



## RETHOS DOWNTOWN LAKE CITY ASSESSMENT

### Overview and Update

March/April 2025

**Background:** In 2022, the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation commissioned Rethos, a national 501c3 nonprofit organization, to complete an assessment of Lake City's Downtown. The mission of Rethos is to lead and inspire people to connect with historic places, promoting community vitality.

Rethos met with different Lake City groups and individuals, through the following methods: five focus groups (23 people), pop in conversations (31 stops), and 609 online survey responses.

This document provides an overview and recommendations from the Lake City Downtown Assessment. Response to the recommendations is provided by the Lake City Chamber of Commerce and the Lake City Port Authority.

**Overview:** As described by Rethos, Downtown Assessments provide answers to begin building short and long -term community vitality. The plan can be used as a framework to develop marketing and tourism initiatives; a platform for business and resident retainment and recruitment; a building block for seeking philanthropic, public, and private investment; or as a planning tool to build additional strategies for growth and revitalization.

### Lake City Asset Themes

- Basic needs are in place (grocery, pharmacy, hardware, etc.)
- Solid framework (good physical spaces exist – indoor and outdoor)
- Lake Pepin love
- Special events are special
- Public spaces are bustling

### Community Member Priorities

- Physical safety
- Building conditions
- Accessible information
- Signs of life
- Shopping locally
- City investment

## Recommendations and Opportunities

### Cultural Activation Strategy Recommendations:

- Address the unrest - - there was a large amount of negativity that came up during outreach
- Tailor events, promotions, and activity to residents of Lake City rather than tourists
- Focus on revitalization efforts to support the downtown infrastructure, both public and private

### Opportunities:

- Work on recruiting a brewery/beer hall type space
- Cultivate regular 'happenings' rather than big events
- Leverage the entrepreneurial efforts happening at the Farmer's Market
- Find ways to leverage vacant lots
- Find ways to open doors

## RECOMMENDATIONS - UPDATE

**Address the unrest:** The 2022 timing of the study occurred at the same time as a major renovation of Highway 61/Lakeshore Drive, which is adjacent to the Downtown area. Negativity regarding the Downtown could have been related to opposition to the highway renovation (conversion of a four-lane highway to a two-lane highway with a turning lane) that occurred in 2022. The City of Lake City has addressed some of the struggles regarding raised sides of the flower beds on the main street, which should be addressed by removing those tripping hazards in 2025. The Chamber and Port Authority, with new leadership, will continue to be open to discussion when there are needs within the community and the Downtown. The Chamber initiative "Wake Up with Heather" is a great way for members businesses or the community at large to see what's happening at the Chamber and address any concerns.

**Tailor events, promotions and activity to residents:** Spring/fall/winter activity and event examples; the nonprofit Destination Lake City will begin hosting quarterly meetings with community organizations invited (including the Chamber and City). The Port Authority and Chamber will be collaborating closely with other key community stakeholders at Quarterly meetings organized by DLC to align and communicate about ideas for our community at large.

Winterstuff has been the coined event phrase within the Chamber for the past few years. There are winter activities in Lake City and the Chamber has promoted those activities this way. The local Market by the Lake is a large draw for residents. The Shops of Lake City organize an annual 'Girls Night Out' event in April to increase and encourage people to visit Downtown businesses. The Chamber and the Lake City Public Library joined forces in 2024 to create a Community Calendar, that any local organization or business can have access to, and this calendar is on the Chamber and Public Library website for locals to know what is happening in the community.

**Focus on revitalization efforts to support the Downtown infrastructure:** In 2022-2024, the Southeastern Minnesota Multi County Housing and Redevelopment Authority administered a Small Cities Development Program, which included building improvement grants for Downtown building owners. Twelve buildings in the Downtown project area received deferred rehabilitation financing for improvements. Following the major Highway 61 improvement project, the City is considering grants and

other funding opportunities for additional Downtown infrastructure improvements. The Port Authority is working with a local task force to bring a regional bike trail, or spur, to Lake City, with wayfinding.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES – UPDATE**

- **Work on recruiting a brewery/beer hall:**
  - Review the recent Lake City brewery market study, provide to potential businesses
  - Site visit to area breweries in April/May 2025
- **Cultivate regular happenings:**
  - Light Up Lake City
  - Lake City Sportsman's Club Holiday Bazaar
  - Lake City Sportsman's Club ice fishing contest
  - Frontenac Sportsman's Club ice fishing contest
  - Moonlight hike/snow shoe at Frontenac State Park and Hok-Si-La Park
  - Kite flying and ice skating (community gathering) on Lake Pepin
  - Lake City Area Arts events (numerous)
- **Leverage the entrepreneurial efforts happening at the Farmer's Market:** The Chamber of Commerce and Port Authority will work with the Farmer's Market, and other local groups and individuals, to identify opportunities for Downtown cross promotion in 2025 at the Lake City Farmer's Market.
- **Find ways to leverage vacant lots:** In 2024, the Port Authority worked with a private developer to assemble an underutilized and vacant Downtown city block that will be redeveloped into a 26-unit condominium project, scheduled for construction 2025-26. Other vacant and underutilized lots will be surveyed and considered for different uses (pop up events and vendors, music events, yoga, parking, etc.).
- **Find ways to open doors:**
  - Destination Lake City is holding quarterly meetings in which local groups and committees are invited (incl. the Chamber, City, Port Authority, the Lake City Arts) to share information and discuss matters of interest.
  - The Lake City Chamber is reviewing the chamber's initiatives and rolling out some additional committees to assist and support these initiatives.
  - Port Authority and Chamber economic development partnership
    - Business tours
    - Childcare needs
    - Housing needs
    - Grant opportunities