



Wisconsin's Commercial REALTORS® Partner With State & Local Governments to Make Smart Growth Real – February 2014

"Like so many other mid-western states with industrial based cities, Wisconsin has spent the past few years trying to revamp and recover," says Jim Villa, President and CEO of Wisconsin's 575-member Commercial REALTOR® Association (CARW.)

That's why, when the state created the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation in 2012, and tasked it with developing a new strategic plan for economic development, job creation, and related matters including transportation, land use, and the environment, it invited the Commercial REALTORS® to be involved. It was not on a whim. CARW has been working hard, repeatedly demonstrating that its members are not only essential to economic development, but at the forefront. "We've really put a focus on public policy, and advocacy, and have made a real effort to elect candidates who understand our business, and to develop relationships with those we haven't supported initially. Either way, we have capitalized on the REALTOR® brand to showcase our members' expertise as economic developers," says Villa.

The big picture is simple, he continues, "The state wants companies and their employees to locate here; REALTORS® want to aid in transactions. Commercial REALTORS® really are site selectors for business, adding to the tax base in a very real, very significant way. So our members have a great deal to offer to any economic development advisory board."

Losing no time, CARW applied for and received a Smart Growth Action Grant in order to research, develop, and draft a report for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, with an emphasis on the Smart Growth policies long espoused by CARW and the Wisconsin Association of REALTORS® (WRA) -- the originators of *On Common Ground* magazine, now published by the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®. It also participated in two economic development summits in June 2013, where CARW members brought prospective clients interested in doing business in the state to meet with the governor and other state officials. "That initial grant allowed us to sit at the table, roll up our sleeves, and be heard as the road map was assembled," notes Villa.

Then, fast on its heels, came another opportunity, more local, specific, and urgent, that prompted CARW to apply for another grant from NAR's Smart Growth program. The aging arena that is home to Milwaukee's NBA basketball team, a Division 1 college team, as well as being the venue for minor league hockey, concerts, circuses, and other cultural events, had reached a crisis point: the NBA had declared it unfit to sustain a team. Unless a half-billion-dollar



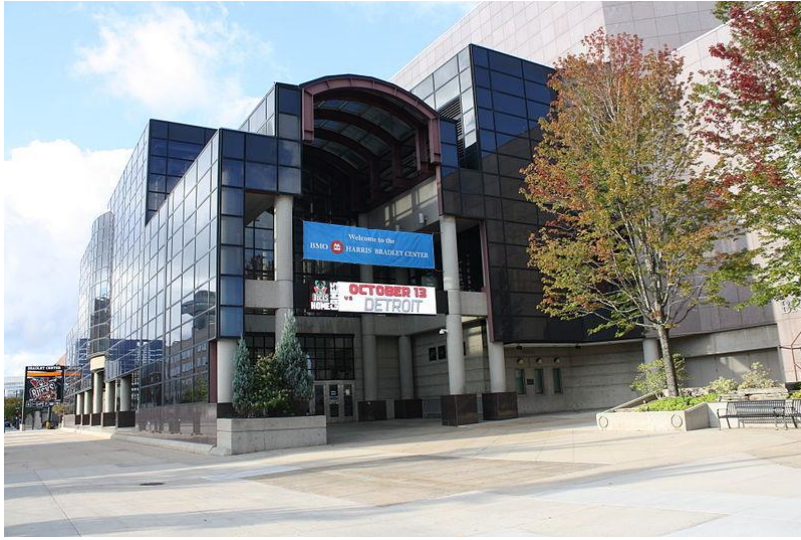
investment was made to renovate or rebuild, the city would lose its team in three years. "The issue is a lightning rod," explains Villa, "In a state with very polarized politics no one wants to go on record in favor of spending public funds on an arena for professional basketball."

Commercial REALTORS[®], however, see not only the tremendous development potential in the area surrounding a renovated or rebuilt arena; they understand the threat to the surrounding property values, should the arena disappear. "Where it now stands, at one of the major entrances to the city, it could become an iconic symbol of Milwaukee. It is blocks away from the central business district, and several corridors of restaurants, an original mega-mall, the convention center, and at least one neighborhood that is prime for development; so if the arena goes away, it will bring a lot more down with it, in terms of economic value."

CARW took a bold step to engage serious discussion of the arena's future. With a Smart Growth Action Grant from NAR, it hosted a breakfast event in October 2013 to address the issue of investing public funds in such a catalytic project. It was aggressively marketed, and attracted REALTORS[®], business leaders, public officials, and a few members of the press. According to Villa, not only did the event provide valuable insights from the three experts brought in to speak, it helped to foster relationships, created conversations, and extended the value of the REALTOR[®] brand. "This is a difficult problem we're facing," acknowledges Villa, "and the event communicated to public officials that we are willing partners in working to solve it." Villa and Mike Ruzicka, president of the Greater Milwaukee Association of REALTORS[®], have since been named to a task force studying the future of the arena and other cultural and entertainment institutions in the area.

"We've come a long way in the past few years," Villa says. "We've made our elected officials and the economic development professionals think of us as partners."

To learn more about how Wisconsin's commercial REALTORS[®] are being recognized as an indispensable part of the state's economic development, contact Jim Villa, President and CEO of the Commercial Association of REALTORS[®] Wisconsin, at jim@carw.com or 414.271.2021.



CARW is part of a 48-member task force looking at key facilities in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, including the possible replacement of their sports arena and how to fund it.

