

Key Components of Eau Claire's Success: A Report on Center Line Community Forum's April 24 Tour of Eau Claire's Phoenix Park and Downtown Redevelopment

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Sturgeon Bay's newly-formed *Center Line Community Forum* sponsored a trip last week to tour Eau Claire, WI's award-winning Phoenix Park and downtown waterfront redevelopment. *Center Line's* mission is to strengthen community, encourage civic engagement and explore ways in which smart growth has been successfully implemented in other communities.

A group of eleven interested citizens was greeted by Eau Claire's City Council President, Kerry Kincaid, and spent three hours touring Phoenix Park and hearing presentations by Eau Claire officials including the Redevelopment Authority Chair, Economic Development Director, City Attorney and Public Works and Parks and Recreation Director. In addition to City representatives, the group heard from developers and staff of companies that have invested heavily in downtown Eau Claire. Finally, the group met the director of the Farmers Market Association, a citizen group working in partnership with the City.

In recent years, the City of Eau Claire has turned a brownfield site (once home to the Phoenix Steel Company and an Xcel Energy gas plant) into the cornerstone of a vibrant, revitalized downtown that includes the world headquarters of Royal Credit Union, JAMF Software, Riverview Terrace Apartments, Phoenix Park and Farmers Market. Eau Claire recently received the prestigious National Civic League's All-American City Award, among others, not only for the 50 million dollar valuation they've injected into their downtown economy but for the process they used to do it.

The following points summarize key components of Eau Claire's success.

Community Input: Over the space of 1 – 2 years, Eau Claire held 57 meetings to solicit community input and ensure that proposed changes met with public approval and were in line with the city’s strategic plan and vision. According to City Council President Kerry Kincaid, “It was not without difficulty. It took patience on everyone’s part, but we can now say that we made the right decisions.” She adds, “Our redevelopment is saturated with public input and support.”

Citizen Advocates: A Farmers Market and Labyrinth were on the community’s wish list. The city worked with “citizen advocates” who raised substantial funds to make each happen. The Farmers Market draws up to 7,000 visitors a week to the downtown.

Natural Resources: According to Kincaid, the Eau Claire community cares strongly about its river. “You need to ask yourselves what relationship you want to have with your most important natural resource? That’s where we started. People value the water, and we are working to give the public as much visible and physical access to it as possible.” Eau Claire’s many city parks are connected by over 29 miles of hiking and biking trails, second only in the state to Madison. Eau Claire is actively engaged in extending its already significant public space.

Private/Public Partnership: In reference to the point above, Royal Credit Union (RCU) first intended to build its world headquarters directly on the river. After hearing from the community, they voluntarily moved just off the river, allowing space for Phoenix Park. RCU was founded by a “home town boy,” Charlie Grossklaus, who is emotionally invested in Eau Claire’s success and wanted to do what was best for the community. According to RCU’s Randy Beck, “When we found out people wanted a park, we figured out a way to make that happen. A thriving community is good for business.” RCU and next door neighbor, JAMF Software, now overlook an attractive green space filled with people. Bikers and walkers are visible on the repurposed railway bridge that spans the Chippewa River and JAMF Software has even installed an air pump that’s available to the tubers who float past their office. Eau Claire calls JAMF a “home run” for the city because it is nonpolluting, high growth and pays high wages. JAMF brings energy to the downtown with a young work force that embodies “new urbanism.” JAMF is a dog-friendly office and many of the employees walk or bike to work.

Downtown Residents: Riverview Terrace Apartments built three new structures across from Phoenix Park. The 111 apartment units enjoy a near 100% occupancy rate. (At the time of our meeting, only 2 were vacant.) When asked what part the park and water view played in their decision to invest, developer Stuart Shaefer said, “It was all about the park. People want to live near the park.”

TIF Districts: Phoenix Park was funded, in part, by tax incremental financing (TIF). Eau Claire has had ten tax incremental districts (TIDs) and has successfully completed five. Steve Nick, City Attorney, stressed the need to make sure development is consistent with city goals, to do background checks on developers and, if possible, to get developers’ lenders to the table. He and other city officials emphasized the need for a good fit and asked “Who are you going to sell your valuable land to?”

By all accounts, Eau Claire’s hard work has paid off. On the day of *Center Line*’s visit, school children laughed and chased each other over the boulders that line the river’s shoreline. Walkers and bikers were out en masse enjoying the views at the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers. Shiny, attractive-side and street-level retail establishments serviced the people who live and work in the area.

For all their success, Nick acknowledges that there have been some detractors. “There will always be some. It means you’re making things happen. When nothing was happening, no one was protesting the brownfield. But, if you’re doing what the community wants, the detractors will be a minority. There will be many more supporters.” His thoughts echoed those of Council President Kincaid: “Encourage civic engagement, let the natural beauty of the area speak to you and be patient with each other.”

Center Line thanks the Janning Family, Bob Papke, Jeremy Popelka and Stephanie Trenchard and Virge Temme for sponsoring the Eau Claire Tour.

- Laurel Hauser