be physically connected to the Norsquare building in the future thereby providing the opportunity for expanded dental services.

3. Library/Parking/Plaza. The City of Rushford is already pursuing the development of a combined Library/City Hall complex on a site at the intersection of Park and Mill Streets. To date, some of the site has been acquired and several of the existing structures have been removed. To proceed with the proposed project, the Litscher's Meat Processing property and possibly the Witt Pharmacy site must be acquired and cleared; relocation details for Litscher and Witt must be resolved; the Library must successfully complete their fund-raising campaign; and the "Jail" must be relocated.

Conceptually, a new Library building at this location, with or without relocation of the Jail, seems to be a good use of this land. In conjunction with development of the site for Library purposes, the opportunity exists to improve traffic/parking patterns by and between the neighboring properties as well as incorporate a public plaza/green space into this neighborhood. By separating the Library from the City Hall project, the City is able to retain the use of grant monies to redevelop the property and provide the additional time needed by the Library to raise funds. At the same time, the City will have more time that may be needed to acquire one or both of the properties desired for redevelopment of this site.

4. Housing Development. In the event that the Library and City Hall abandon their present location, their current site could be developed with new housing. The development may or may not include retention and redevelopment of the existing municipal building. This property is conveniently located and would allow for either multi-level and/or single level home construction. In that the City owns the property and utility services are readily available, land costs could be lessened thereby creating greater "affordability."

5. Retail Anchors. Rushford Hardware/Lawn and Garden Store and Rushford Foods have begun to explore the feasibility of constructing the new hardware store immediately south of Rushford Foods. To achieve increased parking area, efficient access and traffic circulation (cars, trucks and pedestrians) and customer convenience, the *Concept Plan* proposes the consolidation of a number of parcels along with a reconfiguration of parking and access to more effectively serve the needs of these two businesses. The *Concept Plan* proposes that the west end of Maie Street be vacated and reconstructed as a plaza/green area to help control vehicular traffic movements and to integrate the Mall with the two anchor retailers. The existing parking area immediately east of the Mall and north of Rushford Foods would also be "improved" to expand the availability of parking for customers and employees. Ideally, the boulevard along Mill Street (Highway #43) would also be improved with landscaping, uniform "signing" for the businesses, lighting and sidewalks.

6. City Hall/Parking/Plaza. The *Concept Plan* identifies the existing Winona Health (Rushford Clinic) facility as a possible new location for City Hall. The adjacent Tenborg Center would be cleared and replaced with off-street parking and plaza. These thoughts are premised upon a determination by the City Council that the Winona Health facility is able

to accommodate the space needs of City Hall and that the property can be purchased and modified as may be needed at an acceptable cost. Furthermore, the *Concept Plan* anticipates that Rushford will proceed with plans to site and construct a new Community Center elsewhere.

Map Two identifies an existing concentration of “entertainment” (food, beverage, tourist sites, and bowling) uses located generally along Highways #43 and #16 in near proximity to the Root River Trail corridor. Since the flood, considerable investments have been made to re-establish and in some cases expand entertainment businesses in this area of downtown Rushford.

Map Two offers a “preferred site” and “alternate site” for development of a Community Center and/or motel facility that would complement existing businesses in this area and throughout downtown Rushford. It must be clearly stated that the sites identified by *Map Two* may or may not accommodate any specific plans that have already been presented to the City of Rushford. However, either site may very well be capable of accommodating development of a Community Center, a motel and/or a combined Community Center/motel facility.

Both sites depicted on *Map Two* are affected and perhaps somewhat limited in use by their proximity to the Farmers Elevator and Fire Hall operations. Whether or not these land use relationships offset the advantages that both sites enjoy (visibility, access, sizeable land area, complimentary neighboring businesses, and existing utilities) must ultimately be determined by the investor(s) of each project.

1. Community Center/Motel Preferred Site. This property is currently for-sale. No other commercial site of this size with frontage on both Highways #43 and #16 is available in Rushford. To create more frontage/visibility on Highway #16 for new development and to retain much of the current tenant base in the existing location, the possibility may exist for “removing” the west one-half (1/2) of the structure and adding a combined Community Center/motel development onto the remaining portion of the building. To facilitate development of such a concept, the Rushford Economic Development Authority, the RCF and other local investors would likely need to embrace a project of this kind to achieve economic feasibility. In this way, the entire project area could be developed to its highest and best use resulting in a significant enhancement to perhaps the most visible site in Rushford.

2. Community Center/Motel Alternate Site. This property is also currently for-sale with an asking price substantially less than the “Preferred Site.” The parcel appears to be large enough to accommodate a Community Center, motel and/or a combined Community Center/motel facility. Compared with the “Preferred Site,” the property is somewhat further removed from the downtown and the Farmers Elevator and may not be as visible and accessible. However, in the event that the “Preferred Site” is determined to be unacceptable for development of the Community Center/motel project, then this site may be worthy of further consideration.

Near-term Implementation Strategy

The RCF should consider the ideas presented for the Project Areas each as an independent planning and development initiative. Not all of the concepts are likely to proceed to fruition and even if they did, they would not occur at the same time. However, the proposals will not proceed beyond completion of this planning program if the RCF, the City of Rushford and/or the affected/interested businesses and property owners choose not to make the effort to move forward from this point.

Step One. Distribute *Map One* and *Map Two* to any and all persons that may have an interest in the future of downtown Rushford. Communicate the “vision” represented by the *Concept Plan* to those individuals and groups that are perceived as stakeholders in the community of Rushford.

Step Two. Work to establish a cooperative relationship and constant dialogue with City Officials relating to the future of downtown Rushford and implementation of the *Concept Plan*. As local flood recovery efforts continue, the RCF must make the effort to learn more about the decision making process of the City of Rushford and at the same time share with City Officials the opinions and rationale of the RCF as they relate to downtown issues. Seek meaningful compromise.

Step Three. Regarding the thoughts represented on *Map One* and *Map Two*, develop a preliminary timeline for each project along with a list of potential stakeholders. Identify the anticipated obstructions that do/might exist which could prevent the project from proceeding. Assign someone the responsibility for monitoring the progress of each project and for communicating the same to the RCF. Assist with the planning and implementation details for each project.

Conclusion

Successful implementation of the *Concept Plan* will not be possible without cooperation, diligent effort, public and private sector financial resources and constant communication by and between the many stakeholders who have an interest in downtown Rushford. The detailed planning process that must follow on a project-by-project basis along with implementation of the development plans themselves will be an ongoing and time consuming process. There will be further challenges, frustrations and second thoughts. However, these challenges will dwarf in comparison to those that Rushford has already overcome.

Supporting Cast

Individuals Interviewed.

Windy Block, City of Rushford • Judy Christian, Stumpy's • Dennie and Rodney Darr, Darr Auctions and Realty • Christina Frederick, Winona Health • Mike Hammell, Hammell Equipment Sales • Jim and Brad Hoiness, Rushford Foods • Mark Johnson, Norsland Lefse • Kevin Kelleher, State of Minnesota • Jim Kitchens, Nordic Lanes • Brian Krambeer, Tri-County Electric • Brad Lenertz, Winona Health • Dave Lombard, Rushford Fire Department • Dr. Gary Marcoux, Dentist • Greg Norstad, Rushford Hardware • Dwayne Ostrem, Rushford State Bank • Chuck Pettipiece, Pettipiece and Associates • Ted Robertson, Rushford State Bank • Myron Schober, Tri-County Record • Mark Schwanbeck, Farmer's Elevator • Joel West, Yaggy Colby Associates • Tom Witt, Witt Pharmacy • Ron Ziegler, SEMN Development Corporation.

Additional Resources Considered.

Community Development Plan 2008 – 2011 ("draft"), SWMN Housing Partnership • Comprehensive Plan ("draft"), Yaggy Colby Associates • Design Team Report (April 2008) • Housing Needs Analysis 2008, Maxfield Research • Recovery Plan for Downtown Rushford ("draft findings"), Rushford Community Foundation Board of Directors meeting • Town Meeting Initiative, SMIF.