

CHAPTER 2: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Intensive and Productive Process

JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause led an interactive planning process that integrated Merrill leadership and residents into the process at every critical step. The result of the open and transparent process is a plan that has earned widespread community endorsement.

This riverfront revitalization plan was prepared through a series of three on-site work sessions. The objectives of the planning process were to create a transparent process, maximize inclusive participation, and identify community goals and objectives.

JJR encouraged the Steering Committee, stakeholders, and the community meeting participants to “make no small plans”, encouraging visionary and exciting suggestions. Yet at every stage, JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause accurately described the existing challenges along the riverfront, explained the solid economic and market data, and stressed that all change will be phased and long-term. The resulting redevelopment vision is creative, but it fits within Merrill’s existing physical and economic framework, and specifically optimizes local assets.

The planning process focused on implementation. This riverfront redevelopment plan is not an end, but a means to the revitalization of Merrill’s riverfront, downtown, and adjacent neighborhoods. Future project champions – property owners, city staff, the rail road, state regulatory and funding agencies -- were integrated into the early decision making.

Initial Information Gathering

To begin the planning process, JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause met with a wide range of over 50 community stakeholders, including city staff, Merrill Marketing, Chamber of Commerce, banks, real estate, local and regional economic development officials, Department of Natural Resources, Department of Transportation, Canadian National, property owners, local developers, and city boards including City Council, Plan Commission, Parks and Recreation, and Redevelopment Authority.

Through direct and open conversations, JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause gained a more thorough understanding of the riverfront development issues, redevelopment market and infrastructure from many perspectives. Major themes that emerged were:

- Accessibility and connectivity across the rail line and along the river must be improved.
- The plan needs to tie the riverfront to downtown.
- Redevelopment should include multiple uses for a broad range of people.
- The riverfront can be a catalyst for city-wide growth.
- Redevelopment should create a Merrill identity and a sense of place.
- Public/private partnerships are necessary.
- The new and revitalized uses should create regional draw for tourists and visitors.
- Riverfront redevelopment should link to or support job opportunities.

JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause also led a community meeting in Merrill City Council Chambers to begin the public process of

the Merrill Waterfront Initiative. JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause introduced the project and described what has been learned so far from mapping, market research, and the stakeholder interviews. To broaden the consideration of the possibilities, JJR also described the elements of successful riverfront revitalization.

Approximately 60 community residents participated in the meeting. The participants broke into nine tables to discuss in small groups the opportunities and challenges and what they would like to see in the study area. The groups then reported back to each other at the close of the meeting.

The participants were asked three questions: What are the primary opportunities for the riverfront? What are the primary challenges for the riverfront? What is your vision for the future of the Wisconsin Riverfront? Major themes that emerged were:

- The character of redevelopment should build on the city's logging history and nostalgia.
- The public should be able to engage the river with boating, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, and bird-watching.
- Redevelopment should include both unique private development and public parks. The area should exemplify Merrill's identity -- City of Parks.
- Public river access is critical.
- New and revitalized uses should be oriented to families and the community.
- Riverfront development should complement the downtown and connect to it.
- Potential uses are a Farmer's Market and a pavilion.
- The riverfront should include looped walk/bike trails.



