

DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT 2022



*Prepared by Rethos and made possible by funding
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ABOUT DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENTS

How would you tell your community's story? How would you talk about its distinct character? These can often be tough questions, and answering them is central to sustaining, activating, and promoting the vibrancy of your downtown district. Downtown Assessments help provide you with answers you can use to start building short- and long-term community vitality.

Rethos staff met with Lake City community members in focus groups as well as organic meetings throughout the community and shared a public online survey to understand and reveal the identity, personality, and opportunities in downtown Lake City. These conversations took many forms--meeting people in groups at places where they already gathered, such as the Farmers Market or restaurants, or at locations easy to access for the public like City Hall and the library. Speaking with a diverse group of residents, business owners, artists, government officials, and academics, we identified distinct cultural assets of the neighborhood: the places, stories, features, and stories which make it unique. In these conversations, major themes emerged that told the story of downtown Lake City.

At its heart, this plan is a testament to what makes downtown Lake City unique. It articulates the past and the legacy of the downtown, the specific qualities that define it in the present, and a vision for growth that will carry it towards the future.

The usefulness of the strategies that come out of the Downtown Assessment extends beyond the recommendations listed here. The community can look at the information presented in this report and draw their own recommendations. The plan can be used as a framework to develop marketing and tourism initiatives; a platform for business and resident retainment and recruitment; a building block for seeking philanthropic, public, and private investment; or as a planning tool to build additional strategies for growth and revitalization.



LAKE CITY ASSET THEMES

Rethos Staff connected with Lake City Community Members from late July through November, 2022. Through these connections the following assets came up regularly. By defining assets, it's easier to leverage what's going well into wider revitalization activity.

01

BASICS ARE COVERED

Pharmacy, Grocery, Hardware, Services--all these places are open in downtown Lake City, and that's not the case anymore in most small communities

02

SOLID FRAMEWORK

Good physical spaces exist--for public and private and indoor and outdoor activity.

03

LAKE PEPIN LOVE

Lake Pepin is beloved for views and recreation, and it's as much loved by locals as visitors.



04

SPECIAL EVENTS ARE SPECIAL

Locals love special events that seem tailored towards residents and not visits--even the Farmer's Market is a special event for people, and they show their support by showing up.

05

PUBLIC SPACES ARE BUSTLING

The library, Patton, and Ohuta parks located in downtown are hot spots for locals. They feel welcomed in these places, and have great ideas for activation.



COMMUNITY MEMBER PRIORITIES

Rethos Staff connected with Lake City Community Members from late July through September, 2022. Through these connections the following assets came up regularly. By defining assets, it's easier to leverage what's going well into wider revitalization activity.

01

PHYSICAL SAFETY

Traffic and parking came up often, specifically tied to safety concerns. Speed of traffic, visibility, and accessibility were all included in these concerns.

02

BUILDING CONDITIONS

The care and maintenance of downtown buildings is a top priority--especially privately owned buildings.

03

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

Locals want to know what's going on, and they don't feel like they know how to readily find information.

04

SIGNS OF LIFE

Lights on, blinds open, flags flying, signs posted--Lake City residents want to see physical signs of activity and business happenings and feel welcome to join in.

05

SHOPPING LOCALLY

Over 50% of residents in Lake City mark that spending locally within the community or county is a priority for them. Activating pop ups, filling vacancies, and loudly marketing those opportunities is crucial.

06

CITY INVESTMENT

City putting \$ and energy into downtown and being loud about their work



BY THE NUMBERS

FOCUS GROUPS

5 GROUPS
23 PEOPLE

Rethos Staff met with 5 focus groups around the following topics: City Staff, Elected/Appointed Roles, Retail, Financial Services, Building Owners. Conversations around topics specifically tailored to each group allowed individuals in particular activities to share their thoughts about downtown.

POP IN CONVERSATIONS

31 STOPS

Rethos Staff spent significant time stopping in local businesses in the downtown and talking with owners, staff, shoppers, and visitors to gather off-the-cuff information about downtown activity. Staff also facilitated a booth at the Farmer's Market to get direct feedback from vendors and market goers.

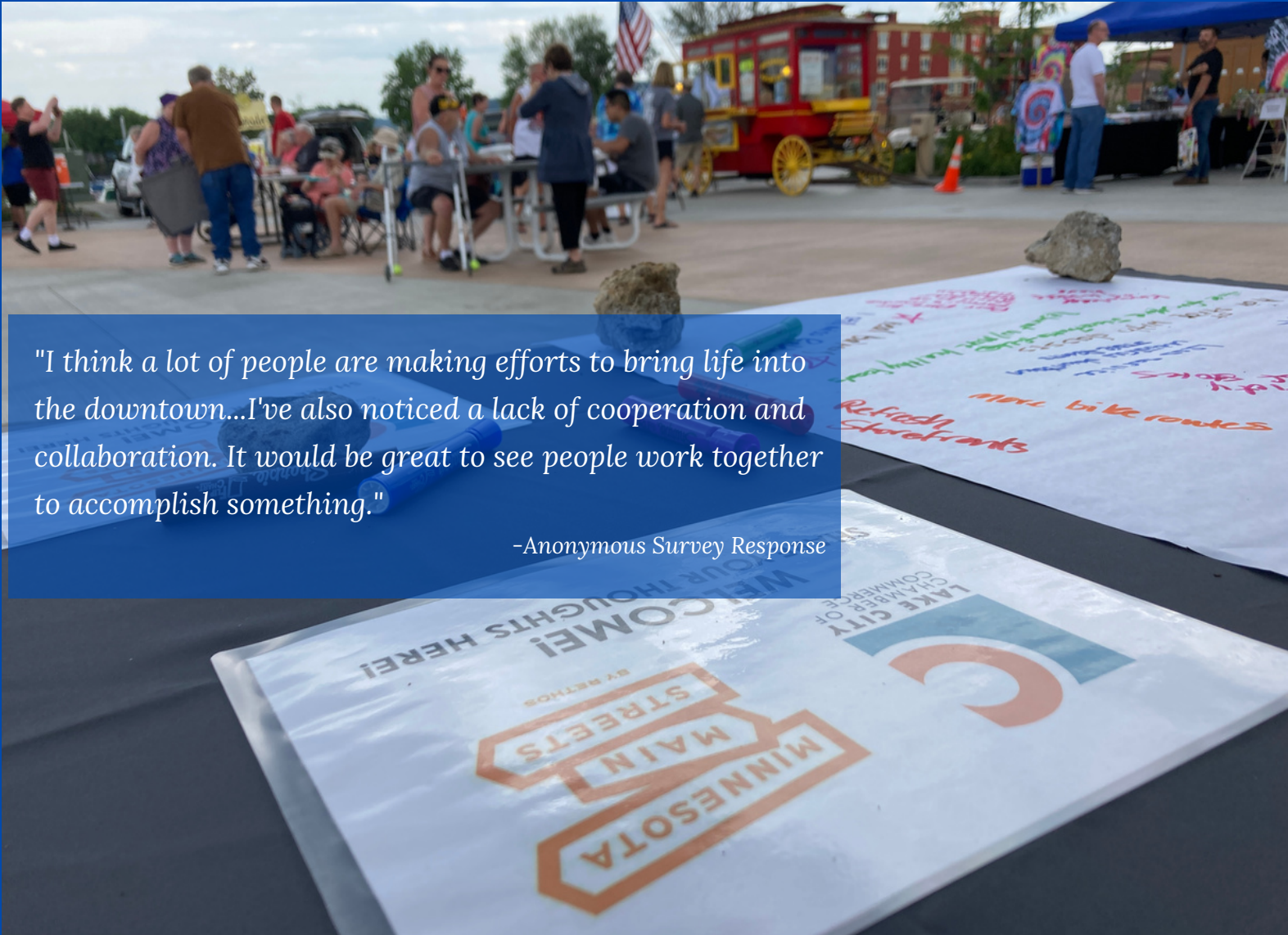
ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

609

11.4% of the population of Lake City responded to the online survey, which is tremendous. Following the in-community information gathering Rethos facilitated an online survey, open to anyone of any age who lived or worked in and Lake City to gather specific information on pre-determined topics. Full details and comments will be available to view.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES



"I think a lot of people are making efforts to bring life into the downtown...I've also noticed a lack of cooperation and collaboration. It would be great to see people work together to accomplish something."

-Anonymous Survey Response

These Cultural Activation Strategy Recommendations provide an evaluation of downtown Lake City's existing cultural assets, as defined by community members and gathered by Rethos staff. These strategies cover priorities for the district which community members identified, and concrete recommendations to utilize the community's existing assets to achieve those priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Address the unrest--there was a surprisingly large amount of negativity that came up in our outreach--toward the city, businesses, public spaces--Lake City residents focused on what they didn't like.

When people care about something, they're often critical of what could be made "better." It's easy to share lots of "what ifs" or hopes and dreams about a district to bring revitalization activity to the forefront. However, Lake City is dealing with some considerable frustration from residents, and it's important to note that they are not feeling heard or supported, rather, that their needs are coming in second to tourists. In the online survey responses when asked to describe downtown in one word, 52.5% of responses were negative, 21.2% neutral, and 26.3% positive. While this is not an easy challenge to face, it's a critical act that sets up the future of downtown for success.

The biggest hurdle in clarifying this challenge is communication. Staff ran into many comments that were shared by many individuals that seemed to lack complete data. The most frequent comments were focused around dilapidation/lack of care and the recent Hwy 61 road construction. Although construction is well past complete, many residents share frustration at the new road format, and blame the City for the changes. However, MNDOT is the leader of the project, and the data shared in dot.state.mn.us/complete-streets/case-studies/lake-city-hwy61.html showcases how critical the changes are for safety of both cars and pedestrians. Despite this case study, locals are still vehemently opposed to the structural changes even though they're already complete. This example is a great leverage point for future public/private conversation and information processes.

Rethos staff heard multiple times in focus groups and pop-ins that "the city wants businesses to fail." That's a direct quote from multiple people. While Rethos does not believe that is the case, the perception of locals matters, and if their perception is that the "city" is not supporting businesses, that message will spread. We saw many comments (which are available to read in the survey results) that were similar to the following: "I wish that the people that make decisions for Lake City would actually listen to the local people of Lake City. Because the building of the 2 lanes and public safety building is proof that they don't listen." Again, this is not likely the full story, but it's the reality that people are sharing, and in that reality comes some sort of truth.



Residents had A LOT to say, and were willing to participate. They showed up online, they were willing to talk in person, and they wanted their input to be heard. That input ranged from specific and small, *"Take care of the plants that were planted instead of letting them die."* to the broad, *"I don't know how you do it, but somehow it needs to be 'revitalized.'"*

In towns that are the size of Lake City, it's crucial for messages to be shared and open as much as possible, because people will talk and information spreads quickly. By getting in front of rumors and gossip, the City, the Chamber, and other businesses, events, and entities can share current, crucial, and relevant information. It's important that there's a one-stop info hub that locals know will have information and can seek it out at any given time. This informational network serves the city as a whole, but is especially critical to downtown as most events, businesses, and public infrastructure is found in the downtown district.

An information hub can exist on any website, but it's encouraged to not rely on social media as this hub. Between people leaving social media, not logging in, and changing algorithms, social media is not a reliable source for information. The Lake City Chamber has an excellent calendar page system, but not enough residents knew to look for information there. The City's website provides good information on resources and processes, but the two sites don't really reference each other in an obvious way. Perhaps a conversation between the City and Chamber/CVB could take place, bolstering calendar and information efforts, and creating language that explains FAQs on both sites would be helpful.

A great place to reference as an example is Galena, Illinois. Galena is a tourist town, but makes sure that locals have information, too. On City of Galena's website you can see everything from council meeting dates to blood drives and recycling pick up. Their Chamber calendar highlights events that are locally business driven, and their Convention and Visitor's Bureau feature places and events that are both local and tourist friendly. These three sites work in tandem for information, and help to clearly share important notices that are coming down the pipeline.

Lake City could also activate the local radio station and print/online publications to run stories on what's happening. What's the highlight reel from the city this month? Is there a newsletter of agendas that could be signed up to receive? Locals feel left out of the conversation, and by inviting them in some of the negativity will recede as decisions are understood. It may take several months to iron out who handles which info sources, but it's a critical piece in getting Lake City residents to be on the "same side" as city officials, downtown stakeholders, businesses, and local leaders. At the same time, create one clear and shareable message about where people can find information, and how they can also provide information to be shared.

This is a crucial first step for Lake City's downtown revitalization. Without organized messaging and concerted efforts around allowing the public "into the know," it will be incredibly difficult to make any forward motion happen.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Tailor events, promotions, and activity to residents of Lake City rather than tourists.

"We are so focused on tourism for the summer and we forget about the people that live in our community year round."

-Anonymous Survey Response



Lake City is a great town for tourists. Lake Pepin is an incredible draw, and it's no surprise that those tourists often turn into part-time residents. However, the divide between year-round residents and tourists (which part-time residents are informally included in) is massive. Tourists may not recognize it, but locals deeply feel this gap. One of Main Street's mantras is "If you build a downtown that locals love, tourists will want to be there, too." Currently Lake City residents feel like the opposite has happened.

Some ways to change this perception comes through messaging, as discussed in Recommendation 1 on the previous pages. However, there is a bit more to supporting local activity, but those efforts can in turn support entrepreneurship, volunteerism, and community activation.



Lake City residents, despite leading off with what seems wrong with their community, do love where they live, and they want to feel like they're the town leaders' priority. In fact, people who were out and about in public spaces responded much more positively to questions about Lake City than online survey goes. Folks at the Library, walking trails, visiting parks and the Farmer's Market shared stories and anecdotes that grew out of positive interactions with both the city entities and other residents.

There is no one right way to start "thinking locally." It helps immensely that there are fantastic public spaces in downtown. Both Patton and Ohuta Parks are great gathering spaces that invite locals to gather and linger. Patton Park's book walk curated by the library, the Farmer's Market with music, the splash pad at Ohuta Park. People feel welcome to be in these spaces and plan for these spaces, but don't think outside of public boundaries. It's been great to see some Chamber-led events taking part in the street, using the whole of downtown as a gathering space. Rethos is hopeful that that kind of energy can be cultivated for more enthusiasm for downtown.

The City, the Chamber, neither of these entities is solely responsible for revitalization. It takes all downtown stakeholders--business owners, building owners, non-profits, services--working together for the greater whole. It's really hard to find consensus among groups with different needs and goals. The great part about downtown is that it has pieces for everyone, but not every piece is something for everyone. To start fostering local goodwill, activating Lake City in the winter when it's not a tourist playground is a good first step. Below are some ideas to bring the community into the fields:



- "I live here" shopping discounts or promotions during the winter months.
- Winter events that invite people to gather outdoors in January/February.
- Pop up shops during winter months in vacant/underused spaces.
- Activate student/school partnerships to host student entrepreneur fairs or window display competitions
- Leverage partnerships for events, window displays, and volunteer clean up days with local students

All of these are ideas that need a champion, and it could be a Main Street group, the Chamber, the City, a retail group--or a combination of these entities. Ultimately, it needs to be a group of folks willing to start shifting perceptions and being a champion for downtown, rather than a viewer just watching things happen (or not happen).

A potential outcome of more local activity is increased entrepreneurship. Getting folks active in community happenings, even just gathering, can lead to new ideas about vacant spaces, empty lots, or underused buildings. This in turn leads to a more solid tax base, more rehabilitated buildings, new businesses--and most importantly residents invested in their downtown.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Focus on revitalization efforts to support the downtown infrastructure, both public and private.

A priority that came out of community engagement was the physical state of downtown. Folks referenced that downtown looked "dumpy" or "gross." Rethos Staff, too, noticed areas where weeds or garbage had piled up and not been attended to. While the city can certainly care for their spaces, it becomes trickier to manage and ensure that individual buildings are cared for. However there are great examples from communities in Minnesota that have leveraged city support for private building owners.

Faribault, MN has hosted a microgrant program for downtown entrepreneurs to start up businesses in the downtown district, but also to provide support dollars for facade work. Red Wing has held several competitions for funding to support business and building updates through their Challenge programs. Owatonna hosted a facade program that allowed for forgivable loans to be taken out in by building owners in partnership with the Owatonna Economic Development Authority, Owatonna Business Center, and Owatonna Main Street. Facade improvement grants are relatively common, and a great way for the City to show the commitment of investment to its historic infrastructure.



That being said, there's more to making downtown feel less dilapidated than hefty facade improvements. Simple, smaller measures can make a great impact. Adding plants throughout the summer that are weeded and watered show investment, and can be managed by volunteer efforts. Clean up days once a quarter can activate local youth or service groups and tidy up garbage and detritus. Local artists could be hired to spruce up window displays for service businesses or offices in the downtown where there is some curb appeal lacking. Volunteers could be activated to help with park upkeep like bench painting or beach cleanup. People do care, and growing the team of folks invested in the future of downtown does nothing but bolster the strength of the district and the community at large.

There may always be some building owners who have no interest in improving their space despite new supports being given. However, there will be some building owners who are ready to repair and activate their space. This could likely draw in new entrepreneurs and investors, starting to churn the waters of development.

Additional ways to show investment would be signage that provides wayfinding. While this is certainly something that residents could use, locals also benefit from wayfinding signage. Simple parking requirements, park signs, downtown business directional signage--all of these help keep downtown front of mind for locals who are in need of reminders to go downtown.

Being savvy about where signs are placed is important--highlight a walking route from one park to another. Remind people about the library when they're visiting the Farmer's Market. Locals are using downtown as a location to exercise year round, and they are a captive audience for downtown activity and business reminders. Don't forget--use uniform branding and materials! Have light pole banners, park signs, wayfinding signs, everything have imagery that goes together.



OPPORTUNITIES:

Rethos staff see potential for activation in the following opportunity areas. These aren't step by step resources to implement, but rather general ideas to cultivate growth.

- Work on recruiting a brewery/beer hall type space that is friendly for locals and all ages to gather. While this would entice visitors, locals want a space that feels like theirs, and breweries are great ways of building community.
- Cultivate regular "happenings" rather than big events. Think Farmers' Market style places to gather, nothing fancy, minimal planning, but a place for locals to be together year round.
- Leverage the entrepreneurial efforts happening at the Farmers Market. Youth are doing incredible work with pop up sales. Food tents and food truckss are offering a variety of flavors for people to dine out, and more restaurants with varied flavors was high on the priority list for locals.
- Find ways to leverage vacant lots. There are numerous spaces in downtown with no building, but no landscaping or invitation for use. Spaces like these are great ways to partner with local arts or arts organizations, students, and special events and non-profits.
- Find ways to open doors. Lake City is a community divided, and by creating opportunities to celebrate locals to the tourists visiting and the tourists to the locals, there can be new relationships and opportunities created. Ultimately, Lake City needs both groups of people to be strong in order for the community to survive.





WHAT'S NEXT?

Rethos hopes that by offering lots of little examples and ideas, Lake City can focus in on specific actions in their specific downtown district. We do not want this data to sit on a shelf--rather, we hope it becomes outdated in a matter of years or months! Downtown revitalization is an art, not a science. There are many ways for it to happen, and it takes everyone to do it.

"These surveys are useless unless there is some effective followup. About every 5 years the City spends large amounts on consultants who offer guidance that never seems to be followed. I'm not optimistic that this latest one will make any difference either. Hope to be proved wrong."

--Anonymous Survey Response

CONCLUSION

Downtown Lake City has a lot going for it. The fact that there is still a grocery store, still a hardware store, still a pharmacy, still significant services and shops mean that it's in a more solid place than many communities. However, the perception of residents needs attention. By focusing on how to support and harness the energy of locals, goodwill and support of downtown Lake City can return, and make it an even better place to live, work, play (and visit).