

# Optimism on Main Streets

## The changing of form and function of Main Streets in the Three Rivers District

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2008 Summer Research. Macalester College- Saint Paul, Minnesota

### Introduction

Traditionally Main Streets established the character for small towns in America as well as being the center point of history, business, and industry. This summer my research involved studying small town Main Streets in Minnesota and Wisconsin and examining how they have evolved and changed to meet the impinging demands of the towns. My research project focused on the changing function and form of small town Main Streets in the Three Rivers Region. Specifically, it highlighted the effects of urban sprawl and Main Street conservation efforts. The American culture and economy has undergone a shift from lifestyles and landscapes based on production to those established to enable consumption. This has created a new economic landscape with a decrease in manufacturing and agriculture functions in original, railroad oriented downtowns. In addition, there has been an increase of shopping and services at the edge of towns and towards the highway. A less dense downtown and more land conversion on the edge are the result of the changes and can be exemplified in the Mississippi, Minnesota, and St. Croix River Basins.

Additionally, these watersheds have been impacted by both suburban growth outward from the Metropolitan area of the Twin Cities and a separate but related development of second homes for retirement and recreation. These types of sprawl can be witnessed in the rapid population growth of Washington and Chisago counties in Minnesota and St. Croix County in Wisconsin. The economy and ultimately the landscape in Pine County in Minnesota and Burnett and Sawyer counties in Wisconsin have been greatly impacted by the growth of tourism, as well. For example, Burnett County is twice as populous in the summer compared to the winter.

### Methodology

During the summer of 2008 I conducted a comparable research on small towns within three watersheds. The study area included:

- \*Minnesota Watershed, St. Croix Watershed, and Mississippi Watershed

- \*Towns with a population of 1,000-20,000

- \*A distance within 100 miles of Macalester

After removing the first and second ring suburbs I had found just over 200 small towns. I then categorized the small towns into five population categories and created four distance buffers. I took a random sample composed of twenty-five percent of the total towns in my study area to create a reasonable list of towns to do field research.

During the summer I traveled to over sixty towns to gather information in the field. My study methods included:

- \*Ethnographic Interviews
- \*Photographs

- \*Speaking with local officials and business owners

- \*Gathering information on number, range, and condition of functions

- \*Geographic evidence of economic growth

- \*Observing urban morphology

- \*As a result of my field research and archival information I was able to compile the data into a matrix or a new classification system for towns in the

watershed-based central place theory--modified to account for urban morphology, growth, and specialized functions. The sample towns were then split into three levels of success based on the information in the matrix. These categories were based on positive/negative influences including but not limited to:

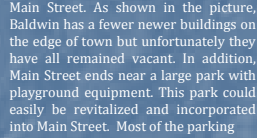
- \*Economy
- \*Local Amenities
- \*Character
- \*Highway
- \*Renewal Plans/Beautification Programs
- \*Community Involvement/Outlook
- \*Main Street Parcel Data based on functions

### Low Success Level: Baldwin, WI

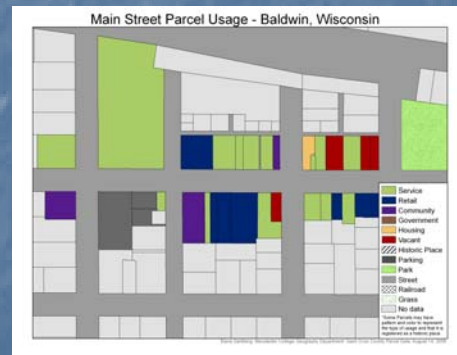
Baldwin, Wisconsin was once a center for agriculture, a saw and flour mill, and the railroad but now ranks as Low Success Level. Towns in this level are currently struggling the most to keep their Main Street as a center of town. Many different negative forces are keeping these Main Streets from growing. I witnessed three types of "dying" Main Streets:

- \*Transition of business towards highway
- \*Death of old Main Street and replacement near highway/large box store
- \*Slowly dying out
- Baldwin follows the third scenario due to many negative influences including:
  - \*Pull of the Highway
  - \*No new investment
  - \*No character and history maintained

Baldwin, WI is a town of 2,667 people located off of I-94 in the Saint Croix Watershed just over thirty miles east of the Twin Cities. Baldwin's Main Street is most likely a thing of the past because of the influence and pull of the highway and the interstate. Highway 63 runs perpendicular to the Main Street and redirects traffic past the business on Main Street. According to a city official in Baldwin "The latest traffic count shows up to 9,000 cars a day take the Baldwin exit off I-94, heading north on Highway 63," and yet it appears that Baldwin's Main Street gets very few of these visitors. Some functions in Baldwin were open and receiving business but many others were vacant. Businesses on Baldwin's Main Street are primarily serving locals with basic functions such as bakeries and banks. Though there is an active Baldwin Improvement Corporation there is very little new investment or plans for development or revitalization in Baldwin. The presence of Baldwin's agricultural past is still very prominent, yet there is little character or history displayed on Main Street. As shown in the picture,



spaces on Main Street were full but customers seemed to just be quickly leaving. There are very few window walkers and the few bars and restaurants on Main Street were empty.



### Medium Success Level: Lake City, MN

Unlike Baldwin Lake City, MN has many great amenities. The towns placed in Success Level two are doing fairly well and they either have the potential to revitalize or redevelop to the point of having a successful Main Street or they are beginning to deteriorate but have not gotten to the point of no return like many of the towns such as Baldwin. Whether or not they are on the way up or down most of the towns in this category have an optimistic outlook for the future of their Main Streets. For example Lake City positive/negative influences include:

#### Positive

- \*Waterfront location
- \*Highway Runs into Main Street

#### Negative

- \*Low investment in historic integrity
- \*New condos not integrated with Main Street



Lake City, MN

is located on Lake Pepin, a wide portion of the Mississippi River about sixty-five miles South of the Twin Cities. The town has a permanent population of 4,950 but like many river or lake towns this grows in the summertime. Lake City was developed as a port city for grain in the 1850's and even in the early 1900's became a hub for recreation on the Mississippi. The town claims to be the birthplace of waterskiing and along with the water another advantage of Lake City's Main Street is that the highway slows and becomes the Main Street. The Main Street is quite large and has both visitors from the lake and from the highway. However, there are still many vacancies on Main Street. Though there has been an economic growth and many middle to high income condos springing up on the riverfront and highway there needs to be more investment in



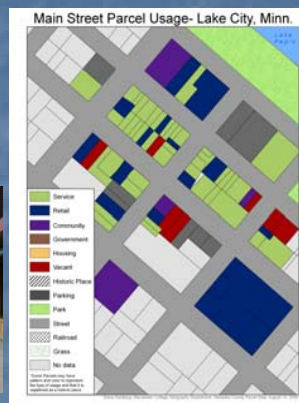
the historic integrity of the Main Street. As you can see in my pictures the Main Streets new condos are being built by the water and yet entirely vacant buildings are being ignored. In addition, the character and history of Lake City is beginning to be lost. In the

### High Success Level: Wabasha, MN

Only twenty miles south of Lake City, MN, Wabasha, MN is known throughout the network of Mississippi river towns as having one of the most successful Main Streets. Despite its small size of a population of only 2,599, Wabasha was an easy choice to add to towns with High Success Level. Some of the positive influences include:

- \*Strong sense of character
- \*Promotion of History
- \*New Investment
- \*Diversity of Businesses
- \*Support of Arts Community
- \*Beautification Program
- \*Network to Neighboring Towns

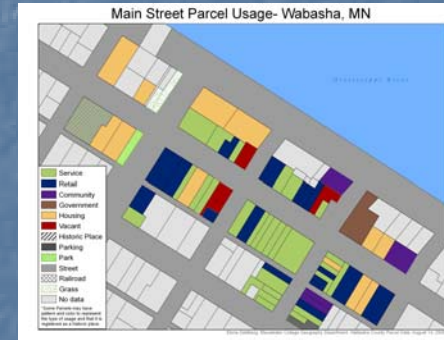
For only being a few miles off highway 61 Wabasha has done a tremendous job resisting the pull to transition towards the highway. Some businesses fluctuate in and out of Wabasha and there are currently a few vacancies in the Main Street District, however, private business owners are willing to take a chance on this Main Street because the overall success rate is high. A number of historic and specialized facilities have helped maintained Wabasha's strong sense of character which attracts a large tourist population. Here are pictures of the historic Anderson Hotel and the newly built 2007 National Eagle Center. Wabasha is able to be so successful because its Main Street plans incorporate new visions and new development without forgetting to



promote the area's rich history that gives you a sense of place. This is not only apparent with services and business but through a combination of Victorian-style houses and new condominiums near the Main Street's riverfront. In addition, Wabasha's extremely active Chamber of Commerce's makes sure that its diverse Main Street businesses serve both the tourists and locals, establishes a network support area artists, music, and the outdoors, and active beautification program and beautiful river setting create even more of an appeal. Wabasha has been extremely active in initiating and helping network and promote neighboring river towns' Main



Streets as a group on both the Wisconsin and Minnesota side. The Wabasha Bridge on the Mississippi serves as an important link between these towns and helps create a loop for visitors to see many of the Main Streets. Wabasha's Chamber of Commerce provides comprehensive plans that serve as a guide for these towns to help promote and connect their area artists, musicians, and outdoor amenities.



### Conclusion

My goal of this research project was to investigate if small town American Main Streets were still the center of history, business, industry and character of the towns I studied or if the increased commuter sheds, the dying small town agriculture industry, and big box store developments are creating a bleak future for all Main Streets in the Three Rivers Region. I was able to gather data on a large sample of towns and then create a matrix which helped me discover the positive and negative influences on Main Streets. I determined that new highways, competition from larger towns and box stores, and lack of revitalization committees or plans played major roles in declining Main Streets. Towns in Low Success Level are seeing the effects of the elements stated above. On the contrary I discovered that economic stability amenities such as water and a defined character are the most important attributes that lead to a successful Main Street. By categorizing successful Main Streets I was able to predict areas of growth and define the nature of landscape that impacts growth within Three Rivers Region. I discovered some Main Streets still prove to be the strength and center of the town. In addition, towns in second success level will be areas to look for change in the future and observe if the Main Streets decline or prosper. Will these towns' amenities be enough or will influences like new development and the highway detract from the Main Street? I took a poll from city officials, business owners, and community members and asked them if they were optimistic or pessimistic about the future of their Main Street. I discovered that thirty-six of the fifty randomly sampled towns were optimistic about their Main Streets even after taking into account the slow economy and changing form and function of Main Streets. It appears that overall most people still believe Main Streets are still a vital part of small town America. However, though most communities are optimistic, the future of all Main Streets as the center of small towns in the Three Rivers Region is unclear. My project indicates not to a death for all of the history on Main Streets but that some will grow and continue to prosper while others struggle to develop plans to combat new pressures to save their Main Street's legacy.