



In the heart of southern Wisconsin's rolling farmland, Stoughton, not quite 13,000 people strong, is a mere 15-minute jaunt down Highway 51 from Madison, and only an hour from Milwaukee. It's also home to a recently revived historic retail strip, where you can buy insurance, your next tattoo, and cheese curds all in one quick stop. And get a warm Norwegian "Velkommen!" for free.

Stoughton's Great Street

Matching Grant Program Takes Off

By Julie Lemerond

Highway 51 Blues

*Highway 51 runs right by my baby's door
Highway 51 runs right by my baby's door
If I don't get the girl I'm loving
Won't go down to Highway 51 no more.*

*Well, I know that highway like I know my hand
Yes, I know that highway like I know the back of
my hand*

*Running from up Wisconsin way down to no
man's land.*

—Bob Dylan, *C. White*

Stoughton, Wisconsin is a bit like Bob Dylan's girlfriend.

If you love your hometown — and Americans love their hometowns like no other — you'll ride a long way just to be with the one you love. And just as a young Dylan rode his motorcycle all the way down Highway 51 from Minnesota to see his sweetheart, Stoughton natives have traveled a long and difficult road to keep their community vibrant and thriving.

Stoughton's journey — like that of many American towns — began with a thriving downtown that fell victim to economic forces

and land-use patterns created by the rise of the automobile and the interstate highway system. A once-thriving downtown became a place to travel through, rather than to. Stoughton's tale is also the tale of Highway 51, which is called Main Street as it runs through the town's heart, for the road changed over the years, too.

In the latter years of the last century, the city's business district still lined both sides of Highway 51 for several blocks. Posted speed limits didn't do much to slow through-traffic. The street was wide, the asphalt bare, and a rundown retail strip did little to invite a closer look. The few shoppers that came to Stoughton would finish their errands, get in their parked cars, and leave for home. The borders between traffic lanes faded over time, leaving a bare four-lane runway — an invitation to speed.

Now, however, a major construction project has rebuilt Main Street, and a hugely successful matching grant program has given the facades of downtown a facelift, making it look a lot more like its old self again. Norwegian and American flags flutter up and down the street, setting off the exposed brickwork of one well-tended storefront after another. An unmistakable sense of openness and warmth permeates the town, and a closer look at the goings-on within Nordic Nook, The Koffee Kup and The Norse Chalet shows Stoughton's Scandinavian roots are firmly intertwined with con-

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Sidewalk treatments and retail storefronts blend with historic landmarks like the clock tower on City Hall.

temporary concerns. Highway 51 once more looks and functions as a Main Street should, even as it remains an effective conduit for traffic. Residents and visitors alike walk on tree-lined streets with old-fashioned lampposts and new benches as they enjoy restaurants and shopping in high-quality public space accessible to young and old alike. That ease of access has become a defining aspect of life in Stoughton.

“It feels better to be down there now than it did five years ago,” says Steve Steinhoff, Community Development Coordinator for Dane County Planning and Development. “People care about the area. The quality of facades does define a space it’s nicer to be in . . . Stoughton’s downtown became livelier, and it was seen more as a community gath-

ering place, a place to go to meet and see people. It restored not just the buildings, but also community pride, and it strengthened the sense of Norwegian culture in the city.”

Long Decline

It wasn’t always a struggle. Early in the 20th century, Stoughton’s thriving retailers crowded onto Main Street, attracting shoppers to local bakeries, pharmacies and delis. Just a few blocks down, warehouses clustered close by the railroad depot to receive tobacco and other crops from area farms for shipment to Chicago and beyond. Home-grown theatrical performances drew people to the Stoughton Opera House from the surrounding countryside.

But as shipping methods shifted from rail to truck, and the automobile generated shopping patterns that hop-scotched from supermarkets at the outskirts of town to the regional commercial hub of Madison, Stoughton’s fortunes declined. Suburbanization spread homes farther apart, and Main Street eventually became just a route out of town. Like every other road in America, it was subjected to state-mandated design guidelines based on engineering calculations about the physics of objects in motion. Those rules had little to do with adjacent land uses or local objectives. Stoughton’s streetscape became far more attractive to cars than to people.

Road Project Opportunity

To some, the reconstruction of downtown Stoughton’s Main Street and the subsequent rebirth of its business district seemed to take place overnight. After all, the street’s makeover conveniently took place while the Wisconsin Department of Transportation diverted traffic around the city

The streetscape project and façade improvements have created a livelier street with more foot traffic – and a noticeable up tick in retail sales. Property values increased about 50 percent.

for a bridge replacement project, minimizing disruption to retailers.

This major infrastructure project presented Stoughton with a chance to turn its streetscape improvement plans into reality, said Gary Becker, a consultant with Vierbicher Associates, which worked with the city on projects ranging from library expansion to the streetscape improvement itself.

“The Department of Transportation was planning reconstruction of the bridge downtown, and the city used this time as the perfect opportunity to start a streetscaping project,” said Becker, whose firm worked with the DOT to redesign the look and feel of streets throughout the city’s downtown streets with new sidewalks, light posts, trees and benches. The approach recognized that streetscapes define cities and shape the activity within them (see box, p. 17).

At the same time, Stoughton took advantage of Dane County’s Better Urban Infill Development (BUILD) program, which provided federal and

It wasn't just new benches and period lighting that made Stoughton's downtown strong again. It took a longstanding political commitment to the city's center.

state money for planning work, capital improvements and, perhaps most significantly, a matching grant program that helped fund façade improvements and sparked private sector investment in downtown buildings.

Taken together, the streetscape project and façade improvements have created a livelier street with more foot traffic — and a noticeable up tick in retail sales. That helped property values increase about 50 percent from 2001 to 2005. Most residents are happy with the changes, and nearly every business has refurbished itself to some degree, says Ed Biono, Executive Administrator of the Stoughton Chamber of Commerce.

“It gets them out of their cars and on their feet, and that’s the best way to see what we’ve got to offer,” Biono says.

Better Walking Means Better Business

Stoughton used a variety of techniques to make its downtown more pedestrian friendly. Curb

Vierbicher Associates



Eric Boegel



The Koffee Kup, a local diner and social hub, before and after its restoration.



Stoughton's restored and lively Main Street. The Façade Improvement Program offered matching grants to any building owner willing to refurbish their storefront.

bump-outs have reclaimed part of the street for walkers, shortening crossing distances and times. Colored pavement highlights the crosswalk for drivers and helps them gauge street width. More than that, the bump-outs define traffic lanes even when cars aren't parked on the street. Drivers respond by slowing down to pass through what appears to be a narrower space. Higher levels of activity, variations in storefronts and physical features of the broader streetscape cause this "side friction," a driver response that is both conscious and instinctive.

These changes have had a tangible effect on safety and traffic patterns. Drivers who once blew through town as fast as they could now slow down, reacting to the physical cues and the very energy of the downtown. "It's safer for pedestrians," Stoughton Planning Director Rodney Scheel notes. "It had been a bit of a challenge for some to cross. Now, the intersections are more controlled."

Biono agrees: "For awhile," he jokes, "it was, 'How high can you make them jump?' The big thing is crosswalk enforcement."

The economic impact of better walkability is equally obvious to local merchants. "There is a greater volume of foot traffic," Biono notes. "Now, we have something nice to show off. Once we get people down here to see it, we get a lot of repeat business."

In one year, the matching grant program for façade improvement sparked a flurry of private sector investment, with three times as much private money spent as grant money.

And, yes, people still drive downtown. "On-street parking is much harder to come by now," Biono adds. "Used to be you could find a spot anytime."

The blocks along Main Street are packed on any given day. Beyond benches and other basic features, some subtler touches enhance the street's overall feel. Brick inlay creates a smooth transition from building to street. Planters soften the hard surfaces of brick and concrete, complementing streetlights and newly planted trees. Metal halide lamps (rather than the more common yellowish sodium vapor ones) add to the district's appearance, especially at night, when their white light brings out fine architectural detailing.

Biono says the new streetscape features aren't just window-dressing. He recounts sitting at his office desk and catching sight of two women shopping around Christmas time. "They just plopped right down and put their feet out to take it all in," he says. Without new benches and other aspects of the improved streetscape, that wouldn't have been possible."

A Long-Standing Commitment

It wasn't just new benches and



Distinctive retail signs were an element of façade improvements.

The Importance of Streetscape

Streetscapes define cities. Subtle variations in sidewalk width, building type and the spacing of street trees work together to frame public space and give each city its own distinctive feel. That narrow seam of shared space—running along the streetwall and the edge of traffic in the street proper—has a pivotal influence on civic life.

Traffic flow and safety improve in streetscapes that bustle with activity and feature many storefronts and other physical features. Building facades and traffic itself (its volume and speed, the behavior of drivers) affect the quality of the pedestrian experience and make an area more or less attractive in general. Overall, a well-tended, amenity-laden haven invites people to linger and spend money, boosting economic vitality.

City officials planning to redesign and upgrade sidewalks and streets often can get funding assistance by reaching out to staff at the county and state levels. Installing benches, planters, and lampposts can draw shoppers into a business district, but pairing such public investments with private sector efforts substantially reinforces chances for success.

Civic leaders who work closely with business owners to help improve or restore their buildings will find the public-at-large benefits as well. Capitalizing on existing architectural assets and reshaping crumbling streets are often-overlooked forms of infill development that raise property values—and they are doubly effective when used together. It is consistent with the existing neighborhood and sets the stage for more intensive/disruptive infill that may come later.

To get public and private elements to fall into place for Main Street's comprehensive centerline-to-storefront makeover, city officials, early on, established a coherent planning process that kept an eye on Stoughton's overall goals and meshed programs handled by different partners. New funding mechanisms were developed along the way, and economic development tools continually tested.

But downtown store owners still weren't ready to invest in restoring their property. Sinking money into their buildings was a risk as long as they had no guarantee that other businesses would follow suit. One rehabbed building does not a turn-around make. Only a district-wide effort would cover costs by increasing overall business.

Initially, low-interest loans were offered but found no takers. Even the matching grant dollars provided through Dane County's BUILD pro-

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period lighting that made Stoughton's downtown strong again, though. It took a commitment from city officials. Stoughton never went bust, even though it struggled. Instead, local leaders kept working to focus business activity downtown, rooting it in place. They kept public services in the city center, rather than building new facilities on the outskirts. In the mid-1980s, they rolled the modernization of City Hall into an extensive restoration project involving the reinstallation of a sizable clock tower. Expanding and renovating the library and fire department followed, along with restoration of the historic Stoughton Opera House. This longstanding political commitment to the city's center underlies every other success.



What's old is new: the transformation of this building, which has housed several businesses, shows how showcasing architectural details can brighten up a retail district.



Evacuation Best Practices

In facing the shared challenges of evacuating the elderly and disabled, transportation planners have access to many educational, organizational and technological resources. Communities with effective special needs evacuation plans serve as examples of best practices, providing basic strategies which only require small adjustments for local conditions.

- The “No Person Left Behind Project” offers registry information and applications in English, Spanish, Braille, tape, or large print, through the website for the ADA Advisory Board of Southwest Florida,

www.adaboardswfl.org/hurricane



in the Management of Elderly Disaster Victims (2006), which is available online, www.bcm.edu/pdf/bestpractices.pdf.

- AARP also has publications including *We Can Do Better: Lessons Learned for Protecting Older Persons in Disasters* (2006), and consumer and preparedness guides for older adults, available through their website, www.aarp.org/katrina.



- The National Consortium on the Coordination of Human Services Transportation provides strategies and checklists for transportation planners through the USDOT website www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/asp/emergencyprep.

- The Terrebonne Parish Readiness and Assistance Coalition (TRAC) (www.trac4la.com) provides hurricane preparedness information which is tailored to South Louisiana. They have versions in English, French, Spanish and Vietnamese. TRAC also provides information for children, the elderly, and the mobility restricted, as well as a guide for implementing community “buddy systems” to assist neighbors with special needs.

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gram met with reluctance.

Government programs meant red tape, and skeptics wondered if, after all the effort, it would work.

New Approaches, New Promise

So, city leaders proceeded to eliminate obstacles real and perceived. Interested property owners could make quick project proposals in 15-minute meetings with the City of Stoughton Façade Improvement Committee, which met monthly, and get on-the-spot approval of matching

grants. Guaranteed reimbursement, owners invested in renovation without any nagging uncertainty over repayment. The process minimized paperwork because most business owners hired the same local rehab specialist.

Even then, Becker says, it was difficult to get business owners to front the money to match the grant, but that once a few people opted in, others followed. “Once things started happening, there was a snowball effect,” he says.

John Neal, Finance Director and Treasurer for the City of Stoughton, agrees. “We went door-to-door talking to business owners, and sold them on the idea that with the street torn

up, business would be slow, and it would be a perfect time to take advantage of the façade improvement grants from Dane County.”

Ed Biono saw it too. “When the first guy did his, you know his neighbor saw the contrast with his own building right next door. He could see the difference – that it worked – so he did his too. Once it got started, it went right up the street.”

It was the model, more than the relatively modest amount provided, that was enough to push the business community to strong participation. The BUILD program had awarded façade improvement grants totaling \$225,000 as of 2005, meaning the

private sector had spent at least that much itself. Many property owners, though, spent more than required. Early on, it became clear that Stoughton businesses were investing, on average, roughly 170 percent of their obligated match. Some restored interiors as well as facades. In one year, the program had sparked a flurry of private sector investment, with three times as much private money spent as grant money. In just four years, 30 storefronts were completely refurbished. That in turn led to rising property values. Steinhoff notes that some businesses have doubled or even tripled in value since the restoration took place.

To complement those efforts, city officials brought other public sector tools to bear, including a Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) district created in the aftermath of a fire that gutted a major building and left a gaping “fire hole” on Main Street. That district generated enough funds to pay for the city’s share of the

streetscape planning process, and some physical improvements. State and county funds were used for everything from street redesign to planning to construction costs.

Ultimately, the persistence of local

leaders — and their openness to forging partnerships with public agencies, consultants and downtown businesses — made it all possible. A willingness to try new tools and to work closely with individual constituents eventually bore fruit. In the end, a true public-private partnership created a striking, high-quality streetwall that redefined Stoughton’s major public space. Visitors receive a visual “Velkommen!”— Norwegian welcome.

In the midst of it all, as early as 2001, John Neal knew the process was headed the right direction: “We’re very, very pleased. I would have to describe it as wildly successful.”

It isn’t hard to find people who agree. Ask any retiree crossing the street, or one of the kids in youth hockey, the next time you run into them down on Main Street. Or just watch them enjoying their surroundings.

It’s enough to make Bob Dylan head right down Highway 51 once more. □



Planters soften the hard surfaces of brick and concrete, complementing streetlights and newly planted trees.