

A REMARKABLE COMEBACK

LANESBORO, MINNESOTA



SITUATION

Lanesboro, sometimes called the “Magical Hamlet,” is a thriving southeastern Minnesota community that has become a destination for hundreds of thousands of visitors. It’s an old town by Midwestern standards, settled in 1856. But its redo as a tourist draw dates only to the 1970s and owes much to the wisdom of converting an abandoned rail line into a bicycle trail. But more about that later.

The town is nestled into the Root River Valley and surrounded by idyllic rolling countryside and rocky bluffs. It had been a busy milling community in the 1870s, when most of the downtown commercial district that remains today was built. A century later, most of the historic buildings were in disrepair, storefronts were boarded up and an old theater stood dark. To make matters worse, the Milwaukee Road, which had closed its line through town, sold its 1870 depot. The new owner tore it down.

That was the spark that energized the town. A citizens group used the depot’s destruction as a catalyst for cultural and commercial

revitalization. Members formed a task force, knocked on doors, held town meetings. City government, local nonprofit organizations, and private individuals adopted a collaborative plan focusing on the region’s natural beauty, the arts and historic preservation. They vowed that main street would live again.

Around the same time, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) obtained the old railroad right-of-way with plans to convert it to a recreational trail: a 60-mile paved route (Blufflands State Trail), a segment of which would meander along the Root River through picturesque limestone bluffs and the small towns—including Lanesboro.

Lanesboro’s remarkable comeback as a livable rural community can be traced to pairing the town’s natural and cultural assets to accessibility. Today, people arrive by bicycle, canoe and even Nordic ski along the Root River Trail. They arrive at the reconstructed train depot (now the Lanesboro Visitor Center, Minnesota DNR Trail Head Office, a public meeting room and public restrooms). Once in town, it’s an easy walk (or peddle) to the Commonweal Theatre, the Cornucopia Art Center, the local history and natural history museums, farmers market, or dozens of art galleries, restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts. Lanesboro has emerged not only as a tourist spot, but with a diverse economy based on agriculture, manufacturing and the arts.

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GOALS

Providing a range of transportation alternatives was not an initial goal of the main street revitalization effort. Instead, organizers created a collaborative plan that focused on natural resources, the arts and historic preservation. Accessibility by foot, bicycle, canoe, in-line skates and by car to the town's destinations was later embraced as part of a varying ways to experience small-town charm.

SOLUTION

It's doubtful that Lanesboro would have enjoyed so much success without the DNR trail. There's something extra special about ditching your car miles away, then biking, hiking, skiing or canoeing through beautiful countryside to reach a charming village.

Bibliography

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PROGRESS

Today, Lanesboro is thriving. In 1998 the town earned an award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Great American Main Street" for the successful preservation-based revitalization. At that time, the town boasted:

- 50 new businesses.
- 200 percent increased in the number of jobs downtown.
- 20 lodging establishments with 102 rooms.
- In 1985, Downtown Lanesboro was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- In 1996, Lanesboro was designated one of the 100 Best Small Art Towns in America by John Villani.
- In 1998 *Sports Afield Magazine* named Lanesboro one of the "50 Best Outdoor Sports Towns."
- In 2004, *Outside Magazine* called it one of the Best Towns of 2004.

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