

Brillion brings in retail consultant to revamp downtown

By Chris Havel

BRILLION—Lyn Falk is an artist.

Experience is her paint brush; Brillion's downtown area and its appearance is her canvas. Her goal is to consult with local residents, business owners and city officials to help them devise a sensible, cost-effective, long-range plan for downtown revitalization.

After a city-wide tour Friday, followed by a 75-minute roundtable discussion with 10 of Brillion's business owners and elected officials, Falk's initial impression was positive.

To describe Brillion and its downtown, she offered a one-word answer: "Potential."

"That's the statement Brillion makes," she said. "There's so much traffic on (CTY PP) - and so much potential - but it's a bit of a drive-through town. There aren't a lot of things that make me say, 'I've got to stop in and see what's going on here!' Facades, window displays, lighting, benches, green spaces, building upkeep, signage, landscaping ... all of those variables come together to make a strong statement about a community. A negative attitude can really affect traffic AND sales."

Falk, who owns Retail Works Inc., sees the need for a lot of work.

But she also sees a lot to work with.

"It's a downtown on the precipice," Falk said. "It can go either way. There is great potential to do something terrific, but if nothing is done it's going to suffer."

That is why the city of Brillion's redevelopment authority elected to spend \$1,600, and the Brillion Chamber of Commerce anted up an additional \$1,000, to hire Falk.

"The key thing is that we really don't have a building that says, 'Wow!' and makes an impression," said Wayne Volkman, Brillion's director of redevelopment. "They all kind of blend in and it leaves the impression of a tired downtown. (Falk) said we basically need to dress up, spruce up and improve our downtown image and buildings."

Falk is the first to acknowledge small-town business owners, elected officials and residents can be sensitive about their downtown area.

"It's exciting to see the new Econo Foods and the bank (Best Advantage Credit Union) being built because it gives



LYN FALK, OWNER OF RETAIL WORKS, INC., takes a tour of Brillion's downtown Friday with city developer Wayne Volkman (background) and alderperson Garrett Zimpel. Falk was hired by the City of Brillion as a retail consultant specializing in re-designing downtown business districts in small communities such as Brillion.

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it some life," she said. "I also think there is a beautiful collection of historical buildings that need tender loving care."

But that isn't enough.

"It's like the old saying, 'A city's downtown is everyone's business,'" she said. "A downtown can be looked at like a retail business, with each building representing a product on a shelf."

The fact is the products on the shelf need sprucing up, and some in a very serious way. Trying to provide a sensible path to that end is Falk's livelihood. She also knows that small towns have a great deal of pride, and rightfully so.

"They have a tremendous entrepreneurial spirit and they are proud of what they're doing," she said. "They don't want to be told what to do. And there's a cost factor. When a consultant starts blabbing about all the things that can be done, retailers tend to respond, 'That's great - but how can I afford it?' I come from a small retailer's upbringing, so I understand budgets and family businesses."

Volkman first met Falk in mid-October at the fourth-annual "Recapturing Your Downtown" conference in Wausau. Falk was one of the keynote speakers, and Volkman was duly impressed.

"I came away feeling that this was an

individual whose background and skills were what (Brillion) was looking for," Volkman said. "Her experience, her background ... she knows the area, and as she said (at the roundtable discussion), 'The problems in Brillion are not unique but in fact common in Wisconsin.'"

The transformation in downtown Brillion, if one occurs, is likely to happen in phases. It also is impossible without cooperation between numerous parties. The business owners must be willing to improve facades, and to work collectively and collaboratively with the city of Brillion and the Chamber of Commerce to recruit businesses to downtown to fill our empty storefronts."

Alderman Garrett Zimpel has been an advocate of business recruiting.

He believes it is vital to the downtown area's vitality.

Volkman said recruiting new business to Brillion is one of his priorities.

"I give the credit to (Zimpel) because he's the one that pushed to hold off on the second phase of the downtown landscape/streetscape and place more emphasis on recruitment downtown and along the US HWY 10 corridor."

The city budgeted \$19,000 for the streetscape/landscape second phase, re-

duced it to \$18,000, and then redirected it toward business recruitment (\$10,000) and the revolving low-interest business loan (\$8,000) for downtown facades.

Lion's Den Pizzeria and Superior Floor Covering have availed themselves to the program with positive results. The city hopes other downtown businesses will at least explore the possibility.

Volkman said Falk stressed the importance of developing a downtown portfolio, one that includes information on vacant stores to prospective tenants/businesses. It should feature square footage, price, cost of utility bills, a history of the store and perhaps ways to facilitate a business's move into the Brillion area.

Falk said she was encouraged by the response at an 11-person roundtable discussion Friday afternoon.

"Every once in a while I will be in a community and I don't feel any spirit and I leave depressed," she said. "They either don't care, or they've given up, or they've heard it all before. That wasn't the case here. These people have plenty of energy and plenty of spirit. They are the type that if shown the path with visuals and goals they could take that to town and run with it."