

ACTIVATE Downtown Devils Lake

A Vision and Action Plan for Downtown

We have a lot to build on

Download the report at: chamber.devilslakend.com

Discuss your ideas at: facebook.com/downtowndvl/

Community Voices

Focus group participants described how they feel about downtown Devils Lake in just one word.



The sizes of the words above correlate with the frequency each word was mentioned by focus group participants.

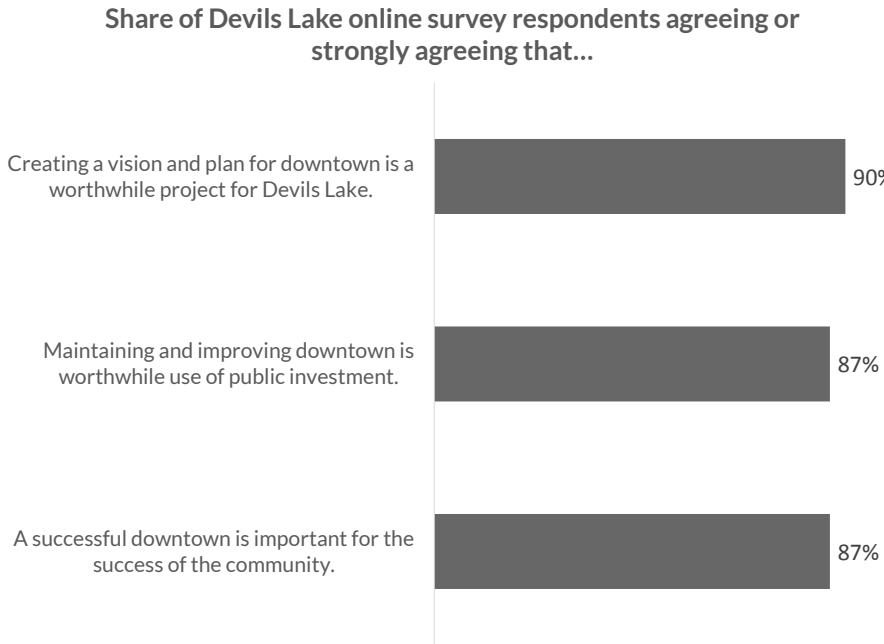
Introduction

The ACTIVATE: Downtown Devils Lake vision plan was created by an eleven-member group of community members to create an action plan to improve the future of downtown. Spearheaded by the Devils Lake Chamber of Commerce, this project reflects the ideas of community members. More than 65 people contributed ideas to the plan in face-to-face interviews and five public focus groups, and more than 620 local residents submitted thoughts and ideas online.

Why now?

For two decades, the community has battled the threat of the rising waters of Devils Lake. The cooperation and effort it took to build the flood protection system is now part of the history and local identity. The success of that flood fight now opens the door to the next stage of opportunity for the community.

More than 600 people responded to the call for public input about downtown, and 74% of them said they spend time downtown at least once a week. Eighty-seven percent said that downtown is important to the community as a whole and a worthwhile public investment. Ninety percent agreed that creating a vision and plan for downtown is a good idea. The time is now.



DOWNTOWN VISION PLAN COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Mayor Dick Johnson
- Lucas Wakefield
- James Leever
- Amy Heilman
- Paula Vistad
- Katie Myklebust
- Terry Johnston
- Amber Sander
- Nancy Conkins
- Erin Wood
- Mike Dunn
- Kelly Swenseth
- Suzie Kenner
- Stacy Dimmler

COORDINATING AGENCY

Devils Lake Chamber of Commerce

FACILITATORS

Jonathan Holth and Mark Schill, Praxis Strategy Group

Why Downtown?

For well over a century, downtown districts have served as the heart and soul of communities. Downtown is where people congregate, and it is where our history speaks to people in the form of beautiful, historic buildings. Downtowns, in a sense, are a good indicator of how a community views itself. Downtown Devils Lake is no exception.

The evolution of downtown in the United States is an interesting story. Downtown districts were, at their inception, the business hub of the community. They were built for the pedestrian with buildings close together, built high so that people could congregate in one district to accomplish all of their daily tasks. Downtown was built so that people could do their shopping, drop off their mail, catch a show at a theater, and have dinner all within a couple blocks. Alleyways were built for deliveries to businesses and also served as walkways for pedestrians. In pictures of downtowns from the before the 1950s, you see dense groups of people walking everywhere: on the sidewalks, in and out of businesses, and all over the streets. In a nutshell, downtown was where you went to “get things done.”

With the invention and rise of the automobile, our country watched as our beautiful historic districts took a back seat to building single-family homes on the edge of town and more automobile-friendly business districts such as strip malls. New developments revolved around access for driving and assuring that, whatever we built, there were acres of parking. This movement left many beautiful downtowns across our country behind. It forced thousands of businesses to close, it left beautiful buildings vacant, and it left our city centers quiet. Cities became places that required a drive to accomplish your daily tasks.

The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act gave the state and federal government complete control over new highways, resulting in many of them being routed right through vibrant downtowns and outlying urban neighborhoods, destroying many of them. By the 1970s, many communities were beginning to realize that Urban Renewal was not an effective blanket planning solution for all cities. Some cities began to take firm stances against the principle of demolition of old buildings to build new developments. Others continued to demolish historic properties, declaring it unlikely that the footprints of these districts had any chance to be renewed.

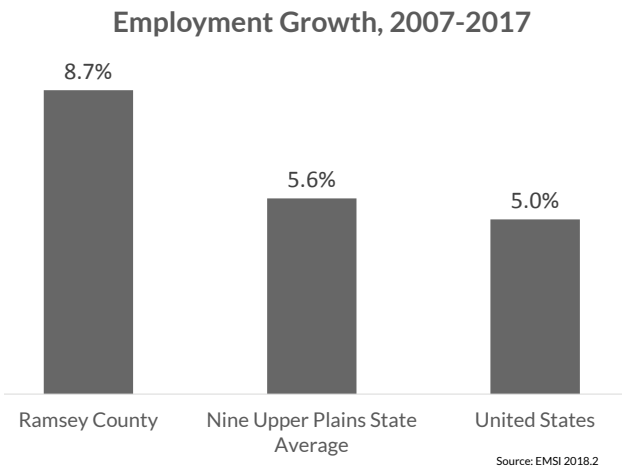
Many downtowns in small cities remained stagnant through the 1990s, yet by the mid-2000s, downtowns across the region began to see a revival. This revival has happened faster in some communities, but we’re now seeing a return to prominence of amenities that we once considered antiquated – walkability, alternative transportation, vibrant public spaces, and mixed-use development.

In the past ten years, cities of all sizes have made downtown revitalization a key part of their economic development, talent attraction, and tourism strategies. Community residents and workers are hungry for communities offering local culture and unique experiences. After the era of four-lane highways and chain stores in every town, an active downtown is the differentiator.

CITIES OF ALL SIZES HAVE MADE DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION A KEY PART OF THEIR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TALENT ATTRACTION, AND TOURISM STRATEGIES.

The Economic Opportunity

The Devils Lake economy is not in dire straits. Ramsey County has not enjoyed the jobs boom that occurred in other areas of North Dakota in the past decade, but there has been steady job growth since 2007. Partly because this region withstood the 2009 Great Recession better than average, the Devils Lake region has beaten the national and regional average job growth in the past decade.



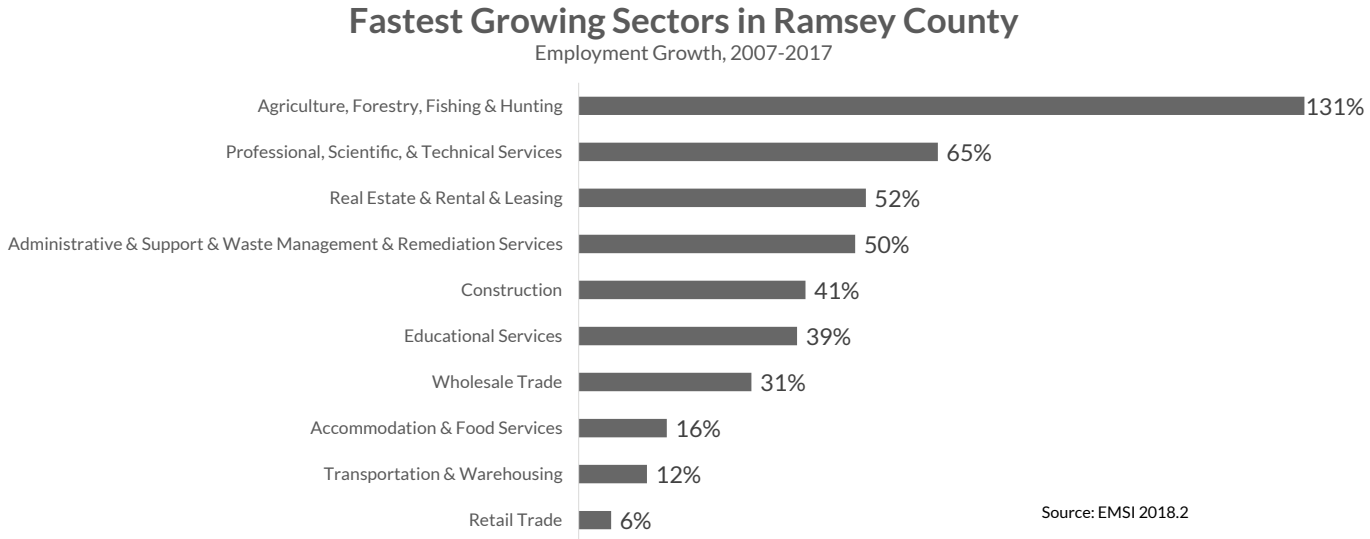
The region’s economy is anchored by agriculture and wholesale trade, construction, telecommunications, higher education, and tourism sectors. The local manufacturing sector is undersized, but has remained steady at about 200 jobs across the last decade.

Devils Lake’s role as a regional center shows in its above average concentration of finance, health care, retail, and food services. The local health care sector has stagnated the past 15 years, making it a major potential source of future good job growth.

Perhaps the best opportunity for high-paying jobs downtown is Devils Lake’s recent growth in professional services. This sector, averaging \$53,000 in earnings per job, is up 65% since 2007, largely due to 135% growth in legal services.

Increasingly, professional services firms do work for clients outside of their home community. This exporting of services generates new wealth for their hometowns and has attracted the attention of economic development agencies. The number of jobs in professional services in Devils Lake remains 70% below national average even after its recent growth spurt. Devils Lake may never become a true hub for professional services, but there is room for more growth and these new jobs would fit well downtown.

GROWTH POTENTIAL: TELECOMMUTERS The rise of telecommuting and independent knowledge workers could present a powerful long-term opportunity for Devils Lake. As a community with unique outdoors attractions and quality internet service, Devils Lake could become the chosed home for agriculture services workers or content providers and experts in outdoors activities who choose to live in Devils Lake while serving customers across the globe.



Downtown Devils Lake Today

Downtowns have endured cycles of development over the last century. Once the hub for all shopping and civic life, most downtowns declined with the adoption of the automobile and sprawling new developments with giant parking lots at the city’s edge. The shopping mall decimated downtowns and now the internet era has destroying many large “big box” retailers.

This cycle has impacted downtown Devils Lake as well, yet in many ways downtown Devils Lake weathered the shopping mall era better than other small city downtowns. Downtown is still home to significant retailers, including home improvement, furniture, sporting goods, automotive, clothing, jewelry, and an experiential retail quilt shop. It is home to one of the first boutique coffee shops in the entire region that would be at home in an urban area of any size. Most much larger cities dream of a downtown grocery store. Devils Lake already has one.

Downtown Devils Lake is home to other key aspects of community life: various churches, the senior center, fraternal groups, a middle school, museums, the public library, and local government. Local residents point out that downtown is missing a broader array of restaurants and nightlife, market rate housing, activities for youth, and a public gathering space.

The national changes in retail shopping patterns, city development, and housing suggest that the 1970s heyday of downtown Devils Lake as a center for commerce will not return. Yet across the country, downtowns are coming back, evolving to become lifestyle centers, entertainment and arts, small-shop retail, community events, and housing.

The Present and Future of Downtown Devils Lake

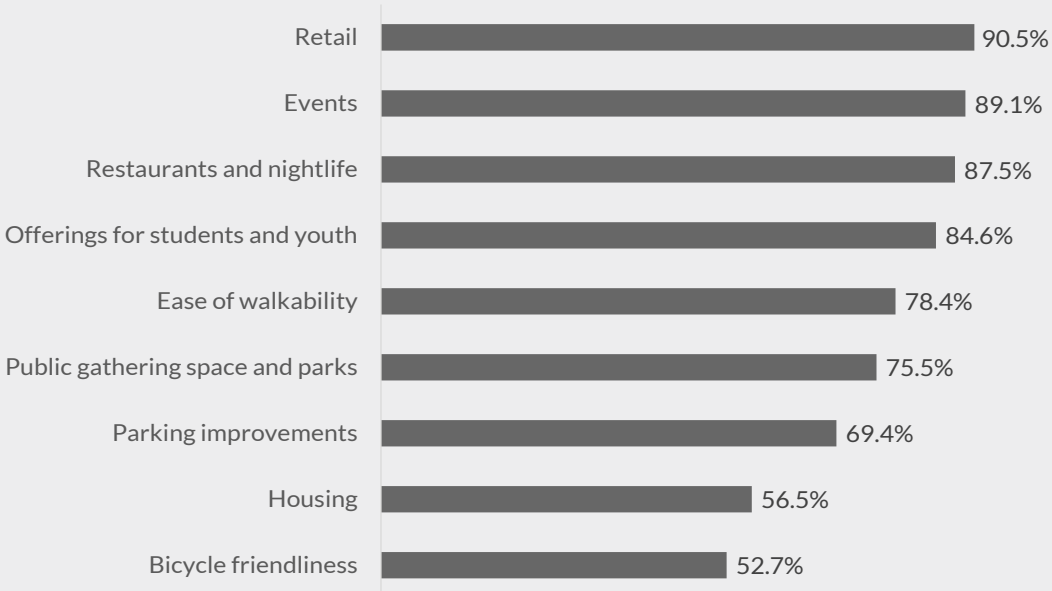
Ideas from community Members

	Positive Forces	Negative Forces
Local Issues	<u>Strengths</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong downtown “bone structure”: historic structures in a sensible street grid surrounded by homes• Significant retail options, including grocery• Many successful downtown events• Strong finance sector and emerging professional services firms• Recent history of small-scale redevelopment	<u>Problems</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disconnected from Highway 2 commercial strip, no clear path downtown• Some storefronts in need of upgrade• Parking anxiety among some community members• Need to improve snow removal process• Fears of danger after dark• Missing full menu of restaurant types with broad appeal• Lack of a public gathering or event space with activities for youth
Regional and national trends	<u>Opportunities</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• North Dakota Main Street Initiative offers new programs of support• Unique tourism assets• “Big box” retail era nearing its end• Empty storefronts ripe for redevelopment• Continued growth of small professional services firms, such as legal, accounting, engineering, or creative• Vitality created by students at Lake Region State College	<u>Threats</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Potential for clash between business interests downtown and along Highway 2 corridor• Residents driving to Grand Forks for shopping and entertainment• National restructuring of retail sector (also an opportunity)• Regional economic decline or disruptions to key industries• Reluctance to change in the community and downtown

Looking Forward

We asked Devils Lake residents about what types of downtown development is most important to them. Local residents would like to see more retail options, events, and restaurants appealing to families or a pub-like atmosphere. There is a strong desire for more activities for youth and to engage students at Lake Region State College. Citizens are also interested in walkability improvements, public gathering spaces, and managing parking.

Citizen Voices: What types of development



Four Key Strategies

Here are four core strategies to grow and improve downtown Devils Lake. These concepts apply in various ways to different topics downtown, including private business development, transportation, parking, housing, government services, and tourism.

01

Create downtown amenities before housing.

Many communities adopt a strategy of promoting housing construction to help drive demand for downtown restaurants and retail. In Devils Lake, residents are looking for a clear answer to the question “why would I want to live downtown?” Devils Lake attracts visitors through the year and downtown is a quick car ride from anywhere in town. More hang outs, restaurants with broad appeal, and events will ultimately help create demand for market-rate housing.

03

The spark of downtown revitalization should be led by businesses and citizens.

Many of the downtown improvements suggested by citizens must be created by private businesses. These ideas include new restaurants and nightlife appealing to young professionals and families, specialized retail, or youth activities. A group of local business leaders formed the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance to promote more events. New property developers have stepped forward in recent months to rehab downtown properties and storefronts. Local employers feel that an improved downtown will help them recruit new talent to Devils Lake. Local government should support and enable these private investments by providing a positive business climate, efficient public services, and infrastructure investments.

02

Prioritize new experiences downtown.

Downtown Devils Lake reflects the identity and history of the region. It offers an experience like no other across the nation. Successful retailers in the future are likely to be those who offer a unique experience to shoppers – and cooperate with competitors to do so. Devils Lake has already been successful creating unique event experiences downtown. Tourists seek an experience authentic to the local region. A new signature public space downtown could become a place to host festivals, live music, farmer’s markets, and public art or historic displays.

04

Increase cooperation among the business community.

In a community of this size, businesses on Highway 2 and downtown have more to gain by cooperating than competing. Each part of town offers something the other cannot. Highway 2 stores offer the type of drive-up retail unlikely to fit downtown. An improved downtown will help attract new residents to town and draw more visitors to benefit all businesses. New downtown development can be done without costly new streets and sewers and studies show that downtown property offers the higher tax value per acre of land compared to big-box retail. Perhaps more critically, downtown businesses must increase cooperation with one another. Downtown shops and restaurants will need to collaborate to offer the best experiences for customers.

ACTIVATE: The Downtown Brand

Devils Lake has many natural assets and a rich history. Momentum is building downtown and the region is already a magnet for visitors. A more active downtown will provide another attraction for the tourism industry and local resorts. Many tourists are searching for an authentic local experience that is best showcased downtown. Ultimately all downtown improvements benefit the tourism industry. As one local citizen put it, “Design it for locals. Tourists will follow.”

01

Devils Lake should **form a working group of branding professionals and community marketers** to create a branding scheme for downtown that fits with other community brands. The downtown brand should focus on localism and authenticity. Once completed, the new downtown brand should be deployed in two initial action steps

02

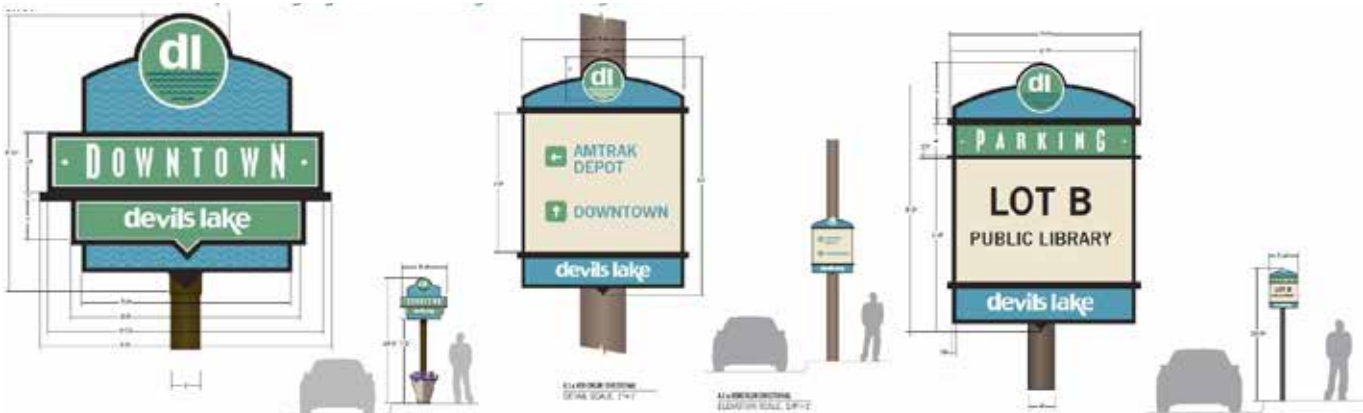
Install a cohesive visual wayfinding system in and around downtown. Driving downtown from Highway 2 is not intuitive for those unfamiliar with Devils Lake. Businesses and some local residents express anxiety about parking downtown. Strategic signage and a wayfinding system with a unified brand and visual design could direct drivers towards downtown and the existing historic sites. New visual cues could help direct drivers to public parking that is already available.

03

Form partnerships with resort owners and tourism operators to share information about downtown. A fun, engaging downtown will drive visitors to Devils Lake area resorts and hotels. Begin working directly with local resort owners, the airport, hotels, and outfitters to identify cross-promotion activities using the new branding scheme.

DOWNTOWN WAYFINDING CONCEPTS

Downtown needs a wayfinding system to help drivers locate downtown and free parking areas and for visitors to find important attractions downtown. These designs are for illustration only.



ACTIVATE: Retail

The Devils Lake retail sector is relatively healthy overall. In 2017, there were 71 retail establishments in Ramsey County, and retail employment grew 6% in the past ten years. The retail job concentration in Ramsey County is 38% higher than national average. This is partly due to Devils Lake’s role as a regional center and a visitor attractor. Yet “more retail options” was the most common request among citizens and many lamented shoppers driving to Grand Forks for more options.

The future of the national retail sector is uncertain. Many of the nation’s largest retail chains will not survive the next few years. Consumer will prefer to purchase many items online, yet there may be an opportunity for a return of local retail that offers a unique experience, specialty items, or goods that buyers would prefer to touch, feel, and try on.

To provide the best experience for shoppers, specialty retailers may need to cooperate by locating near each other and avoiding isolation. Small retailers will not survive on a geographic island. A local retail cluster could be a place where locals find items they would prefer not to order and where visitors come to sample the local flavor. The best place in the region to host a cluster of small retailers is downtown Devils Lake.

Devils Lake already has a strong base of long-time well-known local businesses along with several newer shops with young, dedicated ownership. There is momentum in the local retail industry.

- 01 **Create a retail cooperative group led by the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance** to identify challenges and to share solutions in the local retail industry. This working group should focus on areas of cooperation among all retailers and tourism operators to grow the industry.
- 02 **Secure empty space downtown to create a retail incubator.** The incubator would provide low cost, flexible space for startup retailers to test concepts and to learn from one another. The incubator could begin with limited hours or sales events. While it works to spin-off new retail concepts to fill empty storefronts, it will also be a new attraction for downtown for local shoppers and tourists.
- 03 **Cooperate to coordinate downtown retail hours** and extended evening hours one night per month.
- 04 **Study retail gaps and leakage more formally.** A research study may prove the market for specific retail concepts to be used for recruitment or local startup.
- 05 **Assist retailers with storefront improvements.** Citizens have voiced concerns about deteriorating storefronts. Continue implementing and promoting programs such as the Devils Lake Façade Improvement Program and the state Renaissance Zone tax incentives for downtown investment.
- 06 **Create new programming and events for peer learning among retailers.** The landscape of retail is changing quickly. Local retailers could benefit from peer learning events and “how-to” courses to help adopt best practices in the industry.

Ramsey County Retail Opportunity Analysis

This retail analysis uses jobs figures to estimate which Ramsey County retail sectors are over- or under-concentrated compared to national average. The tables below indicate the share of jobs in each sector compared to the share of jobs in the same sector nationally. For instance the county is home to six times more floor covering store jobs than national average, but has a concentration of shoe stores more than 50% below national average. This is a high-level analysis to begin discussions of which sectors may flourish in the region.

The Devils Lake region shows very strong concentrations of retailers selling goods that are hard to ship, such as home improvement, vehicles and related products, furniture, sporting goods, and women’s clothing. There may be opportunities for growth in other specialized sectors such as children’s and men’s clothing, gifts and novelties, art, pet supplies, hobbies and toys, books, art, cosmetics, refurbished goods, or specialized foods.

High Concetration Retail Sectors	Job Concentration
Floor Covering Stores	624%
Department Stores	522%
Recreational Vehicle Dealers	503%
Hardware Stores	503%
Nursery, Garden Center, & Farm Supply Stores	501%
Florists	330%
New Car Dealers	288%
Gasoline Stations with Convenience Stores	280%
Manufactured (Mobile) Home Dealers	238%
Tire Dealers	224%
Automotive Parts & Accessories Stores	217%
Motorcycle, Boat, & Other Motor Vehicle Dealers	201%
Furniture Stores	152%
Women’s Clothing Stores	149%
Beer, Wine, & Liquor Stores	142%
Paint & Wallpaper Stores	120%
Used Merchandise Stores	116%
All Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers	116%
Supermarkets & Other Grocery (except Convenience) Stores	94%
Sporting Goods Stores	91%
Other Health & Personal Care Stores	90%
Other Gasoline Stations	90%
Pharmacies & Drug Stores	85%
Electronics & Appliance Stores	58%

Low Concetration Retail Sectors	Job Concentration
General Merchandise Stores, including Warehouse Clubs & Supercenters	54%
Shoe Stores	44%
Fruit & Vegetable Markets	36%
Jewelry Stores	34%
Family Clothing Stores	30%
Other Clothing Stores	26%
Office Supplies & Stationery Stores	16%
Clothing Accessories Stores	8%
Electronic Shopping & Mail-Order Houses	5%
Home Centers	4%
Pet & Pet Supplies Stores	0%
Other Building Material Dealers	0%
Art Dealers	0%
Gift, Novelty, & Souvenir Stores	0%
Hobby, Toy, & Game Stores	0%
Meat Markets	0%
Men’s Clothing Stores	0%
Optical Goods Stores	0%
Cosmetics, Beauty Supplies, & Perfume Stores	0%
Children’s & Infants’ Clothing Stores	0%
Sewing, Needlework, & Piece Goods Stores	0%
Musical Instrument & Supplies Stores	0%
Other Specialty Food Stores	0%
Outdoor Power Equipment Stores	0%
Book Stores & News Dealers	0%

ACTIVATE: Events

Downtown Devils Lake has shown a remarkable capability to host numerous events throughout the year. The Downtown Devils Lake Alliance has shown how to leverage a small amount of resources and volunteer time to create a large impact downtown. The Devils Lake Chamber of Commerce has also significantly assisted with downtown events over the years. These events are opportunities to showcase all of downtown – what’s old, what’s new, what’s exciting, and what’s to come. Events introduce the experience of downtown to all residents across the region and drive traffic to businesses in all areas of town. The largest events not only showcase downtown and attract visitors, but they also show that downtown has the parking capacity to host a lot of people at once.

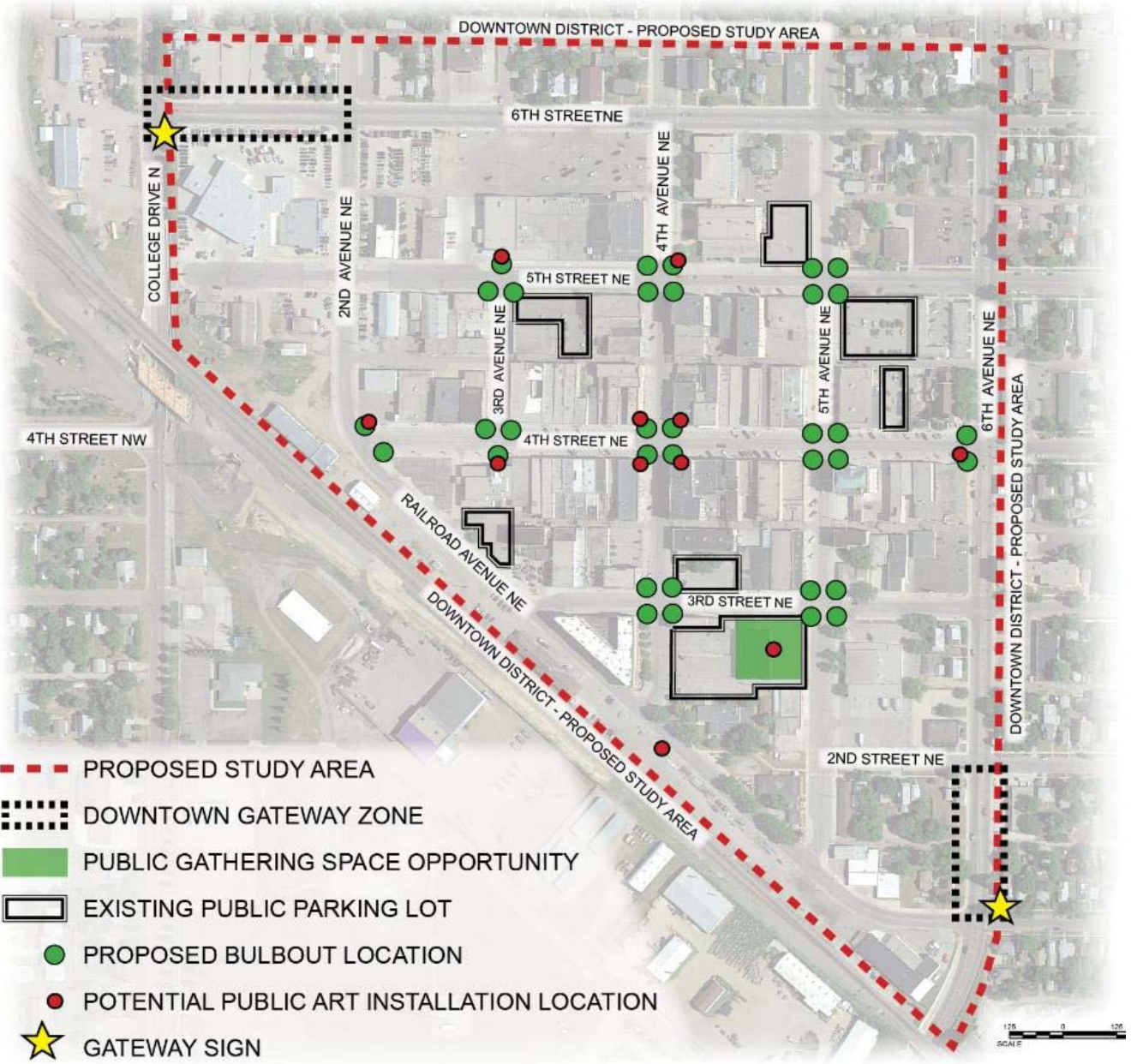
- 01 **Increase the capacity of the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance.** Run by a small group of volunteers so far, the community should find ways to support and enhance the efforts of the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance. DDLA membership should be expanded to include the broader community interested in helping with downtown events.
- 02 **Continue to build the community calendar operated by the chamber.** Many residents express the need to continue to exchange and centralize information about events and civic happenings in Devils Lake. Collecting content is always the biggest challenge for a community calendar. The chamber is spearheading and local event planners and partners should contribute their events.
- 03 **Continue to focus on winter events.** ShiverFest is one of the best and longest-running winter festivals in the region. Continue to integrate downtown into existing festivities and develop more events showcasing the downtown area during winter. Winter events are often times the most well-attended events because people are anxious to get out of the house and have some fun.
- 04 **Increase event startup or marketing funding.** City of Devils Lake should consider developing a special events fund, where grants could be given to local organizations to be used as seed money to get new events off of the ground. New events have difficulty getting private sponsorship until proof of concept is established. A small, dedicated seed fund through the city or Forward Devils Lake could be used to help alleviate the startup challenge or to reach more attendees visiting from other communities. Many of these events contribute to the economy by drawing visitor spending from across the region.
- 05 **Consider hosting events in parking lots, alleys, vacant buildings, or other underutilized private spaces downtown.** This can work to show the potential of an unused space so that residents and business owners can see the possibilities of filling those spaces on a permanent basis.
- 06 **Create a downtown event targeting high school or college students.** There is a strong desire in Devils Lake to engage youth and offer activities for young people. With the help of civic and business leaders, students could be involved in planning and executing events, or find roles as performers.

Downtown Devils Lake has shown a remarkable capability to host numerous events throughout the year.

ACTIVATE: Downtown Design and Streetscape

With the governor’s new Main Street Initiative underway, there is a new opportunity to leverage state support to make catalytic aesthetic upgrades to downtown infrastructure. This offers Devils Lake the chance to upgrade its streets using state grant funds and minimal local dollars.

Downtown’s greatest physical asset is its bone structure: a network of streets and historic buildings anchored by the iconic 4th and 4th corner. As shown in the map below, downtown Devils Lake is ripe for signage and improvements at its two major gateways, new locations for public art, and upgrades to the pedestrian experience at key intersections. Sound strategy builds on local assets. A streetscape investment in downtown leverages three of Devils Lake’s strongest qualities: its history, its business community, and its attraction to visitors.



Why upgrade downtown streets?

Based the community focus groups and online input collected for this plan, the broader Devils Lake community is likely to support streetscape upgrades downtown. Of the 620 people submitting ideas online, 78% feel that improvements to walkability are important or very important and 76% favor development of public gathering spaces. Overall 87% feel that downtown Devils Lake is worthy of public investment.



What is a streetscape?

A streetscape is the design of a street, including the road itself, sidewalks, landscape plantings, and the character of the building storefronts. A good streetscape design is holistic, incorporating all of these elements into one. Quality streetscapes balance the needs of cars and walkers by including plantings and trees that do not hide buildings, incorporating public art and historic displays, integrating sidewalk furniture and trash bins, increase safety for walkers, add to the overall cohesive feel and identity of the neighborhood.

What are the benefits of a high-quality streetscape?

- Unifies downtown and promotes a sense of place
- Increases private investment and economic development by improving investor confidence
- Improves safety, comfort, and experience for pedestrians, especially those with wheelchairs or families with strollers. Great streetscapes improve experiences for people from age 8 to age 80.
- Promotes and preserves local history and culture
- Upgrades old infrastructure to modern standards

What is the return on investment of streetscape improvements?

A high-quality streetscape and good walkability has been shown to return value to downtowns. A study by the University of Arizona found a 5 to 8 percent increase in property values for every ten point increase in walkability (on a 100-point scale). Another found that a five to ten percent mile per hour decrease in vehicle speeds correlated with increases in property values of 18-20% for adjacent residences. In Douglas, GA, and agriculture community of 12,000, a streetscape improvement combined with new small business and facade improvement programs helped bring the vacancy rate downtown from 25% to 6% and create 800 new jobs at small businesses.*

*Pivo G and Fisher J: The walkability premium in commercial real estate investments. Litman T: Traffic calming: benefits, costs and equity impacts. Melbourne, Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 1999. How Small Towns and Cities Can Use Local Assets to Rebuild Their Economies: Lessons from Successful Places.

ACTIVATE: Transportation and Parking

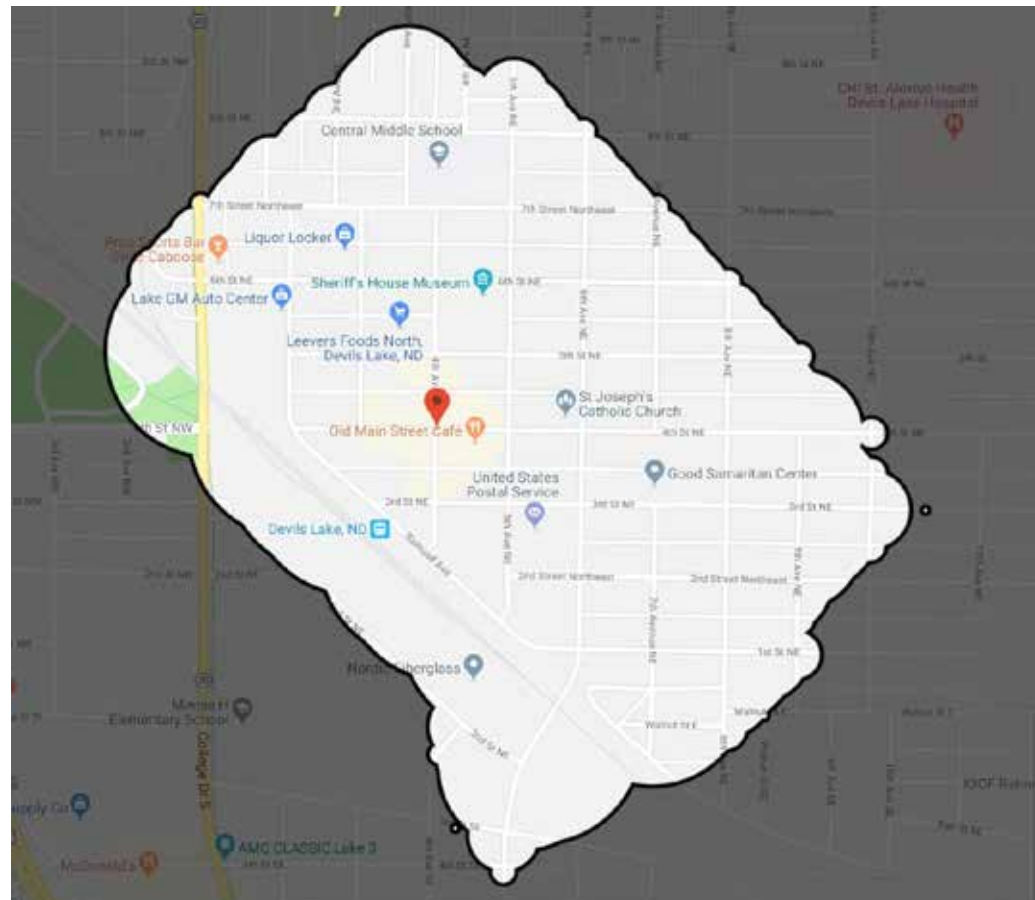
Parking is a major topic of discussion in every downtown. There isn't a downtown in the world that has completed a parking plan that is a finished product declaring parking to be "solved". Parking challenges take many forms, from a shortage of spaces, to awareness of where parking is allowed, to a simple driver disconnect between the styles of parking downtown compared to a big box retail store.

Parking problems are a good thing – because it means that people are using your downtown. There are many cities and with empty downtowns that would love to have a parking problem. Parking is an always adapting system that will always be discussed, managed, and changed in any community.

As described in the branding section of this plan, Devils Lake suffers from a lack of a clear corridor into downtown from Highway 2. A cohesive signage system directing drivers towards downtown and to parking and landmarks once downtown could greatly improve vehicle access to downtown without installing a costly and logistically challenging new railroad crossing.

Ultimately the best transportation asset in downtown Devils Lake is its walkability. The area corner of 4th and 4th has a "Walk Score" of 70, qualifying it as very walkable, where most errands can be accomplished on foot. This also means that most parking downtown is within easy walking distance of most downtown destinations. As shown in the 10-minute walk time map below, all of downtown and parts of nearby neighborhoods are reachable within ten minutes by foot from 4th and 4th. A three-block walk downtown might be a comparable distance to a walk across the parking lot to the Walmart sporting goods section or through the halls of Lake Region State College, but the experience walking downtown is much different.

MAP: Area reached by a ten-minute walk from 4th and 4th



Transportation and Parking Recommendations

- 01 Assess parking policies and systems.** City of Devils Lake should work with downtown property and business owners to evaluate current parking policies. Small adjustments to length of time, enforcement, ability to share stalls, and parking communication can make big differences both in efficiency and public perception.
- 02 Use signage to Improve utilization of city-owned parking lots.** The city-owned parking lots should be better signed and communicated to the general public and current daily downtown users (employees and residents). This work could be led by the beautification committee. Downtown business owners should cooperate – perhaps through a discussion led by the Downtown Alliance – to agree to encourage all employees to use nearby parking lots instead of street parking.
- 03 Improve walkability to alleviate parking issues.** If people have an enjoyable experience from point A to point B, they're more willing to park and walk to their destination. Aesthetics, lighting, streetscape improvements, and cleanliness impact the walker's experience and can be incredibly effective tools to alleviate public perception of lack of parking.
- 04 Make small, simple bike infrastructure improvements.** Though there isn't enough interest to build dedicated bicycle infrastructure right now, the city should consider implementing sharrows on the streets downtown to let cyclists know that they can share the road. Sharrows are street painted arrows used to increase awareness of drivers that there may be cyclists present. Consider the addition of bicycle racks at key intersection bump outs to encourage more bicycling. Accommodating alternative transportation options alleviates parking congestion.
- 05 Educate visitors about parking and how to get downtown.** Develop printed parking maps or brochures to be distributed at hotels, resorts, the visitor's center, and other attractions, so that visitors know exactly how to reach downtown and where they can and cannot park.

MAP: The map to the right shows the Walmart building and parking lot land area superimposed over the corner of 4th and 4th downtown. Walmart and its parking areas cover the equivalent of more than two city blocks and streets downtown.



CATALYTIC PROJECT: A New Downtown Public Space

Well-designed, active public spaces in the heart of a community have the ability to serve as catalysts for significant momentum throughout the neighborhood. If designed properly, these spaces can take on a part of the community identity, drawing significant visitors to them and the neighboring area. These public spaces have the ability to cut across community differences and serve as gathering places to meet your neighbors and take pride in your city. These public spaces are often activated using a series of pilot projects and events to find out exactly what the citizens are craving prior to making major capital investments. Public spaces should be designed to accommodate all ages, capabilities, seasons, and user groups. Since the public owns the space, it should take into account the needs of all.

A new public gathering space has the potential to fill several needs identified by citizens contributing ideas to this project:

- Activity space for young people
- A venue for live music events or other large festivals
- A location for the farmers market
- An flexible, low cost public event venue for upstart event planners
- A place to showcase local art, monuments, or history
- A draw for local residents and visitors to the community, driving foot traffic for local businesses
- An attraction for visitors, a “must have” photo that everyone across the region instantly knows is Devils Lake
- A signature local icon that local residents can be proud of.

The former Firestone Tire lot on the south side of Downtown presents a tremendous opportunity to become a new public space in Devils Lake. This location, adjacent to the signature Great Northern building, could become a catalyst to reinvigorate the south side of downtown. Efforts are underway to begin development, but Devils Lake need not make the entire investment at once.

Here are a few next steps to develop the Firestone lot:

1. Continue fundraising efforts to develop the Firestone lot.
2. Incorporate the insight from the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance, Chamber, and other experienced event planners
3. Set up a series of pilot projects and events that focus on different activities, and measure the response from the public about design options and amenities for the new space.
4. Consider winter programming and winter design features. A winter-utilized public space (like an outdoor, non-hockey ice rink or fire pits) could be a big differentiator in Devils Lake. Many winter cities use their public spaces as a place to store snow.
5. Using the knowledge collected from event planners and pilot tests, spend invest early in a holistic design for the space, even if construction will occur incrementally.

A Vision for the Firestone Lot

The city-owned former Firestone lot is the perfect place for a new public gathering space downtown. This space could become a new signature attraction, a place to hold new and existing events, or a place to hang out or play with children on a lazy day. The space could be designed to interface with adjacent buildings, to have a stage or performance space, and to be flexible enough to hold various types of events and festivals.

The drawing below depicts a vision for the Firestone lot hosting a music event and food trucks on a summer night.



In the winter, the space could host skating activities or outdoor games and become a perfect place for holiday events or ShiverFest festivities.



ACTIVATE: Public Policy

There are other areas for potential policy action or new initiatives to improve downtown Devils Lake:

- 01 **Develop downtown design guidelines.** As interest in downtown development increases, the community could benefit from a set of uniform downtown design standards and code review. A special task force should be assembled to gather input on downtown design guidelines, with several immediate areas of focus: downtown signage regulations and the allowance of blade signs, complimentary window sizing, street-side doors opening to the interior instead of the exterior, regulating hand-painted signage, encouraging see-through windows at street level establishments, and adding a mural code.
- 02 **Review liquor licensing policies.** The city’s liquor licensing policies and procedures should be reviewed to assess whether regulations are hospitable for the types of development desired by local residents. Consider simplifying liquor code to reduce number of types of licenses and incentivize license gaps to fill desired types of establishments.
- 03 **Conduct a code review.** The community could benefit from a code review with input from business people from inside and outside downtown. For instance, there is some perception that downtown establishments serving alcohol must cover all street-level windows, even though no such law exists. Others have inquired about the potential for sidewalk seating. A code review and associated engagement effort could help stimulate new business ideas downtown.
- 04 **Assess and adjust snow removal procedures.** The city could benefit from a review of snow removal practices to address concerns raised by downtown constituents.
- 05 **Address the perception of safety after dark.** Downtown is generally safe, yet some citizens voice a concern for safety after dark. The Devils Lake Police force is viewed as an outstanding partner by the downtown community. Concerns could potentially be alleviated with strategic lighting upgrades and community policing practices.
- 06 **Consider creating a seed capital fund.** Many of the desired improvements to downtown must be carried out by private businesses. The region could benefit from a source of “patient” capital, where investors hope to make a profit while also generating community outcomes they would like to see. Several focus group participants for this project mentioned the desire for a microbrewery operation, a business that could provide other community benefits as a tourist attraction and source of local pride. Some economic development organizations are begging to fund these operations as product exporters or influencers of talent attraction. The fund could also provide an opportunity to match up and coming entrepreneurs with the seasoned business people of the region. This could help create a new culture of business in the region. The fund could be operated by Forward Devils Lake, another entity, or privately using models already developed for regional capital funds.

DOWNTOWN DEVILS LAKE		
1,000 Day Action Plan		
Immediate Improvements Continue Work Already Underway	Catalytic Physical Projects Begin Planning Discussions	Plans and Big Investments Assess Demand and Feasibility
<div>1. Form a working group of branding professionals and community marketers to create a branding scheme for downtown</div> <div>2. Form partnerships with resort owners and tourism operators to share information about downtown</div> <div>3. Continue fundraising efforts to develop the Firestone lot.</div> <div>4. Create a retail cooperative group to identify challenges and to share solutions in the local retail industry.</div> <div>5. Cooperate to coordinate downtown retail hours.</div> <div>6. Continue implementing and promoting programs such as the Façade Improvement Program and the Renaissance Zone tax incentives.</div> <div>7. Continue to build the community calendar operated by the chamber.</div> <div>8. Improve utilization of city-owned parking lots.</div> <div>9. Improve walkability alleviate parking issues.</div> <div>10. Assist retailers with storefront improvements.</div> <div>11. Assess parking policies and systems.</div> <div>12. Conduct a code review.</div>	<div>1. Consider downtown street-scape improvements.</div> <div>2. Form partnerships with resort owners and tourism operators to share information about downtown.</div> <div>3. Increase the capacity of the Downtown Devils Lake Alliance</div> <div>4. Continue the focus on winter events.</div> <div>5. Consider hosting events in alleys, vacant buildings, or other underutilized private spaces</div> <div>6. Create a downtown event targeting high school or college students.</div> <div>7. Educate visitors about parking and how to get downtown.</div> <div>8. Set up a series of pilot projects and events that focus on different activities, and measure the response from the public to inform design of a new downtown public gathering space.</div> <div>9. Review liquor licensing policies.</div> <div>10. Assess and adjust snow removal procedures.</div> <div>11. Address the perception of safety after dark.</div>	<div>1. Construct a new public multipurpose space downtown</div> <div>2. Install a cohesive visual wayfinding system in and around downtown.</div> <div>3. Secure empty space downtown to create a retail incubator.</div> <div>4. Study retail gaps and leakage more formally.</div> <div>5. Increase event startup or marketing funding.</div> <div>6. Make small, simple bike infrastructure improvements.</div> <div>7. Consider creating a “patient” seed capital fund.</div> <div>8.</div>

Conclusion



Sketch: A vision for Fourth Street after streetscape improvements.

Downtown Devils Lake has survived the big box retail boom much better than most historic commercial neighborhoods. It is still full of history, with beautiful old buildings and the necessary infrastructure to continue to build a city core that invokes pride with residents and fervor with tourists. Many comparable communities across the country have spent the past decade planning to replace historic buildings that were knocked down in favor of inefficient surface parking lots. Devils Lake weathered that storm, and can now begin planning for the future with those historic buildings already in place.

We have recently seen an increased interest in downtown – both from an investment standpoint and a traffic standpoint. New property owners have emerged, and have begun to develop mixed-use properties that have made a significant impact on neighborhood vibrancy. Downtowns begin a renaissance this way – by having committed citizens take actionable, intentional, incremental steps to make improvements one-at-a-time to the place that they call home.

Downtown Devils Lake will never be what it once was – and that's OK. The great neighborhoods are always evolving and changing with the times. As we work to diversify our economy, attract new workers, and expand opportunities for citizens, downtown will play a critical role in our future.

We have a lot to build on.

There have been a number of new retail shops that have opened up downtown in the past few years, signaling a renewed interest in the core. Banks and civic amenities still have large presences downtown, which injects a number of daily employees into the core. And with the Governor's Main Street Initiative in the implementation phases, Devils Lake has the opportunity to be a shining example in the state of what can be accomplished when citizens come together to activate their town's core.

For Devils Lake to be competitive in the areas of workforce development, business attraction and retention, tourism, and a diversified economy, the community must care for and incrementally build upon downtown over time. Devils Lake is positioned well to have a downtown that is known in the upper Midwest as one that is charming, well-planned, dynamic, and busy. But a vibrant downtown will not happen on its own, it must be built by local citizens and businesses working together to make one small investment after another.



ACTIVATE: Downtown Devils Lake