

Downtown Walk Around Summary Keota, Iowa

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This report is a brief summary of observations and recommendations that are a result of an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Keota, Iowa on June 15, 2021.

KEOTA (pop, 1,009) “Why Not Keota?” Located in Keokuk County in southeast Iowa. Keota is a beautiful rural community with a long, but compact Main Street full of historic buildings and lots of opportunity. Some things we found in downtown Keota that are not always seen in other communities its size include a grocery store, hardware store (with appliances), a museum, three auto repair shops and a vacant corner lot (with tons of potential) that has been used as a public square or gathering space. Just a few blocks off downtown is a busy ball diamond and a few blocks beyond that is an accessible biking/walking trail with plans to connect to area towns. We also toured a community catalyst project with two beautiful apartments in the heart of downtown. Pride in place was demonstrated throughout town.



WHAT WE LIKE

Having a can-do attitude and surrounding yourselves with positive progressive attitudes was demonstrated during our visit. Leadership is critical to your success. The fact that you have “actual people”, whether formally or not, rolling up their sleeves and beginning the work of community and economic development is **REFRESHING**. In Keota, these people have names like Tomisha, Lori, Scott, Keith and Tony; we’re convinced there are plenty more willing to assist. So, where to **START**?

We’d like to encourage Keota to inventory what is going right. This is always where any community should begin. That which can be **MEASURED** can be **IMPROVED**. We shared an example with you of another community that began their measuring process with just two (2) restaurants and thirteen (13) retail businesses. Years later, they had ten (10) restaurants and forty (40) retail businesses. **This could be Keota**. Here are some suggestions to start this process:

- List of buildings/building owners downtown/community (public and private)
- List of businesses downtown/community (retail, service, professional, bars and restaurants)
- List of downtown/community housing opportunities (Upper story, in-fill lots, sub-divisions)

We also talked about another list of how downtown is used. A few things that came up were the grocery store, hardware store, restaurant, bar, the American Legion, the ball diamond, the lot that was used for both horseshoes and the same lot is used for a “mini-Rockefeller Center” (in the winter). This is a great place to start with a promotional campaign. These are the parts of your town that are already serving you and others. The question to ask is how can you build upon what you already have bring it more attention (and more people)?

PRIDE IN PLACE

We noticed a clear and visible “Pride in Place” throughout the community and all along Main Street – someone (or many someones) obviously care about this community. This showed in the potted plants downtown, the Fire Station building, and the well-maintained museum inside the state-of-the-art City Hall building. We got inside as many businesses as possible. Keota has many destination businesses. Some businesses we visited could learn from others. For example, we saw quality window displays. Every retail business could learn from this activity and collectively make downtown an even bigger destination. Some just need to focus a bit on TLC to get cleaned up and organized. A volunteer driven clean-up day could really help. We encourage every business to demonstrate pride in place. Work together and have some fun. Maybe create two opportunities, one for downtown and one for the ball diamond. If you’re able to get volunteers to help with a clean-up project at either place, then it would be the beginning of another essential list – a volunteer list. Also, the closed Malt Shop is a huge, missed opportunity. The sign reads “the Best Little Malt Shop in Keota” – clearly, if it is not open regularly, that slogan is offering a false promise. Initially we were excited.....then disappointed once we discovered it wasn’t open.

SIGNAGE

This is a big issue. Some time needs to be spent planning clear directional signage into town and then signage telling you how to get around town once you are there to see everything Keota has to offer. This should include wayfinding signage that lists destinations like downtown, school, ball fields, etc.; then destination signage once you get there letting a visitor know they have arrived. Also, some real thought needs to be put into what is happening and available once visitors arrive. We talked about what your town is used for – one could argue that a “few pieces of downtown” are underused. The lot across from City Hall was recently used for horseshoes. For example, the warm months would be spent playing horseshoes having a weekly contest or maybe a Farmer’s Market. Both activities could use a set of picnic tables, shaded areas, and/or a food truck or two. It also seemed

clear to us that auto service and repair is a real part of your downtown. These improvements should be considered as customers might need a place to wait while their vehicle is being serviced or tires being rotated. Downtown should be welcoming and a comfortable place to hang out. This could be as simple as having shaded benches in the summer, a place to enjoy a picnic or read a book while you're waiting for your car to be fixed or your appointment with an accountant or lawyer in town.

BUILDINGS/ORDINANCES

Apply for another [Community Catalyst Building Remediation Grant](#) from the Iowa Economic Development Authority to spur development. This grant provides up to \$100,000 for one rehabilitation project in your downtown per fiscal year. Just pick another building with a cooperative owner that the city can partner with for success. Keota needs additional positive examples.

Consider applying for a Department of Natural Resources' "[Derelict Building](#)" grant. The Derelict Building grant is intended to reduce landfill waste by rehabilitating city owned buildings. It also helps with asbestos assessment and remediation. The buildings cannot be on the National Register of Places. Reach out to the [League of Cities](#) for assistance in dealing with derelict buildings.

Research options for design technical assistance from [Iowa State University's College of Design](#) or the [Iowa Architectural Foundation](#). Show building owners the possibilities. If building owners can't SEE the vision, they may not do it.

Several areas in downtown Keota could be improved with paint. Explore the [Paint Iowa Beautiful Grant](#) program. Keep Iowa Beautiful and Diamond Vogel Paint provide free paint throughout Iowa to a wide variety of public service projects.

Consider drafting design guidelines for your downtown district. Be sure to keep the highest standards in place. It should be mandatory that property owners comply with the new guidelines prior to receiving any local incentives. EVERYONE should be proud of the work done.

Enforce your current codes and if they fall short of your desired outcome – pass enhanced ones. Consider adopting a vacancy registry to ensure you get the best possible occupancy in your downtown. Storage in the storefront side of the first floor should never be an acceptable option. Define vacancy to include storage as not acceptable. Encourage public uses – not private. Businesses benefit with more people on the sidewalk.

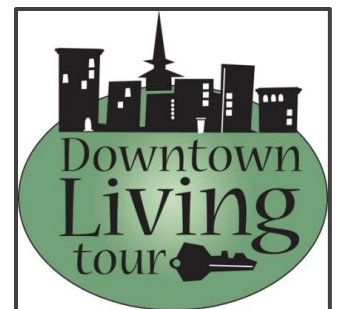
Start with something small like repainting crosswalks, parking stalls, yellow curbing, and fire hydrants. This activity shows instant improvement and shows the town cares and provides a "quick win" to build upon other improvements.

HOUSING

Upper story housing must become a priority. Historically, first floor business – building owners lived above their businesses – but over time these spaces have become run down, vacant, or simply ignored. Buildings that stand empty lose money – not just for the building owner but the ENTIRE community. Upper floor housing not only helps property owners "cash flow" their buildings, but it also brings a whole new market of people downtown to eat in the restaurants, use the services, shop in the stores, walk the sidewalks and create activity in the commercial district.

The character and types of spaces in historic buildings provide opportunities to create housing that is much different than a typical unit.

- Do an inventory of available upper story housing, rental rates, and potential new units. What is available? What opportunities exist? Research funding sources for downtown housing projects. Assess local market conditions. How much demand is there for quality rentals? What is the maximum residential rental for your district? What is the median market rent? What are reasonable commercial rents for your community? In order to respond to these questions, will require that you interview all downtown property owners with upper story rental spaces or vacancies.
- Take field trips. Visit communities that celebrate success with upper story housing and tour their projects. For example: Woodbine, West Union and Elkader are models of small towns with very active downtown residential neighborhoods. Talk to them about their challenges but also your opportunities.
- Hold downtown open houses for upper floor spaces. Start with the completed Community Catalyst project. Give tours. Include some nice upper floor units that are already completed and occupied. Include some raw space. Perhaps a potential floor plan. When people see the finished spaces, they can more easily transfer the ideas to other similar unfinished units.
- Consider a local incentive for downtown building owners to renovate upper floors into residential space.



PROMOTIONAL/BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

We liked the history mural that told the story of the former hotel. And of course, the history is well preserved in the museum. Consider a series of historical murals throughout downtown to help to tell you own story. A big picture idea could be an audio tour or podcast assessable by cell phone scan or other device so people wandering through town while waiting for their vehicle could find their own tour. We also talked about events at the American Legion. We learned about a Buddy Holly Night held once a year and other themed events that occur. We think these should be promoted by the City, the Community Club, and Keota Unlimited. You clearly have locals that want to have a good time. What other projects/partnerships could be added/developed to fulfil shared goals – in this case, working together to raise awareness of both the organizations and the downtown?



OCCASIONAL STORES

In a rural Iowa community such as this, sometimes the best days/hours to post is Open "Occasionally". Although this is a new term to us – after a quick explanation – we now understand what it means. We get it but believe "Open Occasionally" is a better sign than no sign at all. Consider organizing all of the "occasional stores" to be open once a week/month. Make it "Keota's Occasional Day". This is a day when all the occasional stores are open from 1-3 pm or 4-7 pm. This could put Keota on the map. We want to come back.



IN SUMMARY, we enjoyed our time in Keota and as we mentioned, we really feel that we visited just before things are about to take off. This is an exciting time for Keota. The pieces are clearly in place, the buildings are still standing, and the history is real, and the opportunities are boundless. The mobilization of people in the community to take an interest, roll up their sleeves and get involved in this planning, leadership, and volunteer work is also crucial. The route to making this happen usually starts with a "big picture" vision and "small" action steps. Keota is on the right track. Now it's time to GET TO WORK! Good luck with your future efforts. "Why Not Keota?"

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

[Iowa Downtown Resource Center](#)
[Downtown Revitalization Fund](#)
[Keep Iowa Beautiful](#)
[National Park Service Preservation Briefs State](#)
[Historic Preservation Office](#)
[Derelict Building Program](#)
[Iowa Rural Development Council](#)

[Empower Rural Iowa](#)
[Nuisance Property & Abandoned Building Remediation Loan Program](#)
[Historic Preservation Tax Credit](#)
[Redevelopment Tax Credits for Brownfields & Grayfields](#)