

Downtown Assessment Visit Summary for Gowrie, Iowa

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Following is a brief summary of the recommendations of an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Assessment Visit conducted in Gowrie. A complete report is also available from the City of Gowrie.



Downtown stakeholders and residents are passionate about the Gowrie, and realize the importance of the Downtown area. The town is rich with amenities and Downtown has a strong core of service businesses, many of whom have served the needs of the community for many years. Community leaders and residents want to see business growth and physical improvements made to buildings and public spaces. Residents also see a need for events and activities that provide entertainment for locals, draw visitors and establish the Downtown as a place to be. Members of the Downtown Assessment Team believe the identification of strengths and challenges should be taken constructively and utilized by local leaders to do many good things in Downtown.

FOCUS AREA #1: PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS

The physical appearance of a community helps generate local pride and creates a lasting first impression with visitors. Gowrie's Downtown streetscape presents a negative first impression with broken sidewalks, weeds and empty lots.

- The first step in any major physical improvement project is the preparation of a detailed Downtown master plan, which includes design and implementation strategies for building improvements and streetscape reconstruction.
- Encourage Downtown business owners to install more visible business signage. Establish a small sign grant program to encourage appropriate new business signs.
- Expand your newly installed community entrance signs and park signs with a community-wide wayfinding project.
- A Downtown cleanup is a great way to involve the entire community in a very visible project that has a huge benefit for very little effort or money.
- Weeds on sidewalks and in front of buildings are a significant problem in Downtown Gowrie as it conveys a negative first impression. Weeds need a regular plan of attack throughout the growing season.
- Sidewalks need immediate repair. Research cost sharing programs in other communities that assist property owners with the repair and/or replacement of damaged sidewalks.

Several buildings in Downtown Gowrie suffer from severely deferred maintenance and need repair. The preference would be to encourage building owners to make the appropriate repairs using incentives, grants or personal resources. This is not an issue you can fix overnight, but one that can be fixed over time in small increments, using both short and long-term projects.



- Submit an application to the Paint Iowa Beautiful Grant program.
- Proceed with your plan to apply to the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), Downtown Revitalization Program (DTR). Plan a field trip to visit to Jefferson, a previous recipient of a DTR Grant, to help with strategies for a successful application and implementation.
- Develop financial incentives for building improvements. To help determine what kind of assistance is needed and would actually be used by building and business owners, create an informal interview or survey of building and business owners.
- Adoption of a minimum maintenance ordinance might be the next best solution.
- A last resort strategy is the Derelict Building Grant Program administered by the Iowa DNR which provides financial assistance for buildings that have been abandoned, or the owner is unwilling or unable to bring the building into compliance with codes.



FOCUS AREA #2: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

There is a dedicated group of individuals working to improve the economic vitality of the community and their efforts should be commended. The Gowrie Economic Development Commission (GDC) has created a strong foundation on which additional organizational structure could be built. Due to a smaller population base from which to draw volunteers, it is difficult to find enough volunteers to complete all the work that needs to be done.

- Create a database of volunteers matched with their interests and skill set to help find the right volunteer for different projects.
- Create a 2018 Action Plan listing all activities and events the GDC plans to accomplish in the coming year. Action plans can help break down the tasks into manageable parts which can be aligned with those volunteers willing to help.
- Identify task forces for each effort and the types of volunteers needed to complete the task.

Communication is a critical piece of economic development, especially in small rural communities that depend on volunteer efforts to get things done. Gowrie exhibits a strong "can-do" attitude and enhanced communication efforts will increase the success of those efforts.

- Create a business database with contact information on all your local businesses.
- Share demographic and retail trade information with business owners.
- Share results of the community survey with the public and business owners. Encourage business owners to look for opportunities to add a product line that is currently not available in town to encourage shopping locally.
- Update and publish the newsletter monthly. Consider printing copies to place in waiting rooms, bank lobbies or the library to help spread the word. The GDC newsletter is a great resource and should be updated monthly and shared with the broad community.
- Consider creating an image campaign (print materials/social media posts) to market the community.

FOCUS AREA #3: BRING NEW LIFE DOWNTOWN GOWRIE WITH PROMOTIONS

In addition to functioning as the commercial business district, Downtowns traditionally served as the community's social center. Other than the 4th of July Celebration, there is very little reason for anyone to come to Downtown Gowrie to socialize. To bring new life to the community it is vital that you program Downtown Gowrie with promotional events and activities.

Take time to plan.

- Use the ESRI demographic information included with the report to learn about your community. Be aware of existing assets and the potential audience when making decisions as to what activities should be included on your event calendar.
- Bring a group together to brainstorm ideas for events. Invite young people to be part of the planning and get their opinions.
- Form committees with volunteer chairs for each event to function efficiently and share the work without the help of paid staff.
- Create a detailed Action Plan for every event. Include the major steps and all the tasks involved.

Gowrie's 4th of July festival is an outstanding example of a special event. Develop and implement at least one new special event to bring people to Downtown on a more frequent basis to have fun and create memories.

- Attendees at the Community Meeting expressed an interest in developing a Farmers Market.
- With Gowrie's critical mass of health-related service businesses, a Health Fair to focus on that niche would work very well.
- Build a new event around a holiday. Consider a more obscure holiday.

Support the retail businesses you have in Downtown Gowrie with the addition of at least one new retail/business promotion.

- Engage business owners to be involved in the planning and implementation of an activity tailored to their customer base and needs.
- There was a great deal of interest in developing a Shop Local activity. Take advantage of the national Shop Small campaign and sign up to be a Neighborhood Champion to receive free materials.
- Be cautious in trying to compete with the big box stores and online retailers with retail events based on price alone.



FOCUS AREA #4: RETAINING LOCAL BUSINESS

Professional services are strong for a community of this size (legal services, medical facilities, insurance, etc.) and definite assets to residents. The friendly, locally-owned businesses ranked high with participants in the survey, and focus groups conducted by the Assessment Team suggested plenty of room for small business growth, especially the need for additional retail offerings. Review the results of the survey and look for opportunities to fill the gaps that currently exist.



- Look for ways to cost-share building improvements and leverage local dollars to provide retail spaces that are ready for new opportunities.
- Consider creating a new business contest geared toward filling vacant spaces and addressing the need for more retail.
- Reach out to the local school district and the SBDC for entrepreneurs who might be interested in a pop-up store to "test" the market and gain expertise. These business types could fill a vacant space or share a space for a limited period of time and be opened limited hours to provide goods and services that are missing from the community without making a full investment into a storefront until they know the business can positively cash flow.
- Celebrate new business starts, anniversaries, remodels, etc. with the community. Take photos, create press releases and share these via social media channels, newsletter articles, etc.
- Encourage a Business to Business (B2B) networking group to get to know what businesses carry, hours of operation, issues and concerns etc., so that businesses can better promote each other.
- Create a task force to conduct a Business Visitation Program to gather information from the business community. This should be updated every two years.
- Consider starting a Lunch & Learn or Breakfast Club to educate local business owners on social media marketing practices or other topics related to becoming more profitable and improving their customer base.
- Research local opportunities to create incentives to assist with business development efforts.
- Create a local handout that lists local incentives as well as state resources that can be distributed to individuals interested in opening a business.

Business Succession Planning is a concern for many small businesses across Iowa, including Gowrie. Local businesses that have anchored the commercial district for many years are approaching retirement age and many do not have a plan to transfer the business to new ownership. The community has already made plans to begin educating the businesses about this important business planning phase by hosting an educational workshop with IEDA staff. Continue to provide education on this topic on an annual basis and consider sharing the handouts provided in the resource section of this report with all businesses.



CONTACTS/RESOURCES:

Certified Local Governments, State Historical Society of Iowa.....	515.281.6826
Iowa Downtown Resource Center, IEDA, Des Moines, Iowa	515.348.6180 www.mainstreetiowa.org
National Trust for Historic Preservation	www.preservationnation.org
National Main Street Center (National Main Street Network Membership)	www.mainst.org
National Park Service's Preservation Briefs	www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm
State Historic Preservation Office	www.iowahistory.org

