

**March 23, 2021**

As I began preparations for the next River to Rail Initiative meeting, I drove through the downtown area again, specifically looking to see the results of our united efforts. I think it is appropriate to share what I saw. Before we began the Initiative, there were numerous commercial vacancies throughout downtown. Landowners were asking the City to allow them to rent the first floor of their buildings for residential purposes because they were unable to find commercial tenants. Fortunately, the City would not allow the residential use AND with the help of everyone, the Initiative is working. My previous report listed all the work by entrepreneurs, landowners, and local businesses and they deserve a great deal of thanks but the details will not be repeated at this time.

Here is a list of the **actions** to date:

1. The City **approved incentives** suggested by R2R/BLAEDC to support redevelopment. More than \$3,500,000 in improvements have been made since inception. More than \$60,000 in permit fees have been forgiven by the City.
2. The Brainerd HRA **received a grant and helped** the owners restore all the second-floor apartments in the downtown area.
3. The Chamber **sponsored three Destination Downtown events** resulting in new businesses downtown – The Purple Fern, The Knotty Pine Bakery, and The Food Coop.
4. The local businesses began **banding together, under Destination Downtown Business Council, secured funds to hire a part-time events coordinator, and are creating an energy** that has not existed for some time.
5. The Brainerd Restoration group were able to get two **murals painted** on the exterior of two buildings in the downtown area and **installed a sound system**.
6. The City, with the assistance of BLAEDC, provided **grants to local businesses** to help through the pandemic.
7. Crow Wing County, with the assistance of BLAEDC, worked to **provide more grant help** from federal and state funds to local businesses.
8. The City **re-established the Parking Committee** that is working on various methods to make access and parking more friendly in the downtown area.
9. I could go on and on. I know I am leaving many things out.

What I saw as I went around downtown is that all but one storefront is now occupied with existing or new businesses. It was fun to see all businesses are open, despite the pandemic. Many of the businesses are the result of the energy being created downtown. Everyone, working together, are making downtown “the place to be in business”.

What is occurring this year as vaccines are given and pandemic restrictions on gatherings are loosened:

1. Special events are scheduled throughout the year to entice people to the downtown area often.

2. Several people are working on the various events surrounding the Sesquicentennial of Brainerd and working with the newspaper on articles providing the public with Brainerd history.
3. A dedicated group continues to raise funds to save the iconic water tower downtown and plans are being drawn for the roof repairs.
4. A group is looking at a long-term plan for seasonal decoration improvements for the downtown area.

There are so many people working on so many things, it is hard to list them all. The Initiative started with people and continues with people, all working together to make the Brainerd a better place. Thank you all for doing so much to make this effort a success. Now let's keep it going. There is still a lot of work to do.