

What Baraboo May be Like in Fifty Years—A Challenge

Tales of Farlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This is the fourth, and hopefully the final article featuring the ruminations of the author regarding the past, present and future of the City of Baraboo. In previous articles we discussed its peaks and valleys in earlier decades, its spectacular and progressive enhancements in the past half century, and its opportunities for additional greatness in the coming half-century.

Each generation has the opportunity to make their locality a better place, sometimes to their own astonishment. For example, in 1960 the ambulance “service” consisted of a county traffic squad station wagon, or perhaps a similar station wagon operated by a funeral home. Who would have believed then that Baraboo would have a fleet of life-saving ambulances and 24 hour skilled emergency service today? Incredulous then, it is now a fact.

Many things were unbelievable in 1960, such as a fully accredited UW campus in the city, or internationally recognized ecology headquarters—such as the Crane Foundation or Leopold Center. What about the world’s greatest depository of circus memorabilia drawing thousands every year, plus the International Clown College. All were unimaginable in 1960, as was the Riverwalk.

Who in 1960 foresaw the Midcontinent Railway operation, or the usage of Devils Lake approaching two million visitors a year? Today we approach the much needed expansion of the library and also the restoration of the opulent Al. Ringling Theatre. It is America’s first palatial theatre for the motion picture industry. We now have a hockey Rink and other sports facilities, and an active Civic Center. There are many other examples—Baraboo is a significant, exciting and quality place to live thanks to those who dreamed and acted in the past half century.

Some opportunities

So what about today’s opportunities? How about a commuter rail service to Madison, with morning and evening trips for commuters, and a daytime round trip for medical and other appointments—and also for daytime visitors to Devils Lake? Speaking of railroads—America is realizing its folly and using rail freight more frequently—how about restoring the Northwestern Line to the Twin Cities and west? Baraboo can’t do this alone, but we can talk it up. Who Knows?

Speaking of transportation, how about a city bus service, stopping at all four corners of the city: the hospital area, Circus Museum area, the facilities at US12 and W, and the UW campus, and all points in between? Fantasy? Well who would have believed 10 years ago that Sauk County would have a bus system today? Its growth will be a symbol of the growing interdependence of the communities in the county. Speaking of transportation, access to the expanding UW campus needs another approach from the East, from northern areas of Baraboo. It would get traffic off Eighth Street (Linn Street in West Baraboo).



This is the view which greeted visitors to Baraboo from the 1890's through the 1920's! It carried Highway 12 traffic across the river and North on Oak Street through the center of the business section. There actually was a rudimentary electric stop light in the center of the Oak-Third Street intersection for a time. The highway exited the city via various routes onto Eighth Avenue.

This raises the question, what is the future of West Baraboo? When it comes to support for the airport, or the type of support the City gives to UW campus or even a village police force, this growing population base doesn't seem to be pulling its own weight. Even little Plain has its own police force, and the smaller Town of Dellona supports the airport. We suspect that the not distant future will find the village of W. Baraboo a much more proactive population center in Sauk County

Downtown

Downtown has survived remarkably well in the retail revolution of the past decades, and remains attractive and busy. Yet a tourist on Highway 33, at Eighth at Broadway would hardly know that the business section exists. Signage, real attention-getting signage is needed. The three blocks of Broadway leading south from Eighth should have street lights immediately to aid in its attractiveness to visitors.

Surely someone could make a living with a small neighborhood grocery in or near Downtown Baraboo. Also how about an old fashioned dime store type, with a little of everything, including ice cream and popcorn? Then there's Fifth from Broadway to Ash. It is a wide street, but how about diagonal parking on the south side? Regarding streets, why is County T called Taft Avenue? My personal choice—Benjamin Franklin Parkway!

A potential attraction for visitors would be a significant development of the Ice Age Trail, filling the gaps south of Devils Lake State Park, with signage all the way to and through Baraboo and onto the Riverwalk. Combine it with a new shelter and rest rooms on the Lower Ochsner Riverwalk. Perhaps a snack bar as it becomes popular. Speaking of the Riverwalk, there are those already interested in some sort of pedestrian bridge over the Baraboo River! Nearby a small marina with kayaks and rowboats would be attractive.

A changing and growing industrial base is essential, and goes hand in hand with an attractive city. A vibrant city is a great inducement for a growing business or industry to locate here, a fact well known to previous civic promoters such as Ted Mandt and Chet Corson. Baraboo has enhanced its charm, but there is more to do. The way things get done in small towns is for a group of citizens to get excited about a project, do some enthusiastic planning, and promotion. It helps to have elderly donors such as Alma Waite and the John Lange's too.

Well, it is all well and good for a 93 year old columnist to propose all of this—he won't be around to do the work! However, my generation produced a few of the amenities mentioned in article three, and now new generations and minds are in charge. Perhaps some of the above challenges can be achieved, plus others undreamed of today.

Your scribe predicts that many more good things are coming for the Baraboo, this Gem City, nestled as it is between the remains of two ancient mountain ranges, and surrounded by Ice Age wonders.