I recently read an article, "The Distinctive City," by Edward T. McMahon of the Urban Land Institute.

The article opens, "If I have learned anything from my career in urban planning, it is this: a community's appeal drives economic prosperity. I have also learned that, while change is inevitable, the destruction of a community's unique character is not. Progress does not demand degraded surroundings. Communities can grow without destroying the things that people love."

McMahon comments on the Soul of the Community Survey conducted by the Knight Foundation in 2010. The survey sought to learn what attracts people to a place and keeps them there. The survey concluded the most important factors were social offerings such as entertainment venues and places to meet, physical beauty and green spaces, and an openness or welcoming of people.

While reading the article, I reflected on our community. In Evansville, I see strength in all three of these dimensions of community attraction.

Social Offerings
I have spoken frequently about the need for Third Spaces. They are where we come together and meet with our neighbors. We share our day-to-day lives. We debate politics. We discuss business or farming conditions; sometimes it's important to talk about the weather. We come together to share our lives.

Third Spaces are equalizers; people of different demographic or socio-economic histories can rub shoulders on an equal basis. It may be different generations. It may be different jobs. A city administrator, a mechanic, a teacher, a truck driver, a small business owner, a secretary: professionals and tradespeople can meet. Or it may be different ethnic backgrounds. We come together to share our experiences.

Sometimes a Third Space may be a beautiful lakeside park; a favorite café, diner, or coffee house; a church basement or fellowship hall; the farmers market; or maybe in the stands of a high school football game. We need them.

Physical Beauty
We often quote the Wisconsin Historical Society's description of Evansville as home to "the finest collection of 1840s to 1915 architecture of any small town in Wisconsin." Our three historic districts contain a variety of architectural styles in hundreds of historic homes and businesses.

The community's appreciation of its historic nature and architecture was a central factor in the city's decision a few years ago to restore the downtown brick street using the original 1914 brick pavers which had subsequently been blacktopped over. And we have had tremendous amounts of historic preservation and rehabilitation in our downtown buildings.

A few years ago we held an advisory referendum. By more than two to one, Evansville's voters favored dredging Lake Leota. This has been my favorite project. It is a joy to visit the park since then and see kids fishing, the Boy Scouts practicing canoeing, and it's such a beautiful backdrop to the baseball games, Fourth of July, and other park activities.

Last year, Leonard-Leota Park was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Its listing was in recognition both as a designed landscape and a fine example of projects funded by the federal government during the Depression era.

Openness

There are too many organizations to name in a brief article, but Evansville Community Partnership stands out. ECP was formed a dozen years ago to give all members of the community an opportunity to participate in the cooperative creation of an economically and socially sound, vibrant future for our community and its people. ECP is the organization that organizes and puts on our annual Fourth of July Celebration. They also support other events and entertainment throughout the year, and they are an "organization of organizations" acting as fiscal agent and technical support for a number of smaller groups.

Mayor Sandy Decker has frequently observed that Evansville has a deep well of volunteerism. We may not realize it when we live with it every day. But in visiting other cities and talking with my peers, I recognize the culture of volunteerism as unique to Evansville. Whether it's a large production or small, whether an ongoing activity or a single event, whether organized or spontaneous – Evansville has great wealth in its volunteers who give so freely of their time, skills, and knowledge. It is about compassion for our community.

Creekside Place Community Center, a Third Space in its own right, offers a setting for many of our groups and activities. So many groups and clubs, activities and classes, and neighborly visits occur at Creekside Place every day. I have often heard the observation, "How did we ever manage before this wonderful center was built?" As a Community Center, it truly has become a center of our community.

Conclusion

In his article, Mr. McMahon concludes, "In the future, planners will have to help communities adapt to change while maintaining or enhancing the things they value most."

He's referring to maintaining a community's distinctiveness as an economic advantage. Observing that so much development today is standardized chain and franchise stores, there is a loss of distinction or uniqueness. He recommends a community attend to its visual, cultural, social, and environmental characteristics. In this way, the character of the city will shape new development rather than the other way around.