

Downtown Walk Around Summary – Ely, IA

JIM ENGLE - DIRECTOR IOWA DOWNTOWN RESOURCE CENTER

TIM REINDERS - DESIGN SPECIALIST MAIN STREET

This report is a summary of the observations and recommendations that are a result of an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Ely, Iowa on June 1, 2017.



ELY is an impressive, well-kept small town whose demographics and perhaps image has changed fairly dramatically over the years. A younger population is locating in recently built housing developments in Ely due to its proximity to Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. The median age, household size and household income are all greater than the state average. The impact of this can be shown in many ways. This is beginning to happen in the downtown with a budding collection of cool, small businesses (*gifts, barbecue store, restaurant, creamery, spa, etc.*). Other strengths include the library, a nice city hall project, excellent parks, a supportive city government, local incentive programs, interesting downtown (*boomtown style*) buildings and an obvious attention to detail that makes the community look good! This downtown truly has a small-town, quaint feel. You know when you are in downtown Ely. The bike trail creates opportunities for business, visitor exposure, and events. As the city attracts more visitors and potential home owners, this team can't help but think that future success stories will continue to happen in Ely. Given the local enthusiasm and commitment, there will be new business development and design improvements that will make Ely an even more desirable place to live and raise a family.

ENTRIES TO TOWN

Ely is a bit off the beaten path. This Downtown Walk Around Team drove into Ely from Hwy 380 and Airport Road; it wasn't obvious to us how to get to Ely. Signage from this route is a bit lacking. We relied on the water tower as we approached. The entrances to town are somewhat cluttered and not extremely inviting to visitors. Perhaps residents have taken this for granted. Entrances to a community are so important. You need to help motorists find you and immediately like you.

- Take a driving tour around the county. Imagine that you don't know where Ely is. Identify signage (*perhaps creative signage*) in strategic areas; work with officials (*county?*) to make this a reality.
- As you reach the entry corridors, identify red flags that detract from your well-kept image. Work with owners of gas stations, junkyard, etc. on ideas to eliminate or screen the clutter.
- Develop an attractive "Welcome to Downtown Ely" sign at Casey's and on the bike trail. Locate this sign in the grassy median that dead ends Dows Street in front of Casey's.
- Ely gets a significant amount of traffic from cars pulling boats. Is more parking needed to accommodate this type of motorist and attract more of their business?



A potential location for a Downtown Welcome Sign is in the median at Casey's.

"COOL FACTOR"

Small towns often work hard and sometimes struggle to maintain a strong business presence in the downtown. This IS important – but attention is also needed to enhance the overall experience of *being downtown*. How can you make it *different*? Downtown Ely is clean, has a bike trail that goes through the downtown(!), has some art and opportunities promoting its history – but the streetscape is fairly basic. Be creative. Think BIG and develop projects that will put the downtown on the map. Events! Events! They are so important in small towns. Events bring business, exposure and entertainment to the community. Events and promotions are viable economic development tools. Ely has an average event calendar for a small town. Although event management tends to be volunteer and time heavy – for continued momentum, it is important that more emphasis be placed to capitalize on the young families moving to town. More public art! Develop a talented action committee to assess the possibilities for an art contest or program. Other communities (*some with less retail businesses than Ely*) have attracted walkers and visitors that come to look at the art lining the downtown streetscape. Visit Woodbine. They are an excellent example of a community that has embraced art and benefited from it. Downtown Ely's grain elevators are mammoth in size. Could this be an opportunity for murals? Carry art themes from the downtown to the bike trail.

- Ely has cool interpretive plaques and displays in the library and at the city hall. Someone in town obviously has an eye for this type of thing. Consider adding more of this kind of attraction outside along the city sidewalks and trail – this creates interest.
- Pull your weeds! Develop a plan to KEEP them pulled.
- Develop three summertime events. Start small. These will grow. Perhaps.....a hot dog feed with music; a pet parade; a crazy competition; wine tasting; a barbecue (*you have your own expert right downtown*), etc. Always have food. Always have music.
- Perhaps the hottest retail promotions around the country are targeted events, such as "Women's Night Out" that combine downtown businesses and strengths to create memorable experiences for women. Normally, this team wouldn't make a recommendation like this in a small town, but downtown Ely already has the elements to pull this off.....massage, wine, gifts, restaurant, salons, ice cream, etc. Use outside vendors too. Would the urban areas to the north and south be interested in a daytrip to your small town? We think so! Pulling in 50-100 women the first year would be considered a success. Another idea would be a "Bike in to Ely" event with activities available for bikers once they reach their destination.



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Business retention and recruitment are important to every downtown's economic development strategy. Often these chores fall through the cracks. Although downtown Ely has a nice cluster of exciting businesses, more would create an even better destination. The young families living in town and the immediate area are a large potential business market. Perhaps Ely's biggest challenge is the preparation of spaces for new business development. Some of the available spaces are not in "move-in" condition; while other spaces are occupied by tenants that are not location driven and can be located anywhere....and don't necessarily complement existing businesses.

- Clean up the vacant buildings. Prepare these vacant spaces like a property owner or realtor would prepare a residential property that is for sale. Clean the windows. Make sure the properties are ready to be shown and be prepared to show them at a moment's notice. Place an attractive "Business Opportunity" or "Ready for Business" sign in the vacant windows. Market your vacancies on the website.
- Given the demographics and the number of leads that come in from potential new business owners, we believe downtown Ely has an opportunity to "pop" when it comes to new business development.



We believe new business startups will most likely come from three categories:

1) Food & Drink 2) Businesses (*that appeal to bike riders*) and 3) Convenience for young families (*daycare, pet boarding/grooming, etc.*). Most communities that have a strategy for business recruitment also have a “wish list” based on market data. Develop focus groups to get the opinions of residents. What kinds of local businesses will they support? (*Possible groups: long-time residents, young families, Cedar Rapids commuters, bike riders*) Also, talk to existing businesses. What businesses will share a similar complementary market? Look closely at secondary data (*an ESRI report was prepared for Ely that shows potential business opportunities*). Because Ely is located so close to Cedar Rapids, it has a sales leakage in every retail category.

- Be ready for passive recruitment. Who will handle inquiries that come to you? Assemble a team of people to work on new business development. Are buildings/spaces ready to show? Are they presentable? Do you have the facts and statistics readily available that show they can make money in Ely?

PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT/LAND USE

Downtown Ely has interesting downtown buildings that still have their wooden “boomtown” fronts. Well kept, historic buildings add to the “Cool Factor.” As in many towns, several of the buildings have been inappropriately altered – especially the storefronts. First, get the existing buildings in downtown in “business condition”. Continue to look at the downtown vacant/underutilized lots as OPPORTUNITIES to establish density and more business options for downtown Ely. Keep businesses and community facilities such as the library concentrated in the Central Business District.

- By all means – develop (*or enforce if you already have one*) an ordinance that bans ground floor, storefront housing. NOTHING can stop the momentum of a downtown faster than the use of commercial storefronts for first floor apartments. However, upper story housing is strongly encouraged.
- Ely has incentive programs for building rehabilitation projects. Make sure you “toe the line” when it comes to project quality. Establish a set of guidelines for reviewing projects. Don’t be afraid to turn an “inappropriate project” down. Protect yourself and eliminate weak projects/applications with a set of guidelines. The Iowa Downtown Resource Center has examples of these.
- Consider offering a grant program for smaller projects like paint, awnings and signs.
- Work to upgrade existing commercial properties for business use on Dows Street and along the trail. Focus on upgrading existing underused buildings as well as converting/upgrading the homes on the west end of Dows Street to businesses.
- Have conversations with owners of vacant lots for plans and possible financial incentives to get buildings built. Infill development will go a long way to ensure that downtown remains the physical and economic heart of the community. There are lots in the core of downtown, along the highway (*by the bank*) and along the trail that could all add significant retail/business density to downtown Ely.
- Locate businesses in appropriate locations and clustered. For example, contractors/industrial businesses typically should be located in industrial parks next to other similar businesses that have many vehicles and equipment. Even though historically industrial, the lots north of the creamery should be commercial businesses that capitalize on the trail. These lots provide a great opportunity to “grow the downtown” and create an even “bigger draw” for Ely. Look at your zoning ordinance and revise it as needed focusing on appropriate uses that enhance the retail character and strength of downtown Ely.



Two possible locations for new businesses.

THE LIBRARY

One specific issue/project that was discussed during the visit was the future of the existing library. The current library is the nicely renovated fire station. Concerns about the lack of space and additional programming space were mentioned. As the community grows, the needs and services of the library, including additional meeting/civic center space are a concern.

- Develop a “program” of uses/activities for an ideal combination library/community center – size and number of meeting rooms, amenities, collection space, etc.
- Identify possible locations for a new structure. Strong consideration should be given to the existing City Hall site. This may require that the tennis courts/park activities be relocated.
- If a new library/community center facility is built, redevelop the existing library facility for commercial use. It provides a great opportunity for new businesses.



DEVELOPING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE...FIRST PRIORITY

Ely has many exciting ideas and goals – this report provides specific recommendations. Next step...time and money! Like many small towns, Ely lacks a community development group that strategizes, prioritizes, fund raises and executes projects. Currently, the city staff handles these kinds of activities, but Ely would benefit greatly from an active group (*to work in a cooperative nature with the city*) that mobilizes volunteers. This may be trickier than the typical Iowa community because Ely has such a significant percentage of young people that work in Cedar Rapids or Iowa City and that have not lived in Ely all of their lives. This makes civic engagement and loyalty to “my town” more challenging. But, it CAN slowly happen.

- Develop a small steering committee/board that establishes priorities, looks for funding sources, partners with the city & other organizations and that evaluates the progress of the group. Develop three (3) action teams consisting of 5-8 *volunteers on each one*. *Based on Ely’s current needs, we recommend the following types:* 1) Events 2) Curb Appeal/Beautification and 3) Marketing/Business Development. Start SMALL – but keep the action teams meeting regularly to accomplish 2-4 projects a year.
- Make a volunteer push. Promote this exciting new opportunity to give back to your community. This proposed new structure should be a good vehicle to get things moving. Be specific about the types of projects and activities involved. Prospective volunteers want specifics and they want to know what kind of time commitment there will be. Brainstorm ways that you can reach the residents in Ely. Utilize social media, e-mail blasts, flyers placed in books checked out at the library and at Little League Games. Use direct mail. Put stories in the newspaper. Fill up your action team positions and volunteer jobs for specific projects and individual events.

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES:

Iowa Downtown Resource Center, IEDA, Des Moines, Iowa.....515.725.3058 www.mainstreetiowa.org
 National Trust for Historic Preservation..... www.preservationnation.org
 National Park Service Preservation Briefs..... www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm
 State Historic Preservation Office..... www.iowahistory.org