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Students, staff at Morris help to revitalize Hoffman downtown

Summary: A year ago, the town of Hoffman, Minnesota, looked like a typical small remote town across Minnesota and the United States. Morris campus students have been working with Muriel Krusemark, who heads the Hoffman Economic Development Association, to revitalize the economy in downtown Hoffman.

(January 9, 2009)-A year ago, the town of Hoffman, Minnesota, looked like a typical small remote town across Minnesota and the United States. The combination of consolidated school districts, railroads closing and a pattern of young people moving to larger cities had caused the economic infrastructure to gradually stagnate. What was once an active downtown, ripe with small businesses and consumers, had become fairly languid, as resources had slowly declined.

University of Minnesota, Morris senior Jeff Wencil has been working with Muriel Krusemark, who heads the Hoffman Economic Development Association (HEDA), to revitalize the economy in downtown Hoffman.

According to Wencil, much of Hoffman's economic instability began with the consolidation of school districts, which, over 15 years ago, left Hoffman without its own school. This caused many people to lose their jobs and depressed the attraction of businesses and as well as prospective residents. Without these critical incentives, young people have largely ceased from living in Hoffman, as well as many other small towns across Minnesota. The consequences are that residents commute to neighboring cities, such as Morris and Alexandria, for jobs and even for basic needs such as medical care.

Prior to making any tangible changes, Wencil created surveys with the intent of identifying what it was that residents felt they needed most. The goal was to improve the economy through means that also bring about improvements at a societal level. It was discovered that the residents were most inclined toward improvements in the arena of health care, and more specifically, a local health care center. The outcome of local availability of these services would help not only those already residing in Hoffman, but also translate into incentives for prospective residents and generate more jobs.

With the goal in mind, the next step involved researching and applying for grants, one of which was received from Prime West for a health care mall.

Another primary focus of Wencil's work involved securing a \$5,000 matching grant from the Minnesota Twins to renovate a local baseball field in Hoffman. Completed last summer, the field provides additional recreational attractions for youth within Hoffman, as well as incentives for families to live there.

Since the start of the HEDA initiatives, significant progress can already be seen and felt in downtown Hoffman—the streets are vibrant again and once-vacant buildings and sidewalks are being used. The health care center is expected to be fully functioning in the very near future and this fall marked the grand opening of The Main Street Galleria, a small business incubator in which current UMM employees, as well as UMM retirees rent retail space. The Galleria houses 23 small businesses.

The story doesn't end here. Morris campus students Sheila Nezhad and Marcus Grubbs continue to work with Krusemark where Wencil left off.

"The students are wonderful," shared Krusemark. "I know we wouldn't have accomplished half of what we did without their help."

Photo: Amy Swenson, Hoffman, helps a young customer purchase a gift basket. Swenson's business, called gif-tastic!, sells an array of gift baskets.

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