



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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### ATTRACTION

## In unlikely win, city transforms neglected river from 'sewer' into destination

In Columbus, GA (est. pop. 202,616), the city's greatest natural asset had been turned into an eyesore. In the 1800s, textile mills dammed the Chattahoochee River as a power source.

A century and a half later, the textile industry was long gone — and the river languished as an industrial wasteland.

But downtown leaders, including the Uptown Columbus Business Improvement District, embarked on an ambitious plan to reshape the city's waterfront into a destination for whitewater rafting.

The project proved transformative — Uptown Columbus raised \$26.3 million, secured approvals from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, hired engineers to design the whitewater course, and brought in an experienced outfitter to run the whitewater operations. Columbus' new riverfront is a thriving, bustling place that has reshaped the city's image.

In the latest accolade for the project, the International Downtown Association (IDA) bestowed a Pinnacle Award on the initiative, which

*(Continued on page 3)*

### ACCESS AND MOBILITY

## Two cities end bus service, move to Uber-style networks

In Gastonia, NC (est. pop. 82,666), and Wilson, NC (est. pop. 47,767), city officials grew frustrated by the lack of passengers on their public bus networks.

Ridership was light, causing the systems to dial back service. In both cities, a dearth of riders created a self-perpetuating cycle — because buses were empty, transit officials scaled back the number of trips. And

less frequent service made buses less appealing to riders.

In response to tepid user numbers, both Gastonia and Wilson opted to end their bus services and replace them with Uber-like on-demand services. Wilson did so first, in 2022.

Wilson replaced public buses with a rideshare service that lets riders go anywhere within city limits

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## Struggling small town uses the fundamentals to drive rebirth

Little Monroeville, AL (est. pop. 5,917), has a big reputation. After all, it's the hometown of two famous authors — Truman Capote and Harper Lee, who set *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Monroeville.

Lee's widely read novel also became a classic film, driving generations of visitors to the town in southwestern Alabama.

"We're able to play off our literary history," says Anne Marie Bryan, executive director at Monroeville Main Street.

Alas, literary bona fides take a struggling town only so far. A textile mill that was an economic driver closed down, leading to an exodus of residents and businesses.

By 2014 Monroeville faced significant challenges. The town's historic district suffered from a vacancy rate of 31 percent, and many downtown buildings languished, sitting vacant.

But downtown leaders didn't give up. Instead, they moved to save the historic district, establishing Monroeville Main Street in 2014.

In just a decade, downtown Monroeville went through such a dramatic transformation that it was one of just three winners in the 2024 Great American Main Street Awards.

Monroeville's first efforts were small, but they made an impact. The Main Street organization put up branded banners on walkways, pressure washed sidewalks, and installed self-watering planters.

"We'd just keep doing small projects, and those grew into bigger and bigger projects," Bryan says.

Monroeville Main Street kindled the community's renewed sense of pride, and the momentum snowballed. Events such as the Monroeville Literary Festival and Paint the Town Paint Out attract visitors from around the state.

Paint the Town draws both artists and art lovers for three days of outdoor painting. The event begins with an opportunity to meet the artists at an evening reception and ends with the Paint the Town Wet Paint Sale with proceeds benefiting Monroeville Main Street.

In 2021, Monroeville Main Street and the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce created the smART Moves in Monroe County mural trail, a unique public art initiative that showcases the talents of local artists and beautifies the historic downtown. Through their Abandoned Art Project, local artists create and place artworks in unexpected places. Anyone who finds a piece of art may take it or move it to another location for someone else to find.

To celebrate the town's literary heritage, Monroeville Main Street installed 17 murals, 14 bronze sculptures, and a 24-panel story trail.

Meanwhile, with the help of Main Street Alabama, Monroeville Main Street encouraged property owners to subdivide ground floor spaces and to add upper-story residences.

Downtown leaders worked with local developers and others to facilitate the renovation and adaptive reuse of 42 properties, resulting in the creation of 15 loft apartments, 12 new commercial spaces, and 23 smaller and more affordable storefronts.

From façade improvements to complete restorations, these projects — valued at \$6 million — have breathed new life into the downtown's historic buildings, creating opportunities for both downtown residents and entrepreneurs.

*"We'd just keep doing small projects, and those grew into bigger and bigger projects."*



Painting at Monroeville's Courthouse Square.



Downtown association trains the next generation of entrepreneurs.

To build a pipeline of downtown merchants, Monroeville Main Street launched Business Understanding & Ownership for

Youth (B.U.O.Y), a free eight month training program for area teenagers and young adults.

The young entrepreneurs develop business plans and then pitch their businesses for an opportunity to win \$3,500 in prize money from a downtown bank's charitable foundation. In its second year, one participant opened a business downtown and another bought a downtown property.

Monroeville Main Street, the Small Business Development Center of Alabama, and Main Street Alabama partnered to create the program which is open to high school juniors and young adults through age 30.

Contact: Anne Marie Bryan, [Monroeville Main Street](#), 251-743-2879. 

## In unlikely win, city transforms neglected river from 'sewer' into destination — Continued from page 1

unspooled over the course of more than two decades.

"This was a massive mission creep," admits Ed Wolverton, head of Uptown Columbus. "We ignored the advice to stay in your lane."

But Wolverton says the ambitious project made sense, even if it flew in the face of conventional wisdom.

"We asked the question, 'If not us, then who?'" Wolverton says.

### Humble beginnings

When Rick McLaughlin of McLaughlin Whitewater Design Group visited Columbus for the first time in the late 1990s, he wasn't impressed. The downtown riverfront was deserted, and the river had been altered from its natural flow.

"It was not a place that anybody would go for fun," McLaughlin told a newspaper in Des Moines, IA, a city that later looked to Columbus for inspiration for its own neglected riverfront.

Columbus residents had been conditioned to look past the river.

"I don't think we appreciated it because we thought of it as industrial," John Turner, a Columbus philanthropist who helped get the project off the ground, told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* early in the project's trajectory.

In its award application to IDA, Uptown Columbus put the image of the river more starkly.

"For generations, most residents viewed the river as an industrial sewer," the group wrote. "Recreational activities like swimming or boating were unheard of."

"You would never put a toe in the river," Wolverton recalls.

Uptown Columbus began championing the remaking of the river in the 1990s. It found a powerful ally in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which was keen to restore the river's natural flow as a habitat for endangered fish and plants. Ecological nonprofit organizations and the city were also on board with the plan.

But the project was hardly a sure thing.

"Buying two dams that were already failing required a major leap of faith," the BID

***"For generations, most residents viewed the river as an industrial sewer."***





The longest urban whitewater rafting in the world.

wrote in its IDA award application. “Uptown had to accept a massive risk to move forward.”

The Corps of Engineers was skittish about removing dams, and Uptown Columbus commissioned multiple studies and lobbied

federal and state officials to gain support.

“This was completely foreign to the Corps of Engineers,” Wolverton says. “They’re used to putting in dams, not taking them out.”

The BID even built a scale model of the entire 2.5-mile section of the river to study water flows and patterns. Georgia Power operates a dam upstream of Columbus, and Uptown Columbus had to craft a 30-year agreement to use the river channel and the utility’s access roads.

Uptown’s acquisition of the dams made the BID owners of the riverbed. The organization negotiated to transfer the river real estate to the City of Columbus upon the completion of the project. That resulted in leasing the river back to control any commercial activity on the waterway.

## Des Moines starts work on downtown whitewater parks

Des Moines, IA, looked to Columbus, GA, for ideas in remaking its own waterfront. It’s moving forward with a project that will bring whitewater access to downtown Des Moines. The attractions are set open in 2026.

ICON Water Trails manages the new recreational sites. An existing dam will be improved, and the \$114 million initiative calls for improvements to fish habitats, creation of pedestrian walkways, and even a wave for river surfing.

To see renderings and for more information, visit [ICON Water Trails’ website](#).

The challenges kept mounting. Because the Chattahoochee River borders both Uptown Columbus and downtown Phenix City, AL, winning approval required wooing officials in two cities and two states.

“This project was unbelievably complicated,” Uptown Columbus wrote.

Over many years, Uptown Columbus kept working to break down resistance. Meanwhile, the “Ready to Raft 2012” campaign raised more than \$20 million to build a whitewater course. The city put in \$5 million, as did the Army Corps of Engineers. The rest of the funding came from private donors.

While the 2012 timeline proved a bit optimistic, the project made rapid progress. A decade-plus of work culminated in the removal of the dams in 2013.

The rafting proved so high-quality that the International Canoe Federation chose Columbus as the site of its freestyle kayak world championships. The 11-day event drew more than 200 elite athletes and judges from around the world, and it established Columbus’ rapids as an international destination.

That success sparked more projects — cross-river ziplines connecting Georgia and Alabama, a playground, a splashpad, a disc golf course, and expanded bike paths.

“Uptown did not just plan but became developers,” the organization wrote. “They acquired a river, donated it back to the city, and secured rights to create a haven for outdoor recreation.”

## Big payoffs

Since the river reopened, Columbus’ Uptown district has added four new hotels and 384 rooms. Uptown’s outfitter sells about 41,000 rafting and ziplining trips a year, activity that brings in more than \$265,000 a year to the BID.

In 2018, Uptown Columbus created a brand, Rushsouth Whitewater Park, to market the city’s outdoor recreation. Rushsouth operates its own website, Facebook page, Instagram account, and email newsletter. These combined platforms have amassed nearly 50,000 followers.

Meanwhile, the local Chamber of Com-

merce, Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Trade Center have adopted the outdoorsy branding, and they prominently feature images of Uptown's rafting and ziplining to market the community to business prospects.

Downtown leaders in Columbus acknowledge that such a long-term project required perseverance. But, they say, the Chattahoochee restoration can serve as a model for other downtowns trying to pick lower-hanging fruit.

"While Uptown's dam acquisition was unique, any community with a river can leverage the waterway to build a strong outdoor brand," Uptown Columbus wrote. "Communities without rivers can reclaim underused or overlooked areas by using similar tactics to envision and repurpose places like on-street parking spaces, traffic islands, warehouses, railyards, and other fallow areas."

Contact: Ed Wolverton, [Uptown Columbus](#), 706-596-0111. **DIX**

## CLEAN AND SAFE

# City turns to nonprofits to care for vacant properties, reduce crime

In Flint, MI (est. pop. 79,865), a nonprofit recently celebrated 20 years of cleaning and maintaining neglected properties. A growing body of research suggests that such efforts are a powerful crime-fighting tool.

The Genesee County Land Bank Authority operates the city's Clean & Green cleanup program. According to a news release from the organization, from April to September 2024, some 66 community groups came together to look after 3,500 vacant properties in and around Flint.

Crews visited each abandoned property every three weeks. Each group received a stipend for maintaining at least 25 properties during the three weeks.

Blight is an unfortunate fact of life in Flint, a city synonymous with economic hard times. But Flint's Clean & Green efforts are paying dividends.

In 2012, according to FBI crime stats, 2,774 violent crimes were reported to the Flint Police Department. By 2022, that figure had dropped to 985, *National Geographic* reports.

Flint's project focuses on maintaining abandoned spaces, either by mowing overgrown yards or converting them into gardens and parks. Researchers who studied the effects

of greening found the efforts were a powerful crime-fighting tool, not just in Flint but also in Philadelphia, and Youngstown, OH.

"It is one of the most consistent findings I've ever had in my 34-year career of doing research," Marc A. Zimmerman, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, told *National Geographic*.

**A review of 45 papers** found that the presence of green spaces, including parks and trees, reduces crime in urban areas. In Philadelphia, researchers found planting grass and trees helped reduce gun assaults.

And in Flint, Zimmerman and his colleagues compared streets where community members maintained vacant lots through Clean & Green with streets where vacant lots were left alone, over five years. The maintained properties saw nearly 40 percent fewer violent crimes.

As for the Genesee County Land Bank, it says that since 2004, the Clean & Green program has used the services of some 9,000 volunteers. Clean & Green groups have mowed more than 330,000 lawns, planted dozens of gardens, and boarded up some 600 properties.

Contact: Marc A. Zimmerman, University of Michigan, 734-763-1989. **DIX**

## Two cities end bus service, move to Uber-style networks — *Continued from page 1*

for \$1.50. The change led to an increase in cost — the bus system cost \$1.4 million a year, while the tab for the rideshare system is \$1.6 million annually, the *Charlotte Ledger* reported.

While cost was up, ridership was also up. After a year and a half, Wilson's shuttles were running about 3,500 trips a week, or more than double the 1,400 rides the old bus system ran in a typical, pre-pandemic week.

Wilson's experience helped inspire the changes in Gastonia, which this year ended its bus service, becoming the largest city in North Carolina to do so. Instead, the city offers public transit with a fleet of minivans that operate an Uber-style service.

The city ended full-sized buses traveling six routes, replacing them with a fleet of vans,

SUVs, and sedans, *Transit Time* reported.

In contrast to the long waits between bus departures, Gastonia aims for a more convenient schedule. The city's stated goal is that drivers will arrive within 15 minutes of a rider requesting a trip. Riders can schedule repeat rides, such as for their daily commute.

The service takes riders anywhere within Gastonia's city limits. The cost is \$2 each way for adults. For senior passengers, the price is reduced to \$1. Children under 5 ride for free.

Transit riders can use the GoGastonia app to summon rides.

Randi Gates, the city's transportation director, said in an interview with *Transit Time* that there are numerous reasons for moving away from a fixed-route system. Many city buses were two decades old and needed to be replaced. The six routes covered only a fraction of the city. And buses arrived only once an hour, making the system inconvenient.

"All of those things are what led us to know that we needed to think about other alternatives for public transportation," she said. "It's really exciting that we could be a leader in this."

Gastonia's transit system moved about 144,000 riders in 2023. But Gates said that meant buses carried an average of just seven passengers an hour.

"That means a lot of empty buses, and the perception of that to our taxpayers, and everything that goes along with that," Gates said.

For the city, the new on-demand service won't cost materially more than the current transit system, Gates said, but it won't save money either.

Gates said it's critical to adapt transit to changing technologies and habits.

"It's just going to save our residents a lot of time when using public transportation," she said. "We know, too, that our population is growing pretty rapidly. And so we are trying to think through: How are we moving our residents around the city?"

Contact: Randi Gates, City of Gastonia, 704-866-6714. **DIX**

### Trolley adds to historic downtown's charm

Cities may be rethinking their fixed-route bus systems, but on a smaller scale, downtown trolleys remain a useful tool for moving people within the city center. In McKinney, TX, a new downtown trolley is connecting nearby parking with the city's central square and providing a lively attraction.

The hop on hop off trolley follows a fixed roughly 20 minute route through downtown. The trolley has official pick-up stops, but riders can exit at any point along the route.

The free service operates on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. It provides a connection to the city's past and future.

"We're thrilled to introduce the downtown trolley, a nostalgic nod to McKinney's historic interurban railway that will greatly enhance the charm of our Historic Downtown Cultural District," said Andrew Jones, director of the city's Cultural District and McKinney Main Street. "This initiative provides a convenient and enjoyable way for residents and visitors to explore downtown and adds to the unique and vibrant atmosphere that makes our community special."

Funding for the project was made possible through McKinney Main Street, McKinney Community Development Corporation, sponsorships, and hotel occupancy funds.

## Downtowns end the year with New Year's Eve celebrations

Revellers will be ringing in the new year in city centers across the nation. While every downtown celebrates in its own unique style, there are some things that have stood the test of time and can be incorporated into virtually any celebration.

**Ball drop.** New Year's Eve is known for the official Times Square Ball Drop in New York City. But local history and lore are reflected in ball drops in other cities as well. Atlanta, GA has a peach drop, Lebanon, PA, drops 250 pounds of Lebanon bologna, while Shippensburg, PA, drops an anchor to welcome the new year, and Mechanicsburg, PA, favors an oversized wrench. Harrisonburg, PA, has not one but two Strawberry drops. A children's drop at noon, followed by a traditional midnight drop.

**Fireworks.** It just wouldn't be New Year's Eve without a fireworks display. The Downtown Denver Partnership hosts two 8-minute shows over downtown. The first show, at 9:00 p.m. entertains families and others looking for an early celebration, while the second show officially marks the start of the New Year at midnight.

**Safe rides home.** Many cities offer free transportation and extended hours of operation on New Year's Eve. In New York State's capital region, bus fares are not collected, a local law firm supports a [Rideshare Home](#) program which provides up to 1,000 \$20 Uber vouchers, and the county traffic safety board provides free taxi rides home.

**Fun runs.** Another way to ring in the new year is with a fun run. New York City hosts what is arguably the largest midnight run through the city's Central Park. At the stroke of midnight a fireworks display lights up the sky and kicks off the four mile race. Other communities extend the

New Year's Eve festivities with a run on New Year's day.

Ocean City, NJ, welcomes the new year with a First Day 5K Run/Walk. Runners compete in several age categories and many take a "First Dip" in the Atlantic ocean when the race is over. Meanwhile Kalmouth Falls, OR, hosts an annual Hangover Handicap, a two mile run through downtown. New for 2023 was a trophy for the first dog to complete the race.

**Arts celebrations.** First Night, the family-oriented festival of the arts has steadily grown in popularity as an alternative to the traditional alcohol-fueled revelry associated with New Year's Eve.

Founded in downtown Boston in 1976, First Night was started by a group of artists who performed in churches, community halls, and outdoors in the Boston Common. Most First Night celebrations feature dozens of dance, poetry, theater, music, and other events held in a variety of downtown venues. The activities generally culminate in a parade or concert, a midnight countdown, and fireworks.

The purchase of a First Night button provides entrance into all of the events, but button sales seldom cover the cost of the events. Instead, most First Night events rely heavily on sponsors and in-kind donations.

Many events are official First Night celebrations, which are run with guidance from First Night Inc. Others have taken the concept and created something truly unique to their community. DIX





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## Downtown supports businesses with a show of hands

Community-directed funding is making a difference for small businesses in downtown Wheeling, WV. The premise is simple: Community members are presented with projects that would positively impact the city and vote for the project they want to support.

Over the past 10 years [Show of Hands](#) has contributed over \$100,000 to small businesses including \$10,000 to open a dough-

nut shop, \$4,436 to add a juice and smoothie bar to a local market, \$7,064 to promote and distribute a local arts magazine, and \$6,070 to a salon owner to make her shop more accessible to people with disabilities.

At the end of the evening, the winner takes home \$4,000 provided by sponsors as well as all of the money collected at the door.

Winners return to a future Show of Hands to report on their project and its impact on the community.



Alex Panas, program manager of Wheeling Heritage explains the value of the program, “Even though it’s just a \$5 donation at the door, they are investors in these businesses, and you can tell

### GRANT WATCH

## Levitt Foundation, a strong record of supporting the arts downtown

Since 2003, the Levitt Foundation has awarded more than \$3 million to more than 50 communities across the United States. The foundation’s primary grant programs focus on free concerts aimed at invigorating public spaces and enhancing community life.

In 2023 the foundation announced that it will spend down \$150 million in assets by 2041. This significantly increases the foundation’s ability to support free outdoor concerts.

Over the years, downtowns have successfully applied for the Levitt AMP grant. This matching grant is limited to cities with populations under 250,000.

The grant combines a traditional model with crowdfunding. Nonprofits complete an online grant application, the foundation reviews all applications, when the field is narrowed to 20 finalists a single winner is selected by online public voting. Each grantee receives a three-year matching grant for \$30,000 per year to present a minimum of 10 free outdoor concerts.

For Batesville, AR, receiving a Levitt AMP grant was a catalyst for moving its downtown arts district forward

Main Street Batesville and the City of Batesville had partnered in presenting a summer concert series. Initially, the concerts were held in a park on the banks of the White River. But the long-term goal was to bring live music downtown. “We are striving for more of an arts district downtown because that’s what people want in our community,” says Maggie Tipton-Smart, executive director of Main Street Batesville.

With the success of the concert series, change is coming to downtown. “A huge highlight is that in the process of launching Levitt AMP, we’ve partnered with the city in building a space to move live music back into our downtown district,” says Tipton-Smart. “So even these free community events are generating actual investment into our community, which is phenomenal to us.”

The next [Levitt AMP](#) grant application will open in April and close in June.



# Idea Exchange

that they are interested in seeing these entrepreneurs really succeed and thrive. What we see after this event is even those who don't win really do receive so much love and support through the community, whether that be through patronizing their business or just getting some more shares on social media to build awareness of their business. It's really great all around."

## Grants for upper floor housing

The City of Beloit, WI, is offering downtown building owners matching grants to create upper-floor housing. Launched in February, the [Downtown Business District Upper Floor Housing Grant Program](#) is administered by the Downtown Beloit Association and funded through the city's TIF housing fund. Funds are provided on a 50:50 match.

Building owners may apply for up to \$30,000 for improvements such as upgraded electrical and plumbing systems, remodeling or adding bathrooms and kitchens, and upgrading or adding windows. Specific improvements are reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the Downtown Beloit Association Design Committee.

"These one-time funds have the potential to create a tangible, positive impact on growing the number of residents in our community," said Drew Pennington, the city's economic development director. "Available housing for our current and future residents is one of the

top concerns of our business community. As our employers attract quality candidates to the area, we want those employees to create their life in our city as residents of Beloit."

## Reverse scholarship program brings college grads downtown

With many small cities struggling to lure skilled workers, Hamilton, OH, tried something new. The Hamilton County Foundation is offering to help people pay down their college loans if they move to town.

The [Talent Attraction Program](#) offered up to \$15,000 to recent graduates who moved to specific areas downtown. Grads were required to work at a business-location in the county or in a full-time remote position. The foundation had for decades given scholarships to promising pupils from Hamilton's high schools, only to see those students leave for college and never return.

The program has proven so popular that the foundation, with its limited funds, has been forced to pause the application process.

## Fire suppression is economic development

The Frederick Historic District in Maryland encompasses the core of the city and contains residential, commercial, and religious buildings dating as far back as the late 18th century.

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Given the construction methods, materials, and density downtown, fire safety is always a concern. To encourage property owners to install sprinklers, the city offers a Fire Suppression Incentive Program. The city notes that the program's goals are to "improve personal safety while helping to preserve the historic fabric of downtown Frederick." In addition, "the program also will have an economic benefit by increasing utilization of buildings as well as stabilizing or improving property values."

The grant provides up to \$25,000 for the installation of a new sprinkler system with a 50:50 match required.

## Nighttime safety recommendations

After several nighttime disturbances in the City of Appleton, WI, the mayor's office has made three proposals to improve downtown safety.

1. Ending food truck operation at midnight rather than the current time of 4:00 a.m.

2. Adding street lighting along sections of the main shopping and dining corridor to enhance visibility.

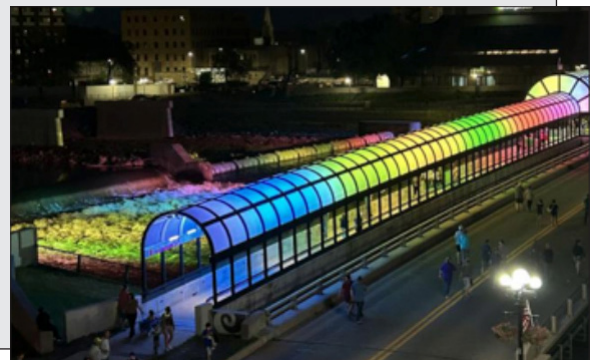
3. Introducing a new requirement for all Class B establishments, those which sell alcoholic beverages for consumption on- or off-premises, to install security cameras at customer entrances and exits. Under the proposal, these establishments would also be required to make the footage available to law enforcement.

## Pedestrian bridge lights up downtown, provides unique event venue

The ribbon cutting and bridge-lighting ceremony in downtown Waterloo, IA, marked a new beginning for the city's Fourth Street bridge. The Waterloo River Lights Experience is a public art installation that brings color and light to the Cedar River. The lights are programmed for a 30 minute show that fills the bridge and projects onto the water below.

The city notes at its website that the display serves as an economic development engine, a source of community advancement and pride, and a tool for visitor attraction. The bridge is also the site for an upcoming fundraising event sponsored by the Waterloo Main Street program. Dinner Across the Bridge will bring donors together for a unique dining experience under the lights.

This is not the first time that the city has hosted a community meal in an unlikely place. In 1903 with the completion of a large underground conduit designed to provide better drainage to the downtown area, the city hosted 450 guests to an elaborate banquet in the conduit. The *Waterloo Daily Courier* noted that the Dry Run Sewer Banquet received worldwide coverage. City booster Frank Pierce wrote in the paper: "no other municipality can hope to equal ... no other city will be able to give us a banquet in a sewer."



The common council has approved the addition of street lighting, while the other proposals are still pending.

## Business owners welcome new neighbors

When the Six Corners Lofts apartment complex opened in Chicago earlier this year, local businesses were there to welcome

residents. The new neighbors received goodie bags filled with brochures, coupons, menus, pens, magnets, and more from 40 local businesses. The reusable bags boasted a Shop Small logo or a Six Corners logo.

"As the community grows, we need to continue to showcase what great businesses we have," said business owner Danny Ehle. "There is something for everybody here at Six Corners." DIX