

# Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and more business downtown



## Targeting Groups

### Market study aims to attract new businesses, inform existing business owners

A new market study in Mankato, MN (est. pop. 39,309), is doing double duty as both a new business attraction tool and as a business retention tool.

“We wanted to have a piece that gave information to businesses and business leaders considering location in the city center, and that would sell the city center with data, and provide the information those decision makers would need,” says Megan Flanagan, director of the City Center Partnership. “The other goal is to provide information to the businesses that are already here so that they can see the impact they are having. They are putting all of this attention and strategic investment into the city center, and we wanted to be able to show them the results from that.”

The 28-page report, *City Center Mankato, Information You Need to Invest with Confidence*, includes:

- a list of resources for new and existing businesses;
- city center details in both text and “by the numbers” formats;
- information about each of the large downtown’s various districts;
- two pages devoted to arts, culture, and events;
- five pages highlighting successful development projects;
- a list of new business opportunities;
- demographic data at a glance for the city center and the trade area;
- and pages highlighting awards and accolades, including being named one of the 14 Coolest Urban Spaces in America, one of the Seven Best Hockey Towns, hosting the Best Half Marathon in the state, and

being one of the Best College Towns to Live in After Graduation, as well as home to one of the Coolest Playgrounds in Minnesota.

“People are really happy to see the piece,” says Flanagan. “Having all the results of that capital investment in one piece, combining it and showing its overall impact, is really impressive. It’s an attractive piece showing what’s already been done, but also where the opportunities are, where there is room to grow.”

The City Center Partnership is the downtown development arm of the broader Greater Mankato Growth (GMG) organization, which also serves as the regional chamber of commerce via its Visit Mankato arm. “The business development staff at GMG is really strongly using the piece at trade shows and when talking to site selectors,” says Flanagan.

### Information delivery with a personal touch

While GMG is taking care of far-reaching distribution of the market study, the City Center Partnership is using its new Business Walk program to put the document into the hands of local business owners.

“The Business Walk is a new initiative we’ve started this year as an ongoing program through our Business Development and Retention Committee,” Flanagan says. The program involves regular visits to downtown businesses. Staff and board members from the Partnership and GMG, volunteers, small business owners, city staff, and others participate.

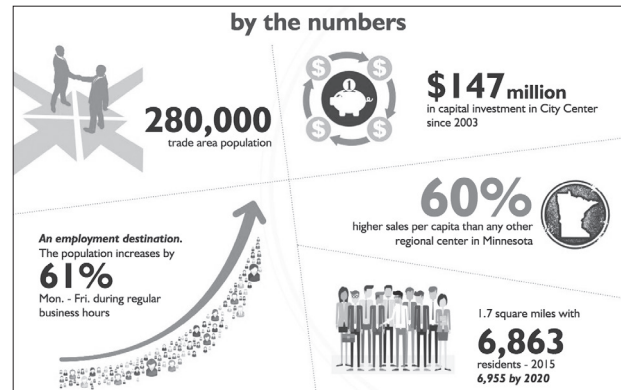
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A training session ensures that all Business Walk participants are well prepared. The training consists of role-playing discussions with business owners, making sure the Business Walk approach is not seen as an attempt to sell anything, but as something helpful to merchants. Goals are twofold. “We want to get information about businesses within the city center, learn their story, why they are located where they are and how that is working for them, and also to hear from them what resources they need that we can help connect them with, what issues we can help resolve,” Flanagan says.

Delivering the market study is another way to provide a service to busy business owners and get a foot in the door. “It’s just a great opportunity to get to know business owners and hear their stories,” says Flanagan. The committee divides businesses to be visited into groups of four or five, with a goal of 20 businesses each walk. “Then we meet for lunch to recap what we’ve heard and see if there are any big themes that need to be addressed. It’s nice having city staff there and able to take note right away. For example, during our first walk, many business owners’ biggest concern was an area where children were crossing the street with a lot of traffic and not enough signage.” That was in April, she says, noting that by the end of September, safety enhancements to the area were complete.

The first three walks, and thus delivery of the market study, focused on areas of the city center that had not been receiving as much attention or development news recently, says Flanagan. The committee discovered several really interesting small businesses in these fringe areas of the downtown that can now be more effectively supported and marketed. “One sharpens Zamboni blades all across the United States,



Info-graphics that can be read quickly aim to impress and catch the interest of potential investors.

and another is a call center handling 300 phones across the country,” Flanagan says. “It’s been really interesting.”

The City Center Partnership Director notes that both the market study and the Business Walk are easily replicable. “Either of these initiatives is very do-able,” says Flanagan. If an in-depth market study seems daunting, “start simple. Think about collecting some stories, some data, and finding partners to help you with the data you need. Talk to people who made an investment in your downtown and get their stories.”

As for the Business Walk, “that’s very easy to get off the ground,” says Flanagan. “And it has definitely engaged our volunteers in a way they have not been engaged and excited before. Get together city staff, chamber staff, and do a practice run with some role playing, and then get out there and talk to your business owners. They will be really glad you’re taking an interest in them.”

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