

Windmill spurs plans in Little Chute

Leaders look to kick-start downtown revitalization

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LITTLE CHUTE — Lifelong resident Marty Jansen thinks the world of his tight-knit community.

Growing up in the 1930s and '40s, Little Chute's downtown was bustling with activity, he says, rolling off a list of old-time restaurants, pharmacies, bowling center and ice cream hangout for youths.

Jansen, 78, hopes the village can recapture its liveliness with the construction of a windmill next year at Island Park.

"They say it will build up business. I'm just waiting to see what happens," said Jansen, who made a modest contribution to the \$2.5 million project. He bought one of several hundred bricks that will be used for a walkway.

With the windmill expected to bring 25,000 to 40,000 visitors through the village after it opens in 2010, community leaders and business owners are looking for ways to spruce up the downtown and generate tourism dollars.

Little Chute is turning to experts for help. The list includes Karen Eischen, executive director of Pella Area Development Corp. in Iowa and Pella Chamber of Commerce. That city is designed around its Dutch heritage. Little Chute windmill supporters have visited Pella numerous times in the past three years to get ideas.

Eischen, who toured Little Chute on Tuesday, said civic leaders need to work on giving the community a cohesive look.

"I see buildings that are very industrial looking. I see some that are very modern looking. I see some that are middle of the road," she said. "If they could make them have some similar elements, whether that be color or building materials, I think that would finish the look."

She also suggests the village become more uniform with its signage and create bold gateways to enhance community identity.

Village Administrator Chuck Kell and Trustee Janet Verstegen are spearheading efforts for the Village Board to consider adopting a design manual that downtown business owners and developers would follow when building or remodeling.

It would be one of many steps to recreate the Dutch feel which Pella has captured.

Pella and Little Chute share similarities in heritage and size. Both have about 10,000 people.

Pella, however, has been working on its Dutch look since the 1960s. Seven years ago it added a windmill, a canal system and four hotels.

"It's not just about looks; it's more of an investment in your future," Eischen said of the economic boom that accompanies tourism.

Pella has seven hotels and hosts an estimated 300,000 visitors annually who spend about \$35 million. The figure is a 47 percent increase from nine years ago.

For Pella, isolation from large metro areas works to its advantage. It's about 45 miles southeast of Des Moines.

Where Little Chute must compete for business development with nearby communities, Pella is sought out by corporations. It has nearly 400 businesses and ranks ninth in the state for manufacturing jobs per capita.

Mike Van Asten, Little Chute Windmill Committee vice president, looks at a broader landscape.

"For the northeast Wisconsin regional area — a windmill along the waterfront combined with other exciting things happening along the riverfront in downtown Appleton, the marina in downtown Menasha, the Riverwalk (Project) in Neenah — we're starting to develop a real critical mass of focus on the river," he said.

Gift stores, boutique shops and cafes are likely to succeed in a Dutch atmosphere, Eischen said.

Kell said the village has been approached for possible developments that are tied to the opening windmill, Little Chute lock and replacement of the Mill Street bridge at Island Park. They will be made public if the projects go through.

The Wisconsin Department of Tourism reports that heritage tourism is strong throughout the Badger State. Little Chute would do well to tap into the market, a department spokeswoman said.

Outagamie County ranked ninth in the state for traveler spending and contributed 2.7 percent of all traveler expenditures in 2006. Travelers spent \$344 million, an increase of 8.5 percent from 2005.

Van Asten looks to the future. In five years, he says, vacant downtown buildings will have tenants.

The customer base will be different. Storefronts will play off of an "Old World" design theme starting with the Save-A-Lot building, which he owns.

"We intend to make some changes to coincide with the opening of the windmill," Van Asten said.