



# RENOVATIONS DRIVEN BY THE COMMUNITY



When deciding where to stop for your next fill-up or for that last ingredient for dinner, oftentimes the place that's most convenient comes out ahead. However, according to a recent NACS survey, consumers would drive 5 minutes out of their way for a store they prefer.

For some, this may mean heading to the place where they can find the local foods they love. For others, it's the stop where they can grab bait, a sandwich and a beverage to fuel up for their fishing trip.

The Cenex® branded River Country Co-op in Merrill, Wis., strives to fulfill all these needs and more for their community. The team is in the c-store business for the people, and the community drives their passion for the store every day.

"We're the main store in town where many people get their gas and groceries," said Bruce Mlsna, general manager and CEO of River Country Co-op. "Having the opportunity to make upgrades to our store and to our offerings through

the Cenex LIFT initiative has allowed us to better meet the needs of our community."

The renovation was roughly a two-year project for the River Country team. Initially, plans to break ground were set for 2020 before the pandemic forced them to reconsider. This pause ended up being a blessing in disguise, allowing Mlsna and his team to consider other upgrades not originally planned both to the exterior and interior.

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To ensure the plans would come to life, Mlsna worked closely with Cenex through the LIFT initiative, a lighting, image and facilities transformation designed to revamp Cenex-branded stores through a series of exterior and interior updates, along with optional no-interest loan funding for in-store improvements.

#### **Drawing customers in**

As with any brick-and-mortar business, an appealing exterior is a major reason why customers choose one location over another. This is especially true in the convenience store business, and aspects like lighting can have a big impact on a customer's choice to stop in. The Cenex brand wanted to refresh its forecourt image and quickly realized

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store interiors needed to be updated as well. So, the LIFT initiative was born.

The Halo image includes improvements to the canopy, forecourt and main ID sign, including a 360-degree LED light band, new Cenex logo signs and three-dimensional backlit blue arches.

“Anyone driving down the road can see the canopy and lighting from blocks away,” said Brad Podevels, vice president, retail east, of River Country Co-op. “The Halo image gives our location a really friendly feeling, and with all the new lighting it looks very nice and approachable after dark.”

Having been motivated to create the perfect space for the community, the team designed the store to mirror their shoppers. These decisions included designing a log-cabin-inspired exterior, maintaining the fuels customers expect and creating areas that welcome people to stay a while.

“We want people to sit down, have a sandwich or coffee and chat a little bit,” said Podevels. “We have a seating area inside the store, and as summer rolls around we’ll add some picnic tables out front so anyone can sit outside and enjoy each other’s company.”



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### Local convenience

Much like the exterior, the interior offerings and amenities needed to reflect the needs of the community. The River Country team wanted to make their store experience the best it could be, so they listened to feedback they received from their community. When they heard customers were craving an easier option for fishing and hunting supplies, the team was happy to oblige.

“We have the Wisconsin River that runs through Merrill and multiple lakes north of us,” said Podevels. “So we put a really nice bait shop in here as part of the in-store upgrades. It’s been a smart business decision because most people are picking up their minnows plus a sandwich or beverages.”

Being locally owned and operated, the location’s in-store upgrades made through the LIFT initiative were completely custom to the Merrill community. In addition to the bait shop, Podevels and his team added hot food options, a beer cave, open-air coolers, clean bathrooms and many local food options.

“We always try to support our local business community as much as we can,” said Mlsna. “A lot of the things we offer are from local farmers too, like milk, meats, cheese and honey.”

### Business impact

With any major renovation, considering the business impact is a key factor. For River Country Co-op, moving forward with the renovation through the LIFT initiative was a no-brainer.

“Partnering with Cenex continues to be great because we’re both cooperatives, so there’s a common understanding of how the business works,” said Podevels. “Doing a project

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through LIFT is an amazing way to build your business. It’s going to help you grow your business. It’s going to increase inside sales. It’s going to increase field sales. It’s going to draw people in.”

Since reopening, River Country has seen an increase in inside sales of about 30%. At the pump, they’re seeing a 15% increase in sales and estimate that will increase another 10-15% as summer hits and tourists begin driving through more frequently.

As for other Cenex branded locations, there’s no slowdown in sight for the LIFT initiative. Renovations on all Cenex-branded forecourts are well underway.

“We look forward to partnering with current and potentially future Cenex-branded c-stores throughout their renovations,” said Akhtar Hussain, director of refined fuels marketing at CHS. “An investment in the store is an investment in the community, and we’re excited to see how store owners continue to elevate their locations through LIFT.” ■



**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CENEX LIFT INITIATIVE, VISIT [CENEX.COM/LIFT](https://www.cenex.com/lift).**