

## Beautifying Oshkosh

The team has had losing seasons the past few years, so they've brought you in as the new coach. Your job is to turn things around. So, do you begin by:

- (a) teaching them some new trick plays;
- (b) installing a new defensive scheme; or
- (c) working on the fundamentals?

Of course, you answered (c). After all, what good are trick plays without solid blocking, or a new defense without solid tackling? But if that's what works in sports, why isn't it our strategy for economic development – by getting the fundamentals, like our basic public infrastructure, down first?

And how bad is that infrastructure? A new colleague of mine moved into town last month. Her father flew in from Thailand to help her move. And he described our city streets as "worse than Bangkok's". So apparently, our infrastructure is not even Third World good.

So, rather than putzing around with TIFs, how about putting more money into our streets and sewers and the like. Maybe increase everybody's property taxes by \$50 a year – about what you pay for basic cable every month, probably less than a month's worth of cell phone usage – and put the money into stepped up street repair. Maybe if we were actually willing to invest in our city streets, outside businesses might find us an attractive place to come to.

But repaving more streets alone is not the answer. Increased repaving would give us smoother streets, but they'd still be ugly. When Hollywood wants to portray a safe, comfortable neighborhood, a good place to live, what image do they show us? Tree lined streets. And when Hollywood wants to portray a place where nobody cares, a place with no civic pride, what do they show us? Well, pretty much any street in Oshkosh.

So here's my proposal: let's create an Oshkosh that looks like a city where people care. With tree lined streets – real trees, lindens and maples and elms and the like. Let's figure out what it would take, and then do it.

First, we'd have to bury the power lines along repaved streets. After all, hacked up trees don't exactly suggest civic pride, do they. That means extra costs for the homeowners – burying the lines leading up to their houses – so let's reduce their costs by either eliminating the assessments on adjoining properties, or rebating some fixed sum, say up to \$1000, to help cover their power line costs.

Then, as part of the repaving project, we plant trees along the terraces. Real trees. Trees that will grow to shade our streets during the summer.

Now, this is going to cost more money, but anything worth having is going to cost something. One way to hold those costs down is to reduce at least some street widths to 26 feet wide – wide enough for two traffic lanes and one parking lane. Many, perhaps most of our residential streets really don't need parking on both sides. A 26 foot street would cost about 18% less, and generate about 18% less storm water runoff. Narrower residential streets would allow us to do about 10% more reconstruction (not all streets should be narrower) at the same taxpayer cost.

If we started now, it would still take a lifetime to convert Oshkosh into a tree-lined city: 50 years to redo all our streets, and another 30 years for all the trees to reach a mature size. But if we don't start now, it'll never happen. We can, and should, turn Oshkosh into a city where people really care. Assuming, of course, that people actually care.