

Downtown and Mental Health and Wellness Action Teams: The Heart of New Ulm in Action

For many people in the New Ulm community, the downtown area is filled with so much great history — and also so much great potential. To help realize that potential, community members have been hard at work on changes that will help guide downtown to a revitalization that not only helps businesses, but promotes health and connectedness, too.

The interest in pursuing ideas for downtown revitalization began during a Community Visioning Conference held in the fall of 2016 that was sponsored by the New Ulm Area Foundation and the New Ulm Area Chamber of Commerce. A recommendation put forth at that conference to revitalize downtown garnered widespread support; shortly thereafter a Downtown Action Team was born.

The action team includes representatives from the Chamber, downtown businesses, New Ulm Medical Center and community residents, and is facilitated by Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project, which has health-related interests that align with many of the initiatives proposed. Specifically, the action team has been working on initiatives to help slow traffic, enhance shoppers' experience, increase pedestrian safety and increase aesthetic appeal in the downtown area.

Promoting Social Connectedness

As a first step, the Downtown Action Team conducted a survey of downtown business owners in order to better understand what initiatives might have the most support. The survey asked background questions related to each business' operations, customers and employees, as well as a wide variety of questions related to possible areas of improvement related to parking and snow removal, designated loading zones and aesthetic improvements.

After reviewing the survey results, the first priority the team decided to address was adding more seating downtown to promote social connectedness. Research shows that social connectedness helps improve health by helping to decrease depression, improve self-esteem and create a sense of belonging. Providing residents and shoppers with more areas to sit and gather, including outdoor dining options, increases the potential that people will choose to spend more time downtown and gather.

The survey showed that the majority of business owners responding supported adding more seating downtown. In fact,



Staff from the New Ulm Area Chamber of Commerce enjoyed using one of the new tables downtown for an outdoor staff meeting.

this idea garnered the highest interest among options on a list of possible aesthetic improvements.

In October 2017, the HONU Downtown Action Team and the HONU Mental Health and Wellness Action Team arranged for the first two tables and benches to be installed, with funding provided by New Ulm Medical Center's Charitable Contributions. There are now six table and bench groupings in the downtown area, with three more planned once funding is obtained. The action teams are also working to secure funds to wrap the table tops in heavy-duty vinyl printed with New Ulm historical facts organized by decades. This approach would help promote walking in downtown by encouraging people to visit all of the tables to get the full history.

As New Ulm residents are showing, working together, they are collectively making the healthy choice the easy choice where they live, work, learn and play.