



# Rock Island

## Strategic Development Plan

April 21, 2014

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## Introduction and Purpose

**What is this strategic development plan?** 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 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 community requires a thorough survey of existing conditions and stakeholder perspectives, 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 and corridor plans and several regional assessments were reviewed for impactful details and insights into past efforts and future goals.

- **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
  - Students from Augustana College, Black Hawk College, and Rock Island High School
  - Real estate development and finance professionals
  - Local and regional government and economic development entities and Rock Island city staff
- **Community Workshops** – The visioning workshops were well attended with residents participating in questionnaire and mapping exercises. A questionnaire was used to give attendees an opportunity to provide input on what they find special or believe could be improved in Rock Island. The mapping exercise allowed residents to visually depict these observations and contribute additional feedback. These responses were then shared with the participants and are provided in Chapter Three of the Comprehensive Plan.
- **Planning Commission** – The Planning Commission served as the steering committee for this process. Vandewalle & Associates engaged with the Commissioners throughout the process to overview initial findings and identify goals for the City before interfacing with the 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 economic assets in order to comprehend the current state and potential catalysts to growth. Goals were then identified for Rock Island's future and existing plans and projects were analyzed for their potential to combat market decline and grow the tax base.

Using the goals as a guide and existing efforts as a foundation, three transformative, forward-looking vision directions 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 and Rock Rivers is both an attractive and underutilized amenity.
- **Schiebert Park:** The family-friendly park is a favorite destination for many Rock Island residents and a regional draw to the City's Mississippi 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 attracts students from across the Midwest and country and graduates hundreds of talented Augies yearly—many of whom take up permanent residence in the Quad Cities.
- **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, Modern Woodmen 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 in addition to regional bike trails.

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

PLACES

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

- 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

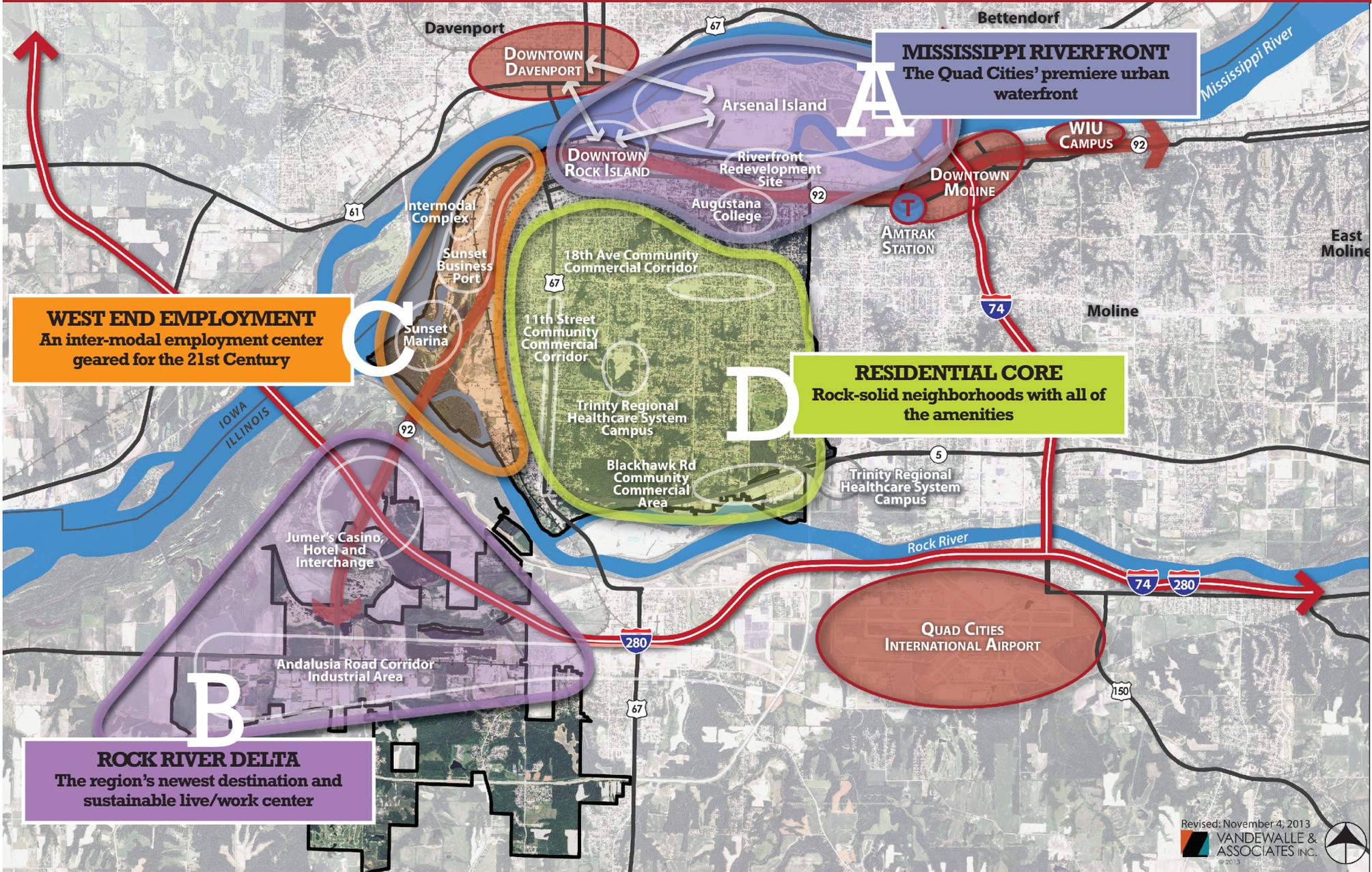
Direction **1**: INTERNATIONAL: Become the International hub of the Quad Cities

Direction **2**: RIVERS: Embrace the Rivers

Direction **3**: CITY: Celebrate the Best of City Living

POSITIONS

**Rock Island Economic Development Framework**



# Rock Island Placemaking Areas

## Placemaking Goal: 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 Placemaking Areas map provides a comprehensive inventory of past and ongoing efforts. The following describe a **future vision** (20+ years) for each of the areas and the existing foundations upon which these visions can be built.

### 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 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 adjoining 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, 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 Schwiebert 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 including Modern Woodmen, 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. Further, 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 these projects as they have 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 on the east 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 new investment prior to the recession and 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 the West End 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 permeating 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 and 14th Avenues, businesses serve residents' daily needs while specialty shops owned by local entrepreneurs draw customers from throughout 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 Goal: Using Bold Action to Improve Market Image and Reverse Decline

Evolving from an inventory of existing assets, plans and efforts are three bold vision directions. 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 vision directions 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.

## Direction 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 they 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, highly skilled labor force. More parents are demanding that their children learn a second language and receive a globally competitive education starting at an early age. Even individuals are amending their preferences to reflect the changing face of America. Six in ten Americans now 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, The Arsenal, and the Quad Cities International Airport. Rock Island should work to retain the diverse workforce 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 unique 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.



## Direction 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 major 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 enable \$20 billion in commodities to move along the upper Mississippi River system. The rivers should be celebrated as fervently today as when the region's first residents walked their shores. Rock Island is the only city in the region with shorefront on three of its sides. The Mississippi flows on the City's north and west sides 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. The City's Schwiebert 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 in Wisconsin to its confluence with the Mississippi. The City can realize the full potential of these efforts by encouraging more festivals, events and recreation facilities 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).



## Direction 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 large homes and lots. Of all the communities in the Quad Cities, Rock Island is positioned 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 that give the City a distinctly metropolitan vibe. Illinois retirement taxes are much more attractive than Iowa's, which attracts retirees to this 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 the City. By embracing and bolstering the community'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 communities in the Quad Cities lack. The City should further develop the unique character of its neighborhoods by encouraging residents to self-define them. 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.



## Rock Island Strategic Initiatives

The following Strategic Initiatives track with the three vision directions described in the previous section of this plan, and, given their broad nature, many of them also address the previously described Placemaking goal and area visions.

By design, most of these Initiatives involve strengthening existing partnerships and creating new ones. Although the City will play a lead role in implementing many of these, there are very few the City can accomplish by itself. The City is fortunate to already have many economic development partners, and it will need to continue to draw heavily upon these to accomplish the goals and achieve the visions.

Several of the Initiatives align directly with ongoing efforts while others are completely new. All are designed as long-term efforts so the City and its partners will need to prioritize and sequence them appropriately for maximum efficiencies and effectiveness. As with most efforts of this nature, starting with some small steps and beginning long-term conversations are often the best ways to build momentum and support.

Critical to the success of all of these Initiatives is a need to share the goals and visions outlined in this plan. Over the last several years the City and its partners have completed several important projects and are well on their way with others. While the community at-large has been receptive and appreciative of most of these, there remains a general lack of a shared vision throughout the community. Accordingly, the City needs to undertake a proactive and sustained effort to build awareness and support for the goals and visions articulated in this plan and then to make direct connections between all major projects and the goal and visions. Too often, critically important projects have been evaluated and debated in isolation of their larger purposes. While complete agreement on every project is not realistic, the tone and tenor of debate will be dramatically improved when the discussion starts with a common understanding of and agreement on larger goals.

## INTERNATIONAL – Become the International and Economic Hub of the Quad Cities

Establishing Rock Island as the Quad Cities' global hub of culture and commerce requires a multifaceted approach to economic growth, business

development and cultural enrichment that capitalizes on the City's existing strengths and unique demographic composition. By identifying project champions, working with the Rock Island School District, rebranding The District as an ethnic foods, arts and entertainment destination, establishing a multicultural center, and creating an international business development center, Rock Island is in a position to propel the City and the region to the leading edge of the global economy.

**1.1. Establish an Ongoing Global Economic Forum.** The International positioning goal's main strength lies in its ability to jump start Rock Island's economic engine with a bold vision that is of global relevance and primacy. Realizing a vision of this potency requires the knowledge, support and dedication of employers invested in the City and engaged in international business and education. Given the multifaceted nature of how the global economy impacts everything from education to entertainment, this effort should begin by establishing a Global Economic Forum consisting of key representatives from area multinational corporations, local schools and institutions of higher education, government at all levels, nonprofits, and immigrant communities. The Forum participants would continue to meet in semi-annual or annual meetings to discuss and provide direction on a wide variety of topics, each of which would then be led by a committee assembled specifically to address the matter at hand. The primary purposes of the Forum would include:

- Serving as a brain trust with intimate knowledge of the global issues confronting the local and regional market and business environment



- Serving as a liaison to local school districts and higher education institutions to identify roles the private sector can play to bolster international learning opportunities
- Serving as a liaison to minority and immigrant communities to identify initiatives that would make Rock Island and the region more welcoming to other cultures
- Further defining and shaping the vision of the "Quad Cities' Global Hub"
- Identifying projects to further the Hub's development
- Aligning opportunities with the community's organizational capacity

**I.2. Establish an International Business Development Center.** Rock Island and the Quad Cities are home to many globally-minded corporations, organizations and entrepreneurs. Establish Rock Island as the Quad Cities' global commerce hub by identifying and addressing the unique needs of these stakeholders. Create an International Business Development Center dedicated to making Rock Island the premier regional destination for businesses engaged in international commerce. This center would:

- Serve as international business development advisors
- Recruit and retain international businesses and domestic businesses working internationally
- Connect area small businesses with larger, multinational corporations
- Provide technical resources to small, mid-sized and large businesses looking to expand into international markets
- Offer a network and forum for collaboration between businesses and organizations
- Aid businesses in contract acquisition
- Connect with CEOs to identify and address their challenges in operating abroad
- Use proximity and knowledge of the global marketplace to identify opportunities for international business cluster development

**I.3. Establish the Rock Island/Milan School District as the Region's Premier Global Education Provider.** The Rock Island/Milan School District (RISD) is backed by dedicated leadership, proud alumni and pleased parents eager to combat the challenges threatening the system's reputation. Enhance RISD's already strong programs in math and science and leverage the impact of the influx of students from across the globe by establishing RISD as a destination for specializing in global studies. Interest in providing children with a global education is only growing. With an increasingly integrated student body that is more reflective of the world than other area school systems, RISD has the opportunity to provide students with a uniquely relevant and multicultural education; exposing all students to the diversity at home and abroad. Programs to expand international curriculum could include:

- Building on the array of languages spoken by immigrant students by offering a greater variety of language learning opportunities for English-speakers from elementary through high school, thus facilitating educational exchange that cultivates English learning as well
- Creating programs that allow students to take core curriculum in their primary and secondary language of choice
- Creating language tables and clubs that connect students with similar linguistic interests through informal and interactive conversation and fellowship
- Teaching humanities and sciences within a greater global context
- Branding RISD as the destination for families interested in providing students with the exposure and competitive edge necessary to excel today and tomorrow
- Developing strong programs to position the high school to serve as a feeder school to the best international college programs
- Overcoming cultural barriers by providing forums through which students of different backgrounds can learn and play together
- Investigating participation in the International Baccalaureate Program

#### **I.4. Rebrand The District as a Cultural and Ethnic Foods, Arts and Entertainment**

**Destination.** Over the last two decades, The District has achieved great success in reinvigorating downtown Rock Island and attracting residents from throughout the region to its many restaurants, shops and night clubs. As is common with most entertainment destinations, changing demographics and consumer habits require continual updating of the offerings and brand identification. Currently, The District is in need of being refreshed to appeal to a wider range of customers/visitors, particularly professionals between 30 and 50 years of age and families through a greater variety of retail, eating, arts and entertainment venues. Incorporating an international focus would serve as an excellent foundation for rebranding The District and expanding its offerings. This could include:

- Attracting additional ethnic restaurants providing an array of cuisines and dining experiences
- Attracting artists and galleries providing paintings, sculptures, literature and similar offerings from cultures across the globe
- Providing venues and festivals that feature ethnic music, dance, poetry, and theater performances
- Encouraging and assisting with business development and entrepreneurship within the often resource-challenged minority, ethnic and immigrant communities
- Improving the physical appearance of The District by celebrating the religious, ethnic and cultural diversity of Rock Island with ethnic flags, banners, public art installations and festivals
- Working with others to establish the recommended Cultural Center is as an anchor for The District

**I.5. Develop a Multicultural Center.** Improving the quality of life of all Rock Island families will create a diverse environment for living, working and playing that is valued by most American families. Here again, Rock Island is positioned to provide a highly desirable experience to residents and visitors, but only by first embracing the differences that too often divide neighbors before they get an opportunity to truly know one another. Creating a Multicultural Center would help break down these barriers by serving to educate all residents about local ethnic and international cultures, and providing a venue to share culture and experiences through discussions, literature, art and entertainment.

It would also serve as place to help immigrants understand American and local culture and customs to help ease their transition to their new society. Initiatives and programs of the Multicultural Center could include:

- Serving as a cultivator of cultural education and exchange, learning, fellowship and mediation
- Becoming a welcoming safe space for new residents drawn to the City by work, military assignment, educational pursuits or displacement
- Providing a forum for artistic expression and celebration (i.e. fine arts and performance arts or religious and cultural holidays)
- Providing after-school assistance and extra curricular activities for all Rock Island students
- Serving as a resource center for understanding other cultures to help employers, local governments and institutions improve their relationships with and services to minority and ethnic communities and to attract and retain a diverse workforce

#### **RIVERS – Embrace the Rivers**

Rock Island is essentially a peninsula, yet the rivers remain an underutilized resource for improving quality of life, increasing the tax base and catalyzing additional economic activity. Both the Mississippi and

Rock continue to be “working rivers” by providing the power and transportation facilities that first attracted settlers to the area nearly 200 hundred years ago. However, as the economy and society has changed, the rivers now also play vital roles in the appearance of the community and its recreational offerings. Just as the construction of the dike system minimized the negative impacts of the rivers, there are several additional improvements that can be made to increase the positive impacts of the rivers throughout the community.



**R.1. Activate the Mississippi Riverfront.** The construction of Schwiebert Park is just the latest of several important riverfront improvements that also include the Great River Trail, Sunset Park and Marina, and Sylvan Slough Natural Area. However, there are additional opportunities to provide even greater access to the river and to further capitalize on these existing assets to drive additional economic development and activity. In particular, there needs to be additional opportunities to allow residents and visitors to actually get out on the water and not just look at it from the shore. Improvements and programs for activating the Mississippi could include:

- Capitalizing on views of Schwiebert Park and the river by developing a business-class or boutique hotel on Parking Lot C that could accommodate visitors to Augustana and Arsenal contractors and serve as overflow for events at the iWireless Center in Moline and the Rivercenter in Davenport
- Creating a kayak course and/or canoe/kayak launch and park along the Sylvan Slough
- Attracting a canoe/kayak outfitter to provide guided tours of the Mississippi
- Attracting a cigar boat tour operator
- Attracting a “working river” excursion tour operator that would provide tours of the area lock and dam system and barge terminals and explain the economic importance of the Mississippi in transporting commodities
- Attracting charter fishing guides to operate out Sunset Marina or Schwiebert Park
- Hosting fishing tournaments
- Working with Davenport and MetroLink to re-establish the water taxi in the lower pool
- Developing additional north-south bike trails that connect with the Great River Trail, particularly through the downtown and The District

**R.2. Activate the Rock Riverfront.** Throughout the Quad Cities, the Rock River is often viewed as the poor step-sister to the Mississippi and receives much less attention. However, it provides a unique experience of its own and plenty of additional recreational and economic development possibilities. These could include:

- Attracting a canoe/kayak concession and outfitter within or adjacent to the Black Hawk State Historic Site

- Promoting the Backwater Gamblers and developing additional facilities to attract recreational water skiers and pleasure boaters
- Evaluating the feasibility of a river connection to the west side of the Jumer’s Crossing area and providing docking and water taxi service to it
- Encouraging additional commercial development along the east end of Black Hawk Road with views and/or direct access to the river
- Further developing the Rock River Trail Initiative

**R.3. Continue Promotion and Development of the Barge Terminal.** The City recently provided assistance to upgrade the barge terminal in the Sunset Business Park for a fertilizer storage and distribution operation. The barge terminal has unused existing capacity and additional expansion potential. Further, other land and facilities are available, yet utilized, just to the south that also could accommodate additional barge traffic. With the presence of rail and excellent highway access, the Sunset Business Park should be marketed as a multimodal hub. The Sunset Business Park plan provides several excellent recommendations for redeveloping the area, which should continue to drive efforts by the City and its partners. Specific actions for attracting barge traffic include:

- Working with the Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce to develop and distribute specific marketing materials for the barge terminal and Sunset Business Park
- Working with existing property owners in the business park to consolidate facilities and operations where possible and to open additional lands for new businesses
- Obtaining additional Brownfield grants to investigate properties for potential contamination and develop remediation plans that can be executed as part of redevelopment projects
- Meeting with existing barge users to discuss possibilities for additional growth and identify other potential users
- Working with the railroad and property owners to reconfigure spurs for greater efficiencies and increase the use of multimodal facilities
- Working with Tri City Black Top to make some of their land available for additional development of multimodal transportation and logistics businesses

## CITY – Celebrate the Best of City Living

One of Rock Island's primary strengths is its neighborhoods and the strong sense of community embodied by each of them. Across the board, most residents of the City feel a deep sense of connection to their neighbors and



neighborhood and would not want to live anywhere else; yet this passion and the amenities offered within the Rock Island's neighborhoods remain misunderstood and greatly underappreciated throughout the rest of the region. Fortunately, national and local demographic trends highly favor a return to "traditional" city neighborhoods that have unique characters, including near-by shopping and services, strong institutional anchors like schools and churches, and several transportation options including walking, biking and public transit. The diversity of Rock Island's neighborhoods in both the people who live in them and the housing types positions the City extremely well to meet these demands and, in the process, change the image of the community and strengthen the tax base.

### **C.1. Partner with the Rock Island/Milan School District to Improve its Image and Programming.**

One the most significant obstacles to overcome in attracting new residents is improving the image and performance of the School District. While the number of households without school-age children is growing, families are the life-blood of any community and the quality (or perceived quality) of the local school district is one of, if not the, primary factor in where families with children choose to live. As a result, the fate and future of the City and the School District are tied together. Programs and projects to engage with the School District could include:

- Creating a standing committee of private sector, City and school representatives to improve the understanding of the many issues faced by the School District (financial and otherwise) and develop programs to build partnerships to help overcome them

- Working with the School District to develop and implement a promotional campaign for its already outstanding programs in math and science
- Working with the School District to increase its technical and career training offerings and establish internship programs with local employers

### **C.2. Partner with Augustana to Leverage its Many Assets and Ensure its Long Term Success and Viability.**

Highly regarded institutions of higher education like Augustana College, if integrated with the surrounding community, can contribute to the town's economic and social health in a way that bolsters a city's appeal and quality of life. Augustana is ranked in the top 100 of National Liberal Arts Colleges and offers more than 40 undergraduate degrees and eight professional degrees. These benefits are shared with the public who have access to lectures by visiting scholars, galleries and museum exhibits, performance arts productions, and sporting events. Augustana produces and attracts thousands of highly educated students, faculty and academics to Rock Island annually, many of whom stay in the area after leaving Augustana. Programs to leverage this asset to grow a mutually beneficial relationship between Augustana and the City to ensure that both thrive well into the future could include:

- Bolster the international program and other disciplines to produce graduates ready to enter the global marketplace with an internationally relevant, highly demanded, and diverse skill set; equally valued by Rock Island's local multinational corporations and organizations
- Institute periodic "Tavern Talk" series where visiting lecturers and dignitaries can present their work or research in an informal setting off campus
- Further expose and define Augustana's arts, sports and entertainment offerings as Quad Cities destinations
- Encourage students to pursue community-focused projects and get involved in local organizations and community development initiatives
- Provide live-work incentives for Augustana faculty and staff
- Connect Rock Island businesses' and organizations' research needs with the appropriate Augustana student and faculty researchers

- Connect students with local internships opportunities and encourage other entities to offer or expand internship offerings
- Provide merit and need based scholarships for local high school students to attend Augustana College
- Promote neighborhood stabilization by working with the College to improve the campus and adjacent communities

**C.3. Identify Downtown Catalytic Projects and Build on Them.** A thriving, vibrant Downtown is a hallmark of many great American cities as they often serve as economic engines powering the city and region with diverse employment and entertainment opportunities. Rock Island has a historic and traditional city grid layout, the highest walkability in the Quad Cities and offers an array of amenities valued by potential residents seeking a more metropolitan lifestyle. Leverage this competitive advantage throughout Rock Island and particularly in the Downtown by identifying projects and opportunities and cultivating them into transformative initiatives. Some catalytic projects could include:

- Providing the housing demanded by young professionals, retirees and families seeking vertical living and Downtown river views
- Investigating the potential for a boutique hotel
- Instituting a Façade improvement program to assist downtown businesses and home owners improve and maintain the aesthetic quality of their properties
- Establishing a framework to guide the transition between commercial and residential zones now and in the future
- Further researching the connection of 17th and 15th streets at 7th Avenue as a primary corridor through the community

**C.4. Continue to Promote Sustainable Development in Southwest Rock Island.** Rock Island employed cutting edge sustainability measures in the development of the Southwest Business Park. From energy saving light bulbs to green building materials and permeable paving, Southwest Rock Island provides ideal location for triple bottom line companies and the growing green industry. The Southwest Business Park is set to create jobs and millions of dollars in revenue for the City. Continue to promote the economic

diversity of the region by establishing the Southwest Business Park as a green industry cultivator serving the region. Additional initiatives could include:

- Expanding incentives offered to green businesses and other business park tenants applying energy saving building designs with low environmental impact
- Continuing the campaign to market the business park and cultivating business development in Rock Island and championing the growth of the emerging green economy in the region
- Working with local and regional realtors to promote the business park
- Achieving shovel-ready certification and work with economic development partners to market availability
- Managing an in-house ore regional, user-friendly database of available sites to ease the property search process for businesses
- Working closely with existing businesses interested in expanding operations by identifying the optimal Southwest Business Park space

**C.5. Create a Regional Destination at Jumer's Crossing.** Jumer's Crossing is a proposed retail and multi-family development area located near Jumer's Casino, the Southwest Business Park and Interstate 280. In addition to offering annual returns to the City and being easily integrated into the existing land uses, Jumer's Crossing would attract its own visitor spending, provide the City with new and modern housing options, and be easily integrated with the Casino to provide visitors with a first-class Rock Island experience. Realizing the vision of Jumer's Crossing as a regional retail and modern residential destination could include:

- Sharing the potential benefits of Jumer's Crossings with various stakeholders in order to build additional support for the project
- Working closely with Jumer's Casino to integrate the retail center with the Casino's existing and successful model

