

# DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT

## ALTOONA, IOWA

August 25-27, 2020



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 Altoona, Iowa. In preparation of this report, the Team learned about Altoona'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 public input survey consisting of 580 completed surveys, a driving tour of the city and a walking tour of the downtown commercial district. The intensive three-day visit included interviews (in person and virtual) with approximately 50 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 Altoona.

## ASSESSMENT TEAM

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



**MAIA FIALA JESSEN** is the Design Coordinator for the Iowa Downtown Resource Center's Main Street Iowa program. In this role, she provides technical assistance and conceptual design services to Main Street Iowa communities and manages the Challenge Grant program for building rehabilitation projects. Prior to joining Main Street Iowa, Maia worked with the Oregon State Historic Preservation office, assisting Oregon communities with Main Street design, historic resource survey and inventory, and property listing in the National Register of Historic Places. She has a BFA in Interior Design from Iowa State University, an MS in Historic Preservation from the University of Oregon and is a certified Historic Real Estate Development Finance Professional (HREDFP) through the National Development Council.

**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 12+ 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 pairing a community's vision with the resources available to make the vision a reality. Jeff is actively involved with several nonprofit organizations and



currently serves on the Des Moines Heritage Trust Board. 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 a master's degree in public administration from Drake University.



**CAROL LILLY** is a Downtown Development Specialist with Iowa Downtown Resource Center's Main Street Iowa program. In this role, she provides technical assistance services to Main Street Iowa communities. Prior to joining Main Street Iowa, Lilly was the Executive Director of Community Main Street in Cedar Falls Iowa. She is a graduate of the University of Northern Iowa and has worked in the fields of property management, retail management, and marketing in Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, and Minnesota. Lilly has presented at state, regional and national workshops on topics related to economic development of downtown districts. She has always been an active volunteer, lending time and expertise to several worthy organizations including local Chambers of Commerce, various boards, foundations, tourism groups, church groups and school districts while living in communities across the Midwest.

**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 (host of 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 his dog, Mister Cotton.

## OVERVIEW

This Downtown Assessment report and recommendations for Altoona are based on the Team's downtown development experience – totaling over 85 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 economic well-being of the entire community. 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 Olde Town Altoona a "go to" kind of destination, not an avoidable area we pass through on our way to somewhere else.

## PURPOSE

The Altoona Area Chamber of Commerce 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, Altoona 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 Olde Town's challenges and capitalize on its opportunities.

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 Olde Town for future generations. This report cannot and does not provide all the answers. Ultimately, Altoona citizens must explore their options, decide what is relevant and realistic and acquire additional information and resources as they address Olde Town Altoona's future.

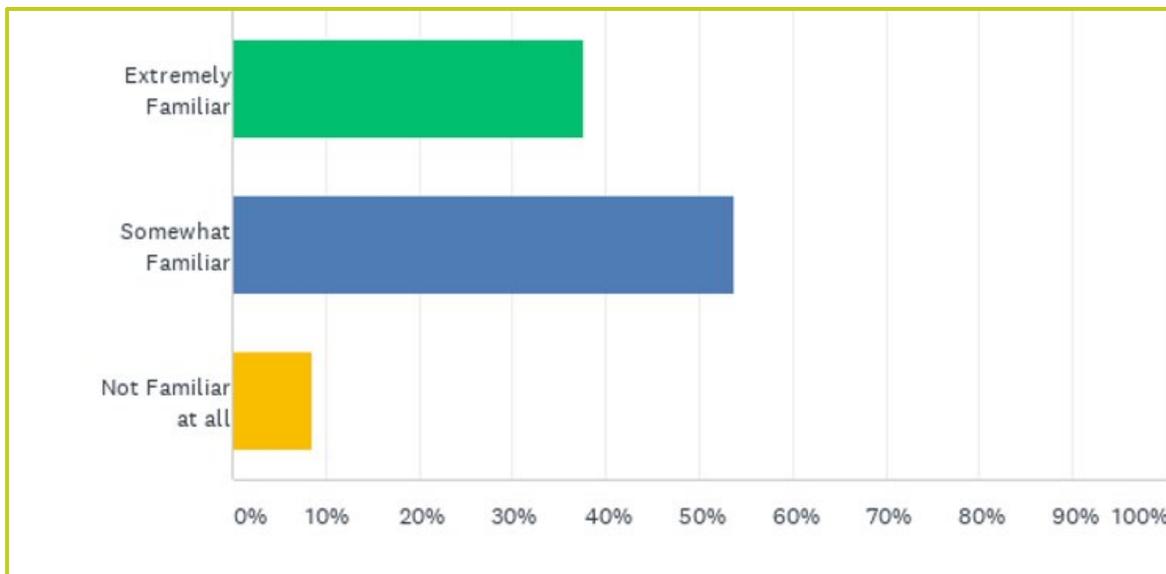
Altoona, Iowa prides itself as Iowa's "place to play" as the home of Adventureland Park, Prairie Meadows Casino, Racetrack and Hotel and beautiful recreations trails. Shopping is abundant with many national chains and locally owned businesses. Altoona is a fast-growing community within the Des Moines metropolitan area. The US Census Bureau estimates the 2019 population at 19,221 which is a 37.1% increase since the 2010 census. It offers large city amenities, but with quality and convenience of a small town.

The Assessment Team had the opportunity to drill down to specific challenges and work to help Olde Town 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 Altoona. Local leaders do not always agree, but that can be healthy and help encourage local talk about the issues and spur involvement. We believe that community leaders and residents do agree on the end result: a healthier Olde Town Business District for Altoona's citizens to frequent day in and day out. We hope this set of recommendations can be used to take Olde Town Altoona to the next level.

Prior to the Downtown Assessment, the Iowa Downtown Resource Center administered an on-line survey of Altoona residents to get their ideas and opinions regarding the Olde Town area. The survey was distributed primarily through social media channels initiated by the Chamber of Commerce and partnering individuals and entities. The survey was also distributed in a blast to the Chamber’s email list. Approximately 580 people participated in the survey during its active period from June 22 – July 30, 2020. A complete summary of responses is included with this report. Survey trends show....

**FAMILIARITY OF THE “OLDE TOWN” DISTRICT:**

All 580 individuals who responded to the survey answered the question: *How familiar are you with Altoona’s “Olde Town” district?* Thirty-eight percent responded that they were extremely familiar with the district, while 54% were somewhat familiar. An additional 8% reported they were not familiar at all with Olde Town. It should be noted, the Chamber of Commerce, located in the heart of Olde Town, was the primary entity to distribute the survey, therefore the response rate may have been skewed toward individuals familiar with the chamber and its location.



**OLDE TOWN’S GREATEST STRENGTHS:**

Identified strengths were numerous, but generally fell into the following two categories: physical (i.e. buildings) and social (i.e. small-town feel/charm). Some strengths encapsulate both categories, such as the barber shop for its building and for the sense of community it brings to the neighborhood. The most frequently cited strengths in the survey were:

- Historic buildings/architecture
- History/vintage
- Small town feel/charm
- Authentic character
- CAP Theater
- Olde Town Tap
- Barber
- Location
- Museum

**IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT THE OLDE TOWN DISTRICT, IT WOULD BE:**

There were three general categories that rose to the top to reflect the desired change: 1) tenant mix – i.e. more restaurants and boutique retail; 2) infrastructure - i.e. walkability, building improvements; and 3) social – i.e. cleanliness, entertainment. The most frequently cited items to change in the survey were:

- More retail (boutique, local, small, unique)
- More food and drink options
- Building facelifts
- Clean it up
- Two-way street
- Unique identity
- More parking
- More walkability
- Better bike access/trail access
- More entertainment options

### **WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU SPEND TIME IN ALTOONA'S OLDE TOWN DISTRICT?**

The list generated by this question related directly to the desired changes identified in the previous question. In particular, the responses indicated that individuals would spend more time in the district if changes were made to the tenant mix and social options. The most frequently cited things that would make a respondent spend time in Olde Town were:

- Restaurants and bars (bakery/café/coffee)
- Outdoor dining options
- Shopping (specialty/boutique/quaint)
- More events (block party/festivals)
- Farmers market/food trucks
- Entertainment options
- Family activities/option

### **WHAT TYPE OF NEW BUSINESS WOULD BE MOST SUCCESSFUL IF LOCATED IN ALTOONA'S OLDE TOWN DISTRICT?**

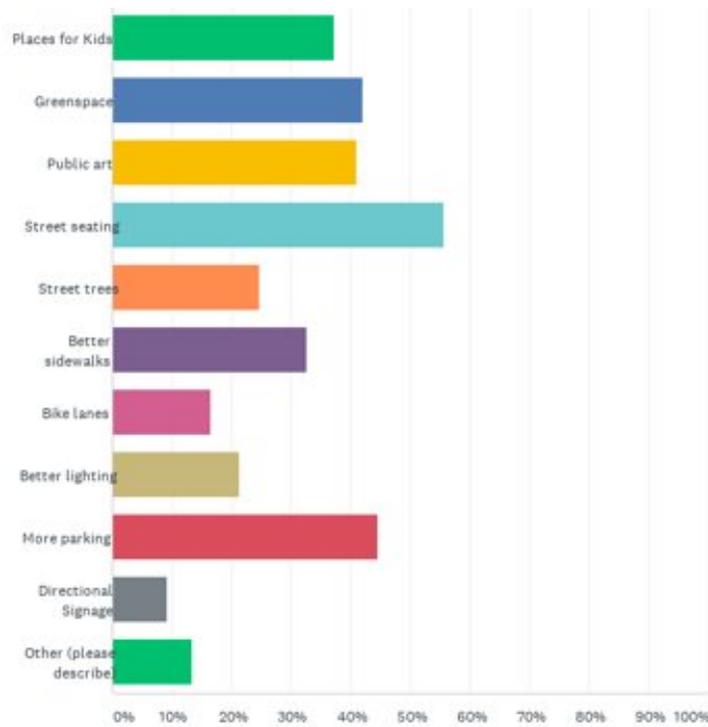
Survey responses were consistent across the board. The *same things* you would like to see CHANGED would cause you to SPEND TIME in Olde Town, thereby contributing to the *success of the business mix* you would like also like to see.

Respondents wanted to see more restaurants and boutique shopping – but not just ANY OPTION – unique, locally, and independently owned were preferred. The new business types respondents most frequently stated as “would be most successful” if located in Olde Town were:

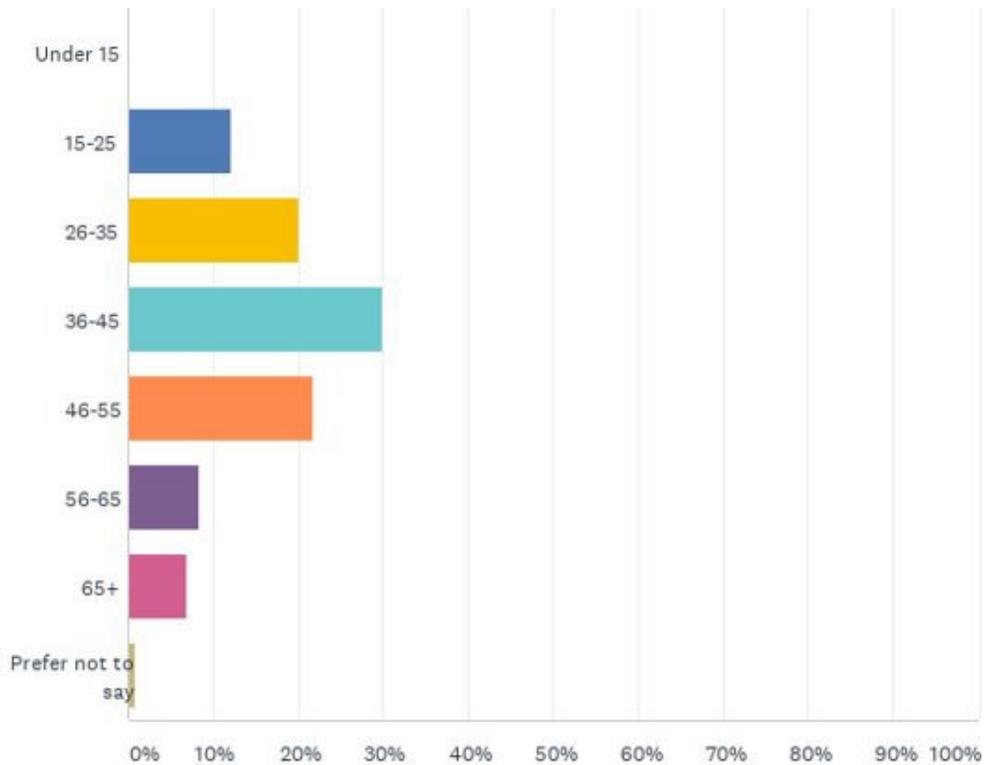
- Restaurants
- Brewery
- Ice cream/candy
- Coffee shop/bakery
- Boutique shopping
- Craft/hobby retail shops
- Kids' activities

## WHICH PUBLIC AMENITIES DO YOU THINK ARE MOST NEEDED IN ALTOONA'S OLDE TOWN DISTRICT?

The top four responses in the survey were: 1) street seating, 2) more parking, 3) greenspace and 4) public art.



## WHAT IS YOUR AGE?



## INITIAL TEAM OBSERVATIONS

The assessment team provides an outside perspective of Olde Town Altoona. Initial observations by the team included existing strengths as well as challenges facing the district. Many of these observations were confirmed through the survey data and on-site stakeholder conversations.

- + The agricultural history is immediately apparent when entering Olde Town. The grain elevator, water tower and mill buildings provide a distinct sense of place and project a small town feel that is cherished by residents.
  - + The proximity of the Vern Willey II Bicycle Trail to Olde Town is a huge asset. The economic impact of cycling has been demonstrated in communities across the state and opportunities will only increase once the trail connections between Bondurant are completed.
  - + Prior investment into Olde Towne has been demonstrated through the streetscape improvements, light posts, plantings, and individual building improvements.
  - + Long-standing businesses, like Burget Mill and Altoona Barber, have had impressive tenures in Olde Town and have a loyal customer base.
- The Olde Town area is somewhat undefined and unknown – both in terms of its physical boundaries and how it is described by locals.
  - The mix of building type use and scale – particularly at the division on either side of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue – adds to a scattered, undefined feel.
  - The current business mix is limited. It skews heavily towards professional businesses and services – while food, retail and entertainment options that provide pedestrian activity and ‘feet on the street’ are missing.
  - Weeds on the sidewalks, overflowing cigarette containers outside of the bar, and light posts void of banners and flower plantings detracted from the overall look and feel of the district. Amenities like benches and trash cans were missing.
  - Few vacancies exist, leaving little room for business expansion within the existing building stock.

## ASSESSMENT TEAM’S RECOMMENDATIONS

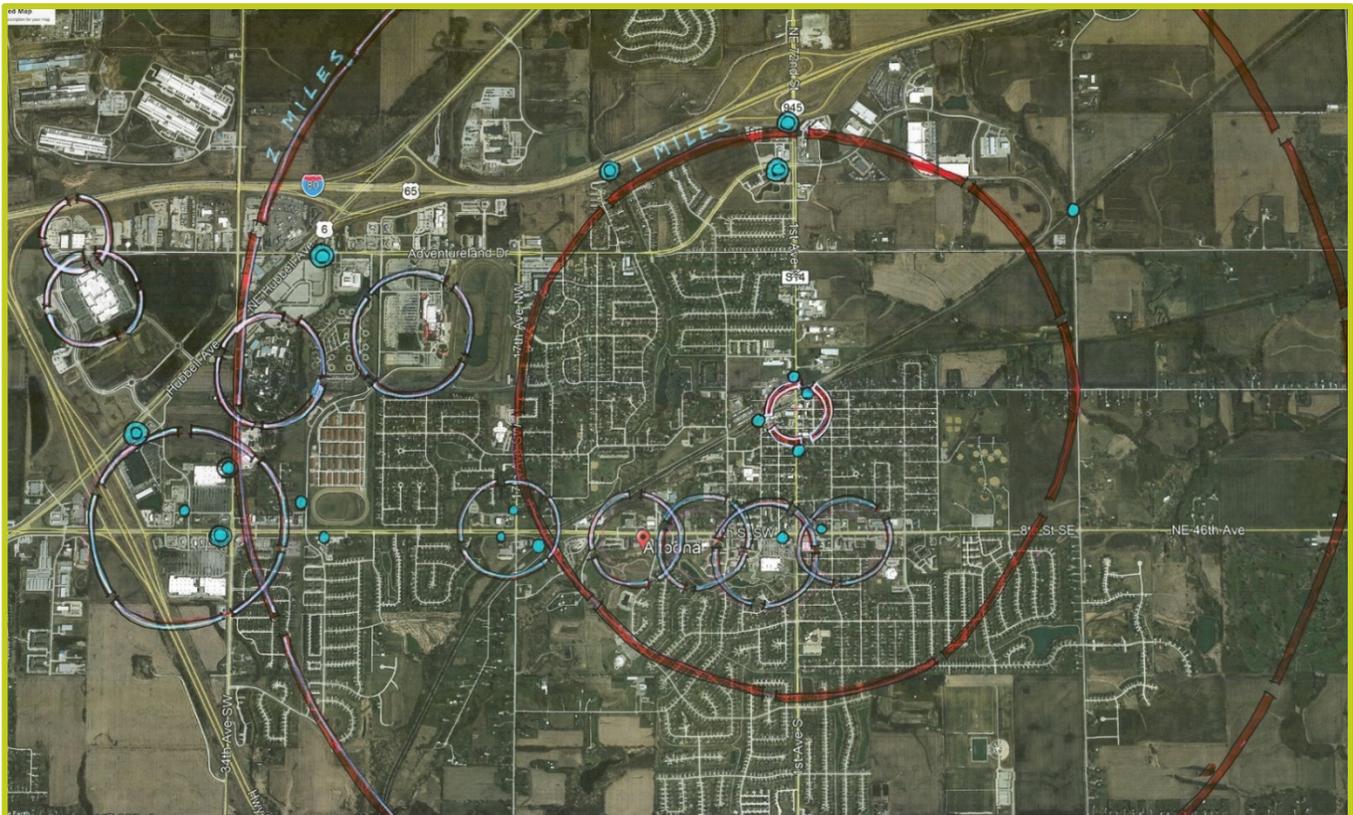
The Assessment Team’s recommendations have been grouped into six overall themes. It is important to take one step at a time and understand that the longer-term recommendations are not of much consequence until the shorter-term recommendations are addressed. The Assessment Team hopes Altoona will assess each recommendation and develop a plan to implement what is RIGHT for Olde Town. 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 in a constructive way to identify the strengths, challenges, and opportunities to help the community improve the vitality of Olde Town over time. We appreciate the openness and honesty of residents, and that community leaders allowed the Assessment Team to be honest in its findings.

## THEME 1: CONTEXT & GATEWAYS

A unique strength of Altoona is its number of large, regional destinations within a five minute drive of downtown including Adventureland, Prairie Meadows Racetrack, Prairie Meadows Casino, Outlets of Des Moines, Bass Pro Shops, Sam Wise Complex, the recreational trail system, and regional big box retail to name a few. Due to these nearby amenities, a tremendous number of visitors come to Altoona for entertainment and shopping.

In the following illustration, Olde Town is the center circle, with one mile and two-mile radius circles to demonstrate proximity to the nearby amenities.



During our visit it was reported that during certain months, the population of Altoona more than doubles due to visitors to major attractions. Olde Town has the potential to provide an alternate destination location for residents and visitors alike that is small town in character, welcoming, comfortable, affordable, walkable, and safe.

To create a destination corridor, people need to be able to feel a sense of place. Olde Town currently lacks clear boundaries, signage, and identity. The core intersection of 1st Avenue and 2nd Street is well defined, but improvements are needed to help identify Olde Town as a whole. Gateway features, located at key points along 1st Avenue, as shown in the following illustration, can be used to help define district boundaries and provide a clear sense of arrival.



The design of gateway features is important, as it sets the tone for the look and feel of the district. A variety of materials, including masonry, metals, and graphic panels that relate to a downtown’s character and history have been used in community gateway features. Consider what speaks to the character of Altoona and helps tell the local story. In the examples below, Valley Junction, the traditional commercial corridor of West Des Moines, reinforces their railroad history in their gateway signage.

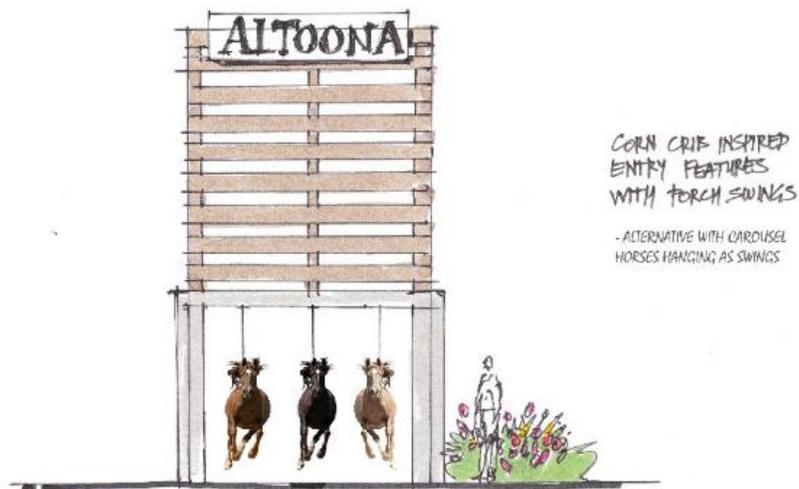


When designing your gateway features, ask yourself “What is unique about Altoona’s character and history?” We heard many comments concerning your agricultural heritage, such as “Our roots are a farm town.” The grain elevators next to Olde Town and Burget Mill reinforce this agricultural heritage.

The gateway concept below is inspired by agricultural “corn cribs” and the welcoming nature of a porch swing.

This gateway feature concept is multi-purpose. It is:

- A distinct vertical icon visible from a distance and over the top of vehicles on 1st Avenue.
- A mounting framework for a literal sign stating “Altoona” similar to the railroad sign along the train tracks that identified the location to the conductor and passengers upon arrival.
- A support structure for the swings.
- A shade structure for the swings.
- A way to incorporate colors and imagery important to Altoona by integrating them into the swings.
- An alternative way to tie into more recent history by adapting some of the carousel horses from the original Adventureland carousel into the swing under the “corn crib”.



Once gateways are defined, think about the overall boundaries of Olde Town. A very common measure of how far people will walk without saying, “I’m taking a walk” is approximately 1,000 feet. Virtually every downtown “main street” or district is 1,000 feet or typically three city blocks, from one end to the other.

Local examples include Valley Junction, the East Village, Court Avenue, the Des Moines Sculpture Park, or any regional mall including Altoona’s Outlets of Des Moines shopping complex. For this reason, starting at the 1st Avenue and 2nd Street intersection, we have used an approximate 1,000 ft circle to define the limits of your Olde Town district. Efforts should be focused on creating a successful commercial district within this circle, as shown in the following illustration.



Distinct from most historic downtowns in small rural communities, Altoona has a low vacancy rate and lacks available buildings and sites to meet the immediate needs of potential tenants. Altoona should focus on proactively creating opportunities for growth by identifying sites and buildings within this circle that can meet both immediate and future needs.

## THEME 2: OLDE TOWN EXPERIENCE

As you plan and implement strategies to revitalize Olde Town, think about creating EXPERIENCES. Think about ways to engage as many of the senses as possible—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. To attract people to Olde Town, focus on providing multiple experiences in one place. Think of the [Power of 10+](#) concept developed by the Project for Public Spaces. The Power of 10 concept is based on having places that provide at least 10 things to do there or reasons to go there.

You then create destinations (Olde Town) with 10 or more places each with 10 or more reasons to go to each one. Examples of things to do or reasons to go to a place include eating, drinking, sitting, public art, music, play, performing arts, shopping, etc. You will recognize many of these same things were included in the community survey responses when asked, “What would make you spend time in Olde Town?”

As you work to create places that draw people to Olde Town, think about the overall experience of visiting Olde Town and how to make that experience engaging and memorable. Strive to engage people at least every 20 feet as they stroll, bike and/or drive in Olde Town. As Jason Roberts from Better Block says, “To create great places – think, ‘how can I fall in love with this place? Think romantic.’”

Details large and small can and must work together to create an engaging place. Here are some of the opportunities to help create memorable and engaging places.

- Wayfinding and Signs
- Parking
- Streets
- Amenities (lighting, seating, shade, art, greenery, green space)
- Storytelling

### Wayfinding and Signs

If you want people to come to Olde Town, they need to know what is available and how to get there. The Assessment Team identified two main signage related opportunities in addition to the gateway features described previously.

First, Olde Town has a tremendous opportunity to connect with and capitalize on the local trail network. Your strategic location along the trail could make Olde Town a trail destination. The trail provides an opportunity to market Olde Town and to bring people to Olde Town via walking and bicycling. Once you pull people off the trail, use complimentary signage (pedestrian scale) to help them navigate to points of interest in Olde Town.



Second, Altoona's Olde Town is "under-signed" and the signage that is there is understated. With that said, there are some good sign examples such as the signs for Total Eyewear Gallery and Edward Jones. More signs like these are needed as are blade signs that jut out perpendicularly from the building, so they are easily visible to walkers, bikers, and drivers farther down the street.

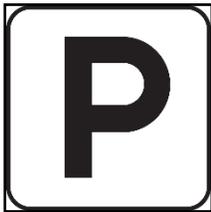
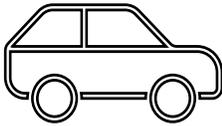
#### ACTION STEPS:

- 1) Add directional signs to Olde Town at key intersections such as Interstate 80/1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, 8<sup>th</sup> Street/1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Adventureland Drive/Hubbell Avenue, and Adventureland Drive/1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.
- 2) Add prominent gateway features at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue/4<sup>th</sup> Street SE and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue near the railroad tracks (see examples on previous page).
- 3) Install more business signs that identify the services offered by the business and that are visual to drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians. Consider collaborating with local artists and schools to design, construct and install signs unique to Altoona (see examples below).
- 4) Provide signage near the trail so that trail users know what is available in Olde Town. Likewise, have signs in Olde Town directing people to the trail so they know the trail is nearby. This could encourage future travel to Olde Town via bicycle and reduce the need for auto parking.



# Parking

Parking was the “second highest” need identified in the community survey. This comment is heard in nearly every community the Downtown Resource Center works in. Often the issue is more related to parking management than parking availability. The Assessment Team identified more than 270 parking spaces around Olde Town within the distance similar to those residents are accustomed to walking at the local Hy-Vee or outlet mall.



300' from parking space to front door



300' from parking lot to center of 2nd St SE



The Downtown Assessment Team identified ways to better define, identify and connect parking spaces along with opportunities to add parking spaces as well.



#### ACTION STEPS:

- Install signs directing visitors to parking
- Organize and maximize parking behind south side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE (see image above)
- Create a visual pass through connecting bike trail parking lot to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE

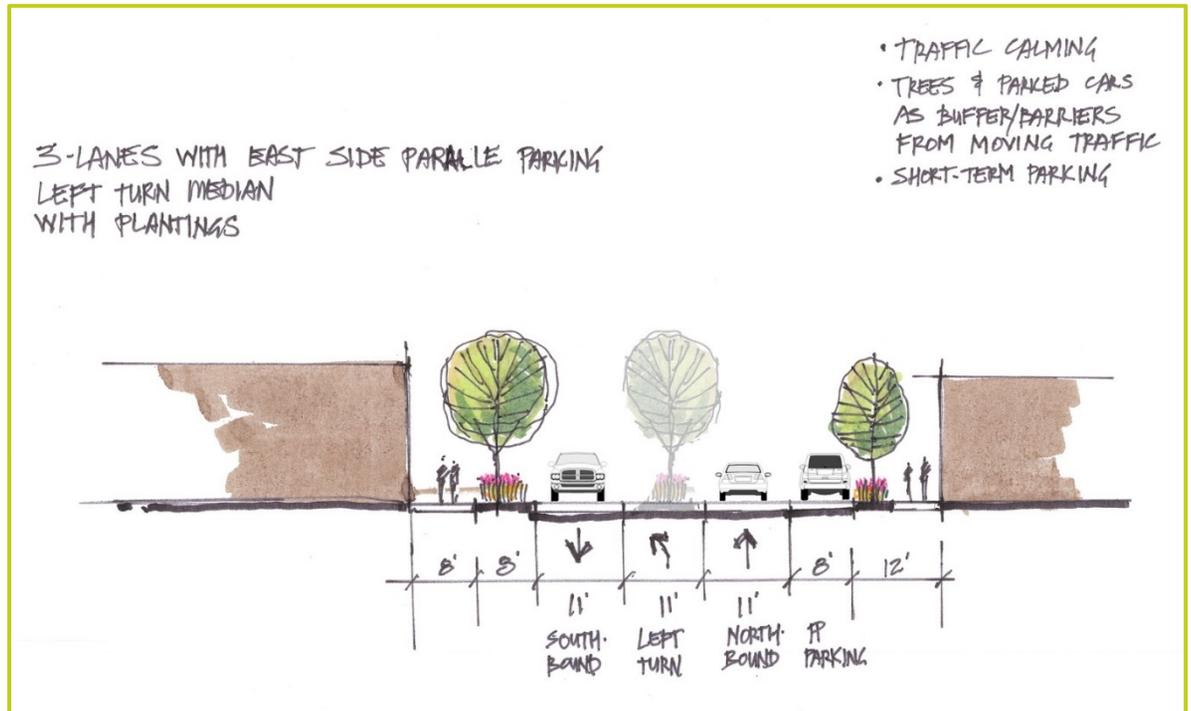
## Streets

1<sup>st</sup> Avenue as designed today, does not provide for a safe and comfortable experience, especially on the west side of the road where it is difficult in some areas to differentiate between the road, parking areas, sidewalk and driveways as little to no vegetation is present. As the city embarks on the Olde Town phase of the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue improvements, the Downtown Assessment Team strongly encourages the proposed 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue 3-lane cross-section begin north of the railroad tracks and continue throughout the Olde Town district. The proposed street section concept shown below makes the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue corridor distinctly part of downtown starting at the railroad tracks and down to 4<sup>th</sup> Street. This 3-lane cross section accommodates the same traffic volume as a 4-lane configuration while greatly increasing pedestrian and vehicular safety. Utilizing parallel parking, street trees and plantings is key to providing a buffer between pedestrians and moving traffic, resulting in a more welcoming, comfortable, and safe pedestrian experience. Developing 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue as a 3-lane road versus a 4-lane road also provides a better connection supporting the proposed expansion of Olde Town to the west of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue described in the Built Environment section of the report.

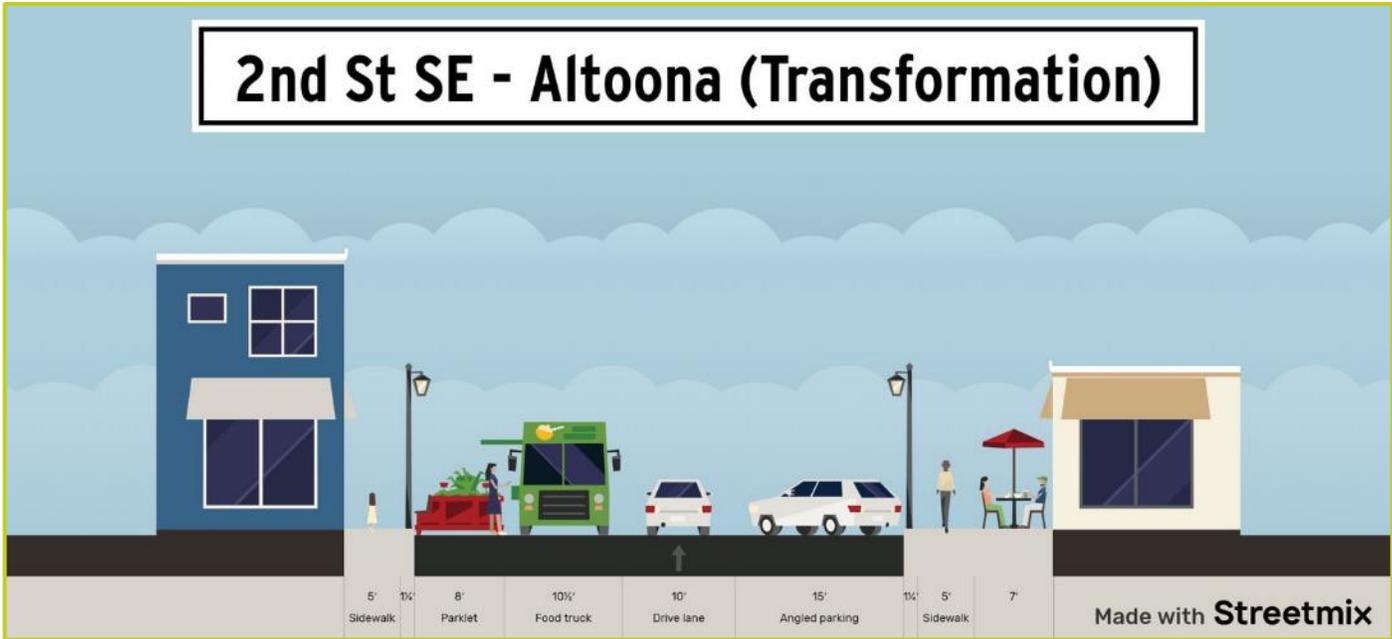
The current heart of Olde Town is 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE. This street is unique in that it is the only one-way street in Altoona and it is considerably narrower than a typical Iowa "Main Street." The width of the street is an asset that lends itself to creating a more intimate and more comfortable pedestrian experience. There are many ways to reconfigure 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE to support flexibility for many uses.

The last major overhaul to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street was 25 years ago. It is once again time to consider major improvements to the street's infrastructure that could also support a transformation of the street to a flexible public space. Now is the time to conduct pilot tests consisting of different street configurations that support a more permanent transformation of the street in the future. Pilot tests can be done inexpensively by restriping the street, using planters, traffic cones, art, temporary furniture and other low-cost approaches to define street spaces and uses.

In homage to Altoona's and the Olde Town's agricultural heritage, think of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE as the community's front porch or community café. On the following page are some possible configurations explore and support the safety and comfort of pedestrians and bicyclists, as well as support the transformation of the street to a community gathering place.



Using the existing street configuration, add temporary outdoor dining spaces and invite in food vendors to test concepts (shown below).



Keep the one-way traffic and angled parking but add greenery and parklet spaces that provide outdoor dining opportunities (shown below). Converting 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE to two-way traffic may actually create a more inviting and vibrant street scene more conducive to attracting visitors and the types of businesses residents indicated they want to see in Olde Town.



If a comprehensive overhaul is considered, a two-way street concept (shown below) would provide a lot of flexibility, slow down traffic and increase pedestrian safety. The parklets or outside dining areas shown along the curb below could also be designed to support seasonal “pop-up” retail shops, farmers market vendors, art fairs, etc.



### ACTION STEPS:

- Test out different configurations of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE. The Farm to Table Dinner is a good opportunity as is Christmas in Olde Town and hosting the farmers’ market. See [Better Block](#) for ways to quickly transform a city block.
- Work with the city to confirm the 3-lane approach to 1<sup>st</sup> Ave is used throughout Olde Town.

### AMENITIES

**Lighting** – Olde Town Altoona already has some wonderful lighting (at the appropriate pedestrian scale) and aesthetically pleasing light poles. Work to make sure that lighting installed as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue project maintains that same character and same pedestrian scale focus. Utilize the existing banner supports on the light poles to add color and promote Olde Town, its history and upcoming events and plan for seasonal floral and greenery displays on the light poles as they add color, interest and make for a more pleasant visiting experience. Well maintained light poles, lighting fixtures, banners and greenery are a symbol that a community has pride in its appearance and is welcoming to visitors.

**Seating** – In the community survey, residents indicated that additional seating was the *number one amenity and most needed* in Olde Town. Its presence is almost non-existent in Olde Town. Seating should be added throughout Olde Town and placed in strategic areas that make people feel safe, that do not impede pedestrians and encourage small group gathering and conversation. Public seating can be fun and whimsical as well as functional – can provide much needed shade and serve as a place to charge electronics and provide a Wi-Fi connection to the world. Just like with signs and gateway features, seating is an opportunity to reflect the character of Olde Town. Collaborate with local artists and schools to design, build and install. See the following examples.

• Technology

• GAMING

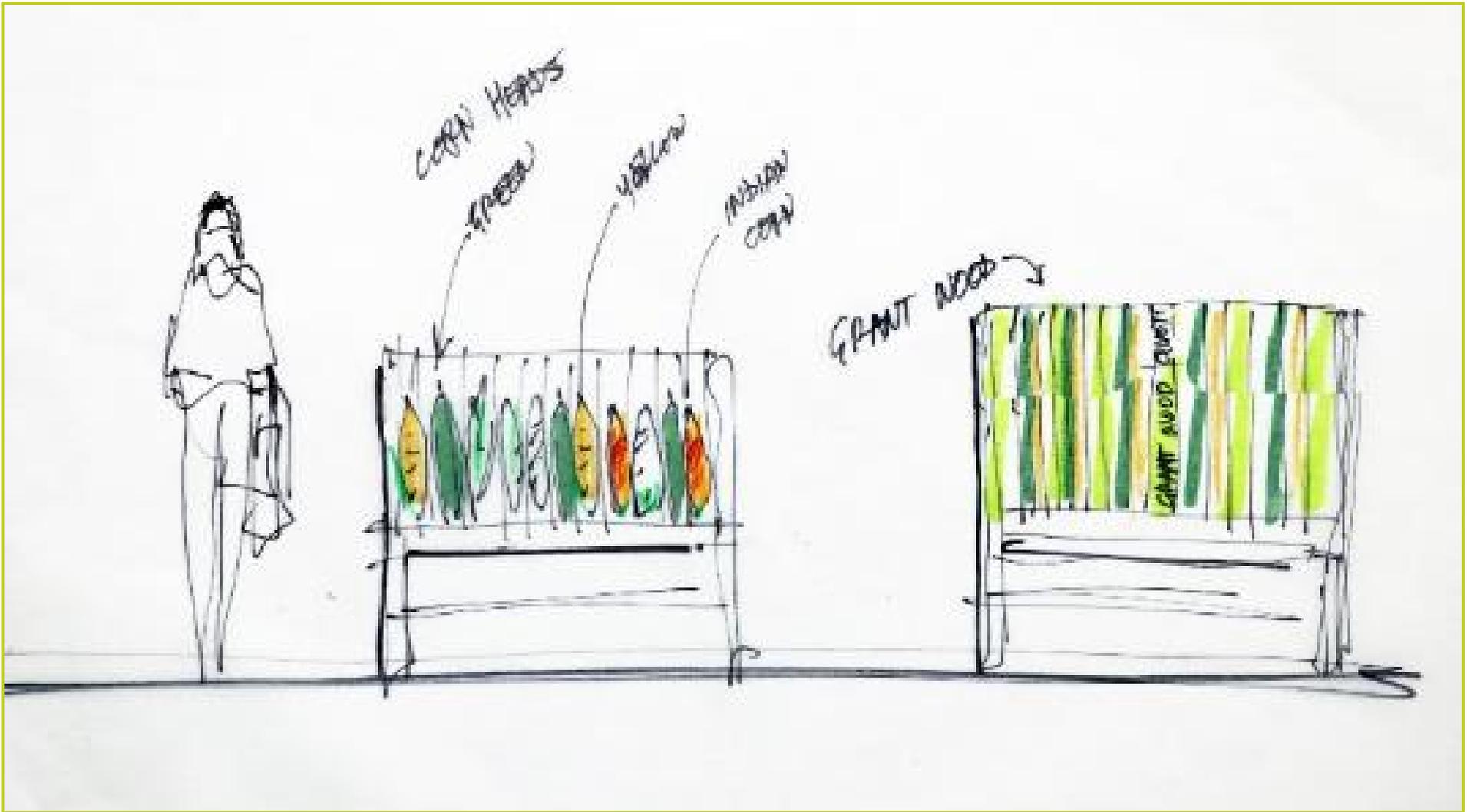
LOCATION - POWER  
PROJECT IMAGERY  
SHADE

• WII - HOT SPOTS

• WII GAMES

• ROLLER SKATING  
• CLIMBING WALL  
• UNIQUE







Furniture made with a CNC Router and 4' x 8' sheets of plywood.  
See <https://www.betterblock.org/wikiblock> for ready to use designs.

**Trash and Recycling Containers and Weeds** – For convenience and to help maintain the appearance of Olde Town, provide receptacles for trash, recyclables and cigarette butts. To help “make and maintain” a good first impression – remove weeds, litter and cigarette butts.



**Art** – The Downtown Assessment Team was glad to hear of Altoona’s efforts to integrate public art throughout the community. The Assessment Team identified many opportunities in this report to incorporate art into Olde Town to reflect Olde Town’s agricultural and equestrian heritage. Public art is another means to further define and strengthen an identity for Olde Town while attracting visitors to the area. When planning for public art in the district, think about how other project budgets can be leveraged to weave art into the fabric of Olde Town such as through signage, seating, bike racks, trash and recycling bins, light poles, pavements, murals, storefronts, gateway features, etc.



When thinking of public art, do not forget to incorporate performing arts such as live music, theater and dance. For more ideas, see the Altoona Arts & Culture Plan. Consider an annual public art contest in conjunction with Olde Town. Displaying the resulting contest art encourages visitors to the area. Visitors can be provided an opportunity to vote for their favorite art piece and those art pieces can be procured for permanent addition to the district. The communities of Woodbine, Clive and Charles City have successfully followed this model to enhance public art efforts as demonstrated in the following images:



**Greenspace** – After seating and parking, greenspace was the next most identified amenity the public indicated wanting to see in Olde Town. Greenspace does exist in Olde Town, but it currently is in small pockets and is not very inviting and in some cases, it is not clear if the greenspace is public space or not. With improvements, Townsend Park could be a very welcoming gateway to Olde Town. The park needs some refreshing, additional seating and amenities should be added, and the bushes surrounding the gazebo need to be pruned or removed. Adding the former Adventureland carousel now owned by the city of Altoona to Townsend Park would make for a memorable gateway and a draw for people of all ages.



The greenspace directly west of 1<sup>st</sup> Ave across from Townsend Park and next to the CenturyLink building also could serve as a welcoming green space to the area, but it’s unclear whether the space is currently intended for public or private use or both. As you will see later in the Built Environment section of the report, the Downtown Assessment Team has developed concepts to show extending Olde Town to the west of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue between 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. If this concept is implemented, the greenspace around the water tower could become a shaded gathering space for the community as well. See following image.



**Storytelling** – Think about how the various aspects of the Olde Town experience discussed in this report can be woven together to help tell the stories of Olde Town’s past and will support the creation of future stories. Commemorate and share your historic buildings and events. Tell the stories of Altoona’s agricultural and railroad experience. Connect with the local school curriculum to share those stories, involve students in researching the history and incorporate Olde Town field trips and community service opportunities. Share the history throughout Olde Town and offer walking and virtual tours of the district to take people outside the history museum and encourage a longer stay in Olde Town.



**ACTION STEPS:**

- Restore banners and greenery displays to the light poles as soon as possible. Change displays seasonally and for special events.
- Develop and implement a plan for seating.
- Add trash and recycling receptacles.
- Make sure that lighting planned for installation as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue project is pedestrian scaled and reflects the character desired for Olde Town.
- Partner with the Art & Culture Committee to implement Art & Culture Plan ideas for Olde Town.
- Work with the city to develop and implement a plan to improve Townsend Park and research the feasibility of locating the carousel in the park.
- Identify and implement projects that highlight the historical places and events of Olde Town.

## THEME 3: BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The three topics related to the built environment noted by the Assessment Team are existing buildings, guidelines for appropriate improvements and new construction and expansion opportunities.

**Existing Buildings** – As identified in the “context section”, Altoona is in a unique position with its low vacancy rate and lack of available buildings and sites to meet the immediate needs of potential tenants. In order to meet demand and to provide options to add to the tenant mix, it will be necessary to find new building space through either new construction, converting the vacant sites and buildings to new construction, or relocating less downtown critical uses from strategic locations to more perimeter sites in the downtown.



**Design Guidelines** – In general, the renovation of Olde Town’s historic structures has been well done and is consistent with their historic character, yet newer construction has typically ignored the downtown’s historic character. Going forward, new building construction should be consistent in character with the built environment. Strategies are needed to help create a more consistent downtown environment reflecting Altoona’s heritage. The City should consider architectural guidelines and link any funding assistance to compliance with those guidelines.



**Expansion opportunities** – The Olde Town district is small with a limited number of historic structures. As additional spaces become available, it provides an opportunity for existing businesses to “right size” or locate to a more appropriate building within the district. As office/service uses relocate, it creates room for more appropriate food & beverage/entertainment/retail uses to cluster in the core. It should be noted, throughout the expansion area, the buildings and their signage should respond to the desirable historic character.

Greenspace, gateways, trail connectivity, traffic flow and redevelopment opportunities are identified in the rendering on the right.

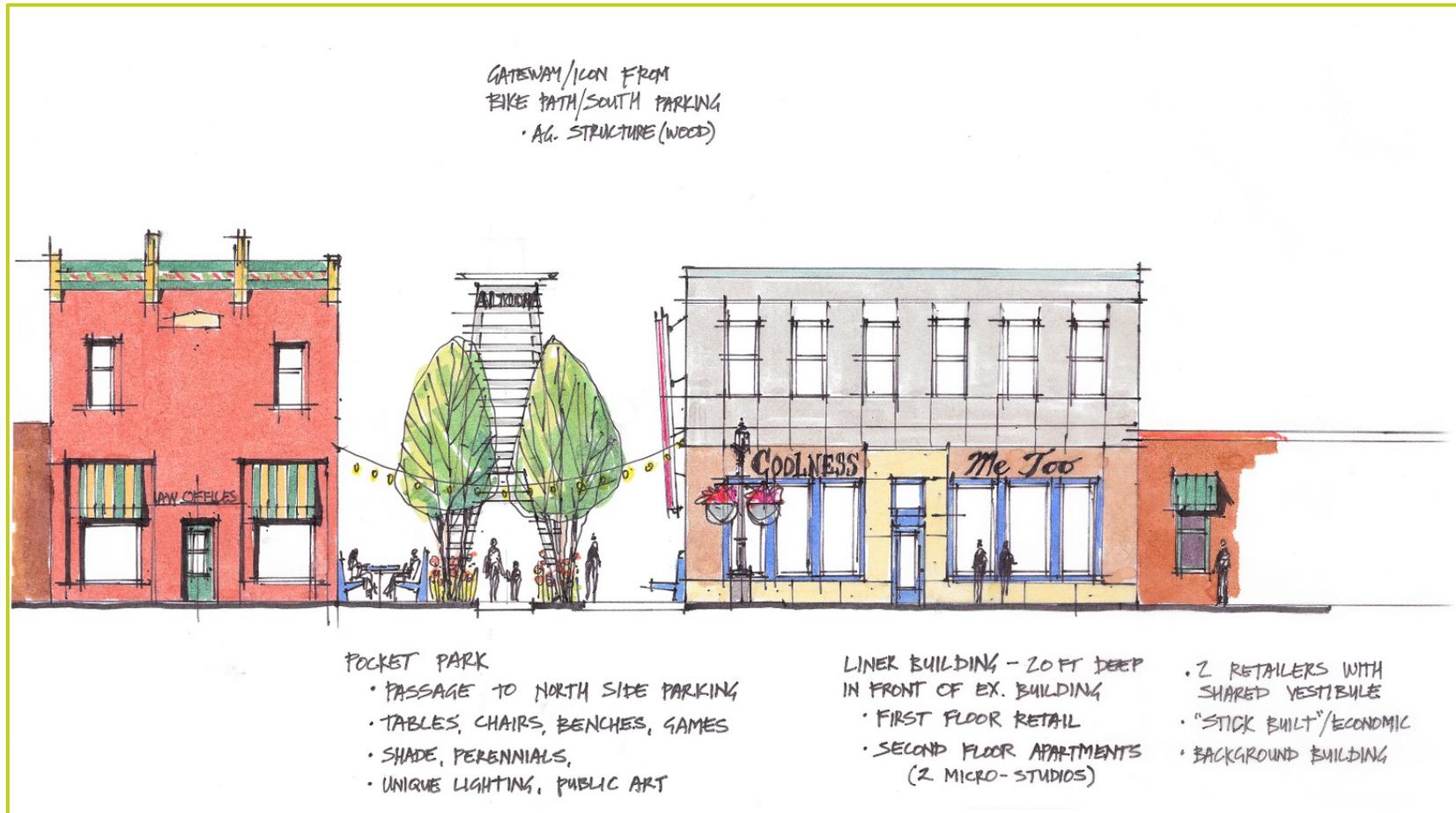
The concept reflects an expanded district encapsulating structures to the west of 1st Avenue. The area identified falls within the 1,000 feet “walkability circle” identified in the “context section” of the report.

In support of the upcoming vacating of the old fire station on 3rd Street SW, the Assessment Team identified an opportunity to extend 2nd Street to the west of 1st Avenue and connect it with 2nd Avenue SW. This would extend Olde Town to the west and provide an opportunity to create smaller business spaces with lower rent in the old fire station bays and would provide an opportunity to provide public green space and more parking in the area.

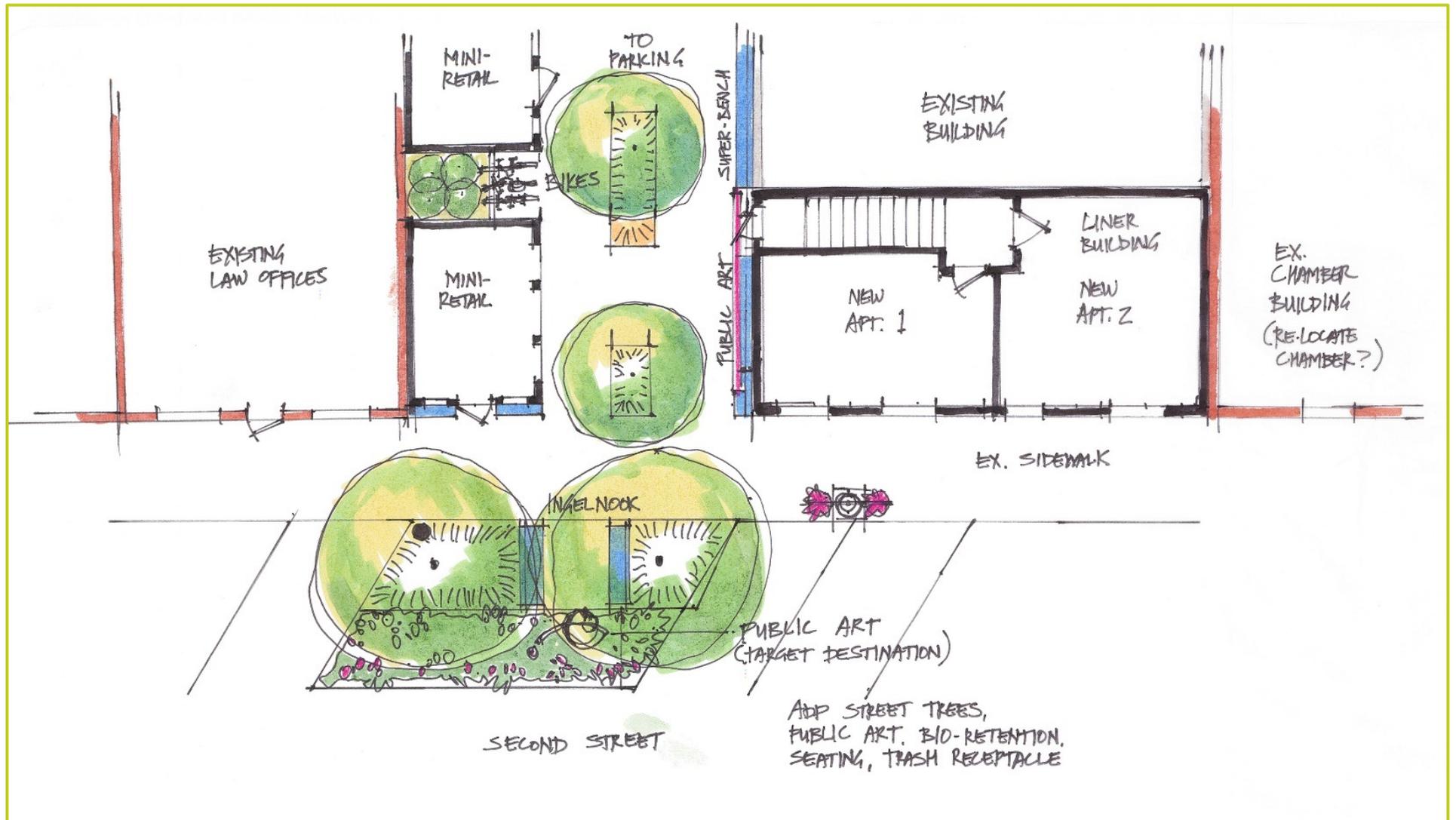
The current location of the Altoona Parks Department could be redeveloped in this scenario into a new mixed-use building featuring specialty retail or office on the first floor and upper-story housing with excellent access to the Gay Lea Wilson Trail.



In the example below, expansion is achieved by removing the small single-story building mid-block at 113 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE. It is a building in poor condition that does not fit the character of downtown. The new passage created between the trail parking lot and 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE would serve as a connector that links the downtown with the under-utilized parking to the north and the bike path to downtown. The passage could include shade trees, perennial flowers, seating, gaming tables, power/Wi-Fi access, unique lighting, public art and pop-up mini retail structures for specialty/starter commercial uses. The adjacent, large metal building is shown as being redeveloped with a new "liner building" replacing the first 20 ft of the existing building. This provides a new, more appropriate street face (more historic in character with larger storefront windows) with the opportunity to add a second floor with apartments. This economical modification can be a "background" building that matches critical design characteristics like scale, window size and proportions but does not require expensive materials and details. A tall iconic gateway located near the north parking and bike path, anchors the passage with a highly visible structure inspired by agricultural structures and can provide visitor services like a downtown map with tenants/activities and bike repair equipment.



The plan view of the passage, shown below, illustrates how a bump-out green space can anchor the south end of the passage with shade, seating, and public art. The passage also provides opportunities for temporary and mobile pop-up mini-commercial buildings. These inexpensive structures can provide a location for seasonal food & beverage, specialty merchandise, festival/event services, new business incubators, seasonal storefronts. In addition, the passage is also a good location to intercept bicyclist with secure parking for their bikes. Note the “super bench” along the east building wall, along with overhead public art, provide ways to activate the passage and make it a special experience within the Olde Town district.



## THEME 4: TENANT MIX/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INCENTIVES

Let's start with an explanation of economic development for downtown commercial district: *"Improving the overall business climate within your Olde Town District strengthens your community's existing economic assets while diversifying and restructuring its economic base. This is accomplished by retaining and expanding successful businesses to provide a balanced commercial mix, sharpening the competitiveness and merchandising skills of business owners, and attracting new businesses that the market can support. Converting unused or underused commercial space and real estate into economically productive property also helps boost the profitability of the district. The goal is to build a commercial district that responds to the needs of today's consumers."*

It is time for everyone to get on the same page for a shared vision for Olde Town Altoona and work toward implementing this common goal. This goal should encompass all areas, especially economic development. Direct resources to Olde Town. Create a plan that addresses exactly what else you want but start with retention of existing businesses. This plan must address appropriate building materials and design standards. Never allow incentives dedicated to the Olde Town district to leave the district. This sends a poor message that any economic development is quality development. It is not. You get what you incent. Make it quality. Consider the Downtown Revitalization as an incentive. Approximately \$3.2 million in federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds are available on an annual basis to cities and counties through the state of Iowa's Downtown Revitalization Fund program. The Downtown Revitalization Fund provides grants to communities for a variety of projects and activities contributing to comprehensive revitalization in historic city centers. To date, the program has funded façade improvements to privately owned buildings. All incorporated cities and all counties in the State, except those designated as HUD entitlement areas, are eligible to apply for and receive funds under this program.

You must create an environment to succeed by helping businesses thrive within the Olde Town district. Start with a comprehensive communication system that reaches every business. Follow that effort with assessment; retention and expansion; recruitment; and finally – development. This comprehensive strategy will provide the best return on investment when you make your Olde Town district a priority in your long-term development efforts.

**Assessment** – This happens when Olde Town district is fully aware of its existing conditions. This is accomplished through data collection. The Iowa Downtown Resource Center has provided you statistical data through our subscription with ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc.). We have provided the following reports: Executive Summary; Market Profile; Retail MarketPlace; and Housing Profile (see resources section at the end of this report).

ESRI uses the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) to classify businesses by their primary type of economic activity. Retail establishments are classified into 27 industry groups within Retail Trade sector and four industry groups within the Food Services & Drinking Establishments subsector.

All estimates of actual sales (supply) reflect current dollars derived from receipts of businesses primarily engaged in selling merchandise. Potential sales (demand) is estimated by using ESRI's consumer spending data which provides estimated expenditures for more than 700 products and services that are consumed by U.S. households. The estimate of a trade area's demand is based upon estimated expenditures by households within the trade area.

Other forms of assessment happen locally: business & building inventories, consumer & business surveys, and finally market analysis training and utilization. We believe a district cannot know what it WANTS, without fully understanding what it already HAS. A great place to start would be through a comprehensive Business Visitation process. There must be a group identified to lead this effort. The goal of a quality business visitation process would be to first create a relationship. If you need any examples, just ask.

A key ingredient to creating places that are engaging with multiple places to go and things to do is a mix of tenants within the buildings and spaces in that place. Diversifying the tenant mix of Olde Town must be a top priority for the area.

The current tenant mix features some long-time businesses and local treasures identified in the community survey. However, the area lacks a diversity of tenants as most of the businesses in Olde Town are professional service-oriented such as legal, financial and counseling services. Other area tenants are more administrative in nature or serve commercial clients. The existing business mix plays a key role in the greater community and provides local resident employment opportunities, but most of the current businesses do not generate a lot of walk-in customers to the area or act as a draw to visitors. The current business mix also does not reflect the types of business residents indicated in the community survey that they want to see in Olde Town—restaurants, bars, outdoor dining, shopping, and events. So that existing space in central Olde Town can be made available to entertainment/dining/retail types of businesses, develop a strategy to relocate non-entertainment/restaurant/retail businesses to the perimeter of Olde Town.

**Retention & Expansion** – Once community leaders fully understand what they have within their district they are better equipped to move to retention and expansion. It is much easier to grow existing businesses. Once district needs are determined, it just makes sense to utilize existing businesses whenever possible. Many times, communities recruit a new business only to lose two of their existing business, thus a net loss in businesses. Altoona needs to start from within and the Olde Town district needs to continue to strengthen its economic base. Review the pre-visit survey for business types currently of interest to the residents. Dig deeper into the survey data or conduct more detailed primary research through consumer and business surveys. The Downtown Resource Center has examples when you are ready to start this process. This effort will explore supply and demand. Once you know what consumers are forced into buying out of the district you can explore the supply side.

For example, the community survey indicated a strong interest in a coffee shop, bakery, ice cream type of operation in Olde Town. Olde Town currently hosts two coffee roasters. The potential may exist for an expansion of one or more of the coffee roasting operations to include food and beverage service. This could be done by the current business owner or could be a partnership with another tenant focused solely on the food and beverage operation.

Economic Development for downtown districts can be summed up in two areas:

**Business Development**

- Business retention
  - *Business directory*
  - *Business assistance team*
  - *Educational seminars and workshops*
  - *Business recognition program*
  - *Business transition assistance*
  - *Newsletter articles*
- Business expansion
  - *Focus groups (business and customer)*
  - *Market feasibility studies*
  - *Business plans and projections*

**Real Estate Development**

*Finding better uses for vacant or underutilized buildings*

- Total building utilization
  - *Upper story housing*
  - *Commercial rehabilitation*
  - *Proforma analysis*
  - *Adaptive use studies*
- Develop & market incentive programs
  - *Local*
  - *State*
  - *Federal*
- Clustering strategies
  - *Determine existing clusters*
  - *Create list of complementary businesses*

Changing the tenant mix will take time but is possible with a plan, coordination, collaboration and intentionality. An intentional effort is needed to let existing, and potential entrepreneurs know the types of businesses Olde Town desires to add to its existing business mix.

**Recruitment** – Retail and dining recruitment are much different from industrial or manufacturing recruitment. Retail and dining recruitment involve being sensitive to what exists while still serving the needs of the community. In many communities, there is not anyone with this charge. Recruitment must not be entered lightly or without the proper amount of training and technical assistance.

**Development** – Real Estate Development will encompass all prior strategies. It will only be successful when identifying the appropriate players at the table and bringing broad based community support. Adaptive reuse and full utilization of vacant or underperforming property must be accomplished to be successful in development. Altoona has plenty of property in need of development. Make sure the outcome is desired development. This may include stepping up enforcement of existing ordinances or researching innovative ways to deal with this issue.

As identified in the “built environment” section of the report, actions will be needed to create new spaces for both existing and targeted new businesses. Some changes to the tenant mix could take place fairly quickly with assistance from the city and current building and business owners. Below are some potential space realignment and new business space concepts developed by the Downtown Assessment Team for consideration.

To support the expressed community interest in a restaurant in Olde Town, the old hotel building located on the southwest corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue SE could be redeveloped or replaced with a two-story building accommodating professional services and/or residential on the second floor and a restaurant on the first floor with an outdoor dining space between the building and the Insurance Station. The second-story space could be an option for relocating existing Olde Town first-floor businesses with little walk-in traffic so that those first floor spaces could be opened up for entities that attract visitors and walk-in traffic such as a boutique, flower shop, restaurant, bar, bakery, ice cream shop, coffee shop or live music venue. The adjacent Insurance Station office building has a flexible structural system and historic tin ceilings, currently hidden, and is a candidate for conversion to a more appropriate retail/entertain/food & beverage use. New storefront windows could be added to provide natural light and provide a livelier streetscape experience.



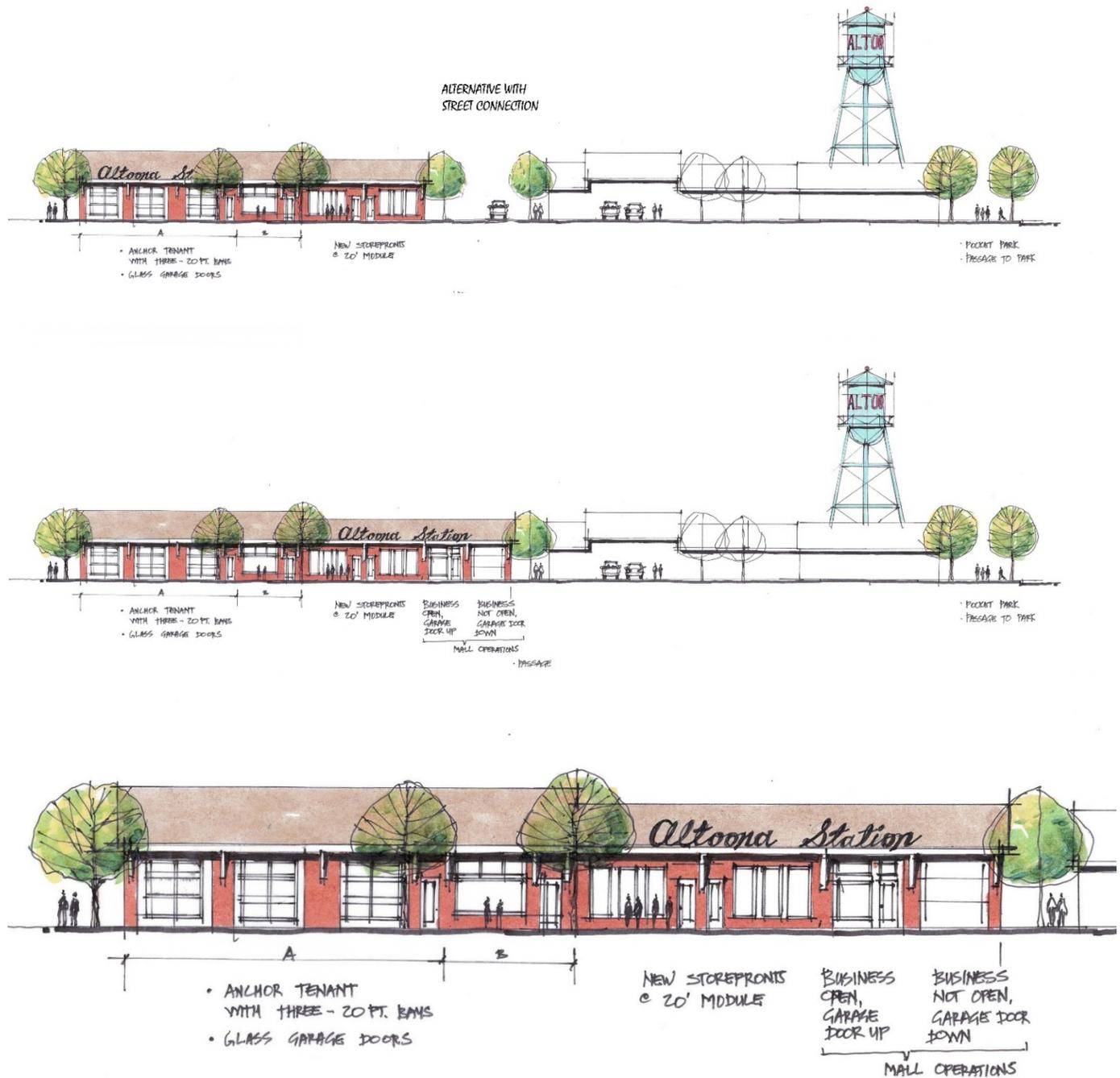
The sketch below shows a new building replacing the old hotel that is inspired by and closely resembles the historic hardware store that was previously at the current CAP theatre site. It could respond with similar proportions, door and window sizes and location and brick material without replicating the more expensive historic details. A small space is left between new and existing construction to provide outdoor seating and reduce construction costs.



In the core of the district, both the Insurance Station building and the beautifully restored bank building on the northeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street SE and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue are two good examples of buildings that with different uses such as a retail or entertainment venue and a boutique, respectively, could serve as anchor stores for Olde Town.

As you move further away from the central point of the 1000-foot circle identified in the “context section”, the former fire/police station is a very appealing opportunity for adaptive reuse for some commercial uses, as shown in the top illustration below. Targeted uses should not require significant parking or should not require significantly high visibility from passing motorist and should remain compatible with the adjacent residential neighborhood. Some potential uses might include service/office uses that have relocated from downtown sites more suitable to entertainment/retail. In addition, specialty retail/entertainment can work in this location if it is consistent with the characteristics described above.

In the second alternative illustration below, the newly proposed street connection is identified. The historic water tower, street connection, and water tower park provide iconic markers and attractive features that help create a strong identity for the redeveloped public facilities, including the City land and metal buildings to the north. The building is very flexible with a simple structural system and opportunities for high ceilings and large storefront windows, with adjacent streetscape parking. Multiple, small scale tenants may be a more sustainable and more easily implemented approach for this long building that can be easily subdivided with multiple entries and storefronts.



## ACTION STEPS:

- Complete an inventory of current businesses in Olde Town, business ownership and building ownership.
- Identify the priority business types desired to add to Olde Town and development and implement a plan to recruit such businesses to Olde Town.
- Develop a strategy to relocate non-entertainment/restaurant/retail businesses to the perimeter of Olde Town.
- Develop a redevelopment plan for the old hotel or the old hotel site.
- Work with city staff to confirm and develop policies and incentives to attract entrepreneurs to Olde Town and implement a plan to market those policies and incentives so potential businesses know of the opportunities. Create your own local incentives:
  - Create exclusive incentives for your Olde Town district.
  - Utilize Tax Increment Financing (TIF) as an appropriate tool to get what you want.
  - Consider other tools like abatement exclusively for Olde Town improvements
- We have attached funding examples for downtown districts. Explore the ones that make the most sense for your district.
- Engage city leadership and key staff in discussions about future use of the old fire station and parks and recreation department property.
- Establish within the chamber of commerce, or separately, a position dedicated to the coordination of revitalization of Olde Town.

## THEME 5: EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

The staging of promotional events is an essential ingredient to every community's downtown development success. And your community is no exception, which is reflected by some of the comments heard during the assessment interview process.

*"We need a reason to go there"*

*"We need more entertainment"*

*"We need something to be a part of"*

Events serve as catalysts to bring people together creating energy and life to the district and it is vital that you program Olde Town with promotional events and activities for short and long-term benefits. Many of the comments we saw in the survey responses and heard in our interviews exhibit why events are important to revitalization:

**Increase awareness of the district** – As mentioned previously, only 37.6% of respondents in the pre-visit survey are very familiar with Olde Town leaving 62.4% are in the somewhat familiar or not at all familiar ranges. Hosting events and activities create an opportunity to promote the district as a destination in Altoona. Actual attendance may vary for the events, but the targeted audiences will become familiar with Olde Town's brand and view it as a destination within the greater metro area.

**Showcase current businesses** located in Olde Town and also show off **future business opportunities** – Through our discovery process, we learned the existing business mix is primarily service related. Although the current mix does not rely on walk in foot traffic, businesses can still capitalize on the storefront's exposure to the public during events. Show off future business opportunities by highlighting future expansion projects to help generate interest from prospective tenants during events.



**Re-establish the district as the center of community life** – In order for Olde Town to have top of mind awareness in the community, a consistent schedule of activities that appeal to the local population is important to maintain. The desire for the farmer's market to locate in the district was a common theme in the survey as well as in multiple interviews during the assessment and reflects the wish for the district to be the center of community life for residents.

**Improve the way the district is perceived** – The right mix of events and activities can shift the community mind set *from* “There is no reason to go there” and “Olde Town never really had that spark” *to* “I get a sense of community” and “I want to be a part of it.”



**Promotes a strong sense of community** – In many of the survey responses and in-person interviews the pride and sense of community was evident. Several Olde Town businesses are generational and have a deep sense of connection to Olde Town and are an important part of Olde Town’s history. Expanding that connection to the greater community can begin through hosting events and activities. ESRI demographics tell us experiences are important to the growing population base of Altoona and the events hosted in Olde Town can help fill that void resulting in a deeper connection for local residents.

**Appeals to diversity** – Feedback from the survey and interviews reflected a desire to appeal to the local population. “We need a day-to-day destination for people who call Altoona home” and “We need something comfortable and cozy for the local population” were just two of several comments related to a desired outcome from the revitalization process. Demographically, Altoona ethnicity is primarily white with 92.7% of the population falling within this classification. In this instance, appealing to a diversity of interests from the population base will enhance outreach. As the population grows and the community becomes more ethnically diverse it will be important to add events and activities to reach the changing market.

**Provides a better quality of life** – Events provide opportunities for participation, skills development, volunteering, and social developments. They strengthen communities by bringing awareness of community assets and acts as a source of community pride. “The majority of residents don’t work here,” was heard in multiple interviews, yet people are choosing to reside in Altoona. The demographic inflow/outflow map shows a large percentage of residents do work outside of Altoona, but also shows an influx of employees from outside the city limits. “We are five minutes from everything, which can be a GOOD thing or a BAD thing.” Geography may play a part of Altoona’s appeal, but events can deepen the relationship residents have with the community and increase the economic benefits residents bring to the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Move beyond cookie-cutter promotion ideas** - Highlight cultural traditions, celebrating architecture and history, and encourage 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.

**Understanding Altoona’s changing market** – Keep abreast of your growing population base and market profile segments. As business mix changes, add events that complement both the population and the merchant mix – retail, restaurants, service.

**Identifying Olde Town’s assets** - Include people, buildings, heritage, and institutions.

**Defining Olde Town’s market niche** – Develop a unique position in the marketplace as the home for local boutiques and restaurants.

**Creating new image** – Further develop the Olde Town brand and use events to bring people back to the district.

- We saw it in the survey open ended responses and heard it in almost every one of our interviews – There is a strong desire for the farmers market to occur in Olde Town. Farmers markets are economic development generators and the city appears to be open to street closures, making 2<sup>nd</sup> Street in Olde Town a logical location. Use the weekly market to draw regular traffic to the district on a consistent evening and add some entertainment and food vendors to broaden its appeal. Night market events are trending and would create an opportunity to expand the booth participants beyond food items. Adding food vendors, and entrepreneurial home based or small businesses to the mix would create the opportunity for potential tenants to build a local customer base prior to opening, thereby improving the likelihood of success long term.
- Although the current mix does not rely on foot traffic, businesses can still capitalize on the storefront's exposure to the public during events. Events and activities can be designed to showcase existing businesses help improve the awareness of the individual businesses in the mix.
- Show off future business opportunities by highlighting future expansion projects to help generate interest from prospective tenants.



- Create specific events for business types you are seeking to recruit. Done well, a food truck fair is an example of an event that could generate interest from start-up or expanding restaurants. Be strategic and target mobile food vendors that also have a brick and mortar location.
- Identify potential bar/restaurant locations and host a craft beer festival or “taste of Altoona” block party nearby. Clearly sign the buildings targeted for future dining locations.

- As previously shown, set up Adventureland's old carousel in Townsend Park to create a destination, which also serves as an anchor or gateway to Olde Town. It celebrates Altoona's history and place as the entertainment capital of Iowa while activating an existing space.
- Through partnerships, program Olde Town with frequent small-scale events and activities to appeal to diverse markets. 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. In addition to programming the carousel with scheduled operational hours, activate other areas of Olde Town such as:
  - Invite a local bike club and/or run club to host a weekly ride/run from the trail head in the district
  - Host outdoor yoga along the trail
  - Create interactive game spots for giant chess, checkers, or bags
  - “Take out Tuesday” lunchtime concert series
  - 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).



- Use new events to embrace Altoona’s agricultural history:
  - Make the Farm to Table dinner an annual event to build community and create a sense of place.
  - Host “drive in” movies on the grain elevator to expand the use of space. Diversify its appeal through movie selection. Choose family friendly movies or throw-back films for an older audience such as Jaws during Shark Week.



- Invite buskers (pop up musicians) to perform on the sidewalks and in public spaces to draw foot traffic as the district expands. Consider extending invitations to buskers during CAP rehearsals to help entertain parents while they wait for their performers.
- Christmas in Olde Town was frequently mentioned. Review the schedule and build upon its success strategically. Add a variety of activities that appeal to different audiences. Consider expanding the event’s reach by rebranding it as Holidays in Olde Town and mix in activities from a variety of heritages.
- Use promotions to create a buzz before/during/after Olde Town revitalization projects, both private and public. Before construction even begins, select a theme and design a graphic that can be used by the city, chamber, and all businesses in Olde Town for their advertising and print materials to generate consumer awareness that something exciting is going on in the district. Examples may be “The Excitement is Building in Olde Town” or “Extreme Makeover, Olde Town style.”



- Create and host construction related activities to share construction updates to keep the media involved and doing stories not only on Olde Town today, but what it will be like when the projects are finished. Activity examples are:
  - Host a “touch a truck day” with a crane, cement truck, bucket truck etc.
  - Create a construction related coloring contest for community youth with a prize package provided by district businesses.
  - Invite the library to do a book reading in Olde Town with construction themed children’s books.
  - Hold a celebration the end of each construction project with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

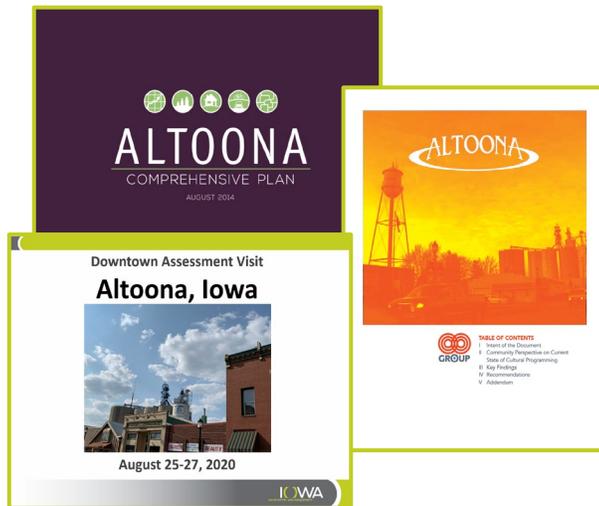
### ACTION STEPS:

- Bring a group together to review ideas provided and brainstorm new ideas. Be sure to invite young people to be part of the planning and get their opinions.
- Be intentional in determining the activities you chose to implement in Olde Town. Be authentic and build on what you have.
- Use ESRI demographic information included with this report to learn about your community. Be aware of Olde Town’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.
- Remember, quality is much more important than quantity.
- 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 action plans to keep planning on time and within budget. Upon completion, take time to evaluate each event and activity in a timely manner. Did it achieve your goals? Keep, modify, or drop?

## THEME 6: TAKING ACTION

Revitalization of Olde Towne Altoona will be an incremental process. This report, as well as previous planning documents, provide a lot of opportunities to consider, and many of the large-scale projects will require considerable time and investment. Take small initial steps now to lay the foundation for full implementation.

### Define the Vision



Multiple planning processes have been undertaken – some with Olde Town as a focus area and some that include Olde Town as a small component of larger plans. People know they want something to happen in Olde Town but are not sure “what or where” to start. Now is the time to define the vision for Olde Town’s revitalization, to move on from planning and move towards ACTION.

Having a defined vision helps provide strategic direction, identify priorities, and communicate to district stakeholders and the community at large. While the Assessment Team has provided initial recommendations and highlighted opportunities for Olde Town, it is up to Altoona to select what YOU want Olde Town to be. This must be a locally led initiative and creating a shared vision that speaks to the community at large is what helps create buy in, engages partnerships, and maintains momentum moving forward.

### Define the ‘Who’

The Altoona Chamber of Commerce has been charged with leading Olde Town’s revitalization efforts thus far, and certainly has a vested interest in the district they call home. However, the Chamber cannot and should not do it alone. The Chamber has a broad service area with hundreds of members across the City of Altoona and neighboring communities. Olde Town is a small geographic part of their overall reach but will require a more concentrated focus. The Chamber has a great staff in place, but with already full plates from their regular duties, the Assessment Team has some concern about capacity moving forward with new initiatives.

The Olde Town Revitalization Task Force is a good start and will be important to the initial vision and decision-making process, but ideally a new staff position would be created to focus solely on Olde Town Revitalization efforts. We understand resources are often scarce, but there may be creative ways to accomplish this. Perhaps the position is part-time, contract, or cost shared by the City if Olde Town is a priority area for them. Having a position with the dedicated time and skill set to coordinate Olde Town’s revitalization efforts could be a key component to success.

Outside of focused staff and task force efforts, continue to engage existing partnerships and foster new ones. This can be particularly effective once initiatives are identified and groups can take ownership over specific tasks or events (like the Historical Society with Christmas in Olde Town or the school groups planting flowers). Seek out new partnerships that play into the strengths of existing organizations and look to pair them in new ways. Service organizations like the Lions or Rotary noted past building projects at the baseball field but have an aging volunteer force. Perhaps they could be paired with student groups to construct pop up vendor villages – providing guidance and oversight while student volunteers assist with the construction labor.

### Communication is Key

Multiple participants throughout the interview process noted great communication between the Chamber and its members. People were happy with the frequency and types of communication and felt well informed about community happenings. We encourage the Chamber to continue this type of outreach through a variety of different mediums and social channels and include a focus on Olde Town revitalization efforts.



While community members at large felt communication was adequate – business owners within Olde Town felt somewhat less informed. Many only seemed to know about events or happenings if they received an in person invite, and others had only gotten involved after seeking out opportunities on their own. Existing business and building owners are stakeholders in the district and their input is important. The business owners we met with see the potential in Olde Town, are eager to hear about the possibilities and want to be involved. Explore ways to engage in regular communication with this group and foster connections between the existing business community.

### Low-Hanging Fruit

Many of the recommendations included in this report are large projects that will take considerable time, money, and effort to accomplish. While it is important to be continually working towards these larger goals, identifying some low-hanging fruit projects can be important to provide some initial spark and easy wins. Low-hanging fruit projects should be readily achievable within the next 12 months and highly visible to show district stakeholders and Altoona residents that progress is being made.

Simple building enhancements and district amenity additions can be effective low-hanging fruit projects. Potential projects for Olde Town Altoona based on Assessment Team recommendations and feedback received on site include:

- Installation of a new awning at the Olde Town Tap.
- The addition of business signage at 101 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. This is a gateway building into the district and has been well maintained but appears vacant from the street without any identifying signage.
- Installation of new banners/flags within the existing light posts
- Installation of hanging baskets on the light posts or sidewalk planters that can be changed out with seasonal plantings and decorations



### ACTION STEPS:

- Following the distribution of this report, assign homework to members of the Olde Town Revitalization Task Force before an upcoming meeting. Have them each pour through the report (and other related documents supplied earlier) and identify their favorite ideas and top priorities. Use these lists to start getting consensus on the shared vision for the district and identify potential champions for different initiatives or projects.
- Work with the Chamber board, the City and/or other local economic development groups to create a new staff position focused on Olde Town's revitalization efforts.
- Create or update a list of potential partner organizations. Identify typical project types, areas of interest and skill sets they can contribute.
- Add an 'Olde Town Update' section in the Chamber's newsletter or other regular communication piece. Share district updates and events consistently so it becomes a regular component that people come to expect and anticipate as the district progresses.
- Create a communication channel (email list, Google group, private Facebook group, etc.) specific to building and business owners within Olde Town to foster connections and improve communication.
- Identify 3-5 small projects that could be easily achieved in the next 6-12 months to demonstrate progress and build momentum. Work with the appropriate parties on implementation.

## 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 Altoona certainly provide a head start and impact quality of life for residents but also make Altoona a good place to visit. This Assessment Team worked with the challenges we identified on-site and with those provided through community input.

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 Olde Town 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 Altoona in keeping the momentum for Olde Town 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 Altoona 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 Olde Town Altoona, Jeff is available to share his expertise, provide technical assistance and return to Altoona to help plan and implement.

In addition, you will receive two complimentary registrations for the 2021 Downtown Conference which is scheduled July 27-28 in Iowa City.

## CONTACTS

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

## RESOURCES

The following electronic files are available for download (12 months) [here](#).

- 8 80 Cities
- Altoona Pre-Assessment Survey Results
- Awning Examples
- Awnings
- Characteristics of a Success Downtown
- Communication Strategies
- Community Project Examples (Incentive ideas)
- Construction Survival Guide
- Creative Placemaking & the Arts Resource Guide
- Creative Placemaking Manual
- Design Renderings (drawings)
- ESRI Reports
- Event Assessment Tool
- Great Promotion Events
- Incentives for Business & Community Economic Development
- Jobs Inflow & Outflow
- Project for Public Spaces
- Retail Grant Summary Example
- Upper Floors: Pigeons or Profits
- Wayfinding Guide

For additional resources and tools to help make your downtown more viable, visit [here](#).