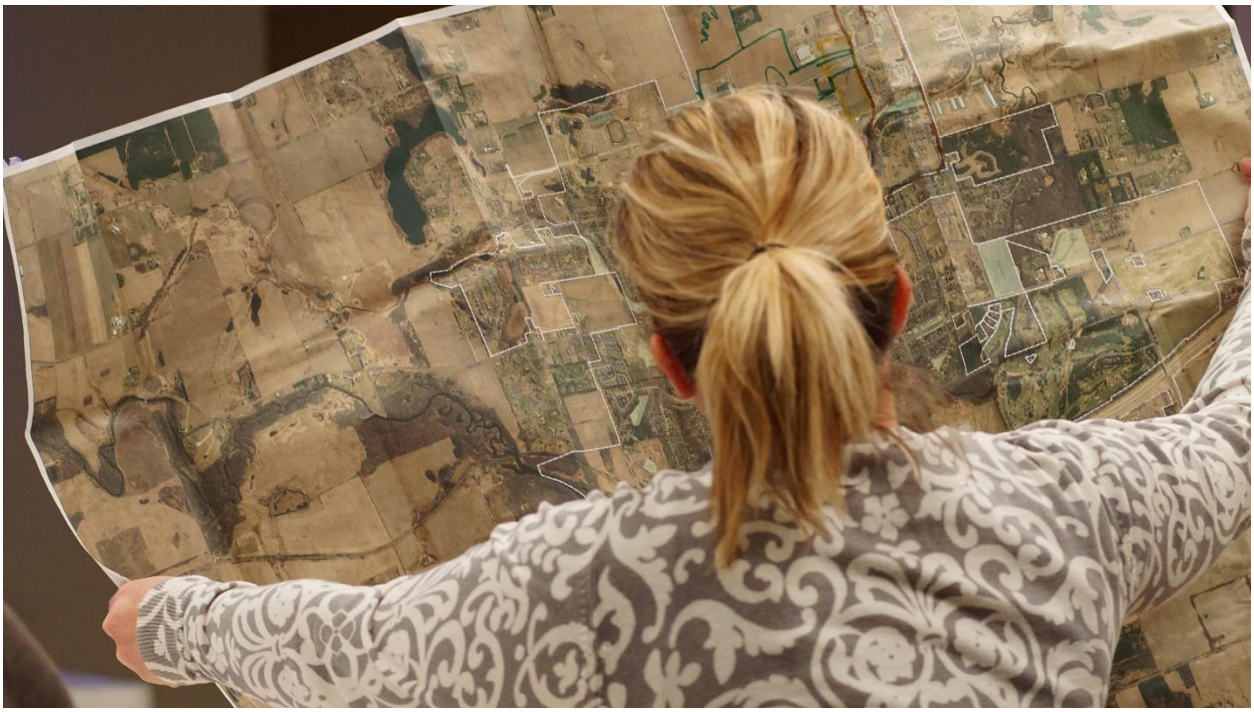
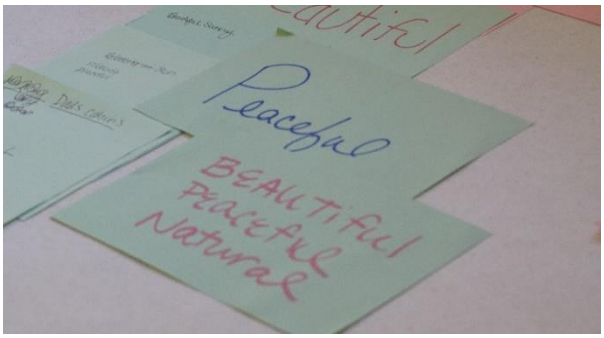
New Richmond Community Action Plan … Volunteers made it work



A chronology

Over the last half of 2017, the city of New Richmond's committee of volunteers making up the Community Action Plan Committee (CAP) met regularly to help define and write the municipality's comprehensive plan.

The committee was formed after an initial attempt with a hired professional consultant was not producing the results the City wanted to see.



In the eyes of city officials, they wanted something more organic. They sought a process that would include city residents and business owners who are, first of all, stakeholders in the outcome.

They also sought volunteers whose only goal was to see the city grow and offer amenities that would place the municipality in better standing for improving the lives of all residents and visitors.

As the body of volunteers, City officials, and the professionals hired to guide the process - Todd Streeter of Community Collaboration and Hoisington Koegler Group, Inc. - met in August, the ingredients for a new comprehensive plan began to mix.

At its second meeting Aug. 23, 2017, the questions were presented:

What is the future of New Richmond, Wisconsin?
What could it look like?
What would it look like?
What should it look like?

Those were the questions members of the City of New Richmond's CAP committee tackled during the initial late August meetings. Questions would continue to be asked and answered over the course of the next several months of the year.

The mission to define and shape the vision of the City's future was the task - a mission each of the more than two dozen members willingly took on as volunteers.

They were chosen by city staff and accepted the work, knowingly stepping into an important task - one they didn't initially understand.

They knew not how the process would proceed, nor how it would look in the end.

They had vague ideas on how to start, but did not know how to get to the end.

When they met for just the second time Wednesday, Aug. 23, at The Centre, the volunteers sat awaiting direction from Todd Streeter, the group's facilitator.

Streeter was hired to guide the community engagement process of the City's comprehensive plan.

His employment came about after the city had initially hired another consultant that was set to guide the writing of the City's comprehensive plan.

The comprehensive plan is a document that has been completed by the City every 10 years; it's a forecast of what the City could look like in the next decade and a vision of the direction the City may take in improving its infrastructure, its business climate, and its residential amenities, among many other aspects of City-building.

Comprehensive plans, many times completed by a municipality's staff or consultants, turn out to be thick documents with a stodgy, technical, or even boring narrative.

After the first meeting in early spring 2017, City officials weren't convinced the direction it was moving was the right way.

The City released the first consultant from their contract and met with Streeter, the former City of Stillwater's Chamber of Commerce Director and the owner of his own consulting firm, Community Collaboration (involvmentisgood.com).

Streeter laid out a plan for community involvement, a plan that would engage and empower volunteer residents in formulating ideas and developing a vision about what they believed was the future of New Richmond.

During this first meeting, the CAP committee volunteers not only heard from Streeter about how the process would unfold, but also from Brad Scheib, Vice President of Hoisington Koegler Group, Inc. (HKGI), the firm that would take the ideas of the committee and produce the City's final document.

The volunteer committee members listened as Scheib kicked off Wednesday's session with a short description of "place-making," and Streeter added guidance for the members, many of whom indicated apprehension about their role in the process and the expectations.

At the committee's first meeting, an orientation was completed where members were placed on planning subcommittees and the members had an opportunity to get "warmed up" for the task ahead.

It was a project that was expected to take several months to complete.

When asked whether they had any questions about their role and the direction they were being asked to take, Susan Bosley, the chairperson of the Creating Community Committee, said, "Maybe some of the others are more organized than I am, but I still don't have a real sense of focus. I feel a little overwhelmed … I could use a little more direction."

"That's fair, and that's typical, "Streeter said.

When Streeter asked for a show of hands from those feeling the same way, many hands shot up.

The stage had been set.

How were they to get started? What was the end goal? And how would they reach it?

Daunting, was a word that came to the forefront at this first meeting.

Scheib interjected by floating a rhetorical question: "It took me 20 years to be a planner for comprehensive plans … how long have you guys been at it? We'll certainly try to help you through this."

Streeter added: "Remember that first meeting we had when someone said, 'I've got a big question mark over my head?' The reality is that we've all got the exact same questions. We're

all starting at the same spot. The learning curve may be a little steep to start, but … we're here to give you all the support you need. I guarantee you that once you start doing the research and start trying to answer the questions that you will start seeing the pieces … come into focus. It always gets easier."

With that encouragement, the subcommittee members began work on addressing the initial plans developed by Streeter, Scheib, and City officials.

These documents laid out ideas for the members to address. The goal was to continue to hone in on the specifics of each plan and eventually develop ideas that would ultimately be presented as recommendations for inclusion in the final comprehensive plan document.

"Because the committee members have not been really associated with this level of community planning, it takes several meetings for them to get their arms around what they need to do," Streeter said.

This first stab at the planning process by a group of citizens with no experience at city planning was informative, engaging, and "daunting."

But as City Community Development Director Beth Thompson said at the meeting's conclusion, the process was "exciting" and "super positive."

More specifically, she said, “I was excited to see such a great community turnout for our second working session of the Community Action Plan. The groups listened to information on ‘our sense of place’ and then broke out into our working groups. The groups were really on track with great ideas and were super positive about New Richmond’s future. When I am involved in these types of meetings it is very moving to see how people care about their community and want the best for its future.”

The subcommittees and members

Creating Community

Susan Bosley
Mark Evans
Blair Williams
Nicole Wocelka
Dan Hansen

Community Connectivity

Ben Kurth
Jim Saliny

Community Pride

Kevin Morris
Melanie Folk
Karen Smallidge
Peter Kling

Quality of Life

Katie Wendt
Jenny Larson
Rose Kosin
Colleen Davis
Jeremy Poole

Economic Development

Todd Loehr
Amber Milton
Michelle Carlson
Caleb Tate
Bryan Knudtson

Downtown Revitalization

Michelle Scanlan
Anna Knutson
Mackenzie Campbell

Sept. 13, 2017

Held at the New Richmond Airport, the CAP Committee members sat with the main hangar doors open, the sounds of the airport filtering in and the feeling of progress in the air.

While it was this group's job to think about the future, what better place to consider growth than at the local airport, the hub of movement in and out of the municipality?

Such was the atmosphere as the group learned about the work of the Community Foundation, the City, and the School District.

The foundation was represented by its president, Tim O'Brien, the City was represented by Mike Mroz, while the group heard from School District Superintendent Patrick Olson.

Collaboration was the theme of the presentations by the city, school, and foundation.

Each of the presenters offered a look into how all have collaborated in the past, but more importantly, how their work together continues.

Of the several goals mentioned on this evening, the most ambitious might have been the mention of the "one-click" website incorporating the recreational resources offered by City organizations and how their connection with residents could mobilize action on a number of future projects within the City.

Following the presentation of the three guests, committee chairpersons provided their first reports to the entire group and then broke into

their individual panels to continue developing approaches to their specific issues and coming up with recommendations.

Sept. 27, 2017

In an interview prior to the night's meeting, Todd Streeter explained why he was involved and what he had seen over the course of the first couple of months of work.

"My experience has been to have the community actively get involved in the process," he said, "not in an advisory process, but through what I call 'working committees.' These committees take on a lot of responsibilities to try to find ideas, opportunities in addressing the issues most communities have." "The comprehensive plan in New Richmond was the perfect opportunity to utilize the concept as a way to leverage the time, effort, and involvement of the community … to really come up with a different product at the end of the day."

Streeter said that while comprehensive plans are “public documents,” they are not generally used by the public. “It pretty much sits on the shelf.”

“With the working committee concept we can leverage the work the City is undertaking and maximize its opportunities by having the committees not just come up with the ideas to address the issues that cities have, but also to come up with the recommendations, set up an executive committee that sees its recommendations through, and work within the community for outreach and resources that support the ideas and recommendations of the working committees. So it’s a multifaceted approach to community engagement, which is not available in the traditional method. This project lives on and it has purpose well beyond the actual working committee work.”

As the evening’s efforts began and the meeting was called to order, Streeter welcomed the members to the evening’s session held at The Centre and talked about where the committee had been, how it had gotten to that point, and what they had to do to continue to move forward.

Streeter also provided a series of examples of the various ways in creating a final community action plan.

He provided examples of a “typical” comprehensive plan, and the example of a downtown revitalization plan, as well as the issues encountered, followed by the resulting resolutions to those issues.

But the evening’s focus was on individual committee reports presented by the chairperson of each of the committees.

They each described their progress in focusing in on their specific issues and some of the challenges they faced when working within a team.

Katie Wendt, of the Quality of Life Committee, said that it had become clear among that committee's members that the most important aspect was connectivity of parks in the City.

She said the challenge of establishing and maintaining trails and parks within the City was considered in the overall cost of such a task.

"That's probably the number one hang-up we have," she said. "It costs a lot of money." But the committee members also agreed that there are ways to economize when building trails that could save the City in the long run.

The committee chairperson also talked about the utilization of parks and trails, mentioning that community involvement could organize groups to help with those improvements, such as the establishment of gardens, among other ways to engage the public in helping keep the City beautiful.

Michelle Scanlan of the Downtown Committee asked, "Why does our downtown need revitalization?"

The consensus among the group was that revitalizing the downtown core of New Richmond was a "chance to preserve and enhance the historic

charm … of our community, while encouraging local spending, tourism, and a sense of community that will improve the overall local economy."

Oct. 11, 2017

Once again the meeting was held at the New Richmond Airport, this was a milestone session for the CAP Committee because each of the groups spelled out in a significant way the progress they made and how all of the ideas across the entire committee tie into a single theme of bettering the City and keeping it "The City Beautiful."

With these presentations were the inclusion of maps and photos to illustrate ideas and where any new improvements would be located within the City.

The focus of the group presentations was to look at

current issues and trends, any emerging issues that may be evident, and ideas on how to enhance community life.

Blair Williams, chairperson for the Creating Community group, explained various elements supporting the theme, "Continuity of Community."

He described the uneven and "interesting" shape of the City.

He described how surrounding towns had pockets of property that crept into areas of the City, an issue that could pose challenges for future development. Williams asked about where best plans should be made to build and zone for industrial and commercial zoning. "How do annexations play a role in the future … how do we set up our City for growth in the next 10 years? When you plan for zoning, you can't always get what you want," he said.

Sustainable development, he said, must be maintained with one study indicating that the City could grow by 1,000 residents in the next 30 years, Williams said that one of the positive aspects of that statistic is that New Richmond has planned ahead and already installed infrastructure for future growth.

So he asked the following questions:

• How to use what we already have?

• How do we make New Richmond contiguous while growing, developing, and changing?

• How do we best serve future residents and future planners?

• How do we create community and make it continuous in the context of all this change?

Michelle Carlson of the Economic Development group, reviewed that committee's goals, which included a look at:

• Expansion/new business parks;

• Marketing New Richmond;

• Freeway corridor planning; and

• Technology leadership.

She used maps to show areas within the City where economic development could and should take place.

• Development of the north side with industry forming around the airport;

• Development of western New Richmond with multi-user properties that extend along the Highway 64 corridor;

• Development of the south side of the City … with much of the area needing a change from agriculture- to industrial-zoned areas south and west of the current site of Wal-Mart.

The goal, Carlson said, is to market New Richmond while promoting local businesses as a great place to live, work and play.

That includes marketing downtown New Richmond; marketing of the corridor 64 area; installing fiber high speed internet across the City; and setting up industrial parks for start-up and emerging businesses; all the while creating awareness to shop in New Richmond.

Michelle Scanlan of the Downtown Revitalization group, shared numerous ideas to retain and develop new business opportunities designed to reinvigorate the downtown's historical core.

"We see revitalizing the historic core of downtown New Richmond as a chance to preserve and enhance the historic charm and heart of the community," Scanlan said. Revitalization would encourage local spending and enhance tourism, improving the local economy by "revitalizing the look, revitalizing the energy and revitalizing the use."

Another important utilization of the core downtown area was its significance in connecting the south side with the north side of the City.

Some of the specific ideas she presented as those to explore were painting the town; offering grants to local artists to help provide the City with a “facelift,” and creating a downtown committee made up of shop owners, City officials, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Katie Wendt, of the Quality of Life group, reviewed the locations of current and potential parks and how new trail additions could connect the community to a wide variety of public spaces and amenities, including the Willow River.

In describing the group’s value statements, Wendt outlined these ideas:

• Connectivity/Cohesiveness - strengthen the community image and sense of place;

• Variety to provide diversified recreational and educational experiences;

• Participation - with the idea to cultivate an attitude of stewardship and partnership within the community;

• Sustainability - efficiently utilize resources and demonstrate fiscal responsibility;

• Environmental awareness - protecting, preserving and restoring significant natural areas and corridors;

• Prosperity - support economic development by stimulating the leisure industries and attracting economic development to the community.

Kevin Morris, of the Community Pride group, outlined the committee's priorities in supporting their vision, value, and guiding principle statements.

• We value expanding and diverse indoor and outdoor facilities complemented with community services and creative opportunities - opportunities that serve a growing multigenerational population, and promote a safe, healthy, interactive community.

• We see New Richmond as a unique, inviting community that honors its historic roots, the dignity and potential of its citizens, and the natural resources with which it has been blessed.

Some possible future facilities mentioned by Morris would include a new library; new police squad car garage; and centralized public works facility.

In addition to those brick and mortar improvements, Morris also discussed the importance of adding high speed internet access that would be available across the City.

He also floated the idea of a comprehensive information/interactive website for City services and activities into the discussion. These services could include an upgraded, simplified recycling service, 24-hour public transportation that would be handicap-accessible, and the continued development of a vibrant and available food shelf program.

Safety was also an important aspect investigated by this committee. The improvements needed across the City, Morris said, include:

• Upgrading pedestrian crossings on Knowles Avenue;

• Offering police patrols in the parks and trails; and

• Establishing a monitored public area for child custody exchanges and online sales exchanges.

Oct. 25 2017

Bill Buell kicked off the Oct. 25 meeting with a comprehensive presentation about the New Richmond Community Foundation's Future Walk initiative.

The presentation included information about how the foundation board researched its community engagement approach, leading to more than 300 public interviews. Their engagement efforts resulted in approximately six main focus areas of community enhancement opportunities.

Buell described what those carrying out the initiative learned:

Government should listen, not talk and tell;

Patience is necessary;

People should be valued;

Education should be valued;

Self-direction is necessary; and

City groups, organizations, and residents should take responsibility and get things done at the local level.

The group also discovered through its efforts that New Richmond is a community of compassion and support; it's lively and energetic; it has power and takes action; there is a great amount of

external learning and internal learning; there is structure and order; and decisions are made from a significant knowledge base.

Of the additional similarities between the Foundation's Future Walk initiative and the Community Action Plan, there should be similar outcomes, especially when it comes to community services, parks and trails, and economic development.

In addition to hearing the presentation by Buell, Todd Streeter helped explain the purpose of the next phase of the process, focusing on the development of project portfolios. The portfolios, he said, will be designed to provide more details on the committee's concepts, including a project description, the beneficiaries, funding sources that may be available, and the estimated cost breakouts.

The portfolios will be developed for each specific committee concept and will be used to attract wider community involvement, support, and funding.

After those points of discussion, the committees continued working on their value, vision, and guiding principle statements and initial development of their concept's project portfolio.

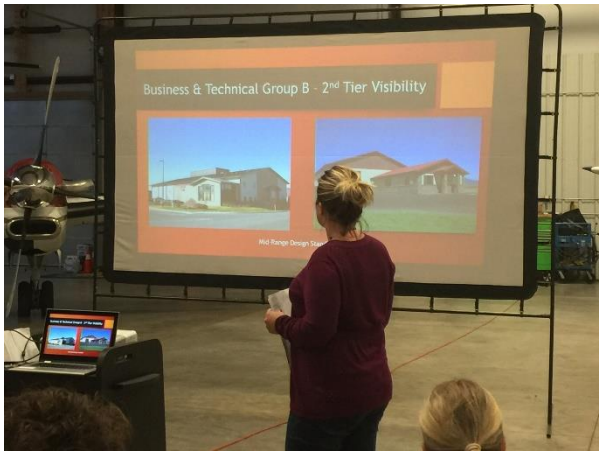
Nov. 8, 2017

Beth Thompson, Rae Ann Ailts, and Craig Yehlik presented the proposed 2018 City budget to the committee at the start of the Nov. 8 meeting.

Some of the major topics included anticipated population growth, increased operational needs, and expected capital investments required to maintain the proper level of City services.

In addition to the budget explanations, Margret Swanson, executive director of the New Richmond Community Foundation, provided an overview of the role the foundation plays in the community.

Swanson explained the various ways the foundation receives its funding and how the foundation, in turn, provides funds to the community through a number of granting activities.



The specific ways the foundation operates:

• It provides a vehicle for investors who look to give to their community; in 2012, the New Richmond foundation became an affiliate with St. Croix Valley Foundation and continues as one its 10 members;

• It manages its funds and turns a profit, realizing investment returns of 12 percent in 2016;

• Investors have offered funds to the foundation to benefit particular projects – there are families that have taken memorial money and created funds; organizations have invested; the New Richmond K-9 project was an example of a way that the foundation has helped to launch community program. Grace Place is another example.

• It provides small grants to non-profits each year;

• It partners with the City and looks at issues that affect the region; and

• It has developed six different drivers to help the foundation set its own priorities that include hunger, literacy, shelter, pathways/recreation, leadership, and economic development.

Following Swanson's presentation about the foundation, Jeff McMenimen and Gabriel Grinde, of the HKGI planning team, presented their understanding and examples of the committees' working projects from their previous presentation.

The HKGI presentation began with a short vision statement-building exercise using the committee's collection of vision statement drafts.

The purpose of the exercise was to create a vision statement and set guiding principles for the entire CAP project.

What they presented were the basic tenets to be used within the vision statements.

They included:

• Mixed use development opportunities downtown;

• Creating public spaces; and

• Quality of life – the park layout should be considered across the city, as well as how it should be interconnected through the use of trails around the downtown area.

They also presented values that have been developed across the committees:

• Connectivity/Cohesiveness;

• Variety and high quality amenities;

• Participation and community collaboration;

• Sustainability and fiscal responsibility;

• Environmental awareness and perseveration of natural areas;

• Promoting prosperity.

In tying the goals together, they presented ideas to promote future plans:

• Replace playground equipment every 10 years;

• Park access within five minutes of every resident;

• ADA accessibility;

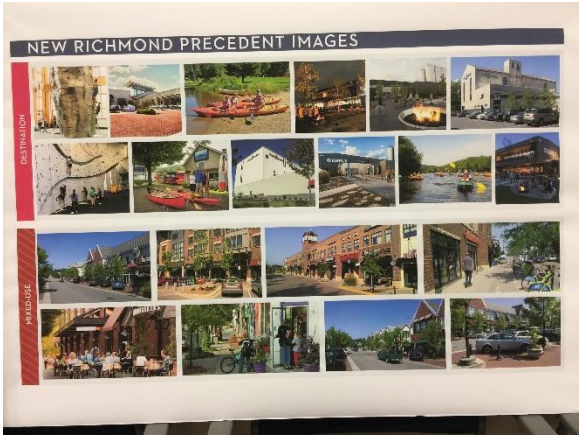
• Establish a downtown destination park;

• Use the Willow River as a centralized gathering place, utilize a river walk with access for all;

• Building fully connected trail loops;

• Trails as destinations; and

• Building a pedestrian bridge to Mary Park.



The presentation highlighted key plan elements and guiding principles that were identified by

each committee. This was done to ensure the planning team understood the fundamental principles the committees developed.

The team also presented initial draft concepts that were created to expand the committee's previous work, as well as the mapping.

These initial team concepts were meant to establish a baseline understanding of collective efforts from which they will continue to add layers of ideas and recommendations throughout subsequent HKGI concept revisions.

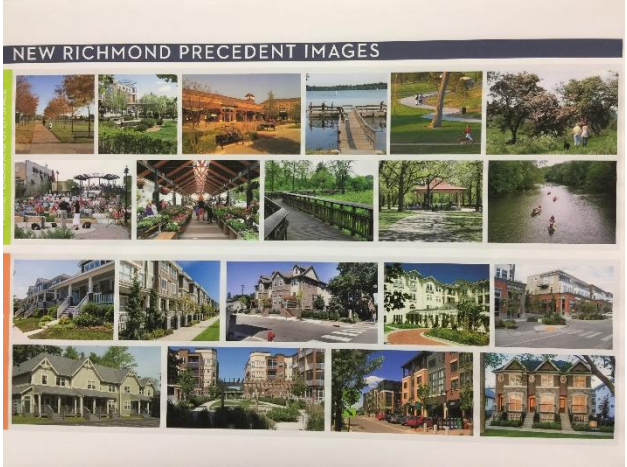
Nov. 29, 2017

Committee members reviewed the final draft of the CAP Vision and Guiding Principle statements as presented by HKGI.

The committee made several suggestions for wording and image tweaks. As presented by HKGI, the following are statements that were presented and edited:

• New Richmond will provide safe and convenient connections to all community destinations;

• The City will work strategically to create incentives for retaining existing businesses and attracting new businesses to the community;



• New Richmond will celebrate creativity and diversity, recognizing that they are essential ingredients to a vibrant future; and

• The City will promote infill development of vacant and/or underutilized sites and contiguous growth patterns within the City limits.

Todd Streeter reviewed the tentative schedule for the remaining duration of the CAP process. The schedule will include continuing to update

committee PowerPoint presentations and expanding development drafts for each project portfolio. This work will be important presentation elements for several planned open houses in January and February. Committees will culminate their project work with a formal presentation to the City Council in March or April.

Streeter also explained the planned formation of a CAP Forward New Richmond Executive Committee.

The committee will be responsible for overseeing the next phase of the CAP project, including strategic development of CAP recommendations and project portfolios. This group is essentially responsible for determining short-, mid-, and long-term goals and implementation preparation activities, such as funding strategies, community outreach, and relationship building.

Streeter and City staff took time at this meeting to review the portfolio development progress within each committee. At the conclusion of the evening's meeting, the committees continued to expand the information drafted for each of the committee's portfolios.

Dec. 13, 2017

In the final meeting of 2017, Jeff McMenimen of HKGI presented the preliminary concepts and option alternatives for the north side of downtown New Richmond.

With the City studying potential opportunities for the redevelopment of the north side of the City, the development of the CAP comprehensive plan comes at just the right time.

The concepts offered by McMenimen provided a glimpse into how the north side's redevelopment potential could impact the revitalization of the historic core.

Questions and comments that were provided by committee members during this presentation included:

• What are the impacts to traffic with the proposed north side concepts?

• Will the parking lots placed between the buildings on Knowles Avenue cut off access to riverfront dining and recreation?

• What will be the accessibility for pedestrian and vehicular traffic? There are conflicts between the proposed trail, the railroad bridge, the dam, and the vehicular traffic.

In addition to hearing and commenting on the plans for the north side of the City, committee members also approved the CAP vision, as well as the guiding principle statements developed to represent a culmination of values from each of the committee's statements.

The HKGI representatives presented the latest CAP developments, reflecting the committee's preliminary work during the past four months.

Each committee was asked to comment on their section as presented to ensure it reflected the nature of their work and recommendations.

The comments provided affirmed the concepts of their work. Members also offered additional comments that should strengthen the concepts.

As the committees moved into the final stages of their work, their portfolios were finalized; their presentations honed; and the concepts for the City's direction documented.

The committees moved into 2018 armed with presentations for the city council, as well as open houses that allowed each of the groups to tell the story … the story that is the future of New Richmond.

All photographs by Raymond T. Rivard