

USA Niagara Economic Development Strategy Niagara Falls, New York

Ernest Bleinberger and Taylor Yewell led the team that prepared the highly successful USA Niagara Development Strategy, and economic development plan that incorporated the adaptive reuse of existing structures, new construction opportunities, and a host of interrelated projects and programs that focused on attracting investment to the urban core. The plan consisted of 24 Strategic Links, placed into a three-phase implementation process. The re-printed newsletter that follows highlights several projects and accomplishments that either Mr. Bleinberger and/or Mr. Yewell were instrumental in developing. A brief summary of these elements of the USA Niagara Development Strategy follows.

United Office Building – This iconic structure was identified at the outset by Mr. Bleinberger as a key target of the development strategy to come. The historic building (tallest in Niagara Falls) had been vacant for more than 20 years, resulting in a statement of negativity and disinvestment to the development community and public at large. Following results of a market and financial feasibility analysis (prepared by Mr. Yewell and Mr. Bleinberger) it was determined that upscale residential condominiums and a small amount of office and specialty retail space was supportable. The project was incorporated into the Development Strategy as a Phase I action item, packaged within a successful developer solicitation, and is now under renovation.



3rd Street Entertainment District – Strategy 5 principal Taylor Yewell prepared a feasibility study and development plan for this corridor in downtown Niagara Falls. Essentially an economic development strategy, the plan sought to leverage visitation and patronage from the new Seneca Niagara Casino and the Niagara Falls tourism industry at large. The study was building and site specific and included a host of recommendations that USA Niagara has been in the process of implementing since the plan was completed in the spring of 2004.

Niagara Experience Center – The concept of a hybrid tourism, entertainment, and cultural center originated with Mr. Bleinberger, although the notion of a historical museum in Niagara Falls had been in the mix for some time. The NEC building program and associated funding and finance strategy, as well as a site analysis and organizational recommendation, were the subject of a separate feasibility study prepared by Strategy 5 principals. Mr. Bleinberger assisted with the formation of the 501 c (3), initial capital campaign efforts, and positioning of the project to receive significant state funding through a pledge from Governor Pataki.



Conference Center Niagara Falls – Mr. Bleinberger and his colleagues identified the vacant Falls Street Faire Building in the heart of downtown as an excellent candidate for reuse as a high-tech conference center. This recommendation was in response to the need for reactivation of space, as well as the conversion of the former Niagara Falls Convention to the Seneca Niagara Casino. The gap in the group meetings market supply would have been devastating to the city's hotel industry, and otherwise served as an opportunity to reposition Niagara Falls within the conference market – a segment that is more in keeping with the city's scale and the competitive environment associated with the convention center business. Again following a market and financial feasibility analysis, a viable recommendation was made and USA Niagara set about the task of acquiring and redeveloping the facility. It opened to great fanfare in the spring of 2005.



Seneca Niagara Casino – This facility marked the first Class III gaming facility operated by the Seneca Nation of Indians in New York State. The process of developing their gaming interests included the completion of a market and financial feasibility study prepared by Mr. Bleinberger in 1996. At the time, the Seneca Nation was active with Class II gaming (high-stakes bingo) and was considering entry into the casino market. Two primary development scenarios were tested: The redevelopment of the Buffalo Convention Center and nearby Hyatt Hotel; and, a Niagara Falls facility. The Seneca Niagara Casino has performed within 15% of Mr. Bleinberger’s projections of ten years ago – the actual revenue and attendance that much higher than forecast.

