

FOND DU LAC VISION & STRATEGIC PLAN

SPAC Project Initiation & Kickoff Workshop

Thursday, December 11, 2014

On Thursday afternoon, December 11, 2014, 17 members of the Fond du Lac Strategic Plan Advisory Committee (SPAC) gathered in the St. Agnes Hospital boardroom on East Division Street to kick-off the the Vision & Strategic Plan project with the consulting team, Houseal-Lavigne Associates. The SPAC is comprised of residents, business leaders, stakeholders, and community leaders who have volunteered their time to help guide development of the Vision & Strategic Plan over the course of the next year.

Workshop participants first reviewed the scope of work and overall project approach. After establishing the logistics of the Plan's development, an informal workshop was held to discuss key policy issues facing the Fond du Lac region. The workshop included a questionnaire exercise soliciting SPAC members' views, concerns, and aspirations for the Fond du Lac region. The following is an issue-based summary of the information received during the SPAC workshop.

Issues & Concerns

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

Regional Economy

The discussion generally acknowledged that despite some major assets and existing foundations to build on, Fond du Lac also faces some prominent economic challenges. Participants noted that in an era of increased economic connectivity, Fond du Lac is somewhat isolated as a smaller metropolitan region. Challenges identified include stagnant population growth, including pockets of urban decline; brain drain and the relocation of the area's educated workforce to other regions (namely Milwaukee); an overreliance on manufacturing and traditional industries, which are shrinking; an undersupply of large, growing companies that provide new employment opportunities; an attractive but ultimately underperforming Downtown district; a struggling regional shopping mall and general lack of national chain retail destinations; and a lack of major tourist draws or well-known destinations.

A related, specific concern was that many of Fond du Lac's major employers and corporate leaders no longer live in the community, and that their decision-making could be impacted by "wallet versus heart" factors, which may ultimately not benefit the region. This is in comparison to past generations, where corporate leadership was more personally invested in the area, for example, attending the same schools and churches as their employees.

Participants further noted that many individuals who work in Fond du Lac live elsewhere, and that many of the region's residents chose to do their shopping, dining, and weekend activities in other parts of the state, such as in Appleton, Oshkosh, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee. Both trends draw resources out of the Fond du Lac region, which ultimately magnify the community's challenges. A central challenge for the planning effort is identifying strategies to slow, stop, and ultimately reverse these trends and create new investment in the Fond du Lac region.

Accessible Location: Pros & Cons

A frequent part of the discussion were the pros and cons related to Fond du Lac's location and access to quick, efficient regional travel throughout Wisconsin. Participants noted that unlike other Midwestern cities that are totally isolated, Fond du Lac can leverage its proximity to a number of markets as well as its access to major metropolitan areas like Madison and Milwaukee. Its location connects the region to amenities like large airports, hospitals, and universities, while still providing Fond du Lac with a smaller-town charm and more affordable cost of living, and participants stressed this advantage should be part of the region's marketing and branding approach.

However, discussion also acknowledged that Fond du Lac's proximity to other metropolitan areas draws potential employers, businesses, residents, consumers, and investment away from its own community. As a result, participants expressed that most other cities, such as Oshkosh, Appleton, Sheboygan, and the Milwaukee suburbs, tend to draw economic activity and people away from Fond du Lac, with very few visitors and dollars coming into Fond du Lac in return. Participants felt the planning process needs to identify strategies to better brand and promote Fond du Lac's attractions and benefits to residents within approximately a 50-75 mile radius, and more effectively connect its local economy to the larger central and southeastern Wisconsin market.

Local Culture & Resistance to Change

Many concerns were expressed about how the region views itself as well as Fond du Lac's image beyond the region. Participants stated it was very difficult to get a news crew to travel to Fond du Lac to cover positive news, and therefore residents in Oshkosh, Appleton, Sheboygan, and greater Milwaukee tend to only hear negative coverage. More locally, it was frequently cited that Fond du Lac is comfortable with the status quo and suffers from low expectations. The discussion also evaluated whether Fond du Lac has an identity crisis and knows who it is or wants to be over the next generation.

There was also discussion that as a region, Fond du Lac can be sometimes too nostalgic and defensive of its local cultural and existing practices, and therefore resistant to change. Along with being comfortable with the status quo, regional leadership can also be too risk adverse and too fiscally conservative, and some participants cited the existence of an "old guard" or "good ole boys" network that is no longer fully representative of contemporary Fond du Lac. A resistance to modeling off of best practices from other parts of Wisconsin or the nation was also noted. All of these factors were presented to express that barriers exist to first even identifying problems in the region, and then secondly developing solutions to address them in a timely manner.

Lake Winnebago

The lake was generally cited as an asset, but a number of limitations and concerns were also expressed. Participants noted that unlike other lakefront cities, Fond du Lac's Downtown and most of the neighborhoods generally lack any relationship to the lake itself. Further, participants stated that Lake Winnebago is seen as dirty and polluted and that the area's youth have little interest in visiting it. Although Lakeside Park and recent improvements were cited as community assets, there was a general feeling that the lakefront was underutilized as an opportunity and should be elevated as a point of shared regional pride. In general, participants stated that Fond du Lac needs more cultural attractions, such as museums, art galleries, and performing arts theatres, and the lakefront was cited as a potential location for those facilities.

Downtown

Downtown Fond du Lac was identified as an important part of the region that serves as the community's central gathering place. Participants all expressed a desire to see Downtown continue to redevelop and become a destination for many different types of land uses and community attractions, such as more museums and art

galleries. Developing more Downtown housing options was a frequent part of discussion, with participants agreeing that housing and full-time residents are a critical part of vibrancy and reinvestment in the district. With most of the historic architecture and urban character located south of Johnson Street (Wisconsin Route 23), Downtown lacks connectivity to the lakefront and the neighborhoods that extend north to Scott Street. Participants also noted that the local community often prefers national chains (which typically will not locate Downtown) and therefore do not support the local businesses and entrepreneurs making investments Downtown as frequently as they could.

Leadership Fatigue

The discussion stressed that Fond du Lac was very fortunate to have a number of regional institutions and community organizations that many other cities its size do not, and participants were complementary of the quality and effectiveness of many of these groups. However, participants were also concerned about “leadership fatigue,” meaning the dynamic that the same small group of individuals, organizations, and businesses were constantly being asked to help, or volunteer, or donate, and that the area’s capacity was approaching its maximum effort, despite emerging challenges in the region.

Specifics cited include that some nonprofits are struggling to locate funds, that corporate donors are not contributing as much as they used to (or there are less local companies to do so), that the region’s volunteers are being spread too thin, that private donors and benefactors are experiencing “giving fatigue,” and that local service clubs are losing membership. The primary concern is this new environment may be contributing to the creation of silos and a lack of collaborative efforts between organizations in the Fond du Lac area. Participants stressed they did not want to see an “every group for themselves” culture in Fond du Lac and want the planning process to identify partnerships and opportunities to coordinate efforts.

Public Health & Safety

Participants expressed concern over the Fond du Lac area’s public health, including general wellbeing, physical, and mental health; it was noted that the area has one of the highest rates of suicide in the State of Wisconsin. Increases in crime, recidivism rates, and growing drug addiction problems were all also cited throughout the conversation as concerns within the community. Further, participants felt there was a decline in local values and a lowering of personal standards in the community; some participants felt there was a growing sense of entitlement that was eroding the area’s traditional work ethic and entrepreneurial drive. There was concern about the schools’ and local service providers’ abilities to meet the needs of these growing problems and their resources being stretched too thin. A complex dynamic was discussed that acknowledged populations with greater income and mobility can move away from Fond du Lac, thus leaving a smaller population with less resources to address these difficult community challenges.

Accepting Diversity

Various comments addressed that while some populations are leaving Fond du Lac, the region could be more accepting of others moving into the area. Participants noted that Fond du Lac could more tolerant and accepting of diversity. But the discussion also acknowledged that attracting new people to the region needs to be one of the area’s main goals, which will ultimately mean creating a more diverse community that mirrors the trends seen in larger regions. Some participants noted this could ultimately be a community asset, providing greater multicultural activities and events to Fond du Lac and increasing the variety of things to do in the community.

Ready Workforce

The discussion addressed that economic development and employment growth has a direct relationship to local workforce demographics, ranging from the ability to recruit certain higher-end retailers and restaurants to providing employers an educated labor pool. Participants noted that the Fond du Lac area has low rate of higher educational attainment compared to other Wisconsin regions (only about 30% of residents have a college degree), and that brain drain has a negative impact on the regional economy. The discussion noted that much of the recent, local job growth has been low-wage work and those jobs represent a large percentage of the region's employment. Some participants noted there could be improved coordination between the local high schools and colleges, and that specialty curriculum could be aligned with job skill needs reported by major employers.

Even in the case of employment based in Fond du Lac, many of those college-educated individuals live elsewhere and commute into the community. The effect is that income leaves the region and goes to property taxes, retail sales, and community organizations elsewhere in Wisconsin. Even if those jobs are filled by Fond du Lac natives, many of them end up working here and living somewhere else, because it is often easier to locate employment for their spouse elsewhere. The discussion acknowledged this was a "chicken and egg" type of problem, where it is challenging to recruit new employers to the area because of the lack of an educated workforce, but then the community also struggles to retain that population because of the lack of existing opportunities in Fond du Lac today.

Ranking the Top Issue

Participants were then asked to vote on which of these issues they felt was the most important priority to address. The list of most commonly cited issues is:

- Brain drain from the region and the lack of college graduates living in the Fond du Lac area;
- The region's high percentage of low wage jobs compared to the total workforce;
- The region's lack of economic diversity and the overreliance on manufacturing;
- The region's low self-image of Fond du Lac;
- The need for a marketing and branding effort that promotes Fond du Lac to a larger market; and
- The local culture's acceptance of the status quo.

Priority Actions & Projects

Workshop participants were asked to list specific projects or actions that could improve the Fond du Lac region. The answers provided cover a diverse array of actions that range from improving the river and lake fronts to economic development to developing and marketing Fond du Lac as a destination. The responses, in no particular order, are listed below:

- Free WiFi as a public service
- A "warchest" of resources for economic development efforts
- Programs to enhance community pride, such as beautification projects
- More Downtown housing
- Commercial development and destination businesses on the lakefront
- A new, large corporate employer
- A major Downtown theatre and/or sports center
- Investments that would make Fond du Lac a destination
- A marketing campaign that created consistency across all Fond du Lac stakeholders

- Improvements to the lakefront
- Seed dollars for new venture startups
- Improvements to the riverfront to create a consistent experience from the YMCA to the lake
- Build a youth sports destination, something like the Fond du Lac Blue Line “on steroids”

Community Strengths & Assets

For the final question, workshop participants were asked to list Fond du Lac’s strengths and existing assets. The responses are alphabetically listed below:

- **Agriculture.** Fond du Lac County and “The Holyland” are located within a historically German-settled agricultural region, and “ag” still plays an important role in the region’s economy; the potential for business development from this sector is still important to the area.
- **Cooperation.** Fond du Lac’s many organizations have a history of working cooperatively and a willingness to solve problems together.
- **Deep Roots.** Fond du Lac has a rich history and many of its “heritage families” share deep roots in the region; children frequently move away but then return to the area, and many individuals are emotionally and financially committed to seeing the region succeed.
- **Education.** Fond du Lac is unique in having multiple high-quality local public and private schools, as well as three college campuses in the community; local students are prepared for college or the workforce, and the colleges bring students from other areas into Fond du Lac.
- **Family-Oriented.** Fond du Lac is an attractive community for families and to raise children; Fond du Lac offers a lot of local kid-friendly amenities, along with great youth sports, schools, and housing affordability; but, larger cities like Milwaukee are still accessible when residents want them.
- **Location.** Fond du Lac is 60 minutes from everywhere, and access to Oshkosh, the Fox Valley, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee is generally a positive (although the proximity carries some negatives too).
- **Manufacturing.** Fond du Lac is still a major manufacturing center and those businesses provide a lot of economic activity for the region; although such industries are declining, the potential for technology and innovation related to the manufacturing sector exists in the area.
- **Mercury Marine.** The company’s headquarters is a major asset to the community not only as an employer and taxpayer but through a variety of indirect impact ways too; without Mercury, Fond du Lac’s challenges would be significantly magnified.
- **Midwest Values.** From its Midwestern work ethic to its traditional, Wisconsin family values, Fond du Lac maintains a strong sense of community where people care about and help each other out; an example was given of charitable donations to a family when a child was recently hit by a car.
- **The Arts.** For a region its size, Fond du Lac offers a lot of performing and creative arts opportunities, particularly for children.