

Economic development roadmap guides Baraboo businesses and leaders



From left are The Green Vine owners Deborah Nelson and Jessica Elsing with her son, Jenny Erickson, Gene Dalhoff and Bill Ryan.

Empty buildings and fewer shoppers concerned central city retailers and discouraged new businesses from locating in Baraboo, an historic city in the heart of Wisconsin's beautiful Sauk County. Like many other Wisconsin small towns, Baraboo faced challenges from the loss of downtown businesses and a tough economy.

Residents, community leaders and local economic development organizations set downtown revitalization as a priority and got to work – but not necessarily together. Among the groups working independently to improve the business climate were:

- Baraboo Economic Development Commission
- Baraboo Improvement District
- Baraboo Community Development Authority
- Baraboo Area Chamber of Commerce
- Sauk County Development Corp.
- Downtown Baraboo, Inc.

A member of Downtown Baraboo, Inc. asked [UW-Extension Sauk County](#) [1] community development educator Jenny Erickson to help create an economic development roadmap for the downtown to retain, recruit and expand retail business. Her colleague Bill Ryan, community business development specialist with [UW-Extension's Center for Community and Economic Development](#) [2], also helped focus the efforts of the community's like-minded economic development groups.

"Turning to UW-Extension was an obvious choice because of the depth of skill, expertise and tools its educators offer such a project," says Sauk County Development Corp. Executive Director Gene Dalhoff.

The downtown revitalization group expanded the project from its central city focus to include 25 study team members and five retail areas across the city of Baraboo. This volunteer corps collaborated with UW-Extension to produce the [Baraboo Retail Market Analysis](#) [3], which provides information to:

- Support local business retention, expansion and recruitment efforts
- Identify retail gaps in the community and fill empty and new commercial space
- Inform existing businesses eager to better serve their customers
- Help prospective businesses examine the potential of a downtown location

"It's the first document I refer clients to who have indicated an interest in starting a retail or personal services business in Baraboo," says Gene. For example, when he worked with the mother-daughter team of Deborah Nelson and Jessica Elsing, they used market study information to help develop a sound business plan for a downtown garden and gift shop.

Deborah, now co-owner of The Green Vine, LLC, says, "The study gives you insight into the type of people who live in the area and puts the information into context. We learned that we needed to target tourists who come to Wisconsin Dells, and the study showed us ways to reach those people."

The study also has served as a resource for local economic development organizations to use with developers and others thinking of a business investment in the downtown area.

Gene concludes, "Not only did the project yield a valuable reference document for business development, it also provided a great opportunity for individuals across our community to collaborate on a common project for the common good."

UW-Extension's Bill Ryan explains that Wisconsin communities are growing their economies in new and innovative ways, a process best served by a solid analysis of local markets.

"An effective study shouldn't simply lead a community to replicating the business mix of the past," Bill says. "Instead it should help to recognize how consumer patterns have changed and how to build on innovative businesses and market niches that make sense in today's market."

Bill recommends that local leaders seeking ways to boost their retail economies talk with their county UW-Extension community development educators. He also suggests going to <http://fyi.uwex.edu/downtown-market-analysis/> [4] for information to help understand the markets, analyze opportunities by sector and develop action steps to put the information to work.

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Links:

[1] <http://sauk.uwex.edu/>

[2] <http://blogs.ces.uwex/cced/>

[3] <http://fyi.uwex.edu/downtown-market-analysis/example-studies/wisconsin-example-studies/>

[4] <http://fyi.uwex.edu/downtown-market-analysis/>

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