

DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT

CRESTON, IOWA

September 24 - 26, 2019



Conducted By:

IOWA DOWNTOWN RESOURCE CENTER



IOWA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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The following report summarizes the observations and recommendations resulting from an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Assessment conducted in Creston, Iowa. In preparation of this report, the Team learned about Creston's development history and plans for future development. The Assessment Team's familiarization process began with a review of materials supplied prior to the visit, a pre-visit survey with a sample of 124 returned surveys, a driving tour of the city and a walking tour of the downtown commercial district. The intensive three-day visit also included interviews with approximately 100 community leaders, individuals and groups representing the public and private sectors and a community meeting. Based upon these activities and the Assessment Team's extensive working knowledge in downtown economic development, this report summarizes their findings and recommendations for Creston.

ASSESSMENT TEAM

The Iowa Economic Development Authority's Assessment Team included five downtown development professionals:

TIM REINDERS, Design Specialist, Main Street Iowa Program. In this capacity, Tim provides technical assistance and training in all areas of design and preservation, storefront design drawings and general architectural and planning services to all 53 of the participating Iowa Main Street communities. Tim has been involved with Main Street since 1988 when he began his career as a local Main Street director in Clinton, Iowa before joining the state program. Over the years he has worked with numerous other Main Street coordinating programs across the country providing training and technical assistance including Wisconsin, Nebraska, Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, New Jersey, Delaware, New Hampshire, Portland, OR and Boston, MA. Tim has served on a number of boards and committees at the state and national level addressing Main Street, historic preservation and community development issues. Tim attended Iowa State University where he studied Architecture and Community and Regional Planning.



JEFF GEERTS, EcoDistricts AP, NCI CS & CM Special Projects Manager, Iowa Economic Development Authority, Des Moines, Iowa. Working for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for 15 years and the Iowa Economic Development Authority for the last 11+ years, Jeff has more than 25 years of grant writing, grant management, and program development experience with an emphasis on environmentally sustainable development. Jeff's expertise is matching up a community's vision with the resources to make the vision a reality. Jeff is actively involved with several nonprofit organizations and currently is a board member of Des Moines Heritage Trust. Jeff is a co-owner of Millennium HRM Press, a publisher of public administration and nonprofit management focused case studies and textbooks. For the last 20 years Jeff has programmed an award winning international comparative policy course in best practices for community leaders and graduate public administration students in the Drake University College of Business and Public Administration. He regularly speaks at local, state and national conferences on sustainable community development practices. Along with being an EcoDistricts Accredited Professional and certified in the National Charrette Institute's Charrette System and Charrette Management, Jeff has a Bachelor of Science degree in management science and statistics from St. Ambrose University and master's degree in public administration from Drake University.



TERRY POE BUSCHKAMP CMSM, CTP, Promotion and Special Projects Specialist for the Iowa Economic Development Authority's Main Street Iowa program has been with IEDA since 2008. She provides professional services to communities as the lead trainer in the area of Promotion; and is the coordinator for the Iowa Downtown Conference and Main Street Iowa Awards. Previously, Buschkamp served as Executive Director for: Main Street Waterloo, the Waterloo Convention & Visitors Bureau and Waterloo Downtown Council. She was in management for a major retail chain and taught Tourism Marketing as Adjunct Professor at the University of Northern Iowa. Buschkamp is recognized as a Certified Main Street Manager by the National Main Street Center; has a BA from the University of Northern Iowa; is a graduate of Iowa Association of Industry's Leadership Iowa and the Iowa Tourism Leadership Development programs; and received a Certified Tour Professional designation from the National Tour Association. She has written articles for state and national publications and presented at state and national Downtown conferences.



DENNIS REYNOLDS delivers award winning master planning, urban design, site design and public art with his unique combination of innovative design; presentation and listening skills; quick hand drawings; and pro-active facilitation of the design process. Prior to creating his own consulting practice, Reynolds Urban Design, he provided senior level design services and leadership at HOK (Kansas City), Sasaki (Boston) and NBBJ (Columbus). He founded and led the innovative HOK S+V+E "Design Studio", facilitating cutting edge multi-disciplined design concepts. His major projects include Ho Chi Minh City's Thu Thiem Peninsula Master Plan, Nanjing Olympic Sports Park (that hosted the 2005 China Games and the 2008 Summer Olympics), The Great American Ballpark for the Cincinnati Reds and the Dubai Autodrome Formula One Racing Community. As Director of Design for a major Midwest real estate development company from 2005 to 2011, Dennis was responsible for groundbreaking projects including the "New Urbanist" Village of Ponderosa and "Shimmer" lakeside terrace. Recent projects include urban design, site design and public art for the emerging downtown Des Moines Bridge District, the North Kansas City Vision Plan, East Village's City Square, Bondurant's Swings and Fireflies, Overland Park Medical Center's "Heritage" public art trail and Edina Grandview Urban Design Concepts. Dennis has a Bachelor of Arts from Wheaton College with concentrations in Fine Arts, Economics and Group Dynamics and a Master of Landscape Architecture from Kansas State University. He currently serves on both the Urban Design Review Board for the City of Des Moines and the Iowa Urban Land Institute Board, volunteers for multiple Dog Rescue groups and provides therapy dog visits with Mister Cotton.



JIM THOMPSON CMSM, HREDFP, serves as a Downtown Economic Development Specialist covering development for downtown districts for the Iowa Economic Development Authority. He served at the local level in all aspects including program director, board member and volunteer. Jim received certification as a Historic Real Estate Development Finance Professional from the National Development Council. He earned his Certified Main Street Managers credentials through the National Main Street Center. He engages communities in market analysis including data analysis, business retention, recruitment, and implementation strategies. He has also led efforts in tax increment finance, urban revitalization, housing & real estate development, branding and one-on-one business technical assistance for Iowa's communities. Jim serves on the Iowa Rural Development Council Executive Board and leads the Empower Rural Iowa Leadership Taskforce. Jim is the grant administrator for the Community Catalyst Building Remediation grant program. He has over 25 years' experience in community development, retail management and served on a City Council for 10 years. Jim has also served as a consultant for the National Main Street Center, worked in several states and presented multiple times at the National Main Streets Conference.



OVERVIEW

This Downtown Assessment report and recommendations for Creston are based on the Team's downtown development experience – totaling over 100 years. Their beliefs are grounded by the philosophy that in order for Downtown to re-establish itself as the social and commercial center of the community – the physical heart and soul of the city – Downtown must become more valuable physically, economically, socially and politically.

The health of Downtown has a direct impact upon the entire community's economic well-being. They are inter-related. Downtown revitalization IS economic development. Downtown is a prime location for incubating small business, it is an affordable location for independent businesses and is historically one of the community's major employers. The commercial center provides a compact environment with multiple stories for commerce, government and living spaces, thus reducing sprawl and the cost associated with extending city services and infrastructure. The pedestrian friendly environment is convenient and accessible, serving as the center (community space) for not only commercial trade but also cultural, social and civic engagement. Historic downtown districts can serve as heritage tourism attractions. A building's condition, the business' viability and maximization of the building's square footage for income generation affect not only the property's value, but also the value of the neighboring properties and real estate in the entire community. Investments in Downtown allow it to "pay its fair share" in taxes resulting in lessening the tax burdens of its citizens and city government.

Most of our memories are directly associated with a place. We "go back" to places we feel good about. We "go back" to places where we have had positive shopping experiences. We "go back" to places where we have had fun. We "go back" to places we think are important. We are also attracted to places where we think we will have a positive experience. We must strive to make Downtown a "go to" kind of destination, not an avoidable area we pass through to get somewhere else.

PURPOSE

The City of Creston worked with the Iowa Downtown Resource Center, Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), to conduct a Downtown Assessment to raise awareness, educate, make recommendations and encourage the local community. In conducting this "self-discovery" process, Creston has begun to empower itself by stepping out of its comfort zone. It is a good sign that the community appears ready to take additional steps to address Downtown's challenges.

This assessment and recommendations should serve as a call to action and provide the community with current information to formulate strategies necessary to address the very serious issue of saving or improving the Downtown for future generations. This report cannot and does not provide all the answers. Ultimately, Creston citizens must explore their options, decide what is relevant and realistic and acquire additional information and resources as they address Uptown Creston's future.

**"Never doubt that a small group of committed
dependable citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
-Margaret Mead**

INTRODUCTION

Creston is a community located in the beautiful rolling hillsides of southwest Iowa. It is the county seat of Union County and is the largest city west of I-35 and south of I-80 in Iowa, making it a regional retail hub.

A number of recreational opportunities can be found in the area, including the Lakes of Union County. Over 2,100 acres of water including five lakes and over 6,000 acres of publicly owned parks, woodlands, prairie and wetland are all located within a 25-mile radius of Creston.

The Assessment Team had the opportunity to drill down to specific challenges and work to help Downtown be even better. Our assessment input comes from a combination of what the assessment team already knew, what we saw and the input we received from the residents of Creston. Local leaders don't always agree. That can be healthy and help encourage local talk about the issues and involvement. We believe that residents do agree on the end result...a healthier downtown (or Uptown, as the central business district is known in Creston). We hope this set of recommendations can be used to take Uptown Creston to the next level.



CRESTON'S ASSETS/STRENGTHS

COMMUNITY

- McKinley Park, Lakes, Trails & Parks
- Museum Complex
- New Emerging Leaders
- Local Technology/Technical Skills
- Strong Regional Retail
- SWICC, Public Schools & St. Malachi
- Employment Center/Local Industry
- Railroad History
- Railroad Quiet Zone
- Hospital (Greater Regional Medical Center)
- Many active Service Clubs
- Popular Farmer's Market
- YMCA
- Local Media (Radio & Newspaper)
- Generally Good Housing Stock
- Street Project/Infrastructure Reinvestment



UPTOWN

- Historic Building Fabric
- Depot/City Hall Complex
- Post Office/Federal Building
- Gibson Memorial Library
- County Seat/Courthouse
- Brick Streets
- Public Art –
Murals/Sculpture/Street Quilt
- UCDA Building Rehabilitation
- CDBG-DTR (Façade Masterplan)
- New Social Events
- Strand Theatre
- Iowa Rehabilitation
- Restaurants/Dining
- New Entrepreneurs with Local Ties
- Fareway



SURVEY

Prior to the Downtown Assessment, Iowa Downtown Resource Center administered an on-line survey to residents of Creston to get their ideas and opinions about the downtown area. Approximately 124 people participated in the survey. A complete summary of responses is included with this report. Survey trends show....

UPTOWN'S GREATEST STRENGTHS:

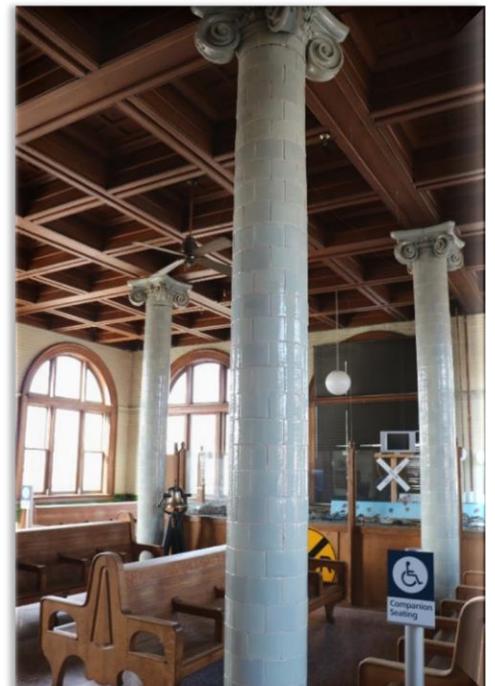
- Business diversity, small/local businesses
- Depot
- Historical qualities, heritage, heart of Creston
- Places to eat
- Long-time businesses, dedicated business owners
- Architecture, buildings with good character that could be basis for revitalization, nostalgia, atmosphere

IF I COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT UPTOWN, IT WOULD BE:

- Less empty storefronts, fill with thriving businesses
- Make it attractive, more color, more curb appeal, inviting, music playing, greenery, art
- Improve old buildings, historic preservation, fix up buildings

HOW DOES UPTOWN CRESTON MAKE YOU FEEL?

- Sad, depressed, we've lost our pride, disappointed
- Ok, could be better, alright, just ok
- Tired, outdated, run down, drab, time capsule
- Hopeful, potential, feel new merging vibe
- Bored, not too lively, low energy, ho hum, no reason to go there



HOW DO YOU WANT UPTOWN CRESTON TO FEEL?

- Vibrant, energizing, upbeat, lively, robust, fun, hustle & bustle, hipster, rejuvenated
- Welcoming, inviting, homey, warm, fresh, friendly, safe
- Proud of it, prideful, like a town that wants to take care of itself
- Happy

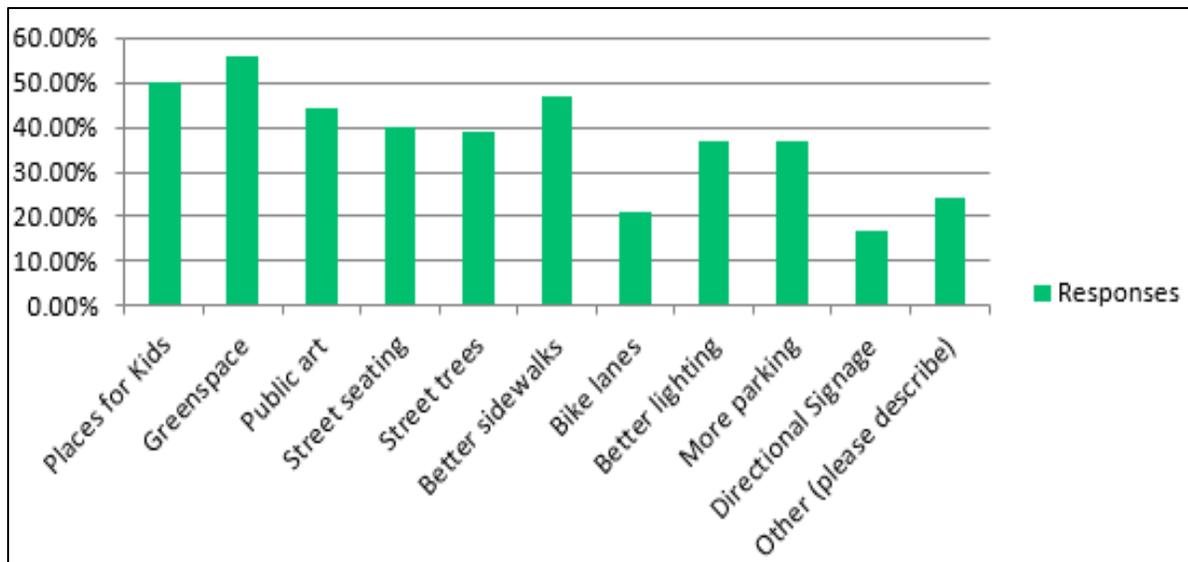
WHAT WOULD IMPROVE THE BUSINESS CLIMATE OF UPTOWN THE MOST?

- More businesses, family friendly, retail shops, variety, interactive, learning, inviting space
- Improve building conditions
- Appearance, curb appeal, flowers, cleanup north Maple, improve infrastructure, cohesive look, lighting
- Events, family activities, Friday After 5 in winter

WHAT TYPE OF NEW BUSINESS WOULD BE MOST SUCCESSFUL IN UPTOWN?

- Brewery
- Clothing/plus size clothing/family clothing/affordable clothing/upscale adult clothing
- Another family friendly restaurant/bigger restaurants/sit-down restaurant with atmosphere
- Home furnishings/décor/home goods/home interior design store
- Candy Shop/Bakery
- Ice cream shop/ice cream shop open evenings
- A small sandwich and ice cream shop/deli/Maid Rite/fast food option

WHICH PUBLIC AMENITIES DO YOU THINK ARE MOST NEEDED IN UPTOWN CRESTON?



ASSESSMENT TEAM'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The Assessment Team's recommendations have been grouped into six themes. It is important to take one step at a time and understand that the longer-term recommendations are not of much consequence until the shorter-term recommendations are addressed. The Assessment Team hopes Creston will assess each recommendation and develop a plan to implement what is right for Creston. As the process gains momentum, community leadership will need to determine additional strategies and develop approaches that are more sophisticated.

Our hope was/is to work with leaders to identify the strengths, challenges and opportunities in a constructive way to help the community improve the vitality of the Downtown over time. We appreciate the openness and honesty of residents and that community leaders allow the Assessment Team to be honest in its findings.

THEME 1: VISION AND PRIORITY

During the site visit, local leaders shared many conflicting thoughts regarding the potential for the Uptown Creston district. Many local leaders felt that the area is no longer relevant as a business district and that the future for businesses, especially retail business is along the Highway 34 corridor. Uptown should be largely dismissed as a business location and should focus on residential development. These same leaders often thought the best approach to Uptown redevelopment would be to remove the vast majority of the existing structures to make way for new development, primarily focused on residential use.

Other leaders were not as pessimistic. They felt that the Uptown area had the potential to be Creston's arts and entertainment district that has a primary focus on eating/dining establishments as well as entertainment and social venues. A mixture of specialty retail and urban style living was also seen by many as a viable strategy to improve the district.

Either of these options could easily be realized. The focus is up to the residents of Creston to decide. While there is a growing "buzz" about renewed activity in the area, it currently appears that there is no clear vision or plan for Uptown. Without this established plan or vision, attracting investment becomes much more challenging since an investor cannot be assured that the initial investment made will be supported by additional city investments or regular additional private sector investments.

Southern Iowa Council of Governments (SICOG) is currently updating Creston's comprehensive plan. While it is certain to contain many elements that are specific to the Uptown district, it is not clear how important the success of Uptown is to the rank and file community member. Without Uptown being a community priority, attracting volunteerism and other involvement could be a struggle.

Having no plan "is like leaping off a precipice and trying to knit yourself a parachute on the way down."

— Kelli Jae Baeli, *Armchair Detective*

"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

— Antoine De Saint-Exupery

"If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

— Lewis Carroll



ACTION STEPS:

As a community, determine if the Uptown area is actually a community priority.

The existing excitement and activities in Uptown support the concept that it deserves to be a priority. Taking proactive steps to support this impetus will help legitimize these efforts and activities and continue to build upon this positive momentum.

- Build on the existing momentum in Uptown Creston by holding additional forums and sessions regarding the future of the district. These sessions should be focused solely on the Uptown Creston area and based on the existing surveys and activities already completed. They may be part of SICOG's comprehensive plan process, or a separate stand-alone process.
- At these meetings, invite the public to be part of the process to determine if Uptown Creston is indeed a community priority. If so, the City must make a commitment to move forward with expanded efforts to improve Uptown Creston. This commitment can start with a simple formal resolution of support from the City Council that publicly states that Uptown is a community priority and as such, will become a bigger focus of the City's time, effort and expenditures.
- The City should then establish additional financial incentives and programmatic assistance for Uptown Creston to build upon the momentum and possible commitment made to the area. If Uptown Creston is in fact a community priority, it only makes sense that additional resources should be allocated to the district to incentivize action and private sector investment.



Establish an Uptown Creston planning task force.

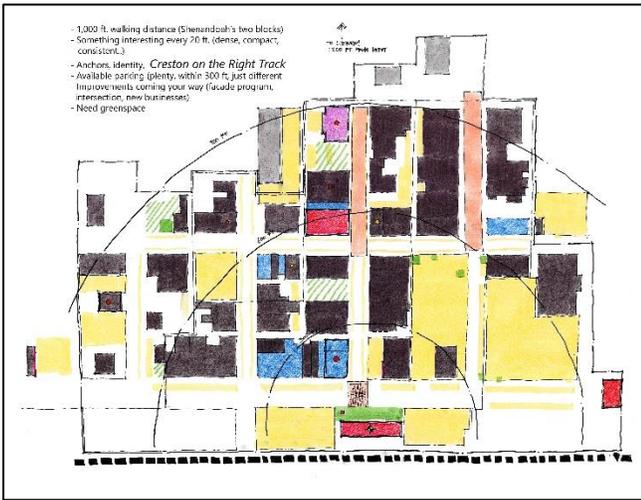
This group should coordinate with the comprehensive plan update being developed by SICOG. This group should be the formal advocacy group for the Uptown area as it relates to the comprehensive plan update. It may also perform additional duties and activities.

- Members should include Uptown property owners, Uptown business owners, UCDA, City Council and/or city staff and members of other Uptown organizations/entities like the Elks Club, Library, etc. These members should be appointed by Council resolution.
- Members should be expected to participate in all public input meetings regarding the plan update, especially as it relates to the Uptown area. They should also coordinate with SICOG staff and receive regular formal updates from the staff regarding the planning process. This group should help SICOG complete the comprehensive plan update as soon as possible.
- This task force could be the initial steering committee that spearheads the comprehensive efforts to revitalize Uptown Creston. *(Discussed in additional detail in Theme #2 below.)*

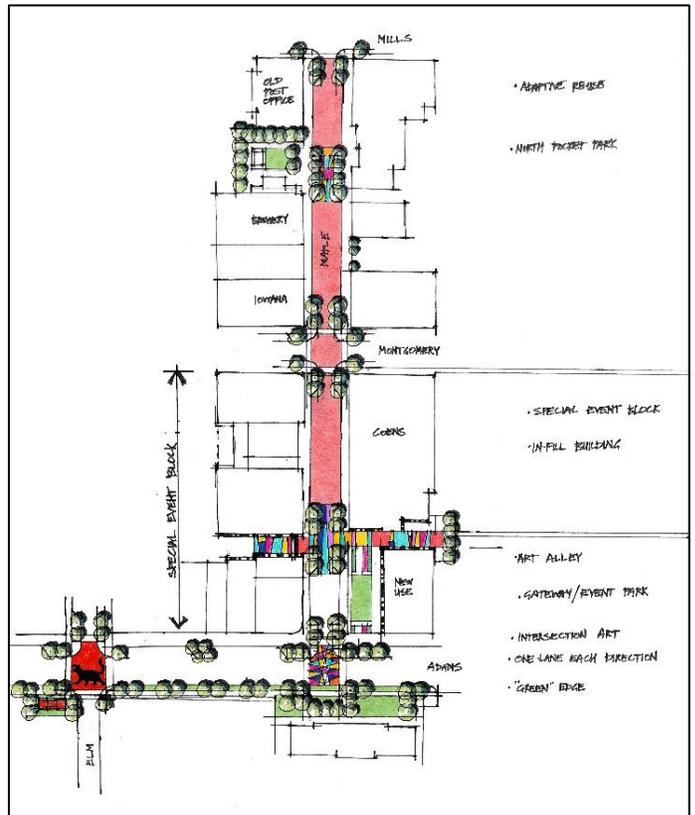
Establish a true vision for Uptown Creston.

What are the possible future development opportunities for the district? What is the ideal future for the area? This is related to, but also slightly different than a typical comprehensive plan update. This will help “fill in the blanks” regarding how Uptown can redevelop that may not be clearly defined in the plan document. This vision will help provide additional investor confidence and also provide an additional basis for further City investment. It will help guide individuals and other entities in their efforts to revitalize Uptown Creston.

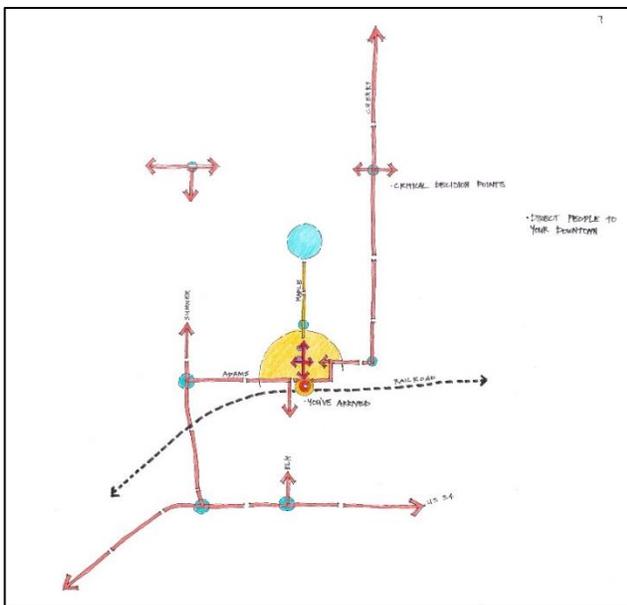
- Establish a focus or target area in the Uptown area to focus initial activities. It seems logical that the first two blocks of Maple going north from the Depot could be the initial target area. This area definitely has the “feel” of the core downtown area. This also creates a core area that is easily walkable with good building continuity and a strong sense of place.



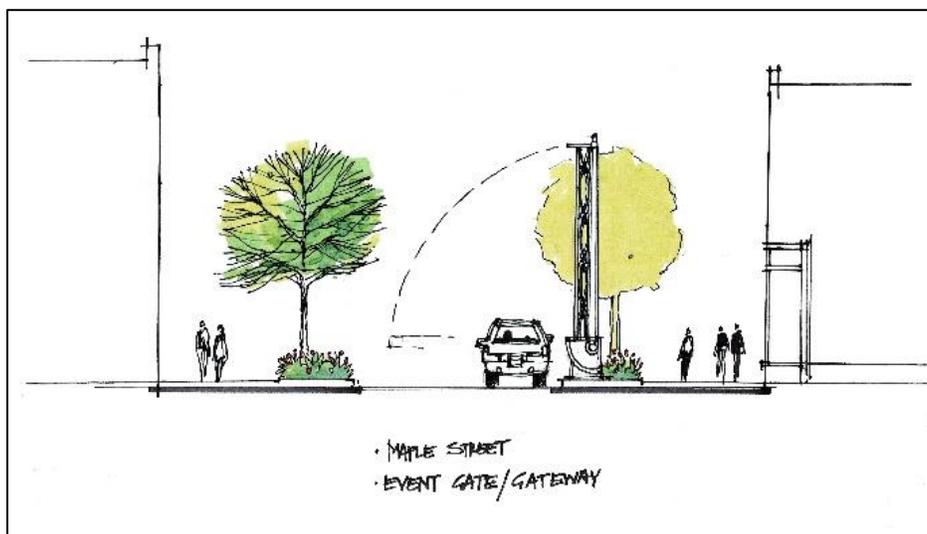
Anchors, Identity



City Core Detail



Uptown Arrival



City Core Gate

Establish a system to promote and help implement the façade project.

This could be a responsibility of the Uptown Creston planning task force, (recommended) or it could be a separate stand-alone group. *(Discussed in additional detail in Theme #4.)*

- Display design renderings of each façade project in storefront windows.
- Install “Under Construction” signs at each location during the project to help promote the impact of the project and investment.
- Hold a ribbon cutting at the beginning of the project and open house(s) as the projects are completed. Celebrate your success!
- Look at ways to encourage additional façade improvements beyond the project. This can include developing improvement ideas and architectural assistance, helping secure contractors and helping to find/secure funding.



Maple Elevation with Storefronts

Integrate the ideas and proposals already developed by Update Uptown and this report, into the long-term vision and plans for Uptown Creston.

- Break these ideas into timeframe segments for potential implementation. Timeframes can be divided into increments like 1-3 years, 3-5 years, 5-10 years and longer than 10 years for implementation.
- As the timetables are identified for each proposed improvement, funding options and possible sources should be identified for each project.
- Implement projects based on the timetables and funding availability.
- Review project list, timetable and funding options every few years and update the list as needed.

Complete a comprehensive historic survey of the Uptown area and the adjacent residential areas to determine potential National Register Historic District status for these areas.

- Work through the local historic preservation commission to apply for a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant from the State Historical Society to hire an appropriate consultant to conduct the intensive survey.
- CLG grants allow for substantial in-kind match. Work with the historic preservation commission to establish local volunteers that can provide in kind research and survey activities. Typical activities include photography of the existing sites and a variety of archival research needs. Solicit senior citizens, high school students, SWICC students and the general public to provide these services.
- Educate the local community regarding the benefits of local district designation and what it does and does not mean for local property owners. Benefits include access to financial incentives (especially state and federal tax credits), potential tourism marketing and a general increase in local community pride of ownership.
- Designate any historic districts. Consider implementing additional local overlay zones for these designated districts. This special overlay can be used to provide additional local incentives as well as additional oversight and review and approval of rehab work.

THEME 2: ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

One of the biggest challenges for downtown development is the lack of structure and focus that is needed to engage and mobilize volunteers to complete projects. Downtowns don't become great places by accident. A firm foundation is key for a sustainable downtown revitalization effort.

Stakeholders and community leaders need to work together to define a mission and vision for Uptown Creston. By involving a broad range of constituents in the process, the downtown program can help each group realize that a common goal exists, and that cooperation and communication is essential for successful revitalization.

"What's missing here is the vision and a partnership."

"You don't know who to ask who does what."

"We are stronger if we work together."

"The way to herd cats is to throw out some cat food."

"There are people willing to give of their time to make a difference."

A solid organizational framework is well represented by business and property owners, bankers, citizens, public officials, chambers of commerce, and other local economic development organizations. Successful downtowns have a broad base of support, with everyone working together to renew Downtown. (*Discussed in additional detail in Theme #1.*)

Attendees at a community meeting that was held as part of the Downtown Assessment provided the following suggestions of who should be involved in the revitalization of Uptown Creston:

- Business owners (local and non-local)/Uptown business owners
- Building owners
- City of Creston/City officials/City Council
- UCDA
- Chamber of Commerce
- Investors/Investment groups/private investors
- Youth groups
- SICOG
- Residents/Citizens of Creston
- School
- YAC
- FLBA
- Consumers
- City leaders
- SWCC
- Private benevolent organizations
- City/county/state agencies
- Union County
- Young professionals
- Creston Historic Preservation Commission
- Real Estate agents
- Home builders
- Everyone!

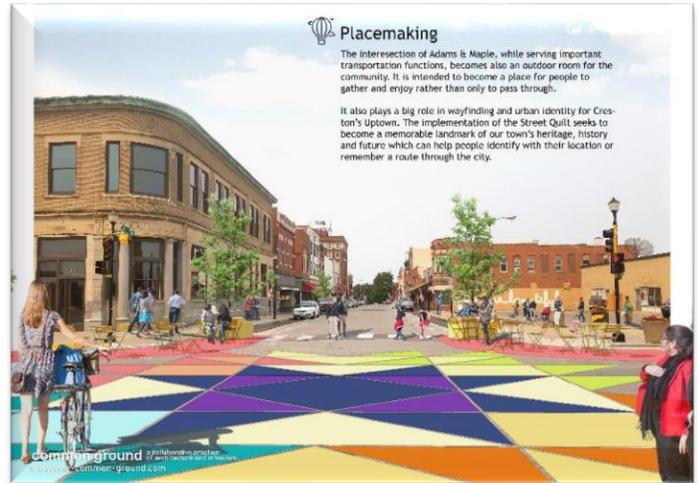


Traditional business districts lack uniform ownership and management, so it is a challenge to get everyone moving toward the same goal. A strong organization focusing on downtown revitalization provides the stability to build and maintain a long-term effort. This can take many forms, from a stand-alone non-profit organization, to a special assessment district, to a program housed in a municipality or existing community development entity. Regardless of the organizational type, the focus is on ensuring that all organizational resources (partners, funding, volunteers) are mobilized to effectively implement revitalization strategies for Uptown Creston.

ACTION STEPS:

Encourage local partnerships and collaboration

- Elks, Rotary, Lions and Kiwanis clubs as well as Crestland Betterment are already working on projects that benefit the community or have resources available. These service groups could really make an impact if they would join efforts (sweat equity and/or financial resources) to help with an Uptown project.
- Bring together that local group of leaders and “doers” to discuss the idea of more formally establishing and promoting the center of your community. Invite everyone on the list that was suggested at the community meeting (included above), and anyone else that is interested. Be inclusive.
- The Update Uptown group has a cool conceptualization of what Uptown could look like with new gathering spaces, but it does not appear the concepts have been widely shared. Post their plans, as well as this report online, provide copies to all Uptown Creston stakeholders, and have printed copies available where groups gather. Be transparent and inclusive.
- There is a great deal of institutional knowledge at the table when the retirees gather every day for coffee at the library. Create a mentorship program by pairing these seniors with a young professional or an entrepreneur.
- Encourage young professionals who are alumni of the UCDA’s leadership training program to form a group and continue to meet for education and networking.
- Form a merchant’s group of Uptown businesses to develop and coordinate retail events.
- We heard about CALS (Creston Area Little Stuff) and their availability to work on small projects. In Jefferson, Iowa, a group of ladies (known as the “Downtown Darlings”) assist where needed, including demolition, clean up and painting downtown buildings. Your CALS group could learn from their example and take on some projects to help Uptown businesses (e.g. the new brewery could use some free labor). High School students who are required to give volunteer hours could also help.



Designate a group to take the lead and focus on revitalizing Uptown Creston

Downtowns need a management group in place to help fill vacancies, keep buildings and public spaces in good condition, program and market the district. The secret to success for Uptown Creston will be to designate a group to focus on revitalization of your central business district. Somebody has to herd the cats.



Union County Development Association (UCDA) has a physical presence in Uptown Creston with their recently completed project, Roundhouse Co-working Space. They also host events in Uptown (Friday after 5), coordinate the Young Professionals program and have a strong committee structure.

The Assessment Team propose UCDA as the organization to lead the efforts to bring community leaders and representatives from stakeholder organizations to the table. Invite the community to be part of the process as you determine how to move forward to form a management group with Uptown Creston as their primary focus.

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

Communication – both internal and external - is a critical piece of downtown revitalization, especially in rural communities that depend on volunteer efforts to get things done.

- Establish an email distribution list of organizational leaders to ensure they are informed and on board with the efforts of the groups. Share relevant information (i.e. news coverage, reports, meeting minutes). An email listserv is a no-cost way to keep everyone in the loop and engaged.
- Share information from the assessment visit, the responses to the survey and the implementation plans moving forward. Break the report into smaller sections that you can “trickle out” through an e-newsletter, social media channels, and newspaper articles over the next several months in an effort to educate the community on Uptown revitalization efforts.
- Taste of Union County is a good opportunity for business to business networking. Continue hosting these regular get-togethers in a different business each time. Use this event to provide updates on what’s happening Uptown and give a few minutes for the host site to share their story and provide tours.
- Share demographic and retail trade information with business owners.
- Update and publish an E-Newsletter to share information on what’s going on in Uptown Creston on a monthly basis. Use the free tools available (e.g. Mail Chimp or Constant Contact) to make your communication look professional. Consider printing copies to place in waiting rooms, bank lobbies or the library to help spread the word.
- Determine your brand identity (cohesive message) that accurately portrays your community’s personality.
- Use social media to share positive messages about the community and local businesses. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other channels are inexpensive methods to tell your stories. Keep your information current and interesting to friends and followers. Be sure to include photos and be consistent across all social media channels.
- Get the business community together to brainstorm opportunities to cross-promote. This exercise will develop relationships between business owners and can produce new opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy the shopping options that Creston has available.
- Create a community calendar so folks know what is happening. Have one organization (maybe the UCDA) serve as a clearing house to keep it updated and encourage local groups/events to share their information.
- Share information on community and area events through the state tourism website. This is a free service and can give statewide exposure to events happening in the Creston area.
- Celebrate local successes – BIG and small! Grand openings, business anniversaries, school events, or a local gathering to brainstorm on how to make improvements to Uptown.



THEME 3: LOW HANGING FRUIT

Too often community projects end up suffering from “paralysis by analysis.” Community members engage early on to help visualize and plan for some important community project but slow implementation of the vision, if any, results in lost community support and project momentum.

In recent years, the city of Creston has done a lot to visualize community and Uptown improvements including:

- Wellmark’s Healthy Hometown walking assessment
- Update Uptown community meetings
- Comprehensive plan update meetings and survey
- UCDA’s Uptown Creston Community Survey
- Bond issues for lake, aquatic center and library improvements
- Completion of the Downtown Assessment

One hundred and twenty-four people participated in the pre-assessment community survey, approximately 100 people were interviewed during the Downtown Assessment, and 30-40 people attended Downtown Assessment public meetings. It is important to seize the momentum to revitalize Uptown and avoid “paralysis by analysis” and planning fatigue.

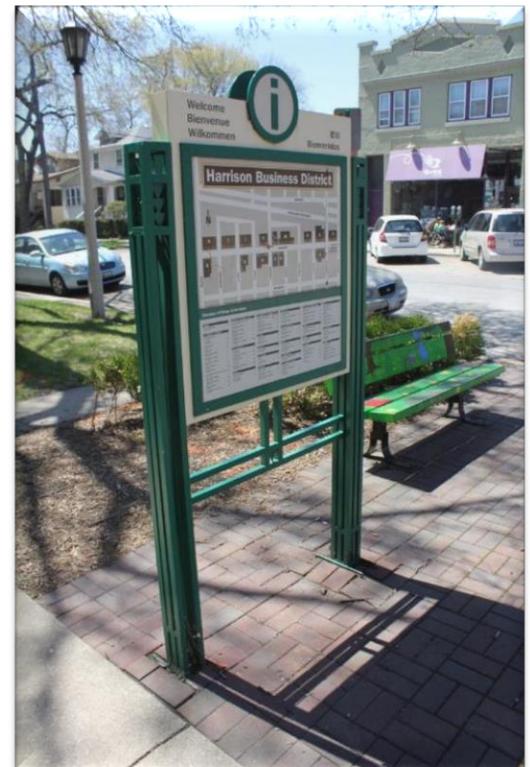
Completing quick, visual projects to improve Uptown can help seize the momentum. These projects should happen in just a matter of weeks and no more than a few months and involve the public in hands-on planning and implementation. Taking this approach can further solidify and grow local support and investment in Uptown. Here are some “low-hanging fruit” types of projects that Creston should consider for quick implementation to continue building the momentum for Uptown revitalization.

ACTION STEPS:

Provide a directory of Uptown services

Information provided by Creston officials to the Downtown Assessment Team indicated more than 120 services offered in the Uptown area, but in the community surveys and focus groups it appears the community is not aware of all the services available.

Establishing a directory and wayfinding signs in the Uptown area along with an online Uptown Services Directory would help locals and visitors alike explore the full opportunities in Uptown. This directory could be developed and installed by one or more local service groups such as the CAST program at Creston schools or Creston Area Little Stuff.



Uptown beautification

Beautification projects are an excellent opportunity to gather the community to make a quick, low-cost visual impact. Uptown beautification projects should focus on:

- Weed and litter removal
- Additional community murals (Great job completing the Adams and Maple intersection quilt mural!)
- Painting crosswalks and buildings
- Window displays in both occupied and unoccupied buildings. Window displays in unoccupied buildings could promote existing businesses, upcoming community events or depict potential redevelopment opportunities for that space.



Promote sidewalk assistance and incentives

Many opportunities exist to improve the walking experience in Uptown Creston. The priority opportunity should be addressing the conditions of the sidewalks. While the condition of the sidewalks in Creston is a responsibility of the adjacent property owner, City of Creston staff indicated during the assessment that they offer a lot of in-kind assistance to property owners including the breaking up and removal of the existing sidewalk and filling of old under sidewalk vaults where they exist. While these services dramatically reduce the cost of sidewalk replacement for adjacent property owners, it is not apparent that all property owners know the assistance is available.

- Put together a simple one or two-page document for property owners explaining the importance and requirements for well-maintained sidewalks along with how the city can assist sidewalk projects.
- Assist property owners in overcoming potential upfront cost barriers to sidewalk replacement.
 - Assess property owners for sidewalk improvements
 - Allow multiple year payment of sidewalk improvements via utility billings
 - Work with multiple property owners at one time to bid a large-scale sidewalk replacement which may reduce the cost per square foot for the project
 - City could issue a bid request to become a preferred sidewalk contractor for work in Creston. Property owners could then use that bulk pricing to reduce costs or the city could offer a rebate of a percent of that bid price while allowing the property owner to choose the contractor they desire or complete the work themselves. (Clive, Iowa used this approach.)
 - City could dedicate a portion of Local Option Sales Tax, if allowed locally, to a sidewalk/trail improvement program. (West Union, Iowa has used this approach.)



Outdoor dining and parklets

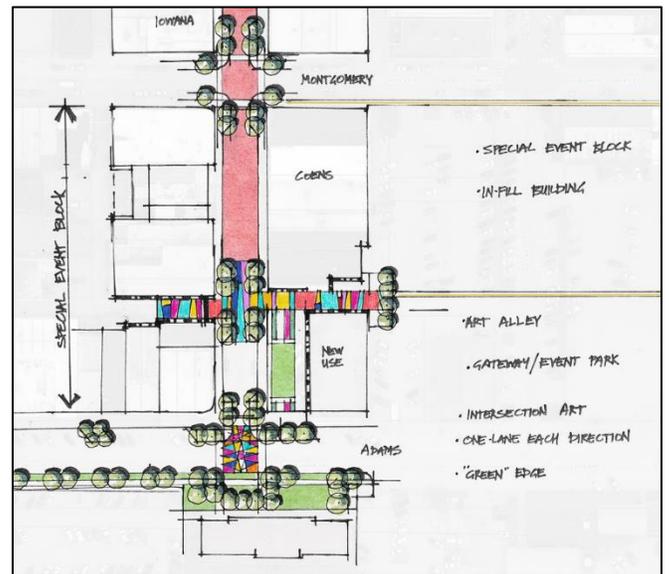
Uptown Creston has a good nucleus of places to eat and drink that will be further enhanced with the addition of Hot Air Brewing. Outdoor dining adds energy and a visual sign of vibrancy to a downtown. Outdoor dining can also generate additional income for restauranteurs and make a downtown feel safer. Outdoor dining can be developed at all price points but can be as simple as a table for two and two folding chairs such as the example at Adams Street Espresso.

Installation of parklets, small outdoors spaces often created in the space of one to two parking spots, can also promote outdoor dining.



Alley improvements

Creston has several Uptown alleys that could be enhanced to improve the pedestrian experience, connect destinations, and create opportunities for outdoor dining and art. Begin with the alley running behind Adams Street Espresso to Iowa Focus. This will facilitate moving people from the Fareway parking lot to Maple Street.



City Core Detail with Alleys

Install bump-outs

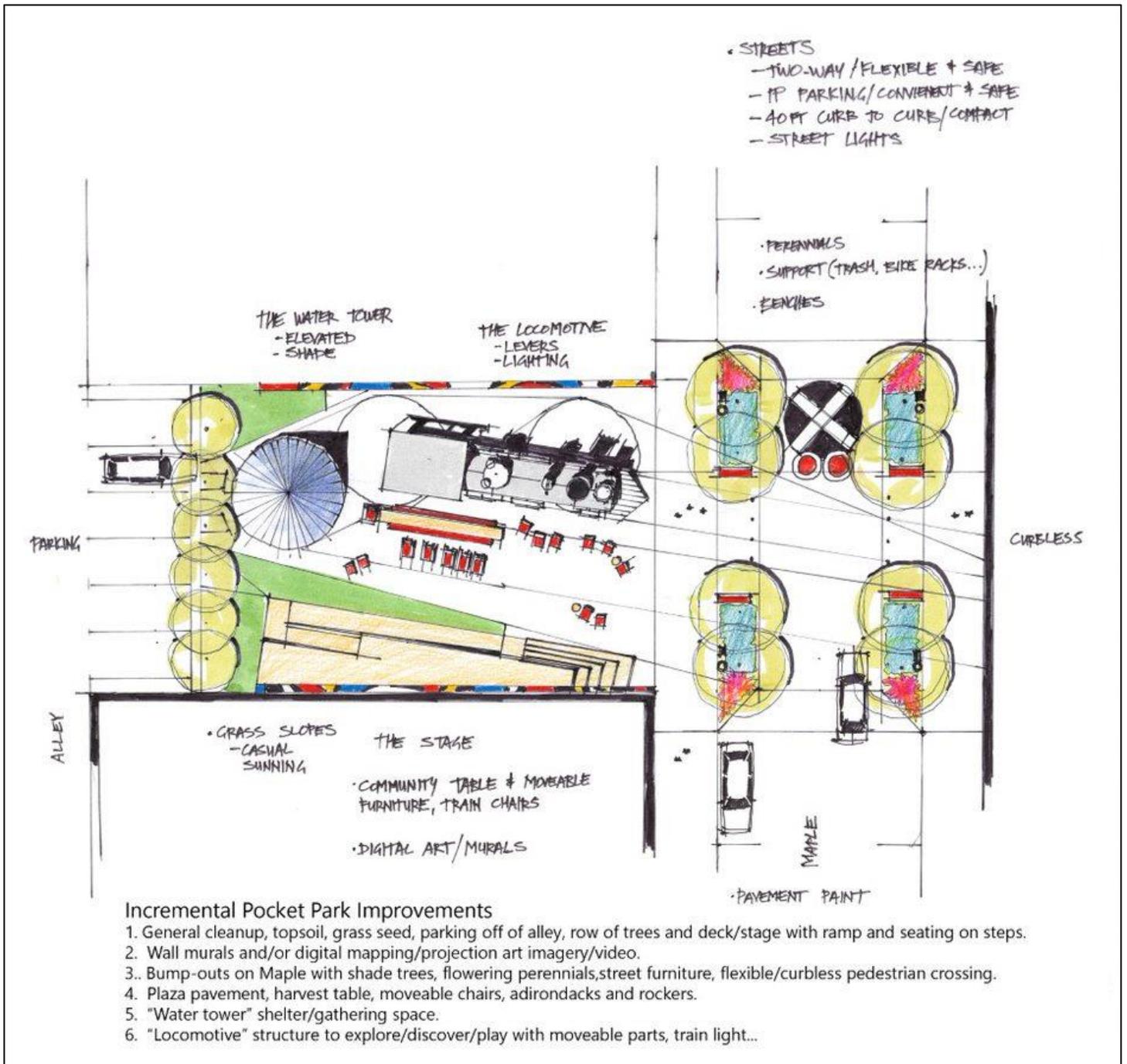
A bump-out is an extension of a curb into the intersection. Bump-outs shorten the distance pedestrians have to travel across traffic lanes at an intersection and calm traffic. Bump-outs also can provide space for greenery, art, public gatherings, and outdoor dining. Stormwater management and treatment opportunities can also be provided by bump-outs.

Creston currently has some bump-outs painted Uptown including the intersection of Adams and Maple. A simple first step would be to add some planters to the existing painted bump-outs to further define the bump-out, slow traffic, increase pedestrian safety and add greenery to Uptown. Ideally the bump-outs would be curbed or permanently defined in some manner and include space-appropriate trees and vegetation while also treating stormwater.



Add parks and greenspace to Uptown

Many community survey respondents indicated a desire for greenspace, trees and things for kids to do in Uptown. Adding one or more pocket parks to Uptown is one way to fulfill the desire for greenspace, trees and things for kids to do while creating an energetic, vibrant space in Uptown. A railroad themed pocket park should be considered and could be installed in phases.



THEME 4: ENERGIZE AND PROGRAM UPTOWN

In addition to functioning as the commercial business district, downtowns traditionally served as the community's social center. Reestablishment of the central business district as a social center through the staging of promotional events is an essential ingredient to every community's downtown development success. This can be done through highlighting cultural traditions, celebrating architecture and history, encouraging local businesses to market cooperatively, offering coordinated specials and sales and hosting special events aimed at changing perceptions of the district and communicating to residents, potential investors, businesses, and property-owners that this place is special. To bring new life to the district, it is vital that you program Uptown Creston with promotional events and activities.

The Assessment Team met with numerous groups and individuals who told us that social activities are important in Uptown Creston. We captured a few of their comments (below) on how important Uptown is as the center for social life in the community

"Uptown is the social hub."

"It's where we have all of our community celebrations."

"There's no other place to gather."

"Social events are what gets people Uptown."

"We need things for people to do."

"If Uptown were an enhanced destination it would help everyone."

"Friday after Five is one of the best things we've ever done."

Residents of Creston appear to be hungry for socialization, and it has been proven that events in Uptown can be and are successful. Existing social activities in Creston include:

- Friday After Five
- Taste of Union County
- First Fridays
- Wine Walk
- Chicks with Checks
- 4th of July Celebration and parade
- Hot Air Balloon parade
- Holiday Parade
- Farmers Market (no longer in Uptown)

As part of the Assessment Visit, the community was invited to share their ideas of the new events that they would like to see in Uptown Creston. Their suggestions are as follows (a full list is attached):

- Concerts
- Art shows
- Free outdoor movies
- Kid's game night/afternoon
- Family oriented events
- Farmers Market
- Coordinated activities with food
- Afternoon and early evening social events
- New unique events
- Paint Parties



ACTION STEPS:

Be intentional in determining the activities you chose to implement in Uptown Creston

- Bring a group together to brainstorm ideas. Be sure to invite young people to be part of the planning and get their opinions.
- Use ESRI demographic information included with this report to learn about your community. Be aware of Creston's unique assets and institutions as well as the potential audience when making decisions as to what activities should be included on your event calendar.
- Form committees with volunteer chairs for each event to function efficiently and share the work without the help of paid staff. Be respectful of the resources (people, time and money) it takes to produce events. They can be labor intensive and take months to plan and implement.

Create a buzz before/during/after Downtown Revitalization (DTR)

Eleven buildings will undergo restoration work, thanks to a DTR grant, but all of Uptown will be affected during the construction period. Construction can be stressful, but there are steps you can take to mitigate the harm.

- Before construction even begins, select a theme and design a graphic that can be used by all businesses in Uptown Creston for their advertising and print materials to enhance the identity of the business district and, through consistency and frequency, enhance consumer awareness of the fact that businesses in the construction zone are "open and ready for business." Perhaps "Building a Brighter Future" or "Uptown Creston: Under Construction, Open for Business."
- Create a "Survival Guide" for all Uptown businesses, with tips on how to address the challenges of the construction.
- Make sure your customers know businesses are still open with social media posts and by advertising in local newspapers, television or radio. Cooperative advertising and marketing efforts are often less costly and more effective than individual advertising. Area-wide, construction-themed campaigns can be organized to leverage attractive advertising rates and to increase exposure throughout the course of the construction season.
- Promotional activities surrounding construction can be a great way to keep the media involved and doing stories not only on Uptown today, but what it will be like when the project is finished. Create posters with design drawings of what the buildings will look like when completed.
- Use the construction theme in building windows and visual merchandising displays inside.
- Work with the business community to create a rewards program to call attention to the fact that Uptown merchants are open (e.g. for every dollar you spend while Uptown is under renovation you get a point, at the end the customer with the most points wins a shopping spree).
- Encourage businesses to develop construction themed coupons to attract customers to their businesses during the project. Sales, giveaways or special services can be effective promotions during the construction period. To the extent possible, it is important to convey the appearance of "business as usual."
- Make arrangements with other Uptown businesses – or with businesses outside of the construction zone – to cross promote. Examples include a coupon for a free manicure with any oil change, or a free dessert at your restaurant with the purchase of a dozen roses.
- Don't forget the grand finale. Hold a celebration the end of the construction period with a ribbon cutting ceremony. Possibly use a contest to select a youngster from the area to cut the ribbon. Be sure to invite the news media!



Program Uptown with frequent small activities

Programming means making sure there is always “something going on” in the plaza. Have plenty to do - more than just once a week - to encourage folks to come Uptown to Get Down. Consider the five senses when developing your programming (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), and be sure to include activities for all ages that the whole family can enjoy.

- Yoga
- Pop-up market
- Outdoor art show
- Games (e.g. giant chess /checkers or a bags tournament)
- Play equipment (for kids)
- Vendors (food trucks, local crafts)
- Music (buskers, lunchtime concert series or a sound system)
- Outdoor movies shown on a large screen



Make Uptown a destination

Tie into events currently taking place in the community or create new activities that are a good fit for Uptown Creston. Be authentic and build on what you have.

With Creston’s critical mass of salons, you could host a hair and beauty event. Stylists could be invited to offer free services (one-minute makeovers, spray-on fun hair color, etc.); and demonstrations of techniques (braiding, nail art, etc.) Beauty shops could ask their suppliers for free samples (shampoo, makeup, nail file etc.) and encourage folks to provide their contact information to be eligible to win a prize like a blow-dryer or hair clippers. The day could include a competition for stylists to showcase their skill and creativity while they compete for prizes. Participating businesses should provide bounce-back coupons to generate return visits.

With the Greater Regional Medical Center and other health-services businesses located in Creston, a Health Fair would work very well in your community. Include wellness activities like blood pressure screenings, five-minute chair massages, demonstration of proper lifting etc. Invite businesses to provide product displays, exhibits and promotional giveaways like toothbrushes, band-aids etc. Encourage them to distribute coupons for in store specials. Be creative and get everyone involved including businesses with less obvious ties to the health sector. (e.g. the grocery store could provide healthy recipe demonstrations, or food related children’s activities; and the dance studio could do stretching demonstrations.)

Or a Bed Race is a fun idea for an event and a perfect opportunity for your body repair shop and furniture store to partner. The premise is fairly simple. Teams compete by pushing beds in a timed race down the street. Colorful team uniforms and wildly creative beds bedecked with themed decorations are all part of the fun.



Bring your success stories to Uptown.

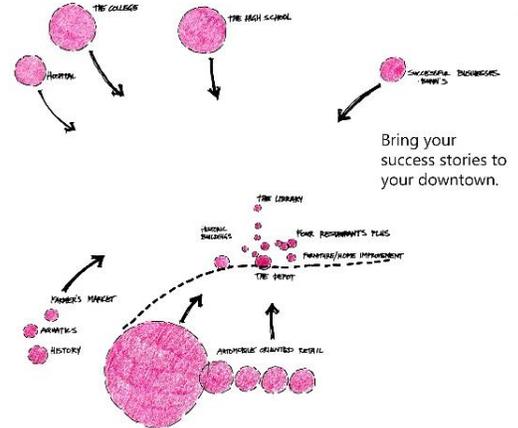
The Assessment Team agrees with the attendees at the Community Meeting who expressed interest in moving Farmers' Market from McKinley Park back to Uptown. There's plenty space for more than a dozen vendors, with room to grow, to move it back to where it belongs. Farmers markets are economic development generators. In its current location, there is little added benefit to the community.

"We have a strong Farmers' Market."



Enhance the market by working with businesses or nonprofits to add small food related activities to the event.

- The library or bookstore could read books like *Veggie Tails* or *Green Eggs and Ham*.
- The Elks Club might help with a pinewood derby-style race, with cars made out of cucumbers.
- Invite chefs from local restaurants to prepare a recipe using seasonal produce that is available at the market. Give away "tastes" and recipe cards.



Add a special event or festival

Special Events or Festivals allow towns to celebrate and capitalize on the unique aspects of their local area and can be real traffic builders. Southwest Iowa Hot Air Balloon Days in Creston is a "Signature" special event for which your community is known. To bring people to Uptown on a more frequent basis for fun and to create memories, plan and implement at least one additional new special event.

The Assessment Team heard from a local historian that Creston has a rich history with the cattle industry. Consider your heritage in creating a new event with this theme in mind.

- Invite everyone to "bring the whole herd" to a Cattle Drive down Maple
- "Egg and Daughter Night" could be built around high-quality sustainably grown produce, beef and honey found in the community.



Showcase your beautiful depot as a backdrop for a railroad related event (e.g. the Thomas the Train Day or Santa Express Train in Boone or Heartland Rails Model Train Show in Dubuque).



Holidays are always a great excuse for a special event. Creston is already hosting a parade to celebrate the Christmas season in your central business district, so you may want to build a new event around another traditional holiday (e.g. Valentine's Day, Mother's Day) or one that is more obscure. Google *365 Special Days of the Year*, and you will find a strange reason to celebrate every day of the year, all the way from January 1 (Z Day) to December 31 (Make up Your Mind Day).

For additional inspiration, see the list of Great Promotional Events that is included with this report. By no means should you try to develop them all. Quality is much more important than quantity.

Encourage the community to shop local/shop small

The district lacks the number of pedestrian oriented businesses to generate “people traffic” and vibrancy on a steady basis, but you can support the retail businesses you have in Uptown Creston with the addition of at least one new retail/business promotion. Engage business owners to be involved in the planning and implementation of an activity tailored to their customer base and needs. Scavenger Hunts and Shop Hops are good examples of a business event. Consider a retail event targeting ladies, as women make 85% of the buying decisions.

A “Shop Local/Shop Small” activity is a great idea, as dollars spent in locally owned businesses have three times the impact on your community as dollars spent at national chains. Uptown businesses can strengthen their marketing during the holiday season by participating in the nation-wide phenomenon of Small Business Saturday, which is celebrated the day after Black Friday. Sign up to be a neighborhood champion at <https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/shop-small> and receive free “stuff” including tote bags, welcome mats, etc.



Make Uptown Creston more vibrant and inviting

“Inviting is not the word I would use to describe Creston.”
“Successful communities have inviting downtowns.”



Art installations create a sense of place and encourage public interaction. The new quilt mural on the street is an excellent example and a really cool addition. Add more vibrancy by installing additional murals, banners and/or public art to beautify the district. Picture your grain silos as giant canvases for artwork.

Provide colorful flags for businesses to use to show that they are open. Invite local nonprofits to create displays in windows of vacant buildings or work with the building owners to make the space available for artists to show their work. At a minimum, keep the windows clean. Install custom-designed flower planters and change the contents seasonally.

Adding better lighting will make Uptown more attractive and provide the feeling of safety. Encourage businesses to illuminate their windows after-hours or use strings of Edison bulbs to brighten the space.

THEME 5: DRIVING INVESTMENT

Creston has tremendous opportunities to make significant change happen in Uptown, but only if you make it a priority. The community has much going for it. Uptown (in its current condition) is not on that list. Uptown feels like it has been forgotten. In many ways it has been. The attitude has been, “Whatever property owners want to do is ok with us”, and inappropriate rehabilitation has occurred in a number of buildings. There is an ordinance to not allow first floor residential on the storefront side of the first floor, but the city has chosen to not enforce it. This is contributing to the poor condition of buildings. Once a building goes residential it is harder to transition it back to commercial productivity. This hurts the commercial buildings on either side. The city must make hard decisions, (stand behind them) and enforce them.

We divided this section into three separate themes:

1. Building triage
2. Business ready
3. Total building rehabilitation

Building triage

First let’s define building triage. Building triage means, *the process of determining the priority of a building’s treatments based on the severity of its condition.* Downtown development is truly only effective when a community takes a one building, one business at a time approach. The city must partner with Uptown property owners to create the best-case scenario to make Uptown a priority and make improvements to Uptown buildings happen. If existing property owners are not willing to become part of this success, then Uptown properties will need to change hands to more progressive ownership. Downtown development will only be successful when the appropriate players are at the table and there is broad-based community support. Adaptive reuse and full utilization of vacant or underperforming properties that adhere to appropriate design guidelines is essential. Now is the time to set the vision for Uptown Creston and lay the groundwork to make this happen.

ACTION STEPS:

- You have a great local example, 301 W. Montgomery Street – Union County Development Association. This property demonstrates quality total building rehabilitation. Let this project serve as inspiration for other property owners. Building rehab can be overwhelming. Creston has a bright shining star within your own downtown, learn from your own example. Feature this project in the local newspaper including information on why it was done, how it was done, the economic impact, etc.?
- Take field trips. Jefferson, Iowa Falls and Manning provide great examples of downtown building improvement projects that were completed in different ways. Talk to them about how projects were initiated, funding sources, lessons learned, etc.
- Investigate and apply for state-wide funding opportunities for downtown buildings.
 - Congratulations on submitting a successful application for a CDBG Downtown Revitalization (DTR) grant. This \$500,000 grant, matched locally by the city and participating property owners, will be used for 13 façade restorations in Uptown. The DTR grant takes coordination and cooperation but makes a huge visual impact on the character of the entire downtown district. Because these are federal funds, there are a number of review and compliance requirements. Many communities work with their Regional Councils of Government (COG) to manage these grants. Following the successful completion and close-out of the project, the Assessment Team encourages you to apply for a second round of the grant funds, with a focus on two blocks of Maple.



- Investigate the Community Catalyst Building Remediation Fund. This grant provides up to \$100,000 to assist communities with the redevelopment, rehabilitation or deconstruction of buildings to stimulate economic growth and reinvestment in the community.
- Consider creating a local grant specifically for uptown building improvements. Do an informal survey of building/business owners to determine what type of assistance is most needed and create specific parameters for eligible activities (façade improvements, signs/awnings, roofs, tuckpointing...). The program should emphasize good design and have guidelines attached. A scaled drawing or rendered photograph of the proposed changes and a written description of proposed work and materials should accompany any application. Require owner investment with a 1:1 match.
- Consider utilizing existing financing tools for example: Tax Increment Financing (Urban Renewal), Consolidated Property Tax Abatement (Urban Revitalization). How you administer these creative financing tools will determine local success.

Business ready



If Creston doesn't prioritize fixing up buildings, don't bother trying to recruit quality businesses into uptown. Union County Development Association didn't just fix up a great building, they are leaders in Creston's business revival. They have devoted quality space to entrepreneurs and are creating an environment for success. Creston has many businesses uptown to build upon like: A & G Restaurant & Lounge, Create Creston, Elm's Club, Coen's Furniture Store, and Spencer's Chophouse & Tavern, just to name a few. Now it's time to fill in the voids between these and other great businesses. If the buildings were fixed up, quality businesses would come. Success breeds success. Creston has some great businesses. Make sure you develop a business transition plan, so you don't lose the opportunity when it's time to move to a different owner/operator. Listen to the community and plan to fill voids that exist today. Growing local entrepreneurs is an effort with no end. Be engaged for the long haul.

ACTION STEPS:

- Develop a business succession strategy to assist older business owners with exit strategies.
 - Develop a business visitation program to discover who needs assistance and identify red flags such as decrease in inventory levels. Open a dialogue with business owners. Strive for frank disclosure regarding their future plans and what they envision happening to their business after they retire.
 - Keep constant communication. Understand where they are, their plans and what barriers they have.
 - Identify possible successors such as family, key employees, competitors or outside entrepreneurs.
 - Provide information and education to both retiring businesses and new businesses. Utilize SCORE, SBDC, Advance Iowa (UNI). Develop entrepreneurial programs to help younger people develop the necessary skills and experience to run a local business. Introduce them to business owners who may be ready to retire soon to help create an opportunity for transition.
 - Develop a marketing strategy targeted to former Creston residents and alumni for these transitioning businesses as opportunities for them to move back home. Be ready with actual sales/earnings data and other financials so that the new potential business owner has a realistic understanding of the business operation.
 - Develop a strategy to help transition ownership from the existing owner to the new owner. This could include some kind of financing package. It may involve the existing owner transitioning into the role of employee/mentor for a period of time. It may also involve updates/improvements to the business location to entice a new owner.

- Brainstorm ideas to assist in the retention of existing businesses.
 - Identify a local business assistance team to work with local businesses and provide them assistance. This team should include members of the local development organizations, City staff, and other professionals like CPAs, bankers, realtors and business executives. The role of this team is to become trusted liaisons to the local business owners/operators and to learn what issues and problems they may be facing and to connect them with appropriate resources that can help address their specific problems. They will be a local “safety net” for businesses. If the group begins to see recurring themes, they should develop programs and/or incentives that can address these broader issues. This could include using social media, effective advertising programs, incentives for advertising, determining the feasibility of extended business hours of operation, insurance for small businesses, etc. Matching new and experienced businesses up into peer groups or mentor groups can provide learning experiences for all....old tricks passed down from seasoned veterans to the rookies and valuable, new ideas like social media marketing from the new kids on the block to the long-time business owners.
 - Start a business tips (one at a time) column for the Chamber newsletter or website...created by existing Creston businesses/retailers.
 - Host a series of “lunch and learns”. Provide targeted information of interest to local businesses. Topics can include customer service, insurance needs for small business, advertising strategies, social media for small business and many others.
- Develop a strategic approach to recruiting businesses on your wish list. Selling the uptown itself does not have to be a daunting task, but you still have to show potential new businesses that they can make money here. The best businesses want to be located next to other great businesses.
 - Analyze both your wish list and the ESRI data and consider possible business type options.
 - Conduct local focus groups to talk about existing business voids (use well scripted questions) to better determine what stores they will shop in, when they will shop, how often, what exactly they are looking for, etc.
 - Inventory all your uptown buildings but most certainly your vacancies. Collect all of the information you need such as ownership, square footage, building conditions, past uses, etc.
 - Market the available buildings and rental spaces on the website.....Hot Properties
 - Clean up the vacant buildings with much attention to the storefront windows. Develop “Business Opportunity” signs or “I Wish I was a Bakery” (or other business types) signs for the windows.
 - Develop a business plan competition with a cash prize for the winner.
 - Develop a plan for collecting new business leads. Don’t make this quiet. Tell service clubs about your business wish list. Get the word out. Collect business cards from businesses in cities just out of your trade area that match your business wish profile. Inventory home-based businesses in Creston or businesses off the beaten path that may be looking for a new location with better foot traffic.
 - Develop a chronological process for following up on leads....phone call, visit to store, call from current retailer, send information about downtown, show market data supporting need for that business type, work for a visit to Creston.



Total building rehabilitation (housing)

Strong downtowns/communities almost always have active residential space (but not in ground floor storefronts). Making use of every square inch of a building helps property owners with positive cash flow and downtown residents bring activity, life and customers to the uptown. Because uptown Creston has so many underutilized and/or vacant buildings there are opportunities for this activity. We heard in focus groups that there is a real need for additional housing. Now it's time to identify the appropriate housing types desired. Earlier in this report we mentioned that the City of Creston has an ordinance on the books that doesn't allow residential on the storefront of the first floor. Please enforce this ordinance. If it's time to revisit this situation, just do it but make a decision. Some communities have allowed residential on the back 50% of a first floor in a uptown. This can be a great compromise as these units would be very accessible units but on the rear of existing uptown buildings and wouldn't disrupt the flow of businesses or customers on the storefront side.

- Inventory what you have. Contact property owners of two-story buildings and collect information about the upper stories. Is there potential for apartment space? Also, look at the city zoning ordinance. The city should work proactively with property owners to direct where appropriate parking is located. Make sure this is understood so there is no confusion. Work out acceptable parking options for everyone.
- Coordinate a tour of empty spaces in uptown buildings, especially upper floor spaces. These tours can be interesting to residents and could spark an idea for a building purchase, a new business opening or an apartment unit. It's OK if residents are just curious. Maybe they'll be inspired and motivated.
- Continue to identify housing opportunities community wide.
- Consider the creation of incentives for uptown upper story housing.

It was said that some homeowners do not take care of their properties which leads to negative curb appeal and image of the town.

- Conduct a series of homeowner educational workshops that include experts/professionals in exterior repair/rehab.
- Carve out a fund for matching grants for residential fix up, such as paint programs. Contact Keep Iowa Beautiful about their Paint Grant program.
- Develop a Home of the Month award and promote it widely in the newspaper and Facebook. Feature homeowners that really take care of their properties. Put a congratulations sign in their yard. Promote pride in ownership.

Housing has been labeled the number one economic development issue in rural Iowa communities. The Team heard many times that housing is an issue throughout the community, perhaps especially for affordable housing and rental units. For example, young teachers that move to town struggle to find a place to live. Prioritize housing, knowing that the lack of it has created lost opportunities for the community. Also, consider that nearly every downtown that is thriving has a strong residential neighborhood...not in storefront spaces (truly a mistake), but on upper floors above the uptown businesses.



Historically first floor business and building owners lived above their businesses, but over time, these spaces have become run down, vacant, or just simply ignored. Buildings that stand empty lose money – not just for the building owner, but also for the entire community. This not only helps property owners cash flow their buildings, but uptown housing also brings a whole new market of people uptown that eat in the restaurants, use the services, shop in the stores, walk the sidewalks and bring activity uptown. The character and types of spaces in historic buildings provide opportunities to create housing that is much different than a typical unit.

Examples of incentives that Iowa communities have used to develop upper story housing include:

- Harlan provides façade (\$5,000) and interior (\$15,000) grants which property owners match on at least a dollar for dollar basis.
- Indianola provides a combination of loans and grants for façade improvements for all building facades and sometimes for roof repairs.
- Knoxville has established a self-supporting municipal improvement district that provides funds for downtown improvements.
- Red Oak uses funds from a downtown tax increment financing district to provide incentives to private developers undertaking building renovations that include upper story housing.
- Waverly provides tax rebates for property owners that undertake upper story housing renovation projects.

Creston has opportunities for additional, quality new upper story housing units. There also appears to be opportunities to rehab existing apartment units with the expectation of higher rents.

ACTION STEPS:

- Do an inventory of available upper story housing, rental rates and potential new units. What is available? What opportunities exist? Research funding sources for uptown housing projects. Assess local market conditions. How much demand is there for quality rentals? What is the maximum residential rental for each community? What is the median market rent? What are reasonable commercial rents for each community? This will also involve interviewing all downtown property owners with upper story rental space or vacancy.
- Take field trips. Visit communities that have had success with upper story housing projects. Tour them. For example, Bloomfield, Woodbine, West Union and Elkader are examples of small towns with very active downtown residential neighborhoods. Talk to them about their challenges, the designs of the buildings, financing, etc.
- Invite experienced developers to town. We can provide examples upon request. These companies specialize in taking buildings and leveraging numerous financial resources, bringing them back to productive life. They could also assist in developing plans to rehabilitate the properties.
- Hold Uptown open houses for upper floor spaces. Give tours. Include some nice upper floor units that are already completed and occupied. Include some raw space. Maybe include a potential floor plan. When people see the finished spaces, they can more easily transfer the ideas to other similar unfinished units.
- Consider a local incentive for uptown building owners to renovate upper floors into residential space. One of the best housing incentive tools the city of Creston already has available, an Urban Revitalization Zone. Use this tool to allow consolidated property tax abatement in the increase in increment for up to 100% for up to ten years.



Finding people available and willing to spearhead projects is a challenge in most communities. Finding people willing to step forward into a position as a locally elected official can be even more daunting. It is refreshing to see that Creston has succeeded in soliciting young elected officials. It also appears that a number of younger local leaders are stepping forward and initiating a number of programs and activities to help improve the community.

“The new people coming in is what our ace is.”

“We used to have the good old boys club – but most of them aren’t here anymore.”

Often times, new leaders emerge from the pool of new or returning residents. In Creston, it appears that these new or returning residents have indeed spurred renewed interest in the Uptown area and the community in general. This also appears to have empowered some long-time residents to become more involved and accept higher profile leadership positions. This is allowing Creston to transfer leadership from the older (Baby Boomer) generation to the younger community members. This is helping to erode the “good old boy” stigma that many communities suffer.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Collect the lists of the alumni from the local leadership development classes.**
Go back 10 years if they are available. Use this list as your “hit list” to recruit additional involvement in local development efforts. Keep these people on a mailing/contact list to ensure they are kept updated about local community issues and leadership needs and opportunities.
- **Continue to encourage additional local emerging leaders to participate in the local leadership classes.**
Consider encouraging additional leadership training for any alumnus of the local program to add new skills that expand upon the local leadership training curriculum.
- **Continue to encourage young leaders to run for local office and other leadership positions.**
This ongoing transfer or local influence will provide fresh and open perspectives regarding community development. Leadership from City Hall – from both elected officials and staff - is key to any successful community.
- **Strive to integrate youth into local service clubs and organizations to enhance their leadership skills.**
It’s never too early to build the next emerging leader. Involve these younger people in the planning and implementation of community events and activities. This not only transfers responsibilities, it also creates a sense of ownership and belonging for the local youth.
- **Work at connecting leaders of different generations.**
For instance, the “coffee club” that meets each morning at the local library could be tapped as mentors for younger leaders, especially youth. Transferring some of the institutional knowledge from older to younger leaders helps to keep things operating more efficiently in the community.

CLOSING

The Downtown Assessment Team appreciates the hospitality, open-mindedness and energy of those that participated in the three-day visit. The community assets in Creston certainly provide a head start and impact quality of life for residents but also make Creston a good place to visit. This Assessment Team worked with the challenges we identified while on-site but also through the community input provided.

We hope this will be a working document for years to come. We encourage you to take the most popular and best ideas from this report and form implementation teams. One of the best ways to build on the interest and excitement for downtown improvements expressed by citizen participation in the Downtown Assessment is to identify “quick win” projects that show what is possible when the community comes together to turn a downtown “space” into a “place.”

Many examples exist of approaches to implementing quick, impactful, and inexpensive downtown improvements. Some examples of these approaches are Better Block, The Place Game and Tactical Urbanism. There are several keys to these approaches turning “spaces” into “places” – where memories will be made, and people will want to visit. These placemaking approaches are often city supported and citizen-lead efforts involving community members representing a wide variety of interests in a community. Resources are “resourced” from the community to keep costs low and to involve more of the community in the project. The projects happen quickly, often within 60-90 days from project conception to installation. And, the projects are flexible and adaptable to lessons learned.

To assist the city and citizens of Creston in keeping the momentum for downtown improvement going, the Iowa Economic Development Authority is offering the time and assistance of Jeff Geerts from the Assessment Team. Jeff is available to serve as a liaison from our agency to Creston to assist in developing and coordinating opportunities for quick implementation of placemaking projects. As your project team identifies potential opportunities to implement projects improving the sense of place in downtown (aka Uptown) Creston, Jeff is available to share his expertise, provide technical assistance and return to Creston to help plan and implement.

CONTACTS

Iowa Downtown Resource Center, IEDA, Des Moines, Iowa.....	515.348.6180
	www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/idrc
CDBG Downtown Revitalization Program.....	515.348.6208
	www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/DowntownFund
Certified Local Governments, State Historic Society of Iowa.....	515.281.6826
ISU Iowa Community Indicators Program retail analysis.....	www.icip.iastate.edu/retail
Keep Iowa Beautiful	515.323.6507
	www.keeptowbeautiful.com
NATIONAL AND STATE PRESERVATION SERVICES AND PROGRAMS:	
National Trust for Historic Preservation	www.preservationnation.org
Main Street America (Main Street America Network Membership).....	www.mainstreet.org
National Park Service Preservation Briefs	www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm
State Historic Preservation Office.....	www.iowahistory.org

RESOURCES

The following electronic files are available for download [here](#)

DESIGN RENDERINGS (DRAWINGS)

SECTION #1 VISION and PRIORITY

- Community Meeting Responses
- Creston Pre-Assessment Survey Results

SECTION #2 ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

- Communication Strategies
- Community Project Examples
- Social Media for Nonprofits

SECTION #3 LOW HANGING FRUIT

- 8 80 Cities
- Creative Placemaking & the Arts Resource Guide
- Creative Placemaking Manual
- Project for Public Spaces

SECTION #4 ENERGIZING and PROGRAMMING

- Construction Survival Guide
- Example Event Evaluation
- Getting Started with Social Media
- Great Promotion Events
- Great Retail – Shop Small
- Hamilton County Shop Local

SECTION #5 DRIVING INVESTMENT

- [All in one] ESRI Creston Profile
- Jobs Inflow & Outflow
- Upper Floors: Pigeons or Profits

For additional resources and tools to help make your downtown more viable, visit [Community Resource Examples](#)