



Central Memorial Park • Downtown Sterling

Section 1

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The information and recommendations contained within the Plan are based upon research, analysis and extensive community outreach. The Plan was made possible through the support and assistance of City Staff and the Riverfront Redevelopment Task Force as well as input from other groups, organizations, residents, and the business community. The planning process included numerous community outreach exercises, providing the public with opportunities to provide valuable local insight regarding the issues and concerns facing the redevelopment of the Riverfront area. The following are the community outreach activities that were completed as a part of the planning process:

- ◇ Project Website
- ◇ Project Initiation Workshop
- ◇ Community Workshop
- ◇ Key Person Interviews

The following section summarizes the results of these community outreach activities.

Project Website

To assist in community outreach, and overall communication of the planning process, a project website has been created that is linked to the City's website. The project website provides visitors information on how to stay involved, a calendar of dates and times for future meetings, and posted copies of all documents that are produced for public review and comment. The Project website will remain active throughout the entire planning process.

Project Initiation Workshop

On Friday, June 18, 2010, a project initiation meeting was held with the Riverfront Redevelopment Task Force at City Hall, to set the foundation for the planning program and review and discuss the overall direction and policy issues facing Sterling's Downtown and Riverfront area. The meeting reviewed overall project objectives and concluded with a Project Initiation Workshop. The workshop solicited the views of the Task Force regarding their concerns and aspirations for the downtown riverfront redevelopment area and served as the "kick-off" meeting for the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan.

Workshop Questionnaire

The project initiation meeting concluded with a four-question workshop that focused on issues and concerns in the City's downtown/riverfront area, as well as community strengths and assets. The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments and opinions recorded and voiced verbally during workshop dialogue.

1. Identify five (5) issues or concerns confronting Sterling's Downtown & Riverfront Area.

A number of issues and concerns, covering a wide range of topics, were identified by the Task Force at the Project Initiation Workshop. The list of identified issues can be consolidated into the following categories: (a) Redevelopment of the Downtown Riverfront Area; (b) Clean-up Environmental Issues/Contamination; (c) Connectivity Concerns; (d) Economic Development & Viability of the Area; (e) Preserving the History of the Area; (f) Diversity of Uses; and, (g) Funding. A summary of all issues and concerns identified and discussed is provided for each specific category below.

- a. **Redevelopment of the Downtown Riverfront Area.** The Task Force agreed that redevelopment of Sterling's Downtown and Riverfront area was the primary concern and focus of the project. The underlying priority identified was replacing vacant and deteriorating structures with new uses that attract residents from the Sterling community and the greater region.

- b. **Clean-up Environmental Issues/Contamination.** The Task Force identified cleaning up environmental contamination on redevelopment sites as a priority to be addressed before redevelopment can occur in the Downtown and Riverfront areas.
- c. **Connectivity Concerns.** The Task Force identified the lack of connectivity between the Downtown and Riverfront as a key issue to be addressed in the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan. Much of this disconnect was attributed to the Union Pacific railroad that divides the Downtown and Riverfront areas; however, they acknowledged a lack of pedestrian connections as well. The Task Force indicated that a general priority of the Plan should be to improve overall access and circulation in the study area; and, specifically, that public access should be provided to and along the Rock River. The Task Force also expressed concern regarding boat connectivity and accessibility on the Rock River due to the two dams in the area that prohibit movement upstream and downstream.



Sterling Hydraulic Company Mural (corner of 2nd Avenue & E. 3rd Street)

d. **Economic Development & Viability of the Area.** The Task Force expressed concern over the number of jobs that have been lost in the area as industrial businesses have closed or relocated, and many stressed the importance of bringing businesses back to the Downtown/Riverfront. The Task Force also discussed the importance of economic viability studies to determine what the market capacity of the project study area is.

e. **Preserving the History of the Area.** The Task Force discussed the rich industrial history of the Downtown Riverfront area and cited it as a primary strength of the City. Preserving this history and any unique, salvageable architectural features was identified as a concern. The Task Force proposed incorporating a museum(s) in the Plan and maintaining structurally intact historic structures (such as the original limestone block from Northwestern Steel and Wire) as a way to preserve the area's history.

f. **Diversity of Uses.** The Task Force expressed concern over the future mix of uses in the project study area and indicated a desire for a diverse mix of public and private spaces. Restaurants, retail and mixed-use buildings were identified as most desirable in combination with green space and public gathering places.

g. **Funding.** Several issues and concerns voiced at the workshop dealt with the City's limited funding sources and the need to identify new resources available. The Task Force identified state and federal grant money as potential future funding sources.

2. List, in order of importance, the three (3) most important issues discussed thus far.

While a diverse list of issues and concerns was generated in response to question one, a general consensus indicated three specific items were considered most important (in no particular order):

a. **Increase Public Support & Cooperation with Rock Falls.** Public apathy and a lack of community involvement was a concern amongst the Task Force. Through community outreach, maintaining the momentum of the project and coming up with a visionary and feasible redevelopment plan, the Task Force believed that stewardship for the Plan could be fostered and public support increased. Additionally, the Task Force identified that better communication and coordination with Rock Falls needs to occur to ensure the success of the Plan.

b. **Identify Alternative Funding Strategies.** As previously mentioned, several concerns identified at the workshop related to the availability of funding. The Task Force believed that alternative funding sources such as state and federal grants would be essential to realize the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan and that a priority throughout the planning process should be to identify potential funding sources.

c. **Improve Public Access to the Riverfront.** Public access to, and along, the Rock River was believed to be one of the most important issues pertaining to the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan. The Task Force felt that continuous trail connections, clearly marked pedestrian crossings and pedestrian amenities should be a key component of the Plan.

3. Identify three (3) specific projects or actions you would like to see undertaken within the Riverfront redevelopment area/surrounding Downtown area.

When asked to indicate specific projects or actions they would like to see undertaken within the Village, the Task Force generated a list of ideas. These ideas have been consolidated into the following list of projects and actions:

- ◇ Clean redevelopment sites and make them "development ready";
- ◇ Incorporate a museum(s) as a way to preserve the area's historic past;
- ◇ Promote adaptive reuse of historical buildings;
- ◇ Provide parks and open space with multi-use trails along the riverfront;
- ◇ Generate additional revenue/sales tax dollars for the City;
- ◇ Eliminate blight/unattractive appearance;
- ◇ Create attractive gateways/entryways;
- ◇ Improve collaboration and coordination with Rock Falls;
- ◇ Capitalize the potential of Lawrence Park;
- ◇ Incorporate recreational amenities such as a splash pad or kayaking; and
- ◇ Create a destination.

4. What are the primary strengths and assets of the City of Sterling and its Downtown & Riverfront?

Although most of the workshop discussion dealt with issues and concerns that should be addressed in the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan, the last question focused on the strengths and assets of the City. The following strengths and assets of Sterling were mentioned by the Task Force:

- ◇ Rich industrial history of the City;
- ◇ Momentum gained from Downtown beautification efforts;
- ◇ Union Pacific Railroad;
- ◇ Sterling murals;
- ◇ Lawrence Park and its proximity to the Downtown Riverfront area;
- ◇ Abundance of old building materials (bricks in particular);
- ◇ Relatively strong retail and Downtown;
- ◇ Involved government leadership and proactive leaders;
- ◇ Geographical location of the area and its proximity to major metropolitan areas; and,
- ◇ People and community pride.

Next Steps

The next step in the planning process will be a community workshop. This workshop will be the first of many face-to-face community outreach events scheduled throughout the planning process. The purpose of this first workshop is to allow residents to share their ideas and opinions before plans and recommendations are made. The workshop will: (1) review the purpose of the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan, the planning process to be undertaken, and the schedule for the study; (2) secure local views on problems, issues and potentials within the redevelopment area; and, (3) conduct a visual preference survey. Additionally, key person interviews will be conducted and community surveys and issues mapping will be made available for residents and businesses.

Community Workshop

The first Community Workshop for the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan took place on August 10, 2010 at City Hall. To promote the workshop, three different forms of media were used for publicity including local newspapers, cable television and radio. Approximately seventy (70) residents participated in the workshop.

The workshop is the first of many face-to-face community outreach events scheduled throughout the Riverfront Redevelopment planning process. The purpose of this event was to: (1) review the purpose of the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan and the planning process to be undertaken; (2) secure local views on problems, issues and potentials within the redevelopment area; and, (3) conduct a visual preference survey to solicit community feedback on potential development and land use related components.

Workshop Questionnaire

The interactive part of the workshop began with a questionnaire that solicited participants input regarding issues and concerns in the City's downtown/riverfront area, as well as community strengths and assets. The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments and opinions obtained during the workshop.

1. Identify five (5) issues or concerns confronting Sterling's Downtown & Riverfront Area.

Several issues and concerns were generated by the group, covering a wide range of topics. The list of identified issues can be grouped into the following broad categories: (a) Appearance and Improved Sense of Place; (b) Union Pacific Railroad; (c) Mix of Uses and Family Friendly Atmosphere; (d) Preserving Local Character and History; (e) Public Accessibility and Trail Systems; and, (f) Economic Viability and Funding.

A summary of all issues and concerns identified and discussed is provided for each specific category below.

- a. **Appearance and Improved Sense of Place.** A number of issues cited related to the riverfront's appearance and sense of place. Specific comments for improving the area's appearance and sense of place ranged from specific to all encompassing, including (but not limited to): burying power lines; incorporating an attractive focal point; creating a unique identity; connecting with the area's manufacturing heritage; ensuring appropriate maintenance take place; and, improving right-of-way maintenance in the area.
- b. **Union Pacific Railroad.** Issues and concerns pertaining to the Union Pacific Railroad were identified. Specifically, attendees commented on the noise the railroad generates and how it forms a barrier between the Downtown and Riverfront areas.
- c. **Mix of Uses and Family-Friendly Atmosphere.** Attendees would like to see a healthy mix of uses and a family friendly atmosphere created along the riverfront. A desire for a diverse mix of public and private spaces was expressed, with specific interest in the following: outdoor amphitheaters/event space; a publicly accessible riverfront; cafes and restaurants; and, cultural icons or museums. A number of workshop participants cited bringing businesses and employers back to the Downtown and Riverfront areas as a key objective. Additionally, participants indicated that the riverfront should incorporate uses for children, teens and adults, and be enhanced with a variety of public amenities such as public restrooms.

d. Preserving Local Character and History.

Workshop participants made reference to or discussed the importance of preserving the City's local history as redevelopment occurs along the Riverfront. Many felt that incorporating a museum into the redevelopment would preserve the area's identity and heritage. People believed that preserving the local character could be complemented through the use of preservation guidelines. Additionally, some workshop participants suggested incorporating historic themes into educational/academic facilities.

e. Public Accessibility and Trail Systems.

In general, workshop participants indicated that a general priority of the Plan should be to improve overall access and circulation in the area; and, specifically, that public access should be provided to and along the Rock River. Issues and concerns related to both physical and visual accessibility along the Rock River riverfront. Participants desired continuous multi-use trails along the riverfront, maximized views of the river; and, public gathering areas or places to "hang out" along the riverfront. Participants also desired that the riverfront be enhanced with public amenities such as restrooms and connections to Lawrence Park and the Dillon Home.

- f. **Economic Viability and Funding.** Several issues voiced at the workshop related to the high cost of redevelopment and its long term viability. Concerns with the City's limited funding sources and the need to identify new resources available were discussed, and many participants emphasized that appropriate use of incentives should occur but not in excess. Redevelopment/development should be financially sound and economically sustainable.

2. List, in order of importance, the three (3) most important issues discussed thus far.

While a diverse list of issues and concerns was generated in response to Question 1, a general consensus indicated four general categories were most important by workshop participants. These categories included the following:

- a. **Cost and Funding.** As outlined in response to Question 1, concerns with the City's limited funding sources and the need to identify new resources available were expressed. Participants acknowledged that a substantial amount of money and funding will be necessary to implement the Riverfront Redevelopment Plan.
- b. **Long-term Sustainability.** This category includes the three pillars of sustainability: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and cultural sustainability. Workshop participants emphasized that any redevelopment that occurs needs to consider all three pillars in the long-term. They stressed that the City should not surrender too much to attract new development and that quality development with a variety of uses is necessary. Workshop participants desired redevelopment that includes green technologies, complements Rock Falls (rather than competes with Rock Falls), and incorporates a healthy mix of uses.
- c. **Union Pacific Railroad.** Workshop participants indicated that the Union Pacific Railroad was one of the most important issues facing the redevelopment of the riverfront. The prominent location of the railroad and the negative connotations associated with it were envisioned to be priorities.
- d. **Appearance.** According to participants, several of the issues and concerns generated pertained to the riverfront's appearance. The Riverfront area serves as a prominent gateway into Sterling and workshop participants desired an attractive appearance to reflect the City's desired character.



"Sterling Secret Six" Illinois State Troopers in the 1930's

3. Identify three (3) specific projects or actions you would like to see undertaken within the Riverfront Redevelopment area/surrounding Downtown area.

Workshop participants identified a number of specific projects and actions they would like to see undertaken in the project study area. Desired projects and actions included, but are not limited to, the following:

- ◇ Incorporation of dining establishments and outdoor seating areas;
- ◇ Installation of a tram that would travel from Sterling's riverfront, to Lawrence Park, to Rock Fall's riverfront;
- ◇ Planting of native plant species;
- ◇ Incorporation of an "event area" or amphitheater;
- ◇ Construction of a community focal point/unique attraction and public gathering place;
- ◇ Development of a year-round recreational facility with a water park and ice rink;
- ◇ Combining resources with Rock Falls;
- ◇ Development of condominiums near the riverfront;
- ◇ Connecting the riverfront with Lawrence Park and other community amenities with bike/multi-use trails;
- ◇ Incorporation of an educational facility and/or museum;
- ◇ Decreasing railroad traffic and noise;
- ◇ Utilization of the river for recreational activities;
- ◇ Utilization of the river for energy; and,
- ◇ Incorporation of a hotel/lodging facility.

4. What are the primary strengths and assets of the City of Sterling and its Downtown & Riverfront?

Although most of the workshop dealt with issues and concerns to be addressed in the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan, the fourth and final question focused on the strengths and assets of the City. Workshop attendees recorded what they believed to be strengths and assets of the City, its Downtown and Riverfront. The following strengths and assets were noted:

- a. **Location.** Workshop participants believed the location of Sterling to be one of its greatest strengths as the City is situated along the Rock River, adjacent to the Union Pacific Railroad and in close proximity to I-88. Furthermore, Sterling is situated in close proximity to several surrounding communities that would provide potential visitors and shoppers for riverfront amenities and for businesses.
- b. **Rich history and culture of the City.** Sterling's rich industrial history was noted as an asset that should be preserved and enhanced as redevelopment occurs along the riverfront. Attendees expressed a desire for museums and cultural icons to be included to preserve this history and distinguish the area from others within the region.
- c. **Progressive City government.** Attendees noted the City's strong and progressive governmental leadership as a strength of the community. The City government will likely play a key role in guiding the long-term improvement of the riverfront area. Attendees also noted that the local government would play an important role in promoting stewardship and working towards the long-term success of the Plan.
- d. **The Rock River.** Attendees described the Rock River as a unique and beautiful amenity with significant potential. Workshop participants noted that redevelopment along the riverfront should capitalize on the river and feature recreational amenities and a healthy mix of uses that will attract residents and visitors from the surrounding region.
- e. **Residents.** The residents of Sterling were described as involved citizens, good volunteers and skilled workers by workshop participants. Attendees identified the City's multi-cultural base and strong sense of community as an asset.
- f. **Large, consolidated area to redevelop.** Participants identified the size of the riverfront redevelopment area as a strength because it offers a large "blank slate." Attendees noted that possibilities for riverfront redevelopment are endless once the area has been cleaned up. The importance of developing a Riverfront Redevelopment Plan was noted to ensure that the aspirations of the community are met as redevelopment occurs.
- g. **The existing Downtown.** Workshop participants noted that the Downtown has an established character that the riverfront can build upon for success. The historic buildings and small town feel of the Downtown were identified as community strengths.

Key Person Interviews

As a part of the Community Outreach phase of the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Plan's planning process, confidential interviews were conducted with individuals to discuss conditions and potentials within the Downtown and Riverfront areas. Individuals who possess various interests and insights into the Sterling community as well as the Downtown and Riverfront areas were selected. Persons interviewed included local business owners, medical professionals, realtors and residents.

Interviews were conducted on September 29, 2010 and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Each interviewee was asked a series of questions regarding the community. Overall responses to each question are summarized below.

How would you define/describe the character of Sterling's Downtown and Riverfront areas?

Each interviewee seemed to have a firm idea of how to best describe the character of Sterling's Downtown and Riverfront areas. While individual responses varied, several underlying themes could be identified and have been summarized in the following statements:

- ◇ Recent streetscaping efforts have made the area more pedestrian friendly, but the Downtown appears to lack a desirable mix of active uses needed to make the area a more vibrant district.
- ◇ While the potential for improvement exists, the vacant industrial sites that currently occupy the Riverfront do not create a favorable gateway into Sterling from the south.
- ◇ There are opportunities to improve both the Downtown and Riverfront and enhance the area's ability to attract new businesses.

The following statements represent a more detailed summary of responses:

- ◇ The Riverfront is industrial and representative of past practices including river/water power and multi-level factories.
- ◇ Industrial uses are no longer appropriate for the Riverfront and there is a desire by the community to move forward.
- ◇ Industrial buildings (such as the Lawrence building) along the Riverfront are in poor condition and some portion of the industrial sites may be contaminated.
- ◇ The Downtown and Riverfront areas currently lack a "critical mass" of retailers, restaurants and entertainment uses found in more vibrant downtown areas and some businesses and amenities in the Downtown seem "hidden."
- ◇ Sterling is a blue-collar community.
- ◇ Redevelopment efforts could create a more attractive gateway to the Downtown and Riverfront from the 1st Avenue bridge.
- ◇ The demolition of aging industrial buildings has improved the appearance of the Riverfront and provided physical signs of progress on behalf of the City.
- ◇ Opportunities for redevelopment/development exist within the Downtown and along the Riverfront.
- ◇ The Downtown streetscaping initiative has been beneficial and made the Downtown more pedestrian friendly.
- ◇ Downtown Sterling currently has a number of vacant storefronts and the area appears to have difficulty attracting new businesses.

What do you believe are the primary assets and advantages of the Downtown and Riverfront?

Few question the manufacturing legacy of Sterling's Riverfront and its importance to the City's history; however, it is acknowledged that the Riverfront is not likely to regain its reputation as an industrial hub. The future success of the City's Downtown and Riverfront areas will be more influenced by the area's existing assets and advantages, than its industrial past. To identify favorable characteristics which the Plan could utilize and build upon, interviewees were asked to identify the primary assets and advantages of the Downtown and Riverfront.

The asset most cited was the Rock River riverfront itself and the recreational opportunities it provides. Interviewees identified views of the river, its proximity to Lawrence Park, and seasonal boating and fishing as advantages that attract residents and visitors. The potential for additional tourism and recreational amenities was also mentioned as an advantage.

Some observed that the availability of land and the large size of parcels along the Rock River function as an asset on which to capitalize. Several interviewees believed that the vacant or available land along the riverfront holds significant redevelopment potential and could be desirable for a variety of users.

In general, interviewees believed that the hospital and numerous medical clinics/facilities were an asset to the Downtown and Riverfront as well. Some mentioned that these types of facilities have the potential to attract more medical professionals and their families to the community, increasing overall demand for commercial uses such as restaurants and retail.

A summary of assets and advantages identified includes:

- ◇ Fairly sizable hospital.
- ◇ Summertime boating and fishing.
- ◇ "Anonymous" donors in the area.
- ◇ Small town, friendly feel of the community.
- ◇ Local schools – their manageable size and opportunities to get involved.
- ◇ Low crime rate.
- ◇ Lack of congestion.
- ◇ Proximity to Rock Falls.
- ◇ Location – convenient access to the interstate system and larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Rockford and the Quad Cities.
- ◇ The National Manufacturing Co. building and possible opportunities for adaptive reuse.
- ◇ Recent clean-up efforts.
- ◇ Nearby jobs along Interstate 88.
- ◇ Large areas available for redevelopment.
- ◇ Views of the Rock River.
- ◇ The Twin City Farmers' Market.
- ◇ The Union Pacific Railroad contributes to the area's character.
- ◇ Retail development and theater on the east side of the City is indicative of the Sterling area's potential.



What do you believe are the primary weaknesses and disadvantages of the Downtown and Riverfront?

While interviewees indicated that potential exists for significant improvements to Sterling’s Downtown and Riverfront areas, they also acknowledged that there are a number of issues that must be addressed if the area is to be successfully redeveloped and revitalized.

Job loss and unemployment concerns were cited by the majority of interviewees as a primary weakness of the Downtown and Riverfront. Interviewees also indicated that Sterling currently lacks desirable amenities such as restaurants and diverse retail options and this lack of amenities is making it increasingly difficult to recruit “white collar” professionals such as doctors and engineers. Some believe that middle class families are leaving the area and commercial businesses can no longer be sustained as a result.

Several interviewees identified the weak and sometime negative relationship between Sterling and Rock Falls as a potential disadvantage. The Rock River was identified as a dividing line by some and it was also noted that competition between the two communities, for things such as state funding or retail customers, was detrimental to either’s success. Some felt that merging the school districts or municipal services could unite and merge the two communities and help foster a mutually beneficial relationship.

The location of the Union Pacific Railroad in relation to the Downtown and Riverfront areas was also identified as an issue. With 66 trains traveling through each day, interviewees stated that access to the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites is limited and that the Riverfront is disconnected from the Downtown. Safety issues pertaining to the railroad were cited as a disadvantage as well.

Lawrence Brothers Smoke Stack

A summary of all weaknesses and disadvantages discussed includes:

- ◇ Lack of vibrancy in the existing Downtown.
- ◇ Environmental contamination and the cost of clean-up.
- ◇ Competition between Sterling and Rock Falls.
- ◇ Lack of new job opportunities in the area.
- ◇ Lack of direct access to I-88.
- ◇ The Union Pacific Railroad – Potential to add character, but creates safety and access issues.
- ◇ Disconnect between the visions and realities of Sterling’s potential.
- ◇ Perception of increased crime activity.
- ◇ Schools are underfunded which deters young families from moving to the area.
- ◇ Industrial job loss and an economically depressed area.
- ◇ Communication barriers with aging medical professionals.
- ◇ The pool closing at Lawrence Park due to maintenance issues.
- ◇ Rumors of low-income housing coming to Sterling and Rock Falls.
- ◇ Money and cost of improvements.
- ◇ Population may be too small to support a “great” development.
- ◇ The Lawrence building is deteriorating.
- ◇ A new “Executive Director of Development” is needed to promote the area.
- ◇ Downtown has undergone a lot of change – many buildings were torn down; the streetwall is gone or discontinuous in many parts; and, there is a lack of retail/destinations.
- ◇ Competition with commercial development on the east side of the City.

What do you consider to be the single most important issue confronting the Downtown and Riverfront today?

As a follow up to the previous question, interviewees were asked to narrow their focus and convey their opinion of the single biggest issue confronting the Downtown and Riverfront areas. While interviewees had difficulty identifying a single issue, this exercise helped interviewees highlight the issues they believed to be the most significant.

With the exception of job loss, there was little consensus among interviewees regarding the single most important issue confronting the Downtown and Riverfront areas. Most interviewees believed job loss and its associated repercussions are important issues that need to be addressed throughout the planning process. Some interviewees stated that the closing of Northwestern Steel & Wire specifically was detrimental to the community, and the majority felt that the lack of jobs within the area made it difficult to attract new people and businesses to Sterling. A few interviewees provided some follow-up, sharing the belief that new Walmart distribution center was a saving grace and that additional development will occur once more employers locate in the area. Others simply stated that something needs to be done to improve overall quality of life in the community.

A summary list of all responses includes:

- ◇ Something is needed to excite people in the community – nightlife, restaurants or a compelling area.
- ◇ Eyesores along the Rock River need to be eliminated.
- ◇ The Union Pacific Railroad presents a problem with access and circulation in the area.
- ◇ Loss of jobs and lack of employment opportunities.
- ◇ Walmart distribution center locating in Sterling.
- ◇ Additional industrial/manufacturing jobs are needed.
- ◇ The community needs something it can feel proud of – National Manufacturing and Northwestern Steel & Wire were sources of pride.
- ◇ The culture of the area needs to be changed.
- ◇ The Riverfront area needs to be cleaned up.
- ◇ More retailers are needed.
- ◇ The demand for space and its sustainability.
- ◇ Developing incentives for businesses to locate in the Downtown or along the Riverfront.
- ◇ Lack of cash-flow and disposable income in the community.
- ◇ Competition between Sterling and Rock Falls.
- ◇ The cost and how to fund the clean-up and redevelopment of the Riverfront.



Purington Paver bricks reused at Martin's Landing and the Sinissippi Dam Walkway

- ◇ What to do with all of the vacant and deteriorating buildings currently situated along the Rock River.
- ◇ Raising money will be a priority/necessary – receiving grant money or federal funds will be difficult.
- ◇ Poor property maintenance of some residences and businesses.
- ◇ Moving forward will be the biggest challenge – it is nice to remember the past, but need to move on and not focus on what once was.
- ◇ Need to remove blight from the area – removing rubble is not enough.
- ◇ Sterling is not a center of technical or “knowledge” workers.
- ◇ There is a need to “paint” a vision and create a plan for the area.
- ◇ There are no weaknesses in the area – just potential.

If you had the power to undertake one project or improvement within the Downtown and Riverfront, what would it be?

Interviewees were asked what specific project or improvement they would like to undertake within the Downtown or Riverfront areas if financial limitations and other barriers to implementation were non-factors. A wide range of projects and improvements were mentioned with no discernable common theme.

A more comprehensive list of suggested projects or improvements includes:

- ◇ A high-end marina complex with a mix of restaurants and retail.
- ◇ Attract outside investors to improve the area.
- ◇ Relocate existing restaurants in the city to the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites.
- ◇ Bike trails.

- ◇ Something other than condos or high-density housing.
- ◇ Attractive, usable green space combined with a streetscaping project similar to the Downtown's.
- ◇ Attracting and locating ten medium-sized manufacturing companies in other parts of the community (not along the river), so that a hotel and restaurants can locate along the riverfront or downtown.
- ◇ Entertainment venues and/or an outdoor amphitheater for concerts/shows.
- ◇ Implement incentives such as TIF Districts; or, freeze property taxes based on the number of jobs created by an employer.
- ◇ Clean the riverfront and make it useful – remove boarded up homes on Wallace Street, incorporate green space and pavilions for festivals.

- ◇ Provide a continuous trail along the river to the dam and work with Sterling Steel to get an easement along its property frontage.
- ◇ Construct a power generating plant near the lower dam.
- ◇ Incorporate a park into something that generates sales tax revenue for the City such as restaurants and bars – place less of an emphasis on street furniture.
- ◇ Demolish the existing buildings along the Riverfront to create a clean slate and inspire new development in the area.
- ◇ Work with Sauk Valley College to retrain and educate the local workforce.
- ◇ Encourage five companies to relocate their businesses to Sterling, with an emphasis on a hotel, a VA clinic and a retirement home.

- ◇ Convert the National Manufacturing Co. building into an interactive museum similar to the City Museum in St. Louis.
- ◇ Create more housing options within walking distance of businesses.
- ◇ Create a mixed-use development with the National Manufacturing Co. building – retail on the first floor and condos on upper floors.
- ◇ Additional park and recreation facilities that accommodate kayaks, rowboats and a fishing pier.
- ◇ A community pool along the Rock River riverfront.
- ◇ Construct a senior housing/assisted living facility.
- ◇ A casino complemented by restaurants, hotels and other tourist attractions to create a destination that raises money for the City.

What are your primary concerns regarding future development of the area?

Lastly, interviewees were asked to identify their primary concerns regarding future development of the Riverfront area. In general, interviewees seemed to have difficulty pinpointing a single primary concern, and oftentimes tied responses to previous comments regarding the weaknesses and disadvantages of the area.

A summary list of primary concerns identified as they pertain to future development of the area includes:

- ◇ The duplication of municipal services in Sterling and Rock Falls.
- ◇ The Riverfront redeveloping as its own separate district, disconnected from the Downtown.
- ◇ Sterling lacks an attractive gateway/entrance from the south and a favorable gateway needs to be created.
- ◇ The constant competition between Sterling and Rock Falls with regards to attracting development.
- ◇ Removing blight from the Downtown and Riverfront areas.

- ◇ The City going into debt for something that does not make sense in the long-term.
- ◇ Cannot rely on the City's heritage for the future or place too much emphasis on preservation.
- ◇ Improving the schools and the school system is the first step towards attracting young families to Sterling.
- ◇ Sustainability.
- ◇ Encouraging traditional architecture that complements the existing buildings Downtown.
- ◇ Create a phasing plan to attract new jobs and development.
- ◇ A lack of technology.
- ◇ The Union Pacific Railroad creates access problems and potential safety concerns.

Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding our work on the Riverfront Redevelopment Plan?

Once questions were completed, interviewees were given the opportunity to provide any additional input into the plan. Additional feedback received is summarized below:

- ◇ It is important to have an appreciation for history and heritage, but these should not be the most important issues considered.
- ◇ A waterpark will attract new people to the area and can be accommodated on the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites.
- ◇ Sterling residents frequently visit restaurants in Dixon.
- ◇ There needs to be something to do along the riverfront – a park/open space is not enough to create a destination.
- ◇ A larger population to support additional/new businesses is necessary and business cannot likely be sustained if there are not more people in the area.
- ◇ Undesirable people are coming into the Sterling community because of the Dixon prison; and, as a result, the school system is suffering.
- ◇ Safety and lighting should be important components of any redevelopment plan.

- ◇ Large industrial users have trouble finding people to do line work and manual labor.
- ◇ The Rock Falls and Sterling Chamber of Commerce work well with one another and try to improve relationships between the two communities.
- ◇ The Rock River is shallow and may limit boating/recreation potential.
- ◇ Clinton (Iowa) and Dixon have implemented successful and desirable riverfront plans.
- ◇ A casino will attract a number of people to the area and provide revenue to the City for future beautification and redevelopment efforts.
- ◇ Key selling points of Sterling include: low crime rate; no traffic congestion; recreational opportunities; availability and price of land.
- ◇ There is a need for additional assisted living facilities and nursing homes.
- ◇ A stronger work force is needed to attract large employers.
- ◇ Attracting "weekenders" or seasonal users would be a positive for the community and add a sense of vibrancy in the Downtown and Riverfront areas.
- ◇ To improve connections between the Downtown and Riverfront areas, opportunities for a shuttle or bus should be investigated.
- ◇ The hospital has a difficult time recruiting doctors.
- ◇ The Riverfront should achieve a healthy balance between recreational amenities and job opportunities.

- ◇ Sterling's proximity to Chicago is an asset.
- ◇ A phasing plan or development cycles should be considered as an important component of the plan.
- ◇ A riverboat casino is not a desirable use.
- ◇ Sterling may have the potential to attract a regional medical facility.
- ◇ The school districts in Sterling and Rock Falls should merge, followed by municipal services – the communities will be more successful if they join forces.
- ◇ The three pillars of sustainability will be important in any redevelopment plan that comes forward.
- ◇ The high school and the coliseum can host concerts, and Rock Falls is planning for an amphitheater – Sterling's Riverfront Redevelopment Plan should not duplicate Rock Falls or compete with existing facilities.
- ◇ Promotional efforts need to be enhanced in the City.
- ◇ Opportunities for recreational tourism should be explored such as canoeing, kayaking, fishing and weekend trips.
- ◇ The Sterling community is sufficient and comparable to other communities with the same demographics.
- ◇ The Veteran's Park in Dixon is a desirable amenity.
- ◇ Sustainable development is desired along the Riverfront regardless of the type of use.