



# Dawn of a **NEW** **SUPERIOR**

**A City Takes Charge of Shaping Its Future**

by Molly Hoeg



JOHN HEINO

**“W**elcome to Superior – Living up to our name.” This message, prominently displayed above Center City Park at Belknap Street and Tower Avenue, perfectly captures the energized local optimism of this Wisconsin city.

The city slogan also reflects the momentum ignited by a revitalized downtown, a blossoming art community, startup enterprises, trendy new shops, restaurants and other major investments.

The city of Superior covers 55 square miles at the head of Lake Superior and is largely defined by the harbor it shares with Duluth, creating the Twin Ports.

With a population of about 27,100, Superior might be thought of as the “little sister” compared to Duluth’s 86,100-plus residents. But Superior is also the “older sister,” officially founded November 6, 1854, a couple of years before Duluth.

Superior’s first slogan – Where Sail Meets Rail – defined its position as a transportation hub.

Today, it remains a vital shipping link, serving as headquarters to five trucking lines and home to three railway offices, a railroad switching yard, a municipal airport (with a new terminal), numerous port-related



COURTESY SUPERIOR/DOUGLAS COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & CVB

A host of dignitaries lend a hand for the grand reopening of North Tower Avenue in July 2014. Top: Barker’s Island is home to the S.S. Meteor Whaleback Museum (left) and headquarters of the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve. The island also hosts homes, a hotel/restaurant and a marina.

terminals and elevators and, of course, to Fraser Shipyards.

Superior's community leaders, though, want their city to be more than a place to pass through, and they are forging an attractive, refreshed identity for this Wisconsin twin.

### TOWER AVENUE MAKEOVER

The true poster child for the city's transformation can be seen along Tower Avenue in the heart of downtown Superior.

After months of closure and intense construction, the street had a grand reopening July 2014, celebrating an appealing new look with a landscaped median, period lighting, generous sidewalks and tree-lined walks beside the storefronts. The development earned two

honors – the State of Wisconsin Urban Design and the Mid America Quality of Life awards.

The project, funded by city, state and federal monies, was the result of years of planning and careful execution by the Business Improvement District (BID), with the goal of rejuvenating the area. A Wisconsin Highway Enhancement Grant of \$1 million for streetscaping gave the project a major boost.

"Streetscape can't do economic development, but it certainly helps it," says Kaye Tenerelli, executive director of the BID. "Changing Tower Avenue changes people's opinions of what we can do in Superior."

And it appears to be working. A smattering of niche shops, destinations in themselves, have already sprouted.

"People are migrating away from malls," says Superior Mayor Bruce Hagen. "They are coming downtown for the small shops. They want to explore."

Aimee Glonek and Anndrea Ploeger targeted Superior's Tower Avenue when they

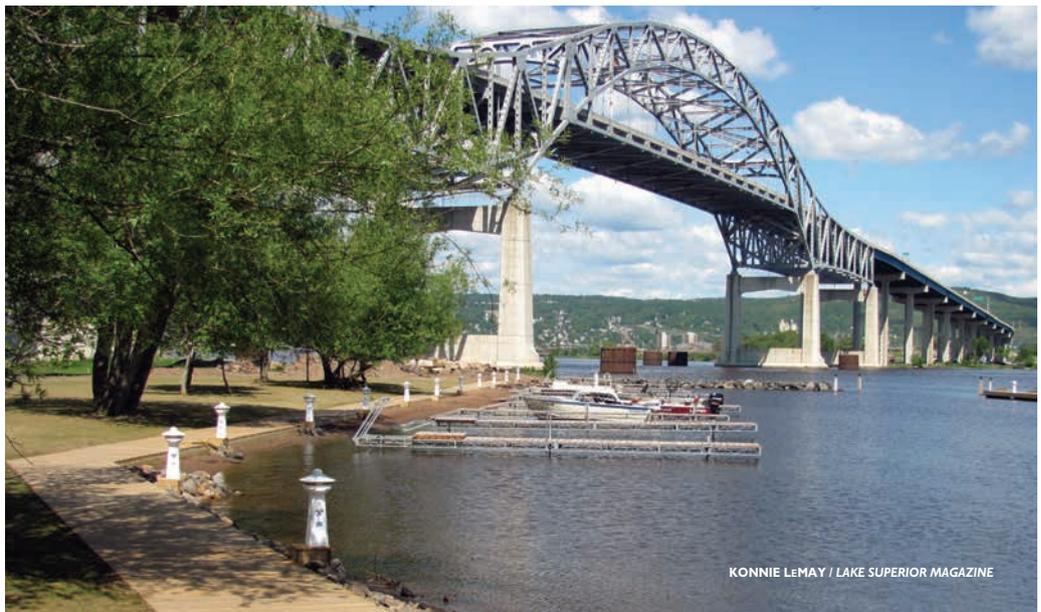


COURTESY THE SPIRIT ROOM



JOANN JARDINE / STUDIO ONE PHOTOGRAPHY

Left: The new Spirit Room joins established favorites like the Red Mug in the historic former city hall building on Hammond Avenue. Right: Superior Mayor Bruce Hagen, his wife, Lois, and Lord Remington enjoy the local produce at the Farmers Market that opens summer Saturday mornings on Barker's Island. Bottom: AMI Consulting Engineers, on Connor's Point in view of the Blatnik Bridge, built a new marina with 40 slips for public rental. Connor's Point is home to many new industrial businesses.



KONNIE LEMAY / LAKE SUPERIOR MAGAZINE

decided to open their new business, the Blue Arrow Boutique.

“We felt as if there was room in the Superior market to add another option for women to shop for on-trend clothing at affordable prices,” Aimee says. “It’s a really cool place to be right now. People are rooting for the street to come back to how it used to be. There is a lot of foot traffic, even in winter.”

New restaurants along the renovated street harken to the days when Tower was a “main drag” for dining options, too.

After four years of searching for just the right location, Brian Noel knew the moment he saw the building at 1015 Tower Avenue it was the one for his restaurant. He gutted it and reconstructed the interior to his exact vision for Shorty’s Pizza and Smoked Meat.

Brian wanted to serve things not available in Superior and to make each dish memorable. He tapped his roots for a Canadian pizza (made with brick cheese rather than mozzarella and with the cheese as the top layer) and for special Montreal-style smoked meat. Testing recipes, he brought lunches to local businesses and surveyed their response.

“From over 100 surveys, most were very positive,” Brian recalls. The result was instant success. “I thought we would start slowly, but we were busy from the start.” Further confirmation he was on the right track came when, in its very first year, Shorty’s earned a spot on the Food Network’s “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives.”

Since Shorty’s opened, more places have sprung up around him. “I would like to think we brought some life to the area,” says Brian.

One “new” joint is the third incarnation of a top-rated restaurant. Sclavi’s, established by the Sclavi brothers Anthony and Dan, reopened on Tower in the fall of 2014 and features Italian and locavore fare along with nearly two dozen house-created cocktails. Opened only Thursday through Saturday evenings, Sclavi’s also has a reputation for witty entertainment, from local musicians to its Wine Drunk with Aaron nights (a free glass of wine and a chat with a local fella).

Down the avenue, you can watch chocolate treats being made at Sweeden Sweets, which stocks vintage candies, pop and flavored popcorn. Its latest remodel turned a bar into an ice cream fountain, complete with the shiny twirly benches and ice cream made right on the premises.

An already popular craft beer establishment, Thirsty Pagan Brewing, is a



JES HAYES / MAD CHICKEN STUDIO

Fashionable new shops and eateries are springing up on Tower Avenue, like Blue Arrow Boutique (top) and Shorty’s Pizza and Smoked Meat (bottom left).



COURTESY SHORTY'S

block off Tower at 1623 Broadway Street.

David Minor, president of the Chamber & Visitors Bureau of Superior-Douglas County, has been encouraged by the downtown’s rebounding of activity.

“We have seen over 12 businesses open on Tower Avenue or in close proximity. The diversity of businesses that have opened up ... it brings different people for different reasons. A traffic generator is good for the community.”

To maintain this momentum, the city plans reconstruction for another major artery, Belknap Street. The two-year project, slated to begin in 2017, will rebuild the infrastructure while refreshing the appearance.

“Belknap will look identical to Tower Avenue when done,” David says.

Sprucing up the streets, according to the mayor, is the first step in attracting visitors to the city. “You can’t market the community,” he quips, “unless you get dressed up!”



COURTESY A WORLD OF ACCORDIONS

## EVERYTHING ACCORDION

If it has anything to do with accordions, you will probably find it in A World of Accordions Museum in Superior at the corner of Hammond Avenue and Belknap Street. With 1,300 accordions plus related art and figurines, the history and diversity of this instrument are carefully displayed and documented, from unique pieces to the highly ornate. If you’re lucky, museum coordinator Helmi Harrington (pictured) will demonstrate them for you. The sanctuary above the museum is home to the Harrington Arts Center which features accordionists in concert throughout the year.

## BEYOND THE STOREFRONTS

Retail enterprises and hospitality businesses are not the only focus for those promoting Superior.

In his role as mayor, Bruce has been a strong supporter of public-private partnerships.

One of the more unique recent collaborations has been a magazine, *Positively Superior*, meant to deliver good news about the city's business, industry and community developments. The bimonthly publication partners the city of Superior, Douglas County, the Superior BID, local Chamber of Commerce, University of Wisconsin-Superior (UWS), Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College (WITC) and Superior School District with publisher AdMax Displays.

The city's economic development team has a reputation for rapidly evaluating the fit for new business opportunities.

"When companies approach the city for assistance, within one month we tell clients what we can do or can't help you," the mayor says. "If I can't help you, I will not waste your time."

This history for such partnerships runs long. Some 35 years ago, the city supported development of a marina and hotel-

convention center on Barker's Island that are still thriving businesses. The 420-slip marina is city owned and privately operated and 80 of the slips are being rebuilt or enhanced. The marina sits next to the privately owned Barkers Island Inn Resort and Conference Center.

More recently, city support helped to bring in high-tech startups, like Fasetto, which offers a cloud storage, content sharing and messaging program.

The city also helps existing enterprises. Exodus Machines, founded in Superior, gained success designing and manufacturing machines used in waterfront barge unloading and in the scrap and pulpwood industries.

An opportunity to form an alliance with international giant Caterpillar meant a large expansion to Exodus' manufacturing capacity and a huge capital investment. One option was to move into a Caterpillar plant with an existing workforce that was closing in another town. Instead, the city, county and state mustered a creative loan package that enabled the company to remain in Superior.

"The city was willing to step outside the box in ways to support Exodus and the manufacturing growth we were going to incur with Caterpillar," notes CEO Kevin Boreen.

Bottom: The University of Wisconsin-Superior's new Yellowjacket Union features a "green roof." The sloping roof sprouts a thick mat of vegetation in season, helping to cool the building and absorb rainwater to reduce runoff. UWS enrolls about 2,500 students.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Coy Christmas' company Fasetto recently announced a wearable device to access the cloud for data storage. The new look for Tower Avenue means wide lanes, a median with growing plants and more inviting sidewalk areas. Laboratory space to analyze tests of the St. Louis River are part of the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve.



COURTESY UWS

Such support creates ripples in the local economy. In the three years since the alliance, Exodus has added 35 jobs – a 56 percent increase in employees. Company leaders expect the growth to continue. They've also forged relationships with three Twin Ports colleges – WITC, UWS and the University of Minnesota Duluth – to train this workforce, collaborating on a certification program for the specific welding skills Exodus needs.

In return, the company strives to buy local. “We have a desire to source as local as we can, while keeping cost, quality and delivery in mind,” according to Kevin, who rattles off nine regular suppliers in Superior, including IDS Waterjet Cutting, Superior Machine Works and Total Tool Supply.

A Superior industrial fixture, Fraser Shipyards similarly praises city cooperation. “The city has been a huge advocate for the shipyard,” says Tom Curelli, Fraser’s director of operations. “We would not be where we are today without the support of the city.”

Through grants and promotion of earmarked legislation, the city enabled the shipyard to modernize and increase its capacity to retrofit vessels.

## IN THE BEGINNING

Just after its official establishment in 1854, Superior became the county seat of the newly formed Douglas County, and by 1856, more than 2,500 people lived in the city. Just one year later, the Panic of 1857, and news that many promised railroad projects would not come to fruition saw the young city’s population fall to 500. In the following years, two key incidents had a significant impact on the future of Superior. Business tycoon Jay Cooke’s decision to put the terminus of his Lake Superior & Mississippi Railroad in Duluth instead of Superior, and the digging of the Duluth ship canal in 1871, were both severe blows to Superior’s economic prospects.

Even so, Superior rebounded, and by 1887 investors began building elevators, docks and industrial railroads. Once again, a railroad magnate played a role in the city’s future.

James J. Hill visited the city, promoting a deep waterway to the East. Owning a railroad that had just reached Superior and a grain elevator poised between that railroad and the shipping lanes, he foresaw great transportation opportunities with a deeper channel to the lower Great Lakes. A year later, work began to build a deeper lock at Sault Ste. Marie, and when completed, Hill fulfilled his promise to put a line of steamers on the Lake for package transportation. Other transcontinental lines soon followed, and the combination of railroad and shipping lines enabled Superior to develop into a successful transportation center.



COURTESY FASETTO



COURTESY LAKE SUPERIOR NERR



MARY MORGAN



RANDEN PEDERSON

“Each time we bring a boat to dock in the yard is an economic opportunity and employs 40 to 50 people,” Tom says. Vessels wintering in the shipyard typically represent a \$500,000 to \$800,000 boost to the local economy. Two freighters wintered there last season.

### HIRING A BIG GUN

As a way to generate opportunities for growth, a group of city boosters founded Better City Superior Inc. last year.

Funded to \$166,500 by 40 businesses, public entities, grants and foundations, this private-sector initiative hired a city-development superstar – Matthew Godfrey.

Matthew rose to national prominence when, at age 29, he was elected mayor of Ogden, Utah, in 1999. During his three-term tenure, he and his development team “recruited over \$1.2 billion of investment, revitalized more than 130 acres of the downtown and built nearly 1 million square feet of new office space, revitalized many neighborhoods and reduced crime by 33 percent in a 10-year span,” according to the website of his company, Better City.

As a hired consultant, Matthew tries to bring similar success to other cities based on their unique characteristics and needs.

Superior decided to tap that well. “I see us as the catalyst to bring outside money to



COURTESY SUPERIOR CATHOLIC DIOCESE

Top: An old-fashioned parade starts the city's Fourth of July celebration. Center: The Catholic Diocese of Superior has invested in its properties, restoring, inside and out, its nearly 90-year-old Cathedral of Christ the King (above) and soon renovating Cathedral School's exterior.

## HISTORY ON THE WALLS

The Superior Public Library is home to 35 murals depicting the history of Superior and Douglas County. Perched above the bookshelves, the collection rings the library's interior with its colorful and vivid scenes. It starts with the Algonquian-Ojibwe story of creation and continues through the 20th century. Carl Gawboy, a regional artist, spent the years from 1992 to 2002 painting the series. The image here depicts the old fire hall, which now houses the Old Firehouse & Police Museum.



COURTESY SUPERIOR PUBLIC LIBRARY

town and get the ball rolling,” says Bruce Thompson, president of National Bank of Commerce and a leader on the Better City Superior Team. “We want to bring options to the public.”

The group has created an ambitious list of projects and has met with potential developers. It’s also conducted interviews with 100 business and government leaders and regular city residents, to gauge local support and gather ideas.

“We think this is a great turning point for the community,” Bruce says. “People nod, ‘Yes, it’s time.’”

The development guru himself was impressed with the support. “We were very attracted to the passion to see the town reach its full potential, and the vision of the economic potential for future generations,” Matthew says. “This is very achievable.”

Matthew points to two primary factors that can bring Superior success.

“There are funding sources in place – financial resources through public-private participation. And there is the demand and opportunity to lead to large-scale redevelopment.”

Leaders of Better City Superior have had bi-weekly conference calls with Matthew, and its board meets quarterly. Among ideas for the downtown are a new hotel/convention center, a multiuse indoor field house, a multiplex movie theater that includes a live stage and downtown urban housing mixed above the retail spaces.

## WHERE TO LIVE

Housing is one major challenge that Better City Superior and others have identified. While the number of jobs has increased in the city, the workers filling those jobs often must cross the bridge to live in Duluth, although it has its own shortage of affordable housing.

Simply building more homes – or building anything – can be problematic in Superior – “76 percent of our developable land is wetlands,” cites Mary Morgan, director of parks, recreation and forestry. “We have a balancing act with respect to what to preserve land for – housing, schools, parks, etc.”

The city and Douglas County have contracted for a housing study to assess the range of needs.

One solution for Superior may lie in creating options for its senior citizens, thereby freeing existing homes for younger families.



MIKE MIKULICH

## RECREATION AND RESOURCES

Superior, with 20 city parks, ranks high for abundant green space. While national recreation and park standards recommend 7 to 10.5 acres of green space per capita, Superior weighs in at a hefty 200 acres per capita, according to Mary Morgan, parks director.

The 4,428-acre Superior Municipal Forest is the third largest city-owned forest in the nation. Only Jefferson Memorial Forest in Louisville, Kentucky, at 6,191 acres and Forest Park in Portland, Oregon, at 5,000 acres rank larger. Superior’s forest features an extensive array of multiuse trails that cater to hikers and mountain bikers in summer and cross-country skiers and snowmobilers in winter. Its 17 miles of shore along the St. Louis River link to canoeing, kayaking and boating. An outdoor classroom on site is handicap accessible and seats 45 students under the forest’s towering pines.

Last year three parks and playgrounds were renovated. Billings Park is nearing the final phase of a renovation that has already resulted in a new pavilion and restroom building, plus extensive new features in the Japanese Friendship Garden in partnership with Superior Rotary Club 40. This summer will see trail repairs, road improvements and installation of vintage-style lighting.

Superior invests in its sport facilities, too. The recently remodeled Siinto S. Wessman Arena on the UWS campus hosts an ice skating and hockey rink October to mid-March. During the rest of the year it’s used for concerts, events like the annual Brewfest, pow wow and fish-and-game show or can be rented. The National Bank of Commerce contributed to the high school’s new NBC Spartan Sports Complex opened in 2014.

The city has four public boat launches, including one adjacent to a prime fishing spot on the St. Louis River. In 2010, a deteriorating railroad bridge was replaced with the Arrowhead Fishing Pier; the boat launch was enlarged and the surrounding area landscaped into a park with a picnic shelter.

Barker’s Island is also home to Festival Park, which hosts 25 annual events, including Superior’s signature summer celebration, the Lake Superior Dragon Boat Festival.

“We have a blend that a lot of harbor communities don’t,” says Mayor Bruce Hagen. “We have a busy port, but it blends well with recreational opportunities. We have a jewel here.”



COURTESY SUPERIOR PUBLIC MUSEUMS



COURTESY BAY PRODUCE

## THE TOMATO PLACE

Throughout the year, the Challenge Center in Superior provides beefsteak tomatoes – vine ripened in their greenhouses – to grocery stores and restaurants in Superior, Duluth, Two Harbors, Grand Rapids and Cloquet. Bay Produce began in a half-acre greenhouse in 1986 to employ and train the Challenge Center clients with disabilities. The operation has grown considerably, now with more than 2 acres of year-round greenhouse space and, from April to November, adds grape tomatoes and red, yellow and orange bell peppers to its harvest.

To that end, Grand Central Plaza, a senior apartment complex across the street from UWS, was completed this April, and 250 applicants were on a waiting list for its 50 apartments.

“These are people who want to sell their homes in established neighborhoods,” says Paul Gerrard, vice president of Gerrard Corporation, the developer, general partner and contractor for Grand Central.

Once again, the developer was impressed with the city support. “The city rolled out the red carpet for us. They assisted us, not just financially, but meeting with us and generating public support.”

As a result, Paul is actively pursuing two other housing projects in the city targeting families and single professionals.

Another project, Spartan Circle Development, will occupy one of the last large parcels available within the city limits.

Owner-developer Ron Gustafson added environmental protections to get permits on the wetlands. “We had to shorten the road to reduce the impervious surfaces and add retaining ponds.”

The site, near the high school and colleges, features 33 buildable lots meant for homes in the \$300,000 range, as well as six duplex units.

“This is the biggest backlog of homes I’ve seen in six years,” says Ron. “This is perfect timing for this to get done.”

Lest you think the wetlands only cause economic headaches for the city, it was the city’s position at the mouth of the St. Louis River that opened an opportunity five years ago. In 2010, the river was

Two structures most often represent the city for visitors and residents. One is the Superior Entry Lighthouse on Wisconsin Point, seen on the previous page, and the other is Fairlawn Mansion and Museum (left), owned by the city and operated by Superior Public Museums.

designated as a National Estuarine Research Reserve.

One of only 22 such reserves in the country, it is the newest and only the second on the Great Lakes. The Lake Superior NERR, operated through the University of Wisconsin-Extension and UWS, focuses on research, education and outreach for the Lake Superior estuaries and coastal reserves. Based on Barker’s Island, its facility is open to visiting educators and researchers, but is rapidly expanding its public programs and spaces. Wisconsin Sea Grant also has an office there.

“We want to connect people with this area,” says Erika Washburn, NERR manager. “We embed that in all our research and outreach.”

## ONGOING EFFORTS

For some in Superior, the current wave of positive momentum flows from a deep, long-standing pool of community effort.

His love of Superior motivated Jeff Heller when he bought the 1890 Trade and Commerce Building, better known as the old Superior City Hall, not far from the Blatnik Bridge. Back then, the long-abandoned building had pigeons flying freely in the upper floors and years of neglect had decimated the bottom levels.

Today the five-story brownstone and the old police station next to it house an art gallery, a yoga studio, the popular Red Mug Coffeehouse and Bake Shop plus work space for several artists and a chiropractor. Just last fall, Jeff opened the Spirit Room, a tavern and restaurant.

Community support and old-fashioned tenacity for his project made Jeff’s vision come true and has made him a champion of Superior’s revitalization.

“The business community recognizes that Superior has its own identity now,” Jeff says. “There is starting to become a reason to cross the bridge.”



Duluth resident and freelance writer Molly Hoeg enjoyed her discovery of the “other” Twin Port and plans to make more frequent visits to her city’s twin.