A fresh start for the downtown
Drug busts should serve as a catalyst for re-imagining a new future for downtown
Andrew Broman

Law enforcement’s crackdown on drug dealing in downtown Litchfield last month was, as much as anything else, an invitation to remake the city’s center into a better place.

It was also a wake-up call for many of us who did not realize the full extent of downtown’s drug dealing network.

Thank goodness law enforcement took action when it did because the situation wasn’t going to get better on its own. With efficiency and professionalism, authorities gathered evidence against occupants in three locations, executed search warrants, made arrests and filed charges. There was minimal disruption to anyone in the downtown, except for those arrested. The worst of the worst remain behind bars, and we hope they stay there, at least for now.

But let’s face it — these kind of people will return to the downtown if steps aren’t taken to improve the quality of the housing stock and the vitality of the commercial district.

Law enforcement did its part. Now the rest of the community needs to do its part, as it can no longer afford to wait for somebody else to make the first move.

Redevelopment doesn’t have to happen all at once, but it needs to get started. We need a vision, though not necessarily a consensus. We need downtown business owners to step up and participate, even if it’s just one or two to start.

For sure, downtown requires financial incentives to kick start redevelopment efforts. One of downtown’s greatest challenges is that the cost to rehab many downtown properties far exceeds the properties’ current worth. A vicious cycle has taken root, in which economic stagnation discourages reinvestment, which leads to more economic stagnation, which discourages investment, and so on. A vacuum forms and gets filled by shady characters, like those arrested last month. To reverse this cycle, it’s going to likely take a powerful combination of tax incentives and federal grant funds — we’re probably talking in the millions of dollars.

Downtown’s challenges are years in the making, and it would be all too easy to allow sticker shock to stifle progress. Some city officials are already feeling the pressure. “Quite frankly, that downtown scares the bejeebers out of me because I don’t know how much money that’s going to take to do something down there,” City Council member Michael Boyle said during a discussion last month about which projects the city should undertake over the next five years.

For sure, we expect more trepidation in the months to come as residents and officials come to grips with the full extent of the downtown’s needs. Conflict and disagreement sometimes happen on the way toward finding a solution. So long as downtown’s various stakeholders treat each other respectfully, there’s no reason why they cannot overcome their differences.

Meeker County Economic Development Authority Director David Krueger is optimistic about Litchfield’s future. “I’m pretty upbeat that something will happen in the next couple years,” Krueger said during an interview last week. “There’s awareness, and there’s a dream I think happening, but at some point, in the next year or two, it will need to be enacted.”

City Council did hire a consultant to study the downtown and potentially devise a plan for future redevelopment. The study started off slowly, however, with few business and property owners showing an interest in participating, and some councilors have questioned the wisdom of hiring the consultant.

Having a consultant examine the downtown doesn’t hurt, and this study might still yield some valuable insight. Regardless of whether this consultant works out, it’s a good idea for councilors to continue to “think big” about the downtown.

Krueger mentioned as a possibility placing the downtown in what’s known as a tax increment financing district. A TIF district allows property owners to pool their property tax dollars to make infrastructure improvements. Another possibility, along the same lines as a TIF district, would be a property tax abatement program, which would provide refunds to property owners for them to use on improving their buildings, such as for installing a new roof or remodeling a building’s facade.

The city of Hutchinson recently applied for a Small Cities Development Grant, and this seems like a logical step for Litchfield, as the federal program is aimed at improving both commercial and residential properties. But for a program like this to happen, property owners need to show an interest. They have to demonstrate that they’re no longer satisfied with downtown continuing along its current path.

There are two ways to interpret the events that transpired in Litchfield’s downtown last month. One way is to allow those drug busts and arrests to define Litchfield, surrendering to naysayers who argue this community is stuck in a rut, too stubborn to do much but talk nostalgically about the good old days.

The other interpretation is to consider these events an opportunity for a fresh start, as a catalyst inspiring this community to envision, and ultimately make, a better future for itself.

We prefer the latter interpretation, and we bet most of our readers do, too. Now comes the hard part — we need to take action.

Herman Roe Editorial Writing Award

Lynn Smith Community Leadership

All Newspapers

First Place: Grand Forks Herald
Out of the Shadows
Steve Wagner’s letter really epitomized the importance of this series. He encouraged reporters to look for issues in the community and address them. The touching stories left a lasting impression. Good work.

Second Place: Albert Lea Tribune
Meeting the Workforce Challenge
This series showed true dedication of staff to stick with an issue over a long period of time. It highlighted issues such as housing and internet access and showed job shortage is not the problem.

Third Place: The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead
Trafficked series
These are well written stories that combine good reporting and good photography. It captures the reader’s attention and leaves a lasting impression.