

Downtown Walk Around Summary Prairie City, Iowa

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This report is a summary of the observations and recommendations resulting from an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Prairie City, Iowa on May 11, 2022.

PRAIRIE CITY (pop 1,700) sits in Jasper County next to the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge and just 22 miles from Des Moines. Community members enjoy safe living in Prairie City. Celebrations include the annual Prairie City Prairie Days, bike nights and several smaller activities. Recent trail development is another community opportunity and Prairie City is blessed with several good restaurants. As residents and visitors approach downtown, they see the massive Heartland Co-Op grain silos that help to define the downtown district. The town square is a definite asset to Prairie City. It provides an area in which people can gather and enjoy music, attend events or simply take a walk in Garden Square Park. Although residents prefer to see more buildings in use in downtown Prairie City – the district does have a core of



businesses that includes a grocery store, photographer, two restaurants and a soon to open café/coffee shop. The downtown buildings feature interesting architecture. Prairie City has recently become active in utilizing grants available through the Iowa Economic Development Authority to rehabilitate some of these structures. There is opportunity to continue this work as many of the buildings need a facelift. Prairie City has spruced up the downtown area with murals on some of the buildings.



The Walk Around Team focused on supplying recommendations to assist Prairie City when addressing their challenges downtown. We have categorized our thoughts into five separate themes for consideration.

MAKE DOWNTOWN CLEAN AND VIBRANT

In order to have a clean and vibrant downtown, a community must take care of the details. Begin by addressing the “little things” that perhaps have just been overlooked. Without a doubt, winter is hard on towns, especially street markings as they tend to wear off during the winter months. It’s time to get serious about parking stall markings and all that goes along with it (i.e., handicapped parking signage, etc.). The trash and leaves have collected in all the wrong places. Address this issue by organizing a community clean-up project. While you have the volunteers assembled – wash the store windows, remove visible junk and/or storage and ask business owners if you can help to create attractive window displays for their stores. This is a great way to get the job done and have some fun along the way. It also adds life to an otherwise dreary space. We LOVED Garden Square Park. It has all the makings of a great place to hang out and hold events. Please take a walk through the park and clean up the grass area and pick up trash. When you invite guests to town you don’t want them to see a dirty living room. This approach works with the entire town. We encourage you to hold local clean up contests and praise/reward the best kinds of behavior.



DOWNTOWN ...ACTIVATING CHANGE THROUGH INCENTIVES AND ENFORCEMENT

Prairie City is the only downtown we’ve worked in that didn’t have upper-story housing. This is a wonderful opportunity for the community to address needed residential. Enforcement for cities starts with having the right kinds of ordinances to get the kind of compliance you desire. Business cleanup issues were visible on our visit. Nuisance properties should not be tolerated. Be sure to encourage best behavior from all your property owners. Never tolerate first floor storage (storefront side) and never allow storefront residential. Once you allow residential on the storefront you have given up on your downtown. We can provide you with examples of ordinances. When you have a parking ordinance on the books, ENFORCE it. Start with a conversation and then, if the problems continue, move toward enforcement. Talk is still the best way to start but move to fines if needed. You have plenty of parking stalls, what you have is a parking management problem. The second part of this discussion is creating local incentives to leverage state and federal grants. We need to work together to create or enhance local incentives to leverage the maximum grant approvals for your projects. We can share an incentives document and can return to facilitate a local incentive training as needed. We want to HELP.

THE POWER OF GOOD SIGNAGE

Even though business signage is a key component to help drive sales and enhance the brand for both the business and the downtown – it is often taken for granted. Good signage and attractive window displays draw customers “off the roadway and encourage pedestrians to come inside” to experience all that a business has to offer. Downtown Prairie City has signage issues like obsolete signs; businesses with no signs or those that do not lure customers in; and windows that prevent pedestrians from seeing what is going on inside.

- Walk the district and determine which storefronts can benefit from improved signage? Think like a visitor who may not know anything about the business. Does the signage communicate effectively about the experience one would have once inside? Is it easily read? Consider offering a small matching grant program to encourage more appropriate signs that are creative and colorful but also practical. Blade signs visually draw a pedestrian down the street to experience more shopping opportunities.
- Remove outdated signs and those in need of repair. Prairie City has several signs promoting businesses that are no longer open. This sends the wrong message.
- Consider vinyl window graphics to communicate what the business offers. Customers love to see what is going on inside a business. Tinted windows detract from that and give a business a “closed” feeling. Activity in the windows brings life to a business and a downtown.



PROJECTS FOR PRAIRIE CITY TO CONSIDER.....

The following is a list of idea/thoughts that we believe can help downtown Prairie City based on our conversation with the planning group and what we saw when we walked the downtown:

- The yard (in front of the metal Heartland Co-Op Building) and across the street (on the backside of the bandstand) is a Place Making project waiting to happen. Those “places” would make excellent areas for people to gather. Consider adding benches, public art, an event kiosk, creative bike racks and plantings.
- The Co-Op is so important to Prairie City and the downtown. The silos create Prairie City’s own skyline. They get dirty. Is there a way to clean them? Some communities have used silos for public art projects. (see image on right)
- Develop a gateway to the downtown (an arch or a large, beautiful sign) at the key point or points of entry. A feature like this really does help visitors know they have arrived someplace with things to do, see, eat, etc.
- Prairie City does an impressive job with local events which are so important for community members and visitors. Events also help establish downtown as a place to be. The annual Prairie Days and the bike nights are good local events. **Some ideas to tweak the event schedule.....**
 - ✓ Develop a calendar of events for the park/bandstand. Encourage local use by organizations.
 - ✓ Market the Bike Nights on the Des Moines calendar of events/websites. This is a perfect way to expose a large market of people to Prairie City.
 - ✓ The Central Iowa Baseball Tourney is a good opportunity to give local businesses (especially restaurants) a boost. We heard that Prairie City knows what communities/teams will be visiting approximately one week in advance. Not much time to market the opportunity, but day of event messages on sandwich boards promoting a lunch special is a great way to bring visitors downtown.
 - ✓ School closures and the awkwardness that sometimes occurs between area communities is REAL. Strength in numbers when celebrating your communities is also real. Consider 2-3 events a year with your “classmates” in Monroe, for example a Pep Night in Prairie City before the big game; a run between the two communities; or an event like a Cash Mob where you pick a Prairie City business where thirty people agree to spend at least \$20 on one evening. Next month, pick a Monroe business. Have a “group of buyers” from each town. Have FUN with this.
 - ✓ Check out [Empower Rural Iowa](#) which we believe is perfect for your community. Areas of interest are Leadership Development, Rural Innovation Grants, Rural Childcare Grants, Rural Housing Readiness Assessment Grants and Power of Connection Grants. This is a great resource. Prairie City needs to become very active in this initiative.
 - ✓ Attend the [Iowa Downtown Conference](#) in Pella on August 2-3. This is an excellent opportunity to gather ideas for Prairie City. To encourage your attendance, we are offering you one free registration.



BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY

It is difficult to make improvements and change your community effectively without a committed group of people listening to the community, identifying issues, and reacting with great projects. It does not appear that Prairie City currently has a group like this. The Business Association has done wonderful things in the past but are currently in a transition period and the Hometown Pride Committee is no longer active. Items in this summary and other community needs are more comprehensive than just providing business support. We believe Prairie City should go a different direction with a new group – one you can introduce, brand, and get people excited about.

- Create a Betterment Group with bylaws and articles and a small set of identified priorities/projects that are modified every year. Involve business and community members. Get the word out about your new group’s 4-8 projects and actively recruit individuals to serve on small action teams to get these projects done. An example of a small project would be a downtown cleanup initiative. A larger project (previously mentioned) could be developing a placemaking plan.
- It was mentioned that Prairie City has challenges when it comes to getting the word out about community events, volunteer opportunities, etc. Develop a small newsletter that can be mailed, emailed, Facebooked, put in church bulletins, at Goldie’s, etc. This could be one of the projects for the new Betterment Group.

IN SUMMARY

We thank Prairie City for inviting us to evaluate your downtown. Good things are happening in your community.

We hope our recommendations help community leaders and volunteers develop plans for even more successful projects. We encourage you to get together; figure out what your priorities are and assign which organizations can begin addressing them.



Get involved. Come to the Iowa Downtown Conference. Access online resources and examples. Subscribe to our [newsletter](#). Stay connected and reach out with any questions!

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Iowa Downtown Resource Center.....	515.348.6180.....	iowaeda.com/downtown-resource-center/
Catalyst Building Remediation	515.240.8873	iowaeda.com/downtown-resource-center/community-catalyst/
CDBG Programs.....	515.348.6200.....	https://www.iowaeda.com/cdbg/
Empower Rural Iowa	515.348.6154.....	iowaeda.com/empower-rural-iowa/
State Historic Preservation Office.....		https://iowaculture.gov/