

OTTUMWA BETTER BLOCK AFTER-ACTION REPORT



PROCESS

PROCESS



How It all Began

Better Block partnered with Main Street Ottumwa, Main Street Iowa, The Iowa Economic Development Authority, and many others under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to conduct a Train the Trainer workshop and Better Block project in Downtown Ottumwa, Iowa.

After starting the conversation three years ago with the Iowa Economic Development

Corporation, the chance to bring Better Block to Iowa came in the form of an NEA Our Town grant in 2017 to Inspire Opportunities In the Arts (IOWA). As part of the grant, Better Block submitted a proposal to conduct a “living charrette” and implement creative placemaking strategies as part of a larger workshop for leaders of the Main Street Iowa program.



Why Ottumwa, Why Now

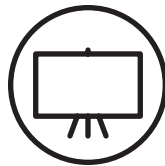
Better Block was brought in as part of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program. The goal was to integrate creative placemaking into the planning process, and build on Main Street Ottumwa's goal of capitalizing on the unique character, identity, and assets of Downtown.

With the work already being done by the Legacy Foundation and Main Street Ottumwa, including the facade program, the redesign of Canteen Alley, the streetscape improvements, and the ArtSpace consulting report, Ottumwa was poised to take the next step. Now that the infrastructure is there or about to be there, life needed to be brought back into the buildings, and the community needed a jumpstart to reimagine Downtown as a vibrant, livable place. While revitalizing Downtown Ottumwa is a long process safely in the hands of the organizations mentioned above, the Better Block method can act as a quick way to spark pride and ownership in the community and catalyze permanent improvements and investment in the area.

Community Engagement



47 individuals and stakeholders in the community met



over 100 community members in attendance at presentation



312 responses to the online survey

As part of the Better Block process, we met with community stakeholders, residents, and business owners to gather ideas and input on what they'd like to see in their Downtown. Starting in summer 2017, we conducted a public meeting to kick-off the events, along with a number of individual community meetings and a public online survey.

From these engagement events, we found out from the community what was missing, what resources were available to us, and who was interested in helping out.

A large part of the Better Block method is transferring ownership of the public realm into the hands of those who live and work there. We use their ideas to inform our plan, and their skills to make it happen.

Over the course of two days, we met with more than 47 individuals in the community, presented to over 100, and received 312 responses to our online survey.

This survey revealed that residents of Ottumwa agree on the need for more places to shop, eat, and be entertained Downtown. More residents would bike or walk more if they felt safer doing so, and if the distances were shorter. There's a need for more kids' activities Downtown, and most people are eager and willing to get involved.



PROTOTYPING

PROTOTYPING

Quick Facts



110 volunteers



8 hours to build



62 trees



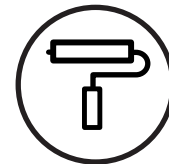
84 shrubs



24 sheets of plywood



15 rolls of white duct tape



5 gallons of tempera paint

From the survey results, we selected action areas based on a few different criteria:

1. Which themes came up again and again in our survey results and meetings?
2. What is feasible based on our timeframe, budget, and resources?
3. What will bring together the broadest range of community members?

There were a few interventions that met these criteria.

Pop-up Shops

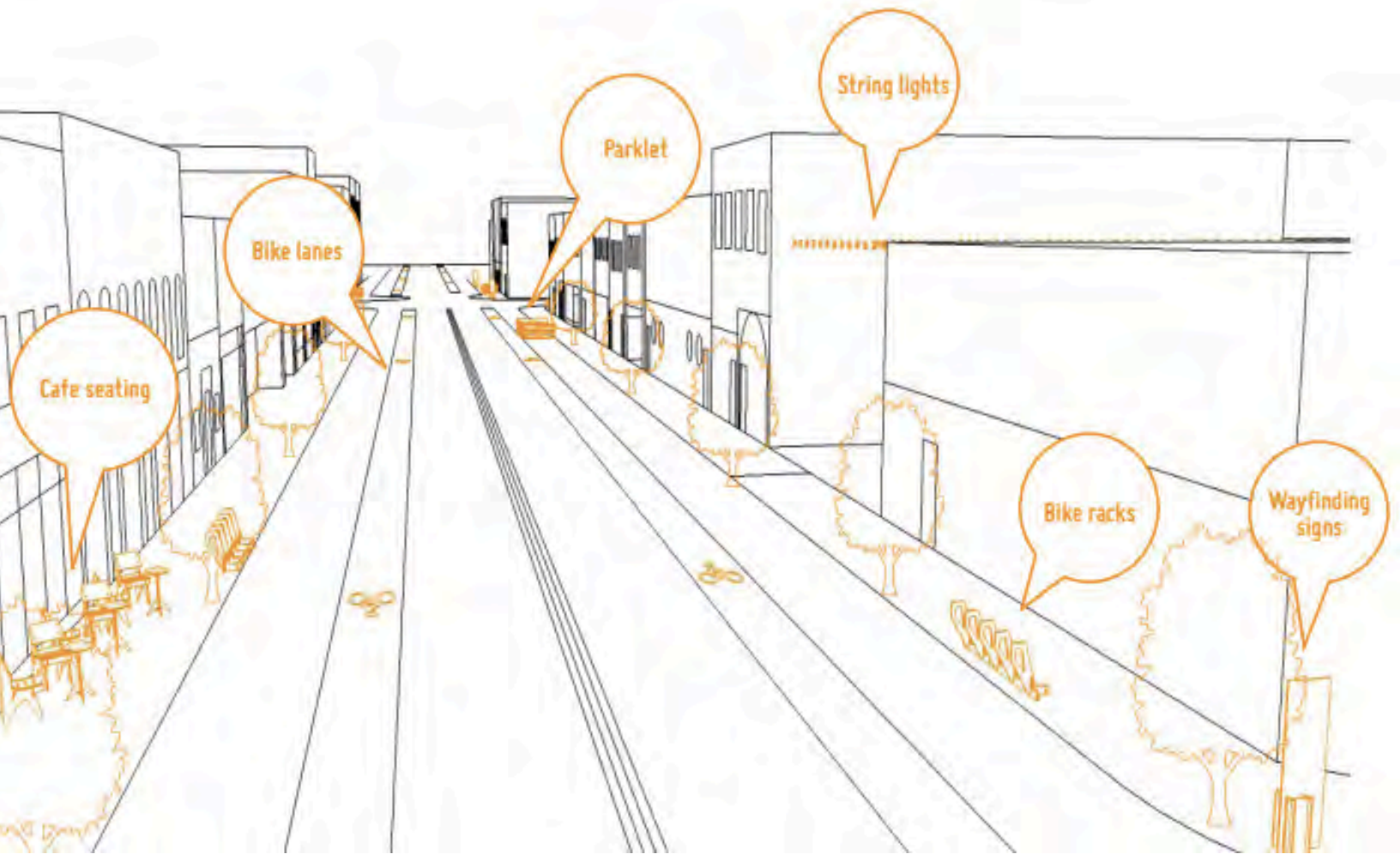
Something echoed almost unanimously from the community was the lack of destinations in Downtown. Bike lanes, crosswalks, and street furniture can only be successful if there's somewhere to bike to, walk to, or sit in front of.

To address this, we asked residents who were interested in starting their own businesses to identify themselves in our survey. From those who responded, four entrepreneurs committed to testing out their ideas in vacant storefronts Downtown for the weekend: Midwest Belle Boutique, a women's clothing store run by Mary Sue Pritchard; Blaine's Bagels, a homemade

bagel shop by Blaine Rupe; Healing Heart Reiki, a Reiki massage studio hosted by at-home masseuse, Suzanne Keller; and Battle Bros, a kids' nerf play zone by Anthony Wiggins.

The project team removed many of the barriers normally associated with opening a brick-and-mortar business, including covering permitting and insurance costs, working with the property owners to get free access to the buildings, and enlisting volunteer help to clean, paint, and setup the spaces in time for the weekend.

Ottumwa Better Block Concept Map



Midwest Belle Boutique Pop-up



Blaine's Bagels Pop-up



Playground Pop-up



Activities for Kids

With many families and kids in the Ottumwa area, a number of survey respondents cited the lack of kid-friendly activities Downtown. To address this, we integrated family-friendly elements into almost all of our interventions, but also made the centerpiece of our project a kids' play area and pop-up park.

At the corner of East Main Street and Green was a large vacant lot that we converted into the main gathering space for the weekend, including a stage for bands, food truck area, seating, and string lighting overhead. To repair the edge of the block, Better Block designed and fabricated

a bridge play structure along the lot on which kids could play. Ottumwa is known as "The City of Bridges," and so we highlighted that identity through the design of the playground. A ramped climbing wall led up to the top of the bridge, which ended in a slide down to a play area with balance beams, our Wikiblock trampoline park, and an area with hula hoops and jump ropes. The play area was one of the most-trafficked elements during the weekend, proving that there indeed was pent-up demand for kid-friendly activities Downtown.



Cafe Seating

Though a number of restaurants and a coffee shop existed in the two-block project area, none offered outdoor sidewalk seating. As an easy way to activate the pedestrian realm, we decided to create cafe seating for all of the existing businesses, as well as Blaine's Bagel pop-up shop. These seating sets were then donated to the businesses for them to use on a regular basis.



Bike Lane

An issue that came up in the survey was the connectivity between a recreational trail along the Des Moines River and Downtown. While the trail is only one block away from the project area, there is no permanent bicycle or pedestrian infrastructure connecting the two. To fix this, we installed a 4-foot green bike lane on one side of the street. Due to parking and lane width minimums, we were unable to install the lane on both sides.

The lane took over parallel parking on Main and Green Street, and was connected to the rest of East Main Street with sharrows.



Curb Extensions

While the 200 block of East Main Street had already undergone a number of streetscape improvements, the 300 block had yet to catch up. We took the improvements that were planned for the block and demonstrated a few of them, including curb bump-outs to match those on the opposite side of the street. These helped slow traffic, create more space for pedestrians, and beautify the intersection.



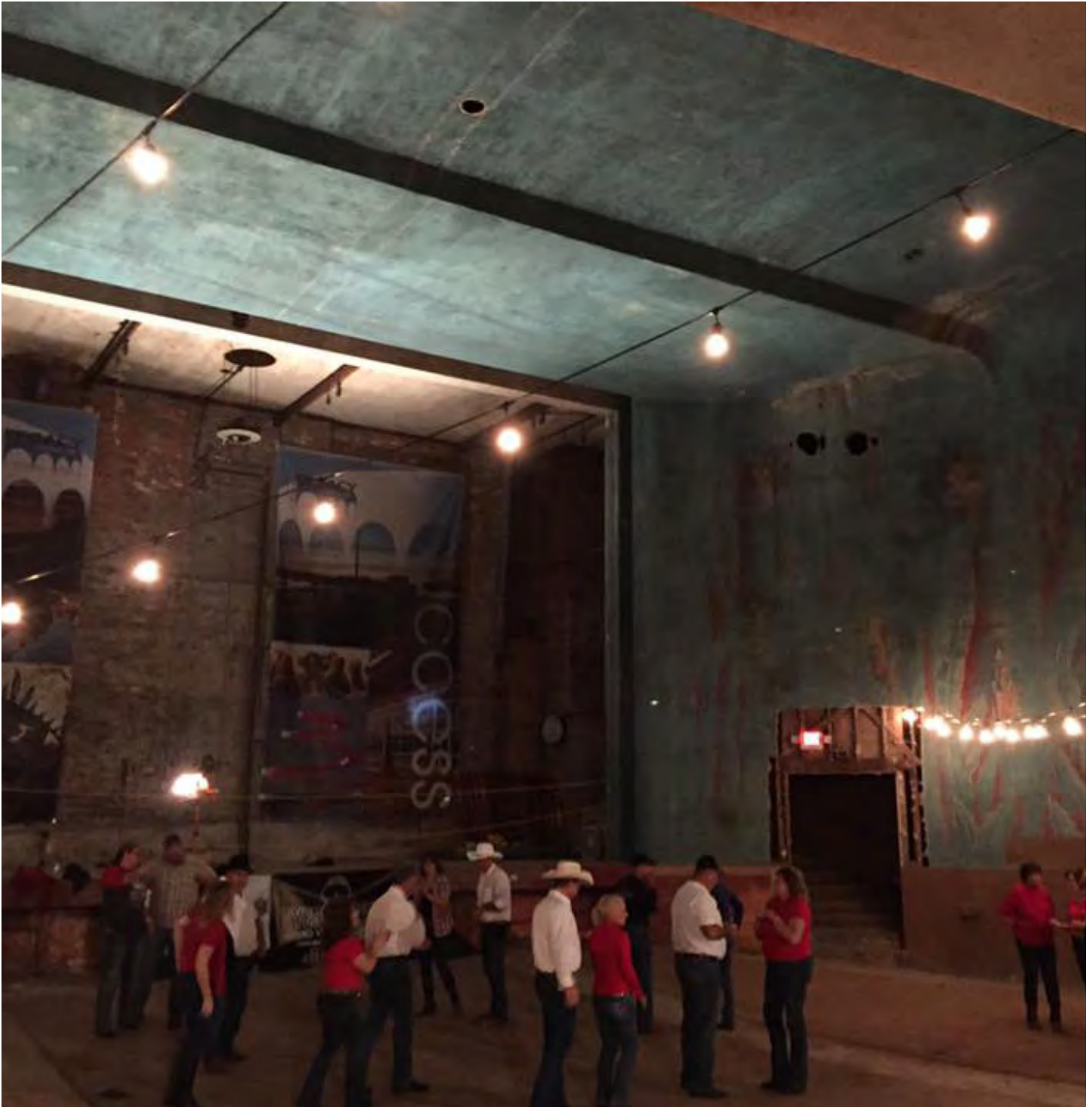
Landscaping

Another long-term plan for the Downtown corridor is the planting of street trees along the sidewalks. To test this, we lined the edges of the street with trees that were both donated and purchased at a discount, as well as mums, corn stalks, and pumpkins to contribute to the festive atmosphere.



The Ottumwa Theatre

The Legacy Foundation, a partner on the Better Block project, recently acquired a number of buildings Downtown, including the historic Ottumwa Theatre. After ArtSpace conducted a study on the future use of the theatre in 2014, Better Block tested some of their ideas during the project weekend. These included dance classes, a pop-up bar with local beer, and live music on Friday evening hosted by the Visitor's Bureau. As this was the first chance for many to be able to enter the theatre, activating the space was a huge draw for Downtown residents and visitors.





Public Art

A major focus of the NEA Our Town grant was integrating the arts into public space design, which we did in three ways:

1. A local artist, Brad Covington, was enlisted to create a piece of public art that documented the whole creative placemaking process. This art piece will be debuted in the coming weeks.
2. In addition, we worked with a local graphic designer, Kelsey Faybick, to create designs for the vacant storefronts downtown that we couldn't get access to. One property owner uses a number of the buildings on East Main
3. Isaac Campbell, a local photographer and artist, spearheaded a wheatpasting campaign during the project weekend that highlighted black-and-white memories from a collection of photos of an Ottumwa resident. His installations including covering a boarded-up building with graphics of what it used to look like, pasting a large-scale print of a child on a slide on the side of a building, and installing a number of other photos on glass windows of vacant buildings Downtown.



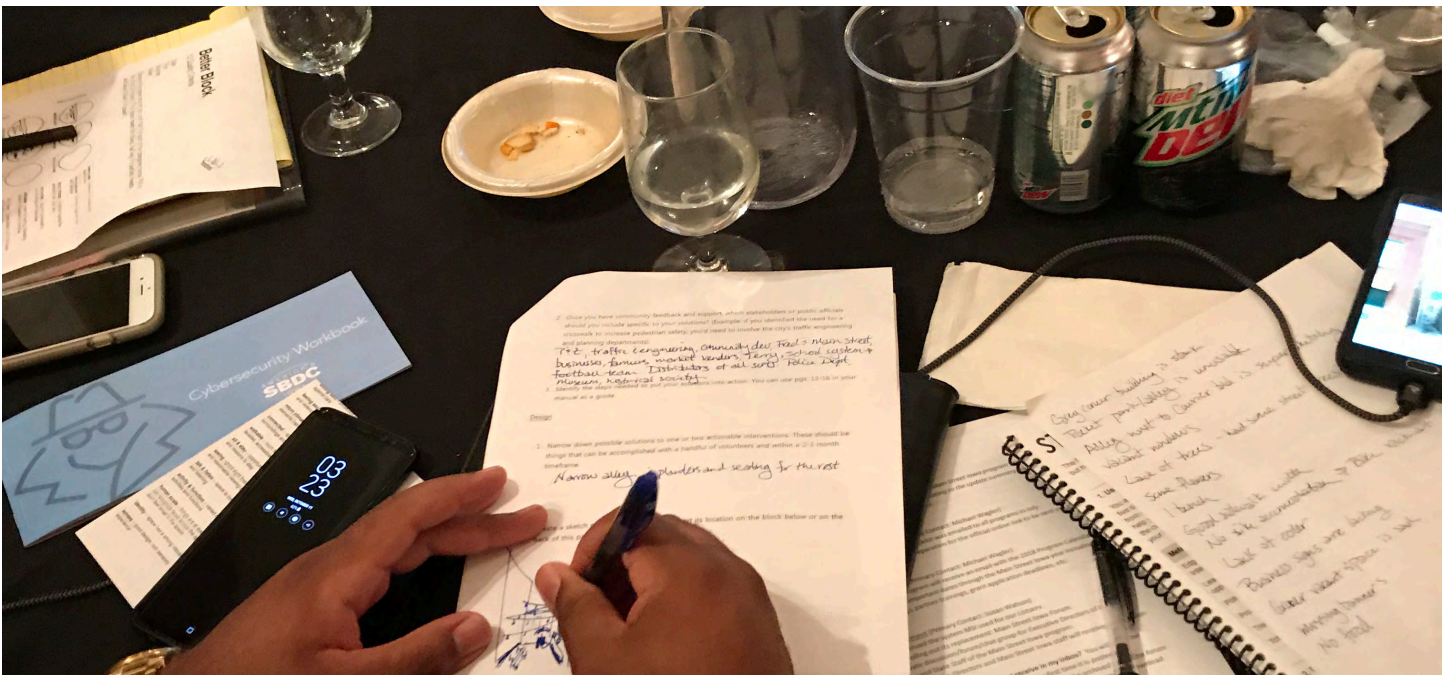
Public Art Mural

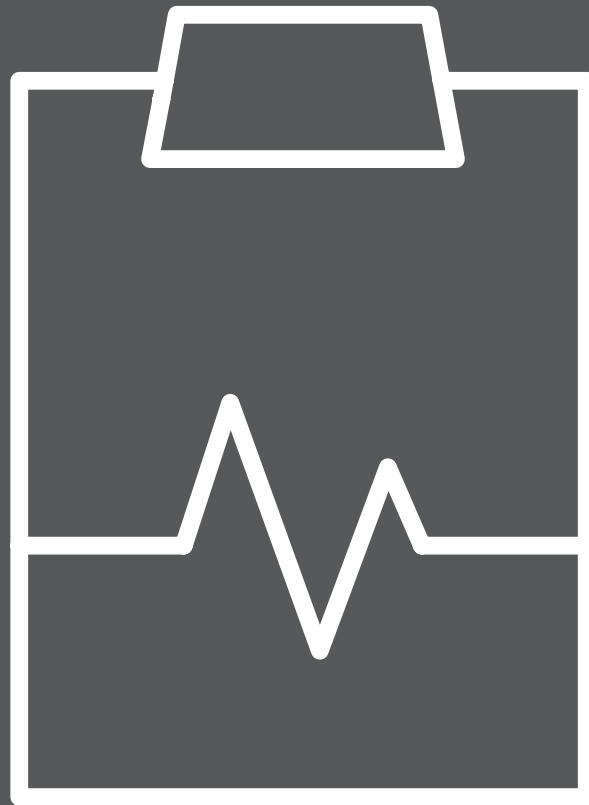


Train the Trainer

As part of the partnership with Main Street Iowa, a Train the Trainer workshop was hosted in Ottumwa the week of the project. Main Street directors from all over the state of Iowa were invited to attend the workshop on Wednesday, followed by our build day on Thursday, when all of the Better Block elements were created and installed.

The goal of this workshop was to inspire and instruct Main Street directors on how to implement creative placemaking projects in their own communities. Phase II of our project will include consulting with five more Main Street communities on hosting their own Better Block projects.





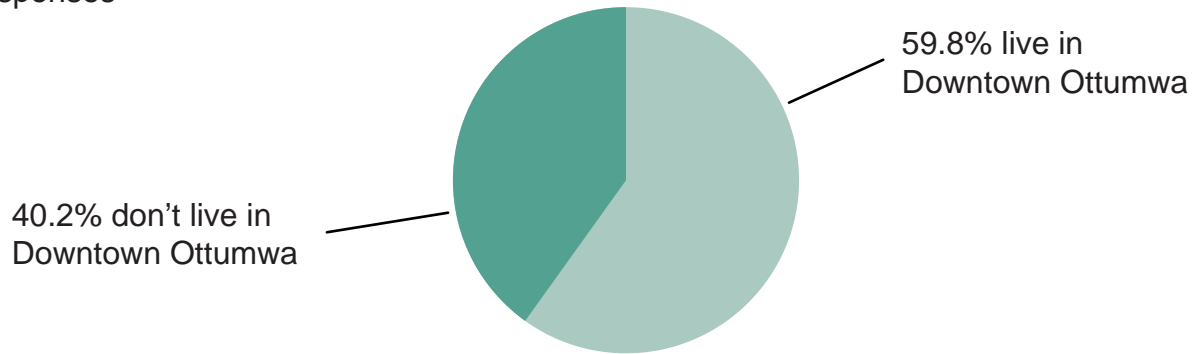
COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

We surveyed the community after the event to gauge their reception of the Better Block project.

Survey Results

114 responses



What Were Your Favorite Elements of the Project (choose up to 5)

Value	Percent	Responses
The street furniture	61.4%	70
The bike lane	33.3%	38
The landscape (trees, flowers)	79.8%	91
The pop-up shops	77.2%	88
The kid's play area in the empty lot (Main at Green St.)	56.1%	64
The food trucks	35.1%	40
The bands	29.8%	34
The bar & dance classes in the old Ottumwa theater	15.8%	18
The public art (wheatpasted photos, vinyl window decals)	56.1%	64

Did You Dislike Any of the Installations? (If so, which ones and why?)

Out of 49 responses, 31 said they had nothing to dislike, while the remaining 18 mentioned the bike lane, the maintenance of the wheatpaste, the noise, and the colors of the installations as things they disliked. Here are some representative responses:

“Loved EVERYTHING. How soon can we get started?!!!”

“No everything looked great the street should be landscaped all year round.”

“I love the bike lane. However it was mostly symbolic of progress rather than functional (it terminated into a seating area) or realistic (in all likelihood, it wouldn't be prudent to remove half of the parking from Main Street). Everything was incredible and, honestly, line the bike lane. However, I hope the bike lane v. parking contest doesn't hinder action.

“While I LOVED the bikes lanes and street furniture, some of it took out a significant amount of parking. And parking is often a struggle downtown. I'm a big proponent of walking and biking to places, so it doesn't bother me personally. But without close parking, some people will choose not to come downtown.”

“I liked the form of them all, but I thought some of the colors for the temp. structures weren't really in keeping with aesthetic.”

“The mural that was put up on the side of a building looked neat at first, but now it's slowly peeling away and there's paper flying around downtown everywhere. It's kind of bad looking now.”

What We Learned

Ottumwa is a community that is ready for action and willing to get involved. The enthusiasm and energy surrounding the project was palpable, and it's in these communities that Better Block projects are most successful.

That said, we agree with some survey respondents about the bike lane. It was largely meant as a visual connector from the river to Downtown for the project, but it may not be the most realistic location for permanent on-street bike infrastructure. Given that East Main is a major through-street for trucks and commuters, and is too narrow to accommodate both a bike lane and on-street parking, a parallel street, such as 2nd or 4th, might be a better option for permanency.

We also learned that having a representative from the city planning or event department on our project planning team would be beneficial in all future projects, as we ran into last-minute

complications with permitting some aspects of the build day. A street closure would have been useful for installing the crosswalk, as we got pushback from the traffic department for temporarily delaying traffic in order for the crosswalk to dry. In turn, we had to allow cars to drive through the crosswalk, accounting for some of the complaints we saw on the survey about colors on the road and messy installation.

In Ottumwa, we also saw our largest number of volunteers, with more than 100 people participating on build day from all over Iowa. This took a higher level of coordination, which we could have improved upon by dividing them into smaller groups and having clear guidelines of what to do after a volunteer finished a specific task. This would require more Better Block staff on the ground, a printed checklist to hand to volunteers, and clearer instructions distributed to volunteers before the build day.

Bike Lane and Intersection Intervention



CODE SCAN

City of Ottumwa uses Iowa Statewide Urban Design and Specifications (SUDAS) for its roadways and traffic control standards. We encountered these requirements when seeking the permit for our temporary bike lane. We also uncovered a few regulations regarding pedestrian safety and sidewalk cafes that may affect the future vitality of Downtown.

Vehicle Lane Widths

SUDAS maintains the same minimum lane width for all commercial roads, whether local, collector, or arterial (12 feet preferred, 11 feet acceptable). It is advisable that some commercial roads, especially in Downtown corridors where traffic flow is meant to be slower, to have narrower lane widths. SUDAS' width specifications favor greater speeds and greater car capacity:

“The lane width of a roadway greatly influences the safety and comfort of driving. Narrow lanes force drivers to operate their vehicles closer to each other laterally than they would normally desire, resulting in driver discomfort, lower operating speeds, and reduced roadway capacity.”

This interpretation prioritizes the car over other modes of transportation. We would encourage SUDAS to look at other states, especially Florida and New York DOTs and the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), to broaden their view of how car traffic flow affects pedestrians and cyclists.



According to NACTO, “Lane widths of 10 feet are appropriate in urban areas and have a positive impact on a street’s safety without impacting traffic operations. For designated truck or transit routes,

one travel lane of 11 feet may be used in each direction. In select cases, narrower travel lanes (9–9.5 feet) can be effective as through lanes in conjunction with a turn lane...Lanes greater than 11 feet should not be used as they may cause unintended speeding and assume valuable right of way at the expense of other modes.”

“The relationships between lane widths and vehicle speed is complicated by many factors, including time of day, the amount of traffic present, and even the age of the driver. Narrower streets help promote slower driving speeds which, in turn, reduce the severity of crashes. Narrower streets have other benefits as well, including reduced crossing distances, [shorter signal cycles](#), less stormwater, and less construction material to build.”

We recommend that SUDAS specify and differentiate between lane minimums for arterial roads versus local roads. Urban streets like East Main Street in Downtown, whose infrastructure and location lend themselves to slower traffic speeds, should have roadways designed to encourage those slower speeds. Alternatively, roads designated as arteries should have wider lanes to allow for greater traffic flow at higher speeds.

If the minimum lane width for local commercial roads is lowered to 10 feet, these extra feet of space can be used to increase pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

Source: <https://nacto.org/publication/urban-street-design-guide/street-design-elements/lane-width/>

*Conserve By Bicycle Program Study Final Report. Tallahassee, FL: FDOT, p. 152, Florida Department of Transportation (2007).

Bicycles

The City of Ottumwa prohibits bicycle use on sidewalks within the business district, and requires that bicycle park only in designated areas. To uphold these laws while encouraging greater ridership, the city should couple these rules with safe, designated infrastructure for bicycles, and more bike racks throughout the commercial districts.



Crosswalks

As in most cities, Ottumwa requires all pedestrians to refrain from crossing the road except at marked crossings. While we do not have accurate data on the location of crosswalks throughout the city, our project area lacked crosswalks at a central intersection (East Main Street and Green Street), making it illegal for pedestrians to cross there. We understand that it is in the city's plans to install a crosswalk at this intersection, which should remain a high priority for all intersections in Downtown in order to promote a safe, walkable business district.

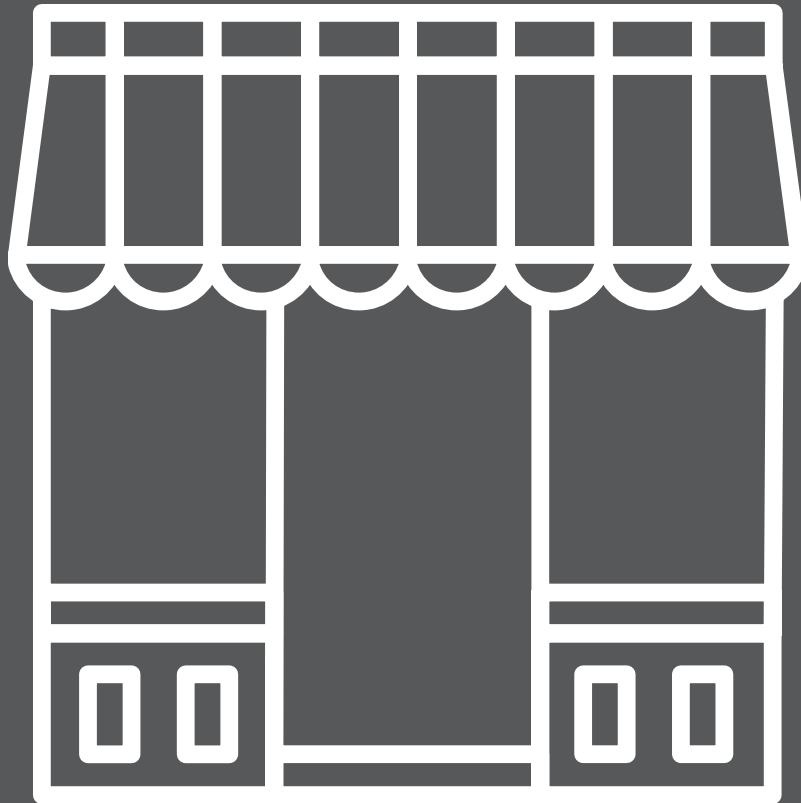


Sidewalk Cafes

Placing seating on the sidewalk in front of a business is allowed under Ottumwa city code, as long as the area allows a 5-foot right-of-way for pedestrians and is licensed under the same regulations as the business itself. While there is no fee for the application, the city does not allow alcohol to be served in a sidewalk cafe, even if the establishment itself is licensed to sell alcohol. This lessens the viability of a sidewalk cafe for restaurants that serve alcohol on the block, such as Appanoose Rapids or El Rancho Grande, as patrons may be confused or deterred from sitting outdoors if they don't have access to the full experience.

Aside from the alcohol regulation, securing a sidewalk cafe is relatively easy in Downtown Ottumwa, so businesses should be encouraged to pursue them in order to activate the block, especially businesses that do not serve alcohol, such as Top Hat.





NEXT STEPS

NEXT STEPS

Where We Go From Here

New businesses opening Downtown would have the biggest impact in Ottumwa currently. The local team should encourage the pop-up owners who participated in the Better Block to take the next steps to opening their business permanently, and continue to identify locals who may be interested in taking over a storefront. Main Street Ottumwa should host (or connect entrepreneurs with organizations that already host) workshops for small business owners to help them feel comfortable and confident in their business plans. From the Better Block weekend, Midwest Belle Boutique and Blaine's Bagels proved popular in the community and should be encouraged to pursue permanency.

Main Street Ottumwa and Legacy Foundation are already working to keep the momentum going in Downtown Ottumwa, and were cultivating it before our project as well. The trees that were acquired during the project will be planted permanently in city parks and throughout Downtown, and the Ottumwa Theatre has been brought up to code in order to host more events

and allow the community to activate it more frequently. Restrooms and lighting in the theatre would make it easier for event planners to host their events inside the theatre.

Main Street Ottumwa should reach out and make it clear to the community that they can use MSO as a resource to keep the momentum of the Better Block going. The city and MSO should work together to streamline the permitting process for projects that affect the streetscape of public spaces, and publicize that process to the community. We identified many residents and business owners who are eager to improve their surroundings, but are unsure of where to start. Having a roadmap locally would help inspire these individuals to take initiative.

Better Block will be returning to Iowa for Phase II of the project, consulting with five additional communities on how to implement a Better Block in their cities.



Case Study: Fayetteville, AR

The City of Fayetteville has partnered with Street Plans Collaborative to implement a tactical urbanism guide and application process for citizens who want to tackle a creative placemaking project in the city. The application includes guidelines for what makes a project successful, clear instructions on who you need to talk to and when you'll get approval, and any next steps that might be necessary after submitting your application (for example, instructions on how to secure a street closure permit or special event permit in addition to permission for the broader project). [The link to their guide is online here.](#)

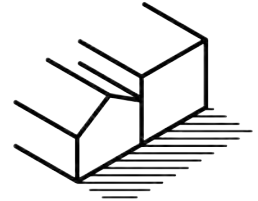
Since the launch of the program in summer 2017, a number of tactical urbanism projects have taken place, including crosswalks at busy intersections, a parklet in front of an urban market, and street furniture installed along sidewalks.



Photo credit: fayetteville-ar.gov



THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS



BETTER BLOCK



Healthiest State INITIATIVE



IOWA ARTS COUNCIL





bicycles



Schwabe USA
3000 extra a week!