

Downtown Walk Around Summary – Preston, IA

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This report is a brief summary of the observations and recommendations that are a result of an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Preston, Iowa on September 7, 2016.



PRESTON (Pop. 1025) is a charming small town with an energetic and creative group of volunteers (Preston Growth & Development) that want to make things happen. Downtown buildings line Gillett Street, a one-way thoroughfare that serves as Preston's "Main Street." The buildings are largely intact.

Downtown Preston has a traditional business mix with stores that serve the local market such as a pharmacy, grocery store and newspaper. The downtown architecture is interesting. An historic fire station was tastefully restored and can serve as a model to other property owners wanting to make improvements. A nice core of events like Pirate Days is popular in the community. The Preston Arts Group is also a viable organization to promote the arts in Preston. A seven-mile trail with direct access to the downtown is also a valuable community asset. Like other small towns, Preston is fighting to maintain businesses and lure customers to support those businesses. The larger cities of Maquoketa and Clinton are within 20 miles.



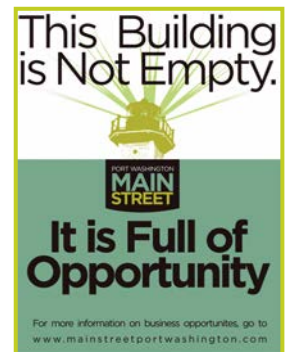
1) Keeping Up Appearances

Preston has a compact, clearly defined downtown. Although the streets and sidewalks are clean, there is room for improvement. Visitors are more likely to return if downtown is inviting, clean and attractive.

- Invite the city council and as a group walk downtown to take photos and record red flags/eye sores along the way. Afterwards, get together and develop plans to "fix" 5-10 of the most glaring issues. Sometimes it takes an active initiative to notice these problems.
- Initiate a formal program to pull weeds and pick up litter.



- Incorporate more flowers/plantings downtown that bring color and vibrancy to the district.
- Clean up the debris on the vacant lot (where the light plant cooling units sit) and develop a plan to mask the lot/units with attractive landscaping.
- Vacant buildings can create negative perceptions of the downtown. Remove signs from closed businesses. Develop window displays in vacant buildings promoting these spaces as "opportunities."



2) Downtown Buildings...What Makes Preston Unique

Building improvements may have the most impact on downtown Preston. Even though Preston has beautiful buildings, most of them need attention. They have typical maintenance problems and have undergone unusual alterations over the years. In many cases, the lower storefront of the buildings has been altered. Many of these buildings can be improved with simple maintenance. Others are in dire need of tuckpointing, roof work and window replacement.



- Consider applying for a Downtown Revitalization Grant from IEDA. These grants can provide up to \$500,000 in funding for façade improvements.
 - Develop a grant program to incentivize smaller downtown building improvements. Even small grants (\$500-\$2,000) can leverage much larger façade projects including windows, paint, signage, awnings, etc. Programs like this can only be effective if these funds are tied to local design guidelines. The Secretary of the Interior's "Standards for Rehabilitation" and National Park Service "Preservation Briefs" can be used as a guide.
 - First...develop plans for these potential building improvements. Both Iowa State University and the Iowa Architectural Foundation are potential resources (fee based) to get assistance.
- Develop community interest in the historic buildings by sponsoring a "Look Up Contest" in the local newspaper. Take photos (close up) of interesting details located on historic buildings and let residents identify those buildings for a chance for a prize.
 - The development of upper story housing is usually critical for the success of a downtown. Not only does this help cash flow the purchase and rehab of historic buildings, but it also brings a market of residents that frequent downtown buildings and generate activity.



Although this is a long-term goal for Preston, it is not too soon to develop ideas for upper story residential. Start by inviting successful developers to town to tour the buildings. Dubuque has had much success in this area. Develop a workshop for property owners to learn about those projects. And, by all means do not allow housing in lower storefronts.

3) What's the Hook...Attracting People to the Downtown

With the current absence of retail businesses in downtown Preston, the development of attractions, interesting features, etc. is even more important to get people to come downtown. Establish downtown Preston as a place to go for leisure.

- Develop a photo-op!.....a place to get your picture taken. The historic jail in the old firehouse? Or, the chicken! Can the chicken be relocated to ground level? Perhaps this is an ag-related public art opportunity throughout the downtown. You also have the connection with Preston Meats. Have FUN with this! Use your creativity to develop special features to get people to stroll downtown Preston.



4) Creating a Buzz with Promotions

Re-establishing the downtown as a social center....a place to go is extremely IMPORTANT. The easiest way to do this is by programming the downtown with more events. If done frequently, 30-60 people events can have economic impact on the district and provide much needed community entertainment. Continue to promote and encourage things like the monthly art events and the twice-monthly square dances.

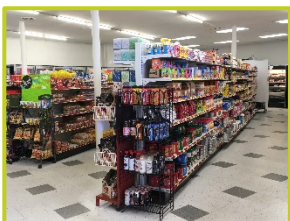
- Set a goal to do six events in the downtown in 2017. Perhaps service organizations or churches can help make this happen. Do not limit your CREATIVITY. The event options are infinite....outdoor movies, pet parades, upper story tours, Halloween events, homecoming pep rally, scavenger hunts, tailgate parties, etc.
- The 20-year anniversary for the Preston Photo Exhibit (Faces of Preston) in the library is approaching. Is this an opportunity for an event/party to celebrate with current photos? Perhaps a second photo exhibit of the subjects 20 years later, with an event that allows visitors to find both versions of the same subjects in several different buildings in the downtown. The photos are compelling and a 20-year anniversary event could prove to be popular with residents and visitors.

5) Downtown....Where is it?

Finding downtown Preston was not obvious. In a small town, visitors are eventually going to locate the downtown...but only if they want to.

- Develop signage for the highway that promotes the historic downtown and the features that visitors can experience....restaurants, public art, businesses, historic buildings, etc.

6) Enhancing the Business Community



Downtown Preston has traditional businesses (grocery store and pharmacy) that other communities similar in size would love to have. Other than these, the downtown has very limited retail options. According to ESRI numbers that measure retail trade, Preston has sales leakage in nearly every retail category except building materials, health & personal care, gasoline stations and full-service restaurants. With the recent closure of a restaurant, this category will most likely also represent sales leakage unless another restaurant comes to town. Although business development is a slow (but IMPORTANT) process for communities the size of Preston – THERE IS OPPORTUNITY.



- Like most downtowns, Preston has a potential challenge with retiring business owners. Developing a succession/transition plan is critical. Form a small business visitation team. Work in pairs to visit all downtown businesses, understand their needs and connect businesses to resources like SCORE or SBDC to get succession assistance.
- What businesses can work in downtown Preston? Attached you will find ESRI data that shows potential business opportunities. Use the data and focus groups to develop a wish list of potential business types that can make money in Preston. Dollar General was mentioned as one possible match. Have they been contacted?
- The vacant Budde's building is already set up for a potential restaurant. Market data shows that Preston pulls people (from outside the community) to eat in restaurants. The market EXISTS. Form a team to research existing restaurants (75-mile radius) that may consider a second location or work with budding entrepreneurs that may have a dream. Contact the Iowa Restaurant Association for help.
- Work with current building owners to develop a rent incentive program (i.e. half-rent for one year) to recruit desirable tenants that fit your wish list to the downtown buildings...or invest in a business plan contest that awards a small cash prize (or free rent for a year) if they agree to locate in a downtown building.

7) Marketing the Trail

The trail (not widely promoted) could be a community feature that draws people to Preston including visitors to the restaurants and other businesses.

- Include the trail in all marketing pieces and research area publications (newspapers, social media, etc.) that would appeal to users of the trail. Develop features to market this opportunity.

8) Building a Network of Volunteers

Preston Growth & Development has a good core of volunteers to get things moving. However, given the opportunities we have communicated in the report, more people are needed to accomplish the aggressive set of goals. It will require an organizational structure with small action teams for specific projects.

- Develop three 3-5 person action teams that work specifically under the Preston Growth & Development Board to accomplish specific projects. We would suggest action teams in these areas: Event Development, Business Support and Downtown Appearances. Develop small lists of doable projects and recruit volunteers to assist.

In summary, we appreciate Preston's hospitality. **As a bonus to the walk around visit**, we are awarding Preston, two free registrations to the 2017 Iowa Downtown Conference scheduled for August 1-3 in Sioux City, Iowa. This conference will offer a multitude of topics, which will help Preston continue their downtown revitalization efforts. (see attached registration voucher for details)

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Iowa Downtown Resource Center, IEDA, Des Moines, IA	515.725.3058
.....	or www.mainstreetiowa.org
National Park Service Preservation Briefs.....	www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm
State Historic Preservation Office.....	www.iowahistory.org
Certified Local Government	515.281.6826
.....	or https://iowaculture.gov/history/preservation/certified-local-governments
Keep Iowa Beautiful.....	http://www.keeptowabeautiful.com
Iowa Downtown Revitalization Fund:.....	http://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/CDBG/Downtown
Iowa Restaurant Association	https://www.restaurantiowa.com
Iowa Architectural Foundation	www.iowaarchfoundation.org
SCORE.....	https://www.score.org
Small Business Development Center (SBDC).....	www.iowasbdc.org