



Wednesday, January 10th, 2007 at 8:57 am

[Downtown retail: struggling, thriving, searching](#)

By Griff Wigley



[Yesterday's NDDC downtown forum](#) focused on the state of retailing downtown.

Anne Bretts, managing editor at N.org, has blogged about it: [What would lure you downtown?](#) (It's an opinion piece, with an invitation to start a discussion.)

Ray Cox has blogged about it on his citizen blog: [Business, taxes and ???](#) and his Northfield Construction blog: [A strong downtown](#).

Ross Currier has blogged about it: [Building and Business Owners Discuss Downtown Issues](#). Ross emailed me this additional reaction:

We were all surprised by how many people turned out. I guess that the Forum lived up to its premise, that beneath the bright surface of downtown, there are some serious structural challenges. The fact that over 50 people showed up on short notice, early in the morning, to talk about these issues makes me believe that folks really value downtown.

During the hours following the Forum I received a half dozen phone calls and e-mails from building and business owners that suggested that we have coffee. I think that such a large gathering may not be the best environment for sharing intimate economic details but it certainly seems to have touched on an important topic and triggered a reinvigorated discussion. Based on the calls and messages that I received, it appears that these folks are not only willing to talk but willing to commit to work to implement ideas to achieve tangible results in the next 12 months.

1

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:
January 10th, 2007 at 11:09 pm

So what is next.? Anne Bretts suggested opening up an on-line forum. Is it better on-line or in person?. A sort of strategic planning forum could help I believe, as long as we find a skilled moderator who can keep the conversation at a high level. It seems to me that there is a big picture view missing in a lot of the conversations, as well as a city-wide vision to bring clarity to how each of the main components of the city's components fit into a larger vision.

I would like to pose a series of questions, and see if it helps. In answering them, could you keep details out, can we craft a visionary picture without the details.?

1 - What is the city's vision of how it wants to be positioned within the global economy.? What is the strategic positioning according to its assets (a high tech factory, a manufacturing region, a great destination for people from around the world?). Don't quote the TIPS plan though, we already know (or should know) what it says. Tell it according to your vision.

2 - What is the city's, and specially downtown's strategy to assembly a mix of local attractions and businesses that can be marketed to this very large market (aside from the TIPS plan).

3 – How do Northfield's DT compete with the other DT's in our region, what is the business strategy to set it apart and make it the best choice to spend the evening and money? For example, the colleges define a lot of Northfield in a large way and represent a connection to the world (is it 130 or 140 countries that are represented?). How are these assets currently managed to maximize the \$'s that they can bring to the city from around the world?. Should we be a place for foreign dignitaries to arrange their meetings in the U.S.? we seem to have things they would like?.

5 - Knowing what defines the city (colleges, downtown, ?) how is the city planning and systems aligned to generate the conditions for people and specially businesses to thrive. Are we strategically and competitively positioned and known as the friendliest, easier, faster, cheaper, and most welcoming place to do business (not a lofty goal for any city in the world, it is actually a necessity to survive in a global market).

We also know that Northfield is a very safe city, has a very competitive environment, a healthy employment rate, an educated work-force and lack of monopolies. All things considered, there is room for many businesses to be launched.

As you business planners out there would know, there are many other questions that need to be answered for a comprehensive citizen's plan to emerge, but the ones above could be an interesting place to start and maybe then we can see the clear picture for our downtown. Are there other big picture questions that need to be asked without creating another or duplicating the comprehensive plan?

I am very interested in this topic, specially as I look into how to fit a Latino Enterprise Center within the long-term vision of the city, and as I look into assembling networks and partnerships that will allow me to accomplish such a goal I need your feedback on the questions posed above just as much as any regular business person would.

I am eager for your comments, personally, if we keep the conversation at a high level for a while, I can use a lot of your input as I continue to look how should the Latino community in Northfield develop. I would like to get a picture of what our position and participation should be 20 years from now within the city leadership, business ownership, economic influence, etc.

I know this is a loaded issue, I know there will be individuals who may wonder who the ?? is this guy to ask these questions. Look at it this way, I am a business person, I want to be successful in this city, I am still trying to get a clear picture future of where the city is being led. I want to see how best I fit in it, and most importantly, I depend on the city being successful (specially downtown), for me to ensure my own success as I am sure it is for all or most of you out there trying to run a business in town.

Reginaldo.

[2](#)

[Griff Wigley](#) says:

January 10th, 2007 at 11:59 pm

Reginaldo, I'm about to head to bed but I did want to react to your first paragraph:

So what is next.? Anne Bretts suggested opening up an on-line forum. Is it better on-line or in person?. A sort of strategic planning forum could help I believe, as long as we find a skilled moderator who can keep the conversation at a high level. It seems to me that there is a big picture view missing in a lot of the conversations, as well as a city-wide vision to bring clarity to how each of the main components of the city's components fit into a larger vision.

I think something significant like this issue can benefit from a variety of approaches, eg,

- a F2F forum like the NDDC did
- a blog post and subsequent comment thread like we sometimes have here on Locally Grown
- a more structured, moderated web-based online forum with guests like [we've done over the years](#)
- newspaper, radio and podcasts

Let a thousand conversations bloom.

[3](#)

[Ross Currier](#) says:

January 11th, 2007 at 8:28 am

Reginaldo, thanks for your comments on these important issues. I have been assembling my thoughts along a different track, and plan to share them later today, however, your thoughtful and constructive participation in a true dialogue merits a response.

1. This will be no surprise to many people but I believe that Northfield should position itself in the world economy based on the so-called Creative Class. I'm not just talking about artists but all people who generate income from their brains. This group would include college professors, assorted doctors, financial advisors and game designers.

I'm not sure about America's manufacturing place in the world and it seems that Northfield manufacturers have of late been selling out and cashing in. Furthermore, there doesn't seem to be much structural support for the lower waged manufacturing workers in the community or interest in making the investment to create that infrastructure.

Frankly, I perceive members of this Creative Class to be more supportive of Downtown and its businesses as well as more receptive to shopping local for the community benefit. But maybe that's just a myth that I've created in my own mind.

2. I think Downtown Northfield has a split personality. Some if it wants to be an on-going festival to attract tourists and some of it wants to be a good value supplier of hammers and slacks to the residents.

It was clear from among the over two dozen recommended actions for the next twelve months that we received from the attendees Tuesday that the Chamber, the City, the CVB and the NDDC need to better coordinate our efforts. We're on it. See my blog at www.nddc.org

By the way, after our coffee Monday morning, I had hoped to see you at the Forum on Tuesday, although I know that you had a scheduling challenge. I look forward to next month when we can discuss the challenges that face entrepreneurs...Latino, Anglo...whatever their historic family origins..in more depth.

3. I'm not sure that viewing the economic competition as being between our downtown and other downtowns makes sense. Perhaps for some of the tourist market we compete with St. Paul residents. Most of the business owners downtown seem to view their competitors as the malls and the internet. However, the topic might merit further discussion.

4. I agree with you about the colleges playing a big role in defining the community and the economy. I will say, and I need to make clear that I'm speaking as an individual and my remarks may in no way represent the views or opinions of the NDDC Board of Directors, that after observing, from a very close range, two of the major economic development entities in the city for the past four years, that the colleges do not get the respect that they deserve. I think it's partly due to the fact that they don't bend trainloads of metal to manufacture their income and partly due to a reason with which I'm sure you are personally familiar.

5. Based on my experience and reinforced by the discussion on Tuesday, being the lowest cost supplier would not appear to be the best strategy. Northfield's successful businesses seem to highlight quality and

service while stressing the importance of listening to their customers. Three of the retailers that are closest to me, Krin Finger, Joe Grundhoefer, and Linda Schneewind, have often emphasized the importance of attracting and retaining high quality workers who can gather and share input from customers that leads to on-going improvement in their business processes.

Thanks again for your comments. I look forward to further discussion on related issues next month.

[4](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 11th, 2007 at 8:32 am

I am personally appalled by the general lack of understanding of the ECONOMIC fragility of the DT, although it should have everything going for it as far as looks, location, etc.

I am also appalled by the lack of "speaking out" by Most of the building/business owners who attended the meeting. Are they having economic problems or not? Why are they so "afraid" to speak in public, with a peer group, about these common problems? Why do all the issues only come out in private discussions or e-mails?

What is it with all these quietly suffering souls? The old aphorism is: Misery loves company.

I'm dead serious when I say that a lot of business/building owners hang in there with an almost philanthropic zeal, because of their passion for the DT, but come on guys.....share the angst, and lets do something about it.

And no, this should not be an on-line discussion.....talk about "dead horses"!!!!!! It needs to be face to face, immediate exchange. There's a lot to be learned by looking at a person while they're speaking.

I have always been frustrated by the "timidity" of the NDDC, which is an ADVOCACY org, but let's face it.... The NDDC is the only game in town. And may the great spirit bless Ross Currier for working unendingly; may the great spirit also give a nudge, no a shove, to the NDDC board to create an ACTUAL membership. I know why they say they don't, but WHY in 6/7 years can't they figure it out? That old excuse of having made a "deal" not to compete with the COC is a leaky bucket. GIVE every business and building owner in the DT a decal for their window, and see if the donations start coming in. Wouldn't the NDDC like to be able to say "we are 200, 400, whatever, STRONG.....rather than we have 20-50 attendees at our morning forums?

[5](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 11th, 2007 at 9:22 am

Reginaldo,

Thankyou for your insight. I have a few comments that may help. These are my big picture views for the City and region. For me, these comments help place your points in line and suggest that, if any real economic benefits are achievable, an understanding of the problem needs to occur first, before we move forward - forgive my approach.

Here goes....My wife and I were talking recently about some of the very issues you raised in your remarks. Katie (my wife) said "Pearls only become a necklace when they are strung together". 'Wow', I said, 'Lets get a really long piece of string and tie the hospital, commercial, cultural, recreational, library, residential, entertainment, government buildings, all together'. 'No, that's not what I meant' she said, 'you have to concentrate and connect the physical environment together, like pearls on a nick lace. 'I see', I said.

How would that work for Northfield, I thought? Build a path, no...already thought of... too much money and then there are the skate borders, no. What about fancy smancy (not a real word) lighting, may be....but people would always be looking up and running into things. What about seats, we can always use a good seat or two, but again the skate borders and there's always, well an endless debate about where to put them.

Putting my planning hat on, I starting to think (dangerous I now), and thought and thought, until I realized something, what makes a pearl necklace a pearl necklace..one, two or three pearl, well if anyone knows about pearl necklace's then they weel tell you that it takes a bunch of pearls with a very good clasp and good piece of string, in other words....economies of scale.

Yes, something I remember, something about economies of scale, what was it? It was something about the how there is correlation between the physical size of a community and its economic scale or characteristics. Yes, that was it, internal and external economies of scale.

I also remember seeing something about this in an Economic Development and Literature Review and Practice (you gotta love that word 'practice') called Third-Tier Cities: Adjusting to the New Economy.

The report discusses the necklace concept not the pearl approach. See, economic development is not really about having trendy vision documents, pretty walkways or street lighting or benches (these are nice to have) but real hard economic planning comes from an understanding of the problems and ways to fix them.

Let me explain, the report states reasons why small cities (Third-Tier) can have failing economies. I'll spare you the read, try it later when the kids are screaming, the dogs barking and the TV's turned up real loud, you'll get more out of it that way.

On Page 11, the report states six primary challenges facing smaller cities affecting their ability to compete and thrive in the New Economy. These are:

- out-of-date infrastructure;
- dependence on traditional industry;
- transformation of their human capital base;
- declining competitiveness within their regions;
- weakened civic infrastructure and capacity; and
- more limited access to resources.

The best 14 pages I've ever read!

From page 25 however, wow, what a read. It discusses 'building on opportunities' and mentions five reasons why some third-tier cities are thriving and what makes a difference. These are:

- enhancing local amenities;
- building on institutions of higher education;
- engaging in regional collaboration;
- creating an effective civic infrastructure; and
- promoting diversity as strength.

You gotta like that last two! To sum up, if Northfield has the pearls to create a necklace, than the string that ties it together is.....you'll all have to read the report (or at least from page 25 onwards) to understand it.

<http://mtauburnassociates.com/Reports/thirdtier.pdf>

'You should never try to 'hit' two birds with the one stone', so I decided to try and 'hit' three.

Griff,

"Retail business owners have long understood they can't compete with Wal-Mart and the other big-box stores that set up in the suburbs, compete on price, and steadily drained customers from family-owned downtown stores. America's downtowns, if they thrived at all, did so by evolving in the 1980s and 1990s into districts of restaurants and entertainment, and clusters of specialty stores that filled niches – candy, healthy bread, sports equipment, used books, gifts, custom clothing, kitchen ware, and the like."

Here is one idea I'm sure you'll love. We could call it the "e-commerce zone" or ECZ for the zoning ordinance. Although, you would have to be careful that you don't allow any more than 5 unrelated computers to be in the same premises.

<http://mlui.org/growthmanagement/fullarticle.asp?fileid=16965>

6

Norman Butler says:

January 13th, 2007 at 6:09 pm

It seems that we were all talking at cross-purposes on Tuesday morning at the NDDC meeting.

Some people spoke as if it was about bringing more people downtown (benches, sidewalks, etc), others about bringing more customers into your business (listen to your customers, link to websites, make gift certificates, etc), still others about envisioning a future downtown.

Based on these varied interpretations of the purpose of the meeting, various participants offered themselves up as consultants and mediators and suggested future sessions to focus further on their issues.

I understood it to be about downtown restaurants and how to attract more downtown and enable them to locate start-up, survive and thrive. I tried to illustrate the difficulties of making a restaurant business work these days downtown Northfield (indeed, any small city in the USA) initially from the point of view of the Profit & Loss Account; that is, Operations which focus on Sales, Cost of Goods Sold, and Expenses. These make it difficult enough to cash flow restaurant businesses, particularly ones with smaller, more limited customer bases. (And there are many people in Northfield always willing and able to help with these matters, especially when it comes to generating more sales).

However, there is also the Balance Sheet and most significantly the Debt Service incurred from borrowing to build a kitchen (etc.) in a 100+ year old building with all the current Building Codes, ADA requirements, architectural and legal costs, material & labor costs, limitations of size (number of seats), parking, etc.; not to mention the big competition on H3 now and tomorrow.

The key issue is about Building It and then Surviving while trying to cash flow what is inevitably an enormous debt relative to the size of the restaurant and its customer base. It is all about RISK and trying to find ways to reduce it.

The City has financial instruments to lure large, financially well-arranged businesses and experienced developers to Northfield. These are not risk reduction measures, merely incentives to locate here. Why feather their nest and ease their passage, yet not consider the small businessperson, the entrepreneur who is eager to open a business downtown?

Bardwell-Smith is trying to encourage a shoe manufacturer in Faribault to open a store on Division. Victor Suma has tried to do the same with a variety of businesses in and around the Twin Cities and Southern Minnesota, for example Nerstrand Meats in Dennison. But apart from singing the praises of Northfield in general and downtown in particular, they have no recourse to any City resources – and these two examples would not be taking big risks as I see it.

What of the enthusiastic, optimistic, hard-working yet relatively impecunious entrepreneur? The EDA loans are targeted at building owners not business owners and, like all loan-givers, needs collateral. And business owners in general face far fewer start-up difficulties and financial challenges than wannabe restaurateurs.

Perhaps now is the time to give grants to building owners to build kitchens in their small historic buildings and then pass the debt on to the tenant but, and crucially, over 15 years instead of 5 years.

‘Never be the one to build the kitchen’; ‘you need 85 seats to make a go of it’; ‘the buildings are too small and too old to house a restaurant’; these and many more adages argue against creating a vibrant downtown filled full of fun, food, drink and entertainment if left solely to the restaurant entrepreneur. The risks are too great.

Yet with the imagination and the will especially in City Hall these cautions, these risks, can be reduced to the point where they are worth taking.

[7](#)

[Ross](#) says:

January 14th, 2007 at 9:53 am

Norman:

We have similar views of the purpose of Tuesday's Forum. Perhaps that was because I invited you to serve on the panel, and had an ulterior motive. Thanks for your service and your comments.

Perhaps you and I are more focused on the microeconomic analysis of the individual businesses and others were thinking more of the macroeconomic analysis of the world around these businesses.

You and I are focused on the bottom line, or net income. Certainly anything that has a potential benefit to the gross income portion of the equation, like a surge strategy for marketing, could help the bottom line. However, gross income is only part of the equation and you and I also are concerned about the expense portion of the equation, including real estate taxes, cost of financing the business and paying for maintenance and upgrades (or business expansion).

The City does have some financial tools available for small businesses but if they are structured to avoid risk with a caution that exceeds that of the private sector, they will be of limited use. Your pushing at the boundaries of the (financial tool) box strikes me as the direction we need to move on this topic.

See you downtown,

Ross

[8](#)

Tracy Davis says:

January 14th, 2007 at 10:34 am

Norman, et al,

I have some comments and a couple of disclaimers. First the disclaimers: 1) I love downtown, want to see it thrive, have worked (at a personal cost) to do what I can to help that. 2) The opinions below are not known, sanctioned, or endorsed by the City, Boards, or Staff. Can I say that just once and have it apply to any post I make?

People who believe it's a piece of cake to have a successful retail business in Northfield if only you "give people what they want" simply do not understand the market realities they claim to espouse. (It's a little bit different for some of the hospitality businesses, especially those who cater to the college crowd, because they *do* have critical mass.) There are precious few downtown businesses whose owners actually live on the income from those businesses; most are second incomes, labors of love, or tax losses. And it's not because they aren't open evenings and weekends; it's due to larger market forces. Independent retailers nationwide are going the way of the dodo unless they are fortunate enough to live in an area which appreciates the distinctiveness of independent retail. Northfield, unfortunately, often does not. Independent retailers have their own set of challenges, not the least of which is that they are not owned by large corporations which can afford to run at a loss for three to five years until the market is established.

But I guess I'll save my "independent retail" rant for another post. Here's what I really wanted to say.

The Economic Development Authority, which is about 15 years old now, is charged with increasing employment and growing the tax base. Downtown entrepreneurial businesses are almost always mom-and-pops, often with no full-time employees beyond the owners, and the tax base is the same whether the buildings are owned, rented, vacant, whatever. So in terms of where to put resources, and be accountable to the public for the expenditure of its tax monies, it simply does not make sense for the City/EDA to put money into incentives for small downtown businesses which are typically undercapitalized and high-risk to start with. It's pretty straightforward.

On the other hand (the one I use most often), I believe that our newly adopted Economic Development Plan recognizes the significance of a vital downtown, and provides justification for use of resources to build and enhance that vitality. If we want anything to happen, then we as downtown businesses and building owners and partner organizations like the NDDC and the Chamber should probably be the ones to propose new programs to the EDA and City staff; and any new programs must be clearly tied to the E.D. Plan goals and recommendations.

And please, can we not get into discussion about “the City/EDA/Staff should craft the programs” or do this-and-that...? It’s government, for cryin’ out loud, and they don’t move very fast. Entrepreneurs who know how to get something done are in a much better position to propose, lobby, and shepherd something through the approval process.

So - to kick that off - What are some specific things that might be done to help downtown businesses? One thing I can think of is to ask the City to work with the County (or State, if need be) to re-evaluate how taxes are calculated and/or buildings valued downtown, or any other creative solution to the fact that

- 1) property taxes on the buildings are high, resulting in
- 2) high rents, with the effect that
- 3) not many businesses can generate enough sales to cover rent/mortgage and pay the owner anything because
- 4) Northfield does not have the critical mass (population base) necessary to support most of these operations.

Ideas, anyone?

[9](#)

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:

January 14th, 2007 at 6:13 pm

I like this discussion. It is nice to have all of these details that are coming out, they are great for business planning and management, weather it is for managing an existing businesses, for suggesting changing in the city’s investment policies and focus, or for evaluating how to introduce a new business into downtown.

Since I don’t have a business in downtown yet, I can still think from the outside, just as I am sure you did before you decided to locate your business there. As you did before, I am now looking into the larger picture, how does what I want to do (weather it is a restaurant, copy center, office supply store, coffee shop, etc.) fits within the long term plans and vision for the city. It is this vision that I believe guides the policies (building codes, investment policies, etc.) that the city is implementing, including the city’s investment in promoting NDT to the region and the world. It is the vision and how it breaks down into city-wide strategic planning and plans implementation that defines weather the customers that I need will, first, will come to my business and second, pay the prices that I need in order to make a profit. For others, it may be phrased as “weather the customers are coming and paying the right price for existing products and services.”

I can understand that it is difficult to leave our businesses and step outside to look back on how it fits the larger picture of what is going on around it. Specially if the larger picture is not properly articulated in a short and concise way. All of us, weather aspiring business owners or established ones, need to step out of the box and re-generate our ability to imagine our businesses in relation to the direction of this constantly changing world. This is a constant challenge, is not done once or twice, but constantly, I see elements of this process coming out in the discussion, but these elements need direction (a larger picture direction).

Let’s engage the planning process now that the city has launched it and is asking for our participation, and let’s shape the future of Northfield according to what makes the most sense for what we plan to do or are doing already, specially if we want to influence the city’s investment policies and how it manages image and promotes the city so that in the future, we don’t need to complain about what the city does wrong, but about what “we” did wrong if something does not work.

Griff, would you run a poll on “how much is Reginaldo getting in trouble”? I only know a few of you so I don’t know how my contributions may be too much “out of the box”.

Gracias.

Reginaldo.

[10](#)

Griff Wigley says:

January 14th, 2007 at 6:28 pm

I kind of like Peter's idea of an ECZ: e-commerce zone, esp. since we've been pushing for ultra high-speed broadband and wi-fi downtown.

This is a great article he linked to:

Internet Sales Help Downtown Smart Growth Revival: Online entrepreneurs compete with big-boxes
<http://mlui.org/growthmanagement/fullarticle.asp?fileid=16965>

Both Bookfellows and Monkey See, Monkey Reads are doing reasonably well, apparently, because of a large percentage of their used book sales coming via the internet. Are there other stores on Division who are doing the same?

[11](#)

Tracy Davis says:

January 14th, 2007 at 7:02 pm

When I was retailing out of the Oriental Rug Gallery, only 35% of my sales were local (Northfield). Another 25-30% was metro area, and the rest was Internet sales.

[12](#)

norman butler says:

January 14th, 2007 at 8:33 pm

Reginaldo. Do not worry about thinking outside the box. I'd be happy seeing more people thinking inside the box.

And beware of envisionaries for they seek your money.

Joking apart, I beg to differ with Ross regarding the difference between micro- and macro-economics. Au contraire, the Balance Sheet, the risk-taking, the debt-service is macro, whereas fine tuning the P&L, focussing on increasing sales, bringing more people in the door, better marketing..all of this is micro...for the individual entrepreneur, provided of course they are not completely clueless.

However, from the City-as-a-whole point of view, bringing more people downtown is macro..for without success in this regard we are all at a loss. Micro to the City is who gets the support, who gets the grants, loans..positive regard

For the moment, let's call downtown Old Town and the H3 development New Town (Peter Waskew's notion). Old Town is competing with New Town (mall city), and also Old Town is competing within itself. New Town developers, savvy corporate people that they are, are intuitively careful - even if they don't talk to each other- about competing within itself (one steak and chops place, one upscale big box, one economy big box, one hardware and builders merchant, one...). Old Town people, optimistic, enthusiastic, naive as we are have no such caution.

The City goes with the flow, aids and abets New Town, shakes its head at the antics of Old Town... 'cos whilst being genuine are perceived as... well let's say either headstrong (good grief..they opened that store in that building!) or timid (my, my..all they do is talk..talk..talk)..emotional...not at all corporate.

I heartily endorse Tracy's view of the mix, motivations and results of downtown businesses. Most (90%?) scrape by, and are tax write-offs, pin-money earners, hobbysists or people who love Northfield and want to make it better (or a mixture of these motivations). All are valuable beyond description..to the life, love, and longevity of downtown Northfield. Yet it is difficult.

Most people think..assume..we are all making loads of money (this alone takes a lot of suspended disbelief). I refer you to Victor's post a while ago on this subject which was restaurant specific. \$1000 per day average is what you need to make a go of it (\$350,000 per year gross sales with the owner working in the business). Less than that, you're stuffed. More than that you're hopefully looking forward to the year as it unfolds (weather, events, The Economy, house prices...).

However, paradigms exist (a bit like visions) and they also shift. But they cannot do so, unless and until, we start talking plain and honest to each other.

BTW, I talk not from the state of my affairs, my businesses, my needs, or myself, but from my experience...for what its worth.

Northfield is a gem. Northfield Downtown (Old Town) is the Jewel in the Crown. Not through accident or design, action or inaction, should it be diminished.

[13](#)

Ross Currier says:

January 14th, 2007 at 9:24 pm

Hey Tracy:

Thanks for weighing in. The rant on being an independent business person that you cut short merits further exploration. I was just, somewhat surprisingly, interviewed over the phone by a group of reporters at KRLX and they seem most interested in the local business owner vs. national chain owner slant on this topic.

I'm not so sure that it wouldn't make sense for the EDA to invest in downtown businesses rather try to lure the next Toyota plant. I'm currently reading a book called Small Mart. The author argues that the track record indicates that investing in locally owned businesses instead of spending to lure new businesses has resulted in much higher and steadier returns when studied over the long term. Unfortunately, I'm too focused on working to have a handful of businesses survive 2007 to try to bring about a paradigm shift at the EDA.

I agree with you that the new Economic Development plan recognizes the potential economic power of our authentic downtown. However, as you know from your final meeting, in focusing on their top priority, the EDA plans to spend approximately \$350,000 on a new business park in the northwest part of the city and approximately \$12,500 on promoting downtown.

I applaud your efforts to bring our attention to the many components that contribute to economic survival for a small businesses. I also praise your suggestion that a financial tool should be evaluated by the people for whom it is intended.

I believe that this discussion will reach a new level of detail in the next few days.

Thanks much,

Ross

[14](#)

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:

January 14th, 2007 at 10:10 pm

Nice material. So far 7 of us have participated in this discussion. There were more than 50 participants I believe at the last NDDC forum. Shall we see if we can get others to express themselves. As I said before, a good conversation on-line could produce the material we need to shape some planning, but we need more folks, specially people with Tracy's depth of knowledge and Ross's ear on DT heart's beat. Anybody else interested in Northfield's downtown.? This feels like an on-line strategic planning session. We are still on the brainstorming, venting, general discussion stage. It would be nice to take what has been said and frame it into a list along the lines of the SWOT or a similar analysis, but we need more (many more) contributors.

Reginaldo.

[15](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 15th, 2007 at 12:32 am

If they can do it, why can't we.

<http://www.gvsu.edu/marec/index.cfm?id=F3B9BDCE-C5C8-E1B2-B4673FDCA00CD0EA>

By thinking about the following questions we can start to strategize what Northfield people need to do to accomplish something of this magnitude.

What would block Northfield from doing a similar project?

What individuals are/not in place politically and organizationally to “make it happen”?

What incentives are/not in place politically and organizationally to “make it happen”?

16

Peter Waskiw says:

January 15th, 2007 at 11:41 am

From ‘Smart City Radio’ a show on

“The Potential of Creative Industries as viable economic development engines.”

This is an extremely relevant topic for Northfield. I suggest that these types of strategies be fully explored and developed in the ‘revision’ of the Comprehensive Plan.

http://www.smartcityradio.com/smartcityradio/past_shows.cfm?showsmartcityID=302&PageNum_getsmar_tshows=2

Any thoughts?!

17

Jerry Bilek says:

January 15th, 2007 at 3:31 pm

Okay,

I was at the NDDC forum and my business has been mentioned in the discussion so I’ll weigh in. I just opened Monkey See, Monkey Read July 24, 2006. Before that I opened Goodbye, Blue Monday 16 years ago with two partners. I also had a hand, a small one, in River City Books.

Ross brings up good points in Small Mart(I think he bought it at my shop). EDA should really look at the cost/benefit of business incentives. The NEC(Northfield Enterprise Center), an EDA funded organization was no help to me. I think Northfield needs the NEC, but it needs to work.

Griff is correct, the internet is a big part of my business. 20% Sept-Dec. I don’t count August since I was not selling online yet. I think more downtown businesses could do a lot online. Restaurants not so much, but retailers for sure. My estimate is 25-30% of my 2007 sales will be online. Currently less than 15% of my inventory is online. As of 3:00 today I have sold 1 book in the store and have 15 online orders. Yes, it’s a holiday, yes it’s a Monday, yes, it snowed.

Yes, many downtown businesses are hobbies etc. Mine is not. It is my only income and I had to turn a profit from day 1. It is a very small profit, but I pay my bills and drive an old car and could use some new socks.

If my store front fails, I will go 100% online as a friend of mine in MPLS will do in April. Pioneer Press ran a story about Loomis Antiquarian in Stillwater. Property taxes are running him out of business.

I cannot control my rent or property taxes, so I look to Anne Brett’s comments at the forum for inspiration. Marketing, Marketing, Marketing. Bring so many customers downtown, businesses would be foolish not to open here. I look to the Rare Pair, Oolala and River City books for inspiration. Professionally operated small retailers in Downtown. There are others, but I like these.

The article about Manitowoc Griff linked is good. I have not read all of it yet.

my two cents for now.

Jerry

[18](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 15th, 2007 at 9:11 pm

Great discussion, and as long as my name has come up, I might as well speak for myself.

I have been writing about retail for more than a decade and have covered small and large towns from Indiana to the Canadian border. You don't have to be large to be successful...think Galena, Bayfield, Ely, Grand Marais. Some have natural attractions, but

Galena is the only one of the three cities with more than a thousand year-round residents. Most of the restaurants in Bayfield are in small old buildings without expensive kitchens. Ely literally is at the end of the road, with no through traffic and a very short and unpredictable tourist season...all have crushing taxes and property value increases.

The things they have in common are:

A strong identity or brand.

Key events that support the brand.

Strong dependence on the Internet—and business and personal connections in large metro areas.

A rock solid and unified marketing strategy.

Relentless communication with customers, Realtors, organizations, travel agents and the media, on topics large and small.

You can't change the expense side of the equation, but there are dozens of things you can do to increase traffic, expand your Internet reach and boost sales.

I'd be happy to help bring in some experts — and profile some local experts — to help get the ball rolling.

[19](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 11:00 am

Anne's comments bring us back around to Reginaldo's questions about "What is Northfield's vision?"

According to the Comprehensive Plan, Northfield wants to be a "freestanding community", which is code for "not a bedroom community". This implies that the community's vision is to have real jobs in town where people can work without commuting to the metro area, a large goal (hence the work of the Economic Development Authority).

To some people, "freestanding community" also implies that our mix of retail and services is geared at least as much to residents as it is to tourists. Anne's example of Grand Marais et al may go to the heart of "the vision thing". One of the comments I used to hear a lot in Northfield about ten years ago was not "We don't want to become another Apple Valley" (although I did hear that), but more often it was "We don't want to become another Stillwater". It seemed that both the long-time and newer residents wanted to preserve the cohesiveness of the Northfield community, and not revamp the downtown to focus on tourism.

Modern consumer options and choices being what they are, it doesn't appear possible that Northfield can support a dedicated shoe store, or men's clothing store, or any number of other things that residents might want. But I don't believe the automatic conclusion is that we should develop more things to attract day-trippers. Sure, outside money is part of the solution/opportunity. But we have a lot of smart, creative people in this town, and there may be other models to learn from: How to take a built environment designed for pedestrian traffic in the late 1800s, and craft it into something relevant for the needs and economics of the 21st century.

You may say I'm a dreamer...

[20](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 11:53 am

Tracy,

You don't have to be a tourist destination or a bedroom community or freestanding community, you need to integrate all these things to make Northfield work.

The fact is that most of the businesses that have moved to the Bayfield area are owned by people who came there from the Twin Cities and Chicago and Madison as tourists and fell in love with it. And as Ely and Bayfield have found, the vacationers build second homes, and then become year-round residents.

An IBM executive who lived all over the world rose high enough in the company that he could choose his base, and he chose the living room of his home in Ely. He still travels some, but runs international projects in the town he chose because he came there on vacation years ago.

The colleges are another key recruiting tool. Treat your students well and as alumni they will find or create ways to bring their businesses back to or near campus.

And those bedroom community workers are the ones who brought the kids who keep the schools and the library healthy and who raised the money for soccer fields and other amenities that draw the tourists and the students and the year-round residents...

I have my freelance office here and so does my husband, but I don't shop a lot downtown. Some of the "tourist" marketing strategies I've talked about would encourage residents like me to wander downtown more often.

As I said, you need to integrate all the pieces. Stillwater has daytrippers, tourists, and a booming year-round population.

Building a town is like building something out of a kit with lots of pieces and not a lot of instructions. Northfield has the pieces. Most towns do. They just need people willing to sit down and put the pieces together in a way that works.

[21](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 16th, 2007 at 12:33 pm

O.K....So everyone agrees that you have to put a lot of small pieces together to have a successful DT; now it's time to get a little more specific on various points.

Let's start with Ane's comments re: Bayfield, and etc. communities. Implicit in Anne's comment re: "vacationers built second homes and then became full time residents" is both the privilege of Money, and Choice. Young families with two working parents, and several kids, don't usually fall in that demographic. We are not talking here about "IBM executives that lived all over the world". Sorry, Anne, but I don't find that an apt parallel.

If new residents value the DT, as a core, as a worthwhile economic and social entity to support.... Then they are going to have to put their dollars where their values are. That means using your economic power to curb a nationwide shopping model that says "1-Stop at Big Box" is best for me! It is not reasonable, on an economic basis, to say the DT is important to me, but I can't shop there. This future MUSEUM [the Downtown] has to work economically, or unless the Medici family comes along to invest and rescue, we are going to continue to slip away.

Ross has mentioned "Small Mart", a good book, and another equally good or better is "Big Box Swindle" by Stacy Mitchell of the Institute for Local Self Reliance. I think it is even stronger on the economic analysis of the struggle for dollars that independent retailers face.

Our local gov't CAN do things to support the DT, AND still be good stewards of the public\$, Tracy. It's a matter of priorities, as Ross said: 750K for an imagined industrial park vs. 7500. for the DT that everyone SAYS is the community's core????? Come on. Where's the political will?

We need BOTH kinds of political will: that which comes from local gov't entities, council, EDA, and that of the citizens buying power.

[22](#)

Anne Bretts says:

January 16th, 2007 at 12:48 pm

For crying out loud, you can keep arguing about changing the entire economy or you can get busy changing the things that can be changed.

The fact is there are a lot of middle-income older people who moved here to be close to their kids and

grandkids, who go to the senior center and are dying to find great places to eat and shop and get together to talk. I know a lot of them — and downtown isn't reaching them very well.

I made my office here and I'm not a wealthy IBM executive and I don't have a second home. I still go to church in Minnetonka each week and we can choose anywhere to have brunch after.

I travel throughout the Twin Cities, Wisconsin, the Chicago area and southern California. I'm not making up these suggestions in a vacuum.

I'm not going to stop shopping at Target, but I'm willing to consider downtown businesses that treat me well and give me a reason to stop in.

I'm saying you start with what you have, see the potential and start chipping away — while you work on the larger goal of dismantling Target and Southdale and the Mall of America. You can't just wait until everything is perfect before you start.

[23](#)

Tracy Davis says:

January 16th, 2007 at 1:44 pm

Anne, I think you're absolutely right about the centrality of the colleges, and trying to get alumni to return here at some point. However, I can't agree with your assessment of the "bedroom community workers". Residential development costs more in services (infrastructure, schools, etc.) than it brings in tax revenues - so a disproportionate increase in residential development is actually detrimental to the community, especially if the residential development is a demographic that includes school-age children. The result is an increased demand for services without bringing in the corresponding revenues. You don't need a Ph.D. in economics to figure out that this can be a problem, and that's exactly what's happened to Northfield in the past decade - the residential development has far outpaced the commercial development, to the degree that we're already economically lopsided and need to address this ASAP.

I'm more interested in why you don't shop downtown... I'm sure you're a good example of a lot of newer residents and I'd welcome a peek inside your head. Is it the hours, or the offerings? Are you looking for things that downtown doesn't have, or do they have what you're looking for but it costs too much, or what?

[24](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 16th, 2007 at 1:46 pm

Anne,

Are you saying "...you start with what you have..." or do you mean HAD.

A very important study identified several interconnected problems that led to the decline of small-city downtowns, these are:

- (1) construction of highways and increasing automobile use;
- (2) decentralization of functions previously centered in downtowns (retailing, professional services, entertainment, hospitality, governmental activities);
- (3) disinvestment in downtown in favor of commercial development on the periphery; and
- (4) the declining image of downtown as a desirable location.

I know I'm gonna cop some flak on this one, but believe it not, Northfield has a very weak civic infrastructure capacity that is fraught with differences and conflicts and is incapable of helping this community pull together around common goals and interests.

Some of comments above reflect this perspective. I have a close friend who has recently set up a home based business. He sought help from the NEC, it took him over a YEAR to get comments back on his business plan. He need to the BP for grants, loans, partnerships commitment etc. What a joke.

How can the City help economic development for the downtown (Old Economy) and the not so NEW Economy (Highway 3 development), when it can't even get the easy stuff right.

I'm really looking forward to your reply.

[25](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 2:21 pm

Peter: This town has a staggering amount of potential. Right now. Right here.

Kiffi: So you only want noble, pure of heart poor people here, their businesses subsidized by me and my small, non-polluting, paper-free, noise-free business, and if they succeed too much they have to leave? Those well-educated, working-parent families you find so endearing have little time or money for \$3 lattes, long dinners at restaurants, original (breakable) art and \$80 shoes. You're going to have to let a few of the middle class in, and rich folks if they promise to put their filthy cash in an envelope before dropping it in the collection plate at church.

Tracy: I have a long list of concerns and suggestions, but I don't have time right now to list them all here. I've offered too many times to help and now I've found people willing to work on what's possible, not just complain about what isn't. I'm heading back over to [Northfield.org](#) to organize some meetings on the topic over the next few weeks. You can check there for details soon. There are people who want to make change, and we will.

As to your point about bedroom community workers, I'm not suggesting you recruit more, just that they are here and they do make a huge contribution to the community — and I'm talking about working with what you have.

Half the people in this town have lived here less than 10 years, actually far less than that. We can shop in any of hundreds of cute stores in dozens of towns — and online without leaving our chairs.

You don't feel compelled to hire me to do your PR, why would I feel compelled to eat at your restaurant or shop at your store? Why should your small business be my responsibility, or the city's, when mine isn't a concern of yours?

Give me a reason to come downtown and I will.

[26](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 2:48 pm

Anne, I suspect we agree on more details than we disagree on. BUT... one difference I clearly see between our longer- and shorter-term residents is that the longer-term ones DO try to hire local as well as buy local, whenever possible - at least, the thought is closer to the front of their minds, rather than an afterthought. That's one of the small, cohesive-community pieces that I wish we could immediately transplant into the hearts and minds of newer residents who have moved here from a suburb, because it's a major thought change.

[27](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 2:52 pm

Anne

You missed the whole point. The whole discussion is about potential - past, existing and future. And by the way, 'economic development' is about "changing" economics. The not so New Economies (big box retailers) do it all the time.

I'm sorry, but if I want to be treated like an idiot I just to Target. But I suppose it's not about the service or the conversation, it about the urge, the excitement of spending money. Yes, the New Economies understand the retailer very well.

[28](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 16th, 2007 at 3:04 pm

Peter,

I didn't miss the point at all. You begin to change the larger economic picture by changing the local economy, and you do that by changing the way you treat people who choose to move here, work here or

visit here.

I am not treated like an idiot at Target, but I have been ignored and poorly served downtown more often than I have at any big box store.

Tracy,

You can't transplant loyalty into new residents, you earn it. Long-time residents aren't buying from total strangers out of loyalty to Northfield, they are buying from friends and relatives, people whose incomes and lives are intertwined with theirs. I have friends and relatives all over, so if you want my loyalty, you need to build a relationship with me, not treat me like an intruder who has screwed up an otherwise perfect little town.

[29](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 16th, 2007 at 3:26 pm

Anne,

I must say at least you speak to the point about the issue and for that, I have to thank you.

Why don't you read the "Third-Tier Cities: Adjusting to the New Economy" - U.S. Economic Development Administration.

<http://mtauburnassociates.com/Reports/thirdtier.pdf>

It actually speaks to two of the issues you brought up, 'Transformation of Human Capital' with regards to difficulties in retaining youth and attracting new residents.

But places these issues along others such as

- out-of-date infrastructure;
- dependence on traditional industry;
- declining competitiveness;
- weakened civic infrastructure; and
- more limited access to resources.

I suppose, what I'm trying to say and perhaps you are also, is that the problem is three dimensional. That is, it will take a number of strategies, including improving retail perceptions about DT to improve the economic vitality of the Northfield Town Center. Some of these strategies would include, in my belief, creating incentives for small business owners to make a go of it.

[30](#)

Anne Bretts says:

January 16th, 2007 at 3:39 pm

You don't need incentives to get started. No one gives me incentives.

I give up...I have to...I'm on the verge of turning into a Republican. I'll keep you posted on the discussions of what CAN be done.

[31](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 16th, 2007 at 3:43 pm

Anne

As one example, what do you call TIF's and who have they been given to in the last ten years.

But...I am looking forward to what can be done. Please keep me posted.

[32](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 16th, 2007 at 4:16 pm

Anne Bretts wrote:

Kiffi: So you only want noble, pure of heart poor people here, their businesses subsidized by me and my small, non-polluting, paper-free, noise-free business, and if they succeed too much they have to leave? Those well-educated, working-parent families you find so endearing have little time or money for \$3 lattes,

long dinners at restaurants, original (breakable) art and \$80 shoes. You're going to have to let a few of the middle class in, and rich folks if they promise to put their filthy cash in an envelope before dropping it in the collection plate at church.

Anne: I do think you misunderstood my point. I was saying that the comments YOU made about the success of Bayfield, etc, seemed to be based on wealthy people settling there, first as vacationers, then residents. I personally think it would be terrific if Lorenzo de Medici and his whole family would come here, re-incarnated, and infuse some developmental \$\$ into the DT..... dollars that some locals prefer to spend on the highway.....all the while proclaiming, to their out of town visitors, how "cute" the historic DT is....

P.S. Please drop all dollar donations in the DT, not in the church collection plate! oh,oh! That's bound to cause trouble.....

[33](#)

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:

January 16th, 2007 at 4:18 pm

Slowly, but surely, the answers to many of the larger issues are coming out. This forum is like a workshop on Northfield DT's innerworkings and the personalities of the people who love downtown.

I commend all of you for such a passion for this city. As a newcomer, I will stay away from commenting until the atmosphere clears a bit more, but please keep bringing new contributors into the picture. We still have only a small sample of the views out there. Can the bank officials post an opinion on how they want to participate and shape the future of downtown Northfield.? And maybe also Malt-o-Meal, they have a big stake. Their actual plans, may also provide a picture of where their investments will turn in the future. Can these aspects be shared.? What about contributions from the city.? I am sure they can contribute more.

Reginaldo.

[34](#)

Ross Currier says:

January 16th, 2007 at 4:21 pm

A few people have responded to the issues raised at the NDDC's Downtown Forum with a call for more marketing. Although more marketing probably couldn't hurt and smarter marketing would probably help, I don't think marketing will meet all the challenges and it certainly won't address all the issues.

Since last week's Forum, I've been contacted by a number of building and business owners. It is clear that not all of them enjoyed as good a year as Joe Grundhoefer did in 2006. Some folks downtown are thriving, some folks are surviving and some are indeed struggling. Based on what I've heard, I think that marketing would probably benefit those in the range between Thriving and Surviving but those that are in the range between Surviving and Struggling have told me that they need more than just marketing.

Based on the theoretical restaurant that Victor Summa sketched out in his earlier comments, and honed by some of the remarks made by Norman Butler at the Forum and further tweaked by phone calls and e-mails that I got from some owners who prefer to remain nameless, I did some financial modeling. I think that the results help illustrate the need for comprehensive strategies.

Below is Victor's restaurant with some free business advice from Norman and Joe. Instead of an approximately 5% loss, it's now showing an approximately 5% profit.

Gross Income \$350,000

Food Costs \$182,000

Labor \$ 62,400

Build-Out Debt \$ 37,200

Other Oprtng Exp \$ 24,000

Rent \$ 20,000

Taxes \$ 7,800

Net Income \$ 16,600

Here is the same business, the following year, with a 15% fuel-related increase in food prices, a modest 2.5% increase in wages, and the discussed 15% increase in real estate taxes. We're assuming that the business and the building are owned by the same person, so that the building owner is "eating" some of the real estate tax increase (a common practice as I heard over the last few days) so there is no rent increase.

Gross Income \$350,000

Food Costs \$209,300
Labor \$ 63,960
Build-Out Debt \$ 37,200
Other Oprtng Exp \$ 24,000
Rent \$ 20,000
Taxes \$ 8,970

Net Income \$(13,430)

Ouch! This business will not be around for long in this scenario. Let's see how much "marketing" it would take to at least maintain the 5% profit. Assuming that the restaurant gets \$8 income on the average from each customer (less than some places, more for than a few others) it would take 3,754 additional customers a year or 10 per day. Not everyone who comes downtown goes into each restaurant. I asked people how many additional sets of feet on the street they would need to get 10 more customers a day. The answers ranged from "at least 40" to "maybe 100". To look at it from another angle, we're talking about a 9% sales increase, not overly aggressive, but no slam dunk either.

Let's try to maintain the 5% by "managing" costs instead. We'll work to limit the rise in food costs to 10% (how, I don't know...using less prepared products?, buying in bulk to obtain discounts?, increasing the percentage of Minnesota goods?, consulting with Joe and Norman?). We'll work with the EDA to get more favorable terms on at least a portion of the financing for the equipment. (Deanna and Rick, here we come!) Finally, we won't sit back and let the legislature increase commercial property taxes by 15%. (David Bly gave us an opening on Locally Grown, let's get together and follow up.)

Gross Income \$350,000

Food Costs \$200,200
Labor \$ 63,960
Build-Out Debt \$ 18,600
Other Oprtng Exp \$ 24,000
Rent \$ 20,000
Taxes \$ 7,020

Net Income \$ 16,220

Hey, not bad, we've maintained the 5% profit, without relying on a sales increase. Let's increase the sales 2.5%, due to better marketing, increased investment, improved service, good weather or dumb luck.

Gross Income \$358,750

Food Costs \$200,200
Labor \$ 63,960
Build-Out Debt \$ 18,600
Other Oprtng Exp \$ 24,000
Rent \$ 20,000
Taxes \$ 7,020

Net Income \$ 24,970

Whoa, we're almost to the point where it makes financial sense to own a business in downtown Northfield. I am assuming that the owner is drawing a salary and this whopping 7% net is going to be used for reinvestment in the businesses.

This modeling exercise seems to support those folks that believe that marketing doesn't address all the issues downtown building and business owners face and won't be sufficient help to the owners that need it the most. It appears that a comprehensive approach promises the best results.

Although it may be worthwhile to evaluate the current marketing efforts for effectiveness, as well as consider an increase in these, perhaps redirected, efforts, we need to continue to work on the other issues too.

[35](#)

Tracy Davis says:

January 16th, 2007 at 4:44 pm

At \$63,000 for labor, that only reflects a living wage for two people at most.

[36](#)

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:

January 16th, 2007 at 5:07 pm

What a great contribution Ross. Even if we are off some points, the picture is painted for somebody who may be thinking restaurants. Ross, could you now provide with a list of all of the different types of businesses in DT. In order to get the whole picture, we will need a similar analysis done for other industries. You probably have this list somewhere already. Then see if we can get other people like Victor to provide the details for the other businesses. We can't bring the case to the EDA or the legislature until we can paint them the larger picture and we can provide a holistic analysis of the current situation downtown in relation to the larger factors (investment, taxes, etc.) and how they affect each business sector. There is more to it, but can we concentrate on collecting factual information from the other business sectors. How about the banks.? And how about the factors that make taxes go up.? Can they be influenced by the business community in favor of everyone.? How.? Maybe a coalition of businesses for socially responsible taxing and city re-investment in DT is needed. Please don't take it serious for now, I am just kidding, the last thing I need is to be seen as trying to reduce the income for the city and have businesses decide how the taxes they paid are re-invested to promote their success.

Reginaldo.

[37](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 17th, 2007 at 9:38 am

Reginaldo, I really like your sense of humor: "...the last thing I need is to be seen as trying to reduce the income for the city and have businesses decide how the taxes they paid are re-invested to promote their success."

Perhaps, I can expand, I hope people working for the City of Northfield capacity realize that any form of investment from a City institution is the communities money not theirs and that investment benefits the City as a whole. Take this example from Austin, Texas, the creation of a homestead preservation district. "...this financing model, which is often used as a tool to raise an areas property values, is being used to help owners effected by its success." A HPD is modeled after tax increment financing. In a TIF district, a percentage of revenue generated by property taxes in a geographic area is designated to fuel future growth, repair, upkeep, or development

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/column?oid=oid%3A435202>

This same principle can be applied to the DT.

For those interested, this article speaks to the issue of one method on "how to" control and use property tax as an incentive for redevelopment, yes it can be done and there are methods. It would be smart if

documented them in a “tool box” of sorts.

<http://www.twincities.com/mld/twincities/news/editorial/16069716.htm>

[38](#)

Dan Bergeson says:

January 17th, 2007 at 9:54 am

Both at the NDDC forum and throughout this discussion, there seems to be an assumption by some that the marketing of downtown, indeed the wider community of Northfield is non-existent. I'd like to offer a list (by no means exhaustive) of all of the marketing efforts of which I'm aware that have taken place during the past 24 months. While I'm a strong proponent of increased and more coordinated efforts in this area, I think it's a good idea to review the base on which we can continue to build.

Feel free to add to this list. I don't intend to leave out anyone's else's work toward our common goal, but my memory might have some gaps in it. That happens more frequently these days. Something about the aging thing.

1. Launch of www.visitingnorthfield.com by the Convention and Visitors Bureau
2. Creation of 5 new sets of downtown lightpole banners and a rotating schedule for installation by the NDDC
3. Establishment of a roadside billboard on I-35 direction traffic to “Historic Northfield” by the NDDC and the Convention and Visitors Bureau
4. Production of the first-ever Vintage Band Music Festival, most events occurring downtown, by Paul Niemisto and the VBF committee
5. Distribution of 1500 “welcome families” bags of downtown information from retailers at St. Olaf and Carleton family weekends by the NDDC
6. Distribution of “Welcome Students” posters for downtown windows by the NDDC
7. “Welcome Students” inserts paid for by downtown retailers stuffed in St. Olaf and Carleton student mailboxes by the NDDC
8. Distribution of “Extended Holiday Hours” signs for downtown windows by the NDDC
9. Distribution of “Welcome Attendees” posters for downtown windows for NCAA athletic championships at St. Olaf and Carleton by the NDDC
10. Launch of “Locally Grown” radio show and website by Griff Wigley, Tracy Davis and Ross Currier
11. Launch of Northfield Entertainment Guide by By All Means Graphics
12. Launch of Diversions section in the Northfield News
13. Staging of first-ever Taste of Northfield in Bridge Square by the NDDC
14. 12 months of Northfield Sesquicentennial events, many events occurring downtown
15. 12 months of Third Thursday events at the Grand Event Center
16. Campus coupons distributed by the Northfield News to all Carleton and St. Olaf students semi-annually
17. Two successful years of ArtSwirl: 10 days of art during August
18. Two seriously successful WinterWalk evenings
19. Two more successful Crazy Daze events
20. Two more wildly popular Jesse James Days weekends
21. Several hundred visits to new residents by Welcome Services for You
22. Distribution of annual Visitor's Guide by the Northfield News and the Chamber of Commerce
23. Extensive programming by the Northfield Historical Society, the Northfield Arts Guild, ArtOrg and the Northfield Public Library
24. Continued enhancements and increased traffic at www.northfield.org

[39](#)

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin says:

January 17th, 2007 at 10:17 am

It was said on another blogg, Northfield has a lot of people who make a living with their heads. I interpreted it as “Northfield has a lot of smart people who make money by inspiring others to pay for their ideas and intellectual talents.”

So let's get deal with the details of running a business in downtown, I believe that most people running their businesses there can explain what works and what doesn't. Their success is no longer depending on how good they are at their business. At least that is what I have been hearing with one or two exceptions.

Thin profit margins are the result of a heavy burden, high taxes, operating costs, etc. This is not something that businesses asked for, or did you all approved the 15% tax increased mentioned by Ross.? What I see is a cloud over the businesses that shaes NDT. from been seeing clearly in relationship with the rest of the city, the region, the state etc. If we get over the cloud, we will be able to take a look at the larger forces that affect DT. With this view we can better suggest the strategies that may help those businesses on the ground be more successful.

The cloud, is made up of the vision for the city, the taxing and re-investment system and policies associated with it, the overall picture of where DT needs to be going in order to succeed etc. A billboard should be at the entrance of the city describing very simply why people passing by should take the time to stop downtown.

The sentence on the billboard is the result of a vision for DT. There is also no need to contradict anything that has been said, all of the contributions have a high value in creating a vision, when other have contributed, there will be work for an outside consultant to take it all and find out what people want for this city and weather it is possible to achieve with the current conditions (taxing, building codes, investment levels, etc.).

This is the work that has been done by the consultants that have come to Northfield in recent years and are back for more. This forum should serve them greatly, but again, we need a more representative participation. Remember, in a meeting at City Hall, you won't have the time to say everything that can be said here, and they probably won't take note of all of what you say. Said here, the notes are taken, and if this forum is representative of a cross section of Northfield, they have an implicit obligation to consider it.

So, leaders of Northfield, can you look into strategies for bringing more representation and take this forum to the next level to really influence how decisions will be made in the near future. It would be a pity to waste all of the amazing contributions made here, not so say the cost associated with all the time we have all invested here.?

Reginaldo.

[40](#)

[Ross Currier](#) says:

January 17th, 2007 at 10:29 am

Good point, Dan, there is a lot of marketing going on in Northfield. Further investment would probably be a good thing, refocusing the message might help, and cooperative efforts definitely would increase the leverage.

The discussion also seems to be focused on attracting more tourists. Certainly this is of interest to many people and I know that the folks at the Convention and Visitors Bureau, where the vast majority of resources for this target market reside, are open to suggestions.

However, looking at the businesses in downtown, approximately 20% are restaurants, 40% are retail and 40% are services. Assuming that half of the retail sells things that might be of interest to tourists, not hardware, medicine, or auto parts, that would be only about 40% of downtown businesses that would benefit from a surge in tourists. Though, who knows, maybe a tourist would get a haircut, buy insurance or hire an architect.

Tracy's comments about Northfield's desire to retain some elements of being a stand-alone community, stressed not only in the aging Comprehensive Plan but also in the recent Economic Development Plan, with a synergy between the residential and commercial portions of our community, seem to call for focusing at least some portion of our resources on the 60% of our commercial sector that is not based on the tourist trade.

[41](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 17th, 2007 at 11:09 am

I guess I wasn't very clear about the issue of marketing. The list Dan presented is fine, but the approaches tend to be very traditional, very passive or very transient. There is information on the website if someone finds the website. And the websites aren't very intuitive in sending people to the information easily. The visitor's guide is available by mail, but you should be able to download a pdf.

There are banners to see if you're already here. The students get a piece of paper in a mailbox, but what happens the rest of term, when the piece of paper is in the trash. They are fine as far as they go, but I was talking about creative, ongoing, proactive — and cheap — ways of engaging the people who live here and getting the attention of those who don't.

Some of the events, such as Third Thursdays, are great, but people don't find out about them in time to plan to attend.

The list of businesses on the CVB website is nice, but the shops don't have descriptions or weblinks. And as I recounted at the NDDC meeting, my daughter wanted to buy us a gift card but instead had to mail a check, get paper certificates and now I have to carry a wad of paper instead of a convenient gift card in my wallet. I know there are fees, but a universal gift card available online would be a huge draw for parents and grandparents looking to send gifts to students and for snowbirds and former residents to send to friends and relatives here.

You do a good job of reaching the Northfield News, but little information gets to Northfield.org, or to more than general media lists. There are shopping reporters and food critics and theater critics and arts publications, all of whom need to have good relationships with us so they will use our businesses as sources in stories and mention us over and over in lots of ways, not just when big events happen. This isn't about placing ads on paper or mailing brochures, it's about creating a buzz, getting people talking. I've seen it done over and over and you can't buy that kind of media attention. I monitor the media closely and Northfield has some of that buzz now, and it wouldn't be hard at all to build on it.

There are lots and lots of other possibilities I see every day in my work. That's why I mentioned Ely and Bayfield and other cities that have gone well beyond tourism to integrate all the pieces they need to build their futures.

And I haven't even started on the ways individual businesses can build sales...

I'm not saying the bigger issues should be ignored, it's just that there's so much you can do while you chip away at the bigger issues.

[42](#)

[Jerry Bilek](#) says:

January 17th, 2007 at 1:09 pm

Yes, there is a lot of marketing and some of it is great. But we can do more and better, I think. How do we reach the 60% of Northfielders who don't currently shop downtown. The Northfield News, internet, direct mail? I wish I knew. Certainly there is a large untapped internet presence. Most DT retail stores don't have a website. I could find just a couple who sell online.

It is a shame the EDA is ignoring downtown. The value of bringing businesses to this business park is great. But how do you attract businesses to a ghost town, which is what DT can become if ignored.

Businesses look for cities with good infrastructure, schools, health care etc. A healthy DT is a strong selling point for Northfield. The EDA funding for DT is a disgrace. The NEC is a joke(it can work, but it does not now). The NDDC should be properly funded by the EDA. The NDDC has proven it's worthiness.

There are a lot of good ideas on this forum. How do we corral them into positive change? I like what the NDDC has done so far. How do we take it to the next level? I am open to ideas and willing to help if I can.

Jerry

[43](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 17th, 2007 at 8:19 pm

Anne,

You are absolutely right about building on the buzz and your suggestions spell out something that could be stronger for Northfield. Thankyou for the suggestions. I hope folks take heart of your suggestions. Can you also build upon “the ways individual businesses can build sales...”
thanks.

[44](#)

[Griff Wigley](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 7:27 am

Reginaldo wrote:

So, leaders of Northfield, can you look into strategies for bringing more representation and take this forum to the next level to really influence how decisions will be made in the near future. It would be a pity to waste all of the amazing contributions made here, not so say the cost associated with all the time we have all invested here?

Jerry wrote:

There are a lot of good ideas on this forum. How do we corral them into positive change? I like what the NDDC has done so far. How do we take it to the next level? I am open to ideas and willing to help if I can.

Some possibilities for next steps:

* Capture the text of this discussion, clean it up a bit, create a pdf, and then take it to TPTB (the powers that be) at the NDDC, Chamber, EDA, and City Council.

* Schedule a time-limited, moderated web forum, with 3-4 panelists and the commitment from the leaders of above-named organizations to participate.

[45](#)

[Ross Currier](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 9:24 am

Hey Folks:

I'm not sure that this plan will meet everyone's needs or desires, however the next two NDDC Forums will be following up on issues raised at January's Forum.

More on this topic soon,

Ross

[46](#)

[Griff Wigley](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 9:50 am

Great to hear, Ross.

Since a lot of people are subscribed to this comment thread, would you post a link here to your NDDC blog entries announcing those next two forums?

It might even be helpful to do a little pre-NDDC forum discussion here.

[47](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 11:35 am

Great news, Ross. Just please be sure to share it with Northfield.org as well. And check out Northfield.org later today for more on a plan of ours to continue this discussion on several fronts. As always, we'll be happy to work with NDDC and Locally Grown to broaden the conversation—and start working on solutions.

[48](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 8:01 pm

I really need to comment here folks, let's do a quick assessment:

From Reginaldo (Wigley) "strategies for bringing more representation"

Obviously there is a need to involve more people from the wider community into the process. People from unrepresented communities like immigrants and non-English speaking people.

From Jerry (Wigley) "take to the next level"

The next level could be (let me work here Jerry) summary / consolidate the issues, discussion at multiple civic organizations, discussion with the wider community, and actually implementing the ideas (want a concept) - any of levels would work.

From Wigley "Capture the text of this discussion...clean it up a bit" and "Schedule a time-limited, moderated web forum".

Great comment Griff, lets put these ideas into a document that makes sense for the average reader, one who may not have access to the web and a document that can be easily published into a different forum. As well as the web forum, let's make the document accessible to non-web community.

From Anne "broaden the conversation--and start working on solutions"

The greatest compliment I can make here is to rip-off your comment-- folks just start working on solutions, don't be afraid to embarrass yourself.

My contribution is to suggest (1) Understand what people are saying; and (2) Align the various comments into subject headings. (3) I haven't heard any response's regarding the Third-Tier Cities: Adjusting to the New Economy. Either this means that folks haven't read it, or have read it and think it's crap, or, don't really understand it. I know from my experience that it's extremely relevant to the City of Northfield. Folks, we don't have to re-invent the wheel, other people with far more experience and skill than us have done this before.

[49](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 8:56 pm

Thanks, Peter, for cutting to the chase.

I'm taking a leap here and offering to start working on those solutions. I will be doing "office hours" at local coffee shops and restaurants each week to talk about ways to improve the visibility of downtown business, get media attention, set goals and work on meeting them. I'll also be answering questions about how Northfield.org works and discussing just about anything else you want to bring to the table. You can read the story here.

<http://northfield.org/node/2548>

[50](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 8:58 pm

And Peter, I promise to read the book you suggested next. It sounds like a winner.

[51](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 26th, 2007 at 9:46 pm

Anne,

What a challenge you lay down. Perhaps others can "walk the talk". PS, you really don't have to read all the report, just the relevant parts that are mentioned in my previous comments. The report is more than building business DT, but about building robust communities in the New Economy. The reason I bring this report up is that I haven't actually heard any person explain the problem, just reactions to a series of unfortunate events.

Free Coffee hey.

52

Jerry Bilek says:

January 28th, 2007 at 11:40 am

Peter,

I read the report, good stuff. I hope the EDA members read it and others like it. Here is a link to 3 economic impact studies that are helpful as well:

<http://www.bookweb.org/education/5975.html>

“kkep Austin Wierd” developed out of the first of these studies.

These studies show the economic power of local vs. chain businesses. I hope the EDA looks at issues like this and those outlined in Smallmart before they proceed with the business park.

I considered heavily the factors in the third tier study before I opened my business. The colleges were an important factor.

Hey, I’m up for the live discussion on tue. and more from the NDDC. In the meantime I am struggling to figure out my own marketing plan for 2007. Any suggestions?

Jerry

53

Griff Wigley says:

January 28th, 2007 at 1:00 pm

Ross/Tracy,

Isn’t the new business park basically a done deal?

54

victor summa says:

January 28th, 2007 at 2:14 pm

I’m not Ross nor Tracy but, Griff are you serious... or is your comment FN?

“Isn’t the New Business Park a done Deal? “

Hello! We’re closer on the library - \$9,000,000 plus or minus....

Arguably there’s more momentum on the Hockey arena (2 sheets) \$8,000,000 to 10,000,000...

And prudent development plans for these would likely carry a \$5,000,000 parking ramp situated so as to serve both these in the developing downtown.

Meanwhile, barriers to the Industrial Park development are:

\$2,000,000 to \$3,000,000 just for street and sewers.

1.6 Million to 2 million more... just for purchase of the acreage (160/200 acres) at 10 k each...

Little public interest in that... when its “offing” is compared to the aforementioned DT amenities..... and oh, yes... one other barrier:

No one seems to be the developer standing in the wings. Maybe you can write a FN about that!

While Northfield can surely benefit from such development... it’s ironic that the area in question (the northwest edge) is JUST OUTSIDE the Northfield city limits... thus making this site truly reminiscent of the Northwest Territory of America’s past. Warring Indians, Grizzly Bears, violent weather and raging rivers, were nothing compared to today’s money needs and developers “bottom line” goals.

Pity there hasn't been more effort devoted by EDAs and City Councils to keeping some previously identified and zoned industrial land along Hwy. 3 south for "MORE LIKELY" IN-FILL DEVELOPMENT.

Imagine a corporate tower of sorts situated to overlook the Cannon River just a few minutes south of a vibrant expanded DT. A DT flanked by two amazing mid rise housing developments - filled in with a LANDMARK THEATER ON THE Q BLOCK AND a half dozen rather good eating establishments complimenting CHAPATI and the other long standing watering and chowing holes along Division Street, and Shops... shops bustling with activity.

Two years ago the cry around the Council and the EDA was: Gimme 40 acres! Just 40 acres to keep College City Beverages in Northfield. All the King's horses and all the king's men couldn't put that deal together back then.

So, "done deal"?

'Fraid not. Good Deal? Not so good deal? Who knows?

But Me thinks your question was driven by plans for more discussion at the NDDC of the DT and how to advance it [the DT].

Well, you tell me... what's most likely to happen first (involving fewer City dollars) Opening the Northwest Territories or expanding the DT.

Second question: Which of these two activities will have the greater impact on the other coming to pass? That is to say, will the Industrial Park out past the hospital pump up development of the DT... OR will an increasingly vibrant DT be a value added asset to developing the fringes of the community.

Deal or no deal?

victor

[55](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 28th, 2007 at 5:37 pm

Jerry,

Thanks for links. I will look at the material over the next few days and post a comment. I'm sure that they hit the nail on the head. Economies of scale are a large part of Economic Impact Analysis (EIA) (as apposed to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

[As a quick side bar, it's amazing that we do extensive "environmental" impact studies for housing or road development, but never hardly do "economic" impact studies for commercial development!. Is 'environmental' impacts less understood than the economic? Having worked extensively in both environmental and economic impact assessment, there is generally a lack of appreciation of the later in this region.]

Back to issue, Jerry you are absolutely correct, both Colleges are the greatest, if not the only distinguishing feature for this community. I know that this may not be a popular thing to say, (but who's trying to be popular), sometimes the truth hurts and the first thing that is part of any real impact assessment is defining "the situation".

My little story about the string of pearls relates back to economies of scale (ES). It does matter what situation we have, the ES is always part of the equation. The comments made by Victor today, (whether he knows it or not {to know or not to know Victor} speaks to this issue). Lets me show you, "more momentum" (public interest); "parking ramp" (why do cars get more investment than local private investment – economies of scale!); "street and sewers" (these usually are planned! we hope); "amenities" (a basic component); OUTSIDE the Northfield city limits (wow what a big one); and the really big one....."keeping some previously identified and zoned industrial land along Hwy. 3 south for "MORE LIKELY" IN-FILL DEVELOPMENT" (you said it all Victor any thing else is just repetition); but wait

there's more, another truth statement about ES "just a few minutes south of a vibrant expanded DT" (I really need to stop there, attention span for most folks is limited to 15 minutes).

My comments can nothing but repeat what has been said, except of course, (I'm not trying to be popular remember), shame on the NDDC for not doing its JOB. I think Ross is an excellent representative for the DT, however the NDDC board needs to be "fired" for not doing there job.

End of story.....

What do you think!!

[56](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 28th, 2007 at 6:25 pm

I think it's crucial to separate what people want from what is feasible economically. A corporate tower downtown isn't going to happen. And if by some miracle it did, it would come with all the new housing and traffic and development that people say they don't want.

Several downtown restaurants aren't going to happen in a market that won't support adding grills to even the most successful existing establishments. Even independent restaurants in downtown Mpls. and the burbs are struggling to stay in business — with 10 times the population. And chains have formulas for traffic and parking that keep downtown out of the game.

Northfield is far behind the rest of the metro area in doing economic development. Why not take the data that's already out there and see what can be applied here?

Talk to some experts and get some real answers and then do the best job possible with realistic goals instead of speculating endlessly on pipe dreams.

If you think a movie theater will work, find someone who will do it or leave it be and focus on a library with capability to do movie nights or adding better equipment to the Grand to host occasional movie nights. It would be a shame to design a library without those capabilities and then find out later that they should have been included because a theater won't work.

And using the Grand or another venue to build demand would be one way of proving viability to a developer.

A \$5 million parking ramp? Build a flat lot and prove you can fill it before you ask for that kind of subsidy for downtown.

And what are the likely business/commercial targets? Can they use in-fill lots or do they need 40 acres?

What have building permits throughout the area shown?

Isn't it time to bury the dead horses instead of beating them and find some that can pull the wagons the next leg of this journey?

[57](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 28th, 2007 at 7:44 pm

Anne, I'd be interested in why you think "Northfield is far behind the rest of the metro area in doing economic development". What do you base that statement on?

Northfield has multiple challenges in terms of both overall economic development, and downtown vitality:

- 1) No large parcels of undeveloped land for formulaic commercial development, metro-suburban-style, even if we wanted it
- 2) Annexation agreements with neighboring municipalities that effectively tie our hands in terms of additional land
- 3) Imbalance of commercial-residential tax base which makes it problematic to provide services and support many of the amenities citizens say they want (expanded library, swimming pool, ice arena, etc.)
- 4) Lack of creative developers who will tackle infill projects (developers as a whole are not a terribly innovative bunch, and they're not likely to do anything they perceive as "risky" [read: different] without economic incentives to do so)

I could go on, but this hits some of the high points.

Sadly, in terms of economic development, our historic downtown has been mostly off the radar, for reasons I mentioned earlier (defining economic development in terms of number of jobs, and increasing the tax base). The TIP economic development plan/study did a good job of outlining strategies for ameliorating some of the imbalances outlined above, and gave very specific recommendations for the types of businesses that would be most compatible with Northfield's strengths and weaknesses.

Unfortunately there was not as much detail about what can or should be done specific to the downtown. I'd like to lobby for the City's doing a feasibility study or even strategic plan focused on downtown issues, taking the TIP plan to another level of detail. The City has done a very good job of casting its net wider when looking for consultants in the last couple of years, so we aren't limited to "expert" knowledge of only what's familiar in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, or in the upper midwest, or whatever.

[58](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 28th, 2007 at 9:10 pm

Tracy, I appreciate you chiming into the conversation; let me also add some value to the issues that Ann wrote based on some of your points:

Point #1 No large parcels of undeveloped land....

What do you call 'large parcels of land'? As for "formulaic commercial development" let's cut the jargon here. There are larger parcels that sit unutilized, subdivided, or in the hands of speculators. You do not need large parcels of land to create economic development, it all about economies of scale.

Point #2 Annexation agreements with neighboring municipalities....

From my experience annexation is not the issue. And if it did, what does that have to with DT economic development? Nothing. There is plenty of existing land within the City limits. It just a matter of asking the people who own it to consolidate or subdivide. There are many existing lots and empty buildings in Northfield that can be used for the purpose of commercial, retail or industrial development. Again, what type of land is available, green, brown or infill. It's not about getting "additional land". Land is a commodity, it's simply supply and demand and with any S&D system, there are those that benefit and some that lose depending on the S&D. Economics 101.

Point #3 Imbalance of commercial-residential tax base.....

If it's so "problematic", why is the City exploring options for relocating the library and safety center? The city knew for years that the swimming pool was failing, why leave it so late. Was the financial cost of repairing the pool a symptom or a cause of ignoring the issue?!!

What about other huge public investments the City has made, like the HOSIPTAL. Can you explain to us from your experience how much money the City spent on this project and the cost at the expense of other infrastructure? But let's not go there as it might upset too many people. What tools did the City provide to allow developers to building along TH3? So in terms of tax cost and benefit, let's be honest about the issues.

Point #4 Lack of creative developers who will tackle.....

Developers weigh their investment, not the risk; the risk is already calculated. But what type of risk are you talking about, land development, building lease etc. Incentives can be tailored to each level of the investment. The issue is, were are the highest investment and the lowest! Sound familiar.

There is not lack of creative developers, just a lack of leadership. What type of risk taker are you talking about? The mar and par risk taker or out-of-towner with spare cash? If you're talking about tipping the edge in favor of the smaller risk taker than be specific. What sort of businesses does Northfield want to attract? The ones that pay the minimum wage or higher end wages that actually allow folks to reinvest, like spend their money locally.

[59](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 28th, 2007 at 10:03 pm

Hi, Peter,

I'm not sure how to define "large" other than to say that developers who have met with City staff in the past couple of years have said that there are no identified contiguous areas large enough for whatever proposals they might be interesting in bringing to the table.

You're right in saying that land can be viewed as a commodity. What do you suppose happens to prices when word gets out that a developer (or municipality) wants a landowner to "consolidate or subdivide"? When the issue isn't actual available land, it's the cost of whatever land *is* available. Have you tried getting your "speculators" to sell lately?

No, annexation has nothing directly to do with downtown economic development, it's just a larger piece of the overall puzzle we're trying to work out.

Regarding your questions and comments about the hospital and Hwy. 3: I don't know anything about the hospital deal. It didn't involve the EDA and most of the decisions were made prior to my time of civic involvement. To my knowledge, the biggest and perhaps only City "tool" involved in development along Highway 3 was crappy ordinances. Most of that land was privately owned and developed, as I'm sure you know.

In answer to your last question about the kinds of businesses Northfield wants to attract, I'll refrain from offering my own opinions and just say that the City's position, based on received and adopted plans and strategies, would favor businesses that pay a living wage, not minimum wage; would have synergy with existing businesses, perhaps up or down the supply chain; and wouldn't necessarily require large parcels of land. Identified industries with immediate potential for economic growth in Northfield include:

- Logistics
- Specialty manufacturing
- Environmental technologies
- Medical/healthcare
- Professional & technical services
- Information, digital and media arts

Many companies in these sectors could conceivably locate downtown, depending upon what their land/space needs are.

Last, I can't agree that the problem is lack of leadership vs. lack of creative developers. Leadership can only go so far until and unless there's money behind it.

[60](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 28th, 2007 at 11:23 pm

Tracy,

I base my conclusion on more than 20 years of writing about small and large communities throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota, the last three years specifically profiling economic development efforts in communities throughout the metro area and southern Minnesota. I've read more economic development plans than I care to total on paper, and I've been to enough visioning sessions to cure an insomniac. I've researched hundreds of municipal, county and economic development websites across the country. I've talked to developers, consultants and government officials. I've driven through dozens of cities, checked out new developments, read the state and private sector demographic reports and follow the business strategies of dozens of national retailers and restaurant chains. I go to development conferences and talk to the panelists. That's my job.

I don't have all the answers, but the information is all out there...and as the cliché goes, it's not rocket

science. It's just clear, hard math. Figure the cost of land and construction, add in population and traffic projections, factor for taxes and incentives. The numbers either add up or they don't.

What have I seen in the last two years here?

Northfield's economic development plan is vague and weak. City, business, chamber and NDDC and enterprise center efforts are disjointed and unfocused. There's no clear inventory of available properties and land. (Refusing to name key parcels needed for large sites doesn't drive off speculators, it drives off developers.)

There's not enough understanding of the industries considered targets for the community, or of the competition offered by other communities in the region.

There are few solutions and no dollar figures attached to any solution.

There is no long-range plan for city and school district spending, prioritizing and consolidating facilities and pinpointing funding for major projects (library, hockey rink, school levies). This makes companies nervous because they can't project long-term costs.

Still, I'm not negative about Northfield. I feel it has potential in some key areas. There's a lot of work to be done. It's harder than beating a dead horse, but ultimately more rewarding.

[61](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 28th, 2007 at 11:48 pm

Anne,

One of my afterthoughts when I posted earlier tonight was that, if there were solutions that were either simple or easy, they'd have been done by now.

I understand your point of view, based on the experiences you enumerated, but I believe that both your confidence and your conclusions may be based on biased data. In addition to being unduly weighted toward the business strategies of national retailers and restaurants, which have almost nothing to do with what is faced by the independents, everything you've said points to old-school development thinking, and I just don't believe that's sufficient.

And it isn't just clear, hard math, because there are factors that are not quantifiable, such as quality of life or place, or the value residents of a small community place on remaining as distinctive as possible while building economically sustainable models of development.

There certainly is an inventory of available property (see <http://www.mnpro.com/home.asp>); however, what is *not* listed is property which is not officially listed for sale, but which may be available "at the right price".

I've come to the conclusion that the type of development and redevelopment that the community of Northfield both wants and needs is **not** going to come about based purely on market forces. I believe we'll need to apply public resources to enable and ensure the kind of development that will be best for the community over the next 10-30 years and beyond.

I'd be interested to know how controversial this idea is - that we, the citizens and government, can monkey around with the Free Market to try to get something we like out of the deal. Most developers are looking for ROI much sooner than that timeframe, and they make their decisions accordingly. We need to take a longer-range view. Uses come and go, but buildings tend to hang around for an awfully long time; and once we've taken ag land and converted it into little pink (or beige) houses, it's not easy to get back.

[62](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 7:41 am

Tracy,

The dead horse is back in the room. We have gone around and around on this, so I must be brief. It's not clear what people here want or how they will get it. Victor talks about office towers and movie theaters and restaurants, definitely old school.

I'm not talking about chains or outside developers being the answer, just pointing out the planning deficiencies you asked me to point out. The other communities I have covered haven't depended on chains but have plans that provided balanced growth. (By the way, what is the residency requirement to be considered a local business person?) If the goal is to launch a dozen new businesses a year for people born in Northfield, each grossing \$500k per year but requiring \$50k a year in subsidies for life, then say it. How many businesses do we need, how much will it cost and for how long?

Finally, whose quality of life are we subsidizing — mine or the independent business people? I'd love it if the city subsidized Northfield.org because I love working from home and newspaper chains like the News use up trees and compete with little publications, but even I wouldn't have the nerve to suggest that.

How successful does a business have to be to become bad? How many offices or branches does it have to have to be an evil chain?

With all due respect, I will no longer address the problems, just the solutions. See you all Tuesday morning at Blue Mondays.

[63](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:08 am

OOPSand OH OH and UFF DA for all you Scandies..... This is turning into a CATfight!

Can you focus on the economic disparity between what the DT buildings cost the owners (taxes, historic upkeep and renovation, etc)and what some small independent businesses can pay and back off the competition/expertise mode? Peter is the only Professional planning expert here, the rest of us are various levels of business or personally involved observers.

Focus on economics. Please.....and Thank you.

Kiffi

[64](#)

Anne Bretts says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:16 am

Thanks, Kiffi,

Fighting cats, dead horses, vivid images but so not the point. We agree that it's time to focus on the numbers...which I have been trying to do without success.

Please add a proposal, with numbers attached, that would achieve a goal.

[65](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:17 am

Come on Anne,

Everyone likes to beat a dead horse. But in this case, perhaps I can add my own horsy analogy. "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink". Sometime it's not about leading the either horse, but about how thirsty you can make it. Now, enough horsing around.

Tracy is right, market forces alone will not be enough.

What about these:

- The latest example of infill development around Northfield have proven that – it's a fact.
- Civic land uses and activities are a form of public/community investment.
- The City provides low interest loans, grants and other forms of \$ incentives.
- Other types of civic investment can make it easier for building owners and business people to invest DT by streamlining the building and planning process.

Does anyone else have any horsy stories?

[66](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:29 am

Folks,

I just read Griffs post on the Northfield Liquor, here is a chance for the NDDC to put there money where there mouth is.

This is an excellant opportunity to assess how market forces, civic institutions, public \$ backing and private DT interests work together....or not!

What is the NDDC position on this proposal?

Come on - lets flog this dead horse, its been around for at least.... mmm..let me think....5 years!

[67](#)

Tracy Davis says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:26 am

Catfights and dead horses, gotta love it...

I get frustrated too, but I don't see it as beating a dead horse. How are we supposed to come up with "solutions" and "proposals" when we can't define the problem?

[68](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 29th, 2007 at 1:31 pm

Kiffi,

Thanks for complement about being an expert. I now that some folks always laugh when we compliement others like you have. So thanks. And by the way, I happen to agree with you.

But I am not an expert YET!! in setting up an individual business in DT and making it successful. This is my weakpoint in the conversation. So my comments try to reflect a land use, planning and economic perspective. Call it.....free professional help.

Despite being a know it all planner, I am still open for compliments from anyone,.....anyone.

Anyone hearing clipity claps lately?

[69](#)

victor summa says:

January 29th, 2007 at 6:35 pm

Victor here.... On Peter's thanx to Kiffi for the "kind" words"....

Careful! Complimenting staff or... former staff, is traveling a "land-mined road".

They're the professionals! Piffle!

Then, when they (any two professionals) disagree... which of their perspectives is our preferred? The one we fired... or, the one we hired, who fired the one we hired? Or, the one who spoke out, then was run out! Or, the one who sits on his hands... and the Comp Plan - only to invoke it when there's a challenge to their peaceful existence. (translates as job security)

Maybe we need a town meeting to sort all this stuff out. Question: Who facilitates?

I'd say the EDA. The NDDC sponsors a meeting giving the EDA a unique opportunity to run an info gathering session.

You'd think, in as much as the DT is a "prime concern" as expressed in the fabled EDA TIP plan (\$90,000 TIP plan) that they'd be on site much more frequently at the ol' NDDC monthly meetings.

Well, ask them, as unit to come and ask questions of their constitues. They've been flying upside down and blind... with commands from one source to another, flailing around like red squirrels on a fall walnut hunt in my back yard... for ten years. Let them ask, and receive... from the Great Unwashed.

NO STAFF! We always defer to staff 'cause they're "professionals".

When, we get our ducks in order, then, let the staff water and feed them... otherwise, take notes.

I'll ask my question again... and really would appreciate some answers (opinions)

Which of these two activities (developing an NW industrial site - or filling in the DT) will have the greater impact on the other [development] coming to pass?

That is to say, will the Industrial Park, out past the hospital, pump up development of the DT... OR will an increasingly vibrant DT be a value added asset to developing the fringes of the community.

Seeking both professional and lay opinions here.

So, Come to the February NDDC meeting, Archer House Meeting Room, FEB 6, 8AM - and, if you've only sat there before... speak up now. Others, hold your tongue. I'll hold mine.

Please NDDC, can we video tape this record?

[70](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

January 29th, 2007 at 6:51 pm

Victor,

Are we onto ducks now? I haven't finished my horse jokes. If we're onto ducks jokes here goes:

A duck walks into a bar and asks the bartender for corn. The bartender says "We have no corn, get out of here." So the duck leaves. The next day he comes back and asks for corn again, and the bartender says "I told you, we don't have any corn! Get out!" So the duck leaves. The next day he goes in again and asks for corn, and the bartender says, "For the last time, we don't have corn! If you ever come back, I'm going to nail those webbed feet of yours to the floor!" So the duck leaves. The next day the duck comes and asks, "Do you have any nails?" The bartender says, "No, of course not. Why would a bar have nails?" The duck then says, "Good. Can I have some corn?"

Here another:

What's the difference between a duck with one wing and a duck with two wings?

A difference of a pinion

[71](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 29th, 2007 at 7:24 pm

Imagine this..... I'm going to disagree with VMFSII ! The EDA? You've got to be kidding! Why would you want the EDA to facilitate any meeting; I think the general opinion is that they have a hard enough time with their "fellow travelers".

I, IMHO, don't even see them initiating any strong action on the plan they paid 90K for, just last year. Why is only the "industrial park" part of the TIP plan getting any talk? What about parts 2&3, the Q-block, and the DT? Those are tied together even though the Highway Q-block is C-2 zoning. What about "priming the pump" on the Q..... build the surface parking that the Walker parking study advocated several YEARS ago; hire a local architect to come up with a spectacular three sided building, retail and offices with all the parking in the center, and a glass restaurant on top of the central parking..... Do something! Vic's movie theatre, Landmark-style, with college students walking from east and west, and townies coming from all over, because they are the movies they are NOT going to see at the multiplexes AND there is a Wolfgang Puck Bar in the glass penthouse! Dreaming now?????

Well, "Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird and cannot fly"!

I'm not beating a dead horse, Anne; I'm looking for Pegasus.

Kiffi

[72](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 7:35 pm

If the spaces at the Crossing are empty, who will fill the new spaces in the Q block? Who will build the theater? How will these new ventures make money once they are built? Truly curious...

[73](#)

[Felicity Enders](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 7:51 pm

Hi everyone,

I thought I'd drop in my \$0.02. My husband and I are part of the "Creative Class," and we're moving to Northfield in a few months... and one of the key factors that drew us to Northfield is the downtown. I think it's a great place, and I can't wait to shop/eat/caffienate myself there regularly. Also, because a downtown like that is so hard to find (and so close to the cities) it's likely to be a major commodity in the future. I'd say build around/better support what's already there.

Some factors to consider:

1) The library! Keeping the library downtown could draw people (me) downtown.

2) Wireless access...

3) I love the small grants/loans from the city idea. That way the town has some control over the diversity of what goes in. Specifically, things that go in should continue to be charming. If a movie theater goes in, it should go in an existing building and be one of those fun and "different" theaters, not a huge megaplex that would likely draw people away from the other stores. "Charm" is what's currently there to capitalize upon.

4) parking/access. If the downtown becomes much more vibrant, this is likely to be a concern.

OK, that was longer than I intended. But obviously this is an issue we all care about.

Felicity

[74](#)

[kiffi summa](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 7:52 pm

A SMART theatre chain will build the movie theatre if they are sold on the idea. 5000 college students within walking distance, at colleges that do NOT have stellar film series; and a whole big bunch of townies that keep bumping into each other at the Edina and the Lagoon. We could run busses to those two sites if we could all agree where to eat afterwards!

It's not "truly curious", it's truly infuriating that we have no city support for marketing the DT if it's such a big economic deal, because it's such a quality of life deal, as the TIP plan says.

The city's economic development specialist job description should have a marketing component that aggressively sells NF.

[75](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:10 pm

So after two years of listening to people wanting a theater, I still find no one is any closer to a proposal or a potential developer. I just hear more demands that someone should do it.

There is no answer to the question about how the Q block project would be viable, just another demand for the city to market private businesses who should be working together to market themselves.

Yes, waiting for a mythical beast like Pegasus is an apt description of this kind of economic development planning.

[76](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 8:48 pm

A couple of quick points, as I'm on the run:

1. Thank you for chiming in, Felicity, it's good to hear your point of view.
2. Kiffi, I completely agree that the emphasis on the business park to the detriment of the other emphases in the TIP plan is a problem and needs to be addressed.
3. Anne, your point about the theater is excellent and gets to the heart of the issue. I don't know if you were referring specifically to a downtown theater or a new theater in general, but a downtown-based movie theater as envisioned by some is not likely to find a developer with the fiscal resources to build it. There aren't any good, relevant models in the metro area which could make the developer and his/her bankers comfortable with risking something so far removed from the usual formula. The only theater proposal / developer interest we've seen is from someone wanting to build on the suburban model (behemoth of a building surrounded by acres of parking on the outskirts of town), which might make it difficult for the students to get to, especially since there are no sidewalks or bike trails to facilitate anything other than auto access in that area.

I suspect the only way Northfield could get a theater downtown would be to justify using public monies in some fashion. And that isn't likely until there's a concrete proposal in hand. And that won't happen until someone takes the lead and spends the money to do the market studies, have an architect draw up some plans, etc. And I can't see either the EDA or the NDDC doing that, given their current emphases and funding (or lack of it), even if they could be convinced that they should.

SO - if "we" the citizens feel strongly enough about this, then I suggest that we mobilize, get hold of John Mathern and the City to discuss what can be done on the Q-block without control of all the parcels, and see if there's any way to make this happen in that location. It's probably the most feasible option at present - and we may find that for several reasons it's not feasible at all. But I guess I'd like to know one way or the other.

[77](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:00 pm

Again, this isn't rocket science and doesn't require a market study. Thanks to the Internet and some phone calls, it took one day to determine that there are no theater chains, mainstream or alternative, that consider a Q-block theater financially viable or sensible, given the noise of nearby trains.

Even Southgate seems headed for trouble when the new theater opens in the spring. The colleges now run buses to Lakeville for movies, so running buses to a new theater in town won't be a problem.

Again, a viable option might be adding movie technology to a new library or the Grand to have movie night events, which could use themes, food or festivals to draw an audience. Perhaps talking to the Southgate owner about testing independent movies, festivals, etc., might be a way to put this topic to rest.

[78](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:41 pm

What's an "alternative chain"?

[79](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:44 pm

Folks, - great comments.

I'm really seeing some deep thinking about the pros and cons associated to the example of the Q block. I worked on the issues several years (from the City perspective). Extensive staff time was spent on looking at

the lots and reconfiguration, plus issues like building lot area, parking availability, green space and mixed use. There is still work to do.

Currently, there is no mixed use ordinance right now, but I could have a draft within 2 days - believe it or not. If folks are interested, let me know and I can put my money where my mouth is and my planning "expertise" to use. 2 days!!!. But that is the beginning of the MARKETING EXERCISE. Next, issues like \$/acre, incentives for jobs, public transport, access, the list goes on. Then, there is the choice of attracting like minded people and investors, then the decision makers, then public opinion.

Folks, you have provided very good comments. Especially Kiffi, Anne and Tracy. In my opinion, having a mix of different views actually makes the solution stronger and more robust. I think the conversation to date has really demonstrated that the problem can be solved with hard work. But that's reality. It will take hard work to figure it out and lots of back and forth to "make the vision a reality".

If people are having a hard time right I suggest looking at this:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_intelligence

Can I still tell a horsey joke now.

"There was the horse trainer who told riders that the hardest part about learning to ride was the ground."

[80](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:49 pm

There are mainstream chains, like Carmike and AMC and Mann and on a smaller scale the Lakes and Rivers group that is building the new theater here. The Lagoon and Uptown in Minneapolis look like independent alternative movie houses but both are part of the Landmark chain, a giant national company that has a lock on independent and alternative movies.

(Mann leases movies to Southgate, but has no stake in the theater, which is a rare independent outlet. I did a story a few months ago laying out the numbers.

Landmark doesn't touch small markets, and the Lakes and Rivers guy (an Ole who loves Northfield) said he couldn't make a downtown theater fly here or in any of the other small towns he targets.

[81](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:50 pm

Good point about the trains - now I remember hearing that before. But the issue of getting locals to DO something still stands; I doubt we'll get the kind of venue that's envisioned from an outside developer who doesn't already have some stake in the community. So if not the Q-block, perhaps some other area contiguous to the downtown...But nothing will happen without someone taking the lead to develop a *specific* idea and keep it moving forward.

We've got a lot of ideas in this town, but not enough people who will actually do the necessary work. Which isn't surprising, since for the most part it's thankless volunteer work and doesn't make one anything but adversaries.

[82](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:54 pm

Anne, do you recall what Steve Payne thought was the crucial difference between a theater on south Hwy 3 vs. a downtown location, why one was viable and the other not?

[83](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 9:56 pm

That's why we're meeting tomorrow morning (Tuesday) to see whether anyone wants to do more than beat that dead horse or wait for mythical ones to take flight. Could be a small group, but I'll take a few workers over a room full of complainers any day.

[84](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 10:03 pm

Trains were a key problem with the Q block, but highway access and the sheer acreage needed were the deal-breakers. Look at his website and see the list of theaters in Red Wing, Owatonna, Hibbing, etc, etc. Viability requires a dozen screens, with related parking. Other chain executives, all of whom love and respect Northfield, agree. Again, check out my story for the details.

[85](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 10:03 pm

I'd love to join your work group, but I'm already a bit overcommitted what with work on the Comp Plan issue, the EDA fiberoptic initiative, a couple of blogs, and three demanding teenage daughters. Oh, yeah, and then there's my 10-hour-a-day business, too, I forgot that, and geez, I have to be traveling for nine days out of the next 30.... But hey, I'll lift a glass and toast you all, and maybe I can join in later. 😊

[86](#)

[Anne Bretts](#) says:

January 29th, 2007 at 10:04 pm

We're all busy...thanks for the kind thoughts.

[87](#)

[Ross Currier](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 7:57 am

One problem with radio is that you can't see the commentators' expressions. In yesterday's podcast, I wish you could have seen Carleton student Mathius Bell's expression when he commented on developers who built beyond the student body's walking range. I interpreted it to indicate that he was wondering why someone would leave that much money on the table.

[88](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 9:58 am

Ross made an interesting post about [trends in theaters and theatergoing](#) on the NDDC site. The model he's describing sounds more interesting and suitable for Northfield. Let's contact a couple of these new-style theaters and see if we can get some ballpark financial info to determine feasibility. Any volunteers?

[89](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 10:32 am

My horse and I would be happy to assist. Just let me know.

[90](#)

[Larry DeBoer](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 3:56 pm

After reading all 89 posts on this forum, I am seeing no difference in Northfield thinking today than I saw in the 1992 Northfield Visioning Definition that was developing when I moved here. Someone commented that they were upset to see the EDA ignore downtown with a comparison to funds dedicated to industry vs. downtown. While all the discussion is focused on finding and supporting businesses that will "fit" with our downtown the main problem to me is that all our local businesses lack "feet on the street". The EDA is looking at the longer range idea of attracting more people to come and live in the Northfield Region which will bring the feet and consumers with needs. One only needs to drive down I-35 to Faribault to see all sorts of new industry with good paying jobs: ABC Bus, Sage Electronics, ALDI Supermarket Distribution, et. al. While we fret and theorize about how nice it would be if....Faribault is developing an economic Engine That Could.

[91](#)

[Peter Waskiw](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 4:32 pm

Nice to hear from you Larry. Thank you for the comparison. Working with the various Cities and Counties around south east Minnesota. I too am seeing a trend similar to the one you mentioned in Faribault.

I must say that Rice County and the City of Faribault work very well together transportation wise. They understand the pull that good access makes and plan their local street infrastructure accordingly. They also know how to work closely with various state agencies to pull it off.

[92](#)

[Tracy Davis](#) says:

January 30th, 2007 at 5:03 pm

And let me mention the key thing that Faribault has that Northfield lacks: Big parcels and cheap land.

[93](#)

[victor summa](#) says:

January 31st, 2007 at 7:03 am

TRACY points out:

the key thing that Faribault has that Northfield lacks: Big parcels and cheap land.

victor's adding:

I-35 access

contiguous infrastructure

and most importantly... a sense of place that co-exists with the development going on there.

Many here (N'fld) may feel that some industry will pull our chestnuts out of the fire... and while I'd never say never [sic] there will be a landmark style theater on the Q block and DT will be all the better for that... Faribault style of industrial development is not on our RADAR.

Thankfully, our industry will be white collar, academic in nature.

150 years of parallel growth of the city and the colleges can not be set aside with the flourish of the EDA wand. Like it or not (never have understood the competitive nature of the City and many of it's old guard with the Colleges... but some still feel inferior) our best bet is to go with what the EDA was entertaining a few years ago; ABCD - Asset Based Community Development, a concept that says, grow from with in.. with what you've got.

Unfortunately, all they (the EDA) did was talk about it.

Still looking for chimers-in w/opinions re: my essential question.

I'll ask again... Which of the activities (developing a NW industrial site - or filling in the DT) will have the greater impact on the other [development] coming to pass?

Will the Industrial Park, out past the hospital, pump development of the DT... OR will an increasingly vibrant DT be an asset to developing the fringes of the community?

Still seeking professional and lay opinions.

Back to Faribault's development along I-35... Faribault's no Northfield. When th tracks are laid and the Northfield Streetcar line runs west along 19 to 35...then, we'll be in the development mode that Faribault is in today.

Finally, wondering. Did Anne Bretts hold her confab at GoodBye Blue... and why there... when the BigChain SA serves coffee on the frontage road - any size any style 89¢ a cup? And of course there's also MacDonalds, Burger King and TOO many others out along the strip, as well.

[94](#)

[Jerry Bilek](#) says:

January 31st, 2007 at 8:25 am

That's mean Victor. I believe Buckaroo Banzai said "We don't have to be mean." I don't think Anne needs me to defend her, but we will never get anywhere if we mock those with differing view points.

I still believe if we want downtown to be successful, retailers like me need to offer customers a reason to come downtown, value, selection, service. Some businesses like the Rair Pair and R.C. Books do it very well. Others need to improve. I could expand my hours and open on Sunday. I hope to this year, but it's not easy. We need to leverage the internet(how's that for business jargon). I think most of the Division street retailers have almost no internet presence. Read Griff's comments about the liquor store.

One of the challenges I see is how do we reach the 60% of Northfielders who don't shop downtown and can we even reach them? We can blame the EDA, the city and others. We should push them to do better. In the meantime, we need to take care of our own business. I know my landlord won't have a problem filling my location if I leave.

[95](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 31st, 2007 at 9:34 am

Yeah, yeah, way too much talk.... and those of us who have been proselytizing/fighting for the DT since the whole big Target/S. Hwy 3 shift, tend to get really touchy with people who think you can have all that highway big box and franchise development , and a cool little historic downtown. You can't; you won't.....Jerry, I'm really disappointed to hear you already saying what would happen "if you leave". There is a very simple economic fact: Because the taxes DT have gotten so outrageously high, The rents have gotten so high, and that pretty much precludes a local independent business person being able to pay those rents, when you factor in the local volume of sales. And that's why the highway franchises/corporations are so annoying, because OBVIOUSLY their profits/losses are spread over a whole huge group, and therefor not as impactful to one location. It's getting to the point where business in the downtown can almost be considered a philanthropy.

We keep making the same mistake.....you can't make the case for the downtown all on the heart; it has to be made on the economics.....either you believe you must support the DT because it is an economic cycle that you have to wait out (until shopping patterns shift again) ; if you want it to be there, and not just be a museum of old buildings..... then you have to put your shopping/eating dollars there, in every way you can, and NOT on the highway.

It's that simple. Will the DT be able to hang on until people get tired of the ubiquitous selection? or will it deteriorate into whatever, and whoever,has the deep pockets to hang in there, and at some point in the future it will swing back to the preferred location?

Read "Big Box Swindle" by Stacy Mitchell, and find out why you need to spend your \$\$\$ in the DT, to KEEP your DT, and then Jerry won't have to talk about what might happen when he leaves, such a short time after he opened.

[96](#)

Jerry Bilek says:

January 31st, 2007 at 9:42 am

Kiffi,

sorry if I gave the impression that I was considering leaving, I'm not. business is good, not great, could be better. I have hit my sales goal every month since opening. I was just saying someone will replace me or my neighbors if we leave.

[97](#)

Curt Benson says:

January 31st, 2007 at 10:44 am

Victor, please expand on this quote from your post: "Thankfully, our industry will be white collar, academic in nature." I smell elitism here.

[98](#)

Jerry Bilek says:

January 31st, 2007 at 11:29 am

Kiffi,

sorry I was interrupted, so more about chains. I'm not a fan of Target and yes I would rather they did not exist, but they do. I don't foresee Target leaving in my lifetime. So do I proselytize or do I act? I have to act. I can't wait for Target to go away. I've read Stacy Mitchell, read Smallmart. Maybe my rent is too high, but I signed the lease knowing what my rent will be including taxes.

I can compete w/ the big boys. I had 5 internet orders today for new books, dvds and calendars. All were cheaper than the chains or amazon. I scoop up the crumbs left behind and it seems to work. Yes I made more money working for St. Olaf, I made even more working for Borders.

Not all chain locations lose money in the early years. Yes they can and they have a safety net if they do, but my experience at Borders proved the opposite. Most locations made money the first year.

I will proselytize, but I have to act. That is why I like what Anne had to say. She is willing to help through Northfield.org. I plan to work with her, the NDDC, locallygrownNorthfield.org and anyone else who wants to partner.

I'll shut up now.

[99](#)

kiffi summa says:

January 31st, 2007 at 2:17 pm

Jerry:

Mean or not, when you enter the public arena expect a few lions to chew on you, especially if you're as aggressive as Anne is about her POV. From my point of view, Anne Brettes goes on and on, putting down visionary remarks... validating her opinion w/her opinion and the "dozens" of towns, jobs, and papers she's worked on... passes off her skepticism of those who will and have worked for more for our community... and all the time rings her chime for big business. I don't give a rip for who she's contacted re: movie theatres. I'm confident that the market here (start w/5000 college students) can and will support the right mix of business accumen and bottom line goals.

I believe earlier you mentioned your read of Big Box Swindle, and I assume you agree then with me that Stacy Mitchell makes an excellent case for why small bookstore such as yours, not only should prevail in the market place... but likely will, as long as the bar is not set too high. Anne speaks only to those businesses that will clear the "bar" and likely the DT.

You'll survive, but not if Anne's view of the DT proves to be accurate. I'm sure there's a football defense term that applies here, something like 3,4, 2 Cover Umbrella, with a nickle back.

Other than that ... I find it too ironic that Anne gets DT... even to GoodBYEBlue! Also, seems equally ironic that

N-Dot-Org's Issues List seems to have fallen back in the pack with the offering of Locally Grown. So, Anne's welcome here (not my place to extend that... but) and with your entry you takes your chances!

Another subject:

Curt Benson asked that I expand on my remark: "Thankfully, our industry, will be white collar, academic in nature." Saying, "he smells elitism" in my comment.

Au Contraire, Curt. My remark probably would have been more accurate had I said Hopefully our industry will be white collar, academic.... etc.

Expanding I'll simply reiterate the ABCD remark... Asset Based Development... playing to your strengths, to get stronger. i.e. College Town - means college business.

Might be Conference Centers, Software developers with Liberal Arts Schools focus, Research Center, etc.

Another strength could be our excellent and impressive hospital (situated next to the Light Industrial site out in the (Northwest) Are there development possibilities in the health care business? Is it growing?

How about a corporate Headquarters located in N'fld - academic or health related. That's all I meant.

FULL DISCLOSURE: I Have no direct link to the colleges or the hospital. Simply feel that these are the kind of businesses that are most likely to locate here - and, I called them "white collar, academic in nature.

Nope, not elitism, merely a practical development outlook.

vs

[100](#)

Anne Bretts says:

January 31st, 2007 at 4:05 pm

Wow. Thanks for the kind words, Jerry. We do agree that there is potential for downtown, lots of it, and I'll be happy to continue working with you and the others who have responded so warmly and who are meeting with me on various projects. There are some great ideas out there and we'll just keep moving ahead with them.

Sadly, I will no longer have time to participate here.

We have had this same discussion now for more than a year, first on the Issues List and now here. I had thought that participating in both venues would show the spirit of cooperation we at Northfield.org feel toward all organizations in town. And I kept hoping that someone would be able to clarify the conflicting demands I've heard and move to solutions. But that hasn't happened. For example, people are angry that taxes are so high, but demand the city spend more for libraries, municipal liquor stores, parking ramps and business subsidies — all of which would drive up taxes even more.

Development doesn't have to be either downtown or the highway but everywhere, and Jerry has it right that we have to start right where we are, not just keep complaining that things aren't perfect.

Finally, the personal attacks say more about the speakers than me, so I'm not going to respond. I simply feel they have diverted us from the real issues.

Before I become yet another dead horse, I will bid you good luck with your discussion. I'll see you online and downtown — and throughout this wonderful city.

[101](#)

victor summa says:

January 31st, 2007 at 6:44 pm

I erred in my response to Jerry and Curt [see comment #99] In that comment it appear to be posted by Kiffi - while I did sign it as I often do [with my initials] it appears to be made by kiffi. Hope you'll all forgive my error and credit me [blame me?] for the remarks in #99.

A special apology to spousal ONE!

Incidentally I had acknowledged this error earlier, but can't find it here - so I must have erred there as well

victor

[102](#)

Holly Cairns says:

January 31st, 2007 at 10:06 pm

As downtown retailers: Who do you target? Is it the townsfolk, or the visitor? Or both?

If it is the visitor or potential buyer, Do we know what is perceived by the outsider who knows little about Northfield? If we did, we might be able to adjust.

For example, what if we found out that New movers were interested in "quaint" for shopping but also might like the Big Box Store option. Maybe some new movers won't even like the city if there weren't big box options.

Personally, when I visit a city I notice if there are a lot of options, or does it seem antiquated? Quaint can be perceived as antiquated...

I think it takes a mix of things to make people happy. It might take people who fight for vitality downtown AND big box stores, AND creativity. I LIKE CHOICE and I don't like to drive for all the things I need. Why can't we find balance instead of just focusing on ONLY DOWNTOWN? What about the the whole of the picture and thinking about vitality in general?

Anyway, IMHO change is good. Old is out. New is in, and we don't know everyone in town (we're too big) and we don't even know what the heck stores are downtown and so we might start there.

[103](#)

[Nick Benson](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 10:33 am

Victor -

Refuting claims of elitism with French - brilliant!

While it might be fun for you to frown upon those with darker collars than yours, Malt-O-Meal puts food on the table for more people than any other employer in Northfield.

The mentality that any good employer is one who is in the service industry is snobby, arrogant, and downright foolish. It's bad policy to ignore the large portion of the workforce that thinks it's insane to spend \$40,000 a year on a degree in puppetry.

The motto "Colleges, Contentment, and Collars, White," doesn't have quite the same quaint ring to it, does it?

[104](#)

[Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 10:52 am

So, what is the master plan for DT.? and what is the vision that emerged from such a great, engaged and amazing discussion.?

After reading more about what NDDC does, I will look forward to their final conclusion and leadership to move all of the contributions into planning format so that actions can be taken to address all of the problems that arose during this conversation and I am sure will keep coming up, specially in the DT forums coming up.

If I can be of service, let me know I have been working on the visionary document and plan for the Latino Enterprise Center as the core strategy for the economic aspect of the local Latino/a population and on the long term integration plan as part of the merging of civic engagement and economic development aspects.

It will be great to now where the city's vision is, investment priorities and the leadership of the NDDC so that I can incorporate those aspects into our own Latino/a sector planning to eventually integrate/merge our own work into the whole picture.

Thank you for such an energizing discussion, it is time to make some strategic conclusions, time for the leaders to emerge.

Reginaldo.

[105](#)

[victor summa](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 3:33 pm

Writ by Victor

Responding to 103

Nick Benson... Curt Benson... so many Bensons? I'll confess to a bit of confusion there - for a moment.

But to the kernel of NICK Benson's reaction to my Curt Benson comment.

Nick: If your claim, "Malt o Meal puts food on the table for more people than any other employer in Northfield, you're referring to M-O-M's the cereal producer, I agree. Obviously people all over the nation eat M-O-M products. I'm not aware of any other nationally distributed food stuffs made in the 55057 zip area. So, I agree, if that's the meaning of your food on the table remark.

But we both know that you're talking about the number of employees, implying M-o-M is the largest N'fld employer.

If that is your meaning, I believe your demographics are incorrect.

My understanding is St. Olaf College is the single employer of the most people in Northfield. Coincidentally, I'm confident that many of the workers who owe their employment directly (or indirectly) to the College, hold what we both would classify as "blue Collar" jobs. Add in Carleton's blue collar and that number increases.

In Detroit they count employees "in the auto industry". In Northfield we certainly could use, college employed, as a meaningful measure of high employment. [sic] good business.

You imply I frown on Blue Collar workers. Hardly true. Before my 40 years as a Film and TV producer I have at least 15 years of hard work in the housing industry. Began as a ditch digger - and excepting my age, imagine I can out-dig many still today. I was a general laborer in the housing industry including: carrying lumber, cleaning up the plaster from the sub floors, and dismantling of the "out houses" . I'd call that a Dark-Blue Collar.

Subsequently I became a carpenter. A little more pale, but still blue, right?

Why is this important? Because those skills and that effort are deep roots in my work ethic, as well as in my expectations.

You wrote of the Irony of my using French to disprove elitism. Hello, but I think of the rabble of the french... storming the Bastille... and all their French peasant relatives. I'm a lot closer to them than Marie Antoinette.

If you feel my perspective is elitist, my blue collar roots undo me... I must be too inarticulate for you to grasp my meaning.

You write of the \$40 K a year cost to get a degree in puppetry (I assume that's a reference to someone you've heard of who went to college and works puppets.) and further, that I consider that career path more worthwhile than some undefined blue collar worker with no degree... and then, charge me with being "snobby, arrogant, and downright foolish." Can't prove you wrong. Believe me you are... but... what does any of this have to do with business growth in Northfield?

My point has been... we are geographically challenged to find contiguous land to develop for big businesses... and we are fiscally challenged to develop and acquire these otherwise, far-fringe areas.

Conversely, we have the opportunity (I'd argue, the responsibility) to improve the environment of the business climate, by improving the DT and its fringe, first... do so with far greater ease and at a lesser cost, while providing amenities to the citizens with the development of these new found uses.

That's not elitism, it is smart growth.

Additionally, I think the most likely business to seek asylum in our community (In what I've called the Far-Fringe) would likely be associated with education [sic] the colleges, or the hospital... as the medical

industry inevitably grows. Could be health care, insurance, research, or a lot of associated activities that I haven't thought of. Might also be an ambulance service garage full of greasy blue collar auto workers.

Finally, your focus on the community's motto "Colleges, Cows, Contentment, etc. provides me with a relevant response.

The Colleges are still here and thriving. The cows are long gone... and likely the Contentment was "tongue in check". Regardless, signage that heralds those characteristics is cvute, but relatively meaningless, when compared to the newer sign out on I-35 that attests to Northfield's Historic Downtown. As to community growth, suffice to say... what I envision for Northfield is development tailored to the scope and the scale of the community. Not OUT SIZING it for the sake of big business's bottom line.

victor

[106](#)

[Nick Benson](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 7:37 pm

Victor, I didn't mean to insult you personally, if I did I apologize. I'll use fewer adjectives and get right to the point this time around 😊

According to the Northfield Chamber of Commerce, Malt-O-Meal has 1100 employees, compared to about 800 at St. Olaf.

I heard there was a kid who used the "design a degree" program at Carleton to major in puppetry, which doesn't seem too practical. I was saying white collar (college degree) jobs don't guarantee success (college degree in puppetry). In other words, effort should be made to attract employers to Northfield regardless of what color their collar is. The broader the economic base the better. The appropriate motto would be "don't put all of your eggs in one basket."

I may very well be wrong though... I don't have a degree in economic development.

[107](#)

[Jim Bohnhoff](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 9:33 pm

Hello All,

This is the third time I have attempted to contribute some words of wisdom to this fray of a downtown blog. Each time I have submitted my Comment - nothing has happened.

What should I do?

I will try again....

"Downtown retail: struggling, thriving, searching"

I don't know about the downtown - but there sure is a lot of struggling and searching in the 106 responses I have been reading for the past couple of days.

My suggestion to everyone would be to Take a nice leisurly Walk around town... even in the brisk fresh air ... you can see what a great place we have... so first put on your cap, mittens and scarf ... and walk out to the middle of the pedestrian bridge and enjoy the view... then head over to Bridge Square ... stop and take a nice long look at the icy falls... and head to either of the 4 coffee shops within a block of the square... things aren't really so bad ... I have had the opportunity to work in the downtown for over 30 years ... let me tell you things have been changing for the BETTER... not perfectly ... but pretty darn good... I can't tell you how long we waited for a new restaurant ... and in one fell swoop Norman came to town and we had a fun pub and a quality restaurant... and after six years they are still in business... Bravo!

Starting a business is not for the faint of heart or the skitterish - no matter what kind of business you start - it takes a whole lotta work - with no promises for success. So we are all a part of a successful downtown.

Lets work together to make it an enjoyable and Hospitable place. Not just argue about this and that.

Well that is my start at blogging. Thanks for Listening - I like this town and hope to see it continue to prosper.

Jim Bohnhoff

[108](#)

[Ross](#) says:

February 1st, 2007 at 11:57 pm

Hey Jim, great to hear from you. One of the really great things happening downtown is your sculptural signs. Thanks to you and the store owners willing to make the investment.

Oh yeah, F. Y. I. folks:

<http://nddc.org/weblogs/homepageblog/archives/000577.html>

[109](#)

Peter Waskiw says:

February 2nd, 2007 at 7:51 am

Comments to Nick and Victor,

Nick thanks for the info. I've added my own professional two cents worth here, but I am glad that we are starting to "connect the dots" and digging deeper into this issue. (I'm starting to run out of horsy jokes) By understanding how many workers each employer has, we can ask the question: Where do these employees live? How many live in Northfield? What part of town and how do they get to work?

You may say, what has this has to do with economic vitality of the DT or Northfield as a whole. Well, the answer is everything.

In economic studies for commercial/retail and industrial development, worker locations, transportation, and supporting infrastructure (including other supportive goods and services) are always taken into account.

(side bar - ask Norman Butler where and by whom he gets his food item delivered and how much?)

Continuing, another important feature is the balancing in the job market (local and regionally). A robust job market = robust local economy. There is a balance between this idea of supply and demand. Take this a step further, we have all heard of the term 'bed room' community. So, if there is more opportunity to attract employees to live and work in Northfield, this will have an impact on the broad economic health of Northfield. This also begs the question, what housing price ranges is Northfield offering. A quick study in the average prices of new home in Northfield will tell you that, plus remember, quantity is also important, how many houses in each range, low, medium, high.

We have all heard of bringing more people DT to live, this is a good livable communities strategy (that ones for you Victor), but again economies of scale plays into the equation. The market can only sustain a certain number of condos. One recent example (we all know) demonstrates that point. But DT housing is only one factor, it is important to supply housing to people who want to live and work in Northfield as an affordable level. If I remember correctly that was also a misunderstood policy in the existing CP.

Over to you.

[110](#)

victor summa says:

February 2nd, 2007 at 12:32 pm

By Vic - or should it be "bye vic!

Nick: No insult inferred - or at least I'm to immune to take offense. Absolutly no need for apology. It was a good perspective excahnge.

Frankly, I like people to respond openly to any comment made here. mine, yours or Peter's, for example.

Yes, I'm suspect of the Chamber's numbers. Regardless, as I don't see my intentions designed to keep blue collar workers down and out... I don't see a disconnect here.

Clearly, balanced growth tailored to the scope and scale ofthe community is best. Would you agree?

If not, let's talk about that.

Incidentally my feeling re: empowered units such as the EDA is that they DON'T "talk" at least about these things, to any reasonable end. They do spend time planning a work matrix, revising it so that they might deal with these issues.. and that's talking... but it's mostly talking about, how to talk about the issues.. or who to hire, to dismiss any effort they finally seem to be inclined to appear to advance. Perish the thought, more experts, more consultants. You, me, Pete and a handful of other lurkers could have a more progressive (and possibly aggressive) dialogue. I think again, my limited verbal skills undo me. I believe that both Tracy and Ross could comment about the EDA process, if they choose to. Tracy for example has proven to be far more proactive here in venting opinion than I perceive she was as a member of the EDA. Shut down?

Was it gender imbalance... or too much respect for civility in discourse and the anonymity of E talk feeling safer. I was always amused by the physical action following saying something challenging (at the EDA meetings) then emphasizing your remark with the dramatic rise from your chair, then with an air of dismissiveness, the casual stroll to the coffee pot for a hot refill. An actors on-stage device for avoiding the cynical stare.

Perhaps Tracy feels she was a tigress on the Authority. I too often felt the underlying rumble was more polite purring.

So now if I tag this with a colon a hyphen and a parens it's okay, right? i.e. 😊

As to the Carleton kid enamored w/puppets - have you experienced the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theater in MPIs? Remember Kookala Fran & Ollie? 60s TV (maybe your too young) Even I'm too young for the Commedia dell'arte... Punch and Judy. The Renaissance, right?. Sounds good to me. Hey puppets ain't bad. Early in my personal TV career, I hosted a Kids show - Pook the 200 lb. Elf - we had puppets... I loved the puppets. I talked w/them. No, let the Carleton Kid pursue puppets, Jonas Salk work on vaccines and Bush with his Ivy League degree, look for weapons in the dessert. All of those activities will involved some blue and some white collars. There's room for all of you. I'm retired.

So, we agree? Balanced growth as much as possible... tailored to the scope and scale of the community, expanding wisely as opportunities evolve and reaching I-35 with Smart Growth by 2050. Did I mention the street car line out to the freeway?

YOU WROTE "I may very well be wrong though... I don't have a degree in economic development."

I doubt that any current or former member of the EDA does or any did.. or any city council member past or present... Tracy or Anne, Peter or Kiffi... Griff and Ross... and I don't either!

But, could I have gotten a degree in Dissenting? Hmm-mm?

victor

[111](#)

[Nick Benson](#) says:

February 2nd, 2007 at 1:30 pm

I'm sorry to say that I'm too young to have seen the golden age of puppetry first hand, but what does that have to do with anything?

City planning is an interesting field... I'm going to try to take a course or two in that area before I graduate with my degree in geography. Let's hope it works out better than puppetry.

[112](#)

victor summa says:

February 2nd, 2007 at 2:11 pm

frm Victor

Nick - you brought it (puppetry) up; I thought, as a reason to not support White collar development over Blue - I merely was trying to make a case for the potential value in puppetry (Any arts/cultural effort) as opposed to tire factories, tanneries, or wheaties... especially in Northfield, today... with what we've got going for us - and in fact with what we've got (ABCD) that is virtually unique. e.g. Small town environs, two world class colleges, historic DT and for MANY intents and purposes, landlocked by so much geography and sociology.

Geography degree. I'd love to hear your feeling about Northfield's geographic advantages - disadvantages... a theme I've been clanging on for the past ten years - ever since the big boxes put their "colonial" boot on our turf!

How for example, from a geographer's point of view the burgeoning corporate take over of the globe effects geography issues; food shelter, tillable soil, water preservation/pollution and air pollution... not to mention global warming... and then, if you can, tie that back to Northfield.. and it's position and responsibility to become a model global community. You could start with the two college wind turbines, ethanol in Bridgewater, highway traffic, and future industry in N'fld.

victor