

# The Quality Urban Development Forum – conference summary

## The Foundation for Consensus on an Urban Agenda

"Wisconsin's urban communities house a substantial portion of the State's population, housing stock, civic, artistic, historical, cultural and economic life. Taxpayers and users have invested billions of dollars in quality urban infrastructure providing the full range of urban services, typically of the highest caliber. Urban architecture, urban form and urban civic celebrations are an important part of what we show off to visitors and to the world. At a time when a world conference is occurring elsewhere on Cities, it is an appropriate time to renew a state-wide commitment to strengthening the health, broadly defined, and attractiveness of Wisconsin's urban communities and to agree on the strategies and steps that will be necessary to make urban Wisconsin a point of pride as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a mere 3 ½ years from now."

The Wisconsin Environmental Initiative (WEI) put forth the previous statement as a starting point for discussion at its inaugural conference, *Quality Urban Development: Setting an Agenda for Wisconsin's Cities* on June 5, 1996. The conference was unique in bringing diverse groups together who rarely meet at the same table. This diversity was reflected in the conference steering committee comprising of business people, government officials, academics, and environmental advocates. These individuals recognized that efforts to address separate parts of the problem are going to be ineffective until an agenda exists to coordinate the efforts of all stakeholders.

In planning the conference, WEI recognized it would not be able to address some of the root causes of inner city decline, namely issues of crime, race, and poverty. WEI chose to focus solely on environmental issues, treating the city itself as an environment deserving of protection and improvement, and understanding that the health of the inner city is intrinsically related to the health of the surrounding area.

The conference was a tremendous success with over 200 attendees representing environmental groups, neighborhood groups, neighborhood associations, municipalities, law firms, environmental consulting firms, developers, planners, state agencies, and businesses.

## Morning Panels

The first morning panel consisted of representatives from the Milwaukee Redevelopment Corporation, the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority, the Wisconsin Department of Development, and the law firm of DeWitt, Ross and Stevens, S.C. These panelists gave the viewpoints of their respective fields, explaining what each perceived as the obstacles to urban redevelopment. Attendees were able to compare the different perspectives and gain a better understanding of the whole development picture.

"The transactional costs associated with needless insurance litigation are now running into the tens of millions of dollars on an annual basis." Peter Peshek

"**T**he underclass - our very prosperity is tied to these citizens . . . Racial minorities will be a dominant factor by sheer number . . . We have to fix it (economic inequality) or fix it, we have no other choice . . . The most important issue is job creation of well-paying jobs."  
Wyman Winston

The second panel highlighted three successful redevelopment projects. Speakers emphasized the need for cooperation between developers, state agencies and municipalities. Tom Lasse of Hendricks Commercial Property described his company's extensive redevelopment of a river front property in Beloit, WI. Lasse stressed that because there are so many opportunities to derail projects, total commitment on the part of all parties is crucial. "Ya gotta wanta. In the end, you must be willing to take a risk."

The keynote address given by Angela Park, coordinator of the Sustainable Communities Task Force of the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD), explained the role the PCSD can provide in the pursuit of quality, efficient land use. Ms. Park stressed the strength of initiatives with commitments and drive begun at the community level.

John Norquist, Mayor of Milwaukee, gave an extemporaneous luncheon address blasting the "**strip, smear, sprawl**" that has blighted American cities, a sprawl which he believes is due primarily to policies which continue to subsidize the sole use of automobile in transportation. He also noted that many urban problems have resulted from the imbalance of economic classes living within the city.

### **Breakout Sessions**

In the afternoon, attendees went to one of three separate breakout sessions according to their interests - Community Planning, Attracting Investment to Cities, and Brownfields Redevelopment - where panelists presented issue-specific information, case studies, and policy recommendations.

Breakout sessions incorporated the most unique component of the conference, the **roundtable discussions**. Here, attendees were divided into groups of eight to ten people where they discussed specific questions pertaining to the breakout subject. WEI organized the discussions to ensure that a diverse cross-section of stakeholders comprised each group. This resulted in a multiplicity of ideas and perspectives being exchanged. Participants, of course, didn't agree on every point, but all recognized the value of the consensus-building exercise in which they participated.

"**T**he roundtable discussion was stimulating." Conference participant.

"**T**he speakers and topics were right on the money." Conference participant.

### **Outcomes**

Conference organizers recognized that mutual understanding is important, but it is only a beginning. Solutions to problems won't be achieved without persistent cooperative efforts. Therefore, one of WEI's primary goals was to initiate future discussion among participants. To facilitate this, WEI scheduled follow-up focus groups for each of the three Breakout

session topics. Participants met and worked on the nuts and bolts of policy recommendations. The result is a publication which serves as a call to action for public policy makers, private citizens, and the development community. The **Quality Urban Development Forum - Setting an Agenda for Wisconsin's Cities** report, emphasizes the need for redevelopment, and more importantly, identifies the major goals for 1) improving community planning 2) attracting investment to cities, and 3) encouraging brownfield redevelopment. An index of resources is also provided. For a copy, please contact WEI at (608) 280-0360 or request via email at [info@wi-ei.org](mailto:info@wi-ei.org).

WEI sincerely thanks the conference steering committee for their time and invaluable efforts. These individuals include Richard Lehmann, John Imes, George Meyer, Brian Ohm, Bill Schaefer, Dave Cieslewicz and Darin Harris.