

DOWNTOWN ASSESSMENT REPORT

GRINNELL, IOWA

June 4 – 6, 2025



IOWA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY | Iowa Downtown Resource Center

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The following report summarizes the observations and recommendations resulting from an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Assessment conducted in Grinnell, Iowa. In preparation of this report, the Assessment Team learned about Grinnell's downtown history, recent planning efforts, economic development and quality of life initiatives.

The Team's familiarization process began with a review of materials supplied prior to the visit, 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 60 community leaders, individuals and groups representing the public and private sectors. Based upon these activities and the Assessment Team's extensive working knowledge in downtown economic development, this report summarizes their findings and recommendations for Grinnell.

PURPOSE

The Poweshiek Iowa Development Group in partnership with the City of Grinnell, worked with the Iowa Downtown Resource Center at Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), to conduct a Downtown Assessment to raise awareness, educate, make recommendations, and encourage the local community.

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, Grinnell citizens must explore their options, decide what is relevant and realistic, and acquire additional information and resources as they address Downtown'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

OVERVIEW

This Downtown Assessment report and recommendations for Grinnell are based on the Team's downtown development experience. Their beliefs are grounded by the philosophy that 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 on our way to somewhere else.

THE ASSESSMENT TEAM INCLUDED FIVE DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

ROBIN BOSTROM serves as a Downtown Development Specialist with the Iowa Economic Development Authority, working with the Downtown Resource Center and the Main Street Iowa



team. Prior to joining IEDA, she served as a local program director for West Union, Iowa, a nationally accredited Main Street program in Northeast Iowa. She has also worked for numerous non-profit organizations, served as Executive Director for the Empower Rural Iowa program, Executive Director for Fayette County Economic Development, and is a small business owner.

She earned a BA from the University of Northern Iowa, is a graduate of the Heartland Economic Development Course and has earned the Development Finance Professional Certification from the National Development Council. She has presented at several state and national conferences on numerous community development topics including business development, business succession and downtown market analysis. She enjoys working with Iowa communities and small business owners to help them develop to their full potential.

BROOKE PROUTY is the Business Specialist with Main Street Iowa at the Iowa Economic Development Authority. Her focus is on economic vitality and community development in Main



Streets across Iowa. Previously she held the position of Marion Main Street Director where she oversaw a 7-year transformation of the Uptown District. In 2021, she was named to CBJ's 40 under 40, that honors 40 leaders who have made a significant impact in their community early in their careers. Brooke started her career in downtown economic development in Ames, working for the Ames Main Street and Ames Chamber of Commerce. She has a Bachelor

of Science from Iowa State University. In her spare time, she works to restore her 1939 home and tends chickens.

TERRY POE BUSCHKAMP served as Downtown Revitalization Specialist with the Iowa Economic Development Authority's Main Street Iowa program from 2008 – 2020. In that capacity



she provided professional services to communities as the lead trainer in the area of Promotion; and was 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 authored articles for state and national publications and presented at state and national Downtown conferences.

FRED ZESINGER, is a native of Ottumwa Iowa. In 1991, Fred received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri and then went on to complete a Master of Fine Arts degree from Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio in



1993 before returning to his home in Ottumwa. Fred has volunteered in various capacities of the Main Street Ottumwa program since its inception in 2005, serving as Design Chair, Organization Chair and President of the Board prior to accepting the Executive Director's position in April of 2015. During his tenure Fred and Main Street Ottumwa helped administer 2 master façade projects (41 Facades), 2 upper story housing grant (27 units) projects, 4 successful

Challenge Grant projects, and helped businesses survive not only through a downtown streetscape project but also the COVID-19 pandemic. Fred retired from his position as Executive Director of Main Street Ottumwa at the end of 2024 to pursue his passion of restoring historic properties.

SAM KESSEL, PLA, LEED AP – Principal-in-Charge – As a principal landscape architect, Sam uses his broad knowledge and extensive design understanding to find solutions for complex projects that blend function and aesthetics. Sam began his landscape architecture career in



2005 and has proven himself at every turn, excelling on multidisciplinary teams as both a designer and project manager. His experience includes sustainable urban design, multimodal design, public art incorporation, site development, and construction observation/administration. Sam’s passion for landscape architecture is exemplified through building strong relationships with clients and engaging with city staff and the public during the design process.

INTRODUCTION

Grinnell, Iowa (pop 9,564), is located just north of I-80 in Poweshiek County. The community is best known for being the home to Grinnell College, a private liberal arts institution which contributes to the vibrant and rich educational heritage of this progressive community. Grinnell serves as a regional hub for employment with several companies pulling employees from the surrounding counties. Its proximity to larger metropolitan areas also makes it a great location to live for those willing to commute to work. The community has a growing arts movement, and residents are proud of their hometown and all that it has to offer.

Prior to the downtown Assessment team visit, a community survey was distributed to the public with 244 responses. The Assessment Team also reviewed several of Grinnell's planning documents including the 2030 Community Plan completed by RDG. As a part of the Assessment visit, the team conducted in-person focus groups, visiting with over 60 community leaders and residents to better understand the areas of pride and the challenges locals feel need to be addressed. We appreciate everyone's time to meet with the Assessment team and for sharing their vision for Grinnell.

ASSETS/STRENGTHS



COMMUNITY

- Grinnell College
- The Ahrens Foundation
- The Spaulding Complex
- Ahrens Park
- Iowa Valley Community College
- Strong public school system
- Numerous senior housing options
- Strong regional employment base
- Easy access to Interstate 80



DOWNTOWN

- Grinnell Arts Center
- Hotel Grinnell
- Good historic building stock
- Farmer's Market
- Merchant's National Bank – Jewel Box building
- Strand 3 Theatres
- Locally owned businesses
- Public art
- Streetscape/Plantings
- Central Park
- McNally's Foods
- Darke Community Library
- Upper story housing



RECOMMENDATIONS

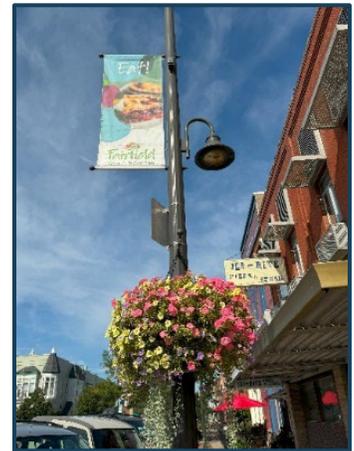
The Assessment team's recommendations have been grouped into five themes with suggested time frames for specific projects.

- Business Development
- Tourism
- Ordinances/Policies
- Vibrant Spaces
- Communication/Collaboration

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. Many of these recommendations will build off the work already underway or identified in your previous planning efforts. Continue to move forward with implementation.

The Assessment Team (pictured below) hopes Grinnell will assess each recommendation and develop a plan to implement what is right for Grinnell. As the process gains momentum, community leadership will need to determine additional strategies and develop approaches that are more sophisticated. Our hope is to help leaders 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 we appreciate that community leaders allowed the Assessment Team to be honest in its findings.



THEME 1: BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Downtown Grinnell is a hub of economic activity with unique and long-standing businesses contributing to the vibrancy of the area. Restaurants, retail, and service businesses are all represented downtown interspersed with anchor tenants that drive consumers from a broader market range. Prairie Canary, Hotel Grinnell, Pagliai's, Grinnell Farm to Table, McNally's Foods and MORE all attract customers from beyond Grinnell's city limits. Target markets for businesses include travelers, student families, seniors, and local residents.



ACTION STEPS

STRENGTHENING LOCAL ENGAGEMENT WITH DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES. A recurring concern among downtown business owners is the lack of support from local residents. While these businesses benefit from visitors and families of college students, they often struggle to attract customers from the community itself. One local resident's comment— *"I don't even know what's downtown"*—highlights a critical gap in awareness and connection. To address this, the community can take the following steps:

- 1. Launch a "Discover Downtown" Campaign.** Create a coordinated marketing initiative that showcases what downtown has to offer. This could include:
 - Monthly "Downtown Spotlights" on social media featuring different businesses.
 - A printed and digital "Downtown Guide" distributed through schools, libraries, and community centers.
 - Collaborations with local influencers or students to create short videos or reels exploring downtown.
- 2. Continue to Host Regular Community Events.** Events are a powerful way to draw locals downtown and create positive associations. Ideas include:
 - First Friday art walks showing off new murals or food nights.

- Seasonal festivals (e.g., fall harvest, winter lights).
- Pop-up markets featuring local artisans and performers.
- Consider unique ways that local businesses can participate that will lead to a return on their investment.

3. Improve Signage and Wayfinding. Many residents may not know what is downtown simply because it is not clearly marked. Consider:

- Installing attractive, easy-to-read directional signs at key intersections.
- Creating a branded map of downtown with business listings and walking routes.

4. Partner with Schools and Colleges. Build stronger ties with Grinnell College:

- Offer student discounts or loyalty programs that are community wide & comprehensive.
- Encourage service-learning projects where students help promote or support downtown businesses.
- Host “College Family Weekends” with special downtown promotions.

5. Create a Local Loyalty Program. Develop a rewards system that incentivizes residents to shop locally. For example:

- A punch card or app that offers discounts or freebies after a certain number of visits.
- Monthly raffles for those who spend a minimum amount downtown.

6. Facilitate Community Feedback. Engage residents in shaping the downtown experience:

- Conduct surveys or listening sessions to understand what locals want to see downtown.
- Involve community members in planning events or beautification projects.

BUSINESS SUPPORT TOOLS. The small business landscape has changed dramatically in the past 10 years as technology continues to impact how both business owners and customers find goods and services. Current market conditions have created uncertainty for both consumers and business owners due to concerns about the impact tariffs will have on goods, labor force shortages, and increasing costs across the board. Building a strong network of support for your small business community can help ease these concerns and strengthen the downtown core. Look for ways that you can help strengthen the skill set of your local businesses through educational workshops related to marketing and social media, understanding the data related to current market conditions, and technology that can create efficiencies and help business owners better understand their bottom line.

1. Foster Collaboration Among Businesses.

- **Downtown Business Alliance:** Support or strengthen a downtown business group that can coordinate joint promotions, shared marketing, and cross-business events.
- **Shared Hours and Promotions:** Encourage businesses to align hours of operation and participate in shared promotions to create a more consistent and inviting experience for visitors.
- **Host Business 2 Business (B2B) Networking events:** Bring your businesses together to share best practices on business operations or policies to help them improve their bottom line. Consider hosting one in August to plan for Q4 (October, November & December) which is a critical time for most small businesses, especially retailers. Have one business each meeting share about the goods and services they provide so others are better educated and equipped to offer recommendations to their customers, families and friends on what is available downtown.
- **Create Experiences:** As more and more shoppers are purchasing goods online, experiential activities are the way retailers are attracting shoppers to brick-and-mortar locations. Encourage downtown businesses and organizations to create experiences to attract customers. Flower and gift shops can offer classes or demonstrations in home decor; appliance stores offer cooking demonstrations; bookstores can offer book readings; and retailers of all types can provide education on how to use their products and services.

2. Consider Field Trips to Comparable Communities.

- Retail is NOT Dead! We heard several times from the focus groups that “*retail is dead, and nobody shops in a store anymore.*” While shopping habits have changed, there are still strong downtown shopping districts across the state where retail is alive and flourishing! You may want to visit some of these communities which are similar to Grinnell to observe their business mix and visit with businesses.

Comparable Communities & Populations	
Decorah (Retail & Restaurant, University Partnership)	7,500
Indianola (Amenities & Events)	1,600
Mount Pleasant (Retail, Lost College)	8,000
Mount Vernon (Retail, University Partnership)	4,500
Waverly (Retail)	10,500
Fairfield (Arts Community)	9,300

3. Research Business Incentives.

- Addressing Local Needs: It is important to understand what needs exist in your local market so that you can create tailored incentives that will improve your downtown. Business surveys are a good way to find out what type of assistance business owners are seeking. The Downtown Resource Center can provide survey examples and recommends that you conduct a survey at least every 2-3 years. Once you know what is needed you can work to create technical assistance or financial resources to help guide the change you feel is needed. Ottumwa has created a strong program, [Business Builder Academy | Main Street Ottumwa](#) that provides both education and small financial resources for their downtown businesses.

ENHANCING THE MIX AND CLUSTERING OF DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES. A key challenge facing downtown Grinnell is the current distribution and composition of storefronts. While service-based and residential are important to the local economy, their dominance in prime storefront locations—combined with the scattered placement of retail and dining establishments—diminishes the vibrancy and walkability that typically draw people to downtown districts. To create a more dynamic and cohesive downtown experience, the community can consider the following strategies:

1. Encourage Strategic Clustering of Retail and Dining.

- Zoning and Incentives: Work with city planners to explore zoning adjustments or incentives that encourage retail and restaurant clustering in key areas.
- Anchor Zones: Designate specific blocks or intersections as “anchor zones” for retail and dining, and prioritize these areas for beautification, signage, and event programming.

2. Activate Vacant or Underutilized Storefronts.

- Pop-Up Programs: Launch a pop-up retail initiative that allows entrepreneurs, artists, or seasonal vendors to temporarily occupy vacant spaces.
- Storefront Activation Grants: Provide small grants or matching funds to help businesses improve façades, signage, or interior buildouts in targeted areas.

3. Balance the Business Mix.

- Business Recruitment Strategy: Develop a targeted recruitment plan to attract more diverse retail and dining options, especially those that complement existing businesses.
- Tenant Mix Guidelines: Collaborate with property owners to promote a healthy mix of business types, ensuring that service-based businesses do not dominate street-level frontage.

4. Improve Wayfinding and Walkability

- Themed Walking Routes: Create themed walking routes (e.g., “Taste of Downtown,” “Shop Local Trail”) that connect dispersed businesses and encourage exploration.

- Unified Branding: Use consistent signage, banners, and maps to visually tie together spread-out businesses and make downtown feel more cohesive.

REVITALIZING BUSINESS RECRUITMENT THROUGH COMPETITIONS AND INCENTIVES.

Grinnell has previously demonstrated success in attracting new businesses through innovative recruitment strategies. A notable example is the business competition that led to the opening of Prairie Canary, a well-known downtown restaurant. However, since that initiative, similar efforts have not been repeated, representing a missed opportunity to build on that momentum.

To reinvigorate business recruitment and attract a diverse mix of retail, dining, and experiential businesses, the community can consider the following strategies:

1. Relaunch a Downtown Business Competition.

- Annual or Biannual Format: Host a recurring competition that invites entrepreneurs to pitch business ideas tailored to downtown Grinnell.
- Incentive Package: Offer a combination of startup grants, reduced rent, marketing support, and mentorship to the winning proposal.
- Community Involvement: Include local residents and business owners in the judging process to ensure alignment with community needs and preferences.

2. Develop a Targeted Recruitment Plan.

- Gap Analysis: Identify specific types of businesses that are missing or underrepresented downtown (e.g., specialty retail, family-friendly dining, entertainment).
- Outreach Campaign: Actively recruit regional entrepreneurs and small business owners through direct outreach, regional business expos, and partnerships with economic development organizations.

3. Create a Business Welcome Package

- Startup Support: Provide new businesses with a toolkit that includes permitting guidance, marketing resources, and introductions to local networks.
- Visibility Boost: Feature new businesses in local media, social media, and community newsletters to build early momentum.

4. Leverage Local Institutions

- College Partnerships: Collaborate with Grinnell College to identify alumni or student entrepreneurs who may be interested in launching ventures downtown.
- Incubator or Co-Working Space: Establish a space downtown that supports early-stage businesses with shared resources and mentorship.

5. Promote Success Stories

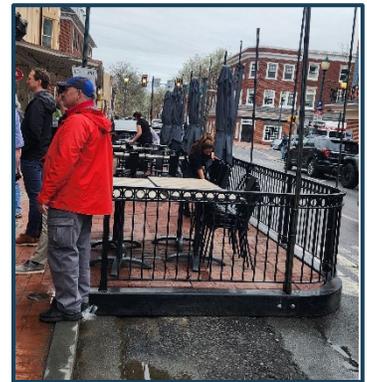
- Highlight Prairie Canary and Others: Use the story of Prairie Canary as a case study to demonstrate the potential for success in downtown Grinnell.
- Video Testimonials: Create short videos featuring successful downtown business owners sharing their journey and why they chose Grinnell.

Business Types Wanted through Community Outreach & Survey	
Retail	Service
Thrift Shop/ Consignment	Yoga/Pilates/Spin/Chair
Outfitters/Bait Shop	Child Care
Art Gallery (Ames)	Gift Boxes (Snack Box)
Bookstore (Cozy)	Recreational/Entertainment
Bridal/Alterations	Board Game Café
Food & Beverage	Music Venue
Play Café	Golf Simulator
International Cuisine (Thai)	Pool Hall
Late Night Café	Axe Throwing
	Bowling

The project team identified a handful of ordinances and policies that would benefit the downtown area. Ordinances and policies are vital aspects of downtown that ensure new development aligns with the character and appeal of the downtown, incentivize investments downtown, protect resources, and foster identity of place.

ACTION STEPS

1. **Outdoor Dining.** We spoke to many residents that expressed a need for more third spaces downtown. Outdoor dining is a great way to enhance the vibrancy of the streetscape while also adding vital square footage to restaurants during the summer months. Downtown Grinnell has two parklet dining spaces on Main Street. These spaces have been in operation since 2020; however, they look temporary.



- **Outdoor Dining Permit:** The project team was unable to identify any information on outdoor dining permits throughout the City. Creating a permit process along with design guidelines will give the businesses confidence in investing in these spaces. Crowd control fencing and sandbags look and feel temporary.

2. **Signage.** While there are many great examples of signage throughout the downtown area, there are also some areas of improvement. Many businesses rely on window cling signage or flat (one dimensional) signage above the awnings. There were some inconsistencies with existing signage and the City's sign code indicating a lack of education and enforcement. The following are some of the ways to improve downtown signage and create pedestrian friendly signage.

- **Update and Enforce Sign Ordinance:** Grinnell has an established sign ordinance which is currently inconsistently enforced. Updating the ordinance is an opportunity to reestablish what types of signage will enhance the collective feel of the downtown, and establish streamlined processes to ensure sign review, and prompt removal of obsolete signage.

Quality signage ordinances encourage signs that are properly placed and proportioned to reflect downtown design vision, the building, while leaving room for creativity and expression of business identity. Ordinances will need to be enforced to be effective. Supplement ordinances with design guidelines to better convey quality signage practices. Consider allowing blade signs (currently restricted under 157.11-6B). Many signs can only be seen from the opposite side of the street, especially those with awnings.

- Launch Signage Grant: Many of the signs downtown are simple vinyl window graphics. While a cost-effective solution, they often block the view of the interior and have a feel of temporary minimal investment. Consider starting a sign grant program that incentivizes higher quality signage.
- Creative Sign Program: Grinnell has a “deep bench” of talent in the arts. There is an opportunity to leverage this talent to support the design and fabrication of quality business signage throughout the downtown. Look at implementing a signage program similar to Valley Junction’s “Cosign” program to connect artists with businesses. Providing local funding for such a program will magnify the impact, however, partnerships and quality signage can be cultivated before funding is established.

View down Broadway showing lacking, poor and obsolete signage (below) and example of street with good business signage (bottom right) showing mix of signage types and purposes.

Example of simple signage updates. Permanent signage above the storefront promotes business name and branding. A projecting blade sign provides visibility to pedestrians walking the sidewalk. Vinyl window graphics display important business information including operating hours.



3. Zoning & Ordinance Regulations. In order to maintain a vibrant downtown, the following zoning restriction should be in place and enforced.

- Prohibit first-floor residential in storefronts.
- Prohibit first-floor storage in storefronts.
- Vacant Building Registry
 - 'No public hours' would be considered vacant and applicable to the registry.
 - Utilize the registry to offer property owners resources and assistance.
 - Stricter policy towards derelict and poorly maintained properties.
 - Ordinances must be enforced to be effective. The City will need to determine who will be responsible for review and enforcement of ordinances.

4. Parking. Downtown Grinnell is very walkable with ample parking for the current business mix and residents. As with most downtowns “we don’t have a parking problem, we have a walking problem.” The team has identified areas of improvement including better parking lot signage, re-evaluating residential parking, and added loading zones for commercial and residential use (grocery unloading etc.).

- Improve the connections between the public parking lots and the park through signage; clean, attractive, and well-lit walkways; and public art. Require and/or incentivize downtown building owners and business employees to park in the city lots. Identify options to improve parking behind buildings and explore possibilities for additional residential parking in the back of buildings.

THEME 3: COMMUNICATION/COLLABORATION

Oh, how we wish everyone read every word in all our communications. Sadly, this does not happen even though we feel like we are reaching out in so many ways.

There can never be enough or too much communication. The Assessment Team heard multiple times “I/We didn’t know.” Grinnell is fortunate to have many civic groups and non-profits doing great work throughout the community. Grinnell College has taken a regularly active role in community development and betterment in recent years including property development. Many of the events hosted at the college are open to the public but several people mentioned that unless you have a direct connection to the college, it is difficult to know what is happening. All these local partnerships greatly enhance the quality of life for Grinnell, but many residents do not realize all that is taking place and available for the public to attend.



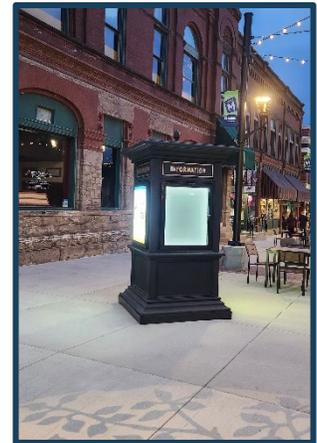
ACTION ITEMS

1. Communication between businesses, the college, and the public needs to be expanded. Streamlined coordination amongst staff, volunteers and the community is essential for continued success. While not easy, it is a crucial element in achieving your goals.

- Consider hosting a quarterly meeting to share updates on what is happening in the community. Invite one representative from each civic group, the city, the college, the chamber, major employers and any other partner you feel is important. Each group has five minutes to share updates on current projects. The goal is to share information and identify ways to work together when projects align. Strive to keep the meeting to no more than one hour.
- The Chamber will soon be premiering a robust new website with an expanded Community calendar, that in addition to Chamber events, will include activities organized by other organizations in the community. Create a method to gather this information for broad

inclusion and be sure to meet with a representative from Grinnell College on how to best link to their comprehensive calendar.

- An information kiosk or artistic community bulletin board would be a good addition to Central Park. Marion just recently added this to their downtown to help guide visitors and residents. Reach out to them to learn more.
- Start a weekly podcast to share what is going on around town. Could this be a partnership with the college, the school district, or a local radio show? Share it on your social media channels and through the website.
- Continue to enhance the relationship with Grinnell College.



Several programs could be revamped slightly to better orient students and faculty with all that Downtown Grinnell has to offer.

- Host a “Welcome Back” party downtown when students return in the fall. Have a Scavenger Hunt to get them into businesses so they know all the goods and services available.
- Offer tours of the community to all students, especially Freshmen. Exposing them early on will help build an awareness of what is right next to campus and help them feel more comfortable visiting downtown.
- Make sure all businesses are listed on Google so that students and visitors can search for them. This could be a good way to engage business or marketing students who are more familiar with social media applications to help business owners improve their skills to make sure their place of business is searchable.
- Websites or other forms of online presence are key for parents with college students attending Grinnell College. Can they order things online to be delivered to their student? Brainstorm ways that businesses could partner together to create gift basket options to market to parents.

THEME 4: TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES

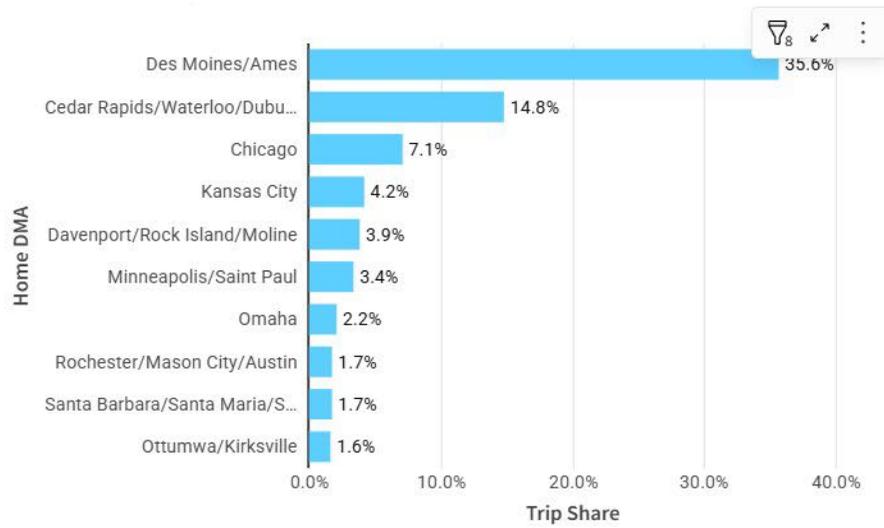
A vibrant community naturally draws both residents and visitors alike with its unique blend of charm, culture, and convenience. The very elements that make life enjoyable for locals—such as well-preserved historic buildings, engaging arts and cultural offerings, and inviting outdoor spaces—create a compelling destination for tourists. Features like flower-filled planters, historic plaques, and outdoor dining not only contribute to the daily quality of life but also give visitors a reason to linger, explore, and appreciate the town's character.

By leveraging and marketing these inherent strengths and weaving them into a cohesive strategy, communities can create an environment that feels both welcoming to residents and exciting for visitors. Downtown areas, in particular, serve as the heartbeat of such initiatives, offering a dynamic mix of activities, events, and experiences that celebrate local history while embracing modern creativity.

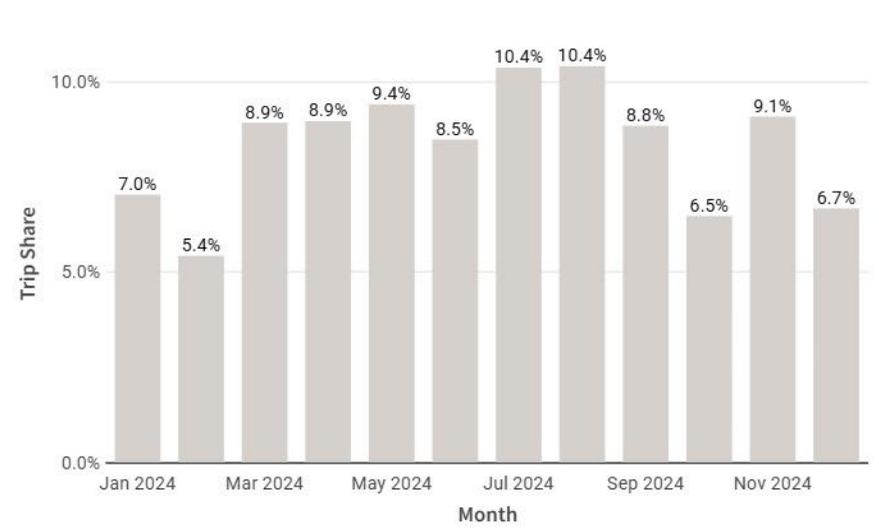
State tourism Arrivist data shows that 35.6% of Grinnell's visitors hail from Des Moines/Ames, with almost 15% coming from Cedar Rapids/Waterloo/Dubuque. With Grinnell's proximity, located halfway between major population centers, you have a unique opportunity to market this position with a "Meet Me in the Middle" campaign. This campaign can serve as a cornerstone for positioning Grinnell as a central meeting point for leisure, cultural exchange, and business. By emphasizing the convenience of accessibility from multiple urban areas and highlighting the town's distinctive features, such as its historic downtown and flourishing arts scene, Grinnell can become a preferred destination for day trips, weekend getaways, and regional gatherings.

Strategic collaboration with local businesses and organizations is key to amplifying the campaign's impact. Initiatives like themed weekends, interactive tours, and partnerships with nearby attractions can create a cohesive experience that resonates with both residents and tourists. With thoughtful planning and targeted promotion, the "Meet Me in the Middle" campaign can elevate Grinnell's profile, drive increased foot traffic and boost local commerce.

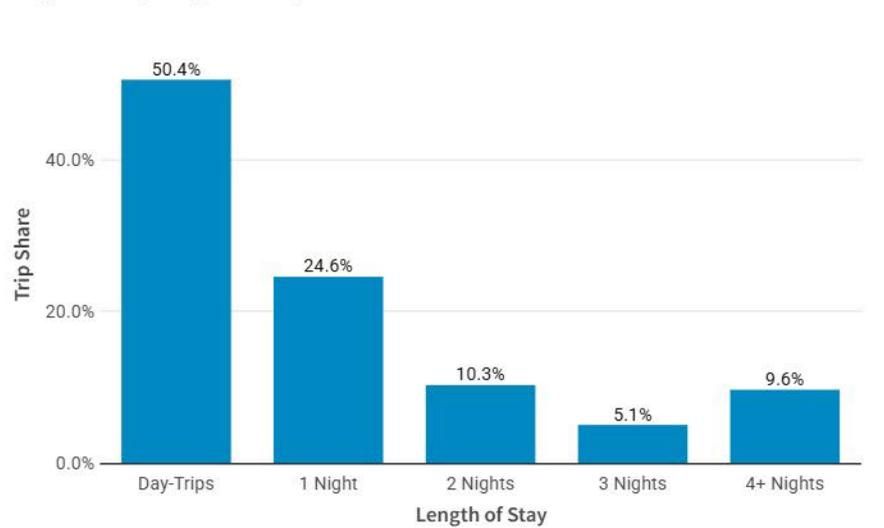
Trip Share by Origin DMA Reset



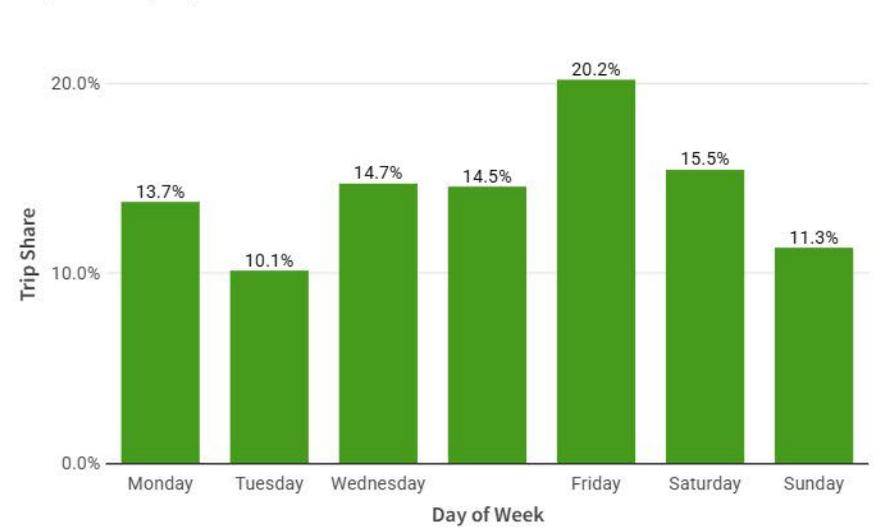
Trip Share by Month Reset



Trip Share by Length of Stay Reset



Trip Share by Day of Week Reset



ACTION STEPS

1. Expand the following tourism marketing concept using the theme “Meet Me in the Middle – Discover Grinnell.”

- **Campaign Objectives:**

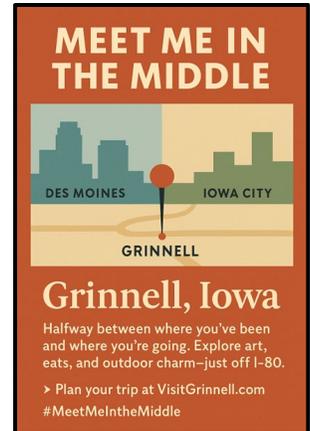
- Position Grinnell as a convenient and compelling halfway point for day trips and weekend getaways.
- Attract visitors from Des Moines, Iowa City/Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Dubuque and beyond.
- Showcase Grinnell’s rich arts, architecture, food scene, outdoor spaces and college-town charm.

- **Key Positioning Message:** “Grinnell is not just a dot on the map

– it is a destination in the middle of it all. Whether you are planning a meetup, road trip stop, or looking to explore somewhere new, Grinnell is your perfect halfway haven.”

- **Target Markets:**

- Travelers from Des Moines, Cedar Rapids/Iowa City, Waterloo and Dubuque (all ~ one hour away).
- College students, parents and alumni from Grinnell College – especially during Parents Weekend.
- Road trippers traveling on I-80 or US 63.



2. Work to develop core themes and day trip options to make it easy for visitors to choose their adventure based on time and interests. Core Themes:

- Art & Culture in the Center

- Grinnell College Museum of Art
- Grinnell Area Arts Council
- STEW Makerspace
- Public murals and sculptures
- Local theater and live music
- Art walks and downtown Galleries
- Tagline option: “Creative energy, right in the middle of everywhere.”

- Historic Charm with a Modern Pulse
 - Historic downtown with indie shops and cafes
 - Restored architecture including the Louis Sullivan Jewel Box Bank
 - Boutique lodging and B&Bs
 - Walking tours of architectural points of interest
 - Historical Museum opening soon
 - Tagline option: “History and Hospitality – halfway to amazing.”
- Foodie Finds on the Way
 - Grinnell Farm-to-Table initiatives
 - Craft Brewhouse and Wine Bar
 - Farmers markets and a diverse range of local dining options
 - Tagline: “Great Place to Gather for Great Tastes.”

3. Once you have compiled a few themed visits, it is time to market them using digital and social media campaigns. You may also want to create hashtags to encourage visitor engagement. A map showing Des Moines and Iowa City, with a dotted line between them and a bright star on Grinnell in the middle. The caption reads “Meet me in the Middle – Explore Grinnell, Iowa.”

- Digital Campaigns
 - Instagram and Facebook: “Halfway never felt so full!” (series of reels/stories from local shops, artists, students’ food spots)
 - Google ads targeting road trip routes and “halfway between X and Y” searches
 - Interactive map on website showing drive times to/from larger cities
- Partnerships & Events
 - Collaborate with Grinnell College for “Middle of it All” weekends featuring art, music and alumni events
 - Joint promotions with nearby towns for mini road trip loops
 - “Middle Point Meetups” (monthly pop-up events encouraging friends to meet in Grinnell)
- Print & Outdoor
 - Billboard on I-80 “Meet me in the Middle. Exit Now for Art, Eats and Adventure.”
 - Posters in coffee shops and venues in surrounding towns.

4. Programming Downtown with Events and Activities. Over 50% of the visitors come to Grinnell for one day only, with Friday being the busiest day of the week. With thoughtful and inclusive initiatives, the town can enhance its appeal, draw an audience of residents, students and tourists and give visitors a reason to extend their stay.

Effective programming, particularly the downtown district, should remain a top priority to fully realize Grinnell’s potential as both a cultural and economic hub. Regularly scheduled events, creative partnerships between local businesses, and the promotion of unique downtown experiences can create a vibrant narrative that places Grinnell as a must-visit destination. This not only fosters economic growth by supporting local enterprises but also elevates community pride and engagement.

Big events are important, but programming means making sure there is always “something going on” downtown. Even small details, like your movie theater showing first-run films or accessible public art, add layers of attraction that resonate universally.

- Central Park is the location for your successful weekly **Farmers Market and Music in the Park** events. Consider moving the time for the two events to overlap and adding some activities and possibly an adult beverage garden to encourage a wider audience.
- Find ways to **include downtown into college events**. Print maps, coupons and/or flyers to direct visitors into the district while in town for alumni events. Extend the Scavenger Hunt offered to international students to include all new students. Create itineraries with experiential activities downtown to give parents and students a reason to stay and play.
- Make this the year to **create a new signature event downtown**. Communities across Iowa celebrate what makes them unique. Pella has tulips and Winterset has covered bridges. What might there be in Grinnell’s history that could be used as a basis for an event? Maybe an “Underground Railroad” festival in honor of your abolitionist roots? Or a “Jewel of the Prairie” festival to showcase your notable architecture with a variety of activities like building tours, presentations, and awards ceremonies to raise awareness of architecture as an art form and highlight the city's historical buildings.

- Bring a **food truck(s)** into the square for one day or evening a month to offer options for lunch or dinner. Several individuals mentioned an interest in attracting a Thai restaurant to Grinnell. Look for a mobile business that serves Thai food. With any luck the food truck will be so successful that they will want to open a permanent brick and mortar location in downtown.
- **Live entertainment** always brings people together. Think about partnering with the High School and/or Grinnell College to present a live theater event in Central Park. Be consistent so folks know that a show will always be held at the same place/time throughout the summer.
- An **Outdoor Movie** night, with movies shown on a large inflatable screen would work well at Central Park. Find businesses to sponsor the family-friendly event and let them choose the movie to reflect their business. Enhance with the night with themes, food vendors and games. (e.g., “Hairspray” sponsored by a local salon. Giveaway samples of beauty products and temporary florescent hair color spray for kids).
- Your Walking Tour of Architectural Treasures focusing on your architectural “jewels” is a great idea. Downtown Grinnell has a critical mass of churches. Consider adding a walking tour **featuring several of the historic churches** and create an event like an “Alter Crawl” (an event featuring a guided tour at each of the churches, with choir or organ music or talks about the stained-glass windows) or “Race for the Alter” (a 5K with runners wearing wedding garb).

5. Enhanced Entry to Downtown. From the moment visitors arrive, it is essential to establish a welcoming atmosphere to enhance their experience. This experience begins on the highways that wrap the north and west sides of the downtown district. The image shown on the following page is taken from Highway 6 heading westbound. Given the speed of traffic and the four-lane configuration, wayfinding elements guiding visitors into Downtown Grinnell need to be more visible and impactful.



- **Signage Color:** The current wayfinding signs, with their muted green tones, often blend into surrounding foliage. To improve visibility, consider using bolder colors and strategic placement that ensure signage stands out to passing drivers.
 - **Bookmark Entry:** the existing entrance from Highway 6 onto Broad Street lacks visual interest emphasis and does not signal a transition into a special district. Introducing a downtown gateway feature – such as monument signage, public art, or enhanced landscaping – can draw attention and create a memorable sense of arrival for visitors.
 - Create a trail of **social media selfie spots** to highlight attractions. Design a graphic and apply it to sidewalks or install signs at different locations. Make sure to include a hashtag specific to your community tourism efforts.
 - **Public art** adds visual interest and shares community stories. Your wheat-paste murals were well received, with interest in making them permanent. Consider this idea inspired by Chicago’s Cows on Parade, where over 300 decorated fiberglass cows

were displayed, successfully drawing tourists and raising millions for charity. This concept has been replicated across Iowa, including Le Mars' giant ice cream cones and Cedar Falls' UNI Panther mascots. Collaborate with local artists to create gem-shaped installations to encourage exploration and engagement, inspiring visitors to linger and discover more.

6. Professional Staff.

- To maximize the impact of these efforts, consider re-evaluating how funds from the Hotel/Motel Tax are allocated. A portion of this revenue could be dedicated to hiring a specialized staff member who would work directly with the Tourism Committee to spearhead these initiatives. To start on a smaller scale, consider hiring a summer intern to program activities during the busy summer months.
- Strategically housing this office in a visible location, such as the front of the Chamber Building, would enable the distribution of information and printed materials to visitors, ensuring they have easy access to resources that enhance their experience and encourage extended stays.

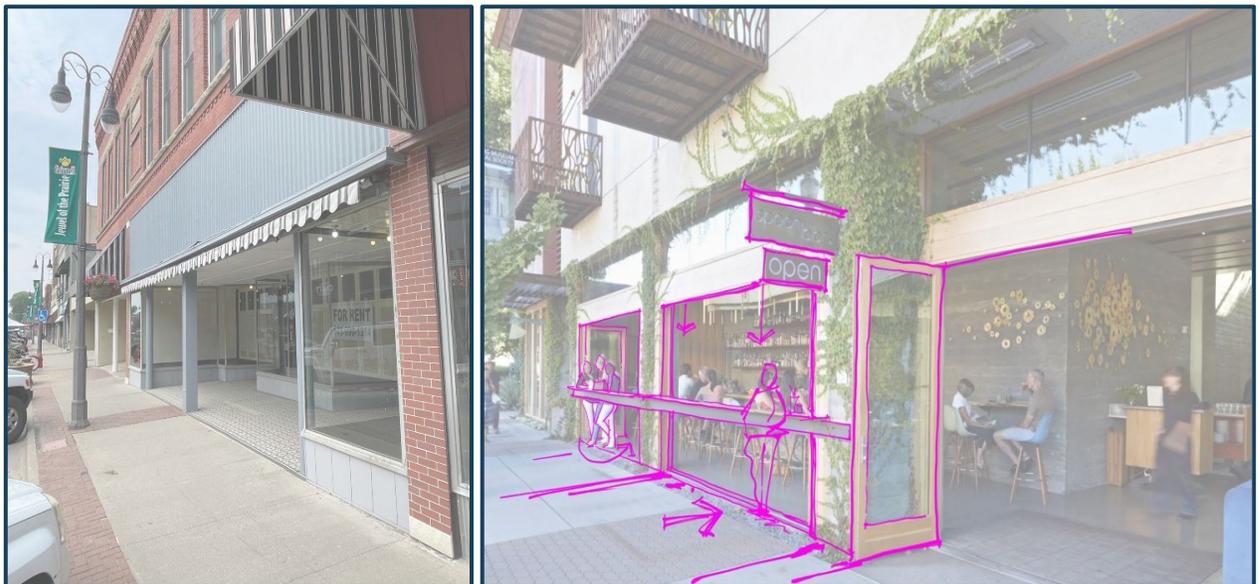
THEME 5: VIBRANT SPACES

Downtown Grinnell is home to many beautiful historic buildings. As business use has shifted in recent years and several properties are now vacant or underutilized, it is time to focus on what the next stage of life will mean for these properties. Over time, some have undergone renovations or maintenance that have diminished their original architectural character. Restoring these historic features will help reinforce Downtown Grinnell's unique identity and set it apart from the uniform appearance of modern structures.

ACTION STEPS

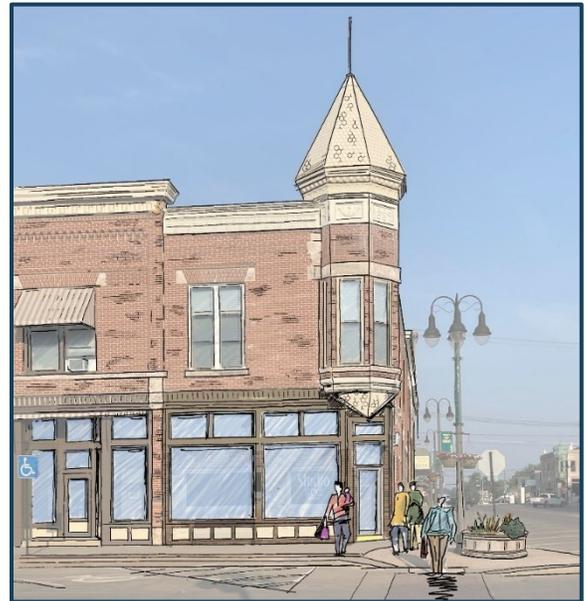
VACANT STOREFRONTS AND EMPTY BUILDINGS can drain energy from a downtown district, diminishing the appeal of surrounding businesses. Activating these spaces – whether through temporary or permanent uses – can reintroduce vibrancy and encourage pedestrian engagement.

- 1. Narrow Sidewalk Activation.** Consider programming building uses that directly engage the sidewalk and create visual interest from a distance. For example, a cocktail lounge could extend its social atmosphere to the street by incorporating garage-style doors and a leaning



rail, transforming the frontage into a casual gathering space and visual destination for passersby.

2. **Large Windows.** Reintroduce expansive storefront windows with finishes that reflect the building's original era. Foot traffic on the sidewalk needs to see what is inside to encourage them to come inside and check things out.
3. **Architectural Details.** Grinnell's downtown is distinguished by unique corner building cupolas. Restoring elements like the inverted cupolas will help recapture historic charm and contribute to the district's distinctive character.



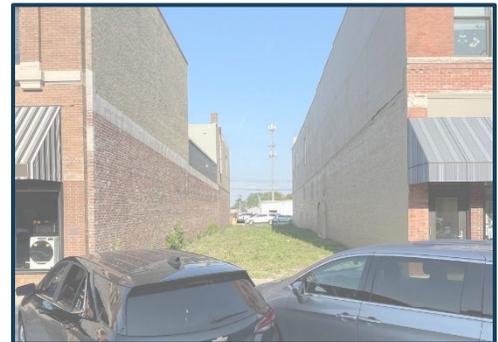
PUBLIC ART AND ACCESSIBILITY. Not every building in Downtown Grinnell is a historic structure – but every property has the potential to contribute to the district's unique identity. Property owners and tenants are encouraged to creatively engage the public realm and enhance the downtown experience through thoughtful design and inclusive access. Grinnell already boasts a vibrant mural scene and a strong artist community. Incorporating sculptural elements into open spaces can further enrich the streetscape and create memorable destinations for residents and visitors alike.



- While not all storefronts can be made fully accessible due to site limitations, it is essential to prioritize accessibility wherever feasible. Ensuring that entryways are flush with the sidewalk helps create an inclusive environment that welcomes all users.
- Thoughtful designs can also tie to the businesses located in the buildings either through artful blade signage or placement of sculptures that give a hint to what you will find inside the building.

VACANT LOTS in a downtown setting can feel like a missing tooth – disrupting the rhythm and energy of the streetscape. While new construction may not always be feasible, these spaces offer valuable opportunities for creative, community-focused uses that can either be temporary or permanent.

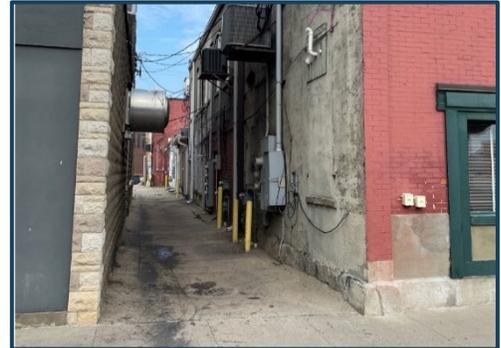
- The vacant lot just down from the theater could be a great location for a Pocket Park Food Hall.
- Activate vacant lots by considering the adjacent businesses and shared uses. For example, this area could be created with seating areas and service from a food truck accessed via the alley. Picnic tables, string lighting draped between the buildings, and some potted



plants encourage social interaction and provide a flexible, low-barrier way to energize the space.

- Thoughtful lighting dramatically increases the appeal and safety of vacant lots. Overhead string lights or low bollard lighting can transform these areas into welcoming, comfortable environments for evening use and community gatherings. These items can easily be removed if a building is constructed in the future.

4. Alleys and pathways that lead directly into Downtown Grinnell should be viewed as valuable community assets – not just utilitarian service corridors. Several communities in Iowa have done a fantastic job activating their alleyways into vibrant community spaces. Consider reaching out or taking a field trip to see their projects and learn from the local volunteers who help with the transformation. Jefferson, Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, and Burlington have all completed alley projects, and Lansing and Sac City have redeveloped vacant lots into community gathering spots. The Downtown Resource Center can provide contact information if you are interested in visiting.



Many downtown residents rely on these routes as their primary access points, using them as front-door walkways. Enhancing these spaces with thoughtful design, lighting, and landscaping can transform them into welcoming, pedestrian-friendly connectors that contribute to the vibrancy and accessibility of the downtown district.

- **Planters:** Introducing landscape planters along these hard-edged corridors can soften the environment and create a more welcoming, pedestrian-friendly atmosphere. Thoughtful placement of greenery adds visual interest and enhances the overall character of the space.

- **Kitchen fans:** Side-mounted commercial kitchen fans are a recognizable feature of downtown’s working character. They are usually found behind buildings or along alleyways. To maintain cleanliness and safety, it is essential to install grease containment systems that capture drips and prevent buildup on sidewalks and surrounding surfaces.
- **Garbage containers and electrical boxes:** Both of these fixtures are necessary but can be screened either with decorative fencing or artistic vinyl wraps to transform them from eyesores to decorative elements.

CLOSING

It was a pleasure for our team to work with Grinnell. The community has enthusiastic volunteers and leaders that are making a difference. We hope this visit and report can assist in building a solid plan for downtown projects and improvements. We encourage leaders, organizations and volunteers to work collaboratively. Focus on projects that you get excited about. Share this report with city staff, elected officials and community partners and encourage conversation on the best way to use the information. We are here for continued support. Good luck!

www.placemaking.org
[@placemakingx](https://twitter.com/placemakingx)

“Everyone has the right to live in
a great place.

More importantly,
everyone has the right to
contribute to making the place
where they already live great.”

Fred Kent

PRIORITIES

The Assessment team encourages Grinnell to prioritize projects listed in this report and other opportunities we feel are of importance. These recommendations can be a complement to your current planning work with RDG.

Theme #	Immediate Priorities: (0-6 months)
1	Discover Downtown Campaign
1	Conduct a business survey
1	Host a B2B networking event for Q4 event planning
1	Host at least one experience event in a downtown business
2	Begin reviewing ordinances for needed updates
3	Host a quarterly “What’s Happening in Grinnell” meeting
4	Share tourism data with key partners, businesses
5	Consider an application to the Empower Rural Iowa program for housing
5	Host a fall pop-up event in the vacant lot near the theater
Theme #	One Year Priorities (0-12 months)
1	Create a local loyalty program
1	Take a field trip to a strong downtown retail community
1	Host a pop-up event in a vacant building downtown
1	Relaunch a downtown business competition
2	Update and enforce sign ordinance
2	Create a signage grant program
3	Host a ‘Welcome Back’ party downtown for Grinnell students in the fall
3	Market the new Chamber Community calendar on the website
4	Develop themed visits and day-trip options for Grinnell
4	Create a new signature event for downtown Grinnell for 2026
4	Create social media selfie spots throughout the downtown
5	Continue to implement your 2030 plan
5	Visit communities that have completed alley projects to gather ideas

Theme #	Longer term Projects: (0-24 months)
1	Create a Business Welcome Package
1	Develop a business incentive program
2	Review zoning and ordinance regulations – make updates as needed
3	Research an information kiosk for downtown/Central Park
3	Start a weekly podcast to share information about Grinnell
4	Expand tourism marketing – “Meet Me in the Middle”
4	Review wayfinding signage to identify possible improvements
4	Research ways to make the wheat-paste murals permanent
5	Create a program to help with façade improvements
Theme#	Down the Road....but plan now: (24+ months)
4	Add a staff person to coordinate tourism activities for the city
4	Consider gem-shaped public art installations for the community
5	Explore enhancements to the gateway entrance to downtown from Highway 6
5	Prioritize accessibility to downtown buildings where possible

CONTACTS

Iowa Downtown Resource Center, IEDA, 515.348.6180 opportunityiowa.gov/community/downtown-resource-center

Keep Iowa Beautiful515.323.6507 keepiowabeautiful.com

ISU Iowa Community Indicators Program Retail Analysis icjp.iastate.edu/retail

Certified Local Governments, State Historic Society of Iowa.....515.281.6826

CDBG Downtown Revitalization Program.....515.348.6208
..... opportunityiowa.gov/community/community-infrastructure/cdbg-programs/downtown-revitalization-fund

Iowa Rural Development Council Iowa Rural Development Council

Center for Rural Revitalization..... Center for Rural Revitalization | Economic Development & Finance Authority

National and State Preservation Services and Programs:

National Trust for Historic Preservation preservationnation.org
Main Street America (Main Street America Network Membership)..... mainstreet.org
National Park Service Preservation Briefs nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm
State Historic Preservation Office iowahistory.org

RESOURCES Electronic files are available for download [here](#). (for 12 months)

- Characteristics of a Successful Downtown
- Developing Pop Up Retail Program
- Grinnell Tourism
- Grinnell Presentation
- Ground Floor Residential Code Examples
- Grundy Center Big Application
- Marion Business Investment Guide
- Ordinance 22-10 Marion Sidewalk Café
- SignUp Valley Junction
- Spencer Retail Kickstarter Application
- Survey Small Businesses
- Vacant Building Ordinance (Adel)
- Vacant Building Ordinance (Clinton)
- Vacant Building Registration (Adel)
- ERSI Data report
- Community Survey Results

POTENTIAL RESOURCES FOR Grinnell (hyperlinks)

- [Design Guidelines Handbook](#)
- [CDBG-Downtown Revitalization Grant Overview](#)
- [Community Catalyst Grant Fact Sheet](#)
- [Sidewalk Resource Guide: Restoring Social Life in Our Communities](#)
- [The Placemaking Process](#)
- [Eleven Principles for Making Great Community Places](#)
- [A Street You Go To, Not Just Through: Principles for Fostering Streets as Places](#)
- [How To Do Creative Placemaking](#)
- [Get Stuff Done, Be the One](#)
- [Uses & Activities: How to Create Multi-Purpose Places](#)