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## Owatonna, Minnesota Project: Improving Owatonna's Physical Appearance

Owatonna Area Population in 2006: 24,725  
Focus of Survey: Cross Section of Businesses  
BR&E Drivers

- Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism
- Owatonna Economic Development Authority
- Owatonna Public Utilities
- University of Minnesota Extension

### Background

The Owatonna BR&E Program began in March 2003 when a Leadership Team was formed and began planning. Next, a Task Force of 25 people was recruited from a variety of sectors. The Task Force set a goal of surveying 100 firms from all sectors of the Owatonna business community.

Volunteer visitors conducted interviews from late April through May, 2003. Visitors worked in teams of two and took responsibility for arranging and conducting the interviews. Eighty-two percent of the initial 100 firms selected participated in the survey. A backup list was used to generate an additional twenty surveys, bringing the grand total to 102 firms. This is a very strong rate of participation; in fact, it is the greatest number of firm visits accomplished since 1996 for a project affiliated with University of Minnesota BR&E.

The BR&E survey results were tabulated and analyzed by University of Minnesota staff. A summary of the data was analyzed by a State Research Review Panel Meeting in August 2003. At the meeting, a team of thirteen reviewed the results and suggested projects in response to the situation in Owatonna. Review panel members included University faculty, government analysts, Task Force

members, and others. SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) was used to review survey results and to suggest projects that might respond to local firms' needs and concerns.

The survey research was reported at a four-hour Task Force Retreat on September 15, 2003. At this retreat, the Task Force set its priorities for projects. Project teams were set up to address each of the three priority projects.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Project**

At the end of the BR&E Task Force Retreat, a project to help firms become more profitable, survive and grow in the community was selected. The project set a goal to "improve the physical appearance of Owatonna and develop ways to draw visitors, particularly interstate travelers, to the city's other amenities."

The beautification project was a response to clear data from the surveys. The November 2003 BR&E Summary Report noted that "The BR&E survey indicated that businesses felt that the physical appearance of the community was important and that there was merit in the idea of promoting the city's attractions to visitors. Over 83 percent rated beautification of the community as "important" or "very important." Moreover, 75 percent of the firms believed promoting the area to visitors is in the best interests of their individual business.

Several action tasks were identified to improve the physical appearance of the city. The plan included improved lighting, adding flower planters, murals, streetscaping of major corridors, an annual downtown cleanup, and developing strategies to improve the exterior appearance of various buildings.

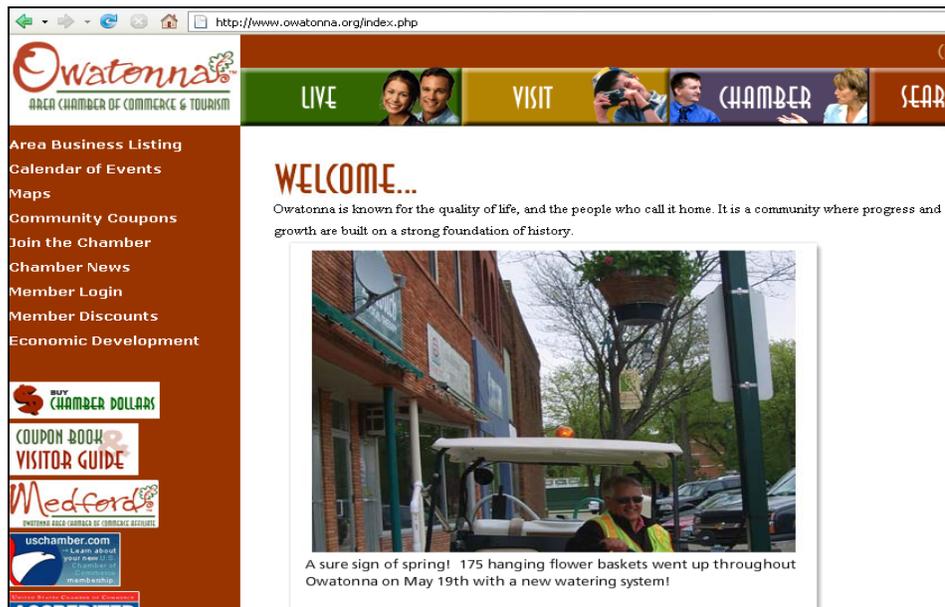
Destination branding to promote Owatonna to outside visitors was also identified as a project. For instance, welcome monuments and improved directional and regulatory signs were identified as valuable additions to local signage. Banners that brand Owatonna in a symbol and/or slogan were also a part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Background section adapted with permission from *University of Minnesota Extension Service Business Retention & Expansion Strategies Program Owatonna Summary Report*, November 2003 by Earl Netwal of Regional Diagnostics and Michael Darger of the University of Minnesota Department of Applied Economics with contributions from Elaine Reber of the Department of Applied Economics, Lisa Krampitz of the Owatonna Chamber of Commerce and Tourism and members of the Owatonna project teams.

destination branding. Finally, coordinating musical ensembles in the Central Park band shell was identified as a way to make Owatonna a visitor destination.<sup>2</sup>

## Results



The project to improve the physical appearance of Owatonna and draw visitors had several positive impacts. The beautification of Owatonna has happened with hanging baskets, welcome banners, a downtown welcome monument, and refurbishing of buildings owned by the public utilities. “The beautification project had a domino effect of involving the whole community,” said Lisa Krampitz, of the Owatonna Chamber of Commerce and BR&E Leadership Team member.

The hanging flower basket project started in 2003, and has grown from 55 to 175 baskets that decorate the downtown and beyond. The Chamber of Commerce raises sponsoring money from businesses and individuals, who “feel there is a benefit,” said Krampitz. “Even if a visitor doesn’t go into a business just because of the beautification, it shows the visitor curb appeal, pride, and welcoming to the

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downtown and the community.” In addition to the tourism related benefits, manufacturers, hospitals, and CEOs can better recruit employees because of the quality of life in Owatonna according to Krampitz. Businesses sometimes drive recruits through the community and downtown among the baskets and beautification to lure prospective employees to “say yes.”.

When asked about the key reasons the project started, Krampitz said hearing from the community was key, including during the BR&E program. The 102 businesses surveys provided a great deal of information and community engagement. “All of the groups involved said ‘the people have spoken and let’s make these [projects into] priorities,’ ” said Krampitz.

## **Resources**

The cost of the hanging flower basket project is covered by fundraising and donations. Under the initiative of the Chamber of Commerce, the beautification project raised donations of \$16,000 for the program for the first year through businesses and individuals. Krampitz recognized the contributions of volunteers to BR&E project successes. “To this day, business owners Warren Simons and his wife - as volunteers - make sure the [hanging flower basket] project keeps going. We couldn’t do it without them,” she said. The key success factor for the projects is bringing all the players to the table, which started during the BR&E program. In Owatonna, economic development is done by all stakeholders, not one entity, according to Krampitz. Thus, they were able to interview businesses and meet with many stakeholders at the same time to develop helpful concepts. “Businesses felt they were being heard by chamber and city, where sometimes it can be political or biased. They were also projects that all could wrap their arms around and get involved instead of just a private or public effort,” said Krampitz.

## Additional Information

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The Owatonna Partners for Progress website

<http://www.owatonnadevelopment.com>

The Owatonna Chamber of Commerce website

<http://www.owatonna.org>

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