

FOND DU LAC VISION & STRATEGIC PLAN

Business Workshop

Wednesday, February 25, 2015

On Wednesday morning, February 25, 2015, approximately 60 members of the Fond du Lac business community met at the Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts to participate in a roundtable workshop. The workshop included a questionnaire exercise soliciting participants' views, concerns, and aspirations for the Fond du Lac region. Discussion and comments focused specifically on challenges and opportunities within the area's business community, and projects or efforts that could improve local conditions for business growth. The following is an issue-based summary of the information received during the workshop.

Note on Summary Context

The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments, and opinions received in response to these four questions. Some comments were shared with the entire group, while others were recorded privately on worksheets. It is important to note that the items identified in this summary are not recommendations or observations of the consultant, but rather feedback and comments received from those who participated in the workshop.

Issues & Concerns

Workshop participants were first asked to identify the most important issues facing the greater Fond du Lac area. Participants voiced their concerns regarding a range of issues; however, many comments centered on key themes, which are summarized by issue categories below.

Growing the Regional Economy

One of the main topics discussed was the strength of the local economy. There were a variety of comments about Fond du Lac's economy and potential for development, and they covered both strengths and opportunities as well as concerns and challenges. Some participants stressed that there were good jobs in Fond du Lac, but that a lot of them are filled by individuals who choose to live elsewhere in Wisconsin, ranging from the Milwaukee suburbs to Appleton. Others noted that Fond du Lac possesses a lot of key infrastructure pieces and assets needed to pursue economic development, but that its convenient commute to other cities makes it very competitive and difficult to retain all of the local economic activity within the region itself. However, other participants stressed Fond du Lac was still too reliant on traditional manufacturing and large employers, such as Mercury Marine. Participants stated that the area needs to broaden and diversify its economy and create new jobs in emerging sectors that makes Fond du Lac more competitive within Wisconsin and nationally. Further, some participants stated this new investment needs to occur in a manner that appeals to young professionals and attracts young families to the region.

Addressing Education & Workforce Development

There were a wide range of comments that addressed developing the local workforce and better connecting residents to employment opportunities. Comments spanned from needing to better structure local education to entry-level skill needs, to promoting career tracks in advanced manufacturing jobs directly to students, to programs to make ongoing technical training and advanced degrees more affordable. One participant proposed creating a "pipeline" of local workers that would seamlessly transition from high school to local colleges to employers. Generally, there were dual concerns that talented workers were leaving the area because they could

either not find or failed to navigate local resources, matched against a challenge for employers to find qualified local workers. Workforce development and locally-developing, attracting, and retaining a modern, qualified labor pool was repeatedly cited and discussed, and is identified as a key issue to address in the planning process.

Promoting the Region

Participants noted that while many other parts of Wisconsin may have a poor image of Fond du Lac, there is also concern that Fond du Lac area residents also suffer from low self-image and pessimism about the community themselves. Participants stressed that while the Fond du Lac area boasts a lot of amenities and high-quality assets, the area remains a “best kept secret” and could be doing more to bring visitors into the region. Some participants discussed the benefit of linking a strong Fond du Lac brand to benefiting other community challenges, such as retaining its local college-educated youth as well as recruiting new companies and professionals to the area. Further, some participants emphasized that while outside branding, marketing, and promotion may benefit Fond du Lac externally, local residents and existing businesses would also benefit from elevating their perception of Fond du Lac. Participants feel that improved attitudes could help motivate people to better the community as engaged citizens. Specifically, participants noted Lake Winnebago, the river, Downtown, and outdoor recreation as competitive attributes that Fond du Lac could really emphasize when promoting the area.

Downtown

Downtown was identified as an asset by virtually every participant; however, most participants expressed that Downtown needs a new vision and targeted reinvestment to better leverage it for the entire community. Participants expressed a wide range of concerns and ideas, ranging from nighttime safety, to the need to demolish old structures, to the need to divert auto traffic away from pedestrian corridors, to the lack of a widely-known destination, for example. It is clear there are different visions for Downtown, as certain issues, like the benefit of adding more housing, the need to add more bars and nightlife, to the competitiveness of adding more small, boutique retailers seems to highlight differences of opinion. There was some disagreement about whether there is enough Downtown parking (or whether it is in the right places), or whether there is simply a perception of a lack of parking. Some participants noted that some people will walk a ¼ mile in a “big box” parking lot but will not walk one block Downtown, and that cultural tendency is difficult to change. Regardless, parking was highlighted as a design and policy matter to examine in the planning process. Further, it is clear Downtown Fond du Lac is a key geographic area to address, which simultaneously can address a wide variety of issues discussed throughout this summary report.

Lake Winnebago

The lakefront was a common point of discussion and the site of many of the proposed projects discussed later in this summary. Virtually all attendees stated Lake Winnebago is one of Fond du Lac’s most important assets, and there is a feeling it is under-promoted and under-utilized in the community. Further, participants stated that the lakefront is currently disconnected from Downtown and the Fond du Lac River, but many felt all three were key assets that should be linked. Participants stated that better connecting Downtown to a riverfront trail or “boardwalk” network, which would ultimately connect to the lakefront, would offer local residents a high quality-of-life while also appealing to visitors, tourists, and new business investment. However, there is a difference in views on whether the lakefront should be redeveloped as a commercial or mixed-use entertainment district, perhaps on a major marina, or whether it should be preserved as passive open space and parkland.

Small Business Growth

Participants expressed that it could be easier to start a business in Fond du Lac and there is interest in building more of a “clearinghouse” of resources to do so. Participants expressed a desire for a range of services, including a network of retired business mentors, seed capital, loan and grant programs, tax breaks and credits, small business networking groups, incubator space, property rehabilitation grants for Downtown, and infrastructure investment to boost technology growth. Discussion touched on multiple topics and addressed how attracting younger professionals could be matched with small business growth. Participants felt one of Fond du Lac’s growth strategies needs to be developing as an affordable entrepreneurial hub that coordinates not only with local colleges, but also with universities and startup communities in Milwaukee and Madison. Generally, there were comments that economic development policy should focus on entrepreneurship and small business growth, over tax incentives for large corporations headquartered outside of the region.

Diversity

Participants noted that while Fond du Lac is aging, it is also becoming more diverse. Participants both identified how new diversity will ultimately be a strength for Fond du Lac, but also expressed concern the region was not doing enough to help navigate through this community change. Participants noted the Hispanic community could be better engaged and that business owners desire to better understand those consumers’ needs and market. Further, participants stressed they would like to see a connected Fond du Lac that celebrates its diversity and leverages it as a strength across the community, rather than retreat to separate parts of the region. Specific ideas included adding more community-based festivals that promote the area’s diversity, as well as add more ethnic restaurants and shops in the community. Downtown was specifically identified as an area to concentrate these types of activities and position the district as the central gathering place for everyone in Fond du Lac.

Transportation Connectivity beyond Greater Fond du Lac

Participants stressed a need for expanded transit service, which ranged from connectivity with Oshkosh’s system, to senior shuttled and new service to outlying towns, to park-and-ride facilities for Milwaukee-area commuters. Some participants felt that the greater Fond du Lac area would benefit from improving its connectivity and ease of travel between it and other Fox Cities, and emphasize its place within this larger, central Wisconsin region. Participants noted the plus-and-minus nature of being able to access so many other cities so conveniently, but stressed that Fond du Lac needs to develop strategies to ensure it captures its share of this broader, regional traffic and disposable income.

Appealing to Young Families

Participants expressed concern that the Fond du Lac area is not retaining enough of its own youth, and related, not enough young families are moving into the area from elsewhere. There was particular concern about “brain drain” and young, college-educated residents leaving Fond du Lac. Further, there are concerns the Fond du Lac region does not appeal to young professionals, who are consistently moving to Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton, and other areas. Participants stressed there are a number of assets, such as affordable housing, good schools, and youth sports, to appeal to young professionals as a place to raise a family, however, workshop attendees also felt the Fond du Lac area was missing other key attributes to attract and retain this demographic.

Investing in Infrastructure

There were comments that stated Fond du Lac needs to invest in infrastructure. The particular topic ranged from roadway maintenance and condition, to telecommunications, cable, and internet service, to improving and

adding parkland and open spaces, to elevating Lakeside Park, to building new schools. Generally, participants feel the quality of public services and community facilities in the area are adequate, but there was some concern expressed that the government agencies and related area stakeholders need to address reinvestment strategies. Further, participants stressed that a wave of new investment in the community would signal increasing revitalization and may help spark private and business-side investment in the area.

Addressing Social Issues

There were a number of individual comments that all related back to challenging social issues within the community. Topics ranged from unemployment, to substance abuse, to crime and gang activity, to a declining work ethic and sense of personal accountability, the shrinking amount of welfare and financial assistance, to an increase in poverty and transitory students. Participants also stressed that a challenging ratio is emerging, where the demand for social services is growing while the amount of resources and number of organizations equipped to handle them are being stretched thin. Further, participants stressed that the complexity and breadth of these challenges are taxing local nonprofits that are in need of more partnerships to keep pace. Regardless, it is clear there is a series of complex social issues that need to be better understood and further explored as part of the planning process.

Fear of Change & Embracing Nostalgia

Participants raised concern that Fond du Lac is too nostalgic and fears change. Although participants noted there are some great things about the community that should not change, and that Fond du Lac has a proud history that makes it distinct from other cities in Wisconsin, ultimately change is constant and inevitable. Some comments expressed frustration that the Fond du Lac community can be difficult towards newcomers as well as individuals who try to propose new styles of projects or redevelopment, and as a result that “new blood” does not stay long. Further, some participants stated this culture then establishes a reputation that Fond du Lac does not like “outsiders” and is wed to conventional ways of business. One participant specifically wrote that younger and more recent residents have ran up against a “good old boys’ club mentality” that has made it difficult to get involved and have influence in the community. Participants stressed that this dynamic ultimately impacts how the region attempts to address virtually every other issue, and engaging Fond du Lac’s traditional culture is a central need for the planning process to address.

Business Operating Environment

There were some comments that zoning districts need to be modified, certain corridors need to be re-evaluated for redevelopment strategies and perhaps rezoned, that certain fee structures should be revisited, that utility costs are high compared to other areas, that more development tools and incentives need to be created, that the sign ordinance is too restrictive, and that in general, the business operating environment could be more flexible. Generally, participants stated that the quality of local government services were professional and responsive and that historically the community has functioned well; however, participants expressed a desire to see a coalition between business and political leadership to strategically reassess the region’s business climate and streamline certain processes and procedures with an eye on elevating “business-friendliness” and encourage more local reinvestment.

Managing Media Presence

Participants expressed gratitude for the local media they do have in Fond du Lac, but also expressed frustration at either the lack of coverage from the Appleton, Oshkosh, and Milwaukee markets, or stated that whatever coverage is aimed at Fond du Lac is typically negative. Participants stated that in the face of this disadvantage,

Fond du Lac area leaders and businesses need a detailed strategy to regularly engage a wide network of media markets to promote Fond du Lac, as well as manage its brand and image outside of the immediate region. Participants expressed this approach needs to stretch beyond tourism and business recruitment and provide success stories about the housing stock, schools, recreational amenities, natural assets like Lake Winnebago, and unique human interest stories. Participants stressed that while social media and an online presence is important, Fond du Lac needs to more directly engage traditional media outlets and influence coverage.

Priority Actions & Projects

Workshop participants were asked to list specific projects or actions that could improve the greater Fond du Lac area and make it more conducive to business development. The answers provided cover a diverse array of actions that range from investing in Downtown and the Forest Mall, to better marketing and promoting the region, to creating programming that links education directly to employment.

The responses grouped by topic area, but otherwise in no particular order, are listed below:

Promoting Tourism & Creating Destinations

- Develop more of a winter sports and cold-weather recreation industry
- Develop recreation-related businesses adjacent to Lakeside Park
- Create a new Lakeside Park attraction or destination
- Create a “themed corridor” for sports within the area and “expose the (Lakeside) park”
- Redevelop Lakeside Park and the lakefront with Door County type establishments
- Draw from Grand Rapids, Michigan’s “Artprize” model and create an Fond du Lac art fair destination
- Create an App for people in the Fond du Lac area to track what is going on
- Create a centralized community calendar of events, including activities at the three colleges
- Create a dedicated marketing and branding team whose only job is to promote Fond du Lac throughout the Midwest and United States
- Identify natural resources and environmental features in the path of new development and conserve them for outdoor recreation and new parks, which can help recruit more young professionals to Fond du Lac
- Expand a trail network throughout the greater Fond du Lac area that connects to state parks and Oshkosh – create bike paths in the City
- Build a Downtown sports arena and host youth sports events and concerts
- Create another community event that draws in visitors like Walleye Weekend
- Demolish Forest Mall and create a destination district including a hotel/convention center
- Redevelop Retlaw Hotel into a Downtown destination and keep corporate spending in Fond du Lac
- Create more community festivals, particularly ethnic-related celebrations that promote the community’s new diversity
- Create a group to program more summer community events
- Expand the hospitality industry and better promote tourism
- Expand on Blue Line Family Ice Center as a community asset and potential tourism draw

Economic Development & Business Growth

- Redevelop the Forest Mall
- Expand on the “C’mon In” theme and apply it to business recruitment

- Create a meeting of business-owners in similar industries to discuss common issues
- Initiate business retention meetings and track what assistance is needed
- Connect people interested in starting new businesses with available land/buildings
- Create a low-interest or forgivable loan program for companies with stable, high-skilled jobs
- Create a network of “seed investors” and early capital for startups and existing businesses to expand
- Improve local telecommunications infrastructure, particularly internet and rural cable
- Adopt right-to-work state legislation
- Create regular roundtables for businesses to discuss industry best practices, i.e. workforce recruitment
- Create a group of retired business owners/managers to mentor younger businesses leaders
- Identify the package needed (i.e. tax incentives, available and large land parcels, new infrastructure) to make Fond du Lac highly competitive in Wisconsin and then implement it
- Create a huge marketing campaign of the advantages of doing business in Fond du lac and target outside markets
- Develop a strategy to recruit talented employees from other areas
- Create a “welcome committee” to embrace new professionals, business leaders, and companies when they relocate to Fond du Lac
- Create small business grants
- Attract more national chain stores to the community, particularly at Forest Mall
- Identify business leaders who have not been active in community efforts and make an effort to recruit them to get more involved
- Add more ethnic restaurants and a more diverse local dining scene
- The City should provide more tax breaks and incentives to encourage development
- Create a collaboration between Fond du Lac’s major employers to fund the promotion of business success stories from the region
- Establish more high technology jobs and concentrate them in one district near housing that appeals to young professionals
- Create a corridor plan for underdeveloped properties from Brooke Street to Lakeside Park
- Add more commercially zoned properties on the U.S. 151 Bypass
- Encourage employers to increase their wages to remain competitive with jobs in other nearby markets
- Better leverage the lakefront, including hosting more events and developing a large marina-entertainment district
- The business community should host discussions with elected leaders to identify mutually-beneficial ways to reduce the tax burden on businesses and streamline regulations to create new growth
- Develop and promote Fond du Lac as one of the most entrepreneurial communities in the nation
- Target marketing efforts in northern Illinois to promote a lower cost of doing business alternative
- Continue to develop policies to shift Fond du Lac away from manufacturing
- Create a popular “shop local” campaign and promote “shop local Saturday” events
- The community needs to stop being so “picky” and shutting down new ideas from individuals proposing projects and development in Fond du Lac
- Fond du Lac should try to recreate the St. Paul, Minnesota and Franklin, Tennessee models

Downtown

- Redevelop Downtown into a walkable district with amenities that cater to local workers

- Target buildings for demolition in Downtown Fond du Lac and create parcels more attractive to redevelopment
- Create more flexible Downtown zoning and ordinances generally
- Create ordinances that are more flexible to allowing Downtown housing development and create tax relief programs for really high quality development
- Add more housing and residential uses on Main Street and near Downtown to support Downtown retailers, restaurants, and the small shops people want to see
- Improve the Downtown group and foster more collaboration and cooperation on how to improve Downtown Fond du Lac
- Incentive Downtown “facelift” including funding and tax breaks for façade improvements and infill projects
- Develop a riverfront boardwalk that connects Downtown and local neighborhoods to the lakefront

Education & Employment

- Strengthen the relationship and frequency of interaction between the schools and employers
- Add specific job training programs and courses at the high school, and create “pipelines” that connect students directly with employers
- Create a community education campaign
- Promote Fond du Lac’s local opportunities to the area’s college and high school-age populations
- Create a small high school and smaller schools in general so parents do not feel their kids “get lost in the system”
- Invest in new school facilities
- Create new engineering and computer science programs in local colleges
- Generate more collaboration between the local colleges and universities, particularly focused on engaging their students in the community and retaining more local talent
- Help grow Marian College into one of the largest and best Midwestern universities

Residential Quality of Life

- Double funding for the “MEG” drug task force unit and increase targeted patrols
- Develop more senior housing and senior living facilities
- Invest in the amenities needed to attract and retain young professionals
- Purchase the properties in unsafe neighborhoods, demolish the structures, and identify new uses

Parks, Open Space, and Natural Features

- Dredge the Fond du Lac River and clean it up so its navigable and can be used (get rid of “stinky spot” too)
- Build a world-class athletic complex that could serve as a destination (use “fieldturf” surface)
- Construct an outdoor trampoline park as well as outdoor music and movie venues within existing parks

Transportation

- Create a regional transportation partners group that includes Oshkosh and address connectivity
- Create a fun-to-use and efficient local transit system that goes beyond the Fond du Lac area
- Expand the transit network to create “outlying routes” to smaller communities in the region
- Redesign the U.S. 41 and U.S. 151 access to Downtown and Main Street corridor and make them more walkable and pedestrian friendly and less like highways cutting through the neighborhood

- Replace the Arndt Street Bridge
- Extend transit service to cover more nights and weekend hours

General Strategies & Priorities

- Lead by example and learn to change
- Create a network for Fond du Lac groups to better collaborate on everything going on in the community
- Better promote all of Fond du Lac's events and good news
- Create a plan to engage the area's unemployed and underemployed populations and address the issue
- Start a veterans outreach campaign to help local military veterans find jobs ,housing, support services
- Conduct a large survey and be sure to include all demographics, to see what people want or need
- Create more youth programming
- Ensure that the *Envision Fond du Lac* project fulfills its goals and creates a new vision for the area
- Increase the available funding for the arts, address low State of Wisconsin level of investment
- Create a "community lab" in Fond du Lac to develop initiatives that innovate new solutions internally and pursue lean and agile approaches to solving community challenges
- Regardless of what Fond du Lac attempts, it should "trailblaze" and not just copy others
- Invest in more and better lighting, particularly Downtown – use decorative streetscape features
- Create a database of Fond du Lac issues that includes examples of what other similar communities in the Midwest area doing to address them in their areas
- Create a City-wide WiFi network and promote it as a quality of life asset
- Address substance abuse, particularly among addicted youth population
- "Follow up, follow up" – ensure implementation and action, not just talk

Community Strengths & Assets

The workshop concluded with a discussion of the assets that Greater Fond du Lac has to build upon and should be preserved moving forward. All assets and strengths identified in the workshop included:

Services & Facilities

- Library
- Service support system
- Police Department
- Fire Department
- Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts
- Stayer Center
- Educational Infrastructure
- High School
- Performing Arts Center
- YMCA
- Boys & Girls Club
- Blue Line Family Ice Center
- Strong leadership
- Pro-business leadership
- IGNITE program

- Higher education opportunities

Identity & Location

- Regional Location
- Access via major transportation routes to other major cities and the greater region
- Affordable Housing
- Cost of living
- Low crime and strong perception of safety
- Historic Downtown Fond du Lac
- Neighborhoods
- Heritage
- Architecture
- Room to grow
- Local newspaper

Community

- People
- Philanthropy and volunteerism
- Generous community
- Passionate community
- Creative community
- Sense of community
- Strong work ethic
- Small town feel
- Community involvement
- Community Size
- Active attempts to encourage diversity
- Great place to raise a family

Natural Resources

- Local parks
- Parks system
- Lake Winnebago and lakefront
- Lakeside Park
- Niagara Escarpment and views
- Fond du Lac River
- Water Access
- Bike trails
- Opportunities for youth recreation

Economic Development

- System of non-for-profits
- Steady, older workforce
- Small business spirit

- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Strong association of commerce
- Big Businesses
- Community partnerships and private supporting
- Low costs of doing business
- Corporate citizenship
- Manufacturing base
- Mercury Marine