

## **BUSINESS CENTRAL**

### **September October 2011**

#### **River City**

The St. Cloud area's most over-looked natural resource – the Mississippi River – could be a key to boosting the area's economy.

By Lawrence Schumacher

Melinda Sanders has thought a lot about what make St. Cloud a more attractive place for skilled young workers and business leaders to call home.

A transplant to St. Cloud herself, the Quinlivan & Hughes attorney has focused her attention on something that natives of St. Cloud often overlook -- the Mississippi River.

“Members want to make this a community where our kids will bring the grandkids back to the house they grew up in, or preferably, never leave the community to begin with,” the former chairwoman of the Emerging Leaders Forum (ELF) said. “They told us they saw enhancements to the river and things to do there as an important goal to make that happen.”

Sanders and ELF members aren't the only ones focusing on the river these days. An organic movement of river boosters has been working for several years to shape a vision of future development along the river that reestablishes the Mississippi as a presence in the everyday life of St. Cloud area residents.

There are several motivations behind their efforts. One is to use the river to boost the St. Cloud area's economy by making it a more attractive place for business recruitment and retention, more desirable for tourism, and a more vibrant option for residents to spend their discretionary time and income.

ELF members joined a multi-year planning effort to guide future development. The plan rolled out this spring with significant support, a list of potential development opportunities, and additional amenities that could aid those economic development goals, if implemented properly.

An ongoing \$34 million, 85,000 square-foot expansion of the newly renamed River's Edge Convention Center in downtown St. Cloud is another sign of increased attention to the Mississippi River, said Julie Lunning, executive director of the St. Cloud Area Chamber's Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“With the expansion of the Convention Center and the expansion of the National Hockey Center at St. Cloud State University, we'll have two unique spaces along the river to sell any type of event,” she said. “That means more people coming and more opportunities for development to go along with them.”

#### **River Economics**

The St. Cloud area's historic relationship with the Mississippi River has always had an economic flavor to it, said Glen Tautges, development officer for the Central Minnesota Community Foundation. Sawmills and meat

packing plants used to dot the riverside. Today's economic opportunity lies in making communities more attractive to the "creative class" of entrepreneurs and technology workers, he said.

"The smokestack days are gone," according to Tautges. "Today, people can live anywhere they want for technology jobs." Recruiting those workers and businesses will have a multiplier effect on the local economy that will aid existing businesses as well as provide opportunities for new ones, he said.

The Community Foundation joined the River Partnership of Community Foundations almost seven years ago to focus on how to reconnect Mississippi River communities to their most unique asset, Tautges said.

Locally, several groups were already working on their own to build a vision for how St. Cloud could do just that. Minnesota Waters, the Initiative Foundation, the Community Foundation and the ELF joined together with other individuals, private and government organizations to work on the St. Cloud Urban Area Mississippi River plan.

Unveiled this spring, the plan talks about where and how to develop along the river in the future, how to increase access to it, how to preserve its natural heritage, and more, said Matt Glaesman, community development director for the City of St. Cloud. "It was a grassroots movement," he said. "Some of the ideas they came up with were things we already have in our plans, some were things we'd considered but put aside, and some were completely fresh." Development of the plan included significant input from business leaders who believe reconnecting St. Cloud, Sartell and Sauk Rapids to the river will have a positive effect on the local economy, Glaesman said.

## **River Cities**

Glaesman, and members of the plan's advisory committee, traveled to other Mississippi River towns -- notably Dubuque, Iowa -- to come up with ideas and learn what worked and why. One member who'd already spent significant time in Dubuque was David Leapaldt, GLT Architects.

"Communities that branded themselves as 'River Cities' saw people coming there to check them out," he said. "Dubuque attracted IBM. Employers are looking for progressive communities with a high quality of life and access to amenities."

Increasing access to the river, creating river-oriented development zones and establishing more things for people to do along the river could help existing businesses as well as attracting new ones, Leapaldt said. The group's next step is to meet and identify "low-hanging fruit" that offer the best prospects for improvements in the short-term.

## **Convention Center Expansion**

One of those opportunities will be to capitalize on the expanded Convention Center by adding amenities to it that make it more "river-friendly" such as outdoor terraces, connections to the Beaver Island Trail and more, Lunning said. Unfortunately, many of those amenities were part of an optional companion to the current expansion and dependent on a \$15 million state bonding request that was vetoed last year and removed from the bonding bill this year.

The current convention center expansion will allow the city to book multiple trade shows, conferences and events at the same time, bringing more people to the St. Cloud area and providing a boost to the local hospitality industry, Lunning said. “Larger shows that currently go to the Twin Cities -- like the state party conventions -- will be able to come here now because we’ve got the capacity,” she said. “We’ll be able to hold bigger trade shows and people coming in can stay longer for them.” That will help St. Cloud’s hospitality industry -- hotels, restaurants and the like -- as well as local businesses that make a living from supplying them, Lunning said.

But while the Convention Center expansion is a key component of the process of reconnecting with the river, it won’t transform St. Cloud’s riverfront by itself, Leapaldt said. “We need to start looking at things like higher-end residential opportunities in the downtown area,” he said. “The plan identifies sites along the river for developments of an appropriate nature so that if and when they become available, we can capitalize on them.”

Development opportunities discussed in formulating the river plan included building a new, river-oriented expansion to the Kelly Inn, adding a riverboat casino and ferry service across the river, developing Cathedral High School’s athletic field, executing a planned expansion of the Beaver Island Trail to the St. Cloud Hospital neighborhood, and more.

## **Branding the River**

A report commissioned by the city of St. Cloud about retaining St. Cloud State University students after graduation found that the Mississippi River is one of the city’s greatest assets. Providing more amenities that engage residents would be one of the best ways to create a positive “brand” of the city in graduates’ minds, Glaesman said. Convincing the skilled college graduates who attend St. Cloud State to stay in the community has always been a top-level challenge. The benefit is that increasing the average education level of area workers opens new doors for business opportunities and generates higher-wage jobs.

All these efforts will take time. Twenty years ago, Dubuque’s riverfront was an eyesore, full of abandoned industrial sites, Tautges said. Now, it has been transformed into a community asset that helps attract business and skilled workers. By contrast, St. Cloud’s riverfront is in much better shape to start with, he said. But it still might take that long to successfully rebrand the area as a river city.

“We have most of the pieces, they’re just not connected as well as they might be,” Tautges said. “I’m enthusiastic about what we can do with this plan in place, but even if no big changes happen, at least it will allow us to not make the wrong decisions, and to capitalize on opportunities when they come along.”

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## **Hidden Treasures**

St. Cloud's Mississippi River offers more than a scenic view

There are many things to do in and around the Mississippi River. Here are a few to consider:

- Small mouth bass fishing -- Some of Central Minnesota's best fishing is on the Mississippi River. Between the Sartell dam and the St. Cloud dam is anglers can enjoy world-class bass fishing.
- Birding -- The Mississippi River is a super-highway for bird migrations. Herons, eagles, gulls, and many more species fly along the river and are easily visible, especially from the Beaver Islands south of St. Cloud.
- Munsinger and Clemens Gardens -- Okay, so they're not exactly hidden treasures. But you'd be surprised how many St. Cloud area resident have no idea that some of the state's most exceptional public gardens are nestled right along the river on St. Cloud's east side.
- Outdoor Endeavors and Clear Waters Outfitting Company -- Canoe and kayak rentals and full service day trips with shuttle service are just the beginning of the outdoor adventure services these outfits offer.
- Sand Prairie Wildlife Management Area -- Located off U.S. Highway 10 across from the Minnesota Correctional Facility-St. Cloud, the area is a little off the Mississippi River but offers extensive hiking and wildlife-watching opportunities.
- The Beaver Island Trail – this paved trail runs along the Mississippi River in St. Cloud.

Courtesy Julie Lunning, St. Cloud Area Chamber's Convention and Visitors Bureau