

Idea Lounge X: The Urban Battle October 28, 2009

The following are comments from the featured panelists and audience members who attended the discussion:

Shift from Suburban living: Demographics from the last 8 years

- City of Eau Claire has additional 3500 people in the last 8 years,
- Eau Claire County increased 4900 people,
- Chippewa County increased 5200 people
- Greater Eau Claire Area: Total 10,000 people; accounts for 4% of Wisconsin's overall growth

Why do people live where they do? (various comments)

Families with kids want to be in the country, trying to get out of the city, middle aged families built out in the country. Downtown is nice, but people want to live in the country. American dream was the suburb - desire for larger lots.

Keep in mind that immigrants are used to different patterns of settlement – higher density.

Living near where you work combats lost productivity and lost income – money that had to be spent on fuel, but also time saved allows for hobbies, etc...

Families and doctors want to be closer to work, there is different demographic.

There are 5 reasons people choose to live downtown:

Accessibility

Access to public transport

Cultural amenities – museums restaurant art studios

Jobs

Variety of housing – reused older buildings, special choices, loft apartments that aren't available anywhere else.

We only have 2: quality of housing, amenities of nature, farmer's market.

We have to leverage what we have; City Council has made decisions to save money on downtown development such as cutting the DECI budget and the restroom facilities at Phoenix Park. The new housing development in Phoenix Park will reimburse in three year's taxes to pay for the restrooms. Housing is important, can't fix the access problems. We have to talk up downtown, especially to the City Council, it is one of the things that council should use to get out of the financial slump it is in now. Use downtown and exploit it, rather than cut it from the budget and ignore it.

One gentleman came to Eau Claire for a manufacturing job and found it difficult to live downtown because of the lack of connections (access). There are no parks on the west side. Manufacturing is well executed, but there isn't housing for the employees to go along with it. Design living closer to the industrial parks for those who want to live close to where they work.

One person was interested in relocating their family downtown – go to restaurants, farmers market, but lacking family friendly living. Have children that use the parks and the river. There is more energy and more things to do, more of a family adventure to be out and about.

Who are the people who build in suburbs? Most of the people want a big yard, family of 2-4 kids, wouldn't think of living downtown. Also, due to economics, it would be hard to find nice housing downtown that would be affordable.

Medical community transferring to Eau Claire is mostly doctors. They make a tour of the city and choose Eau Claire because they have families.

Thoughts on condos in Eau Claire:

The old Boyd School was redone into successful condos. The Waterford is a good example of a project that didn't go because of the market. Waterford not well thought out. They needed to single out affluent people interested in living downtown. Waterford would have worked great if it was downtown.

The cultural center is downtown, the theater is downtown, the rivers, parks, university, there is so much downtown, Farmer's Market. It is important to get condominiums, renters and owners are two different groups, it is important to have both mixes downtown.

Neighborhood just North of Madison Street and east of the river is ripe for revival. Parts of North and West side and Third Ward are ripe for renewal, and redevelopment. When talking about downtown, we need to expand the geography to include surrounding neighborhoods to keep them vital.

Thoughts on crime:

Publication of crime demographics shows N Barstow as high crime area, that perception has deterred people from wanting to retire downtown. Currently, one of Dr. Weichel's classes is doing a study on crime related to location in Eau Claire. Crime may be perceived as greater than it really is.

Want to be somewhere safe where children can run around. Feeling unsafe might only be perception. It is more about creating a sense of place; knowing where we are from. We've seen cities across the United States that look exactly the same. Jane Jacobs wrote a lot about US cities and spoke of having "eyes on the street." By increasing the population in an area, you have the ability to monitor more of what is going on. More people are watching. Another option: hire security guards. A lot of it is perception when it comes to how safe the downtown area is.

Also need to keep in mind that newspapers print what people will read. It may not be an accurate representation of what is actually occurring.

Does your carbon footprint or the desire to save energy play a part in where people choose to live?

There are cities all across the world that have made a decision to limit automobile access – great blog at cooltown.com – creativity, usability and the type of synergy that's being created. See Madison for an example. Once you have made everything pedestrian friendly, the people will come.

The City of Eau Claire has green team, which is a sustainability effort through the city. They are waiting for Copenhagen treaty that will replace Kyoto protocol before making city wide decisions.

Carbon footprint lacks accountability. We are in an energy descent mode – energy is going to be less available.

This is the place we live work and play, we don't have to use a car, we can work, walk, ride bikes. It's typically known for a lot of older homes which buildings are not energy safe. Homes are getting assessed by Focus on Energy – there are parks downtown that make up for not having a yard.

Estonia and Lithuania municipalities have government owned enterprises making a lot of money in this cap and trade.

What the City is doing: 25 by 25 – 25% renewable energy by 2025. \$200,000 is saved every year by using methane from solid waste at wastewater treatment plant.

Ideas for city – city has the most inspectors, yet are the only area that doesn't do insulation inspections.

Questioned if there are zoning restrictions for putting up solar panels or wind conversion systems- these are allowed by conditional use permit to make sure it is not affecting other properties. It is also necessary to do site assessment for solar power.

Address Land usage. Need stronger zoning rules. Need higher property taxes on the outskirts than on the city center, to discount the living, because it is cheaper to provide services. Plan unit development districts. Compact type development hasn't been used by developers.

Why doesn't the city allow commercial within residential neighborhoods anymore? This becomes a problem when driving. East side hill where corner houses used to be butcher market, etc. These types of stores are not economically feasible. People now drive to Walmart and Target and the small shops can't survive. There is a failure to find out what people are willing to spend.

There could be an Ideas competition for a city urban design to make a better use of the rivers.