



DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT



Prepared by Minnesota Main Streets by Rethos, Made possible by funding from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation

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 Kasson 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 Kasson. These conversations took many forms--meeting people in groups at places where they already gathered, such as the legion and 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 students, 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 Kasson.

At its heart, this plan is a testament to what makes downtown Kasson 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.



DOWNTOWN KASSON ASSET THEMES

Rethos Staff connected with Community Members from late June through October, 2023. 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

A grocery store, gym, clinic, hardware store, banks, hairstylists, theater, bars, and more still exist in downtown.

02

LOTS OF LITTLE OPPORTUNITIES AND SPACES

There are great variations in spaces for people to try entrepreneurial ventures in downtown, from storefronts to stylist chairs.

03

PEOPLE WANT TO DO MORE

Residents and business owners of all ages expressed the desire to partake in more activity in downtown, and Kasson in general, on a regular basis

04

ABILITY TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Kasson can identify that they're a bedroom community, and their audience is their residents. You don't have to guess at who might be tourists or prospective visitors.



COMMUNITY MEMBER PRIORITIES

These priorities are the most repeated and emphasized comments from in-community conversations and online survey responses. By tuning into top community priorities, economic development leaders can tailor plans that are most likely to succeed.

01 People want something to do in the evening--there's a captive audience.

02 Safer parking and access for pedestrians and drivers.

03 Fix the buildings, especially facades, before it's too late.

04 Newcomer welcoming efforts: let people know what's here and available when they decide to move to Kasson.

05 Create family friendly places to gather (not a bar).

“
"We can and need to do better! Make Kasson a place people not only sleep but LIVE!"
-Survey Response
”



BY THE NUMBERS

FOCUS GROUPS

5 GROUPS
27 PEOPLE

POP IN CONVERSATIONS

19 STOPS

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONSES

211

Rethos Staff met with 5 focus groups around the following topics: Elected/Appointed Officials, Retail/Restaurant Owners, Downtown Stakeholders, Economic Development Officials. Conversations around topics specifically tailored to each group allowed individuals in particular activities to share their thoughts about downtown.

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, including spending time at the Legion and restaurants visiting with locals.

Following the in-community information gathering Rethos facilitated an online survey, open to anyone of any age who lived or worked in Kasson to gather specific information on pre-determined topics. Full details and comments will be available to view.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

"Don't really consider it "downtown" [it's a] quiet place to go get things or services when needed - not lots else to offer"
-Survey Response



These Cultural Activation Strategy Recommendations provide an evaluation of downtown Montgomery's existing cultural assets, as defined by community members and gathered by Rethos staff. Described herein are major themes amongst those assets, priorities for the neighborhood which community members identified, and concrete recommendations to utilize the community's existing assets to achieve those priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Support entrepreneurship and rehabilitation efforts in downtown.

Starting revitalization activity can seem very daunting. However, getting the community on-board with activity doesn't have to be. Simple steps using existing assets and energy are the best way to start the ball rolling. Kasson already has great people doing good work planning special events for the community. Those events can be a catalyst for rethinking how the community interacts with downtown.

Kasson residents who remember previous decades reminisced about activity and celebrations taking part in downtown. In recent years, those same celebrations have either phased out or moved into areas of town away from the downtown core. There have been efforts to rekindle activity in downtown over special holidays, and that is a great place to continue momentum.

It's hard to encourage entrepreneurial and revitalization efforts without some matched energy from the city and community non-profits. Currently, downtown is an afterthought for most members of the community, but they don't want that to be the case. During conversations with locals it was brought up often that folks wanted a place to gather, celebrate, and just be in downtown, and they shared numerous examples of communities in the state that had a downtown they loved visiting and wished they could mimic in Kasson.

Downtowns people love to spend time in don't just happen overnight, and they aren't only built around locations for tourists. Kasson has a prime opportunity to redefine what their downtown is, and build it into a space tailored to Kasson residents, by Kasson residence. The rehabilitation of the dance studio is a great example of how locals can take the initiative into making a place into a place where people want to be.

A resident shared in the online survey "Don't really consider it "downtown" [it's a] quiet place to go get things or services when needed - not lots else to offer." This sentiment is very representative of how most people felt about downtown. Is this the type of central business district you want? Or are there ways to engage and activate people to do more?

Kasson residents seem very focused on looking to new retail opportunities as the way to revitalization. Downtowns have long been a retail hub, but the future of downtown is likely to be less retail-heavy and more experiential gathering places. While it's hard to magically wish specific types of businesses into existence, there are steps that local leaders can take to cultivate a business district in downtown that reflects the needs of the community.

RECOMMENDATION 1 CONTINUED:

While it may require funding to be secured in new ways, city economic development offices can partner with other local business leaders to create business challenges, special areas for financial and technical support, and programs for entrepreneurs to succeed in your community.

Owatonna, MN, has a great example of a retail challenge, which can be found on the Owatonna.org website. This challenge offered an incentive package up to \$25,000 for a business to open or expand in downtown Owatonna. The award package required creation of concept, business plan, and a final pitch, with support coming from Main Street Owatonna, The Owatonna Economic Development Authority, the Owatonna Area Business Development Center, and South Central Minnesota SCORE. Business challenges for restaurants and retail in other communities like Red Wing have also included marketing training and support and specific media assistance as well. By creating a buzz around a challenge, a cohort of potential entrepreneurs will get involved and connected, likely increasing the number of businesses that open as a result of a challenge.

Support programs can extend beyond specific businesses as well. Red Wing created a Redevelopment Challenge, which focused on building rehab. Willmar, MN, worked to turn a portion of their downtown into a Renaissance Zone, which is using tax incentives for businesses and individuals to purchase, lease, or improve property in the defined corridor. These incentives include tax abatement, free building permits, loans for facade renovation, and zoning openings.

Creating a safe and habitable district is certainly a joint venture between the public and private sector, but when a downtown is seeking significant investment like Kasson, it's important for the public sector to take the lead. Kasson has already shown that they're investing in their future by having a now full-time Economic Development Role, with conversations about investment and financial support in downtown continuing. Transferring that conversation to the greater community is crucial, and can be done by tailoring programs, meetings, and development updates to messaging that is accessible to the community and understandable by folks not deeply involved in civic jargon.

Kasson has good bones. There are great buildings, strong businesses, and big ideas that can truly grow into something incredible. The desire for rehabilitation is there, and the biggest challenge will be defining exactly how the city of Kasson can take the lead.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Leverage special events and programming into regular activity for locals.

Many survey respondents were focused in on the desire for more specialty stores, restaurants, and entrepreneurial ventures. However, it's hard to entice new businesses to open up in a district that feels uninviting or unwelcoming. In order to attract the attention of potential businesses, downtown Kasson needs to focus on creating spaces and events that showcase the audiences that new businesses could attract. Most people that Rethos staff spoke with in person and surveyed online were under retirement ages. This means that their ability to be out and about in downtown is limited to after work and school hours.

Kasson is a bedroom community, which is ok! It means people are *choosing* to live there, that they want to be in Kasson. Folks in the community and in the online survey responded that they want more opportunities to participate in activity and opportunities in downtown, especially on evenings and weekends and with their families.

Rethos staff heard great comments about the special events that have taken place already, and that community members are stepping up to aid in the planning of special holiday events for families and kids. These folks are leading the way in changing community member's perceptions on what can happen in downtown.

Many small towns and bedrooms communities around the country are doing great things to keep families entertained, and Kasson can certainly leverage their ideas into community activation.



The school district was a frequent topic of conversation. Kasson has an incredible school that people want their kids to attend. How can that help the downtown? There are often events throughout the school year that downtown can celebrate. Could the downtown and school district work together to host a Homecoming Parade in downtown and local businesses put up banners in tandem with school groups?

Another great example of celebrating local students is Graduation Banners. Red Wing's Downtown Main Street started this initiative during the pandemic lockdown, and it's become an annual event. Banners are posted in downtown with local graduate's pictures, and a stationary parade for graduates takes place.

RECOMMENDATION 2 CONTINUED:

A Book Walk is another great example of an ongoing activity that is free and moves people throughout downtown. Faribault's Library has a StoryWalk in downtown, and regularly updates which books are posted. While their presentation is very elaborate, there are simpler ways to print a book walk, for example on yard signs or in business windows that aren't open to the elements.

There can also be more short-term options, like chalk art competitions, street dances for a ballroom or line dance with instructors, costume parades at Halloween, and so much more! It's highly likely that people in your community have great ideas for how to activate downtown, but perhaps need information on how to start or where to go for support. As Kasson explores options for downtown revitalization, it's important to include residents and their ideas. Change cannot come without broad-based community support, and by welcoming input the City shows that they value what residents care about within the community.



RECOMMENDATION 3:

Leverage food trucks as a potential to fill restaurant spaces and support food businesses already in downtown.

Restaurants were an incredibly popular point of in-person conversation as well as a priority shared in focus groups and online survey work. While it's more difficult to encourage entrepreneurial activity than to implement plans completely executed by the city or volunteer groups, it is possible to direct energy into economic development efforts in a specific area.

Food trucks are a very low-risk opportunity to encourage restaurant growth in a community. Food trucks can be a great way to introduce potential restauranteurs into a community, build a following, and funnel that energy into a physical space. How is that possible?

Taqueria El Jefe in Faribault, MN, did just that. For years the Taqueria El Jefe folks operated a food truck in downtown, serving the community and popping up at special events. With a menu that locals came to love, Taqueria El Jefe took a chance and moved into a physical space.

The number one need of community members was a place to dine and gather that was family friendly. Restaurants are notoriously hard to start, but by fostering food trucks from surrounding communities, building up an audience, and helping those entrepreneurs get into a restaurant space in downtown, the community will be much more likely to support them and in turn the restaurant will succeed.

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RECOMMENDATION 3 CONTINUED:

How can food truck events start? Include one to two food trucks at each classic car evening, during holiday events, and even during one lunch hour each month with publicity. Regularity is key--make it an event that residents come to expect and plan for.

An additional bonus of leveraging food trucks to create an increase in not only available options but filling vacant spaces is industry knowledge. Typically folks in the food truck business have some restaurant experience that helps them become more successful in business creation, rather than going into the industry blind. In addition, by slowly scaling up a business there's a greater threshold for long-term success.

One point of concern for Rethos staff was the amount of times people were either unaware or disregarded business that exist. For example, there is a bakery in downtown, and a bakery is a business that was mentioned as a big wish for downtown. How people find out about what is available can be tricky with social media algorithms, but it's critical to support existing businesses in order for new businesses to feel there is a space for them to begin and prosper.

Rethos staff had no trouble finding dining and beverage options while visiting downtown Kasson. While there wasn't a huge number, there were options at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It is fair to say that due to parking and building styles it was hard to see business signs, and there was a major disconnect between hours listed online and what was actually open in reality.

While it may feel like there are "no restaurants" in downtown, there are in fact, several. By working with these private businesses and entities like the Chamber of Commerce, sharing the news on "we've got that here" changes peoples' perceptions on lack into how to grow what exists. Leveraging these places with new food trucks "trying out" Kasson, local options are likely to grow significantly.



OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities are places where Rethos staff see potential for activation. There aren't step by step resources to implement, but rather general ideas to cultivate growth.

- Conduct a parking survey. While Rethos typically doesn't usually suggest efforts to be focused around parking (as local perceptions of lack are more likely due to issues of regulation and type), staff did see some concerns around parking safety in downtown. The diagonal parking led to unsafe pedestrian practices, as well as difficulty navigating a vehicle downtown. Alternative parking options could really help to make the downtown feel safer for cars, drivers, and pedestrians. For as many great walking and biking trails and routes that Kasson has, downtown is certainly lacking in people using modes other than cars to get there. over 90% of people surveyed drive downtown, and it's due to not feeling safe to move about without a car.
- It's ok to be a bedroom community! Everyone has to live somewhere, and creating a community that people want to live in is more important than focusing on how to get people to visit. Embrace the nature of your community, and hone in on what efforts locals are interested in and need. The time that locals have to spend in downtown is after regular work hours, and that's also when they do most of their shopping. How can Kasson capitalize on an audience that's around during non-traditional business hours?
- Approach big challenges with lots of little efforts. While it may seem like major issues need one big answer, it's much more sustainable (financially, physically, and timely). Lots of little can be offering multiple small grants for facade work rather than one big fund. It could also mean activating local non-profits to host one event per year in downtown rather than one group managing all the planning. Lots of little helps stretch both energy and imaginations.
- Activate a community calendar that is populated with information from all major stakeholders in the community. Folks in Kasson seemed hard to reach and responded to questions with questions, as they themselves perhaps didn't know where or how to find information. Consider partnerships between the City, EDA, Chamber, or other entities to have a unified community calendar and info page. Make sure that calendar stays updated, and easy to provide events and information to. It's also important to make it easy to find and share!



CONCLUSION

Kasson has a solid base, but it's important to start with the basics. Fixing the infrastructure of the district and making residents and workers feel welcome and safe is critical. Once those pieces are handled, understanding how the future of downtown can celebrate the past but adapt to a changing population and world will make for more effective economic development.

REMEMBER:

Sustainable and successful district revitalization takes time and multiple players. The City, private businesses, non-profits, civic clubs, and residents all have a stake in the future of downtown Montgomery. Continue to find ways to invite residents and workers to the conversation about downtown. Making a plan with goals, timelines and priorities along with who are important partners can make all the difference in success. Rather than focusing on everything all at once, hone in on one challenge at a time to see steps of sustainable revitalization.

