

Jim Engle, Iowa Downtown Resource Center / Tim Reinders, Main Street Iowa / Debi Flanders, Iowa Downtown Resource Center

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



Downtown Princeton has a beautiful riverfront that attracts boaters and sightseers. The residential neighborhoods are generally well kept and attractive. Typically, the downtown area is the face of a community. In Princeton’s case, River Drive is perhaps the street that needs the most attention in terms of building use, land use and overall appearance.

One essential task for any community is to develop a community supported vision for the downtown for 10, 15, 20 years. There are many options. Will this downtown attract tourists? Serve area residents? Will it cease to exist and become residential? It is important to go through a democratic process to develop one voice....one vision that the community can embrace.

1: STRUCTURE

Princeton has many goals for the downtown. To make an impact a network of community leaders and volunteers are needed to implement strategies and projects. City officials need to take the lead, but both public and private sectors must be partners. All community groups, businesses and private citizens have a role in downtown.

- Host a community meeting to discuss and prioritize projects and recommendations.
- Establish a beautification work group and an events work group.
- Identify and involve partners – local, regional and state - in addition to the city governing body.
- Recruit volunteers.

2: COMMUNICATIONS

Comprehensive communication is crucial in building support and long-term sustainability. An effective strategy requires identifying the varied purposes of the communications, consistency in messages and design elements.

- Use a mix of traditional methods and electronic methods to reach particular audiences and adapt as needed.
- Design a versatile one page informational piece about Princeton. A printer friendly version should be available on the website.
- Take advantage of regional and state networking and educational opportunities.
- All involved should be positive, vocal advocates for the initiative.



3: EVENTS – COMMUNITY BUILDERS

In addition to functioning as the commercial business district, downtowns also serve as the community’s social center. While the Community Center performances and events like Princeton Days show potential to attract people into the district, Downtown Princeton lacks enough pedestrian oriented businesses to generate “people traffic” and vibrancy on a steady, daily basis.

- Meet with entities presently coordinating special events in Princeton. As a group, evaluate the success and return on investment of the existing calendar of events.
- Develop ways to gradually combine some events into one larger event, expand existing events, or introduce new activities to the calendar.
- Expand the Community Center calendar of activities and events. Create event subcommittees.

4: LAND USE/RESIDENTIAL CREEP

A characteristic of a vibrant, successful downtown is various housing. This helps buildings cash flow and attracts people that shop, use services, and generate activity in the downtown. However, one of the most devastating things that can happen to a downtown is ground floor, storefront housing. Downtown Princeton is seeing substantial, “residential creep” into its downtown.

- Develop a half page vision statement for downtown Princeton with a set of strategies and action steps. Make this a facilitated democratic process.
- If an ordinance-prohibiting ground floor residential exists, enforce it. If not, develop one and enforce it.

5: TRAFFIC BUILDERS/SPECIAL FEATURES

Generating activity in downtown is essential. Typically, a combination of retail, service businesses and interesting features makes a district a social hub. Developing interesting design elements and public spaces can add to the variety and experiences downtown has to offer. In Princeton, the current absence of retail limits traffic; however, the river itself (and Go Fish) do serve as attractions.

- Inventory existing interpretive signs other features and identify other locations for the new pieces.
- Develop a small creative team to develop ideas for river related interpretive signs and public art to help position downtown as a cool place to be.
- Install some interactive features to draw pedestrians like “A Play Me Piano” or a giant checkerboard. Interactive/kinetic public art. Consider public bikes.
- Work with an area company to create a raw piece of art, for example a sphere, a square, a fish, clam, etc. Develop a contest where artists decorate the raw forms, then place throughout downtown. Eventually sell them as a fundraiser.



6: BUSINESS GROWTH

Community residents have memories of downtown Princeton and its businesses. A core of businesses is important to create the meeting place that residents want downtown to be. Businesses that capitalize on the river and recreation appear to be the most logical opportunity. Communities that are successful are typically strategic and make their decisions based on market data, competition from other communities, existing space, etc.

- Develop a strategy to acquire the buildings for improvement and sale. The City should consider this....one building at a time. Recruitment efforts may only be successful after this kind of preparation is in place.
- Develop a database of home-based businesses. Find out if they would consider expansion to a downtown location.
- Develop a wish list of business types that Princeton can support.

7: BEAUTIFICATION



First impressions are vitally important to community development. Princeton has charming qualities, but many things can enhance downtown and the community gateways/entries. Weeds and garbage are obvious items. Most of the buildings in the downtown need fresh paint.

- Take a walk through the downtown with a critical eye.
- Hold a community-wide clean-up event. Bring in free use dumpsters.
- Review and enforce local ordinances regarding property maintenance and junk.
- Create an incentive program to improve downtown buildings.
- Install screening around storage yards. Include greenery along with solid fencing.
- Add some color/details like banners along River Drive.

The downtown boat ramp brings hundreds of boaters into the community. Accommodating boat parking is a challenge. Boater parking along River Drive has a negative impact on its pedestrian friendliness. There is not a lot of space where the public can easily access the river beyond the boat ramp. The green area between the street and river on south River Drive appears to be a long linear park, but it is private property.

- Develop a strategy to provide additional (remote?) boat parking. Perhaps a golf cart valet service?
- Do not be afraid to think big. Develop a comprehensive streetscape plan including, seating, sidewalks, plantings, public art, and perhaps a river walk.

8: BUILDINGS/BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Princeton’s focus is River Drive and the riverfront, but the Highway 67 corridor should also receive attention. Development along the highway will be different from River Drive. Keep River Drive a compact, more densely developed district. The highway will have larger parking lots and setbacks from the road.

Princeton has a handful of very interesting historic buildings as well as contemporary buildings. A few buildings need major overhauls. There are also developable sites ripe for infill development and underutilized properties.

- Take the initiative to improve the visual (and physical) condition of your buildings. Target one or two buildings per year.
- Solicit assistance and guidance for from professional resources like AIA Iowa (Architects) or university outreach programs.
- Develop design standards for River Street and for the highway corridor.



9: RESOURCES/FUNDING

Economic and community development is an ongoing, collaborative process. A key to successful community development is to have a vision, a plan for the future.

- Become more active in regional and state economic development.
- Create a vision for Princeton with a preferred development/land use plan and concrete implementation strategies.
- Invest in yourself. Create financial incentives for business development. Leverage your investments by accessing appropriate financing tools.

