



Lessons to learn

By Liz Allen, September 2, 2006

To learn about Racine, I do my homework.

I research Racine's economic turnaround, cruise Main Street and the Lake Michigan shoreline, interview officials and collar regular folks.

But I get my real introduction to Racine when my parking meter expires. The ticket is computer-generated; I can pay the fine online. That tells me Racine has embraced technology and found a smarter way to govern.

I get the ticket because I underestimate the time I'll spend with Mayor Gary Becker. From City Hall, he whisks me into his car to show off new developments, a retail-filled downtown and graffiti-free neighborhoods.

After an hour, I gently remind Becker that I have to meet Gordy Kacala, executive director of the Racine County Economic Development Corp. The mayor drops me off, but the meter's expired. Time's ticking for Erie, too.

Our leaders could benefit from Becker's energy and sense of urgency. They could make progress if they follow Kacala's mantra that plans must still move forward when political leaders change.

Package Becker's charisma and Kacala's strategy, and Erie can become a place our kids and grandkids call home. And a place where someone like Dr. Tony Herrmann can retire.

Mayor sells his vision

Becker rolls up his shirtsleeves, chain-smokes Camels and pitches ideas, fast, like a fireballer. The mayor, 48, a businessman, served on Common Council from 1994 to 1999, dropped out of politics, then beat the incumbent mayor in April 2003.

He ran for mayor because "we have some great assets here, but there was no real passion, no sense of urgency. We have to move things forward."

As we get into his car, Becker waylays a city worker. Buy one of the new waterfront condos, he urges; they're going fast.

His sales pitch exemplifies what he senses, that having three major housing and mixed-use developments in the works improves attitudes.



"People who live here are the hardest ones to convince it's great to live here," he says. "In the last six months, I think we've actually started to change that."

How? "For one, I'm a better cheerleader than we've had."

We zip out to the \$180 million Lake Michigan housing development on the site of a former muffler factory. Then we're off to riverfront real estate he wants to revive.

An old uniform company will be converted to loft apartments. Then he wants to reclaim a vacant publishing plant.

"I'm just drooling over it - 50 acres of waterfront property to create a whole new neighborhood."

We also tour old neighborhoods. He's eagle-eyeing garages for gang tags. The city paints over graffiti within 48 hours after it's reported. It's a battle, but erase the graffiti six or seven times and the vandals surrender.

Before, if you lived near a junky house, you'd call the building inspector, the health department, the public works department and/or the cops to report broken windows, garbage, weeds or graffiti. Now one call sparks action, Becker says.

"This isn't Shangri-La, but it is clean." He drops me off to meet Kacala for lunch at JavaVino.

Downtown comes back

The wine-coffee bar is part of Racine's rejuvenated downtown, with trendy restaurants, upscale gift shops, an independent drugstore, art galleries, a toy store and clothing boutiques.

Main Street, quaint and charming like Girard or North East, intersects with Sixth Street, an avenue of the arts.

At Porters of Racine, a high-end furniture store dating to 1857, the window displays a \$1,900 price tag - for the bedding, not the furniture.

Millers Flowers, in business for 98 years, serves customers "who buy one flower because that's all they can afford" as well as "customers who live in mansions," co-owner Hilary Krejcha says.

"People down here have had the patience to wait it out and know it (downtown) was going to come back and you have people (newer owners) who took a risk," Krejcha says.

Two years ago, Tim and Sherry Este restored a vacant building to open their 700-variety wine store, Uncorkt!.

Wine, food, flowers and art create an environment that's mellow and lively, without being snooty. You can't take yourself too seriously when birdbaths are your public art project. Downtown Racine Corp. unveils a new project (like our fish and frogs) every year.

"I heard that this was a town that was really cool at the downtown," says Virginia resident Leslie Wiechmann-Roddy, 49, photographing the birds. Her family was vacationing outside Chicago.

"This is a happening place at night," says Devin Sutherland, executive director of Downtown Racine, which hired a consultant in 1999 to develop a plan for downtown retail, housing, business and entertainment districts. The plan will be updated in 2007-08, as it was in 2005.

S.C. Johnson Co. paid the plan's \$550,000 tab and then built the headquarters for Johnson Bank, a \$4 billion company, downtown.

"We hear from developers because we have developed a plan. It's been adopted (by Common Council), and we have a track record," Sutherland says. "It's giving them confidence to invest in downtown."

Downtown Racine Corp. has spruced up the streetscape and sponsors downtown events, such as free noon concerts, a European-style arts-and-crafts market, and Gallery Nights, with late hours for art browsers and buyers.

Family business makes impact

"Downtown has really come back," says Jen Gallagher, 17, who works at the Sugar Shack, a 1950s-themed ice cream parlor.



Gallagher is a senior at Horlick High, named for the defunct Racine company that invented malted milk. Racine takes pride in its inventions, including the Hamilton Beach blender, the InSinkErator garbage disposal, Case tractors, and Johnson's Wax, Windex, Raid, Drano and Pledge.

Sam Johnson, who died in 2004, is remembered for his unassuming demeanor and determination to shepherd his family business to the fifth generation in Racine.

Picture the Behrend family still operating Hammermill Paper Co., starting a bank and owning an office-supply store.

Then imagine those Behrend heirs sharpening their business acumen on a campus with a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed building.

Now you see the Johnson legacy, which includes four separate Racine-based businesses.

But eliminate that investment from a benevolent local family, and Racine still outpaces Erie in key areas.

City, suburban and rural government leaders have pulled together, sharing revenue from an extension of the city's sewer system.

The county school district, unified in 1961, tempers suburban flight. Nonprofits cooperate, instead of competing, on economic development.

Racine County's Economic Development Plan (similar to our Bosworth report) was presented to 47 groups in 2003, including school boards. Forty-six approved the plan. "So now it's policy for the community," says Kacala, the economic development director.

The plan has been updated twice; a small working group meets every two months. One task is to figure out how dropouts and truants will impact the work force.

Erie's Civic Coordinating Committee was supposed to foster that kind of cooperation. It hasn't.

The New York Times reported that Racine's Democratic mayor and Republican county executive work together. (That was our old story.) But Kacala says economic development should advance, even if the players change.

"Anybody should be able to go away, and the process should be able to continue," he says.

Technology is key

By one measure, Erie's old administration is still in charge.

Click on "About Erie" at the city of Erie's Web site, www.ci.erie.pa.us.

Rick Schenker is listed as county executive. Rick Filippi, former mayor, isn't named, but the site says that for the "first time in many years, the city and the county have new leaders" and says "both co-chair new organization, Civic Coordinating Committee," an obvious reference to Filippi.

Unemployment rates are stuck in March 2002.

The major employer list includes Ethan Allen (closed), Smith Meter (now FMC) and Steris (450 manufacturing jobs being sent to Mexico). The Tom Ridge Environmental Center is still under construction.

But technology involves more than updating Web sites. "Our technology is more bleeding edge," Kacala, 54, said. "Bleeding edge" leaps beyond "cutting edge" technology to take risks.

For example, Racine's economic development agency acquires intellectual property - unused patents that can be spun off to entrepreneurs.

Racine's Center for Advanced Technology and Innovation now owns close to 43 patents, worth an estimated \$45 million in revenue, he says.

One is for Yokit, instant yogurt.

You won't find it at Giant Eagle, but there's a market for long shelf life products like it in institutions and Third World countries.

It sounds like one of those innovations that makes Dr. Tony Herrmann, 70, proud to call Racine home. He and his wife moved back from New Jersey, to be close to family.

Herrmann teaches me a lot about Racine's industrial history and social fabric.

I feel like the mayor, who travels to educate himself. "Just because I got more votes last night (in the election), my IQ didn't go up 30 points," Becker says.

As I drive 520 miles back home, I feel smarter, too.

I'm not sure my IQ jumped.

But I do know how to log on to my computer to pay my \$13.95 parking ticket.

LIZ ALLEN is an Erie Times-News Editorial Board member. She can be reached at 870-1735 (liz.allen@timesnews.com).