Mayor's Column for December 1, 2010 Review

I recently had the opportunity to attend a presentation by Donovan Rypkema of PlaceEconomics, Washington, D.C. that was held as part of the Wisconsin Local History and Historic Preservation Conference. The Lake Geneva Conference was attended by more than 350 people. The workshop was entitled "Measuring the Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Your Community."

Methodologies and measurement tools have been developed to look at the economic impacts of heritage conservation. Here are some of Rypkema's program highlights.

1) "As a rule of thumb, U.S. new construction will be half materials and half labor. Rehabilitation on the other hand, will be sixty to seventy percent labor with the balance being materials," according to Rypkema. He points out that "we buy the services of the plumber, electrician, and the carpenter from across the street." … "the plumber gets a hair cut on the way home, buys groceries, and joins the YMCA—each recirculating that paycheck within the community." Materials are often not locally produced.

2) Rypkema stated, "I cannot identify a single example of a sustained success story in downtown revitalization where historic preservation wasn't a key component of that strategy." He is a strong proponent of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program.

3) Heritage tourism is a major component of the economics of historic preservation. Rypkema reports that wherever heritage tourism has been studied, it is found that heritage visitors stay longer, spend more per day, and spend approximately 90% of tourism dollars on non-heritage items like lodging, food, and general shopping.

4) Rypkema discussed the "back to the city" movement. He commented that "when 'back to the city' happens, historic districts are first magnets."

5) Historic commercial buildings have a role as natural incubators of small businesses. He argues that one of the controllable costs of new businesses is occupancy cost—rent. Older buildings are often more affordable than industrial parks or shopping centers.

6) Historic conservation is compatible with Smart Growth strategies of walkability, density, and sense of place. Historic older homes are often nearer to schools, services, and shopping.

7) Older houses often provide the affordable housing for people of modest means. Transportation needs are partially addressed when housing is located near businesses and schools.

8) Heritage conservation is sustainable. Demolition costs, landfill costs, and energy costs of new material production are some of the arguments for adaptive reuse of existing buildings.

9) Mr. Rypkema explained that when historic preservation is "done right," local citizens are the biggest beneficiaries. Residents newly appreciate their communities' character, significance, and value.

Several of the preservation impacts discussed in the workshop are addressed in Evansville's Smart Growth Comprehensive Plan. Some examples are "We value our well-maintained historic district" (page 6); "We value the strong sense of community history defined by historical buildings/architecture, traditional downtown and beautiful homes" (page 6); an identified opportunity of "Promoting Unique Parks and Historic District to Attract New Businesses, Executives/Professionals and Tourism" (page 12); and "The City is known across the State for its collection of historic homes, but also for the diverse mix of developments …" (Housing Vision, page 30). Implementation goals of our Smart Growth Plan include Economic Development Goal #3, "Revitalize the downtown to enhance its historic charm, mix of businesses, walkable amenities, and tourist potential" (page 215). An objective of Agricultural, Natural & Cultural Resources Goal #6 is to "promote Evansville's unique parks and historic district to attract new businesses and tourism" (page 210).

The Wisconsin Department of Tourism 2009 annual survey, conducted by Davidson-Peterson Associates, reports that travelers to Rock County spent more than $216 million. Our community has worked diligently on capturing tourism dollars. We have made tremendous strides in downtown revitalization, established a room tax to provide tourism community marketing dollars, promoted our community through Discover Wisconsin Media, restored Lake Leota, completed our local history museum/visitors center, and secured funding to undertake establishment of two new historic districts.

We have established a strong base for heritage tourism and events in Evansville. Future heritage activities are already being planned for 2011, including a Civil War Reenactment weekend and a special Theodore Robinson lecture by a national expert on the Evansville-raised artist.

Mr. Rypkema has published "The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader's Guide." It is in my pile of reading materials; I hope to read it this winter. I may provide a book report in the coming months.

Community Announcements

The 13th annual lighting ceremony for the AWARE Love Light Tree will be held at City Hall on Friday, December 3 at 6:00 p.m. Names of loved ones honored/remembered will be read during the event and music will be provided by Evansville High School band members.

Giving trees for "Toys for Evansville" are located throughout the community, including Dave's Ace Hardware, School District, Eager Free Public Library, M&I Bank, Bank of Evansville, BlueScope Steel/VP, Evansville Manor, Evansville Health Club, and GL Rehabilitation. Items must be returned by Monday, December 6.

Evansville's 27th annual Holiday Craft Fair, sponsored by the J.C. McKenna Student Council, is being held Saturday, December 4, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Scholastic Book Fair held in conjunction with the Craft Fair will benefit AWARE with a buy one/donate one book sale.

Hats and mittens, new or gently-used, are being collected by Union Bank & Trust.

The Piggly Wiggly is sponsoring a "Stomp Out Hunger" campaign.

Eager Free Public Library will allow fines to be paid with non-perishable food items that will be donated to the Care Closet Food Pantry.

Charitable giving is prominent during the holiday season. Needs are great this year. As you make decisions about year-end giving, please consider our many local organizations deserving of our support. Some of them are the Evansville Fund, Friends of Eager Free Public Library, Evansville Community Partnership, Evansville Community Theatre, Evansville Grove Society, Creekside Place, Evansville Youth Center, S.O.L.E., Evansville Ecumenical Care Closet, and school organizations like the Band Boosters and PTO. Thank you for your consideration and support.

The Evansville Ecumenical Christmas Choir will hold their annual concert at the United Methodist Church on South Madison Street on Sunday evening, December 5, at 7:00 p.m.

Community Thanks

Our community thanks the Boy Scouts for their recent city-wide food collection on behalf of the Care Closet Food Pantry.

Our city thanks the Evansville Fund for the recent distribution of grant funds to local projects that will benefit our community. Many additional worthy projects were not funded—as the Evansville Fund grows, additional programs will receive assistance in the future.

Evansville thanks Janis Ringhand for more than a decade of service in the positions of mayor, city alderperson, and chair or member of numerous committees. Her dedicated effort is recognized and appreciated by city residents. Janis will continue to serve Evansville as our new representative in the Wisconsin Assembly.