

# The Merrill Westside Renewal Plan

*Reshaping the Westside*

2015



REDEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

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## Preface

Merrill's Westside Renewal Plan is an effort that stems from the city's Westside Task Force initiated three years ago. The task force began its work with Westside business people, the Merrill Chamber of Commerce and city officials and staff together with the city's consultant, Redevelopment Resources. Task Force activities were launched with the identification of the area's strengths and challenges via bus tours, task force discussions and walking tours.

This document, the Merrill Westside Renewal Plan, is a companion piece to the recently completed downtown Redevelopment Plan and is aimed at making recommendations to create a strong Westside and improve its economic condition. It represents a continued effort of the task force, and includes utilization of city advisors in engineering, architecture and community and economic development, as well as receiving input from local property and business owners.

An important component of input process from business owners was a listening session held in July 2015, and several of the recommendations are rooted on the recent local input received. In addition to business and property owner considerations, recommendations are built on the fundamentals of community redevelopment and revitalization, as outlined in the original downtown plan, but specifically as applicable to the unique Westside market area.

The study area is small and consists of mixed commercial and residential uses approximately one-third the size of the downtown redevelopment area. As shown in the map included on page 6, it extends from the intersection of West Main Street and Grand Avenue to include all property adjacent to the area up to Wright Street and along West Main Street to State Street. Another smaller commercial area is included in the plan west of the Wisconsin River within the entry to the 6th Ward.



## Background and Purpose

The City of Merrill is distinctive in that the community of 9,800 residents has two 'downtown areas' and a third newer, still developing commercial district on the far east side due to an improved and expanded Highway 51 corridor. Each of these areas represent distinctive eras of development for the City, with the original downtown located along the Wisconsin River extending along E. Main and First Streets; the formerly known "Prospect Park" or "West Merrill" downtown area (the subject of this paper) extending along W. Main Street / Highways 64 and 107; and the USH 51 corridor, which represents a development era experienced nearly 100 years after the City's founding. The USH 51 corridor meets the modern era, enabling buying power to be easily and conveniently drawn into the local economy.

Through the strategic use of TIF district designation, the development of USH 51 corridor has provided the opportunity to make investments into the areas that exemplify both the City's rich history and unique character. The City has been cognizant of the need to maintain basic quality services of police, fire and emergency services, water and sanitary sewer and street infrastructure as well as support the development of recreational and community experiences for residents and visitors alike. Despite the challenges these needs present on a budgetary level, the City has kept its attention and focus on growth of its tax base while supporting a 'Main Street' agenda.

Merrill's Westside 'Main Street' district consists of a triangular area bordered approximately by West Main Street, Grand Avenue west to Wright Street and further along Main west to State Street. This Westside business area is important because it provides commercial services to the surrounding residential neighborhoods as well as possessing a significant taxable value supporting the community's basic services.

The quantifiable importance of the Westside (in addition to serving the neighborhood residents with products and services) lies in three areas: Tax base, jobs and incomes. Within the boundaries of the main district as well as the far west side (6th Ward) there are approximately 38 commercial businesses which employ and generate incomes for its employees. These vital statistics are as follows:

**Tax Base: \$3,100,000 • Jobs: 73 • Incomes: \$1,358,640**

The purpose of the Westside Renewal Plan is to revitalize the Westside business district in an effort to preserve and expand these economic cornerstones. The implementation and advancement of this effort will require an earnest and steadfast private and public investment. Based on how Merrill development has evolved, importance of the Westside to the community cannot be understated.

## Principles of Community Development and Renewal

When considering and planning for renewal activity, there are principles or underpinnings which have been proven to be the foundation to a successful revitalization effort. These include: infrastructure, blight elimination, condition of building stock, land banking for future development and the programming of activities.

The first of these essential elements – infrastructure, blight elimination and condition of building stock – convey an immediate message to residents and visitors about the quality of the community and its immediate surroundings. Laying a foundation of quality sights, sounds and experiences are key to driving continued traffic to an area.

Land banking for future development speaks to the ability of the community to have, and act on, a vision for the development of an area. Land banking is essentially taking a proactive vs. reactive approach to managing what is controllable within a market (real estate), and sends a powerful message both to existing stakeholders as well as prospects that the community is forward-thinking and prepared for investment.

Finally (and often overlooked), the efforts undertaken to attract people to a downtown core through activities and programming are critical to the success of downtown districts. Downtowns become ghost towns without the influx of people to purchase goods, utilize services, or experience the atmosphere. Of course, programming is made more difficult if the first essential elements (focused on infrastructure, sound construction, consistent property zoning and uses and appealing properties) have been ignored.

### ***Adaptation***

Defined in its simplest terms, adaptation means to change in response to new situations or conditions. It's been widely applied to any number of disciplines like economics, politics or social change, but it also applies directly to urban redevelopment.

As people and society change (demographics, socio-economic trends, social priorities), their demands for new housing types, new businesses, different services and conveniences over time, communities and neighborhoods must also adapt to those new market influences.

For example in a 'Low Density Residential (R<sub>1</sub>) district there's little interest by individuals and families to look for a home just meeting the minimum 10,000 sf lot size. Also, although there are exceptions, many residents when shopping prefer one-stop destinations (like Walmart) rather than visiting multiple businesses throughout the community. Brightly lit, well maintained, active businesses create an attractive setting which appeals to resident and visitor shoppers. Prominently located, easily accessible stores

with convenient parking also affect how people make their purchasing decisions. In order to meet these new market preferences and demands businesses need to adapt.

### ***Numbers and Diversity:***

What is known about biology and history can also be applied to communities and their revitalization efforts. Over time it's been observed that large populations are less easily extinguishable as well as those which are more diverse in nature. The adage of 'safety in numbers' and having a broad skill (and tool) set to rely on when change influences one's environment is also applicable to communities. A large downtown or commercial district (by virtue of its size and diversity) will better be able to withstand impacts from new suburban developments as well as maintain its position within the local economy.

With a population of nearly 10,000 residents, the City of Merrill is Lincoln County's largest community; attracting people from the immediate area as well as visitors to the city from more distant places. Growing the commercial areas in Merrill will not only be able to continue serving the immediate market area, but also draw visitors into these corridors, enhancing the marketability of the area. The Westside benefits directly from the traffic of local commuters traveling to existing employment centers as well as visitors traveling to Council Grounds State Park. By enhancing existing retail segments (creating effective clusters of businesses) as well as embracing new and diverse business segments, the community can create a unique, attractive experience will attract the recognized wider market. As such, supporting the development of a complexity of new commercial opportunities for the Westside will serve to strengthen overall renewal and revitalization efforts.

### ***Economic Factors:***

Examining an area's commercial district to identify its core economic growth factors is important to the overall success of any revitalization effort. These factors are a baseline for renewal activities, serving as a foundation for the growth of new development and the root of redevelopment success. It is by leveraging these assets into local opportunities that communities can eliminate the perceived need to shop outside of the local economy – particularly for specialty items – and increase the rate of local economic exchanges.

Factors for growth may include existing 'destination' businesses as well as underutilized or underdeveloped areas that hold the promise for new market development. Within the Westside renewal area, current (destination-based) business assets include Winter Chiropractic, the Center for Wellness, Ballyhoos, Humphrey's Pub, (the seasonal) Briq's Ice Cream. The area is further

supported by the activities undertaken at Trinity Lutheran Church and School, T.B. Scott Library, and the resident centers provided by high-density housing via Park Place and Franklin Apartments.

## Renewal - Levels of Investment

Investments take different forms in terms of size and purpose, but are ultimately made in an effort to actualize future benefit. The economic investments made by a City differ from individual financial investments in expectations for rates of return, timeframe for profitability, and a public purpose orientation. However, both are made with the hopeful expectation of some future advantage or effect. Whether made by a single corporation or by a city for revitalization of an area, investments may take several forms.

Similar to the Downtown Vision Plan, this document will outline three types of investment scales which deliver varying redevelopment effects. Levels of Investment include:

**Small Scale** – Amenities are small scale investments which enhance appearance and create a pleasant atmosphere. These aesthetics are highly effective in attracting and accommodating people to downtown areas. Examples include installation of benches, bicycle racks, banners and flags, flowers and planters, signage, music, streetscape and particularly landscaping and lighting.

**Impact Level** – Impact activities are those which bring about a strong result in changing the redevelopment environment over the long term and create a basis for future developments. Types of investments which represent ‘impacts’ include improving the downtown commercial building stock especially those historic in nature, new infrastructure designs, blight elimination and events and festivals.

**Transformative Change** – Investments which shape new experience and inspire positive changes create a powerful effect and a beginning for economic change. Projects which may instill transformation include accentuating existing focal points, green space, and new construction on redevelopment sites.

The cost associated with the varying levels is generally low for the small amenities and escalates through the impact and transformative scales. In addition there’s a close correlation between cost and timeframe in which to complete improvements. The cost for installing ornamental lighting and planting trees along a Main Street is relatively inexpensive and can be accomplished within one season. Acquiring, remediating and designing new spaces to create a downtown redevelopment impact will come at a greater expense and may require several years to complete.

Most often the municipality is responsible for stimulating the majority of initial small scale investments with responsibility for larger and more impactful investments to be shared by both public and private sectors. Transformative changes are most always ultimately driven by the private sector.

Typically, small scale amenities are first undertaken by a municipality in an effort to create an appealing environment – an effort intended to assist in attracting future additional investment from the private sector. It can be said that undertaking numerous amenities and impact-type developments can achieve transformation when accomplished together through a management-type capital improvement approach. For example, a regular program of installing urban amenities together with creating green space and rehabilitating commercial storefronts will transform a downtown without having to make transformative level investments like building a hotel or sports arena.

## Status and Assessment

### *Boundaries and History of Study Area*



The approach or “gateway” into the targeted area begins at East 1st Street and S. Polk Street (intersection located at the entrance to Weinbrenner Shoe Company). From that point west, the historic building at 107 W. 1st Street, T.B. Scott Library, as well as Stange and Kitchenette Park, provide a pleasant and welcoming entry to the Westside commercial area. Each of these three properties are community assets and should be enhanced and preserved.



Historically, the Westside was developed as part of the Prospect Park subdivision platted in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and was briefly known as 'West Merrill.' This area was home to the lumber and mill-working operations for a number of local barons including business associates of the prominent Stange family, and features a significant number of architecturally significant residences of the era, examples of which are pictured below. The City of Merrill has a number of historically significant properties, and a number of homes on the Westside represent some of the best of Merrill's historic housing stock. These homes contribute significantly to the character and richness of the area.



### *The Business District*

Located along the Prairie River (a tributary to the Wisconsin River) and at the conjunction of two major East/West and North/South roads (now Highways 64 and 107, respectively), the area was a transportation hub. In fact, current owners of the Ballyhoos building, located at 124 North Prospect Street (located to the left of the building in the early picture), believe that it was originally a stage coach stop. Pictured below: Corner of S. Prospect and Grand Ave, Circa 1900, then 2015.



As the area provided residents with a bank, churches, taverns and employment centers (mills serving the logging, planking and mill working industries) as well as other basic services, residents were able to enjoy most benefits of City life without the need to travel two miles east into downtown Merrill. The Westside quickly grew to become large enough to emerge as Merrill's second downtown area, and featured the Hotel Badger, built in 1905 and shown in the period photo as the farthest building east. Park Place apartment complex now stands on the site.



View east from the corner of Genesee and West Main Streets, Circa 1900-1915



View east from the corner of Genesee and West Main Streets, July 2015

### ***Commercial Building Inventory***

Considering the age of the building stock and their multiple uses over time, a number of individual properties have been extensively remodeled; often changing both the building's interior configurations as well as exterior façade. Property owners have been faced with the balance of affordability, vision, and achieving a 'modern update' for their buildings. As such, current commercial stock in the area display varying degrees of success to-date with enhancing the Westside commercial district overall. In some cases, a building's original style has been retained and highlighted, while others have lost much of their original character to time, deterioration and budget constraints.

Recent, successful examples of commercial rehabilitation efforts in the area include the Center for Creative Wellness located at 406 W. Main Street as well as the To Your Health Market (Food) store located at 129 North Prospect.



Center for Creative Wellness



To Your Health Market (at left; former Merrill Monument Co.)

Both of these rehabilitation projects have been successful in restoring the facades to their original style and character, adding value to the properties themselves, as well as enhancing the appearance of the Westside. Additionally, the rehabilitation work undertaken at 1502 W. Main Street – a building that was vacant for over a decade – was similarly successful in retaining much of the original character of the building and is now fully leased.

Current Westside restoration/rehabilitation projects (involving various levels of investment and phasing) include the former Armory building located at 419 W. Main Street, Ballyhoos located at 124 N Prospect, and the 1892 building on Grand Avenue adjacent to Ballyhoos (currently in the design phase). When completed, these six properties will add significantly the area's appearance, promoting a ripple effect of increased commercial viability (and profitability) for the area.

### ***Condition of Building Stock***

Over time, and without continuing re-investment, buildings deteriorate and can begin to violate building codes and contribute to influences not suggestive of progress. Within the study area (east of the Wisconsin River) there are approximately 33 commercial-style buildings. As of July 2015 the City of Merrill Inspection Department has on its spreadsheet 16 properties in violation of the building and property code. This constitutes approximately 50% of properties not fully complying with Merrill ordinance. Orders range from clean-up, refuse disposal, painting to siding and fascia replacement. These required improvements are reasonably small issues on the spectrum of code violations, but when taken as a whole, are impediments to the vitality of the Westside.

### ***Vacancy***

Vacancy rates are a factor in determining several important issues, including demand and profitability as well as viability as a commercial district. The vacancy study for this project focused on West Main Street (From Prospect Street west to Ohio Street) where the greatest number of vacancies exists within the study area. Of the 29 total leasable commercial spaces available in that section of the district, 11 properties are vacant storefronts (38%).

### ***Traffic and Parking***

Two areas of commercial concern in all communities are 'traffic and parking'. Most information is usually based on people's individual perceptions rather than an in-depth analysis of daily traffic numbers and parking availability.

### **Traffic**

According to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, the "gateway" intersection to the Westside Commercial district experiences significant traffic values, comparable other commercial districts in the City. Traffic flows primarily East-West (6200 AADT on West Main), with supplemental activity (3200 AADT) running along Grand Ave/Highway 107 towards the Merrill Area Recreation Complex (MARC), Council Grounds as well as residential and industrial areas. Traffic along First Street, passing T.B. Scott Library and along the gateway corridor is 8,000 AADT.

Interestingly, traffic volume on Highway 107 at Superior Street is 3,200 vehicles, but only 1,700 on Highway 107 north of Council Grounds State Park entrance. As the counts for near the West Taylor Street / STH 107 intersection hover at around 700 AADT, one conclusion to be drawn from the data is that the State Park and the MARC draw approximately half the traffic off of STH 107.

As the MARC continues to be developed, the traffic measured north of Superior Street is likely to increase significantly. What these numbers may mean for the Westside commercial district is that the study area - Grand Avenue commercial properties in particular - will potentially benefit by being exposed to increased traffic (which serve as potential customers for business).

Currently, West Main Street (STH 64) has significantly higher traffic volumes than on Grand Avenue (STH 107 north), with traffic activity increasing along the Wisconsin River bridges that mark the entrance to Merrill's far west side (7000 AADT) - likely a result of the CTH Q/State Street intersection located just to the east.

Overall, traffic counts decline dramatically west of Oregon Street (located to the west of the study area, intersecting with West Main) and north of Champagne Street (located north of the study area, intersecting with Grand Avenue), which illustrates the high correlation between industrial centers and traffic activities, in addition to the recreational draws in the area. No matter the origin, the numbers are significant and have the potential to both increase and become more evenly distributed throughout the commercial area.

### **Parking**

Sufficient and available parking is a universal concern for business districts. Both the perceived and actual challenges in parking quantity and convenience is a concern for any business district, and the Westside Renewal area is no exception. Currently, there are approximately 137 on-street public parking spaces sited within the study area; 41 (34%) of them are located on Grand Avenue while West Main Street has 37 (27%) of the total on-street parking spaces. The remaining 33% of on-street spaces are located throughout the area on Prospect, Wright and Genesee Streets. The City of Merrill also provides a municipal off-street parking lot at the corner of Grand Avenue and North Prospect Street which has 14 spaces.

Of the 17 commercial buildings on West Main Street (which are primarily served by on-street parking) there are 37 spaces from Prospect Street west to State Street; accounting for an average of 2.17 spaces available per commercial building. In comparison, Grand Avenue hosts 13 businesses sharing 31 spaces which average to approximately 2.5 spaces per business – quite similar to that of W. Main Street. The area with the most generous ratio of spaces per commercial storefront is on South Prospect Street, where 7 businesses are served by 31 on-street parking spaces (or 4.4 spaces per commercial building).

As commercial activity is currently limited along Wright and Genesee Streets, these streets offer sufficient parking for on-site commercial activity, while supporting overflow parking for adjacent commercial corridors such as Grand Avenue and West Main Street.

Also serving the area is available private (or restricted) parking primarily located behind Miller Furniture and Ballyhoos, the S&S Bar parking lot, the Housing Authority-owned lot (formerly Lincoln Community Bank Drive-through and surrounding property), the St. Vincent DePaul/Bridge Community Clinic lot off of S. Prospect Street, as well as the lot serving Family Dollar and Ministries Day Care. In addition, Trinity Lutheran Church has a dedicated parking lot for its functions. The total parking located in these private lots is approximately 372 parking spaces.

Based on the number and location of parking located throughout the Westside, there appears to be a need for additional public parking within the Westside study area.

To date, the far west side (known as ‘The 6th Ward’) has displayed a sufficient number of on-street parking spaces to serve its 11 commercial establishments within an acceptable walking distance. Changes in the type of commercial uses as a result of the recent renovations to 1502 W. Main, as well as overall market churn may result in added parking needs in the future.

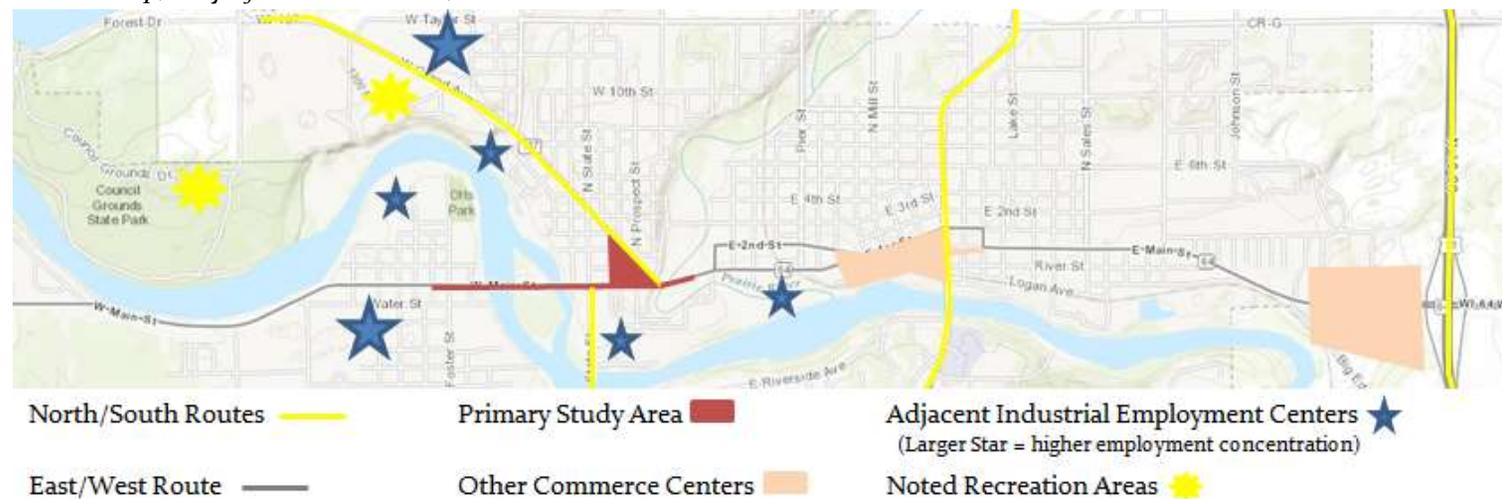
## Business / Market Environment

Merrill’s Westside Business District is one of three primary commerce centers located in a relatively small city of 9,800 residents. Each commerce center has its own history and flavor, with the Westside and Downtown representing the historic city, and the far Eastside near the USH 51 corridor gaining momentum in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Connectivity

Geographically, the Westside study area is more difficult to reach for visitors, despite its location at the intersection of STH 64 and 107. Primary traffic flows regionally run north and south along USH 51 with ancillary (primarily commuter) north/south activity following CTH K / Center Avenue between Merrill and Wausau, WI. That said, the intersection of CTH Q/ State Street (as a tributary to CTH K and USH 51) with West Main contributes significantly to the area. In addition, the intersection of STH 64 and 107 is critical for travelers visiting Council Grounds State park, which, according to the Merrill Chamber of Commerce, attracts up to 200,000 visitors per year. The enhancement of the nearby amenities (namely, the MARC) will only serve to enhance the traffic flows and visitor-ship in this area.

Partial Map, City of Merrill: Routes, Commerce and Recreation



In addition to serving as a main connector route from USH 51 to recreational facilities, the area is host to local commuter routes that feed nearby industrial centers. The combined traffic flows of local commuters, resident recreationalists, and visitors will be one of the primary enabling factors for the continued relevance and growth of the Westside Business District.

### ***Stakeholder Feedback***

On July 13 2015, Redevelopment Resources hosted an input and feedback session for Westside business and property owners. Held in the Council Chambers at Merrill City Hall, attendees included local elected officials and City staff members in addition to property and business owners from the study area. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the area stakeholders about the effort to renew the Westside, solicit feedback and input on that effort, as well as inform property and business owners about support programs currently available that support quality investments in area properties.

In addition to general feedback, the participants were asked to respond to questions directly related to the need for a renewal on the Westside, both from their perspective as a business owner, and from the perspective of their customers over the past few years.

Questions from the cards and response highlights include:

**Question 1:** Do you believe that Merrill's Westside has reached its full potential as an economic engine for the City of Merrill? (Y/N, comment)

Yes: 0 No: 7 No Answer: 1

- ✓ It has become an afterthought that is underserved.
- ✓ I think it can be highlighted as a draw of traffic east to west, MARC, Council Grounds
- ✓ Little owner investment
- ✓ Lack of pride by property owners in many cases
- ✓ More parking; Wire Products building – tear down make a parking lot, or put workers in the building.

**Question 2:** Have you heard feedback from your customers about the condition of Merrill's Westside (positive or negative)? (Y/N, comment)

Yes: 3 No: 3 No Answer: 0

- ✓ It's not what your building looks like it's the quality of work being done inside the building.
- ✓ Lack of parking
- ✓ Blighted buildings
- ✓ Positive-people do love the area-it is fond area of community/city
- ✓ "Nothing left on the Westside"

**Question 3:** How do you see yourself and/or your business participating in the Westside Renewal efforts?

- ✓ I desire to be a profitable business, a part of a viable eclectic community
- ✓ I put a new roof on in 2009. I painted in 2014. That's all that I can afford!! Period
- ✓ Putting money that I have back into my building/business not borrowing it. But will borrow at 0%.
- ✓ Yes I have a new awning ordered
- ✓ Would like to have windows
- ✓ We live in a beautiful historic Westside home. We are contributing by maintaining/up grading our property. Don't ignore homeowners! Removing blighted housing is good.
- ✓ My business 409 W Main renovated the old Burmans Floral into Sweeter Times Antiques & Candy synergistic with Zinters and an adjunct to the other Antique shops. Tourists like to go to small unique shops
- ✓ Major Player – Housing Authority – Tax Credit Redevelopment

### ***Challenges to Commercial Development***

#### **Positioning**

In addition to its location far off of USH 51, the Westside Business District suffers from a distinct lack of positioning as a core "downtown center" within the community. While recognized as a 'second downtown,' currently, there are few reasons / opportunities for residents to travel to the Westside to shop. Current assets / traffic drivers include Ballyhoos, To Your Health Market, Trinity School and Daycare, and the newly-located Dawn Troyer Dance Studio in 1502 W. Main Street.

There are a variety of other shopping and dining opportunities in the area, but they have not (to-date) yet gained the ‘critical mass’ of awareness and activity that can spin-off additional growth for the area. Shopping opportunities include Family Dollar, Sweeter Times (Antiques and Sweets Shop), Gruett’s Appliance Store, Miller Home Furnishings, ZInternet Sales & Antiques as well as the Helping Hands thrift store. Dining opportunities (other than Ballyhoos) include Kozy Korner cafe, Avenue Bar, and DAT Bar (located on the far Westside).

Cultivating an array of quality shopping and dining experiences on the Westside will be critical to its renewal, as it is precisely these experiences that will motivate both residents and visitors alike to break current routines and build new commerce relationships in the area.

### **Project Costs and Gentrification**

Investment into commercial properties requires the capital capacity (both in dollars and in risk assumption) to see a project through not only to completion, but to profitability. Current market conditions make investment in the area, when viewed as a short-term investment, difficult for many property owners. In addition to project cost concerns (which can be mitigated to some degree through City and Regional supportive programs), concerns related to increased property values and taxation also exist.

As a means of combating the effects of Gentrification, it is imperative that the programs employed in the area are focused on the existing businesses and property owners that want to make investments and stay within the area, as opposed to focusing efforts primarily on new investors. This may mean developing programming and assistance for projected tax increase management (if applicable), and/or assisting in developing project phasing and cost projections.

As stated during the public feedback session, the buildings in the area were constructed a century ago –at great cost to the builders - to support the economic progress of the community for generations to come. Over time, many of these buildings have deteriorated, now require yet another injection of significant investment to ensure that they are, once again, sound for another 100 years of commerce. While the project costs may be significant, the costs associated with not making the investment – both economically and socially – are arguably greater.

## ***Assets to Commercial Development***

### **Service & Retail Businesses**

As noted in the Challenges to Commercial Development section, there are a number of existing retail assets currently located in the Westside Business District, including To Your Health Market, Sweeter Times, The Goblin Workshop, Briq's Softserve, and Ballyhoos.

Outside of the quality retail experiences currently available, a number of service-sector businesses exist in the area that contribute significantly to the quality and economic diversity of the area, have well-maintained storefronts and, as destination businesses, contribute to the retail landscape by increasing the daytime population for the area. These businesses include Winter Chiropractic, A Cut Above hair salon, the Center for Creative Wellness and Thrivent Financial.

### **Nightlife**

The Westside currently boasts an entertaining nightlife with the array of bars and associations active in the area. Some of these locations – Ballyhoos and Humphrey's Pub in particular – have retained many of their original architectural details both inside and out. The Goblin Workshop – a late-day coffee bar and gaming forum taps into the demand for “good, clean fun” in the area, attracting 20-50 participants on a given night.

### **Population Density**

Residential housing is an imperative for enhancing the viability of any downtown-style commercial corridor. Within the Westside primary study area, there are a handful of multi-unit housing options including Franklin Apartments (located on N. Genesee Street) and Park Place (located at the corner of West Main and Grand Avenue). Importantly, Park Place has been working with a design/development firm with the intent to renovate its existing building as well as build additional units across West Main Street on (what is currently) parking and vacant lot space. These investments will not only improve the quality of the living conditions for an important and growing demographic for the City, but will also enhance the streetscape and develop-ability of the surrounding area.

### **Ongoing Private and Public Investments**

The City of Merrill and the private sector – including non-profit organizations - have been active in making investments in the Westside. From the recent expansion of the River Bend Trail (which runs along or near-to the southern border of the primary study area) to the expansion and ongoing investment in the Trinity Lutheran Church campus, non-profits have played a critical role in maintaining a positive investment environment for Westside businesses.

In addition, through ongoing partnership efforts, the City has supported business entities dotted across the area in making investments into the renovation and rehabilitation of commercial properties. From funding architectural design and renderings to providing direct gap financing through loans and grants, the City is an active partner with a shared interest in the ongoing maintenance and renewal of Merrill’s Westside.

### **Targets for New (and Ongoing) Development**

Similar to information procured in the Downtown Vision Planning process, the gaps and leakage analysis for the area within a 15 minute drive time of Merrill included the following categories of opportunity:

- Electronics & appliance stores
- Building material & supplies dealers
- Clothing & clothing accessories stores (including shoe stores)
- Sporting goods, hobby, music and book stores
- Other general merchandise stores (not Walmart)
- Specialty food retail including organic/whole foods, wine, beer, spirits
- Limited service eating places

Continued development of “Experience-driven” and “Service” businesses is recommended. In particular, businesses that play off of the relative connectivity of the Library, the MARC, and nearby schools such as Discovery/Learning Centers, a Children’s Museum, and interactive family learning or art centers would be desirable as they add value for residents and visitors alike.

Traditional categories to pursue include medical offices (including physical therapy, chiropractic, dental, massage, etc.) or office / administrative activity locations.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are offered as a way to achieve Westside goals and purpose. As stated in the 'Background' section of the plan, the goal for the Westside district is to expand tax base and revitalize the area. Several principles (Adaptability, Numbers & Diversity, and Economic Factors, outlined earlier in the plan) are the basis for the following recommendations. Recommendations are outlined by levels of investment: Small Scale; Impact and Transformative Change.

### *Small Scale Investments*

Small scale amenities are those mostly publicly-funded improvements which add to the appeal and attractiveness of the area. They constitute ornamental street lighting, banners, benches, bike racks, flowers and landscaping, all of which, when working in cohesion, create an inviting atmosphere drawing people into an area, and creating a sense of vitality. The foundation for this work has been laid by the efforts of volunteers who maintain public flowerbeds such as those found at the corner of Merrill, Prospect, and Grand Avenue. Continuing and building upon this effort will enhance the overall experience for the Westside resident or visitor.

- **Ornamental street lights** should be added to the main portion of the west side commercial district primarily on W. Main Street and Grand Avenue as a starting point and then be installed throughout the district as budgeting allows.  
Budget, Year 1: \$80,000  
Timing: Immediate and ongoing until completed
- **Benches, banners and bike racks** give pedestrians (both area residents and visitors) and shoppers an opportunity to relax after walking and riding in the Westside.  
Budget: \$5,800  
Timing: Year 1
- **Flowers and landscaping** should be affixed to either the tall cobra-type street lights or the ornamental light fixtures and located on all of Main Street and Grand Avenue from Park Street Baptist Church up to Briq's Ice Cream store.  
Budget: \$15,000  
Timing: Year 1 - 2

- **Public art installations** are an additional way to enhance the area in the form of a mural(s) on buildings as well as sculptured art in visible areas (like the small triangle at the intersection of Grand Avenue and prospect Street).  
Budget: \$5,000  
Timing: Year 1-3
- **Additional public parking** would enhance convenience for customers to access their destinations and likely improve the overall business climate in the area. Currently, public parking can be located in municipal lot #2 (immediately east of S&S); two small additional surface lots should be considered for easy access to both West Main Street and Grand Avenue.  
Budget: \$50,000  
Timing: Year 1-3
- **Block by block building audit** and general aesthetics and individual storefront consulting is recommended through Redevelopment Resources strategic partner Lyn Falk, award-winning designer and retail consultant.  
Budget: \$10,000  
Timing: Year 1

*Conceptual Illustration, Amenities along Grand Avenue.*



*Conceptual Illustration, Amenities and concept redevelopment along West Main Street.*



### ***Impact Level Investments***

Impact Investments do just that -- they create an impact on an area. Impact investments have an influence which produces a strong effect over a long time period and they have a connection with community renewal principles involving both adaptation and economics. Impact investments recommended for the Westside include Commercial Rehabilitation, Housing Development, and Organization and Events Programming.

### **Commercial Rehabilitation**

Maintaining an attractive commercial building stock is of utmost importance relative to offering an attractive environment that is appealing to existing and potential customers - both residents and visitors alike. Investments in buildings - especially architecturally and historic properties - provide dividends in both terms of both profitability in the long-term for the owner, as well as positive impacts on the community as a whole.



Often, property owners indicate the cost of rehabilitation is 'too expensive' – a concern that should not be discounted considering that many buildings haven't been updated after many years (and costs for both materials and labor have escalated over that time). The City of Merrill has assisted owners with small grants and loans to assist in making rehab projects more affordable. A secondary question and maybe an equally important one: What's the cost of not doing anything to maintain and restore buildings?

**Recommendation:** City to continue Commercial Rehabilitation financial assistance. (Sources of funding may include Economic Development Loan Program or Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) incentives and loans.

Budget, Year 1: \$150,000

Timing: Immediate, and ongoing as needed and sustainable.

### **Housing Development**

New market-rate housing not only adds to the diversity of the economy but it creates customers for near-by businesses. The Housing Authority is undertaking a renovation in conjunction with a private developer to not only improve its units but its campus as well. In addition, the attractive Franklin School apartments on Genesee Street add to the area's housing mix. Considering the low vacancy rates in rental housing throughout the City of Merrill a new 24 unit development could conceivably not only be economically successful, but also renew the Westside by adding customers and new vitality to the area.

Locations for new housing would be predicated on the availability of sites; however, as there are few large parcels readily available for redevelopment, sites would have to be banked and assembled in order to create sufficient space new development. Other housing opportunities consist of renovating upper level spaces within existing commercial buildings or creating rental housing units as depicted in the Main Street illustration.

**Recommendation:** Support the Housing Authority's renewal project; create new housing opportunities within the Westside District, both new developments as well as the rehab of upper level units.

New Development Budget, Year 1: \$250,000

Upper Unit Rehab Budget, Year 1: \$100,000 (4 units @ \$25,000/unit)

Timing: Ongoing

*Budget Note: A usual municipal contribution may be in the range of 10-15% of total development cost depending on the total project's proposal meeting the city's goals and objectives relative to location, design, size and other considerations.*

*For example: a 24 unit new development with an average of 800sf per unit at a cost of \$135 per unit would have a total construction cost of \$2,600,000. A 10% municipal incentive would total \$260,000.*

*Resulting first-year set aside: \$250,000*

### **Organization and Events Programming**

Without benefit from any significant number of Westside businesses belonging to the Chamber of Commerce, property owners and tenants could create a neighborhood-styled district on an informal basis to undertake similarly styled activities as many other downtowns do. The purpose of doing so would be to increase recognition of the Westside as an active place of business.

One way to demonstrate that recognition is to add vitality in terms of hosting a number of events and festivals. An annual “Westside Days” may be a promising beginning. It is suggested that the “Westside Days” festival be held on the same weekend as the inaugural “Lobster Fest” sponsored by Ballyhoos held in July 2015. The festival grounds would be created by closing off Prospect Street from W. Main Street north to Grand Avenue and incorporating Memorial Park into activity space. Sponsoring food, beverage, kids’ rides, music, sidewalk sales and other activities would attract patrons and help begin to re-establish the Westside as a destination.

**Recommendation:** Establish a Westside organization to include business owners and a city representative. Create an annual “Westside Days” festival (to be held in conjunction with “Lobster Fest”).

Budget, Year 1: \$10,000

Timing: Immediate and ongoing

### *Transformative Level Investment*

Transformative Investments are those which shape new experiences and inspire positive change creating a powerful effect: the beginning for economic transformation in an area. Projects which may instill transformation include accentuating existing focal points, creating green spaces, supporting new construction on redevelopment sites and development. Both the public and private sectors can contribute to a district's transformation, however: experience dictates that the greatest change comes when the public sector initiates / lays the foundation for large private sector investments. Public contributions, beginning with investment in amenities to support for impact level projects is important, but: transformative properties which are code deficient, deteriorated and haven't adapted to changing conditions, are opportunities to attract large private investments.

Opportunities for transformative change initiated by the public sector in the Westside Business District include the former Wire Products Manufacturing Co. building located at 106 N. Genesee Street, and the former Society of St. Vincent building located at 401 W. Main Street (the southwest corner of Prospect and W. Main Streets).

#### **106 N. Genesee Street**



In its current condition and use, the former Wire Products building contributes little in the way of tax base, jobs and generating incomes. In a renewal project the property will offer opportunity for a new business development, parking and landscaping.

**Recommendation:** Facilitate acquisition, clearance, remediation and redevelopment of the former Wire Products property.

Budget: \$50,000

Timing: As soon as practical

### 401 W. Main Street



The Former St. Vincent building, once thought to be an historic rehabilitation opportunity, was found to be economically unfeasible for this approach, due to the combination of extensive damage to the original façade and the current state of the roof on the building. As an alternative, reviving this corner property with an architecturally cohesive new development could offer new leasable commercial space, new apartment housing units, and create new tax base (as it currently generates no revenue due to its non-profit ownership).

**Recommendation:** Acquire, clear and redevelop the 401 W. Main Street

Budget: \$125,000 - \$200,000

Timing: As soon as practical

In some cases, transformative change can be spearheaded by the private sector, requiring public support in principle, or perhaps in the form of gap financing when viable, for the project. Such examples are also found in the Westside Business District, including the 1892 Building (located at 403 Grand Avenue) and the former Armory Building (located at 419 W. Main Street). While other opportunities exist, these projects are currently underway (either in design phase or in construction), and stand alongside other successful rehabilitations in the area as testimony to the viability and vitality of Merrill's Westside.

Taken together, the impact of these four transformative projects will begin to change the nature and positioning of the Westside for the benefit of the City as a whole.

### 403 Grand Avenue



The 1892 building (located at 403 Grand Avenue) is an exceptional candidate for renewal in part due to its prominent location. Currently under discussion is renovation of the exterior façade which (like Ballyhoos) will contribute to the historic theme of the district, attract small commercial tenants and improve the Grand Avenue sector of the Westside.

**Recommendation:** Continue to support the renovation/rehabilitation of the building to closely resemble original character.

### 419 W. Main Street



The former Armory Building located at 419 W. Main Street is currently under reconstruction. Although having deteriorated and being vacant for many years, the property once renovation is complete will offer a wide variety of benefits to the Westside and the community overall.

**Recommendation:** Continue to support the renovation/rehabilitation of the building to closely resemble original character.

*Conceptual Illustration: Possible West Main Street Renewal Plan outcome*



*Conceptual Illustration: Grand Avenue Renewal Plan outcome*



## Investment Matrix

SMALL SCALE INVESTMENTS		
ACTIVITY	BUDGET	TIMING
Ornamental Street Lights	\$80,000	Year 1 - completion
Benches, Bike Racks, Banners	\$5,800	Year 1 - 2
Landscaping & Flowers	\$15,000	Year 1 - ongoing
Public Art	\$5,000	Year 1 - 3
Parking	\$50,000	Year 1 - 3
Retail Consultant	\$10,000	Year 1
Total	\$165,800	
IMPACT SCALE INVESTMENTS		
Commercial Rehabilitation	\$150,000	Year 1 - ongoing
Housing Development	\$350,000	Variable, ongoing
Upper Units Rehabilitation	\$100,000	
New Housing Development	\$250,00	
Organization & Event Programming	\$10,000	Year 1 - ongoing
Total	\$510,000	
TRANSFORMATIVE INVESTMENTS		
Redevelopment, 106 N. Genesee Street	\$50,000	As soon as practical
Redevelopment, 401 W. Main Street	\$200,000	As soon as practical
Total	\$250,000	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$925,800</b>	