

Getting Ready for the Recovery:

Wayfinding systems as valuable economic development tools

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If you’re like most downtown professionals, you tend to take economic news with a grain of salt. While there is no mistaking the global economic downturn, you believe that there are opportunities in any economy, and that making the right investments now will pay dividends in the future.

While development dollars may be scarce, building awareness and attracting revenue from tourists and businesses alike is more critical now than ever. A properly implemented wayfinding system can be a valuable economic tool in that regard because it can build awareness of all that your city has to offer while directing visitors to key destinations. As part of a larger streetscape plan, a wayfinding system promotes your city’s reputation, heritage and spirit. And making your environment more accessible boosts positive word of mouth and increases return visits.

Interviews with city officials and business development leaders find that they agree on the importance of wayfinding systems, especially in this economy. And the fabricators who install such systems add that it’s a buyer’s market.

Elizabeth Alley, a planner with the **City of Raleigh, North Carolina**, said the wayfinding system now being installed there is helping drivers navigate the booming city’s tight urban grid and array of one-way streets. The system of vehicular and pedestrian signs is designed to guide visitors to downtown Raleigh from major entryways and direct them to downtown attractions and parking areas.

The city undertook the project in response to a surge in public and private development in downtown Raleigh, including a new convention center, a four-star Marriott hotel and new restaurants, entertainment venues and high-end residential developments.

“Wayfinding is the final piece of the puzzle in getting our downtown revitalized,” Alley said. “We’ve got all the venues now; we just have to get the visitors to them.”

Alley added that she’s seen increasing interest in wayfinding from municipal leaders in other areas.

“I have been getting a ton of calls from other cities and downtowns that are considering wayfinding programs of their own and wondering how to go about it,” she said. “I probably get two or three calls a week about wayfinding.”

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Arthur Mullen, executive director of Michigan's **Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority**, sees the wayfinding system now being designed for his city's downtown as "setting the stage" for the eventual economic recovery.

Mount Clemens is a city of 17,000 outside Detroit. Signage on the highways that direct the region's drivers around downtown Mount Clemens does a "terrible job" of pointing people to the downtown itself, Mullen said. The wayfinding system now being developed is designed to fix that, he said, while enhancing the community's sense of identity and improving the visitor experience.

"We just look at this as a great tool to help market the community and put some pointers out in the area towards us," Mullen said. "It's important to move forward in these down times to take advantage of things when they get better."

Closer to home, Corbin Design is working with the **Traverse City Downtown Development Authority** on a wayfinding system for the DDA district.

Rob Bacigalupi, the DDA's deputy director, said the system is needed to direct potential customers to the downtown business district.

"I was telling a neighborhood group this recently and it sounded a little silly, but it's true that visitors to Traverse City may not know that there is a downtown or where it is," he said. "So it's important to direct visitors to downtown and make sure they're aware that it's there."

While Traverse City has not been impacted as severely as other parts of Michigan by the recession, its effects are being felt here, Bacigalupi said, with downtown storefront vacancies increasing from about three percent to over seven percent. "We're impacted by the economy in the nation but seven and a half percent is still a good vacancy rate," he said. "Anything we can do, we certainly should be doing, and this is certainly something we can do."

The wayfinding system that Corbin Design developed for the Quad Cities region of Iowa and Illinois has gone beyond being an economic development tool and helped unify the region as a whole, according to **Joe Taylor**, president and CEO of the **Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau**.

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The system, installed last fall, is based on an icon that shows the geographical relationship of each of the Quad Cities communities to the region's most prominent geographical feature—the Mississippi River. The convention and visitors bureau is making the icon available to businesses and the press for use in news stories, pamphlets, brochures, websites and other marketing materials to promote its use.

“The community loves the system and has embraced the system,” Taylor said. “We hear comments all the time about how flexible it is. What wayfinding immediately did was connect the dots between these attractions and unify the community. It helps the Quad Cities be the Quad Cities.”

One of Corbin Design's first major city wayfinding projects, for Downtown Indianapolis, Indiana, was installed in 1998 and updated in 2005 to incorporate cultural districts. The city continues to update system components with new destinations as needed.

“We're still big advocates for wayfinding and for Corbin Design,” said **Tamara Zahn**, president of **Indianapolis Downtown, Inc.**, the not-for-profit company that manages, markets and develops downtown Indianapolis and worked with Corbin Design on the project.

The wayfinding system has been particularly helpful in directing the large number of pedestrians around the downtown, she said. “Major destinations that have listings greatly appreciate it,” she added.

Like other big cities, Indianapolis is being affected by the slumping economy, Zahn said. But she added that city boosters are looking forward to positive developments in the next several years, including a convention center expansion, the opening of a high-end JW Marriott hotel complex, and the city's 2012 hosting of Super Bowl XLVI. As in the past, the wayfinding system will be there to direct conventioners and tourists to the new destinations and events.

This is also a good time to have a wayfinding system fabricated and installed, according to the companies that do such work.

“Right now, we're finding that it's a buyer's market,” said **Chuck Amundsen**, national sales director for the Milwaukee-based **Poblocki Sign Company**. “In order to be competitive, we've had to reduce our margins.”

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Increased competition for fewer and fewer jobs is a major reason for the more competitive pricing, Amundsen said. The architectural signage company, which works on wayfinding projects nationwide, frequently sees twice as many competitors for each job these days as before the downturn. He noted that many of the newer competitors are smaller firms or those that may not have the same level of experience as more established companies like Poblocki, with its 77 years of experience in the field.

Another factor working in the buyers' favor is a faster turnaround time for projects, Amundsen said. Where a project might have taken 12 to 14 weeks for engineering, approvals, fabrication and installation previously, the same project now takes 10 to 12 weeks.

Lower costs for raw materials can also reduce the cost of a system. While steel and aluminum prices peaked last October, Amundsen said, they've dropped about 15 percent since then, to prices not seen since January of 2007.

Gary Stemler, vice president of Minneapolis-based **Nordquist Sign Company**, agreed with Amundsen's assessment and noted that the reverse is true—once the economy improves, the backlog of projects will make getting a wayfinding system built and installed a longer and more expensive process. Nordquist, which was established in 1904, manufactures and installs large-scale architectural signage projects across North America.

"The big thing you're going to find is that it's much more competitive now because there are far fewer projects out there," Stemler said. "Once this does loosen up, there's going to be so much pent-up demand for the product that lead times are going to get extended and costs are going to go up."

A national leader in environmental graphic design, Corbin Design has developed wayfinding and signage systems for more than 50 cities and downtowns across North America, including eight of the 50 largest cities in the United States. Every day, millions of people rely on the wayfinding systems developed by Corbin Design to find their way.