

Coming Full Circle

Downtown Revitalization Key to Growth

By Symone Salisbury

Build it – or in some cases rebuild – and they will come from near and far. That’s a philosophy Wabash officials believe in as they emphasize historic preservation and downtown revitalization.

The Wabash County seat doesn’t have immediate interstate access, but proximity to U.S. 24, U.S. 31 and Interstate 69 puts cities such as Fort Wayne (50 miles), South Bend (80) and Indianapolis (90) within easy driving distance. Although it pales in size (approximately 11,000 people in the city and nearly 33,000 in the county) to those metro areas, unique attractions are already in place for local residents and visitors with more on the way.

“Our goal is to bring downtown Wabash back to life the way some of us remember as a hustling, bustling place before a bunch of retail stores moved out to shopping malls,” reveals Jim Ridenour, on the board of directors of the Charley Creek Foundation, which is overseeing several downtown initiatives.

Among them are the Wabash County Historical Museum (read more in the Indiana’s Leader story on Page 75), new \$9-million plus YMCA, restoration of the former Red Apple Inn and riverwalk extension. Additional area developments include:

- An entrepreneurial program promoting business growth in conjunction with the Honeywell Center, a performing arts and conference facility that attracts more than 150,000 annual visitors
- Manufacturing continuing to play an important role with two new ethanol plants and an agri-industrial park
- Living Essentials, a Michigan-based manufacturer of the 5-Hour Energy Drink, relocating its national distribution center to Wabash

The Honeywell Center provides a wide range of events for residents and visitors. Its Educational Outreach Program fosters arts appreciation through a variety of activities, including fun-filled festivals.



Housing the arts

The Honeywell Center provides the backdrop for a variety of arts events ranging from concerts featuring award-winning musicians to comedic performances and educational youth programs.

Wabash-born businessman Mark C. Honeywell established the facility as a youth center in 1940, but it wasn’t completed until 1952 due to the scarcity of building materials during World War II. He gained international fame by co-founding Honeywell Inc. and making innovations in the hot water heating industry.

As the Honeywell Center increased its arts emphasis, Ford Theatre (which seats 1,500) was added to replace an in-house gymnasium as the site for performances.

Today, the 120,000-square-foot Honeywell Center hosts approximately 2,500 events each year.

In addition, the Center holds numerous wedding receptions, holiday parties and corporate meetings, and implemented an educational outreach program. Students from school districts in eight counties participate in creative writing workshops, in-school residencies, culinary internships, bus-in theater performances and more.

“Of our ticket buyers, over 70% come from outside the county and we expect that number to grow through the years,” executive director Tod Minnich contends. “It’s a really special asset for the community. Almost all other communities

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of our size lack this amenity.”

When considering cross-promotional opportunities with other downtown venues, he observes, “We’re always trying to add the second experience onto the first. Very few things import capital into the community, so we’re working hard to provide cultural assets downtown to bring tourism dollars into town.”

Make way for the YMCA

In the 1940s, Wabash Community Service began operating out of the Honeywell Center. Prompted by growth, it renamed itself the Wabash County YMCA in 2001 and began raising money to build its own facility.

Construction on a new 75,000-square-foot building broke ground in December and will conclude in spring 2009. Amenities will feature two swimming pools (including a six-lane competition pool), three gymnasiums (with one designed for indoor tennis and soccer), children’s activity area and a 4,000-square-foot fitness center with an indoor running track.

In addition, the YMCA will lease space to The Rehab Place, Wabash County Hospital’s physical therapy and sports medicine center. Individuals also will be able to attend classes such as karate, Pilates and yoga.

Commenting on the YMCA’s close proximity to the Honeywell Center, a recently completed skate park and still under-construction bike park, executive director Julie Echard proclaims, “We want this to become the place where everyone wants to be, and I think that will happen. It will be the quadrant of the city where kids want to hang out.”

Hotel renovation

Built in the 1930s, the former Red Apple Inn is getting a makeover. Restoration has already begun on the yet to be renamed building, which is slated for completion in 2009. It will offer residential, retail and hotel space.

“It (the post-restoration hotel) will far exceed anything we have in our community at the present time,” Ridenour declares. One goal is to provide lodging for Honeywell Center patrons and additional revenue by establishing businesses within the hotel.

“On the outside we’re going for a historic restoration to bring it back to the beauty it had when it was originally built,” Ridenour explains. “We’ve done our demolition on the inside, and we’ll completely rewire the infrastructure from scratch.”

The building will feature luxury 1,200-square-foot apartments, conference space and retail shops. Further, Ridenour wants to attract a restaurant with a “cocktail lounge theme” and a sports bar. In addition, the grand ballroom will be restored.

Native Indiana plants will adorn the hotels “green”



Following renovation, the former Red Apple Inn will offer modern conveniences to guests while retaining a historic feel.

rooftop. Also on the rooftop will be what Ridenour refers to as “a party room” accommodating up to 80 people with views of the courthouse and church below.

“We would have outdoor cooking facilities out there for them,” he says, “so if they want to cook a steak and have a meal in the evening, it would be a nice social gathering place.”

Walk in the park

The \$1.2 million riverwalk extension is another element of the downtown revitalization plan. Currently, the half-mile trail starts at the corner of Market and Allen streets at Paradise Spring Historical Park, site of a United States

peace treaty with the Potawatomi and Miami Indians in 1826.

Once lengthened, the riverwalk will begin at Huntington Street, wind under the Wabash Street bridge and reach the Carroll Street bridge.

“We have plans beyond that to expand the trail both directions, east (toward Lagro and eventually Huntington) and west (toward Peru),” Ridenour notes. “That’s all part of the state’s master plan for the government trail system.”

Elephants and espresso

Modoc’s Market derived its name from a feisty elephant named Modoc that escaped from the circus in the 1940s and embarked on a weeklong tour of Wabash and Huntington counties. Her adventures set the fun, lighthearted tone at her namesake café.

Customers can order coffee at the espresso bar, purchase baked items and homemade candy, or shop at Modoc’s small grocery. Owners Mike and Angie Beauchamp (who opened the business in 2003) also lease executive apartments on the building’s



Modoc’s Market attracts customers with its coffee bar, grocery section and tributes to the circus elephant that inspired its name.

top two floors to residential and commercial tenants.

With its prime location in the downtown historic district, Modoc's is positioned for additional growth as revitalization continues. One project the Beauchamps are excited about is the new YMCA.

"We can't wait to see what it will bring to the community," declares Angie, a member of the board of directors. "We're (also) anticipating what that might mean to us (as business owners)."

In addition to his role at Modoc's, Mike is the third generation owner of another downtown business: insurance agency Beauchamp & McSpadden. He has been impressed with changes in the town during his 30 years with the insurance agency.

He maintains that no small part of that progress has been community members' positive attitudes.

"Pessimism doesn't build bridges," he stresses. "Pessimism doesn't build a Honeywell Center, a museum, a YMCA or all the other things going on here."

Offsetting manufacturing setbacks

Bill Konyha, president and chief executive officer of the Wabash Economic Development Group, asserts that although Wabash has experienced manufacturing challenges in recent years (such as the November 2007 closing of the GDx Automotive plant, which produced sealing systems and glass encapsulation products), the outlook isn't as bleak as some may think.

While acknowledging the significance of the 800 job losses brought about by the demise of GDx, he remarks that the closure "really was not all that unanticipated."

"What happens is when one (plant) closes and two or three are sold, it begins to develop a local psychology that our economy is slipping even further away," he states. "The fact of the matter is that we have suffered some losses, but we have enjoyed some successes. All of these acquisitions are not necessarily bad news."

For example, Aleris International purchased Wabash Alloys (manufacturer of aluminum casting alloys and molten metal) in 2007, but already operated a Wabash facility. Konyha emphasizes that "there was no reason for them to run two administrative staff in the same community" adding that it has "invested money (into the community). We think opportunities exist for them to expand and create economic opportunities.

"From our standpoint, we didn't have locally owned businesses being sold," he continues, citing Thermafiber's sale (see Page 82 for more on the company) between two private equity firms and the purchase of the Hayes Lemmerz Wabash plant by Harvey Industries. "They were owned by entities that didn't live here and sold to other entities that didn't live here."

As for Living Essentials, the manufacturer that recently set up shop in Wabash, Konyha notes, "They've already begun distribution,



A mural at the Honeywell Center illustrates pride in former residents who have gained fame on national and international stages.

and we have the opportunity to help them grow beyond what the original intention was."

Ethanol plants

Through a partnership with Wabash AgriProducts, a 220-acre agri-industrial park (including an ethanol facility) in LaFontaine was scheduled to break ground in April.

"We would like to continue to attract ag-related enterprises," Konyha suggests. "It will help us put some factory workers to work while providing extra

income to our ag people and capitalize on those two strengths of ours (agriculture and manufacturing)." Potential tenants include milk bottling or cheese plants.

Poet Biorefinery, another ethanol plant, will begin operating in North Manchester later this year.

Landing the ethanol plants, he maintains, "was a giant step in helping everyone understand the synergies that exist between industry and agriculture."

Rewarding downtown investment

The Entrepreneurial Development Program (EDP) is open to all of Wabash County, but only individuals starting businesses in Wabash's downtown district receive working capital loan guarantees upon approval of a business plan.

According to Konyha, "We have the opportunity to export this to North Manchester but instead of using the Honeywell Center as a focus, we have Manchester College, which also attracts thousands of people each year."

Instruction revolves around 10-week business planning courses led by the Small Business Development Center. That is followed by ongoing counseling. Funding includes a \$100,000 rural capacity grant from the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs and contributions from a number of local organizations.

The first round of participants graduated in December.

"We need to repopulate our downtown district with galleries, boutiques and entertainment," Konyha asserts. "We're hopeful it will provide us with the movement we need to reoccupy downtown."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: **Tod Minnich, Honeywell Center, at (260) 563-1102 or www.honeywellcenter.org**

Julie Echard, YMCA, at (260) 563-9622 or www.wabashcountyyymca.org

Jim Ridenhour, Charley Creek Foundation, at (260) 563-6356

Bill Konyha, Economic Development Group of Wabash County, at (260) 563-5258 or www.edgwc.com

Angie and Mike Beauchamp, Modoc's Market, at (260) 569-1281 or www.modocsmarket.com