

FOND DU LAC VISION & STRATEGIC PLAN

Community Workshop
Tuesday, February 24, 2015

On Tuesday, February 24, 2015 at 7 p.m., an *Envision Fond du Lac* workshop was held with over 90 community members from greater Fond du Lac at the Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts. This workshop was the first of many opportunities for residents and stakeholders to publicly discuss issues facing greater Fond du Lac.

The community workshop began with a brief overview of the planning process and concluded with a community discussion of issues, concerns, and ideas. The workshop included a questionnaire exercise, from which participants shared their written comments with the overall group. The following is an issue-based summary of the input 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

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

Revitalization and Business Development

One of the most common points of discussion was the need to strengthen and expand greater Fond du Lac's economic base, including creating new jobs and companies. Various locations throughout greater Fond du Lac, particularly Forest Mall and Downtown Fond du Lac, were emphasized as needing revitalization and redevelopment. Participants noted the high prevalence of vacancies and business closures, which is creating an unfavorable community appearance. The need to attract new businesses, startups, and niche retailers was commonly highlighted as a community need.

Similarly, many respondents raised concerns over the growing gap between the region's employers and labor pool. Brain drain, low rates of higher education attainment, and gaps in industry skills have created disconnects between the kinds of jobs offered within the area and the availability of a workforce to fill those positions. Participants suggested that workforce training and increased secondary education would help prepare the regional workforce for local jobs. Similarly, respondents stressed the need to attract new and better paying jobs that match existing skill levels and jobs that would help attract and retain students post-graduation.

Diversity

Participants raised concern over diversity within the greater Fond du Lac area, with many residents feeling that the area could be more tolerant and accepting of diverse people from different backgrounds. The discussion acknowledged that attracting new people to greater Fond du Lac needs to be one of the area's main goals, which will ultimately mean a more diverse community that mirrors trends seen elsewhere in the Midwest. Some

participants noted Fond du Lac's marketing campaign is "c'mon in" and stated that attitude should reflect how Fond du Lac residents treat any new residents moving to the community. Greater diversity was discussed as a potential community asset which could encourage multicultural activities, aid in definition of a unique community identity, and attract new retailers and restaurants that cater to a more diverse population.

Education & Youth Retention

Participants highlighted education as an important issue for the region, with concerns about both the grade school, high school, and higher education facilities. For pre-kindergarten through 12th grade schools, residents noted the poor maintenance and condition of facilities, as well as low rankings and test scores for schools in the area. Most widely discussed was the gap between grade school and higher education, with many feeling that students were unable or unmotivated to pursue college degrees. Compared to similar areas, participants noted that greater Fond du Lac has a lower level of higher education attainment.

In addition, attendees felt that retaining the area's youth, especially after college graduation is important. Residents noted that often students leaving for college do not typically return to the area and there are a variety of impacts with this trend, commonly known as "brain drain." This represents a loss of skills in the local work force and can be linked to issues of job growth and homeownership. Participants emphasized that the issue is tricky, with some elements of "chicken and the egg," where greater Fond du Lac needs to create more of the quality-of-life amenities needed to attract and retain college graduates and young professionals, but conversely, the area also needs to offer more higher-paying jobs to generate tax revenue that can support those amenities.

Creating a Destination & Identity

Many community members agreed that greater Fond du Lac lacks a clear identity, which decreases the area's appeal as a destination within Wisconsin. This concern was closely linked to business vacancies and the lack of activity within Downtown Fond du Lac and other locations. Participants highlighted the need for new signature destinations to increase activity and more completely develop the area, including entertainment uses, the creation of music, arts, and culture district, and utilization of the region's natural assets as outdoor recreation. Lake Winnebago was emphasized as an important asset that could be better utilized for tourism through entertainment and recreational uses, such as water-based sports.

Local Culture & Resistance to Change

Closely linked to the creation of a regional identity were issues regarding Fond du Lac's local culture and resistance to change. Participants stated that the area has a poor self-image which yields low expectations and creates pessimism in the community. Some participants felt the Fond du Lac area is resistant to individuals who try to change the area or make improvements, and as a result those individuals then leave and the community remains stagnant. There was also discussion that as a region, Fond du Lac can sometimes be nostalgic and defensive of its local cultural and existing practices, and therefore resistant to modeling best practices from other parts of Wisconsin and the U.S. more broadly. Some participants felt that changing this local culture was a key to establishing a more defined regional identity and opening Fond du Lac's doors to new investment.

Sustainability

Participants expressed interest in preserving the area's environmental features and introducing more sustainability measures, particularly in relation to Lake Winnebago. Manufacturing and intense uses along the Fond du Lac River were noted as a concern, as well as future development along the lakefront. Many respondents felt that greater Fond du Lac should better utilize Lake Winnebago as an asset for recreational uses and to create a destination or feature within the region. Sustainability was highlighted as a necessary element of any new

utilization of the lake, to ensure protection of the feature as a natural resource. Respondents also noted the need for increased park space and preservation of existing open space.

Priority Actions & Projects

Workshop participants were asked to list specific projects or actions that could improve the greater Fond du Lac area. Their responses provide a wide range of ideas that span from improving the river and lake fronts, to economic development, to developing and marketing Fond du Lac as a destination. All responses are listed below, and are in no particular order of importance:

Economic Development

- Recruit employers of all sizes to the area
- Attract stores and restaurants to the Forest Mall and surrounding properties
- Install beautification elements at the Forest Mall to make it an attractive place to shop
- Convert the Forest Mall into a multi-purpose or multi-use facility for sports, concerts, or conventions
- Create a lakefront boardwalk with shops and restaurants
- Create a riverfront along the Fond du Lac River including shops and restaurants
- Provide economic incentives to attract, retain, and expand businesses in the area
- Host a regular “job fair”
- Establish or fund training for the local workforce to better match employment skills to employment needs
- Encourage businesses to offer living wages
- Create a one-stop-shop for human, social, and health issues that are user-friendly
- Represent non-profits in economic development strategies
- Create an entrepreneur fund and improve access to venture capital
- Research and survey reasons why high income employees and graduates are not living in the area
- Create a citizens group to identify new businesses to attract to the area
- Start a bio-tech education outreach non-profit
- Develop a “shark tank” that helps innovative small businesses develop

Parks and Recreation

- Develop the lakefront for recreational and entertainment uses
- Develop specific sections of the lakefront, to create a focus and vision for uses
- Reinvigorate Lakeside Park for great local and regional use and maintain as open space
- Build an indoor sports complex
- Dredge the Fond du Lac River so it can be navigable
- Develop community gardens and program for schools to teach gardening and healthy cooking classes
- Reduce waste being drained into the lake, especially through regulation of mega-farms

Governmental Services

- Develop a program to more thoroughly reach out to public for input and feedback, especially those unlikely to be able to attend a meeting
- Survey infrastructure to address aging structural defects
- Improve aging infrastructure
- Ensure that one evening a week has no school or sport activities scheduled
- Create a paid position at the County level that educates the government officials issues of diversity

- Upgrade existing community facilities
- Develop a City or County managed broadband system modeled after other communities to attract businesses and provide affordable internet for residents and schools
- Strengthen partnerships and collaboration between greater Fond du Lac municipal governments, stakeholder organizations, education administrators, the businesses community, and entire community at large
- Increase police presence in neighborhoods known for crime and drug abuse
- Increase diversity of law enforcement officers
- Hold business owners, landlords, and home owners accountable for the upkeep of their properties
- Host more festivals and cultural events, with the aim of bringing the community together
- Host weekly events at parks, especially the lakefront
- Open a mental health “walk-in” clinic
- Ensure proper library maintenance

Education

- Establish a program to improve test scores and ratings of local schools
- Limit class and grade sizes for local schools
- Develop a consortium of curriculum and courses to connect students to career tracks. Tie this program into post-secondary institutions to create a pathway for career building
- Develop a program that enables parents and other adults to participate in higher education opportunities
- Develop an education program that involves parents, administrators, teachers, and students in a high value learning atmosphere that enables students to succeed
- Explore the options for better utilization of public school facilities
- Develop a county-wide teen mentoring program
- Host an education summit to learn from other community “best practices”
- Develop opportunities for technical education in middle schools
- Construct an additional high school
- Work with local institutions to make higher education opportunities available to adults
- Increase job counselling in high schools
- Develop programs to teach youth about the community and foster interest to participate

Transportation

- Expand transit to include areas of employment and areas of poverty outside Fond du Lac
- Expand public transit options
- Remove parking meters
- Increase parking options within the Downtown, including street parking
- Increase investment in road maintenance
- Repave all roads
- Increase bike access and mobility, including bike lanes throughout the City
- Develop internet applications for real-time public transit
- Build an overpass over all railroad crossings
- Increase access to mental health facilities and necessary amenities
- Install traffic cameras in areas of high traffic violations, such as the bridge on Johnson Street/Highway 23

Downtown Fond du Lac

- Develop a Downtown revitalization project which includes cultural amenities, restaurants, activities, and shopping and develop a new branding campaign
- Develop the downtown as a more walkable area
- Attract stores and restaurants to the Downtown
- Relocate businesses to the Downtown
- Provide below-market-value rent to fill Downtown buildings, slowly raising leases as business grows
- Attract a hotel to the Downtown
- Develop gardens and other beautification efforts in the Downtown
- Establish design and façade guidelines for architecture within the Downtown
- Remodel Downtown buildings to historical accuracy and recruit niche shops
- Establish a fund for future events in the Downtown

Identity

- Establish Lake Winnebago as a regional destination
- Develop a branding or promotional campaign to foster a identity for greater Fond du Lac and demonstrate local assets and amenities
- Make Fond du Lac a “community lab” to institute cutting-edge best practices
- Invest in building diversity relations and awareness
- Create a coalition of churches to address the issues regarding racial tension and embrace cultural diversity
- Require mandatory cultural diversity training or dialogue for educators, public service providers, city staff, and employers
- Develop a multi-faceted program including a diverse range of community residents and stakeholders to install greater pride and identity in the region
- Develop a media or educational campaign to break down common misconception regarding race, sexual identity, and religion
- Address issues of racial tension in education, so that students learn to be open-minded adults
- Hold open-forums to address racial tensions
- Develop programs for minority retention
- Develop museums, arts centers, music centers, or other entertainment attractions
- Build a multicultural center, performing arts center, or therapeutic aquatic center
- Beautify the region to attract new tourism, residents, and businesses
- Promote volunteerism

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. Workshop participants identified Lake Winnebago, the community’s central location within Wisconsin, its local colleges and universities, and strong work ethic as key assets to greater Fond du Lac. All assets and strengths identified in the workshop are listed below:

Services & Facilities

- YMCA
- Library

- Middle & elementary schools
- Museums
- Higher education opportunities
- Police services
- Fire services
- Bread of Life Church
- Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts

Identity & Location

- Central Wisconsin location
- Access to surrounding cities and regions
- Safe community
- Small town character
- Low cost of living
- Affordable housing
- Downtown architecture & restorations
- Community history

Natural Resources

- Local parks
- Lakeside Park & lighthouse
- Lake Winnebago
- Niagara Escarpment
- Four season climate
- Farmland
- Agriculture
- Fairgrounds

Economic Development

- Advanced manufacturing base
- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Strong network of not-for-profits

Community

- People
- Youth
- Sense of community
- Community relationships
- Volunteerism
- Strong work ethic
- Generosity in fund-raising for social needs
- Progressive thinking
- Leaders
- Public engagement

- Active religious communities
- Cultural groups
- Diversity
- Arts & music
- Walleye Weekend
- Good place to raise a family
- Healthy, physical lifestyle
- Active long-time and senior citizens