

Sustainable (re)Growth:



Suisun City, CA and Leavenworth, WA

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The gold rush and westward expansion saw the founding of many rural towns across the west. Suisun City and Leavenworth are two such towns, who share remarkably similar histories and fates. Both towns were settled by pioneers going west in search of a fresh start. As various forms of transit and trade expanded across America, both towns became bustling centers of commerce. But when the railroads pulled out of these two towns, both lost their status as centers of commerce and became ghost towns. Years later, through the visions held by a few willful residents, both of these towns saw a rebirth.

The task of rebuilding a city offers many opportunities for improvement which would not be available otherwise. Suisun City and Leavenworth went about this task in very different manners, with varying degrees of sustainable design worked into the blueprints.

Suisun City

The California gold rush brought new settlers to the area of Suisun slough, which was originally inhabited by the Patwin Native Americans. In 1848, Suisun City was officially founded¹. Because of its location near the deep waters of Suisun slough, Suisun City and its river port soon became a bustling commercial center. In 1868, the Transcontinental Railroad



Figure 1: Suisun City before redevelopment²

was routed through the city, bringing more trade and a healthy economy¹. However, by the 1960's, the major routes of trade and transit had shifted, and when highway I-80 was built, Suisun City was passed over, thus marking a time of declining commerce and a steep fall in economic development¹.

In the 1980's, Suisun City had become another struggling rural town, its Main Street lined with boarded up buildings. The waterfront, which had 100 years back been the town's pride and source of wealth, was now polluted by poor maintenance practices on the part of an oil refinery and storage site¹. Nearby Crescent neighborhood was notorious for a high crime rate, making people too frightened to spend any leisure time around town or near the waterfront. In a 1999 comparison of Bay Area cities, the *San Francisco Chronicle* rated Suisun City at the

bottom of the list¹. With no economic growth and no community investment, Suisun became a commuter town.

But a new mayor with a vision brought much needed change. In 1986, James Spering was elected with a plan to change the whole character of Suisun City, and make it the healthy, bustling town it once had been¹. His first move was to commission a new city hall, to replace the trailer that had



Figure 2: The new city hall behind the revamped marina²

previously been used. The plans illustrated a beautifully glass-domed building to be built near the dangerous Crescent neighborhood¹. While at first Spering's plan was met with incredulity, he soon had a citizen committee of residents, business people, elected officials, planning staff and architects to back him up¹. In 1991, the "Downtown Specific Plan" was adopted, based on the notion that "Downtown Suisun City has the opportunity to become a unique waterfront town that is pleasant to live in and at the same time serves as a regional destination"¹⁰.

With pressure from the city, the oil refinery moved away from the waterfront and cleaned the contaminated area. The newly opened waterfront was cleared to make way for a marina, now in heavy use, and a 5,000 foot promenade, ending at the now popular Town Plaza, which features an outdoor stage and a lawn, where people come to spend a sunny afternoon. This new public space has brought festivals and events which attract more than 150,000 spectators from the surrounding area¹. No longer a ghost town, Suisun City is now a local destination.



Figure 3: Attractive storefronts in the new commercial center²

Sustainability in Suisun City

The Downtown Specific Plan, which served as the outline for redevelopment in Suisun City, clearly set sustainability as its main goal, with plans for "a working Waterfront, an Historic Main Street, established

neighborhoods, direct freeway access, an AMTRAK/Intercity Rail Station, a rich natural environment, and a location that is in the path of regional growth”¹⁰. Impressively, all of these goals were met.

One of the most notable aspects of Suisun City’s redevelopment is the focus that was put on keeping a local flavor to the community. The city encouraged small local businesses to set up shop along Main Street. With the Façade Improvement Plan, they matched any funds put towards storefront renovations, livening up the sidewalks with cheerful frontages¹. Rather than taking the perhaps easier path of selling huge chunks of property to big chain stores, which would have brought quick money—but also would have meant unsustainable dependence on outside business for the city’s economy, Suisun City carefully kept the local feel intact, giving the city a memorable character and sense of place. With a development team which included a committee of residents and local business owners as well as the usual architects and policy-makers, Spring ensured that all decisions made were fair to all parties involved.

The city planners also made sure to make full use of Suisun City’s natural resources, in cleaning up the once polluted Suisun Slough. In building the marina, the Suisun City developers met multiple key standards of sustainable development. They made mixed use of the waterfront area in building both the marina, (used for commerce), and the promenade, (making Suisun City’s downtown area more inviting to pedestrians). They also reused the silt dredged from the bottom of the slough to rebuild the wetlands, revitalizing and preserving open space¹.

Before Spring’s mayoralty, the empty shell of Suisun City had been surrounded by sprawling, car-dependent suburbs. In keeping with the sustainable goal of reducing dependence on cars by offering multiple transit options, easily accessible bus and train stations were built, reestablishing Suisun City as the transit center it once was. The new bus stations serviced Greyhound and other long distance lines, and Amtrak trains to Sacramento and other Bay Area cities offered commuting alternatives to the highway.

An alternative to driving and public transit is, of course, to walk. Walkability is an important quality to consider when thinking in terms of sustainable design. Suisun City makes walking within the downtown area of the city very easy, with its mix of residences and shops, as well as open areas for strollers to sit and chat, and making the streets inviting for pedestrians. Besides single family homes, the city also has many live/work units. This type of housing turns the “commute” into a walk downstairs, putting one less car on the roads, and is attractive for

residents like Babs Curless, who awakes at 5 AM every morning to walk downstairs and start baking biscuits for her popular restaurant, Babs Delta Diner¹.

Leavenworth

Leavenworth's story starts in a familiar way. Originally inhabited by the Yakima, Chinook and Wenatchee tribes, who fished Icicle Creek for salmon, the area around the Icicle Flats was settled by pioneers moving west. The town of Leavenworth was founded in 1890⁵. The town was named for Captain Charles Leavenworth, president of the Okanagon Investment Company (one of the first commercial developers in this area of Washington), and a stockholder in the Great Northern Railroad, who were quick to build a hub through Leavenworth³. The hub had a switchyard, roundhouse and large freight yard⁶. Just like Suisun City, Leavenworth had become a center of commerce, blessed with a booming economy. In 1903, the Lamb-David Lumber Company built the second largest sawmill in Washington State⁶, which brought thousands of jobs and new residents to Leavenworth. The town was a refreshment center for trappers and miners who traveled the surrounding mountainous area⁶.

But in 1922, Leavenworth's fate took a turn for the worse. The GNRR moved its roundhouse to Wenatchee⁶. With the loss of the freight yard, in 1926 the sawmill was forced to close⁶. With the loss of the sawmill and railway hub, many jobs vanished. The community endured by subsistence farming and trading goods and services with neighbors, but it was a feeble survival. Throughout the Great Depression and the 1940's and 50's, many downtown storefronts were vacant, and Leavenworth was truly a ghost town, with a dwindling population.

The few remaining business owners of Leavenworth wanted to turn things around for their struggling town. One resident, Ted Price, had spent time in Bavarian Germany during the war, and had fallen in love with the beauty of the countryside and the small Bavarian hamlets. In 1963, with the aid of a consultant from the University of Washington Bureau of Community Development, a group of concerned residents started project LIFE (Leavenworth Improvement For Everyone)⁶, with Price as its chairman. Because of Leavenworth's lack of population base, project LIFE would need more than a new city hall to begin the turnaround—as well as repopulating the downtown area, Leavenworth's economy needed a jumpstart. The LIFE committee decided to invest in tourism, and to “go Bavarian”. Starting with 7 local building

owners, Project Alpine was launched to guide the Bavarianization of the town⁸. Project Alpine is now an incorporated part of the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce.



Figure 4: der Markt Platz Gift Shop, before and after⁸

Always on the brink of bankruptcy, the members of Project Alpine purchased dilapidated buildings downtown, and with the aid of architect Heintz Ulbricht, rebuilt the crumbling buildings in the model of a Bavarian town³. It is noteworthy that the entire redevelopment effort was privately funded by residents mortgaging everything they had, there was no federal assistance. Leavenworth residents educated themselves on German culture³, some even adopting faux accents to make the visitor experience more authentic.

Sustainability in Leavenworth

Making use of natural resources while ensuring the preservation of the town's many green spaces, in 1965 the frontage on the Wenatchee River was opened up making way for what is now the Leavenworth Waterfront Park⁸. Four seasonal festivals were begun, to make use of the beautiful new park: the Autumn Leaf Festival, the Christmas Lighting, Maifest and Art in the Park⁸. Today there are more than 27 annual festivals, bringing visitors and participants from across the Pacific Northwest.

Project Alpine members populated their newly remodeled Bavarian-style buildings with authentic businesses, and encouraged other residents to do the same. Many previously welfare-dependent farmer-turned-local-business-owner residents set up shop along Main Street, featuring small, authentic bakeries, candy shops, a music shop and a



Figure 4: Maifest in Leavenworth⁸

nutcracker museum. Leavenworth's streets now boast handsome rows of inviting Bavarian storefronts, sustainably rebuilt on existing development exclusively by stakeholder participation and funds.

Leavenworth was deemed "America's top holiday town" by the Arts and Entertainment Channel⁶, and it is obvious why; the charming new architecture and the tradition surrounding the much loved festivals, as well as the many uniquely local, (local in terms of ownership, if not in terms of origin), museums and shops foster a unique sense of place, bringing many return visitors each holiday season.

A key aspect to sustainable design in a town is accessibility, walkability and transportation options. In this respect, Leavenworth and Suisun City are not quite comparable. Suisun City is just that: a city, surrounded by suburbs; one of the goals of its redevelopment was that residents would be capable of traveling within the surrounding neighborhoods and from the neighborhoods into town without heavy dependence on cars. Leavenworth, on the other hand, is a rural community. There is the small, condensed center of town, with the main streets lined with live/work units—tourist accessible shops on bottom and apartments on top. There are also a handful of Bavarian inns for visitors to choose from. There are a few single family homes and multiple-condo buildings on the periphery of this downtown area. Once you leave these small streets, the surrounding area is farmland and mountains. Because of the town's small size, residents in this main area and visitors at the inns can walk anywhere within the town, and many residents bike or walk to work⁹. For transit to and from Leavenworth, there is a daily Amtrak train to and from nearby Wenatchee, a public school bus line and transit bus lines from Leavenworth to other nearby towns. While the transit options are varied and within Leavenworth people hardly ever drive, most of the rural residents drive when leaving their property.

Conclusion

Suisun City and Leavenworth, both once bustling centers of commerce, both abandoned by the very companies that had brought them wealth, both turned to ghost towns, both brought to new life by the visions of a few impassioned individuals. The superficial similarities abound, but the fundamental aspects of these two cities' rebirths vary quite a bit.

One quality that residents of both communities enjoy is a sense of place. With Suisun City's focus on local businesses, the new sense of community among residents is strong. And no one can argue that a Bavarian village in the middle of Washington State is easy to forget. While both of these cities went about finding their sense of place in extremely different fashions, the end result was the same: residents who feel like their community has something unique to offer.

Both of these towns made the wise decision of rebuilding on and within existing development, thus electing not to participate in other cities' sprawling habits. Spering could easily have chosen to start fresh with a new location for downtown, laying down new pavement for its streets and city hall, just as project LIFE could have put forward the idea of building another suburb to attract new residents. Instead, Spering rebuilt the existing downtown, and gave new life to the old boarded up buildings. The members of Project Alpine set an example for other residents by buying old dilapidated buildings in downtown Leavenworth and remodeling them, rather than starting from scratch on the outskirts of town.

While one of these cities looked outward to tourism for its rebirth and one looked within, both were given a second chance and both were reborn as sustainable communities. Suisun City residents feel safe and welcome again in their streets, and Leavenworth's main strip is no longer lined with crumbling facades and empty windows, but with beautiful, quaint architecture and the smiling faces of a revitalized population and visitors from up and down the coast.

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