



Best Practices Trip to Milwaukee, Wisconsin October 4-6, 2023

Frequently heard comment:

Milwaukee “has its swagger on.” It’s time Portland got its swagger on, too.

Milwaukee, after many years of de-industrialization, population loss, and civic problems seems to be coming back.

Key Takeaways

- Downtown Revitalization is Critical.
- Building Civic Pride, a must.
- The Form of Government can be powerful.
- Corporate Commitment to Milwaukee a foundation.

Downtown Revitalization: The power of the central city to the entire region’s vitality.

Milwaukee’s downtown has benefited from investment in bold projects, clean-up, and renovation. Since the Milwaukee Downtown Area Plan was adopted in 2010, \$4.5 billion has been invested in public and private projects. More than \$3.1 billion additional investment is underway or planned.

Current projects include development of the Deer District (ongoing); lights on the Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge (ongoing); and plans related to the overall urban plan, “Connecting Milwaukee: Downtown Plan 2040.”

The downtown ends at the shore of Lake Michigan, and efforts have been made to make the most of the long stretch of lakefront. The signature Quadracci Pavilion of the Milwaukee Art Museum, designed by Santiago Calatrava, was completed in 2001. The outdoor concert venue housing Summerfest, the music festival was first held in 1968, has grown into a multi-stage concert location for not only the long-running music celebration but also for celebrations by other ethnic and cultural groups.

Large companies (e.g. Milwaukee Tool, etc.) are moving operations, including headquarters (e.g. Fiserv), into the city.

The Historic Third Ward, where most trip participants stayed in the Kimpton Journeyman Hotel, was historically a warehouse district. Today it is a “mixed-use district,” home to hundreds of businesses, specialty shops, restaurants, art galleries, and condominiums.

“Overall, our economy is strong with an unemployment rate in Milwaukee County running around three percent. That’s better than the national rate. However, we cannot ignore the clear disparities in economic health that exist within our city.,” said Mayor Cavalier Johnson during his June 2023 State of the City address.

In July 2023, the city of Milwaukee and the surrounding Milwaukee County each approved local sales tax increases—helping both the city and county avoid drastic cuts to essential services and possible bankruptcy. Approval for the local sales taxes emerged from a successful effort to win bipartisan approval from the Republican-controlled legislature and Democratic governor.

Strong leadership has helped make some projects succeed, according to Omar Shaikh, co-owner of a food court that is revitalizing a once-neglected area of downtown.

The improvements in downtown cleanup and investment, as well as in tourism and entertainment facilities has boosted tourism to Milwaukee. Convention business also is picking up. The Republican National Convention is scheduled to convene in Milwaukee in 2024.

Participant Reflections:

A question for us: can corporate Portland become more involved in community revitalization, renewal, and innovation? The task force to address Portland's downtown problems, organized by the governor (Gov. Tina Kotek's Portland Central City Task Force), and the work of the Portland Metro Chamber (PBA) and other corporate groups, are directly focused on aligning with evolving efforts to revitalize (and hopefully, reimagine) Portland.

Steve Percy from Portland State University.

Portland is often its own worst enemy when it comes to growth and development. Yes, growth has to be managed strategically and intentionally but not to the point where growth stalls, the population declines, and Portland loses its appeal. It is up to civic and government leaders to embrace thoughtful growth and drive change in public opinion about what the state's largest urban center needs to be viable and compare favorably against our peers.

Amanda Lowthian from Travel Portland

While standing atop Northwestern Mutual's tower and admiring the investment they'd made (and continue to make) in downtown Milwaukee, it reminded me of how important it is to have strong business support in your city's core... we could use more of that... more large HQ's downtown with the monetary and political capital to promote safety and vibrancy in our core.

Eddie La Berge from Hoffman Corp

Building Civic Pride: Civic projects use electrical lighting to highlight bridges and art.

Building civic pride started with bold vision, imaginative thinking, and collaboration, tapping into youthful ideas and energy.

The Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge, Milwaukee's largest and most visible bridge, lies across the mouth of the Milwaukee River estuary where the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnikinnic Rivers empty into Lake Michigan. Light the Hoan (“a collective of local business and civic leaders who have joined forces to illuminate the Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge.”) has been outlined on the western side of the bridge with colored lights: many lightbulbs affixed to the bridge frame, which blink on and off and change colors, according to Light the Hoan programming.

Lights can be programmed to any music – and even have been programmed by local school students.

Light the Hoan, a non-profit, is entirely funded by philanthropic dollars and earned revenue.

The bridge lights have become a visible symbol of Milwaukee and revenue in excess of expenses is produced by allowing organizations and private parties to have the bridge programmed to light up the sky with their cause. Think Wisconsin Badgers on homecoming night or gender reveals.

Participant Reflections:

We should make a huge gesture that enhances civic pride via art and placemaking. Milwaukee looks at Chicago to see how well this works (the Bean and Millennium Park), but there isn't precedent on the West Coast at the same scale, and we (Portland) should lead that charge.

Alisha Sullivan from Willamette Light Brigade I Portland Winter Light Festival

We need to be bold and creative. Milwaukee is searching for ways to invest in their community and be proud. Too long we Portlanders have thought better of ourselves than we maybe deserved. We rested on legacy as our feather in the cap and stopped striving for improvement and community building through thoughtful investment in quality-of-life projects and community enhancement projects that don't necessarily return huge financial dividends.

Erik Lawrence from TenBridge Partners

Form of Government: A taste of city government under Portland's new charter

Milwaukee's city government is similar to (but not exactly like) what Portland's city government will look like after the new city charter is fully in place.

- Milwaukee. has a "strong major" system of government,
- The mayor is elected citywide and serves as the city's chief executive.
- Milwaukee's lawmaking body is the Common Council, with 15 members (called aldermen and alderwomen), each of whom represents a district.

Forming consensus among such a large group of aldermen/women is not easy, according to current council members, but it helps for individual aldermen to be not only familiar with their own districts but also familiar with other districts as well.

Milwaukee is notorious for the gap between haves and have-nots, and more work is needed to ensure that have-not neighborhoods get their fair share of services.

The city bureaucracy is at times slow to take action, and so individual aldermen/women have been known to go around the mayor to approach portions of city government to demand services.

Participant Reflections:

No questions were asked about concerns with the system, will it (Portland's new charter) actually be an improvement to our current system and how they would change their governing structure to be more effective.

Dan Yates from The Portland Spirit

Corporate Commitment to Milwaukee; A collaborative effort a foundation to pride

It was abundantly clear Milwaukee was very good at collaborating on many of the areas for Key Takeaways. The downtown revitalization, building civic pride, and global positioning were a process of government, business, non-profits, academia, and the general public getting involved and imagining the city they wanted to not only live in, but also be proud of.

By embracing large public private partnership projects, Milwaukee was able to transform their city center core and revitalize the city. Whether it was the continued development of the Summerfest grounds creating a space with broad appeal and diverse use, the Deer District development around the Milwaukee Bucks stadium creating a space used by the public and tourists year-round, The Avenue shopping mall transformed into a public space including business offices and apartments, or the Historic Third Ward being transformed from a dying industrial area to a vibrant, hip, special place to be.

Participants Reflections:

"Throughout our visit, we saw extensive evidence of corporate investment in the community. A question for us: can corporate Portland become more involved in community revitalization, renewal, and innovation?"

Steve Percy from Portland State University

"...it reminded me of how important it is to have strong business support in your city's core... we could use more of that... more large HQ's downtown with the monetary and political capital to promote safety and vibrancy in our core."

Eddie La Berge from Hoffman Corp

"There was something very collaborative in the economic development they are doing for their whole region that we should learn from... Currently, our suburb cities directly compete with Portland and that dynamic needs to shift. I was surprised at how many people I spoke to on the trip who live outside of Portland and Multnomah County."

Alisha Sullivan from Willamette Light Brigade | Portland Winter Light Festival

"Public/private partnerships are critical. Milwaukee is working their way out of morass because they are doing critical investment in their community through well-crafted public/private partnerships. We tend to shy away from business and minimize the role business plays in the success of our community. Remembering we need to foster a close and meaningful relationship with our business community and embrace that community as partners in creating a better Portland is very important."

Erik Lawrence from TenBridge Partners

"Intentionally developing the Deer District as a place people go even if they're not going to a game - whether they're watching the game at one of the outdoor beer gardens or going to a restaurant or shopping in the area, it's vibrant and fun. How can we do that with the Moda Center district? Slabtown is a perfect success story/example."

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For more information about this trip or to participate in future trips, please contact:

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