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## Appleton community development director to retire in May

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Hensler says he'll maintain interest in river growth

**By Steve Wideman**

*Post-Crescent staff writer* January 27, 2008

APPLETON — As an 8-year-old growing up in New Jersey a mile from the Atlantic Ocean, Peter Hensler fell in love with the rowboat presented to him by his father, Ray.

Hensler would pull the oars many thousands of times, each pull adding just a little bit of energy to his growing passion for rowing and the water.

Five decades later that passion would manifest itself in Hensler's job and give him daily peace of mind.

Hensler retires in May, eight years after taking the reins, first, as Appleton's economic development director and, two years ago, in the expanded role of community development director.

But the 58-year former banker and alderman will not give up his warm weather regimen of visiting the river at daybreak and guiding his 27-foot, 34-pound carbon fiber rowing shell, a delicate sculling boat he calls "Son Ray," on a 9,000-meter course from Appleton to Kimberly and back.

"I'll always be drawn to water and appreciate it," said Hensler, whose desk sports a pewter sculling boat paperweight. A pen and ink drawing of a solo sculler rests on the wall above.

Hensler also plans to maintain his interest in development along the Fox River — development that blossomed during his 16 years influencing interest in riverfront development as an alderman from 1993 to 2001 and as economic development director from 2001 to the present.

"Had I not taken the job I have now I would still have a passion for the river. I'm anxious to see how development continues along the river," said Hensler, who nods in approval when asked if he was the right man in the right job at the right time.

Hensler, who celebrates his 59th birthday days after retiring, said he wants to sit back for a couple months to enjoy the city's economic progress in the time he stepped into and out of the never-ending cycle of municipal growth.

"A whole lot of people are involved in community development. I was just a cog in that wheel," Hensler said.

Hensler and his wife, Etta, came to Appleton from Kenosha in 1974 as part of a career move in which he was named manager of Great Midwest Bank on College Avenue.

He entered politics in 1993 when he was elected to the first of four two-year terms as District 5 alderman. He was appointed economic development director in 2001.

"You can't be in banking without some experience in economic development issues," he said.

Mayor Tim Hanna said Hensler's background in banking and city government helped him to realize community development is not the result of a single entity.

"There are so many pieces that must fall into place for development to happen. Over the years, Peter has done a very good job of establishing relationships with the right people to get the job done," Hanna said.

"You have to have the ability to put on the hat of a developer, the hat of a banker and a city hat and know how to balance all three. That's what the community development director job is all about," he said.

Hensler credits a wide range of public and private initiatives to create a diversified economy in Appleton that he feels gives the city strength against fears of recession.

"We've had some quality projects that brought value to the community," he said.

Hensler pointed to the success of the Northeast Business Park, retail development on the city's east side near State 441 and riverfront development, particularly ground-breaking efforts by the owners of Fratello's restaurants and projects in the former Atlas Mill along with development of the Vulcan Heritage Park.

"Without Fratello's and the Atlas Mill projects we never would have gotten the Trolley Square project," he said. "We have a strengthening downtown and development near 441, and E. Calumet Street has been no less than dramatic. But the softest spot in my heart is for the riverfront."

"When you are down on the river it is exceptionally beautiful," said Hensler, a member of the Fox Valley Rowing Club and a sculling participant in the annual Badger State Games.

Hensler said he is excited about plans to construct a condominium and retail project, tentatively called Riverheath, along the river's east side beneath the College Avenue bridge. The 15 acres have been the focus of an environmental cleanup project overseen by the state Department of Natural Resources.

"The state DNR has been a huge help in redevelopment along the Fox River so we can get these former industrial properties back into a positive use," he said.