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When DavenportOne was formed, in part, out of the consolidation of the several separate but similar downtown groups earlier this year, I was skeptical of how decisions were going to be made on future spending, vision, and the organization of our city's core. Always the proponent of incremental development, I saw the potential for even further stagnation and dilution of the role of the small- to medium-sized business owner in our downtown in favor of the ever-elusive "silver bullet" solution, e.g., a shiny new insurance-company headquarters. Longtime readers of this publication will remember our criticism of the MIG study (see cover story) and, despite its public-input process, how it didn't originally account for the necessity of small-business owners, specialty retail, and residential projects in the vision for our downtown.

One of the first bold steps taken by our newly formed DavenportOne executive committee was to hire Wisconsin-based Vandewalle & Associates as our consultant for redevelopment in downtown. It should be noted that DavenportOne has faithfully maintained downtown redevelopment as one of its top priorities, and even taken some heat for it from members who think they are focusing too much on downtown. It's a "damned if they do, damned it they don't" scenario. The short answer to the reasoning behind hiring Vandewalle was the success of the John Deere Commons project and because he was, by some accounts, instrumental over in Moline, maybe some of that success could be had here in Davenport. (We all know the time-old tradition of "It's not what you know, but who you know.") So, I began to make inquiries regarding Vandewalle's contributions to Quad Cities-based projects. Feedback was pretty much split down the middle. There were those who lauded his participation and those who were skeptical of the need for the "expert from afar." It was difficult (as this cover story suggests) to pin down tangible evidence of what these consultants did, or to obtain an original work product you could hold in your hands.

Maybe the real work product is simply ideas and contacts, and the savvy consultants don't put those on paper for everyone else to copy, or else they'd put themselves out of a job. One can't fault a business for protecting its intellectual property. Nonetheless, when a business like Vandewalle's is involved on so many levels with urban redevelopment in so many areas of the Quad Cities, it begs a closer look, beyond, "Look how great the John Deere Commons turned out." Not to mention the recurring investments made by the city and downtown groups in plans

and economic-development studies.

Meanwhile, many in Davenport are wondering if Vandewalle can help our downtown achieve the “economic critical mass” that the Commons did without the financial largesse of a John Deere-type corporation. Further, where is the real economic critical mass in downtown Moline: Is it in the Commons proper or does it extend to the historic downtown south of the railroad tracks? These are all questions worthy of answers, especially as we move toward achieving our own version of such economic critical mass in downtown Davenport under the stewardship of Vandewalle & Associates.

Some additional over-arching questions must also be put on the table: Why do we really need a Vandewalle & Associates? Where is the vision, leadership, and execution of our own city leaders, elected officials, real-estate developers, and the like? Has no one come up with great ideas about what to do to revitalize our downtown before? This multi-layered question won’t warrant a simple answer. The cynical answer is that the real-estate and development communities have been focused on a short-sighted, self-serving vision of two-car-garage-domino-style houses, strip malls, and office complexes planted squarely on top of the world’s richest farm land for the past three decades.

As cities in the Midwest face the nationwide challenge of retaining and attracting a new, younger, and educated workforce, they are starting to realize such a workforce doesn’t want to live, work, and shop where they grew up – in their parents’ suburbs. They desire an urban experience dense with places to live and things to do close to where they work. That’s why our youngest and brightest so often move away from here once educated. Now the sprawl that was spawned in the ’70s is starting to impact the bigger companies’ bottom lines – their current workforces are retiring and they need thousands of new employees. The result is a pendulum that is starting to swing back to urban renewal and a celebration of our urban cores culturally, historically, and geographically.

So why do we need consultants such as Vandewalle & Associates to convince us of this? Last week’s DavenportOne A.M. breakfast event was sold out and was attended by dozens of the key Quad Cities decision-makers, including area corporate CEOs and city officials. This was Brian Vandewalle’s first public appearance on behalf of DavenportOne, and he briefed the crowd on his firm’s vision for downtown Davenport, advocating the possibilities of an ag-tech venture-capital center, among other things. If anything, such an attendance indicates our community is poised for the successful private/public partnerships needed for our downtown’s rebirth – it could be right time, right place. Perhaps one longtime downtown player on the inside of DavenportOne summed it up best. “If it takes DavenportOne paying Vandewalle tens of thousands of dollars to hold our local developers’ hands so they will invest some of their own money in downtown, then so be it!” Ahh, the power of “the expert from afar.”