



View looking south down 2nd Avenue, First Congregational Church on right

Section 4

# ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

## Issues & Opportunities

Preliminary issues and opportunities were identified throughout the course of the existing conditions analysis. These issues and opportunities have the potential to impact future plans and recommendations for Sterling's riverfront and the rest of the Downtown. The issues and opportunities presented in this section are based upon consultant observations; discussions with the community leaders; and, concerns voiced by local residents and business persons. They are organized by topic in this section of the report.

### Rock River Riverfront

**Multiple sites along the Rock River have fallen into disuse and disrepair after manufacturing businesses closed or declined in recent years.**

These sites are highly visible from the 1st Avenue Bridge and function as the key gateway for people entering the City from the south. The vacant buildings detract from the community's character and evoke a sense of blight that is unattractive to the surrounding area. Furthermore, these vacancies do not contribute to the City's tax base and affect the City's ability to provide valuable community services and fund important capital improvements.

**Some of the vacant industrial sites may be contaminated and will require remediation prior to redevelopment.**

As a result of previous manufacturing operations, suspected environmental issues exist relative to both soil and groundwater on some of the sites along the Rock River. The City has actively pursued grants and other funding for assessment activities on riverfront sites contaminated by hazardous substances, pollutants or other contaminants. To date, the City has been awarded multiple grants for site cleanup and plans to achieve regulatory closure of sites under the Illinois Site Remediation Program (SRP) and develop Remedial Action Plans (RAP) for affected sites.

**The Riverfront's unique, historic buildings are threatened by age, obsolescence, deferred maintenance and deterioration.** Community outreach efforts have indicated that preservation of historic structures is desirable along the riverfront, but this may not be possible. Repurposing buildings, whether deemed historic or not, is a sustainable measure that represents a responsible policy a community can do to protect its past. However, the size, past use, and current conditions may limit the feasibility of preservation of all most of the structures.

**Future redevelopment along the Riverfront will compete with new development on the City's periphery.** Sterling's Downtown and Riverfront areas are being challenged by new developments on the City's along Illinois Route 2 to the east as well as other locations in the area. Some existing businesses Downtown have been displaced as "big box" stores that have located in outlying areas and as shopping and dining uses continue to develop in the City's periphery it may impact the future potential of the Riverfront .

**Public accessibility to the Riverfront is currently impaired.** A number of issues currently affect public accessibility to the riverfront, including the Union Pacific Railroad; a lack of at-grade crossings; a lack of pedestrian connections; and, privately-owned property along the riverfront. Currently there are no public trails planned along the riverfront within the project study area, and two nearby dams prohibit movement upstream and downstream on the Rock River. Overgrown vegetation, uneven shorelines and inconsistent retaining walls also prohibit residents and visitors from utilizing the riverfront as an amenity.

**Portions of the area are located within the Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA) Zone AE floodplain.** The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has recently completed the Flood Insurance Study (FIS) and modernization of Whiteside County's Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) which becomes effective on February 18th, 2011. The new FIRM has established the 100-year Based Flood Elevation (BFE) along Rock River. Should any redevelopment along the riverfront place fill below the BFE, compensatory storage for 1.5 times the fill volume below the base flood elevation would be required. New building construction within the 100-year floodplain must be elevated at least one foot above the BFE. Chapter 11 of the County's Code for Floodplain and Stormwater Regulation will govern any proposed developments within regulatory floodplain and detention requirements.



First Avenue Bridge mural • West 2nd Street

**The depth of the Rock River near the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites may limit boating and recreation potential.** Though the Rock River provides opportunities for recreational activities, shallow water in the project study area may limit boating/recreation potential. Non-motorized boats such as canoes, kayaks and paddle boats can be used in the area, but motorized boating is best on other segments of the river where water is deeper.

**The Riverfront Redevelopment Sites have significant potential for redevelopment and recreational opportunities.** Totalling over 35 acres in size and occupying nearly one mile of the Rock River riverfront, the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites provide a large, consolidated area. Much of the area is vacant, or anticipated to be so in the future. These sites may significantly impact the appearance and economic health of the City as they undergo redevelopment and improvement.

**The Rock River is both a local and regional amenity.** The Rock River is the defining characteristic of the riverfront area and the community. It functions as an important natural resource and provides opportunities for recreation and pleasant views and settings. Though the river never became the major navigational water route as was once hoped, it has historical ties to the City of Sterling. Previously, the river provided power for saw and grist mills and later provided power to the City's booming industrial base. As a defining amenity of the community, the City should maximize the potential of the Rock River as both an economic and natural resource.

**Opportunities for recreational tourism on the Rock River should be explored.** The Rock River provides opportunities for recreational activities including canoeing, kayaking, fishing and weekend trips. Shallow water in the project study area limits motorized boating potential, but other activities can still be enjoyed and attract "weekenders." Community residents and business owners generally felt that attracting seasonal users would be a positive for the community and add a sense of vibrancy to the Downtown and riverfront.

**The potential for a vibrant riverwalk connecting the river to the community and larger regional trail system.** The recent completion of the Sinnissippi Dam Walkway has created a connection between Sterling and the region's Hennepin Canal trail system to the east of the Riverfront area. To the west, Whiteside County has proposed a riverfront linking Lawrence Park to Downtown Rock Falls. Creating a riverwalk in the Riverfront area, running between Lawrence Park and Martin's Landing could help establish a full circuit of dedicated trails and walkways on both side of the Rock River as it passes through Sterling and Rock Falls. Furthermore, an active riverwalk along the Rock River would provide a tremendous community amenity and provide the desired public access to the waterfront.



*Existing welcome sign near the 1st Avenue bridge*

## **Community Image & Identity**

### **The City lacks a distinct identity and gateway features at its primary southern entry point.**

Vacant buildings near 1st Avenue Bridge evoke a sense of blight that is not attractive to the community and the existing gateway sign is understated. Coordinated street and wayfinding signage would be desirable to enhance the image and identity of the area.

### **The Sterling/Rock Falls rivalry is**

**disadvantageous to the area.** Sterling residents and business owners identified that competition between Sterling and Rock Falls is detrimental to both of their successes. During community outreach efforts, it was mentioned that the Rock River functions as a dividing line between the two communities and that there is constant competition for state funding and attracting new businesses. Rock Falls benefits from direct access to Interstate 88 and Sterling benefits from proximity to Dixon. Both have the potential to benefit from the Rock River as a valuable natural resource. Some community members feel that merging the school districts or municipal services could unite and merge the two communities, resulting in mutual benefit.

### **Getting the word out – The City of Sterling is a friendly community with “small town charm”.**

As a friendly community with a traditional downtown, excellent community services and an abundance of recreation opportunities, many believe that this is not the image portrayed beyond City limits to perspective residents or potential visitors. Instead, it is believed that a poor community image and lack of identity deters people from visiting and moving to Sterling. The business community, along with institutions such as the College and Hospital, has said it is difficult to recruit young or new professionals to the area, citing a lacking amenities and an overcrowded school system. Whether actual or perceived, this issue should not be left unaddressed.

**The City of Sterling is well-positioned with convenient access to major transportation routes and metropolitan areas.** The City is located with excellent access to the interstate being approximately two miles north of Interstate 88. Two state routes, Illinois Route 40 and Illinois Route 2, pass through the Downtown, as well as the Union Pacific Railroad. Sterling is situated along the Rock River, and is proximate to major metropolitan areas including Chicago and Rockford.

### **The existing City leadership is progressive.**

Residents and business owners in the Sterling community believe the City has strong and progressive governmental leadership in place. The City government will play an important role in guiding the long-term improvement of the riverfront area.

### **A chance to build new from old – a more sustainable approach to new construction.**

The City of Sterling has an abundance of old bricks and pavers salvaged from old streets in the community. As demolition continues on the industrial sites, there will be additional opportunities to divert materials from the landfill and reuse them within the Riverfront’s redevelopment. Bricks contribute to the image and character of the area and have already been incorporated in streetscaping efforts Downtown and in Martin’s Landing. Redevelopment along the waterfront provides an opportunity to continue and expand this measure.

### **Opportunities to expand streetscape improvements and improve gateways exist within the project study area.**

Local residents and business owners feel that recent streetscape enhancements Downtown have been successful in beautifying the public realm. Momentum from the streetscaping project can be carried into the riverfront area. Additionally, the community believes that opportunities for improved gateway signage and banner programs exist within the study area, such as utilizing the railroad underpass as a gateway feature.

**The Sterling Mural Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting the heritage of the Sterling area by promoting the painting of murals on buildings.** Eighteen murals currently exist within the City, seventeen of which are located in the study area. These murals enhance the sense of place and character of Downtown. Opportunities for additional murals may be created as the riverfront undergoes improvement and redevelopment.

### **Opportunities to enhance Lawrence Park exist.**

Lawrence Park is identified as a community amenity by residents and business owners. Its location on the Rock River is highly visible to both Sterling and Rock Falls, and convenient access from Avenue G makes the park significant to the Riverfront Redevelopment Plan. Currently, the park features fishing areas, boat launches, picnic areas and more. The Sterling Park District has plans to close the outdoor swimming pool in the summer of 2011. Opportunities to incorporate the park into the Riverfront Redevelopment Plan and create a new community attraction exist.



Looking west down the Union Pacific Railroad tracks adjacent to the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites

## Downtown

**Downtown Sterling has an established character and “small town charm.”** Residents and business owners identify the existing Downtown as a primary asset and strength of the community and believe redevelopment along the riverfront can build upon it for success. The historic buildings and attractive streetscaping strengthen the area’s identity and sense of place.

**Downtown is disconnected from the Riverfront.** The Union Pacific Railroad acts as a barrier between Downtown and the Riverfront, limiting north-south connections for pedestrians and vehicles. The Downtown’s street grid terminates at the railroad prior to reaching the riverfront area, and lack of pedestrian connections and grade changes also contribute to the disconnect.

**Vacant buildings Downtown.** Within the Downtown, there are vacant and /or underutilized buildings that detract from the appearance of the area and contribute to negative perceptions of the entire community. Furthermore, vacancies and underutilization of sites fails to maximize the tax and revenue benefit of Downtown.

**The current mix of businesses does not create the vibrant and active area desired for Downtown.** Retail, service and office uses all coexist in the project study area, and residential uses are within close proximity. However, there appears to be a lack of synergy among the variety of uses. An analysis of existing conditions and land uses indicate a poor concentration and lack of active businesses Downtown. This observation was echoed by the Sterling community who indicated a desire for more pedestrian generating uses such as restaurants, entertainment and retail shops.

## Transportation & Infrastructure

**Pedestrian amenities are insufficient in certain areas.** The existing sidewalks along the 1st Avenue Bridge are narrow and uninviting to pedestrians, contributing to pedestrian disconnect between Sterling and Rock Falls. However, this issue should be alleviated in 2013 as IDOT intends to widen the sidewalks when the bridge is replaced. However, the Union Pacific Railroad still creates a challenge for pedestrian access to the riverfront area. An additional grade separated pedestrian crossing may be desirable to better connect the riverfront with the rest of Downtown.

**There is a lack of alternative transportation options for residents and visitors to Sterling.** Bicycle infrastructure is insufficient to promote cycling Downtown and in the Riverfront area. Additional designated bike routes and bicycle parking may be desirable. Additionally, there is no local bus service or regional transit service such as Greyhound bus or Amtrak trains. These transit options are not being considered for the future either, however they too may be desirable to better connect Sterling.

**The City’s existing network of watermains, storm and sanitary sewers are more than adequate to meet the demands of additional development.** The existing infrastructure is oversized due to prior industrial uses. As a result, the existing infrastructure is sufficient to accommodate any market-feasible development.

**Relatively low traffic volumes present opportunities to convert one-way couplets to two-way operational roadways.** The recent jurisdictional transfer of Illinois Route 2 west of Locust Street from IDOT to the City provides an opportunity for the City to revise the existing street network to two way operations. The low traffic volumes on other one-way couplets Downtown suggest that fully or partially converting these couplets to two-way operations may be possible as well. This could allow sidewalks to be widened, resulting in a more pedestrian friendly environment.

**IDOT has plans to replace the 1st Avenue Bridge.** The purpose of the project is to replace the bridge for structural reasons. Project limits are 2nd Street in Rock Falls on the south to 2nd Avenue in Sterling to the north. The new bridge design features two travel lanes in each direction, a 10 foot wide bike/walkway on each side and four scenic outlook points overlooking the Rock River. The project will lower the bridge profile, offering a more open vista into Downtown Sterling.

**Relatively low traffic volumes present opportunities for additional bicycle infrastructure.** Sterling’s Downtown has relatively low traffic volumes that could accommodate additional bicycle amenities and infrastructure. Opportunities for signage geared towards bicyclists, shared use markings and dedicated bike lanes may exist.



1st Avenue bridge as one arrives in Sterling

## Economic Development

**Rock River TIF funds may be used for public improvements, land assemblage or to help finance private investment on the Riverfront Redevelopment Sites.** The Rock River Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District was created to help the City achieve its ultimate redevelopment goals for the Rock River Redevelopment Area. The TIF is a public/private partnership between the City and a number of private businesses including Sterling Steel and its parent company Leggett-Platt. Much of the Rock River TIF spending is focused on remediating environmental concerns left behind after industry was displaced, but its presence provides the City with more tools and authority, and may make the area more enticing to new investment.

**The decline of the local economy has negatively impacted the City.** The current decline of the national economy, local economy and changes in manufacturing process including the ability to compete for overseas labor markets, has left more than 35 acres of vacant and dilapidated industrial properties along the riverfront. Since 2000, several large employers such as Northwestern Steel and Wire have closed in the community resulting in significant job loss and heart-ache.

**The City's financial capacity to remediate and redevelop the Riverfront Sites.** Although most of this area falls within a tax-increment finance (TIF) district, the City has limited financial capacity and funding sources available to achieve the desires of its residents. The City has actively pursued other funding for assessment activities on contaminated riverfront sites; and, to date has been awarded multiple grants. Identification of additional grants and funding sources could be beneficial in the long-term redevelopment of the riverfront area.

## Land Use and Development

**An increase in "upper-income households."** Demographic analysis and projections indicate that Sterling's population is decreasing, however the number of upper income households and older households is increasing. This means that despite a net decrease in population, the purchasing power of the Sterling-Rock Falls area, and related demand for goods services, is expected to increase. Increases among upper income, 'empty nester' households may also be indicative of increased demand for multi-family residential development such as condominiums and apartments.

**The riverfront area is well positioned to take advantage of high traffic volumes passing through Downtown Sterling along IL Route 40 and IL Route 2.** The redevelopment plan should consider scenarios in which commercial uses are sited near the intersection of IL Route 40 and Wallace Street. Access, circulation and site lines from these busy roadways should also be addressed to make it easier for passing motorists to view and visit the site.

**Multi-family housing in the riverfront area must be linked to successful, non-residential redevelopment efforts.** The current level of demand within the Sterling-Rock Falls area cannot support a large, standalone residential development. While mixed-use development should be encouraged in the riverfront area, residential components of such projects should be secondary to their commercial counterparts. Condominiums and apartments could be used as means of enhancing commercial development at the site.

**There appears to be market support for additional retailers to locate within Downtown Sterling and the surrounding area including a food and beverage stores and limited- and full-service restaurants.** The riverfront area may also be able to capitalize and expand upon the base of niche retailers within Downtown Sterling. While these uses are generally well-suited for a riverfront area location, direct competition with existing businesses in Downtown Sterling should be avoided. For example, a full-service grocer considering a Sterling location would be sensitive to the proximity of nearby competitors such as County Market, but a smaller grocer focusing on a certain market segment may be able complement existing retailers.