Development is helping revitalize Evansville’s riverfront and downtown areas.
Evansville was incorporated in 1819. For many of the ensuing years, commerce along the Ohio River was the driving economic force. One of the characteristics, however, that distinguishes Evansville from other river communities is the dramatic U-bend in the Ohio that shifts its direction from east-west to north-south.

Just as boats and ships have long navigated that change in course in a place nicknamed "River City," Evansville is successfully redefining its community. And what better area to focus on than the river and downtown – anchors of strong growth in business, recreation and culture.

"The river is why Evansville is where it is," notes Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel, elected in November 2003 after serving as a state representative. "It’s a wonderful natural asset."

The revitalization is not limited to the downtown area. Traditional business stalwarts in manufacturing, plastics and other industries are located throughout Evansville and augmented by a retail stronghold on the east side of the city. A diverse and growing higher education community is present, along with recreational facilities and programs that enhance the quality of life for all.

Public and private sector leaders are working together within the city, in Vanderburgh County and on a regional basis. Progress through partnerships is paving the way for Evansville’s future.

Down by the river

With Evansville’s nautical history and heritage, it should be no surprise that a boat played a major role in the recent success. Casino Aztar was Indiana’s first riverboat in 1995, bringing gaming recreation and related business, as well as all-important tax revenues, to the community.

Mike Schopmeyer, a local attorney and chairman of the Metropolitan Evansville Chamber of Commerce in 2006, recalls that the site was “pretty much a dump” prior to the Aztar arrival. “You have to look to the riverboat as being the sparkplug.”

Funding generated by the riverboat paved the way for many community projects. Abatement and tax increment financing programs were also utilized to supplement substantial private sector investment.

Marco DeLucio, also an attorney and the incoming chairman of the local chamber, says the boat “provided the impetus for people to come downtown. Schopmeyer adds that few people realize that a riverboat “brings as many people into a city to spend money as a pro football franchise.”

Bus tours, often from the south, now make daily stops in Evansville.

Casino Aztar is adding to its existing facility with a $40 million entertainment complex expansion. It includes a luxury boutique hotel and various dining and entertainment venues. The direct and indirect economic benefits will be significant.

Another key economic boost in the mid-1990s came from construction of the Toyota plant in neighboring Gibson County. Schopmeyer points out that Evansville is surrounded by major industrial employers – Alcoa and AK Steel to the east, General Electric in Mount Vernon, Toyota to the north and Henderson, Kentucky’s agriculture processing facilities across the river. Many of the employees of those companies live in Evansville and spend their money in the city.

DeLucio notes that Toyota’s arrival “may have been the initial step toward more regionalized thinking.” Bob Koch, president and CEO of Koch Enterprises and the Indiana Chamber’s 2000 Business Leader of the Year, says Toyota’s presence allowed the region to realize a net gain of manufacturing jobs when many others were suffering significant losses.

Downtown menu

What else is going on in downtown Evansville, you ask? Here’s a sampling:

• The new Children’s Museum of Evansville located in the redeveloped historic library.

Community of the Year Winners

2005: LaPorte
2004: Muncie
2003: Warsaw
2002: Marion
2001: Greater Lafayette
2000: Jeffersonville
1999: Fort Wayne
1998: Rochester
1997: Batesville
1996: Elkhart
1995: Indianapolis
1994: Kendallville
1993: St. Joseph County
1992: Columbus
1991: Muncie
1990: Bluffton

By Tom Schuman
Weinzapfel says this is an excellent example of government and business working together. “The public sector provided the direction and the corporate community provided the muscle to get it done.”

- The LST-325 Historical Floating Museum. The LST-325 is the last of 167 World War II vessels assembled in Evansville. The newly constructed docking space for the museum can also house the Delta Queen steamboats and other river crafts. An alliance is in place to help coordinate the efforts of five museums.
- Greenways and walking paths that allow for easy pedestrian access and activity.
- Business growth. Distinctive new corporate headquarters for Vectren and Old National Bank are community

An artist’s rendering shows a portion of the Casino Aztar entertainment complex — including a Ri Ra Irish pub and Jillian’s, which are now open for business.

The LST-325 now calls Evansville home and serves as a museum for the World War II ships that were built in the city.

Proud to be a part of the Evansville community for over 150 years.

Your UNIVERSITY OF EVANSVILLE

www.evansville.edu

Ranked First as Best Value among Midwestern Universities by U.S. News & World Report’s America’s Best Colleges

1800 Lincoln Avenue
Evansville, Indiana 47722
symbols as well as major employers. They are accompanied by, among others, a new facility and expansion at American General Finance and the start-up Evansville Commerce Bank.

• Additional housing opportunities. The city provided matching grants to existing business owners for renovations to vacant upper floors. That spurred additional development with a new project (Renaissance on Main) bringing condominiums to an old J.C. Penney store that had been empty for approximately 25 years.

• With more business and people comes the need for improved traffic flow. Access from both the northern gateway and the riverfront is limited by too many one-way streets and a lack of interchanges.

“We want to see more people living in the downtown area, and we have to make it more convenient for them to get in and out of downtown Evansville,” Weinzapfel comments. “Our downtown is our identity, the heart of the city. In any city in the United States if the downtown is failing, it sends a perception that the rest of the community is failing.”

While the riverfront has evolved to a recreational and aesthetic asset, the mayor points to additional business opportunities. A River Commercialization Advisory Board will examine the possible relocation of existing companies in an industrial corridor along the river.

"St. Mary’s is proud to be part of Indiana’s NUMBER ONE community."

“Our ADVANCED CARE reflects the spirit of Evansville.”
Timothy Flesch
Chief Executive Officer
Healing BODY, MIND and SPIRIT.
www.stmarys.org
Physician Referral Service
1-812-485-4DOC
(1-812-485-4362)

“St. Mary’s is proud to be part of Indiana’s NUMBER ONE community.”

“It’s people caring about people that sets Evansville apart. It’s the same philosophy that makes St. Mary’s the Advanced Care Hospital. It’s our faith-based mission, outstanding physicians, a dedicated staff of nurses, technicians, therapists and support people, and, of course, leading-edge technology and medical procedures. Together, they give our patients and their families a total, positive healing experience, just as the positive qualities about our community make it the Indiana Chamber of Commerce 2006 Community of the Year.

Congratulations to our city and all our citizens. YOU are NUMBER ONE at St. Mary’s Advanced Care Hospital.”

Swonder Ice Arena is home to university and youth activities.

Around the city
The community efforts extend beyond downtown. Plus, the focus is on helping all residents enjoy a higher quality of life.

Front Door Pride is a neighborhood revitalization program that combines a state grant with funding from local financial institutions. Through mid-2006, the city had acquired 120
vacant or neglected properties in need of demolition or rehabilitation. Work on refurbishing the homes, or turning the land over to developers for new housing opportunities, will begin soon.

The Goebel Soccer Complex and Dunigan Family YMCA were developed through a mix of community funding and private sector support. In addition to athletic and fitness opportunities for area residents, Goebel hosts various state and regional tournaments that bring out-of-town guests to the city. Hockey and ice skating enthusiasts also have a home in the Swonder Ice Arena, renovated and dedicated in 2002.

The Healthier Evansville program includes information on physical fitness, nutrition, prevention and healthy choices. It is organized by the School-Community Council, striving to create a stronger environment for student success. In addition, the Evansville Education Roundtable (another collaboration of...
Higher education is a strong point with the tradition of the University of Evansville, one of the state’s fastest growing public colleges in the University of Southern Indiana and an Ivy Tech Community College campus that is undergoing a $38 million expansion and renovation.

Roseann Young, chief of staff for Weinzapfel, points out that the business community has once again been a strong supporter (providing almost $2 million for state-of-the-art equipment and technology) of Ivy Tech. “Business leaders realize a variety of education options are needed.”

Koch, a longtime business and community stalwart, says education, in his opinion, must continue to be a leading community initiative in future years. He adds not to forget the success of the Signature School on the north end of downtown, which “brings in 300 students with their parents” to shop and utilize other businesses on a daily basis.

Taking the team approach
Evansville has been at the forefront on government reorganization. Business leaders once again paved the way for multi-year efforts that helped lead to House Bill 1362, which allows local control in determining the best government structure to efficiently meet today’s needs for services.

With the legislation in place, DeLucio says a new study group will be formed to move the reorganization forward.

The city and county are already working together in a number of areas, Weinzapfel reports, with a current focus on locating various organizations together. The goals include assisting with downtown development, providing entrepreneurial services and establishing a high-tech incubator.

Cheryl Musgrave, Vanderburgh County Commission president, points to combined city-county economic development efforts as a starting point. And while she lives in downtown Evansville and is a huge proponent of the area, she says the east side of the city has “just exploded the last 10 years” in retail development. Extending an existing roadway will open up additional development opportunities.

“We’re not in competition with the city. There are businesses that just can’t fit into downtown. Sometimes there is difficulty in putting together parcels of land,” Musgrave states. “Cross Pointe Boulevard is becoming another downtown of sorts. It’s geographically between Newburgh and downtown Evansville, and it offers the advantage of all the cross-traffic.”

Cooperation has been extended to a four-county region...
The coalition, according to Musgrave, has “brought a lot of people to the table, many who have been there before and some new faces as well.” She credits area companies for their work. “The business community has put its money on the table (including a majority of the funding for the coalition) and given their best, most talented executives the time to work on these issues.”

Koch says that CEOs of larger companies began meeting a number of years ago as the Evansville Regional Business Committee. Such unified approaches, he adds, are essential to sustained progress. That type of effort will be needed to make a downtown sports venue (first explored several years ago) a reality. “That could be a huge catalyst for further development.”

Positive attitudes

Business opportunities will also be realized with the long-awaited construction and completion of Interstate 69 between Indianapolis and Evansville, part of an extension of the roadway from Michigan to Texas. This has been a leading priority of the Evansville chamber for 20 years and an issue the community has battled together for an even longer period.

The local chamber has also been a catalyst in organizing community visits the last two years, with bus trips to Nashville and Lexington offering the opportunity to learn from others, as well as bringing area leaders closer together.

“We know every day that our friends and competitors are working hard to make their communities more attractive,” explains Matt Meadors, chamber president and CEO. “Not only do we want to compete, we want to compete very vigorously.”

Weinzapfel states that the political and business communities have worked together to “chart the course of the city.” DeLucio adds that “people are talking to each other” with the end result revealed in results and attitudes.

“People are believing,” Young offers. “The downtown is moving. It is going to become a downtown to be most proud of. Everything is converging together and everyone is very committed to pursuing that collaborative effort. They see that each one of our successes is all our successes.”

Meadors is even more enthusiastic. “It is about vision and people and leadership. Folks here feel like we can do this, make this into a truly special place.”

Among the recent downtown additions is the Children’s Museum of Evansville.

(Vanderburgh, Warrick, Gibson and Posey) with the creation of the Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana. Weinzapfel, co-chair of the new group’s board of directors, says this was one of his top priorities upon taking office.

“We’ve had a lot of different organization devoted to economic development working in their own silos,” the mayor contends. “We were not working together as a region. This is a chance to refocus our efforts. It is a direction successful communities are moving,”