



Rock Island

Strategic Development Plan

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VANDEWALLE &
ASSOCIATES INC. 
Shaping places, shaping change

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Introduction and Purpose

What is this economic development framework? In conjunction with their comprehensive plan, the City of Rock Island engaged Vandewalle & Associates to prepare an economic development strategy to identify ways the City could combat local and regional challenges to growth, and best mobilize efforts to improve the quality of life and image.

A critical first step towards the success of any strategy is establishing a vision and framework. The City has experienced success in micro project implementation, but with no prior comprehensive plan or unifying vision, some projects have encountered push back from residents.

Accordingly, in addition to identifying assets and opportunities, this document proposes three bold and vision tracks designed to transform the image and role of Rock Island in the Quad Cities. These visions are audacious, transformative and a natural fit for the City's current environment and future aspirations. They should be used as criteria against which subsequent action items are measured and priorities set; giving guidance and validity to the City's projects.

Planning Process

Recognizing that a vision for the area requires a thorough survey of the existing conditions and stakeholder attitudes, Vandewalle & Associates engaged in a rigorous planning process that included the following steps:

- **Data Collection and Analysis** – This step consisted of collecting and analyzing available demographic and economic information. All existing neighborhood plans and several regional assessments were reviewed for impactful details and insight into past efforts.

- **Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups** – In September, representatives from Vandewalle & Associates spent two days in Rock Island conducting interviews and facilitating the following focus groups:
 - Area young professionals
 - Small business owners and corporate leaders
 - Augustana College, Black Hawk College, and Rock Island High School students
 - Real estate professionals
 - Regional government entities and City staff
- **Community Workshops** – The visioning workshops were well attended with residents participating in the questionnaire and mapping exercises. The questionnaire was used to give attendees the opportunities to provide their input on what they find special or believe could be improved in Rock Island. The mapping exercise then allowed residents to visually depict these observations and contribute additional feedback. These responses were shared with the participants and are provided in Chapter three of the Comprehensive Plan.
- **Planning Commission** – The planning commission served as the steering commission for this process. Vandewalle & Associates engaged with the commissioners throughout the process to overview initial findings, identify goals for the City and interface with City Council.

Economic Development Framework

The Economic Development Framework shown on the next page takes a multistep approach to identifying the City's development opportunities.

Vandewalle & Associates analyzed the City's key assets in order to comprehend the City's current state and potential catalysts to growth. Taking the goals identified for Rock Island's future, existing plans and projects were analyzed for their potential to address market decline and grow the tax base.

Using the goals as a guide and existing efforts as a foundation, three transformative, forward-looking, vision opportunities were strategized. This framework will help the City objectively determine the projects and priorities for moving Rock Island forward.

Key Assets

- **The Rivers:** Access to the Mississippi River and Rock River was highlighted as an attractive and underutilized amenity.
- **Schweibert Park:** The family-friendly park is a favorite destination for many Rock Island residents and a regional draw to the City's waterfront.
- **Diversity:** The array of cultural backgrounds in Rock Island adds to the City's unique vibe.
- **Jumer's Casino:** The casino draws visitors from all over the Midwest and contributes significantly to the tax base.
- **Augustana College:** This highly regarded liberal arts college graduates hundreds of talented Augie's yearly.
- **The District:** As the arts and culture hub of Rock Island, The District is a regional destination in the Quad Cities.
- **Solid Employers:** The Arsenal, Trinity Regional Health System and several other employers provide a stable employment base for the City.
- **Community Heritage:** Rock Island has a long and colorful history that carries a positive image of the City well beyond the Quad Cities region.

- **Transit Connectivity:** Rock Island boasts an inter-modal transportation network composed of highways, rail, barge and public transportation.

Strategic Goals

The assets listed above have played a crucial role in the City's development and will continue to support Rock Island's strategic goals. Strategic goals serve as the lens through which subsequent plans and actions can be identified and assessed for their ability to further the City's growth. The two goals identified for Rock Island are:

1. **Place making – Grow tax base to build a healthy City.** A solid tax base allows cities to cover expenses, provide services and maintain infrastructure. Rock Island has several major employers and established neighborhoods that contribute significantly to the property tax base. Yet, property taxes alone cannot adequately sustain the City's near-term costs or long-term goals. Increasing the revenue generated by sales tax while maintaining a healthy expansion of taxable property would be a step towards creating a thriving, self-sufficient community attractive to both new and existing businesses and residents.
2. **Repositioning – Use bold action to improve market image and reverse decline.** Rock Island has struggled to find a competitive footing in the Quad Cities. With a disproportionately high number of unemployed and impoverished citizens, aging and vacant housing stock, and a poor image throughout the region, Rock Island faces several hurdles in its journey to realizing growth. Such challenging hurdles demand bold action to be overcome and the City Council and staff have demonstrated a tangible commitment to repositioning the community. A multifaceted, transformative approach to future projects, centered on an aggressive vision for the City's future will fuel this commitment, retool existing efforts, leverage assets, and shift the direction of community change while bolstering its image.

The following framework visualizes how to achieve these goals through existing place based investments and bold innovative visions.



Current State

Strategic Goals

Places and Positions

The PLACES listed at top are key areas in the city with assets and activities that can be aligned strategically to grow tax base and build a healthy city. The POSITIONS below are strategic market positions that leverage area assets to improve image and reverse decline.

- Diverse and engaged citizens
- Highly capable economic development partners
- Strong neighborhood identities
- Historic character
- Mostly built out with challenging expansion areas
- Deferred maintenance and replacement of infrastructure
- Need to expand and diversify tax base
- Poor regional image and declining population

Placemaking Goal:

Grow tax base to build a healthy city

Positioning Goal:

Use bold action to improve market image and reverse decline

Area **A**:

MISSISSIPPI RIVERFRONT:
The Quad Cities' premiere urban waterfront

Area **B**:

ROCK RIVER DELTA:
The Region's newest destination and sustainable live/work center

Area **C**:

WEST END EMPLOYMENT:
An inter-modal employment center geared for the 21st Century

Area **D**:

RESIDENTIAL CORE: Rock-solid neighborhood with all of the amenities

Direction **1**:

INTERNATIONAL:
Become the International hub of the Quad Cities

Direction **2**:

RIVERS:
Embrace the Rivers

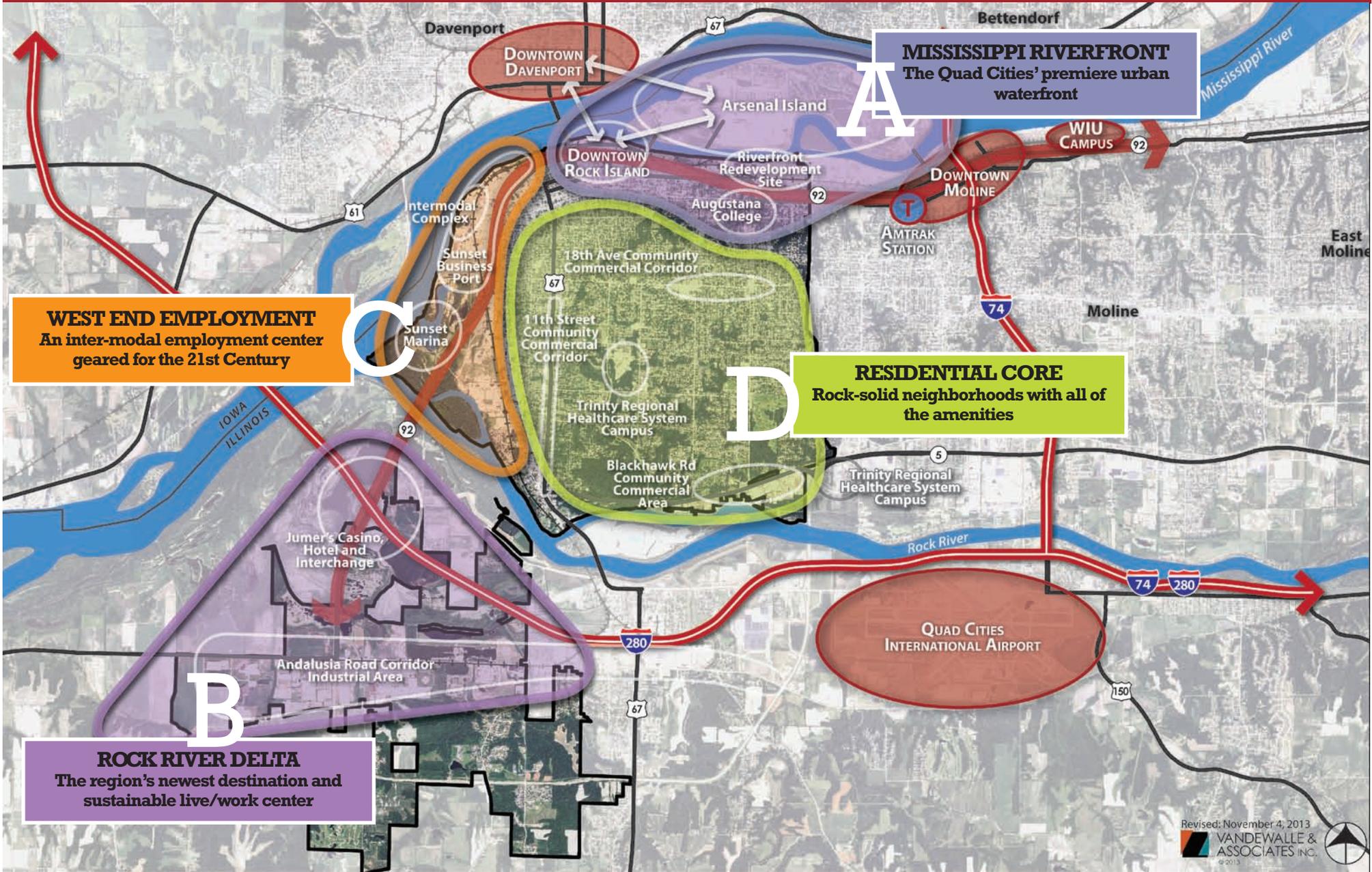
Direction **3**:

CITY:
Celebrate the Best of City Living

PLACES

POSITIONS

Rock Island Economic Development Framework



Rock Island Placemaking Areas

Placemaking Elements: Growing Tax Base to Build a Healthy City

Rock Island has had a successful record of plan and project implementation on a micro level. This attention to detail has created a solid foundation upon which high-impact, tax base increasing projects can be realized in the future. Consolidating existing plans and projects into the areas identified in the Economic Development Focus Areas map provides a comprehensive inventory of past and ongoing efforts. This section aims to help better inform the City as it assesses critical next steps and its ability to further Rock Island's place making goal.

Area A: MISSISSIPPI RIVERFRONT – The Quad Cities' Premiere Urban Waterfront

A



The Rock Island Mississippi Riverfront offers a vibrant, urban mixed-use environment that is the heart and soul of the community and a premier destination in the Quad Cities. Just as it has been from the community's beginning, the Mighty Mississippi is the area's and City's defining feature and a place to gather, celebrate, relax and recreate in the many riverfront parks and along the Great River Trail. The area offers something for everyone as a regional showcase for the arts, culture, food and entertainment, and the downtown is a bustling employment center with a dynamic mix of established corporations and budding entrepreneurs. Residents include young professionals in renovated lofts and new apartments who walk to work or travel short distances with a range of transportation choices to reach Arsenal Island, Augustana College and Downtown Moline and Davenport. They also include empty nesters and retirees, and families who relish vertical living with stunning views of the river and easy access to a variety of goods and services.

Foundation: The City has a number of excellent plans in place to build on the riverfront's historic assets, economic base and outstanding connectivity. Building on these factors will expose the area's full potential, dramatically impacting the tax base. These plans include the Columbia Park, Downtown, River Vision, and Arsenal Gateway Plans in addition to several neighborhood plans that overlap the area as well as Tax Increment Finance Districts and the Enterprise Zone. More important, the City and its strategic economic development partner, Renaissance Rock Island, have demonstrated their abilities to implement these plans through a host of development projects and programs that have resulted in millions of dollars of reinvestment including Schweibert Park, Jackson Square, and The Locks—downtown's newest development. Rock Island should continue to promote areas with high levels of activity and expand out from those rather than diluting efforts by spreading resources thinly across many projects. Key area employers also provide a solid foundation. These employers include Modern Woodman, MetroLink, and the Arsenal in addition to the County governmental center and City Hall. Further, rather than acting as a

barrier, the Mississippi serves to closely tie Rock Island to its surroundings through the Centennial Bridge, Arsenal Bridge, Great River Road (IL 92), and Great River Trail. Promote this connectivity and employment as a Mississippi Riverfront asset.

Area B: ROCK RIVER DELTA – The Region's Newest Destination and Sustainable Live/Work Center

B



The Jumer's Crossing entertainment and retail area coupled with the new housing and clean industries in Southwest Rock Island provide the City with dynamic and thoroughly modern developments that are the envy of the Quad Cities. Jumer's Crossing draws visitors from across the Midwest and serves as a gateway to experience the best the region has to offer in the way of shopping, entertainment and recreation. With direct interstate access and close proximity to the Quad Cities International Airport, the Southwest business parks attract modern industries with minimal impacts on the environment. New residential areas are sensitively nestled in the river valley bluffs with nearby public open spaces, recreational facilities and daily goods and services. Although newer to the community, Jumer's Crossing and Southwest Rock Island reflect the values and neighborhood cohesion that are the hallmarks of life in the City, and the excellent transportation connections and location on the Rock River fully integrate the old and new areas of the City into a singular Rock Island.

Foundation: The City's forward-looking annexations, land acquisitions, and utility and road extensions in the Southwest have already paid great dividends and have positioned the community for future growth and success. The relocation and upgrade of Jumer's into a first-class casino, and its subsequent purchase by a national entertainment and development corporation, have set the table for an adjacent regional retail center. The plans in place for Jumer's Crossing and the Southwest provide the blueprints for future growth and development, which the City and its partners have shown they are more than capable of achieving. Continue to build support for this project as it has tremendous potential for increasing the City's property and sales tax base.

Area C: WEST END EMPLOYMENT – An Inter-modal Employment Center Geared for the 21st Century

Hosting a strong base of manufacturers and transportation companies, the West End Industrial area provides a wide range of skilled labor, technical, and professional employment opportunities. Employees live in all areas of the Quad Cities, but many have found Rock Island's west side neighborhoods like Longview, Old Chicago, and Douglas Park to be an ideal location for their families while providing short commutes by walking, biking or transit. Capitalizing on its unique multimodal and inter-modal assets including highway, rail and barge, the area attracts and grows businesses in key regional clusters of transportation/logistics, metals manufacturing, and advanced manufacturing. Although many companies have enjoyed this outstanding location for decades, most have taken advantage of local, regional and state programs to reinvest in their facilities, address environmental issues, and upgrade to state-of-the-art machinery and equipment. Likewise, several newer businesses have been attracted to the sites assembled and cleaned up by the City. As a result, this hard working yet thoroughly modern commerce center provides a highly attractive gateway to downtown and the rest of the community.

Foundation: The West End Industrial area includes both the Sunset Business Park and the industrial area to the south of it on the other side of the Centennial Parkway. These areas continue to be the home of some of the City's top employers while also providing several opportunities for site assembly and redevelopment. The combination of truck, rail and barge service is unique to the region and should continue to serve as a major draw to the area as businesses seek more efficient means of transport in the face of rising fuel costs. Although parts of the area suffer from blight and a legacy of Brownfields, targeted local, regional and state programs already in place can be used in a persistent fashion over the long term to allow the area to reach its full potential. The City should also work with existing business to consolidate operations and make areas available for new business growth. The Sunset Business Park plan provides an excellent road map. The area saw some new investment prior to the recession; the recent fertilizer barge terminal demonstrates an ability to continue attracting reinvestment to the area, provide employment and increase the tax base. However, visual blight continues to be a problem that not only affects the area but the adjoining neighborhoods as well as the City's image as a whole given that Centennial Parkway is a critical community gateway. Continue to improve the livability of Rock Island's neighborhoods through grants and property improvement programs.



Area D: Residential Core – Rock-Solid Neighborhoods With All of the Amenities

At its core, Rock Island is a city of solid, unique neighborhoods. Whether comprised of stately historic homes, two-flats, mid-century ranches, garden apartments, modern condominiums and apartments, the strong sense of pride and community that permeate all neighborhoods distinguish Rock Island living. Several vibrant neighborhood and community commercial districts are key to this exceptional lifestyle. These and the Trinity Health campus are well integrated with the surrounding residential areas. Along 18th Ave., businesses serve residents' daily needs while specialty shops owned by local entrepreneurs draw customers from the Quad Cities. The close proximity allows residents to walk or bike to shop, get a bite to eat, or meet with friends at a local tavern. Along 11th Street and Blackhawk Road, regional and national franchises serve City residents and nearby communities. Together, these businesses provide a range of full and part time employment opportunities for nearby teens and adults of all abilities.

Foundation: Trinity's \$61 million expansion now underway ensures the long term viability of the facility in this location and may provide new opportunities for nearby complementary development. Watchtower Plaza and Blackhawk Commons at the south end of 11th Street are the long-awaited anchors needed to drive a renewal of this important corridor, and the area plan currently under development will provide the guidance needed to leverage these investments accordingly. The east end of Blackhawk Road also is seeing some renewed interest and has significant redevelopment and infill potential, although progress is likely to be much slower. The 18th Ave. community commercial area continues to have many strong businesses, but a lack of a plan for the area has contributed to a contentious discussion about a major redevelopment project along the corridor. As important as the strength and longevity of these commercial areas are to their surrounding neighborhoods, future improvements and expansions will have to be sensitively planned with extensive input from residents. The City should identify the areas that offer significant infill and redevelopment opportunities that could spark a resurgence of investment and work with the neighbors to strike a balance between protecting neighborhood character and bringing in new, much-needed redevelopment. Conflicts with and between the neighbors will not only thwart specific development proposals but can discourage investment in general and lead to stagnation to the detriment of both the business district and the surrounding residential area. Therefore, building a coalition of project support across the City will be paramount to meeting the objectives of the placemaking goal.



Positioning Elements: Using Bold Action to Improve Market Image and Reverse Decline

Evolving from an inventory of existing assets, plans and efforts are three bold vision opportunities. The City's adoption of clear visions will be paramount to guiding Rock Island through the planning and implementation phases of future development, as well as creating the support needed to ensure smooth plan adoption. The objective of these visions is to reposition the City of Rock Island from one that is in decline to a leader in quality of life in the Quad Cities. They are grand, but rooted in the bedrock of the very real assets and opportunities Rock Island has to offer.

Position 1: INTERNATIONAL – Become the International Economic and Cultural Hub of the Quad Cities

Technological innovations and emerging global markets are driving communities around the world closer together. This increasingly blended marketplace presents new challenges to American communities vying to compete internationally. American businesses in particular understand the risk of losing access to foreign customers because not only do they not speak the language, but they lack an understanding of the culture. In response, multi-national corporations, small businesses, governments and individuals alike are realizing the advantage of multiculturalism in carving out a competitive edge. Tremendous efforts are poured into attracting a culturally diverse, high skilled labor force. More parents are demanding that their children learn a second language and receive a globally competitive education at an early age. Even individuals are amending their preferences to reflect the changing face of America. Six in ten Americans say they would prefer to live in politically, racially, religiously or economically mixed communities. While cities around the nation struggle to address these shifting trends, Rock Island has organically built a comprehensive framework for global competitiveness over the last two decades.

Why It Works for Rock Island: Capitalizing on this asset will be crucial to Rock Island's development as a competitive force in the Quad Cities. Rock Island has close proximity to globally-minded organizations like Deere & Co., Alcoa, Kraft and the Quad Cities International Airport. Rock Island should work to retain these workers attracted to the region's employers and cultivate a labor force cluster of foreign language and culture experts and international business professionals. The City is home to Augustana College, which is dedicated to producing world leaders through their many language programs and International Business program. Over 20 different languages are spoken in local schools, reflecting the cultural fusion that is taking place not only in the Quad

Cities, but the world. Embrace the multicultural student body. Integrate diverse language and cultural teachings into the curriculum, thus becoming the ideal school system for parents interested in providing their kids with a global education. Arsenal Island is a critical asset to the region as well as to the Department of Defense who, along with the State Department and Homeland Security, rely on a labor force skilled in foreign languages and cultures. Further define Rock Island's unique connection to the Arsenal by helping local industry connect with U.S. defense and other contracts, and assisting defense contractors in tapping local talent. Tight-knit neighborhoods with distinct character, and the many other uniquely Rock Island assets are paramount to cultivating a culturally rich, internationally competitive community and ultimately improving the quality of life. Success in becoming the international economic and cultural powerhouse of the Quad Cities hinges upon Rock Island's ability to provide the elements necessary for businesses, organizations and individuals to excel in the international arena. These elements include a diverse, highly-skilled workforce, quality primary and secondary multicultural education opportunities, distinct neighborhoods and a culturally vibrant downtown. As demonstrated, the foundations for many of these elements already exist.



Position 2: RIVERS – Embrace the Rivers

Since the dawn of civilization, city living has been characterized by access to bodies of water. The Quad Cities is no different. All five cities have shores along the fourth longest river system in the world. The region was formed and thrived because of the rivers. The cities, especially Rock Island have a long history of river use for transportation, recreation, power generation and commerce. Today, the Mississippi and Rock Rivers are still tourism draws. The locks and dams on the Mississippi are still operable. The river should be celebrated as fervently today as when the region's first residents observed its shores. Rock Island is the only city in the region with shoreline on three of its sides. The Mississippi flows on the City's north and west side and the Rock River flows along the southern edge. Therefore, the City should become a model for river activation by embracing all of its waterfronts in the way only Rock Island can.

Why it Works for Rock Island: Rock Island residents, businesses and visitors recognize the rivers as one of the most attractive assets in the Quad Cities and have made great use of the waterfront assets. The City's Schweibert Park is a major waterfront destination with sculptures, observation shelter, multi-use path and digital playground that provide fun for the whole family. A transient boat dock is currently under construction and the Rock River trail initiative is working to create a water, bike and auto trail network from the Rock River's headwaters to its confluence with the Mississippi. The City can realize the full potential of these efforts by encouraging more festivals, events and recreation to make use of the rivers. By fostering a boardwalk atmosphere along the Mississippi and Rock Rivers, Rock Island can attract restaurants, and commercial and residential developers to reinvest in the City's shores. Sunset Marina is open to the public and provides a boat launch and docking space for boat enthusiasts throughout the Quad Cities. With space to accommodate 473 boats, this marina is the only one of its kind at this junction of the river. The Great River Trail takes users on a breathtaking trip along the Mississippi River. This 60 mile long path crosses three counties, coming to rest in Rock Island's Sunset Park. The City should strengthen visual, pedestrian/bicycle, and economic connections between the river and adjoining activity areas (such as the District, Downtown and Augustana).



Position 3: CITY – Celebrate the Best of City Living

The perception of city living is experiencing a nationwide shift. More and more Americans are choosing to live in the city and enjoy the conveniences of a metropolitan lifestyle. These city dwellers are often young professionals looking for affordable rental housing or empty-nesters ready to downsize. They are entering the market with more of an eye on the diversity and vibrancy of the environment and place less weight on other variables like primary education offerings. Of all the cities in the Quad Cities, Rock Island is in the best position to offer the best of city living to this growing demographic.

Why it Works for Rock Island: Rock Island is laid out on a street grid, serviced by an award-winning transit system and boasts a downtown and several other commercial corridors. The City has the highest walk score in the Quad Cities, several historic neighborhoods, and homes give the City a distinctly metropolitan vibe. The Illinois retirement benefits are much more attractive than Iowa's which could attract retirees to the Illinois side of the river. Several colleges and institutions in the area graduate hundreds of educated professionals to the workforce every year. Rock Island offers an abundance of opportunities for these graduates to live and work in Rock Island. By embracing and bolstering the City's predisposition to quality city living, Rock Island will encourage residents with a preference for urban life and amenities to live, work, and play in the community. Additionally, Rock Island's current residents harbor a wealth of community pride and neighborhood appreciation. With each neighborhood offering visitors a different experience, Rock Island provides a unique range of living options; an offering which many cities in the Quad Cities lack. The City should further develop the unique character of its neighborhoods by encouraging residents to self-define their communities. It should also promote arts and culture events that correspond with these City-defining efforts and create a destination that will showcase the new Rock Island.



Strategic Initiatives

