

COMMENTARY

Change of scenery

The evolution of Appleton's downtown into a thriving entertainment district benefits the whole area

When I moved back to Appleton four years ago, I re-discovered the joys of small-city living, like big parking lots, short commutes and affordable real estate.

My main lament was giving up certain cultural comforts of big-city life, like ethnic restaurants, a live music scene and coffee shops.

But before I could miss these urban elements too much, Appleton began to undergo a transformation. Spurred by construction of the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center downtown, some of the big-city fundamentals found their way right here.

Stylish new eateries and bars appeared, and established businesses spruced up. Even the road and sidewalk got pedestrian-friendly makeovers.

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to a wine bar, unwind at a spa or get off an airplane on an enclosed jetway without leaving the Appleton area.

The area's growth, particularly in downtown Appleton, has played a major part in attracting me to stay in the area rather than move back to a big city.

When I first came back to Appleton, I worried there would be "nothing to do." With the evolution of downtown into an entertainment district, now the hard part is choosing what to do, because there are so many options.

guest

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A night out downtown is not just for a narrow segment of the population. A variety of bars, restaurants, coffee shops and more cater to many interests and age groups.

There is something for everyone, whether you want an ethnic dinner, live music, flavored martinis, a cappuccino, dessert, a sports bar or a night of dancing.

A prosperous entertainment district downtown benefits the downtown area as a whole and encourages other kinds of development.

The more often people go downtown for dinner or a drink, the more relevant downtown becomes to their lives.

As a result, people think of more things to do downtown in addition to going out at night, like eating lunch, opening a boutique or even relocating their office.

The recent addition of the WGBA-TV studio downtown adds momentum to downtown's image as a place

to be.

We don't need to limit the number of bars downtown, as some have suggested. The simple economics of a supply-and-demand marketplace will take care of determining when there are "too many" of any one type of business downtown.

Meanwhile, let's celebrate the fact that there are businesses opening in formerly empty storefronts and that people are excited about downtown again.

A strong downtown is good for the rest of the city as well as surrounding areas. Clearly, downtown planners recognized at some point that they weren't going to beat the Fox River Mall at its game, so downtown invented a different game. The Fox River Mall can't compete with what's downtown now, and doesn't need to.

Each area caters to a unique focus, while mutually benefiting the other by drawing people to the Appleton area.

The combination of cosmopolitan amenities plus small-city benefits like low crime, affordable cost of living and warm community neighborhoods — not to mention geographical proximity to northwoods recreation and major metro areas like Milwaukee or Chicago — makes Appleton an attractive place for longtime residents to stay.

At the same time, it increases Appleton's appeal to two other groups who are important for our future: the young people of Wisconsin, whose abilities and contributions we hope to keep in our talent pool, as well as outsiders considering relocation.

We want both groups to see that Appleton has many of the creature comforts — but far fewer hassles — than bigger cities.