

Economic Development Initiatives

Rockford has incurred a steep opportunity cost through past policies that did not effectively capitalize on *existing* industrial assets. The City can, however, now catalyze private investment and support broader economic development through targeted public support of economic development initiatives in the Kishwaukee Street Corridor, encouraging industrial reinvestment in concert with new industrial investment in other target areas.

Recommended opportunities for the creation and implementation of economic development initiatives are related to the land use framework and key opportunity areas, establishing mechanisms to support positive change and reverse the endemic under-valuation of properties in and around the Corridor. “Seeding” these efforts will stabilize the area and catalyze further private investment in the long term by ensuring a stable investment environment.

The recommended economic development initiatives can be broadly grouped into three categories: redevelopment assistance, business development assistance, and access to energy / environmental resources.

Redevelopment Assistance

The City is uniquely positioned to provide redevelopment assistance to new and existing businesses through its powers of blight clearance and land assembly. Developers face a number of obstacles when attempting infill development in established cities like Rockford: irregular parcel sizes, multiple land owners, and incomplete property records can combine to derail redevelopment projects. The City can, however, work with the development community to assistance with land assembly and site preparation so that redevelopable land is “packaged” and available to interested developers. Returning these under-utilized parcels to the tax rolls will increase property tax revenue. The City may consider developing a land bank of properties within the Corridor that can be packaged for developers when market conditions support their sale. This level of planning will prevent piece-meal redevelopment and ensure that a coherent redevelopment vision for the Corridor is achieved.

Because of the Corridor’s history of heavy industry activity, brownfield remediation is an issue for many properties. The City is currently working with multiple levels of government and undergoing the application process to receive Federal funding to clean these sites. This Federal funding could be leveraged to spur the redevelopment of these sites, which could catalyze redevelopment on adjacent underutilized sites, as well as improving the environment of these abutting properties. The City should remain active in pursuit of this Federal funding, as well as explore other avenues of environmental remediation funding from the state or regional level.

While some aspects of the Corridor’s industrial history require remediation, another legacy of heavy industry and manufacturing leaves the Corridor with an asset: unique and historic multi-story warehouses. These structures provide an opportunity for redevelopment and reuse that is distinctive to the Corridor. The City should consider coordinating with these building owners to ensure that any future redevelopment retains the structural and visual integrity of these buildings. Because upkeep and maintenance costs of older structures are often a burden on property owners, the City may consider establishing an Industrial Corridor Legacy Fund that provides matching grants to property owners who work with the City to redevelop these buildings in a historically-sensitive manner.



HNTB

February 2009

Business Development Assistance

Investments in the physical infrastructure of the Corridor must be complemented by investment in local businesses and human capital. This is a long-term, strategic effort that must include active participation on the part of the City, local businesses, community-based organizations, schools, and residents. This strategy should include two approaches: business retention and outreach to stabilize existing businesses and long-term capacity building to ensure the sustained future growth of the local economy.

Efforts are currently underway to improve communication among existing businesses within the Corridor and coordination among these businesses and the City. These efforts are being catalyzed through the City's organization of a Kishwaukee Street Corridor Roundtable series of meetings. These meetings are designed to provide outreach and guidance to Corridor businesses and residents who are interested in creating a group whose mission is to advocate on behalf of Corridor businesses. Depending on the final structure of this group, it could become a forum for businesses to become more involved in the community, serve as a coordination point to address Corridor-wide concerns, and increase stakeholder awareness of and involvement in the Corridor revitalization efforts.

Additional business retention strategies could include the distribution of annual or bi-annual surveys to gauge satisfaction with the business climate of the Corridor. The results of the survey could be evaluated at a Corridor-wide stakeholder meeting, and strategies could be discussed for addressing outstanding concerns. Additional coordination could occur within existing industry clusters to efficiently address both industry-specific concerns and more general business issues, like expansion and relocation assistance.

In addition to addressing the needs of existing businesses and community stakeholders, the City can assist the Corridor in long-term capacity building through the creation of public-private partnerships to address key opportunity areas. The sustained revitalization of the Corridor will be achieved through the sustained participation of all of its stakeholders, including businesses and nearby residents. As the City looks to promote the jobs / housing balance within the Corridor, private businesses can become involved through the active recruitment and training of neighborhood residents. The City should consider the creation of a program to facilitate workforce development training in either a coordination role or working with regional and state partners.

The City should also encourage the continued and expanded use of the successful Chicago Rockford International Airport's Foreign Trade Zone. This program provides the region, including the Corridor, with a competitive advantage that should continue to be leveraged into the future.

Energy / Environmental Resources

As modern industry has evolved, so has its reliance on traditional forms of energy sources. Older structures and facilities within the Corridor are often not able to support modern industrial functions, which puts the Corridor at a competitive disadvantage with regional greenfield industrial development sites. The City should work with property owners and energy suppliers to ensure that infrastructure and telecommunications upgrades, including the use of renewable energy sources, are undertaken within existing structures.

The City may also want to consider offering educational resources and financial incentives for the use of sustainable or "green" building techniques. These techniques



HNTB

February 2009

Economic Development Initiatives { Continued }

could include permeable pavements, rooftop gardens, stormwater barrels, landscaping with indigenous plantings, stormwater management through swales, and numerous other options. Residential and business owners who choose to utilize these construction techniques should be eligible for streamlined permitting, fee waivers, or grant assistance.

Organizational / Administrative Initiatives

The City can leverage its role as administrator and regulator to facilitate the revitalization of the Kishwaukee Street Corridor. Through intensive coordination efforts with Corridor stakeholders, the City can modify existing regulations and policies to improve communication, remove obstacles to private investment, and guide redevelopment efforts. Some opportunities for regulatory and policy modifications include:

Regulatory modifications and incentives

Zoning amendments

The City should review its zoning code to determine the degree to which existing zoning classifications within the Corridor complement the existing land uses, and whether amendments could be made to increase the opportunity for redevelopment of under-utilized parcels.

Streamlined review process

Based on feedback from existing businesses, the City may want to consider offering streamlined permitting application and reviews for projects in the Corridor that meet certain eligibility criteria. These criteria could be based on the project's compatibility with established planning principles for the area, participation in a workforce development program, or use of green building materials, or any number of other policy goals that the City may want to promote.

Development standards

The City should consider ensuring that development standards for key high-visibility elements of the built environment within the Corridor, including signage, surface parking lots, and landscaping, meet acceptable standards of aesthetics and functionality. Compliance with these standards should be a condition of City assistance.

Code enforcement

Existing businesses have expressed concerns that code enforcement within the Corridor is inconsistent. Any regulatory power held by the City that can be exercised to encourage stability within the business environment should be immediately undertaken.



Policy modifications and incentives

Ongoing contact with existing businesses

While this concept was already discussed in the “Economic Development Incentives” section of this report, its importance cannot be overstated. Businesses within the Corridor have expressed a sense of disconnection with other businesses and the City. Businesses that do not feel invested within the Corridor may be more easily persuaded to relocate outside of the Corridor or simply make minimal investments to their existing businesses. The creation of a mechanism to share information and monitor and address business concerns would improve connectivity and encourage the active participation of existing businesses within the economic and social ecosystem of the Corridor.

TIF or BID designations at key opportunity areas

The City has already created a number of TIF districts, but has not yet established a TIF that is targeted to improve the Kishwaukee Street Corridor. The creation of a TIF or BID within the Corridor would provide a mechanism to fund the infrastructure investments that are key to spurring private sector redevelopment, in particular at key opportunity areas.

Improvement grants and loans at key existing structures

Because of the age of many of the iconic structures within the Corridor, their maintenance and upkeep may become a financial burden to property owners. The City, then, should consider the creation of improvement loans and grants in order to provide financial support for the upkeep of these historic structures and improve the aesthetics of the Corridor while maintaining its unique character.

Public safety patrols

Public safety is another concern that has been voiced by both businesses and residents. If employees and residents do not feel safe within their community, they are less likely to invest in homes and businesses and engage in social interaction. Without financial investment and personal involvement from stakeholders, it will be difficult to sustain Corridor revitalization efforts. The City may consider increasing police patrols within the area, or local community groups may consider organizing safety patrols to increase the numbers of “eyes on the street” to discourage criminal activity.

Coordination with ongoing bicycle access improvements and open space improvements

In order to support a multi-modal character for the Corridor, the City should coordinate Corridor efforts with ongoing bicycle access improvements and open space enhancements to ensure that the highest levels of coordination are achieved.



February 2009