

Downtown important to Janesville's future: Consultant

By Jim Leute

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JANESVILLE—A revitalized downtown Janesville that embraces the Rock River is essential for a community facing an economic future challenged by an aging workforce and the business recruitment and retention issues that go with it, a consultant said Thursday.

That was one of the messages from David Schreiber, the luncheon speaker who kicked off the Rock Regional Business Expo in Janesville on Thursday.

Schreiber is owner of SAA, a Madison-based urban planning, landscape architecture and civil engineering firm.

Schreiber has been working with the city for 10 months on its latest downtown redevelopment plan.

The plan, which has circulated at a series of public meetings and again at Thursday's luncheon, is a visionary approach that's heavy on green space, public areas and river access in a swath of downtown that runs from Racine Street to Traxler Park.

The city council is expected to take formal action on the plan later this year.

It includes a variety of specific projects that could be done over a five- to 20-year period. Examples include a festival street, a pedestrian bridge, a marina, a kayak river course, a civic building and private redevelopment of existing properties.

A key component is the Rock River, which Schreiber and a parade of planners many years before him said should be embraced.

The city, Schreiber said, has an opportunity in being forced to remove the parking deck between Milwaukee and Court streets.

“Something has to be done with that space,” he said. “You've got to think bold.

“The river is not something to fear.”

Schreiber said the city has two options: rip out the parking plaza and patch in the river walls as best it can or instead create a welcoming area that invites river access with green space, a pedestrian bridge and river overhangs.

He said the downtown could become a series of connected gathering places that people would want to visit often.

“People will go there because they want to be there, and when they are there, they will have expectations of the business community,” he said.

“Downtown Janesville needs to be a cool place.”

That's a must if the community is to draw younger residents who will work at thriving area businesses, he said.

Schreiber acknowledged that the city has been down the downtown redevelopment path many times before.

It's a challenging proposition, he said, but many other communities in Wisconsin have turned their downtowns around and are thriving because of it.

“The question is always, 'How do we get there?'" Schreiber said. “It takes commitment, money and persistence.”

The commitment, he said, needs to come from a strong public-private partnership with the will to get the project done.

The money part of the project is even more challenging, he said.

“It takes money, but it's not money falsely invested into a black hole,” he said. “There is plenty of precedent that there are returns to be had.”

“As for persistence, you just have to keep going at it and going at it and going at it.”

Community involvement is critical, he said.

Not because the city's staff or a handful of private developers say so, but because the community members truly share the vision, he said.

Such a project also requires lots of time.

“It may take five years to see something, then five to 10 to see it pick up,” he said. “It may be 10 or 15 years before it really gets going and then usually, after about the 15th year, you see it start to replicate itself.

“... If you're going to hold people to a community, this is a way to do it.”