



- Introduction
- History of the RDA
- Overview
- Projects and Achievements
- Community Impact
- Future Plans
- Q&A

Overview & History

A Presentation for the Watertown RDA Board Members

Mason T. Becker – RDA Executive Director

July 16, 2025



- Introduction

- History of the RDA
- Mission and Goals
- Achievements and Projects
- Community Impact
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Purpose of Presentation

- Overview of RDA Mission
- Review Major History Points
- Discuss Future Efforts



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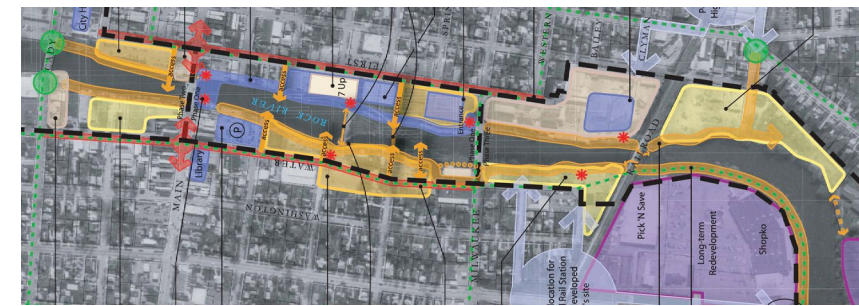
Evolution of the Economic Development Process in Watertown

1993 –

A new Business Incubator is built for business start-ups.

Businesses that successfully transitioned from the Incubator:

Symbol Mattress SI Roller
Berres Brothers Coffee Roasters Peterson Stainless



Watertown Riverfront/Downtown
Redevelopment Initiative

2014 –

The Watertown Common Council accepted the
“**Riverfront/Downtown Redevelopment Plan**”.



2018 –

RDA purchased the 100 W. Main St. block buildings.

2021 –

RDA hired full-time Executive Director
Watertown Common Council approved TID #8
targeting 18 acres in downtown Watertown.

– 2024 –

RINKA and Kapur work with the RDA to create the **Rock River District Vision** plan for further riverfront redevelopment and completion of the riverwalk.

– 1940’s

The Promotive Corporation is started by a group of local business people to look into the growing concern over a Watertown company that was struggling to sell their products.



– 2004

“**Watertown Riverfront Plan**” presented by VANDEWALLE & ASSOCIATES

– 2011

The **Watertown Economic Development Corp** created to provide a unified effort to retain, expand, and attract business to Watertown.

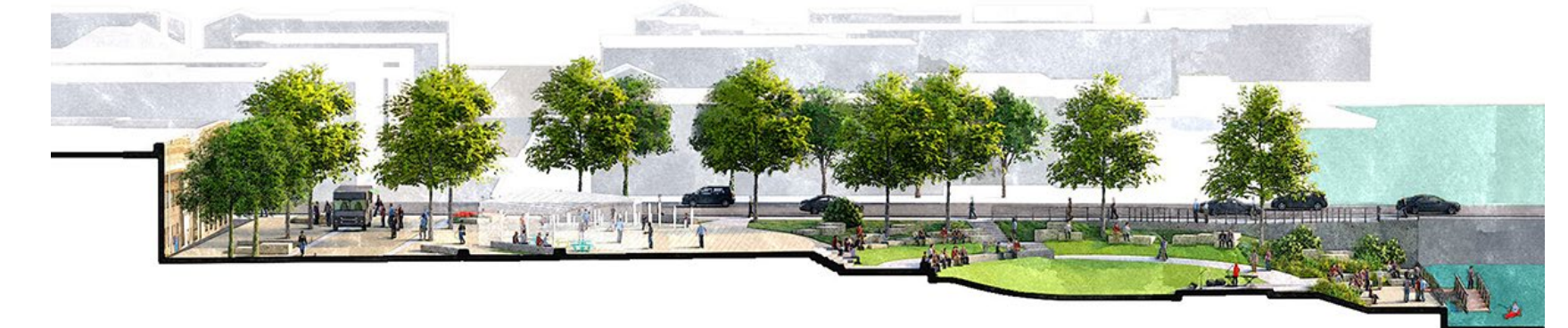


– 2016

The Redevelopment Authority (RDA), created to lead transformative change in the City of Watertown, held its first meeting. Adopted a plan to attract economic growth to Watertown’s Main Street and downtown area.

– 2017

Commercial Rehabilitative **Revolving Loan Fund Program** launched in December.



– 2023 –

Bentzin Family Town Square opened. RDA transferred the property to the City.



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Watertown Redevelopment Authority Overview

MISSION: "Turning Opportunity into Results"

The Watertown Redevelopment Authority (RDA) was established to:

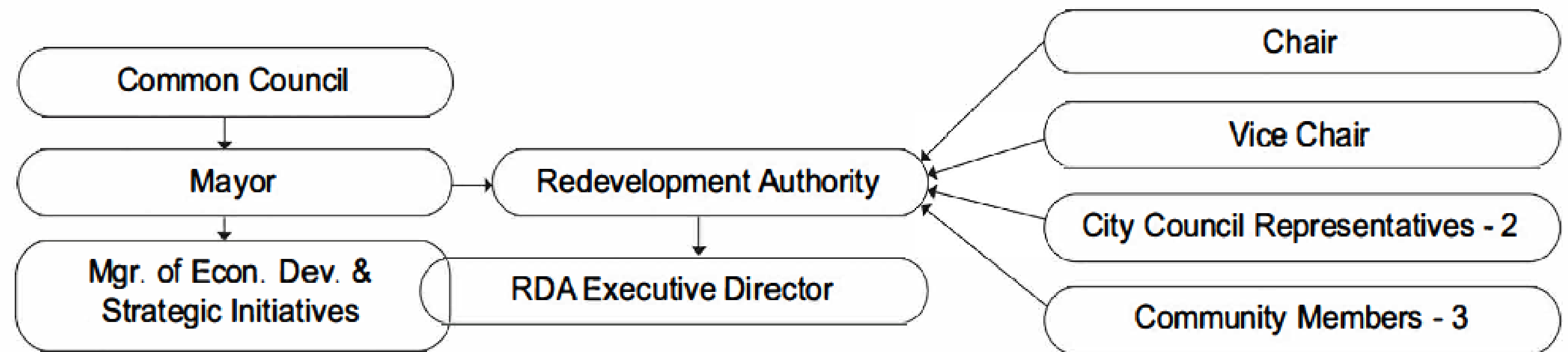
- Develop urban renewal projects
- Encourage private/public reinvestment in under-utilized areas resulting in:
 - New infill housing and commercial developments
 - Job creation
 - Expanded tax base
 - Improved quality of life for the citizens of Watertown

MANAGEMENT / OVERSIGHT:

The RDA Board, appointed by the Mayor and approved by the Watertown Common Council, is made up of seven members from the Watertown community who are involved in enhancing the economic vitality of the City through their professional and/or civic affiliations.

The Board is the governing body that meets on a monthly basis to provide guidance by contributing to the organization's strategic purpose and advocating on behalf of the RDA's redevelopment efforts.

The Manager of Economic Development and Strategic Initiatives is a City employee and serves as the RDA Executive Director.





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Projects and Achievements – Sale of the Business Incubator

The RDA sold the Business Incubator building for \$550,000 in January 2020.

Benefits:

- Funds were invested in building the Town Square.
- Maintaining the grounds (snow plowing/mowing grass) became the responsibility of the property owner.
(Had been provided by the City at no cost to the Incubator.)
- Five local businesses were renting spaces at the time of the sale.
- Below market rates rent put the RDA in competition with the private sector commercial real estate.
- The RDA was not designed to be in the landlord “business”.
- The building was almost 30 years old. Eventually, repairs would be needed.
- The property was returned to the tax rolls, with a current 2025 assessed value of \$835,100.





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Projects and Achievements – Sharp Corner Park

Goals:

To Provide:

- An inviting green space on the east end of Main Street
- Space for food trucks
- A shelter and seating areas for guests



The RDA provided \$23,300 for the centerpiece sign.

Project Outcomes

- Eliminated a blighted area with an abandoned gas station.
- Created a safer intersection.
- Provided a sign to proudly welcome visitors and residents to east Main Street.
- Recognized with a 2020 Wisconsin Main Street Award for Best Public Improvement Project.



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Projects and Achievements – Revolving Loan Fund

Purpose:

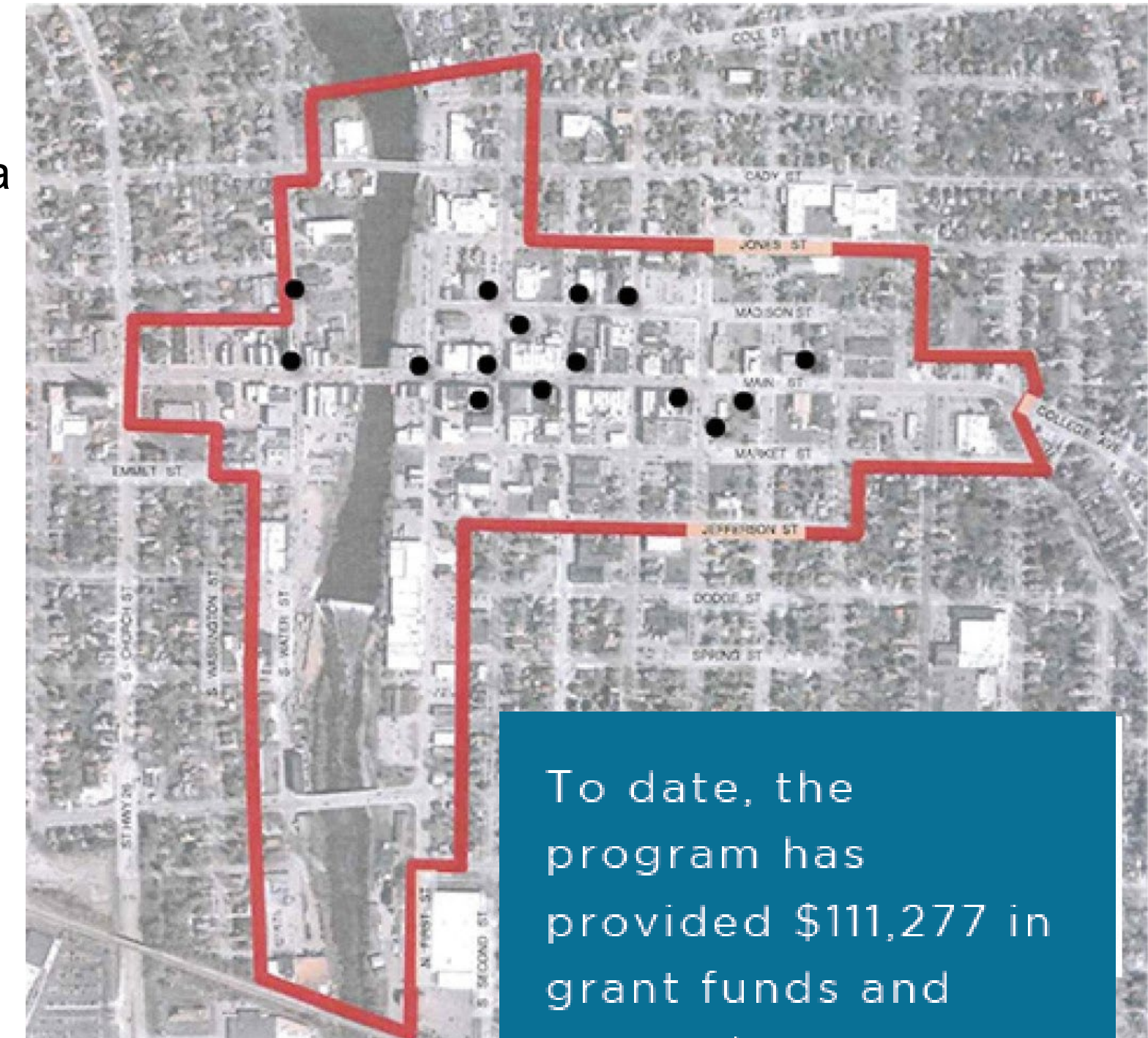
Attract private investment, which in turn increases property values, attracts more businesses, and provides a destination where people can live, shop, dine, and enjoy.

Goals:

- Foster business growth and expansion
- Facilitate the development of high-quality upper-level residential units
- Update and preserve historic structures
- Increase the overall economic vitality of downtown Watertown
- Stimulate rehabilitation and redevelopment of commercial real estate

Achievements:

- Partially funded Revolving Loan Fund with excess TID #3 funds.
- Partnered with Bank First, Ixonia Bank, and Bank of Lake Mills who provided additional funding at low interest rates.
- Provided loans and grants to 15 businesses in Watertown's Downtown Commercial Corridor.



To date, the program has provided \$111,277 in grant funds and nearly \$1.2M in low interest loans for 18 projects.



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Projects and Achievements – Bentzin Family Town Square

Mission:

Provide a sense of place for building community.

Vision:

Create a world-class, open-air gathering space for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy.

Goals:

The Town Square was designed with the goals of:

- Honoring the past/creating a world-class gathering space.
- Integrating the expanded Library into the Town Square.
- Providing a place for people to connect with the Rock River
- Attracting further downtown redevelopment.
- Serving as Watertown's central gathering space for social, recreational, and entertainment.

Achievements:

- Bentzin Family Town Square opened May 2023
- Construction fully funded predominantly by:
 - Private Donations: \$2,271,500 - 48%
 - Grants: \$1,245,136 - 26%
 - RDA: \$248,000 - 5%
(not including the \$752,000 for design, engineering, demolition, surveys, and studies)
 - City of Watertown: \$1,000,000 - 21% (TID closeout funds)
 - **79% of the building expenses were covered by non-City funds.**
- Raised over \$4.7M to fund Square and \$350,000 for Future Fund
- Awarded the 2023 US EPA Region 5 Brownfields Success Award
- Awarded the 2023 Mid-America EDC Economic Development Award in Placemaking





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Projects and Achievements – Bentzin Family Town Square

- Recently, the Historic Art Wall was officially unveiled at the Bentzin Family Town Square. The ribbon cutting was May 31, 2025.
- This art piece, recognizing and honoring Watertown's unique history, was made possible through a generous donation by Barton Bentzin.





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Projects and Achievements – Beltz Foundation Downtown Watertown Grant Programs

Purpose:

To encourage growth and programming in the Downtown Watertown Redevelopment District Target Area.

Program: Total \$50,000/year for 3 years with option to renew funding, currently in Year 3.

Beltz Foundation Downtown Watertown Special Events Grant Program

Provides grants up to \$10,000 per event to public events that attract more than 150 attendees, meet economic development goals of the area, contribute to the unique identity of downtown Watertown, make the City's core a compelling destination, provide economic impact, and promote business and community involvement.

Beltz Foundation Downtown Watertown Business Grant Program

Offers funding to encourage unique businesses to relocate or expand into the Target Area. Funds can be used towards eligible expenses such as capital improvements, renovations, and signage. Preference will be given to businesses that fall in categories that align with the program goals such as entertainment and family and full service, fine dining, grab-and-go lunch stops, and craft beer. In addition, organic and gourmet food stores, retail establishments offering quality merchandise, and non-chain/non-franchised businesses.

2024 Grant Recipients:

SPECIAL EVENTS

\$10,000 – Bentzin Family Town Square programming

\$6,177 – Jingle Bell on the Rock (Main Street Program)

\$5,000 – Watertown Parade Committee

\$10,000 – Holiday Tree Lighting at Bentzin Family Town Square

BUSINESS GRANTS

\$5,000 – Sassy Sweets (116 W Main St)

\$9,721 – Rapha Bowls Café (120 W Main St - completed in 2025)



“Opportunities come when people see value in what’s happening...forward thinking entrepreneurs see beyond the current state and invest in what something can become.”

– Dr. John Beltz, DVM



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Housing Rehab Grant Program

Housing Rehab Grant Program funded by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) :

- One time allocation of ARPA funds by the Watertown Common Council, to address an identified goal in preserving and maintaining existing housing stock in the community.
- Funds can be use for physical repairs to homes, including roofs, windows, plumbing, electrical, siding, etc.
- All housing units within the City of Watertown are eligible, including owner-occupied and rentals.
- Applications are reviewed by the RDA and Thrive ED. Some applicants are also eligible for assistance through the HOME Consortium.
- Assistance is on a sliding scale based on income, using HUD defined guidelines which are updated annually.
- **To date, over \$84,000 in projects have been approved by the RDA.**
- **Most projects have been in older areas of the City.**





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Rock River District Vision



Purpose:

- **Next logical step after completion of the Bentzin Family Town Square**
- **Continue work brought forward in previous plans...over 40 years**
- Improve public access to the riverfront
- Promote appropriate redevelopment along the river
- Enhance the river's environmental character and scenic beauty
- Enhance the Rock River as a downtown focal point and finish the riverwalk

Creating better physical and experiential connections between Main Street and the riverfront, building off of work already done (Watertown Public Library expansion, Bentzin Family Town Square, new Main Street bridge), as well as upcoming 2028 Main Street reconstruction.

Next steps: Finalize fundraising plan and identify mix of funds

- First five years of infrastructure plans have been placed into the City's five-year capital plan, with expectation that the City **will not be borrowing to fund this project.**



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Rock River District Vision (continued)

More than a riverwalk:

In late 2024 and early 2025, the RDA worked with the US EPA and a third-party firm, ICF. An Economic Impact Analysis was conducted, funded by a technical assistance grant (which did not have a required local funding match). A summary of the findings regarding potential redevelopment sites IDed in the plan:

*Based on the analysis, short-term construction activity has the most significant impact and would occur over the duration of the construction. While construction activity will be staggered across three phases, in the aggregate, **construction activity is anticipated to support \$25.4M in labor earnings, 462 additional jobs, and \$63.4M in industry activity in the region.***

*In the long term, household expenditures from new residents will drive economic activity, on the order of **an additional \$6.0M per year in labor earnings, 145 additional jobs, and \$16.7M in industry activity per year.** Long-term retail activity will also drive an **additional \$1.1M per year in labor earnings, 38 additional jobs, and \$3.5M in industry activity per year.***





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Other Future Opportunities

Citywide Sign Grant Program: A proposed program currently being reviewed by the City Attorney. This program would be funded through a one-time allocation of funds from the closeout of TID #4. This would be the RDA's second foray into a citywide program (after the Housing Rehab Grant Program).

Continued messaging and education: The RDA now has a 12-month messaging calendar which is coordinated with the City's Media Director. Most messaging is through Facebook and the RDA website. Other messaging efforts occur through occasional press releases and earned media.

Networking: The RDA works with other economic development groups, such as Thrive/JCEDC, MadREP, WEDA, and others. There may be opportunities to further leverage these partnerships.

Other future steps: There is now opportunity to discuss the RDA's long-term strategy and improve ongoing operational activities. Long-term, ongoing funding sources may need to be secured.



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Parting Thoughts

Shifting the Community Conversation

“Downtown economies are critical to a healthy and balanced community which draws and attracts people and investments. ...**When viewed as a whole, ‘Downtown Watertown’ is a significant and vital client of the City** and should (as any other major asset) be preserved, managed and enhanced, in order for it to continue, as well as increase its economic impact in delivering jobs, incomes, tax base, and service to the community.”

- Watertown Riverfront/Downtown Redevelopment Initiative
October 2014

Change in Community Narrative

Watertown leadership and stakeholders boldly took a stand to change Watertown’s future. The benefits of focusing on “Downtown Watertown” as ONE WHOLE asset are already reaping economic benefits.

Overarching these tangible benefits is a slow, but steady, change of narrative. Once defined by its “problems”, Watertown is now attracting regional media attention with positive comments.

“The smaller, tight-knit community of Watertown is thinking big with its new downtown space.”

-Channel 3 / 5-9-2023

“Some big things are happening in Watertown, Wisconsin. This historic city recently redeveloped the heart of its downtown, and it’s now a lively destination for family fun.”

-Only in Your State / 7-4-2023

Headline: “Investing in Main Street makes more sense than Foxconn”

“Helping historical downtowns succeed, such as the central city of Watertown, is a better investment than trying to lure large corporations such as Foxconn.”

-Wisconsin State Journal / 12-5-2020



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Questions?





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Thank You!

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