



Why Wabash Marketplace?

-by Steve Downs, Wabash Marketplace president

So I was feeling pretty good about Wabash Marketplace. We had just awarded almost \$130,000 in grants to improve downtown buildings, hired a full-time executive director, and signed a contract to purchase a building to rehab ourselves. All in all, not a bad couple of weeks.

But then I arrived at my office Thursday morning and found the following message from Norma O'Dell: "Why do you want to spend all this money on downtown when it's never going to be like it was—and I'm not the only one in the community who feels this way!"

Now that was a real downer. After all, at least fifty of Mrs. O'Dell's fellow citizens, who serve on the Marketplace board of directors and its various committees, have been spending countless volunteer hours over the last year dedicated to improving downtown Wabash. And a lot of others contributed money to support our efforts.

I was stunned to think that anyone would object to how we wanted to spend our time and the money that had been given to us. We really thought we had been doing a pretty good job.

In talking about Mrs. O'Dell's message with other board members, we decided that perhaps we hadn't been effective at getting our message out and that this was a good opportunity to explain why we support Marketplace.

- First of all, every business looking to locate in Wabash inspects our downtown. It's no secret that the appearance of a City's downtown sends a strong message about that City's vitality, pride, efficiency, and economy. Quite simply, a well maintained vibrant downtown is crucial economic development strategy that, if successful, will benefit not only the entire City, but the County as well.

- We love Wabash’s old downtown buildings. Rich in architecture and history, we find the stories that go with each building to be absolutely fascinating. Our downtown buildings form a significant piece of our City’s heritage which we think needs to be preserved.
- We now have an opportunity to motivate people to improve their buildings that we may never see again. What has been occurring in downtown Wabash over the last few years is most unusual and provides the impetus for improving downtown that few communities the size of Wabash have ever had. With the Honeywell Center, Paradise Spring Park, River Walk, Dr. James Ford Home, County Historical Museum, YMCA, and Charley Creek Inn, this City has amenities that few others possess. We truly are incredibly fortunate and need to build on the energy these amenities are providing.
- Finally, while downtown Wabash is no longer the primary provider of goods and services, it still represents a significant share of the City’s economy. A significant number of our citizens still own downtown real estate and operate businesses there. We need to help them improve the value of their investments, which in turn will increase our City’s tax base, create more jobs, and provide our citizens with more products and services.

So that, in a nutshell, is why we spend our time and money on Wabash Marketplace. We understand it’s not for everyone. We know that some of you don’t give a hoot about downtown buildings—and that’s OK. But we’re having fun, have a passion for what we are doing, and think we are doing work that is good for our community.

One other thing. We know that downtown Wabash will never be like it was. After all, nothing ever stays the same. As my college roommate used to tell me, “the only constant in life is change.” I’m sure he stole that from someone, but the point is certainly valid. We never started out to make downtown Wabash like it used to be. We just want to make it better than it is.