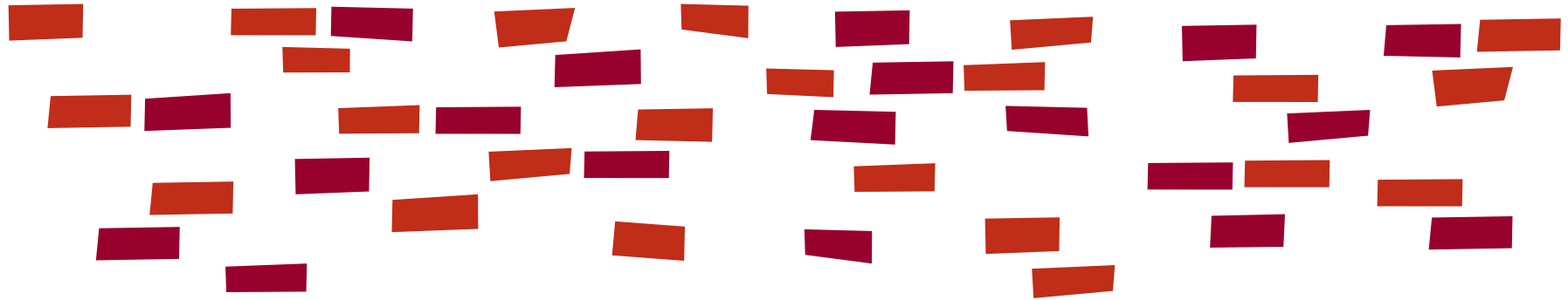


# UPTOWN CRESTON REVITALIZATION PLAN

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A stylized silhouette of a city skyline in a dark red color. It features several rectangular buildings of varying heights, with the tallest building on the right having a domed top. The silhouette is positioned behind the main title.

# INTRODUCTION

"It has potential to be great."

-Survey respondent, on what they love best about  
Uptown Creston

## INTRODUCTION

The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan is supported by the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) and their Comprehensive Neighborhood Revitalization Planning program. Six communities across Iowa were selected through a competitive application process to participate in this inaugural planning effort. The program assists communities in developing revitalization strategies for a deteriorated or distressed area in their community. After the initial planning process, communities may be invited by IEDA to submit an application for activity funding to advance projects and programs recommended in this plan. This unique and one-time implementation funding of up to \$1.75 million will also be awarded through a competitive application process. Most importantly, the funding can offer the City of Creston and its partners financial support for projects that otherwise have limited grant funding sources.

Creston is not new to the planning process. In recent years, numerous plans and reports have been developed to guide city leaders in establishing policies and priorities. These plans include:

- Creston Boost Report (2023)
- Creston 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2020)
- Creston Downtown Assessment (2019)
- Creston Walkability Assessment Report (2018)
- Creston Housing Study (2017)

The intention of this Uptown Revitalization Plan is not to contradict any of the previous plans, but rather reinforce previous recommendations, offer additional insights and recommendations based on recent community feedback, and consolidate these recommendations into one singular, actionable document.

## PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

- >> Assess needs and conditions specifically within the Uptown project area
- >> Determine areas or projects of greatest opportunity and impact
- >> Prioritize activities
- >> Build community consensus
- >> Provide a roadmap for the City and its partners to move forward in implementation

## WHY UPTOWN?

Uptown is truly the heart of Creston. Just like the human body, if the heart is not healthy, the rest of the physical body suffers. An unhealthy heart cannot efficiently pump blood to the extremities.

As in any community, the downtown core is the center of civic life and a destination for cultural, social, and commercial activities. That core is the lifeline and economic engine that sustains and enhances vitality across the rest of the community. Creston is no exception. The health of Uptown financially impacts the City and its ability to invest in residential neighborhoods and commercial corridors elsewhere. A healthy Uptown filled with thriving businesses, locally-owned shops, entertainment venues, office space, and housing maximizes property tax valuations while also limiting infrastructure costs due to the compact footprint. Dollar for dollar, investments in Uptown are able to yield the greatest return on investment (ROI) compared to investments elsewhere. A healthy Uptown also provides quality-of-life amenities that attract new residents and employers to a community. Uptown revitalization IS economic development.



## FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS

The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan builds upon a solid foundation of planning efforts and past community outreach. Foundational materials include:

- Creston Boost Report (2023)
- Creston 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2020)
- Creston Downtown Assessment (2019)
- Creston Walkability Assessment Report (2018)
- Creston Housing Study (2017)



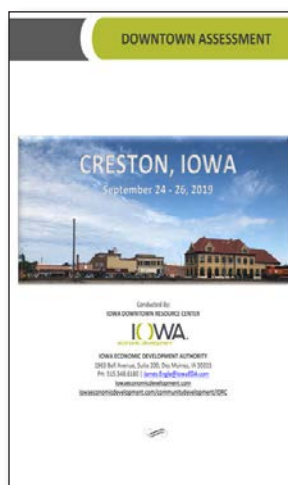
The Creston 2040 Comprehensive Plan was completed by the Southern Iowa Council of Governments in 2020. The plan is expansive, covering goals and implementation strategies for all neighborhoods in Creston.



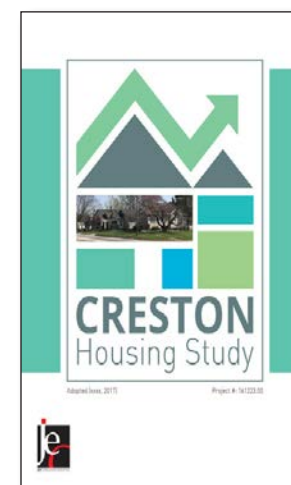
Wellmark Healthy Hometown conducted the Creston Walkability Assessment in 2018. The purpose of the report was to identify strategies to help Creston residents “eat well, move more, and feel better.” Key recommendations included adopting a complete streets policy, connecting trails across town, and develop additional pocket parks in Uptown.



The Creston Boost Report was completed by the Iowa Economic Development Authority in 2023. The purpose of the report is to provide technical assistance to the community to identify implementable action steps to launch the community into a new stage of success. Key recommendations include connecting Uptown to Lake McKinley, implementing wayfinding signage Uptown, and creating a strong and clear branding strategy.



The Iowa Economic Development Authority completed the Creston Downtown Assessment in 2019. The assessment included interviews, public meetings, and a walking tour. The assessment addressed multiple areas for improvement, including organizational issues, a need to drive reinvestment in the neighborhood, and identifying key leadership to move forward.



The Creston Housing Study was completed by JEO Consulting in 2017. The study conducted interviews with key stakeholders, and an analysis of the housing market in Creston. Key recommendations included more affordable and market rate apartments, more single family homes in the sub-\$275,000 range, and widened opportunities for homeowners to maintain aging homes.



## STUDY AREA BOUNDARIES

The boundaries for the Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan study area can be seen on Map 1.1. The street boundaries are: Howard Street to the north, Birch Street to the east, the railroad tracks to the south, and Division Street to the west.

These boundaries align with the Greater Uptown Reinvestment Area as identified in the Creston 2040 Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use plan. The Greater Uptown Reinvestment Area was delineated as a focus area in Creston needing particular financial investment to create a more viable commercial district. The Comprehensive Plan also lists improving walkability, increasing residential density, adding upper story housing, and bolstering civic spaces as needs for the area. The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan will help identify strategies to reach the goals of reinvestment the 2040 Comprehensive Plan calls for.

### STUDY AREA - BY THE NUMBERS:

Estimated population: **360**

Estimated number of households: **172**

Estimated single-family households: **78**

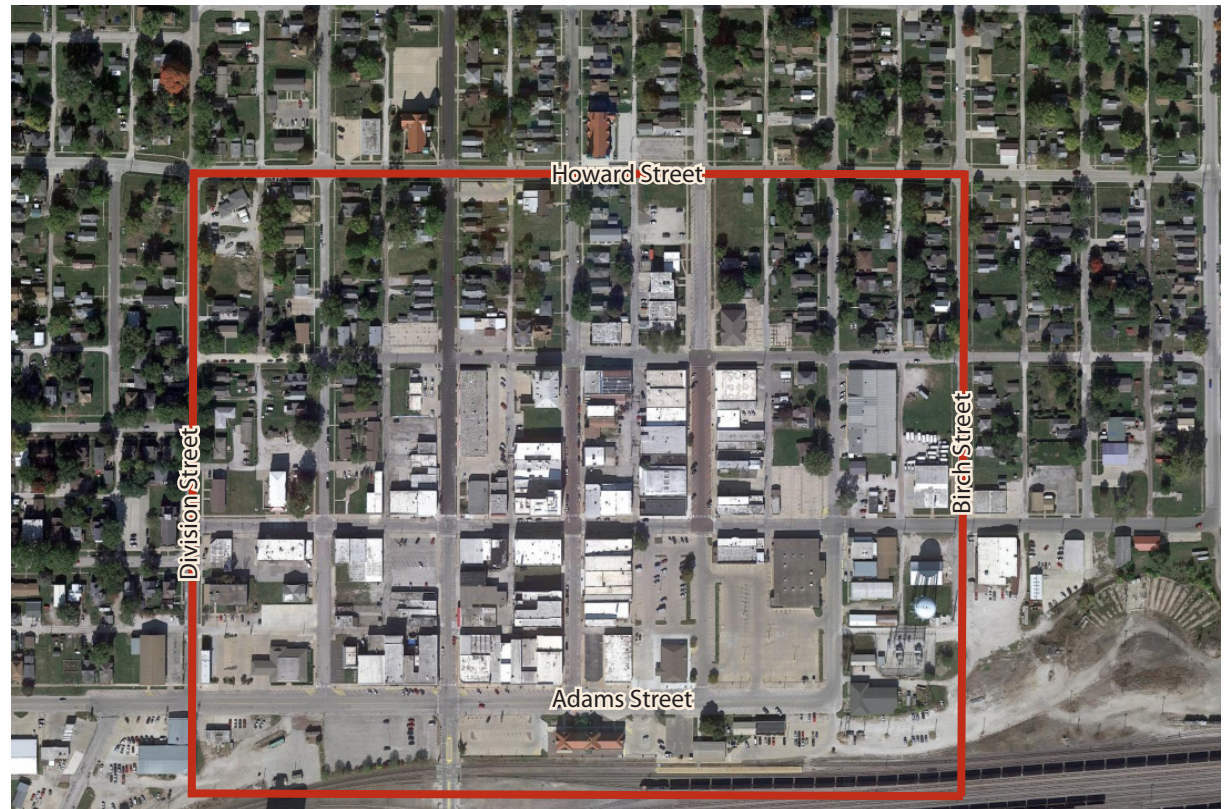
Estimated multi-family households: **94**

Total number of structures: **198**

Number of civic and commercial structures: **103**

Number of residential structures: **95**

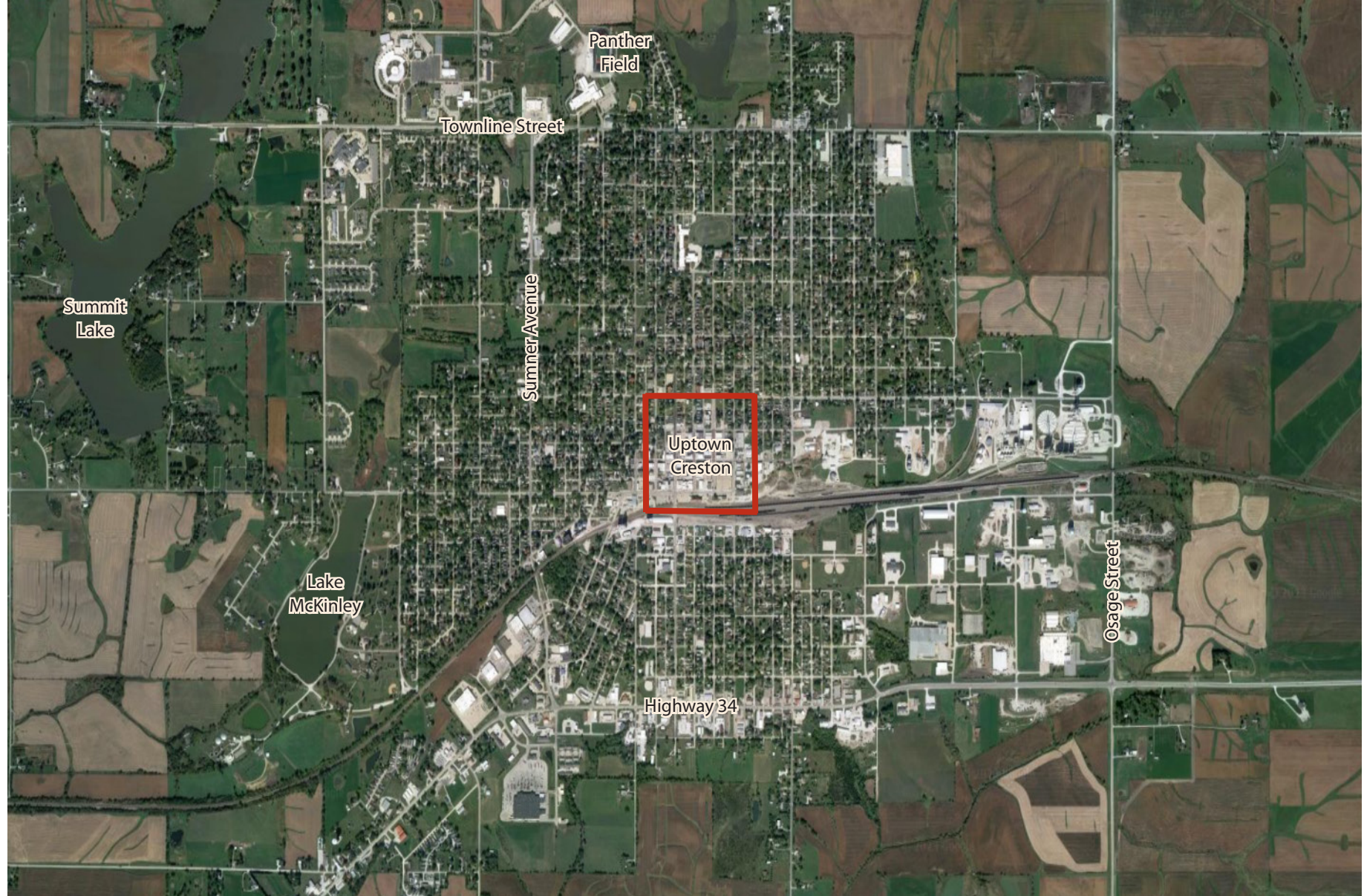
Map 1.1: Study Area



The area within the red boundaries is inside the revitalization plan study area, referred to as "Uptown Creston."

Source: Google Earth, RDG Planning & Design



**Map 1.2: Context Map**

The area within the red boundaries is inside the revitalization plan study area, referred to as "Uptown Creston."

Source: Google Earth, RDG Planning & Design





## 2 COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

"Close knit folks"

- Survey respondent, on what they love best about  
Uptown Creston

## CRESTON POPULATION

Many communities in rural Iowa struggle with declining population due to an aging population or loss of a major employer. To the contrary, other communities are facing rapid growth due to proximity to major urban areas and employment centers. Creston is perhaps an anomaly as a rural community with a relatively stable population.

- The City of Creston's population in 2020 was 7,536. This population has remained relatively stable since 2000, when the City's population was 7,597.
- The City's growth rate between 2010 and 2020 was -0.3% annually. If this rate is to continue, Creston will have a population of approximately 7,097 in 2040.
- The median age for Creston residents in 2020 was 39 years old. Other cities within Creston's secondary market had higher median ages, such as Corning and Afton with median ages of 44, and Mt. Ayr with a median age of 43. Iowa's median age in 2020 was 38 years. This indicates that while Creston's market area has an aging population, Creston's population remains relatively young in comparison.

To continue to retain and attract young families and professionals, it is important that Creston continue to improve its Uptown district, strengthening it as a viable center for commercial development and reinvestment. To further stabilize population and prevent decline, there must also be quality, affordable housing options for working families as well as seniors and older adults in Creston.

**Table 2.1: Historical Population Change, Creston**

Year	Population	Decennial Change	Decennial % Change	AnnualRateofChange
1950	8,317			
1960	7,667	-650	-8.5%	-0.8%
1970	8,234	+567	+7.4%	+0.7%
1980	8,429	+195	+2.4%	+0.2%
1990	7,911	-518	-6.1%	-0.6%
2000	7,597	-314	-4.0%	-0.4%
2010	7,738	+141	+1.9%	+0.2%
2020	7,536	-202	-2.6%	-0.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

**Table 2.2: Growth Scenarios for Creston**

Growth Rate	2020	2030	2035	2040	2045
-0.5% Annual	7,536	7,168	6,990	6,817	6,648
-0.3 Annual	7,536	7,313	7,204	7,097	6,991
+0.3% Annual	7,536	7,765	7,882	8,002	8,112
+0.5% Annual	7,536	7,921	8,121	8,326	8,537

Source: U.S. Census, RDG Planning & Design



## CRESTON INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

The income and employment character of Creston provides insight into the workforce and economy the Uptown district serves.

- Creston's annual median household income is \$48,407. This is 3.9% lower than Union County's median household income of \$50,375, and 21.7% lower than Iowa's median household income of \$61,836.
- Creston's strongest industries are education, healthcare, and manufacturing. Together, these three industries employ nearly 50% of all working Creston residents.
- The percentage of employees in an industry does not directly correlate to the percentage that industry contributes to the economy. For example, while only 3.8% of employed Iowans work in agriculture, it's estimated as much as 12% of the state's economy is driven by agriculture.



Innovative Industries, located in the study area, provides vocational training and habilitation services for individuals in the community.

**Table 2.3** Median Household Income for Uptown Creston, Creston, Union County, and Iowa

	2000	2010	\$ Change 2000-2010	%Change 2000-2010	2020	\$ Change 2010-2020	%Change 2010-2020
Uptown Creston*	\$28,317	\$32,917	\$4,600	13.9%	\$45,313	\$12,396	27.4%
City of Creston	\$29,831	\$35,498	\$5,667	15.9%	\$48,407	\$12,909	26.7%
Union County	\$33,473	\$40,879	\$7,406	18.1%	\$50,375	\$9,496	18.9%
Iowa	\$39,469	\$48,872	\$9,403	19.2%	\$61,836	\$12,964	21.0%

\*Uptown Creston data uses Census Block Group data, which includes the study area and some surrounding blocks  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, RDG Planning & Design

**Table 2.4:** Employment for Creston and Iowa, 2020

Business Description	City of Creston		Iowa	
	Total Employed	Percentage	Total Employed	Percentage
All	3,789		1,611,524	
Agriculture	54	1.4%	60,443	3.8%
Arts, Entertainment, Food Service	361	9.5%	116,108	7.2%
Construction	75	2.0%	105,449	6.5%
Education, Healthcare	859	22.7%	391,707	24.3%
Manufacturing	961	25.4%	236,327	14.7%
Public Administration	84	2.2%	49,737	3.1%
Wholesale Trade	104	2.7%	45,624	2.8%
Retail	497	13.1%	185,930	11.5%
Transportation, Public Utilities	213	5.6%	80,042	5.0%
Finance	89	2.3%	124,973	7.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

## CRESTON POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The Uptown Creston neighborhood has a historically higher poverty rate than the Creston community as a whole, Union County, or the state of Iowa. In 2010 and 2020, over 19% of Uptown Creston residents had an income at or below the poverty level. The Federal Poverty Level threshold in 2020 was an annual individual income of \$26,200. Uptown Creston residents are significantly under-earning compared to the City, County, and State.

Despite having a higher poverty rate, Uptown Creston does not have a significantly higher unemployment rate than the Creston community as a whole, and holds a lower unemployment rate than Union County and the state of Iowa. This implies that the population working earns a wage that does not adequately meet the costs of living. Many individuals and families receive financial assistance to help bridge the gap.

In 2000, 10.8% of Uptown Creston residents received public assistance, food stamps, and/or SNAP to make ends meet. By 2020, that number grew to 32.9%. Of the 32.9% receiving public assistance, food stamps, and/or SNAP, the highest proportion were 3-, 4- and 5-person families with children 17 and younger.

**Table 2.5: Poverty Rate for Uptown Creston, Creston, Union County, and Iowa**

	2000	2010	2020
Uptown Creston*	12.8%	19.7%	19.1%
City of Creston	11.5%	18.3%	13.3%
Union County	11.4%	10.4%	11.9%
Iowa	9.1%	12.6%	11.1%

\*Uptown Creston data uses Census Block Group data, which includes the study area and some surrounding blocks  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau



The lowana in 2023

**Table 2.6: Unemployment in Uptown Creston, Creston, Union County, and Iowa**

	2020
Uptown Creston*	3.2%
City of Creston	2.6%
Union County	3.7%
Iowa	3.9%

\*Uptown Creston data uses Census Block Group data, which includes the study area and some surrounding blocks

Source: U.S. Census Bureau



## SUBSIDIZED HOUSING SUCCESS IN UPTOWN CRESTON

In 2020, 6.6% of Uptown Creston\* residents used rental assistance to afford housing. Compared to Creston as a whole, where 3.6% received rental assistance, Uptown Creston has a proportionately higher need for affordable housing, with or without assistance. In recent years, some efforts have been taken in Uptown Creston to increase both the quantity and quality of available rental units for low- and moderate-income families. One of the most successful projects is the lowana.

The lowana (previously known as the lowana Hotel) is a historic building in the heart of Uptown Creston. The building was once a hotel, erected in 1920 and situated just one block from the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad's depot. The building served the community as a hotel until 1980. After closing its doors, the building stood vacant for several decades, until being placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. Following this designation, renovations went underway to transform the hotel into apartment units.

Officially opening as an apartment building in 2011, the building offers 14 one-bedroom units and 10 two-bedroom units. Units are income-based, and the building receives funding through the Section 515 Rural Rental Assistance Program, and the Section 521 USDA Rental Assistance Program. The building rarely has vacancies.



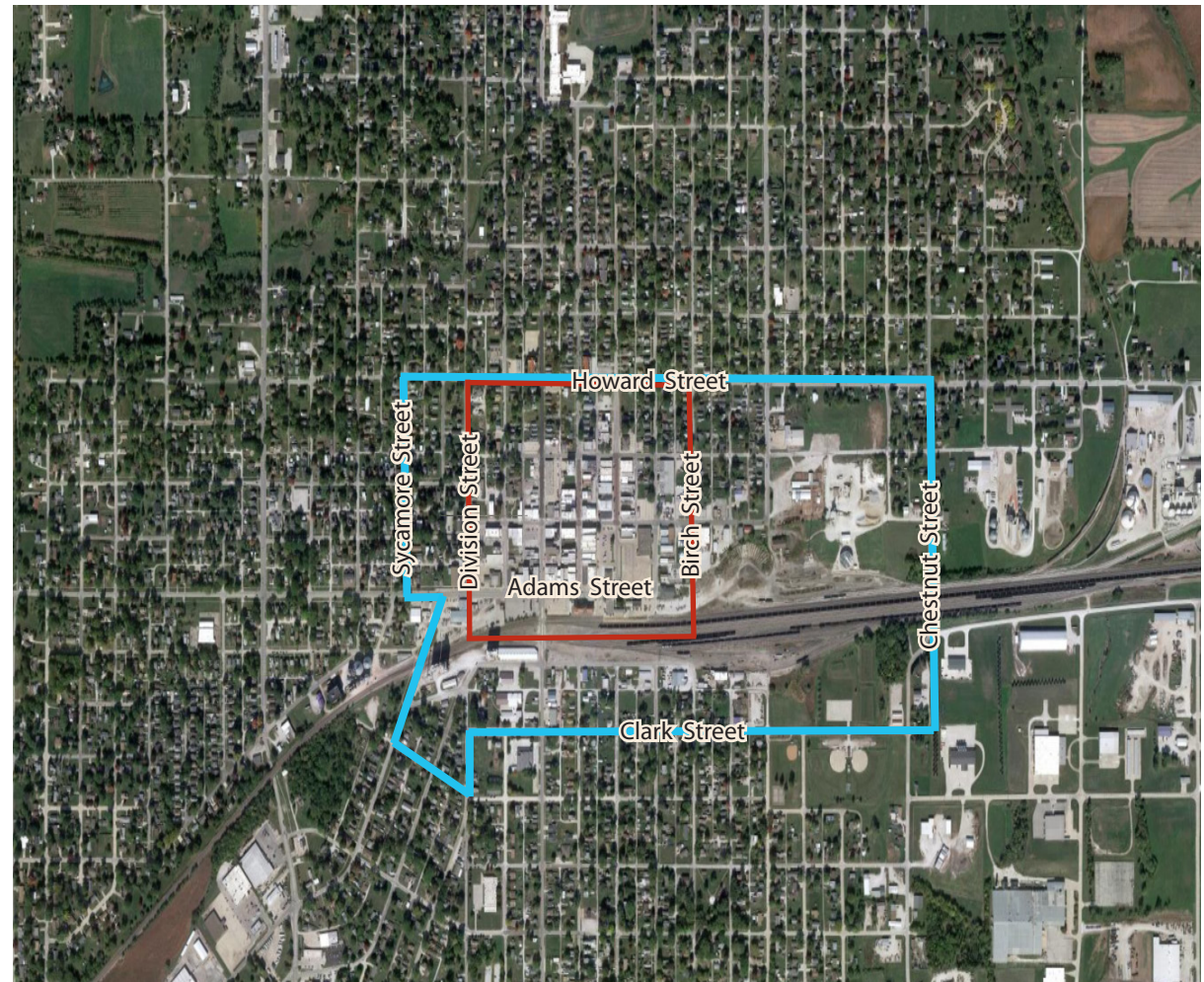
## UPTOWN CRESTON LOW TO MODERATE INCOME LEVELS

The Comprehensive Neighborhood Revitalization Planning program - and ensuing implementation funds - are being made available by IEDA through the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The primary goal of the federal CDBG program is to provide housing, economic opportunities, and suitable living environments principally for people of low and moderate incomes.

Low-income is defined as families earning no more than fifty percent of the median family income of the county; moderate-income is no more than eighty percent. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) determines these incomes through Census data. The median family income of Union county is \$52,321. Families in Creston with incomes less than \$41,857 are considered low to moderate income.

As a requirement of CDBG, improvements must be directed to neighborhoods or areas where more than fifty percent of residents are determined to be low to moderate income. In Creston, 53% of all residents community-wide meet the requirement of low to moderate income per the 2011-2015 American Community Survey. The census block group that includes Uptown and surrounding neighborhoods is 59% low to moderate income.

**Map 2.1:** Census Block in context to Uptown Creston



The area within the blue boundaries is the Census block (Block Group 5, Census Tract 1902, Union County) for which Uptown Creston data was pulled. The area inside the red boundaries is inside the revitalization plan study area, referred to as "Uptown Creston."

**Table 2.7:** Percentage of Low to Moderate Income Levels in Uptown Creston, Creston, and Union County

	LMI
Uptown Creston*	59%
City of Creston	53%

\*Uptown Creston data uses Census Block Group data, which includes the study area and some surrounding blocks  
Source: 2011-2015 American Community Survey



A stylized silhouette of a city skyline in maroon, featuring various building shapes. The number '3' is prominently displayed in white on the left side of the skyline.

# 3 UPTOWN TODAY

"I LOVE all the cool buildings Creston has. I also love that people are taking the time to make Creston look beautiful with their talent by painting murals all over town. I love all the time some people are putting into making their yards look nice."

- Survey respondent, on what they love about Uptown Creston



## HISTORY OF UPTOWN: THE RISE, DECLINE, AND RENEWED ENERGY

With the rail line as the anchor and catalyst for Uptown, Creston owes its origin and early development to the railroad industry. Creston was originally settled in 1868 as a camp for railroad workers. The early bustle of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad placed Creston in a strategic position for growth and development in the late 19th century. Between 1870 and 1880, the community's population jumped from 411 to 5,081. Creston became home to Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy's largest roundhouse in 1871. Uptown thereafter emerged as a center for commerce as the city's reputation as a "railroad town" became more prevalent. By 1920, the city's population surpassed 8,000, and with rapid growth in population, growth in size quickly followed.

Uptown Creston's relevance as the heart of commerce and services in the community remained strong for nearly a century. However, in the mid-20th century, Highway 34 was widened on the south side of the community, just over one half mile south of Uptown Creston. As was typical in many communities at this time, commerce became increasingly auto-oriented and the highway drove much of the community's commerce and travelers away from Uptown. Passenger rail fell out of favor, bringing fewer visitors into Uptown. The neighborhood experienced quick decline.

Highway 34 changed the dynamic of commercial construction from being centralized Uptown, to being spread along the southern end of Creston. Many larger, more recent commercial developments have been constructed along the heavily-trafficked Highway 34. Incentives and large numbers of daily travelers makes development along Highway 34 attractive to

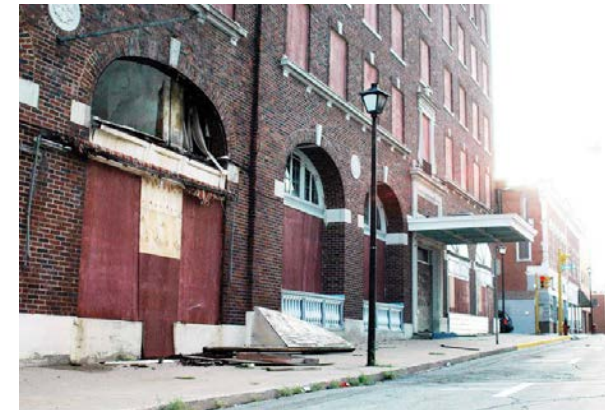
developers, so retail businesses, hotels, and restaurants have all elected to build there rather than in Uptown over the past half century. Wal-Mart constructed a store on Highway 34 in 2005, adding further competition to discourage local Uptown retailers. Over time, Uptown lost several businesses to their relocation to Highway 34, such as Dairy Queen and Maurice's.

Uptown continued to struggle for much of the past forty or so years. However, residents and city leaders today all point to a singular turning point that breathed new life into Uptown: the redevelopment of The lowana.

The Hotel lowana served as Creston's primary hotel until 1958 and continued to operate into the 1980s. After sitting vacant and abandoned for many years, the City was forced to board its windows and the property was designated a public nuisance. In 2010, a Minnesota-based developer acquired the property for \$1 and led the \$5 million renovation to redevelop the property for low-income senior housing. The property opened to new tenants in 2011. Grants and tax credits helped make the project financially feasible. The restoration is a source of pride in the community.



Wal-Mart was constructed in 2005, further drawing retailers and shoppers away from Uptown.



Condition of the Hotel lowana in 2007, prior to being declared a public nuisance.  
Source: Creston News Advertiser



West side of Maple Street, looking north from Adams Street, late 19th Century.  
Source: Creston, Iowa Photos Old and New by Mark Paxson



Maple Street, looking south, in 2023



With a renewed sense of energy, community partners and civic organizations have come together in recent years to further re-imagine a revitalized Uptown. Momentum is shifting and palpable.

Commercial buildings are being transformed. Two vacant, historic properties in the 100 block of Maple Street have been beautifully restored with funds from IEDA's Community Catalyst Building Remediation Grant. Another eleven properties have enhanced their facades with funding through IEDA's Downtown Revitalization (DTR) grant. Quality upper-story housing is being added in Uptown. The City of Creston is updating their antiquated water lines to allow for more housing in the future.

Placemaking strategies have further activated Uptown. A vibrant quilt mural was painted by community members in the intersection of Adams and Maple. Two parklets have been installed, one outside of Hot Air Brewing and another at The Roundhouse.

In 2020, the innovative Mentor Mural Program was brought to life and has transformed Uptown. The program was started as a collaboration between Creston Arts, Creston High School, and the Department of Human Services who directed decategorization funds to the project to improve opportunities for area at-risk youth. Recognizing the powerful impact of the murals, additional support has since been provided by private donors and the Iowa Arts Council. The result is over twenty truly inspiring and world-class murals in Uptown. These murals are changing perceptions of Creston and created an economic draw that brings tourists – and their spending dollars - to Creston.

Looking ahead, the Update Uptown Committee has developed a vision for future placemaking and beautification efforts in Uptown. These strategies are well-vetted and included as recommendations in this plan.



## PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

While many efforts are underway to improve physical conditions in the Uptown study area, blighted conditions persist. Just as blight does not set in overnight, correcting these conditions is a long-term effort.

Many factors have led to the poor physical conditions of Uptown. As noted earlier, main street communities across America struggled when the interstate and highway system directed attention and development interest to the periphery of communities and away from the downtown commercial centers. This was very much the case with Creston. Local Uptown businesses have struggled to compete with big box retailers, both in Creston and in the larger markets such as Winterset and Des Moines. As such, businesses in Uptown closed. As storefronts become vacant, it is difficult to cash flow a building to pay for maintenance let alone improvements. This leads to deteriorated conditions. In some instances, commercial properties have been converted to storage or have converted to residential uses in the lower levels. While not vacant, these uses do not contribute to a vibrant and attractive Uptown commercial district.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, residents of the study area – and Creston as a whole – lack the financial resources to invest in their homes. Local wages are low. Poverty is high. Families are struggling to make ends meet and do not have the capacity to invest in their homes. As the following maps will show, houses in the study area are aging and are in poor condition. Many of these homes were built in the late 18th and early 19th century as affordable workforce housing. These houses require significant investments through the years including stabilized foundations and new mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. As with every house, roofs need replaced. Most owners of

these structures have not been able to make these investments.

Another challenge is the lack of skilled labor in the area – an issue across rural Iowa. Focus group participants shared that for those financially able to make physical improvements, it can be very difficult to find qualified contractors to complete the work. With the proximity to Des Moines, contractors are able to line up large, highly profitable projects there. Those contractors willing to work in Creston are able to charge a premium for their work. Southwestern Community College offers a building trades program and is attempting to address the skilled labor shortage by attracting high school students to the program.

Compounding these issues, the City has not had the proper ordinances or code enforcement in place to deter the poor conditions. Progress is being made, however. In 2021, the City of Creston created a new position for a code compliance officer to enforce property maintenance codes. In 2022, the City adopted a sidewalk ordinance. These measures are steps in the right direction, but again, changes take time.

Lastly, Creston has a weak tax base and just as property owners do not have the financial resources to invest in their buildings, the City struggles with funding needed to maintain quality infrastructure and public spaces. There is also an inability to fund staff positions, so leadership capacity is diminished. As the following pages will show, building age and conditions correlate directly with low values. Low property values, spread across a community with vacant lots and open spaces, compounded with exempt uses, translates to a low value per acre. These conditions do not generate the tax revenue needed to make community investments needed to target blight.

## SUMMARY OF BLIGHTING FACTORS:

- Development along Highway 34 changed the commercial landscape of Uptown. Des Moines is near enough that consumers also travel there to shop.
- Poverty levels are high in Creston, and even higher in the study area.
- Many commercial and residential structures are 100- to nearly 150-years old. In Uptown, age correlates with poor conditions and low property values.
- Lack of contractors and skilled labor makes renovations, for those with the funds to do the work, difficult to complete.
- Historic lack of city ordinances and code enforcement made poor conditions publicly acceptable.
- A weak tax base has hampered the City's ability to invest in infrastructure, public realm improvements, and appropriate staffing.



This house on Elm Street was built in 1908. The current assessed value of the property is \$17,790. The land is assessed at \$4,820, and the dwelling is assessed at just \$12,970. The Assessor lists the condition as "Poor." The current owner purchased this property in 2021 and in April 2022 pulled a permit for an interior remodel with a value of \$30,000. Photo taken September 2023.



## EXISTING LAND USE

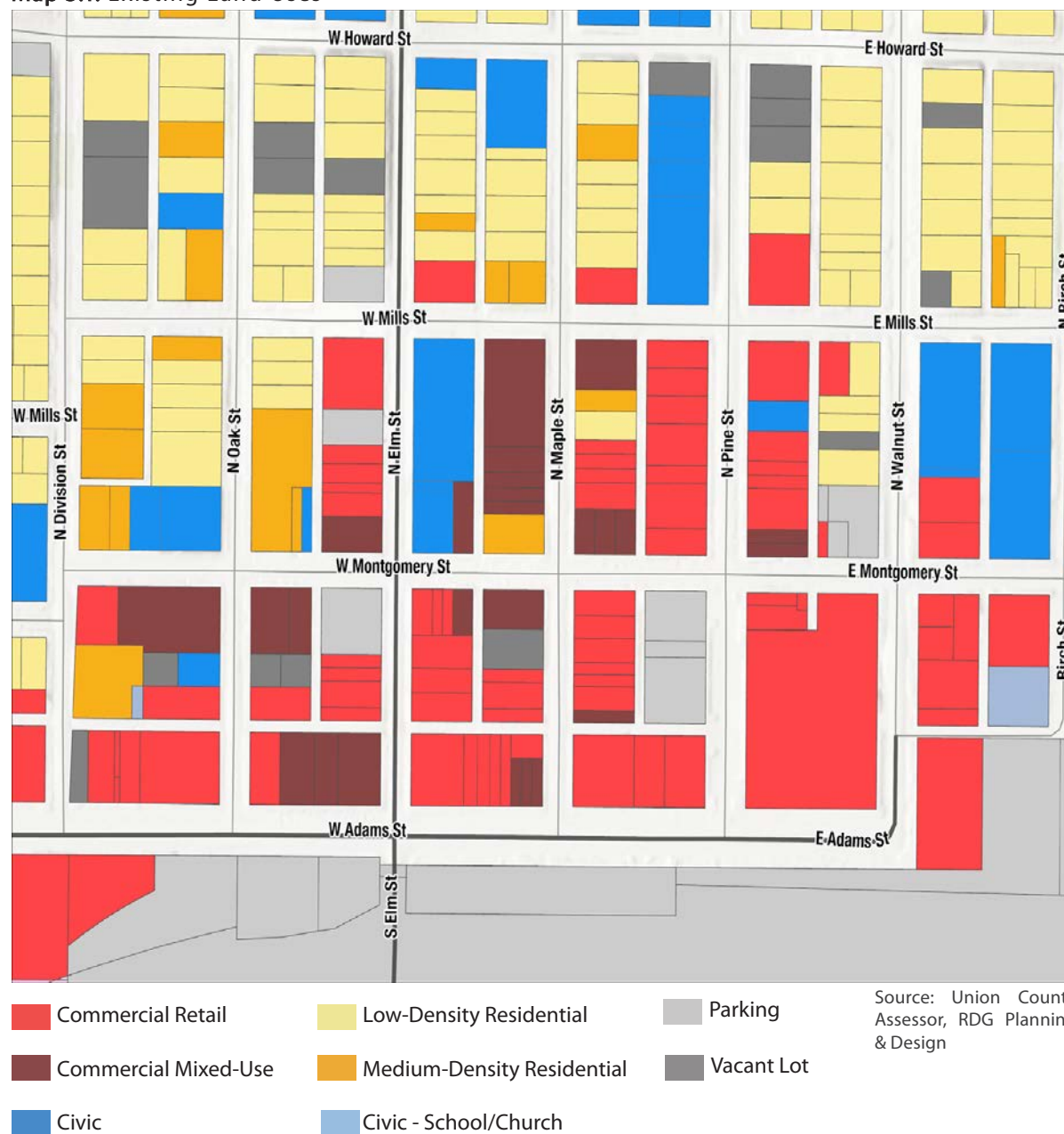
The Uptown Creston study area is a condensed area of nineteen blocks with a wide mix of commercial, residential, and civic uses. There are over 198 structures in the study area, served by over 1,000 parking spaces between on-street and off-street parking.

The area has a grocery store, restaurants, office spaces, the library, City Hall and the County courthouse; residents living in the Uptown District are able to receive many goods and services without the need for a personal vehicle.

The southern portion of Uptown Creston is largely commercial retail and office use. With options for shopping and dining, Adams and Maple street are popular destinations for locals and visitors alike to visit.

The northern portion of the Uptown Creston study area is largely residential, with a smaller mix of civic and commercial offices. Residential use is denser toward the center of Uptown Creston, with numerous multi-family units and upper-story housing. The residential density lowers to primarily single-family homes closer to Howard Street.

Map 3.1: Existing Land Uses



## BUILDING AGE

The cost of rehabilitating aging buildings, updating mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, and bringing into compliance with current building codes can be prohibitive to encouraging good building condition. The older a building is, the costlier it tends to be to maintain and institute improvements.

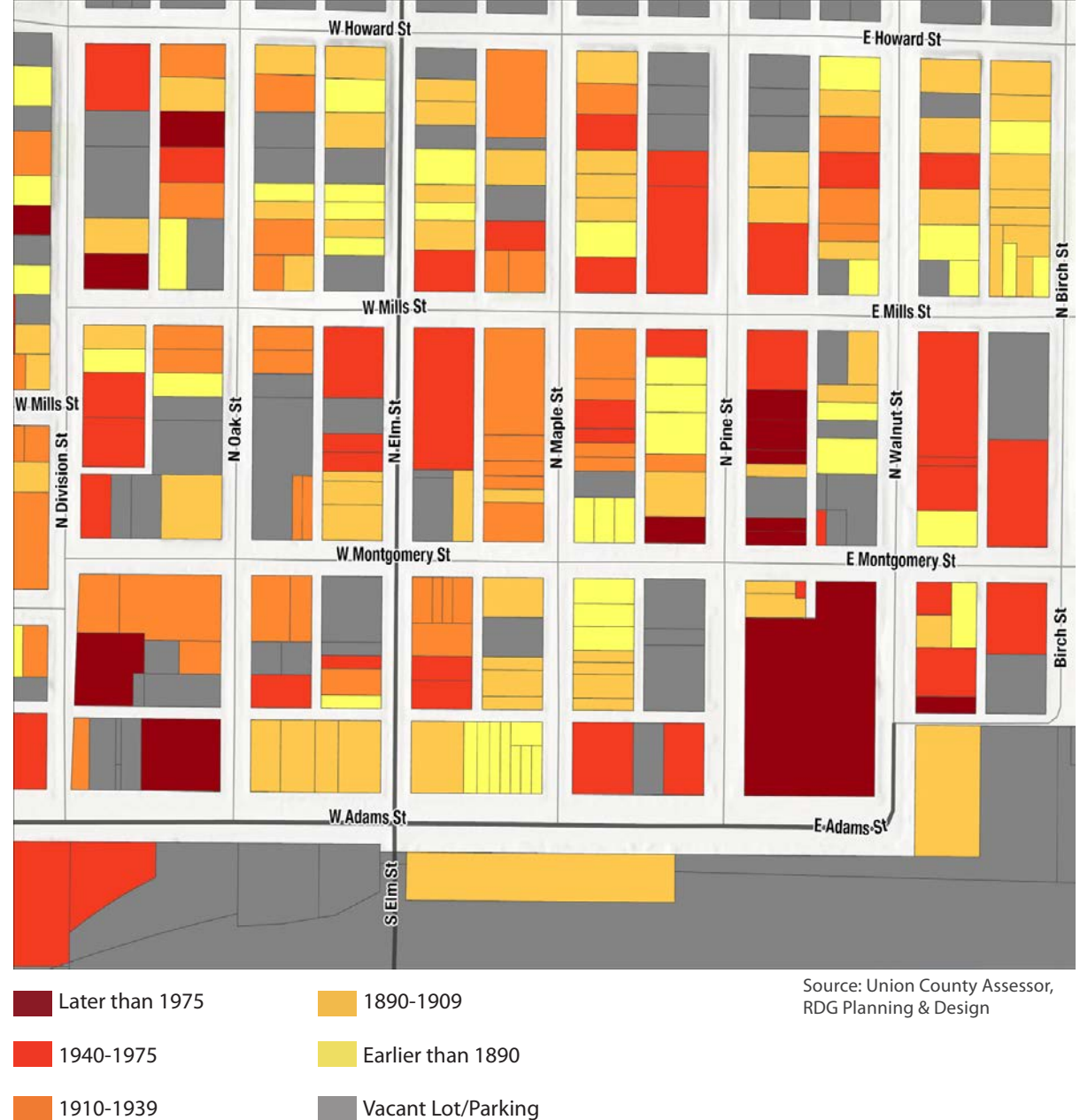
The Uptown Creston project area includes 40 homes and commercial buildings built prior to 1890, and another 59 built between 1890 and 1909. Twelve buildings in Uptown Creston were constructed, or significantly altered, after 1975.

While building age can be a deterrent to rehabilitation, the concentration of historic commercial buildings contributes significantly to the charm and character of Uptown Creston. Historic buildings foster a sense of place in Uptown and are worthy of investment to preserve.



The historic First National Bank building, erected in 1880. The building is the oldest standing in Uptown Creston. The space is vacant in 2023 and the building is currently listed for sale.

Map 3.2: Year Built



## PROPERTY VALUES

Property values in the Uptown Creston study area vary but are generally low. Factors that go into a building's value include age, condition, recent renovations, and existing infrastructure. Property values correlate directly with building condition, as seen on the next page.

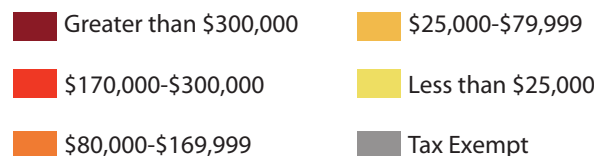
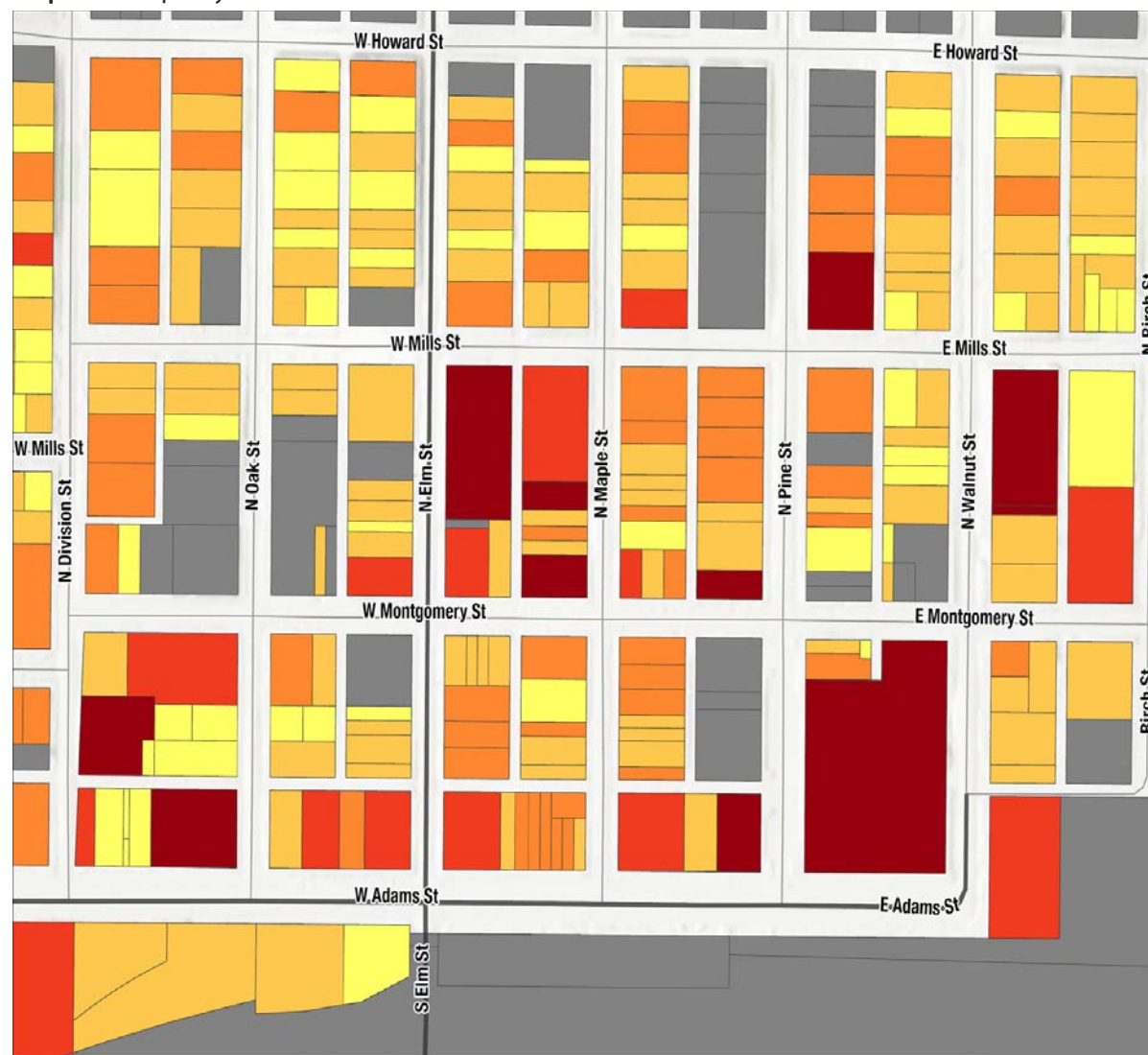
There are fifteen residential structures in the study areas that are assessed below \$25,000. The remaining parcels assessed below \$25,000 are vacant lots without a primary structure. Only ten commercial properties have a value over \$300,000.

With low property values comes a weak tax base. Adequate property values are imperative to building a stronger tax base that can then be used to reinvest in infrastructure in the Uptown Creston neighborhood. Focusing efforts on improving housing stock yields higher returns with increased property values not only for the subject property but also those neighboring it.



This house on Oak Street was built in 1889. The current assessed value of the property is \$14,120. The land is assessed at \$6,680, and the dwelling is assessed at just \$7,449. The Assessor lists the condition as "Very Poor."

Map 3.3: Property Values



Source: Union County Assessor,  
RDG Planning & Design



## BUILDING CONDITIONS

The County Assessor assigns each building in Union County a condition rating based on the physical upkeep and exterior condition of the building. The Assessor's ratings are typically updated every few years. In that time frame, properties can be renovated just as they can quickly deteriorate if left to the elements. The consultant team walked the project area to confirm and update the Assessor's data. Map 3.4 indicates current conditions observed in September 2023.

### DEFINITION OF CONDITIONS:

**Excellent:** The structure is very well maintained. No physical deterioration or required repairs are observed.

**Good:** The building has been well maintained. Some major building components may be updated or recently rehabilitated. Improvements exhibit limited physical deterioration due to normal wear and tear.

**Average:** The structure has been adequately maintained and components are functionally sufficient requiring only minimal repairs. Improvement exhibit some physical deterioration due to normal wear and tear.

**Poor:** The structure remains functional and usable, but building components exhibit more significant deferred maintenance and require repairs. Properties that are not used for their intended use - storefronts converted to lower-level residential units, for example - are also downgraded to poor condition, or worse.

**Very Poor:** The building or dwelling needs substantial repairs with defects severe enough to affect the overall safety or occupancy of the property.

Map 3.4: Building Conditions



## RESIDENTIAL BUILDING CONDITIONS

Addressing deteriorated housing conditions in Creston has recently become a strategic focus of the City and community partners including UCDA and Greater Regional Health, among others. In 2021, the City hired a code enforcement official to enforce city ordinances regarding property upkeep. In 2023, the City hired a Director of Housing Development to lead efforts for improved housing - a position funded by the hospital and private donors. Also in 2023, Creston was named a Thriving Community by IEDA. The designation provides additional points to developers competing for workforce housing tax credits if they plan to construct new housing in Creston.

Indeed, housing conditions in the study area indicate the extent of housing deterioration, with 38% of residential structures in poor or very poor condition. Addressing these conditions with both housing rehabilitation and acquisition/demolition/new construction will help to advance the community's goals of providing quality housing for all.



Elm Street homes in varying conditions



Uptown home designated in excellent condition



Uptown home designated in good condition



Multi-family conversion in poor condition.



## COMMERCIAL BUILDING CONDITIONS

There are more than a dozen buildings in the Uptown Creston area that have been rehabilitated in the past five years. Many of these renovations are the success of the facade improvement program through IEDA, while others have been driven by the private investments of community members.

The facade improvement program has made a tremendously positive impact on the condition of commercial buildings and overall feeling of Uptown. Of the 103 commercial and civic buildings in Uptown Creston, almost one-quarter (24%) remain in poor or very poor condition. Prior to rehabilitation, most of these other structures would have been designated in poor or very poor condition as well.

These recent renovations serve as a catalyst for future rehabilitation work in Uptown, though there are still hurdles to overcome with such work. One of the greatest obstacles to renovating structures in Uptown is the sheer cost of renovations. The investment required to complete renovations often exceed the After Renovation Value (ARV). Because of this, it is difficult for investors to receive loans from banks to complete work. Continuing to invest in commercial buildings to fill the financial gap can further improve the commercial building conditions in Uptown.



The Old Post Office is an iconic historic building on Maple Street. It is in good condition.



This Maple Street building, home to Create Creston is designated good condition.



The Hot Air Brewery building on Maple Street is designated average condition.



Pine Street building designated in very poor condition. Community members are concerned about future structural failure.



Maple Street multi-family building designated in very poor condition.

## COMMERCIAL BUILDING VACANCIES

Uptown Creston has struggled to keep commercial tenants in buildings for the past few decades. As noted previously, one of the struggles Uptown business owners have is competing with businesses on Highway 34. Throughout the years, the Creston community has lost many of its treasured small local businesses to the larger box stores.

Approximately 33%, or roughly 1 in 3, of commercial retail buildings currently sit vacant in Uptown Creston. These vacant buildings are less likely to be reinvested in and are becoming further deteriorated because of this. Several storefronts have been converted to residential uses in the past for two reasons: 1) lack of potential commercial tenants, and 2) the ongoing need for affordable rental housing units in Creston.

Despite this vacancy rate, recent facade and building renovations have led to many new business start-ups in Uptown that are worth celebrating. These include Hot Air Brewing, Three Little Birds, Paisley Rose Boutique and Greens N'Things among others. Recommendations later in this plan share strategies to further lower Uptown's commercial vacancy rate.



The Strand movie theater closed in 2021. The new owners are renovating the building and plan to re-open the theater.



Maple Street building with vacant storefronts.



The owner of this property is looking to fill the lower-level with incubator and maker spaces. The upper level is vacant.



The former Hair Tech School of Cosmetology sits vacant on Montgomery Street. This building may be a candidate to be converted to housing or artist lofts and studios.



Maple Street building with lower-level housing units.



Montgomery Street building with lower-level housing units.



## PUBLIC REALM CONDITIONS

Public realm conditions include not only the physical environment that one sees above ground, but also all the infrastructure below ground that we do not see. The quality of these networks, both visible and invisible, are equally important for making Uptown a viable and attractive commercial and residential district.

Public realm maintenance and improvements are expensive. As a community with a very limited budget, the City of Creston has maintained infrastructure at a minimum level with a necessary focus on safety and function. The City has recently approved bids to begin work on replacing water lines in Uptown. The current water lines date back to the 1890s and do not provide capacity needed for buildings to meet modern codes for sprinkler systems. This investment by the City is critical in continuing to improve the commercial buildings and adding upper-level housing in Uptown. Streets are generally in good condition. Some alleys have recently been repaved with concrete; others have an asphalt overlay that will require eventual replacement but are otherwise in acceptable condition. Streetlights have been updated with historically-appropriate LED fixtures. Overhead power lines have been buried by the utility provider.

Sidewalk conditions vary in the commercial district and are poor to very poor (at best) in the residential area. While sidewalks are in the public right-of-way, the City has placed replacement responsibilities on property owners. This has resulted in sidewalks that are tripping hazards in the commercial district and unusable in many areas of the residential neighborhood. Sidewalks are also not ADA accessible. Overall walkability to the library, parks, and other community destinations can be greatly improved.

The streetscape environment is in need of a refresh. The colorful murals provide bold pops of joy throughout Uptown in an otherwise dreary concrete and asphalt environment. Union County Development Authority is working with the City and Trees Forever to plant trees in Uptown, but currently the trees and flowerpots are too sparse to make a visual impact. Uptown lacks a true park or greenspace for people to congregate or recreate. An old caboose from the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad sits on display in a parcel owned by the BNSF Railroad, but there is limited ability or reason for visitors to gather or interact with the site. Several vacant parcels provide green lawn spaces on Maple and Montgomery Streets, but the spaces are privately owned and not activated in any way. As private investment continues to be made in Uptown, public investments need to be bolstered to maximize impact for both parties.



Adams Street streetscape



Maple Street streetscape





Alleyway parallel to Maple Street



Crumbling sidewalk on Maple Street



Adams Street looking east



Brick sidewalk in front of a multi-family building



Privately owned vacant lot on Maple Street



Caboose Park



A stylized silhouette of a city skyline with several buildings of varying heights, including one with a grid of windows.

# 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

"More businesses are opening up in our Uptown District (yay!), so I think our focus should be on improving aesthetics/landscaping to help with attraction and retention, for both our businesses and community members..."

- Survey respondent, on what they would change about Uptown Creston



## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT (CDBG)

CDBG is flexible to fund a broad array of uses. Eligible CDBG activities include, but are not limited to:

- » Property acquisition and disposition
- » Demolition and clearance
- » Rehabilitation of residential and commercial buildings
- » Construction of affordable housing
- » Park and open-space improvements
- » Streetscape and beautification efforts
- » Sidewalks and trails
- » Infrastructure such as streets, curb and gutter, water and sewer lines, and flood and drainage improvements.
- » Economic Development activities such as grants and loans to businesses, technical assistance, and job training.
- » Public facilities such as City Hall, fire and police stations, libraries, and community centers.

## OVERVIEW

As noted in the Introduction, Creston has participated in numerous planning efforts over the past six years. This planning effort is unique in that implementation funding may be made available by the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) through the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. While many of these recommendations qualify for CDBG funding, the following recommendations also aim to guide the City of Creston and its partners in sustaining current momentum, building capacity and leadership, and further leveraging financial resources for greatest impact.

## THEMES

Six emerging themes developed from the Community Engagement process. Recommendations are divided into the following themes:

**COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS**

**BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

**INFRASTRUCTURE**

**BEAUTIFICATION & COMMUNITY IMAGE**

**HOUSING**

**LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS**





## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLANNING PROCESS

As mentioned previously, Creston is not new to the planning process. The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan is one of six plans that have been developed in the past six years. Each of the previous plans provides a solid foundation and vision for Creston, each with a specific purpose and strategies to move the community forward. To that end, the consultant team was wary of “planning fatigue.” As such, the team employed a streamlined strategy for the planning process that focused on four primary tasks: 1) Develop an understanding of the existing conditions in Creston, 2) Meet with city leaders and stakeholders to understand the planning efforts to date and barriers to implementation, 3) Conduct public outreach to understand what Creston residents and stakeholders most value and prioritize, and 4) Develop plan recommendations that speak to community input, address barriers, and provide a framework for implementation.

### CITY STAFF MEETING

The consultant team kicked off the planning process by meeting with City staff, across various departments, in City Hall. This meeting helped the consultant team understand past, current, and planned projects being undertaken by the City. Ongoing challenges and opportunities were also discussed. Ten staff members attended the two-hour meeting.

### STAKEHOLDER GROUP MEETINGS

The planning team held a series of stakeholder group meetings to explore the opportunities and challenges facing Uptown and the Creston community as a whole. These discussions allowed the planning team to speak

to Creston residents, stakeholders, and elected officials to begin formulating the ideas that would emerge for the Uptown revitalization plan. The consultant team held nine meetings in City Hall, where a total of 25 stakeholders attended the meetings throughout the day. Additional one-on-one conversations were had with additional stakeholders outside of the group

### BALLOON DAYS POP-UP EVENT

The consultant team hosted a pop-up event at Creston’s annual Balloon Days event. Under a tent in the City Hall’s parking lot, the team shared information about the project’s efforts. Creston residents and visitors that interacted with the activity were asked “If Uptown Creston received a \$1,000,000 grant, how would you prioritize the following physical improvements?” The goal of the question was to begin prioritizing the activities that the consultant team formulated from the city staff and stakeholder group meetings. Participants were given four stickers and asked to rank their top four of nine available priorities:

- Beautifying Uptown
- Constructing and repairing sidewalks
- Constructing new homes
- Constructing a permanent addition to Gibson Memorial Library
- Enhancing safety
- Renovating aging and deteriorating commercial buildings
- Renovating aging and deteriorating homes
- Updating and repairing infrastructure
- Other

A total of 52 people interacted with the activity. The top three priorities identified from those participants, based on weighted scores, were as follows:

- 1) Renovating aging and deteriorating commercial buildings
- 2) Updating and repairing infrastructure
- 3) Renovating aging and deteriorating homes

Of those that selected “other,” requests were: more activities for children, services for those experiencing homelessness, and changing the Elm Street railroad crossing.



Creston residents and visitors weigh in on their desired priorities for Uptown Creston



The priority options boards covered in stickers, signifying the wants of Creston residents and visitors.

## COMMUNITY SURVEY

In September and October, an online survey was available to the public to respond to in regards to Uptown Creston. The survey asked questions about goals, concerns, ideas, and priorities for Uptown. The public survey closed in October with 309 total responses. These responses help determine priorities for City leaders moving forward.

## RESPONDENT AFFILIATIONS

Of the 309 responses the survey received:

- 78.7% were Creston residents\*
- 3.9% were Uptown Creston residents\*
- 7.5% were Uptown business owners\*
- 7.2% were Uptown property owners\*
- 12.1% worked in Creston, but lived elsewhere\*
- 7.2% were just visitors to Creston\*

\*Respondents were asked to select all that applied, so total results are unequal to 100%.

## OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Respondents were asked three open-ended questions:

- What do you love about Uptown Creston?
- What would you change about Uptown Creston?
- What's your "BIG idea" for Uptown Creston?

Questions received from 233 to 278 responses. Some of those responses are included here.



A flyer for the community survey hangs in the window of an Uptown Creston business

"People see the potential in this town and are working hard to achieve the common good for everyone. Creston has good bones with the uptown."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What do you love about Uptown Creston?"

"It is starting to feel like a place I want to be."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What do you love about Uptown Creston?"

"I love that Creston is trying to grow through art and community."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What do you love about Uptown Creston?"

"I love seeing our town come back to life. I love the new businesses, updating the faces of older buildings. I love seeing more community events. I love seeing even the trees and flowers coming up. Every step is bringing life to this town."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What do you love about Uptown Creston?"

"I enjoy what is being done to make uptown a better place, but still feel as though more can be done. We have yet to see its full potential."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What would you change about Uptown Creston?"

"I would like to see more beautification of uptown Creston so that it has a charming and welcoming feel. Maybe finding something that is unique to Creston like tulips are to Pella. Just something to make us stand out."

-A survey respondent in response to the question "What would you change about Uptown Creston?"

## COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Survey respondents were asked the same question as participants in the Balloon Days pop-up event: “If Uptown Creston received a \$1,000,000 grant, how would you prioritize the following physical improvement opportunities?”. The respondents were presented with nine different options to rank. The results of the 306 respondents that answered the question can be seen in Table 4.1 to the right.

In order to score each priority, each vote was given a weight in correspondence for its preference. For example, #1 votes are worth 9 points, while #2 votes are worth 8 points, and so on. Using this method, total scores varied from 2,021 to 491, and can be viewed in Table 4.1.

Respondents that included “other” in their top five priorities were asked to specify what “other” priority they would like to see action on. While responses varied, the following common themes were found in responses: (1) a space for children and teenagers to recreate, (2) bring more events to the Uptown area, such as the farmers market, and (3) improved connections for cars and pedestrians across the tracks on Elm Street.

**Table 4.1: Community Priorities Survey Results**

Priority	#1 Votes	#2 Votes	#3 Votes	#4 Votes	#5 Votes	#6 Votes	#7 Votes	#8 Votes	#9 Votes	Total Score	Overall Placement
Constructing and repairing sidewalks to improve walkability	46	69	67	39	41	23	15	5	0	2,021	1
Renovating aging and deteriorating commercial buildings	62	49	56	35	37	37	19	7	3	1,959	2
Beautifying Uptown with trees, flowers, and new gathering spaces (ie: creating a park near the caboose or adding pocket parks along Maple Street)	87	34	37	30	30	29	28	22	8	1,896	3
Updating and repairing infrastructure (ie: water and sewer lines, etc.)	33	34	32	39	39	38	37	49	4	1,587	4
Enhancing safety (ie: better and more lighting, additional cameras, etc.)	5	37	36	53	55	45	41	31	2	1,553	5
Renovating aging and deteriorating homes	17	32	28	32	45	43	55	49	4	1,461	6
Constructing new single-family homes, duplexes, townhomes, and apartment buildings	25	24	26	44	24	54	54	43	11	1,458	7
Constructing a permanent addition to the Gibson Memorial Library	22	23	21	28	32	30	46	81	22	1,299	8
Other	8	3	2	5	2	6	10	18	251	491	9

Source: RDG Planning & Design

“The Uptown area has improved so much last 10 years with the lowana and other buildings being refurbished. It’s exciting to see the changes and I hope they continue so the Uptown becomes a destination for people with a variety of shopping, services, food, and meeting places.”

-A survey respondent in response to the question “What is your “BIG idea” for Uptown Creston?”

## OPPORTUNITY FRAMEWORK

Creston is a community of dedicated volunteers with a commitment to see improvement in Creston. Based on our conversations with community leaders as well as survey results, the following are initial opportunities to leverage and challenges to address to move Creston and Uptown forward.

### OPPORTUNITIES TO LEVERAGE

- » Regional Employment. As the county seat of Union County, Creston is a hub of commerce in southwest Iowa. Greater Regional Health, Southwestern Community College, and Buena Vista University have a strong presence in Creston. Other major employers include Bunn-O-Matic Corporation and Wellman Industries.
- » Recreational Amenities. McKinley Park is a regional attraction and source of pride for Creston residents.
- » Historic Resources. Charming brick-paved streets and historic buildings strengthen a sense of place in Uptown Creston. The renovation of the Historic Depot for reuse of City Hall is a focal point in the community.
- » Infrastructure Investments. Infrastructure throughout Creston is quite old. The City of Creston has recently bid work to update the water lines through Uptown, which date to the late 1800s. This investment will allow for modern upgrades and code compliance in commercial buildings.
- » Mural Program. Local Creston students have worked hand-in-hand with international artists to create more than twenty murals in Uptown and elsewhere across Creston. These murals not only brighten Uptown but also attract tourists to the community.

### CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

- » Vacant Storefronts. Vacant storefronts or those used primarily for storage have a negative impact on downtown by deactivating the street. These spaces represent a major opportunity to bring additional businesses (or other uses) to complement the overall function of the Uptown district.
- » Building Conditions. While several buildings have recently been renovated, or are in the process of being renovated, many buildings show their age and need facade repairs or full rehabilitation. Special attention to storefront features, upper story windows, awnings, and signage could significantly improve the character of Uptown.
- » Underutilized Upper Stories. Some upper stories are either currently used or being renovated for use as residential units. However, most two-story buildings leave the upper level vacant, missing the opportunity to bring additional life to the district, adding long-term revenue to building owners and businesses, and transforming downtown into a district where people live, work, and play.
- » Business Retention and Recruitment. Creating a business climate to attract new businesses and retain existing businesses such as the movie theater and restaurants in Uptown is needed.
- » Shortage of Quality Workforce Housing. Lack of workforce housing, and poor housing conditions overall, was identified in each focus session as an issue to address community-wide. As mentioned above, underutilized upper stories provide some opportunity to address this, but additional new construction will be needed along with renovation of existing structures to make them attractive to the market.
- » Uptown Image. Large expanses of parking lots and lack of landscaping and green space contribute to a dreary and unattractive Uptown environment. Beautifying Uptown was identified as a top priority in the community survey.
- » Walkability. Sidewalks in the residential areas outside of Uptown are in extremely poor condition. Those in wheelchairs, pushing strollers, or otherwise experiencing mobility issues are relegated to walking in the street. Sidewalks are also crumbling in some areas within the Uptown commercial district, and are missing altogether in areas such as the south side of Adams Street. Improving sidewalk conditions is important in connecting Uptown to destinations such as the library and McKinley Park.



## COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

More than eighty commercial buildings make up the commercial core of Uptown. Approximately two-thirds of these buildings are historic to the early days of Creston. These structures are a vital piece of community infrastructure that contribute directly to the image of the community and the viability of the business district. Having attractive, activated commercial buildings conveys a sense of care and economic well-being.

The continued rehabilitation of commercial buildings was noted in the community survey as a top priority for future investments. Residents feel a renewed sense of energy in Uptown with the recent exterior transformation of many facades and hope to see that work continue. Survey respondents pointed to vacant storefronts and residential conversions as concerns for Uptown's future.

Due to the cost of renovating historic buildings, it is often necessary to provide financial support to generate reinvestment. The funds may include layered financing that includes CDBG grants with credits such as workforce housing tax credits and/or historic tax credits. The following recommendations aim to direct financial incentives to ensure that buildings are structurally sound, visually appealing, and provide housing critically needed to grow Creston.



The Agnew Building, located on Maple Street, is a strong candidate for worthwhile reinvestment



## FACADE IMPROVEMENT INCENTIVE PROGRAM

The improvement of building facades serves multiple purposes: improving the appearance and longevity of the historic buildings; promoting reinvestment in the structural envelope and increasing the viability of upper story occupancy; improving the ability to recruit new businesses; and increasing the likelihood that patrons will stay longer and return more often.

Twelve buildings in Uptown have recently completed - or are in the process of completing - facade renovations thanks to CDBG funding made available through the Iowa Economic Development Authority. While this is a great start and is making a visible difference, there is a significant opportunity to bring reinvestment to the remaining buildings. Efforts should continue to prioritize rehabilitating commercial buildings in Uptown. The City of Creston should also consider the development of design guidelines to ensure that projects are appropriate to the context of the district, including the historic character of Uptown.



Top: 107 Maple (Greens N' Things) and 411 W. Adams (Creston Arts) are two recent facades recently updated through a grant made available by IEDA.

Below: The facades of 109 and 111 Maple are candidates for restoration to expose historic materials and storefronts.



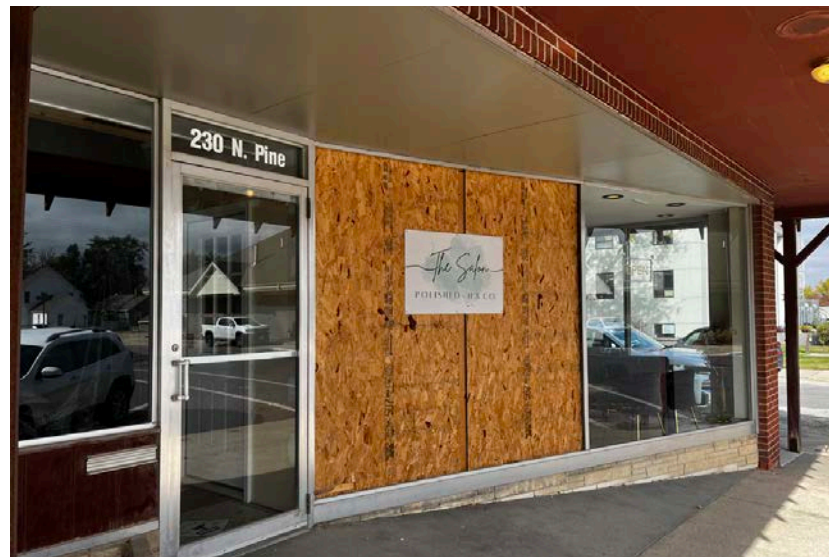
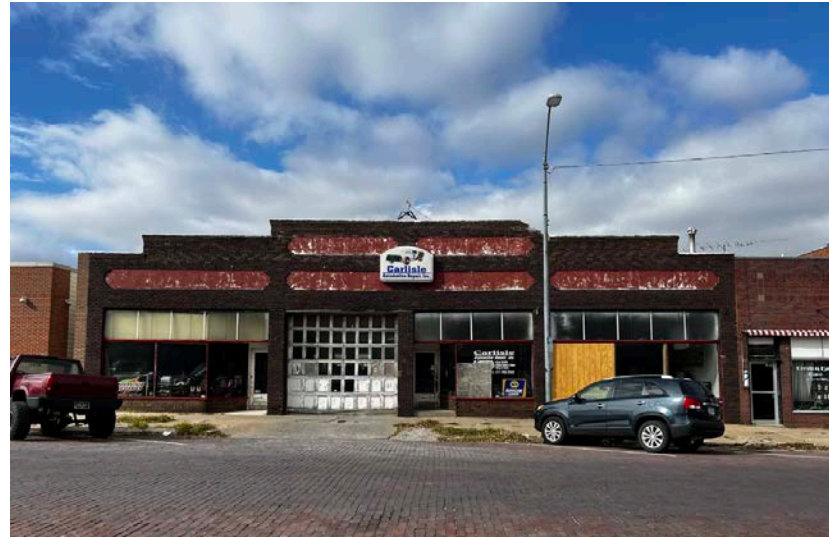
## BUILDING STABILIZATION AND WEATHERIZATION

The City of Creston recently spent \$650,000 for demolition of 118-120 Maple Street in the 100 block of North Maple after the building was in danger of collapse. What was once a tax-generating property is now a vacant lot and missing tooth on the most valuable block of the Uptown District.

Investments in commercial buildings should be prioritized to ensure that properties are structurally sound and weather-tight to protect the public interest. Ensure that the building envelope including the building façade, common walls, alley wall, the roof, and exterior windows and doors are structurally sound and safe from further deterioration due to the elements. A small investment in weatherproofing can save future buildings from public demolition.



118-120 Maple Street in 2016, prior to demolition.



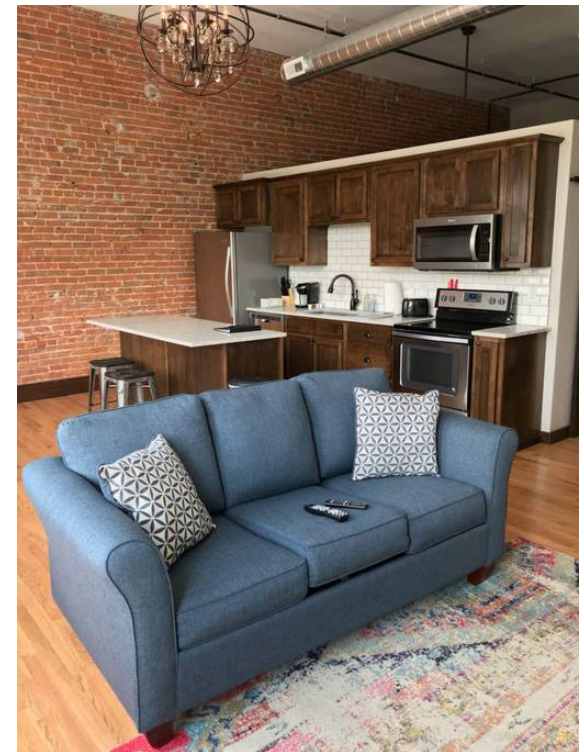
Windows at Carlisle's Auto Repair (top) and 230 N. Pine Street have been broken for several years without repair. These photos were taken in September 2023. The broken windows appear in Google Streetview from September 2021.



## UPPER-STORY HOUSING

Housing is a key element of most downtown revitalization programs and is important to this plan's vision of Uptown as a lively mixed-use neighborhood. Providing upper story housing units in Uptown provides stable rental income to building owners, which is often critical in making a financial pro-forma for building renovations work. Upper story housing helps fulfill a community need for workforce housing and builds a stronger customer base to support restaurants and other businesses in the Uptown core.

Nearly a dozen upper-level units have been added in recent years and an estimated thirty or more could feasibly be constructed in the next several years. Not all community members feel that upper-level housing is a benefit to Uptown, citing concerns about the potential inhabitants as well as the additional parking needs that could impact business owners. In the past, there have been poor examples of upper-level housing that existed in Uptown. Conversions of storefronts into lower-level residential units has also reinforced these concerns. Recently-renovated units provide an example of what upper-story housing can look like when adequate resources are directed to improvements. These units are great opportunities to support housing for teachers, nurses, artists, and young professionals in your community as well as adults that simply prefer an urban living environment free of yardwork. They can also be used for short-term rental housing for visitors to Creston. Consider hosting an Uptown Upper-Level Tour to showcase the quality units that have been created.



Above: Upper-level living spaces on Maple Street  
Top Right: Upper-level living space above The Roundhouse  
Right: Upper-level living space in Dunlap, Iowa



## HISTORIC DISTRICT NOMINATION

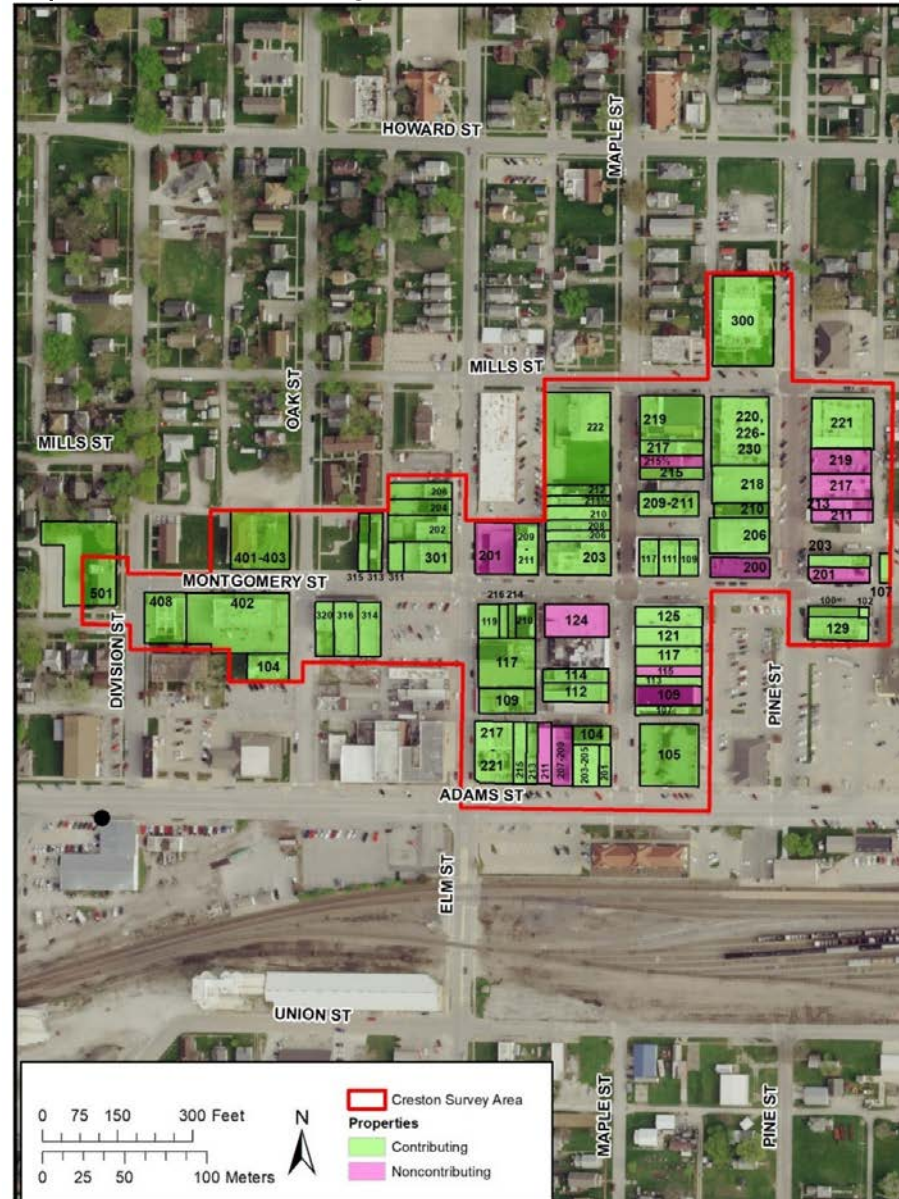
In 2021, the Office of the State Archaeologist completed a Historic Architectural Survey to evaluate the historic significance of 74 properties in Uptown Creston. The work was supported in part by a Certified Local Government grant, and project assistance was provided by members of the Creston Historic Preservation Commission. The report recommends a boundary for a proposed historic district nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Advancing a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places is strongly recommended. Once a historic district is established, properties of historic significance qualify for state and federal historic tax credits that can help fund the rehabilitation of buildings in Uptown. To receive historic tax credits, rehabilitation must comply with historic standards as determined by architects with the State Historic Preservation Office. Rehabilitation of The Iowana and City Hall have been assisted with historic tax credits.



Three buildings in Uptown are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Depot was listed on the National Register in 1974 when it was restored and repurposed for Creston's City Hall. The former United States Post Office was listed in 1978. The Iowana Hotel was listed in 2009. Jefferson Elementary School, located just two blocks north and east of the study area, was listed in 2002.

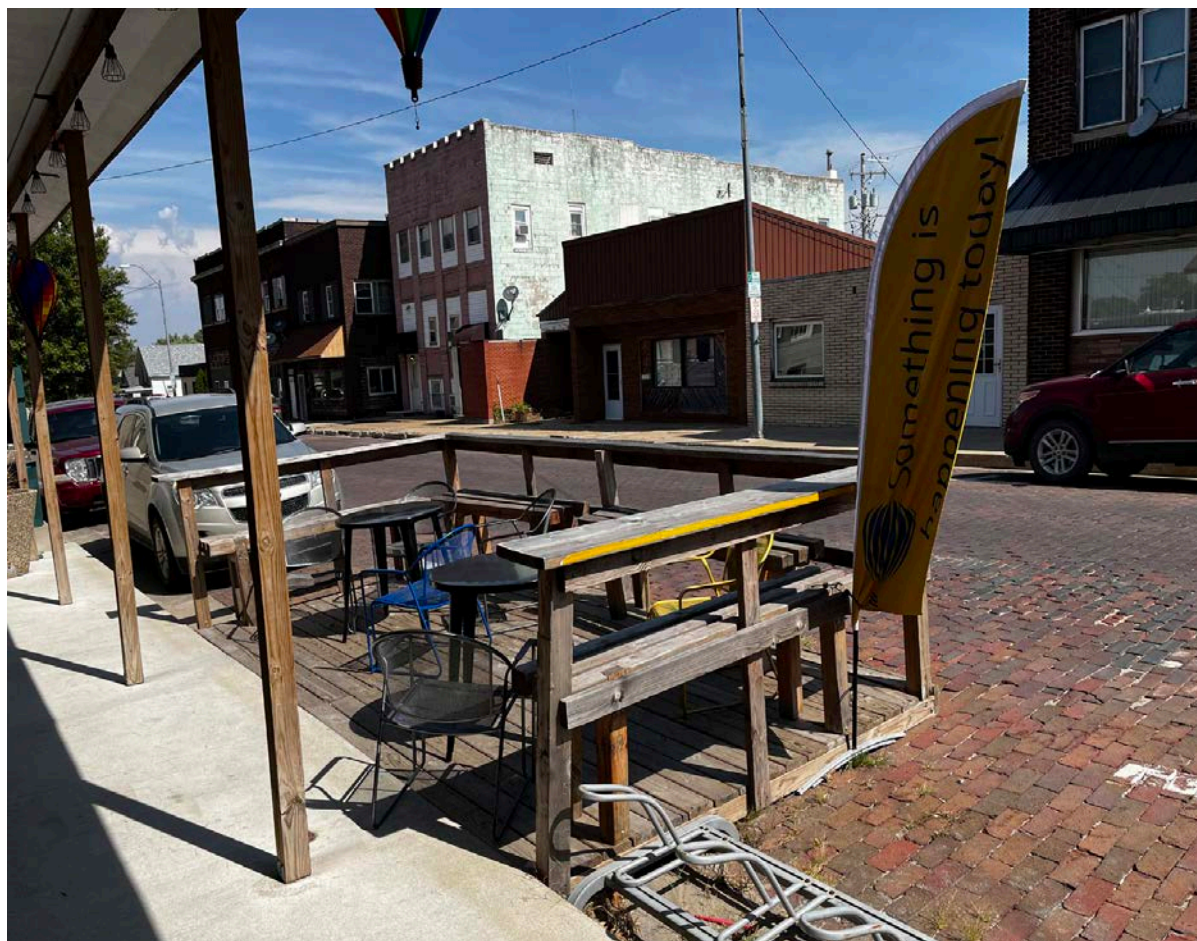
Map4.1: Potential National Register Historic District



The red outline depicts a potential National Register Historic District. Properties in green are contributing historic structures and would be eligible for Historic Tax Credits.  
Source: Intensive Level Historic A

## BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Small businesses form the foundation of any community main street, and Uptown Creston is no exception. With the excitement of new businesses opening in Uptown in recent years, there have also been some notable closures including multiple restaurants. The movie theater has been closed for an extended period of time while improvements are being made. Another restaurant will be leaving Uptown soon to relocate to the Highway 34 corridor. Approximately one-third of Uptown storefronts currently sit vacant. Once a building struggles with vacancy and lack of rental income, it becomes even more difficult to invest in its upkeep. As buildings deteriorate, it can be more difficult to attract tenants. Vacant buildings in disrepair often become repurposed for storage use and perhaps worse - the storefronts are converted to residential uses. This cycle can be challenging to overcome. Stable, long-term tenants are important to the continued revitalization of Uptown. Creating the social culture and physical environment to support local small businesses and foster entrepreneurship should be a priority of ongoing revitalization efforts.





## EXPAND SMALL BUSINESS GRANT PROGRAM

The Union County Development Association, in partnership with the Creston Chamber of Commerce, currently offers a Small Business Start-Up Grant. The program provides up to \$1,000 in operating grant funds. The grant comes with a number of limitations, including the businesses must be within its first year of operations, the business must have three or fewer full time employees, and other additional requirements. It is recommended that the Small Business Grant program be extended, both in award size and to a broader scope of small businesses.

An award size of \$5,000 or more would help businesses further pursue their plans, and with the money reinvested into Uptown Creston and its buildings, the money would continue to circulate in and boost the local economy.

Widening the scope of who is able to apply for funding to businesses that have been open for longer than one year would encourage new and seasoned business owners alike to fill the gaps of needs to keep doors open and storefronts full. The grant should also provide assistance for interior renovations, signage, and equipment to help defray the risks of opening and operating a business in Uptown.



Three Little Birds window display in Uptown Creston



New bookstore coming to Maple Street.



The Wishing Well is a small business located on Adams Street



Patrons recently enjoying Trivia Night at Hot Air Brewery

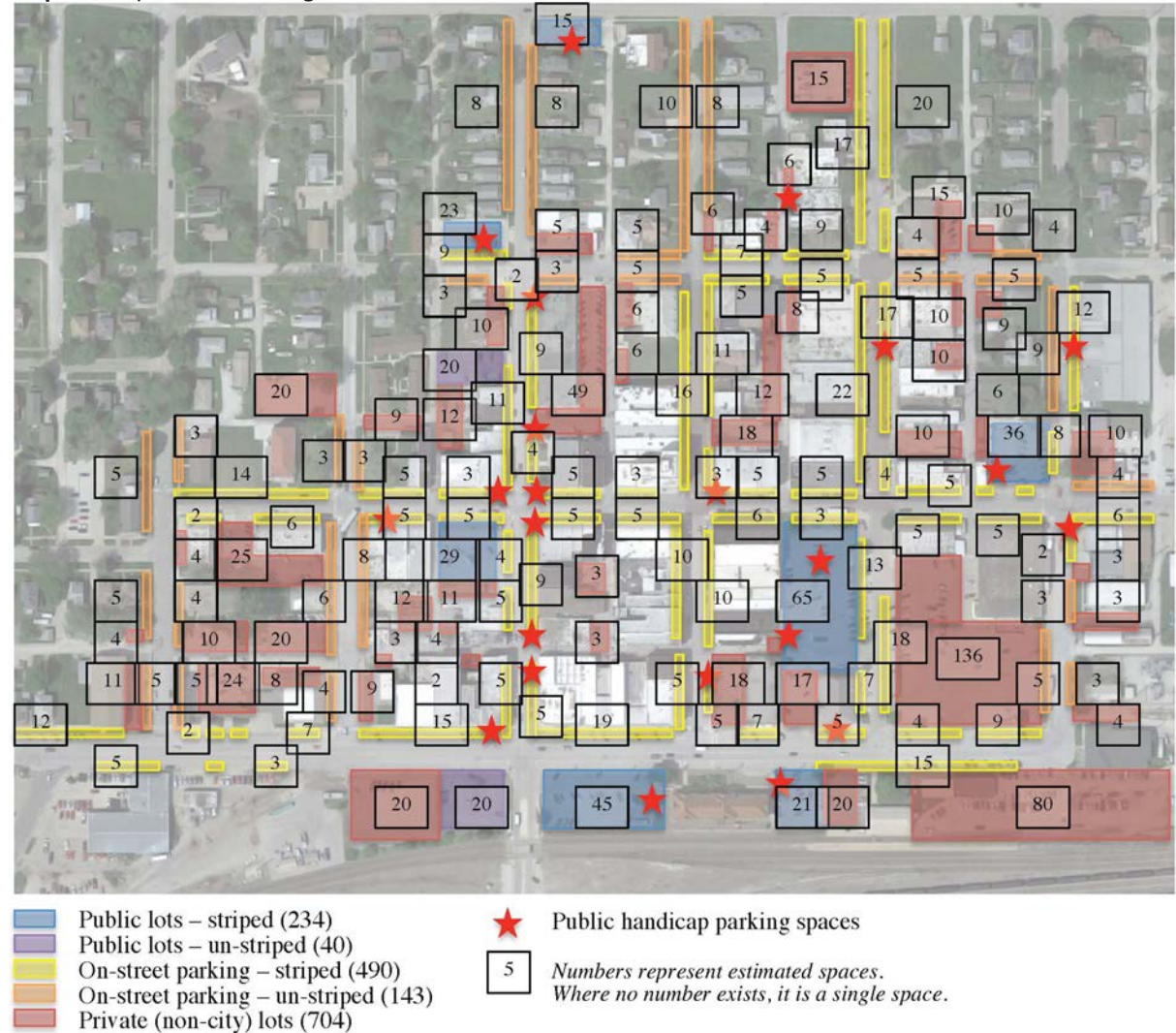
## DISTRICT PARKING STRATEGY

Parking is inevitably seen as a top priority, particularly for businesses along Maple and Montgomery Streets. The number of parking spaces within the Uptown neighborhood is more than adequate; a study conducted in 2019 found more than 1,500 parking spaces in Uptown Creston. Even without private lots, there are 907 parking spaces in the district. Yet, in the 2023 Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan Public Survey, residents and business owners alike shared comments and concerns about parking availability in Uptown.

When visiting a big box store, the nearest parking spaces to the front door - those typically reserved for patrons with disabilities - are typically a minimum of 60-feet to 70-feet away from the entrance. An able-bodied patron typically walks 150-feet or more to a front door. In terms of Uptown, this would be the equivalent of parking a half block away. Rather than a focus on the number of parking spaces available, attention should be turned to employing strategies that make a walk between parking and storefronts a more pleasant and enjoyable experience. Enhancing the quality of the public realm with trees and landscaping, fixing deteriorated sidewalks, filling vacant storefronts with artwork, and improving lighting are all means to create a more attractive environment that encourages patrons to explore Uptown. Also consider signage to direct patrons to public parking lots.

To accommodate parking needs of upper-story housing residents, consider additional strategies. Work with landlords to designate parking in public lots or create shared parking agreements in private lots for overnight hours. Provide residents with required window stickers and provide “friendly citations” if needed. Having an Uptown Business Association can also open communication channels between businesses and landlords.

Map 4.2: Uptown Parking Infrastructure, 2019



Source: Creston 2040 Comprehensive Plan



## WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

Installing directional wayfinding graphics to direct residents and visitors alike to Uptown and inform them of the many destinations Uptown Creston has to offer.

The signage system should be a two-tiered system: one that is legible for motorists to read, and one oriented to pedestrians walking around Uptown. Placements should be near decision-making points for travelers, such as the intersections of Adams Street and Sumner Street, Adams Street and Maple Street, Howard Street and Maple Street, and/or any other key intersection identified by the City. Signage should also direct visitors to Uptown from Highway 34.

The signage system should be coordinated in color and theme. The signs should pay nod to Creston's heritage as a railroad town or its newfound identity as an arts community. Recommendations for developing a logo and motto are included later in this plan.



Covered entrance to building on Maple Street.



Vacant commercial buildings provide an opportunity for window art and/or advertising

## VACANT BUILDING WINDOW ART PROGRAM

Approximately one out of every three commercial buildings in Uptown Creston currently sits vacant. As a pedestrian, walking by multiple vacant storefronts to get to a desired destination is not enjoyable.

Vacant storefronts have the opportunity to be activated with art to improve the overall experience of walking in Uptown Creston. Other Iowa communities such as Atlantic, Fairfield, and Mason City are already taking advantage of such programs to enhance their business districts.

Building owners may be able to partner with local artists to fill their window displays with creativity. Art style and medium may vary, from blown glass, to sculptural pieces, to painting, to shadow boxes. A mixture of different art styles and mediums are encouraged to ensure passersby enjoy the program.

Alternatively, to fill existing empty storefronts, businesses may opt to advertise in storefronts in addition to their own. For example, a clothing boutique on Pine Street may elect to borrow space in the empty storefront of an Adams Street building for additional advertising. This will help existing business owners reach potential patrons that may not regularly stop by their business, and help the overall feeling of Uptown appear to have less vacancy. Consider paying a small stipend to property owners, if necessary, to encourage participation in a window art program.

## UPTOWN EVENTS AND DISTRICT NIGHTS

The public survey found Uptown events to be wildly popular. Market on Maple, the annual wine walk, and Fiesta on Maple have been especially well-received. What makes these events so unique is that they block off sections of Maple Street, creating a temporary pedestrian mall for shoppers to enjoy both existing brick and mortar stores, and tables and tents with other local businesses, makers, and artists. Building off of the success of these events, other annual events could be added to the community calendar to bring more life to Uptown across all seasons. Potential holidays and celebrations to build events off of include an annual street festival on the anniversary of Creston's founding, Small Business Saturday, and Back to School season. In order to activate the street on a more consistent basis, moving the local farmer's market from McKinley Park to Maple Street is also recommended.

The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan Public Survey also found that one of the greatest barriers Creston residents have to shopping Uptown is the limited hours businesses are open. In years past, Uptown Creston businesses elected to work together to stay open late one night a week. This gave working people the opportunity to spend their evenings supporting the local small businesses in the district. It is recommended that Uptown business owners bring back this tradition and choose one day out of the week to keep their businesses open to patrons until 7:00 or 8:00 pm. Offering this once-a-week opportunity to working residents will allow for more money to be spent in local businesses, further boosting the local economy.



Merry Marketplace attendees in front of City Hall  
Photo by Chloe Thompson Photography



Market on Maple attracts hundreds of visitors to Uptown in May  
Photo by Chloe Thompson Photography



The annual Balloon Days Parade takes place in September



Activating vacant lots as a temporary performance venue during Uptown Events has been popular in the past. Local and/or regional talent should be used to bring in and engage attendees.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

As a communal resource, it is in the public interest that the infrastructure of Uptown remains in good condition. Some steps are already being taken by the City to work towards updated infrastructure.

The City of Creston approved plans in 2023 to replace the water mains in the Uptown District. The existing water main in the neighborhood dates back to the 19th century, and improvements are imperative to provide buildings with adequate water pressure and supply. This paramount project will help to provide historic buildings with modern-day amenities.

While streets are torn up for infrastructure upgrades underneath, the City should give consideration to the way in which streets and sidewalks are put back into place. These are opportunities to move curbs or widen sidewalks, add bumpouts, and consider other streetscape enhancements that are not only functional but improve the overall appearance of Uptown. Costs are minimized by aligning these efforts.

Recommended strategies to improve infrastructure include new sidewalks and evaluating Uptown lighting to ensure appropriate lighting levels. Each recommended infrastructure project will benefit the community in stabilizing Uptown and preparing it for future prosperity.



The City of Creston has recently repaved the surface of many alleys throughout Uptown.



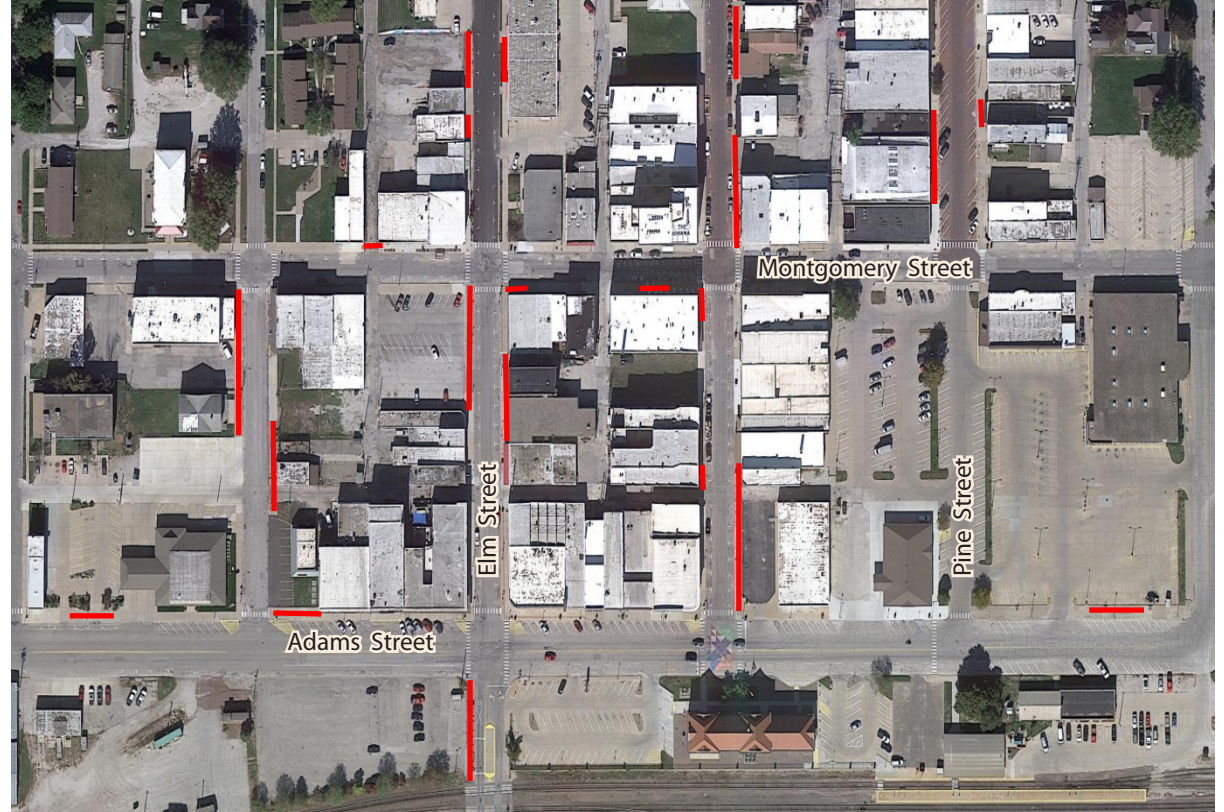
## COMMERCIAL DISTRICT SIDEWALK REPLACEMENT

In the survey of 309 Creston residents and stakeholders, improving sidewalks was identified as the top priority of nine potential physical improvements. In the Uptown commercial district, approximately 1,740 linear feet of existing sidewalk was determined to be of poor or deteriorated condition and needing replacement.

Sidewalk replacement in commercial areas goes hand-in-hand with beautification efforts. Sidewalk widths vary throughout the district but generally measure 12 feet in width. This distance provides ample room to incorporate flower beds or street furnishings such as flower pots and benches. The general recommendation is to provide a minimum of 6 feet of clear space for pedestrians, although 8 feet may be more appropriate in areas of higher pedestrian traffic. The remaining 3-4 feet of space can be dedicated to streetscape elements. The recent site improvements to The Roundhouse provide an example of the positive impact that simple planters have when integrated into the design.

Prior to any further sidewalk improvements in Uptown, the City should establish design guidelines and require that streetscape elements be configured into new construction

**Map4.3: Commercial District Sidewalk Conditions**



Sidewalks in poor or deteriorated condition are noted in red.



Right: Broken sidewalk in the 200 block of Maple Street.

Far Right: Landscape beds are integrated into the walkway surrounding The Roundhouse.







Above: Sidewalk conditions across Uptown

## LIGHTING ASSESSMENT

In both focus group discussions as well as the community survey, residents indicated that improving lighting in Uptown would enhance a sense of personal safety in the evening hours. The City may want to explore having a lighting assessment conducted to determine if light levels are adequate, or if supplemental lighting is needed. It may be a simple solution, if necessary, to increase the bulb wattage in the ornamental fixtures. A lighting assessment will test light levels and light quality, and provide recommendations for improvements, if needed.



A view of Maple Street at night



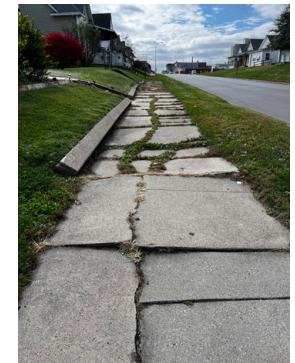
## RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT SIDEWALK REPLACEMENT

Improving walkability in Creston is an identified goal of elected officials and residents alike. In September 2022, the City of Creston adopted a sidewalk ordinance to establish standards for sidewalk conditions along with requirements for maintaining and replacing sidewalks. Throughout the public engagement process, sidewalks were noted as one of the highest priorities to be addressed.

Due to the lack of a sidewalk ordinance previously, sidewalks have been allowed to deteriorate significantly, especially in the residential blocks surrounding the Uptown commercial center. In many cases, the sidewalks consist of the original brick sidewalk dating back to the late 1800s. If maintained, the brick sidewalks alongside properly rehabbed historic homes would contribute significantly to a sense of place. Instead, the walks are uneven and buried under grass. Newer concrete walks are also in poor condition across many properties. The City understands the need to replace the walks but has yet to determine the best route to do so. It is worth noting that constructing new sidewalks is an allowable expenditure with CDBG funding. The City may want to consider a minimal cost-share program with residents willing to participate in a sidewalk replacement program. For those unwilling to participate voluntarily, the City should be prepared to replace sidewalks and assess to property owners. To truly improve walkability, sidewalks need to be contiguous. Replacing only a portion of sidewalks on any given street does little to enhance safety or mobility.

An estimated 5,000 linear feet of sidewalk need (re)construction in the residential district, as identified on the map at right.

**Map 4.4: Residential District Sidewalk Conditions**





## BEAUTIFICATION AND COMMUNITY IMAGE

When Creston residents, business owners, property owners, and visitors were asked what they would prioritize most with potential grant funding, “Beautifying Uptown with trees, flowers, art, and new gathering spaces (ie: creating a park near the caboose, or adding pocket parks along Maple Street)” was the most popular number one response. This priority option earned 87 number one votes, while the second highest priority (Renovating aging and deteriorating commercial buildings) earned 62. Many of the survey’s open-ended responses referenced the charm and appearance of neighboring communities or other places visited such as Corning, Winterset, Valley Junction, Marshalltown and Pella. Improving the overall community image of Uptown Creston is clearly a desire from the community. People want Uptown to be a true destination district and to enjoy their time spent in Uptown.

Focusing on beautification improvements is a worthwhile investment. Improving the appearance of Uptown’s public realm encourages private property owners to invest in their buildings and outdoor spaces. An attractive district improves the ability to recruit new businesses and increases the likelihood that patrons will stay longer and return more often. Communities with vibrant and attractive downtown districts provide a higher quality of life, which also helps attract potential employers to a community.

Beautification **IS** economic development.





## ADAMS STREET LINEAR PARK

McKinley Park is a well-loved regional park located one mile directly west of Uptown on Adams Street. The Update Uptown Committee established a vision for the Adams Street Linear Park that aims to connect Uptown to McKinley Park, improving connectivity for the community and helping to draw visitors to Uptown from Lake McKinley. The Adams Street Linear Park also strives to beautify a particularly unattractive yet highly visible corridor in the community and further showcase the renovated historic depot. The multi-use path will allow people of all ages to safely walk, jog, bike and roll from one place to the other.

Moving forward, the Implementation Task Force should consider engaging with a professional landscape architect or engineer to further study the area and develop construction drawings. Adams Street is a good candidate for a road diet, eliminating the turn lane. Additional park space may be able to be acquired on the south side of the proposed path. This would allow for additional green space that would further enhance both the use and appearance of the park. Any parking that remains can simply be restriped.



Adams Street Linear Park as imagined in the future  
Rendering courtesy of Common Ground and Update Uptown



Adams Street Linear Park as imagined in the future  
Rendering courtesy of Common Ground and Update Uptown



Adams Street current conditions

## CABOOSE PARK IMPROVEMENTS

Creston has a rich railroad history that is celebrated in the community. Caboose Park features a historic Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad caboose that sits on the south side of Adams Street. The caboose and the land it sits on is owned by the BNSF Railroad, but is leased to the City of Creston indefinitely on a zero dollar lease. The park has great potential to pay ode to Creston's railroad town heritage. However, the existing site is in poor condition and not connected to other rail-themed destinations such as the depot. Caboose Park sits along the proposed Adams Street Linear Park and could serve as a trailhead for cyclists. The proposed park improvements include repaired brick paving, lighting, seating, and landscaping.

The Implementation Task Force is encouraged to visit the newly-constructed Waveland Trolley Loop in Des Moines. The Trolley Loop is an interpretive site that pays tribute to the streetcar and its role in the expansion of early neighborhoods across the City. The Trolley Loop is located on the site of a former trolley turnaround - the only extant site remaining in Des Moines. Interpretive signage tells the story of the streetcar system, while the paving delineates the rail lines themselves. Many design cues from the Trolley Loop could be incorporated into a Caboose Park interpretive site.

Like the Adams Street Linear Park, a more detailed site plan will need to be developed.



Caboose Park as imagined in the future  
Rendering courtesy of Common Ground and Update Uptown



Existing Caboose Park



Waveland Trolley Loop interpretive site in Des Moines is an example for Creston to consider.



## STREETSCAPE ENHANCEMENTS

Streetscape improvements are often a longer-term strategy to beautifying a commercial district. As mentioned previously, however, if sidewalks or streets are to be torn up, these are perfect opportunities to put back infrastructure in a condition better and more aesthetically pleasing than it was before. Integrating landscape beds into sidewalks for trees and flowers can make a big visual impact, as can special paving details such as brick banding. Careful thought must be put into the design as Maple Street has a narrow right-of-way and parallel parking. Vehicle passengers need to be able to open doors and exit vehicles without stepping into flowers and shrubs.

Other opportunities to beautify the streets in Uptown are more easily implemented in the short term. Christmas decorations currently adorn the streetlights throughout Uptown, creative a festive atmosphere. For year round color, consider banners. Street furnishings such as trash receptacles, benches, bike racks and flower pots are practical and can be selected from a manufacturer's collection for a cohesive visual impact.

Bump-outs are a very simple and relatively low-cost way to enliven the streetscape and areas to place them are already delineated along Adams Street. Bump-outs are an extension of a curb at an intersection, typically found at pedestrian crossings. Areas along Adams Street that are striped yellow for "no parking" are exactly where bump-outs would be found. Installing bumpouts in these locations would require removing existing paving and subbase, installing new curbs, amending the soil, and adding landscaping.



Vision for Maple Street with Streetscape enhancements and potential new development in the vacant lot. Rendering courtesy of Common Ground and Update Uptown



Street furnishings can be added in the interim of full streetscape efforts



Bump-outs can be added to Adams Street relatively inexpensively. Example photo is from Mitchell, South Dakota. Snowplows are able to navigate around the bumpouts.





## POCKET PARKS

A desire of the community found in the Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan public survey is additional gathering spaces in the neighborhood, including pocket parks in the currently vacant lots along Maple Street. A pocket park is defined as a “very small park or outdoor area for public leisure.”

Pocket parks throughout Uptown Creston would activate currently unused lots, providing residents and visitors with a gathering space and shared outdoor amenity. The pocket parks could be activated in a number of ways, limited only by imagination. Ideas include passive uses such as landscaping and seating or a sculpture garden. Active recreational uses such as playground equipment, bocci ball, or a putt-putt golf course are fun for all ages. Pocket parks can focus on temporary placemaking opportunities or long-term permanent improvements. There is no right or wrong way to activate vacant land into a space to be enjoyed by all.



Creston residents indicated a desire for more family-friendly activities in Uptown. Consider a public putt-putt golf course!  
Source: UrbanCrazy



This vacant lot on Maple Street has the potential to be activated as a pocket park.



With shade structures and lighting, this lot on Montgomery Street has already taken steps to become a pocket park.



## ALLEY LIGHTING

Enhancing the sense of safety in Uptown ranked in the middle of desired priorities in the Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan public survey. Specifically, respondents indicated that the streets in Uptown are dimly and perhaps inadequately lit, and many pedestrians navigate Uptown through the alleyways. Implementing and improving lighting in alleyways would not just help pedestrians feel more secure, but would make the spaces a more enjoyable place to be.

Lighting in the alleyways may be utilized to feature the already-existing mural work in the area. Visitors come from all over the region to see the artwork in Uptown Creston, and extending the hours its able to be enjoyed would be a positive, especially in the darker winter months. Alternatively, the lighting may be artwork itself, and serve as another piece of art in the already colorful alleyways.



Outdoor lighting illuminates a mural in the Drake Neighborhood of Des Moines



Lighted mural in a Philadelphia alleyway  
Muralist: David Guinn, Lighting Designer: Drew Billiau



Edison bulbs stretched between buildings may be a quick, cost effective way to light alleyways in uptown  
Rendering courtesy of Common Ground and Update Uptown



## LIBRARY PAVILION ENHANCEMENTS

In 2023, the Creston City Council voted to approve the construction of an outdoor pavilion on the lawn south of the Gibson Memorial Library. The pavilion's approval has been long-awaited; the Library Legacy Committee first explored an expansion to the library in 2016. Public support for the library addition failed a bond referendum. As costs for construction of a permanent addition became unattainable, the Committee turned its focus on an open-air structure. The project is anticipated to be completed in 2024. The addition of the pavilion will expand the number of programs the library is able to provide its patrons.

Additional site improvements are needed, including additional parking, sidewalks, landscaping, seating, tables and lighting. Opportunities to incorporate art such as murals, mosaic, or sculpture into the space would visually connect the Library to the commercial buildings of Uptown.

Expanding internet access for patrons to utilize wi-fi outside of the library would also be a benefit to Creston residents.



Current rendering of the soon-to-be Gibson Memorial Library Pavilion  
Source: KSIB



The mural on this pavilion located in Schuetzen Park in Davenport celebrates the area's natural wildlife and foliage. A mural on the library's pavilion may pay tribute to famous authors, or Creston's railroad history.  
Source: Schuetzen Park Historic Site

## HOUSING

Part of what makes Uptown Creston desirable is the blend of commercial and residential use in a compact area. Having adequate affordable housing in Uptown impacts the quality of life for residents, persuades people interested in moving to the area, and provides workforce housing to benefit businesses seeking to recruit and retain employees.

Uptown Creston homes vary from small, upper story units above commercial spaces, to modest one- to three- bedroom single-family homes, to larger historic homes with three or more bedrooms. Many homes in Uptown will require rehabilitation efforts to stabilize and rejuvenate the structures. Other vacant lots in the area are great candidates for new builds. Strategies will alter home to home, and block to block, but all share one goal: returning Uptown Creston to a neighborhood residents want to live in.





## HOUSING REHAB PROGRAM

Housing conditions throughout Creston are a concern of nearly all residents and stakeholders that participated in this planning process. Much of Creston's housing stock dates back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, when it was constructed as affordable workforce housing to serve the influx of employees of the railroad. Over time, major investments are required to ensure the homes remain in good condition. For a number of reasons, these investments have been deferred. The owner may be unable to pay for the renovations. A bank is likely unwilling to loan money for renovations that will not pay for themselves if/when the house is sold. It may be difficult to invest in a property when neighboring properties are in deteriorated condition.

Houses that are structurally sound and need relatively minor improvements are strong candidates for housing rehabilitation. A housing rehabilitation grant program - rather than a loan - is most likely to be effective in the Uptown study area. Costs may range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 or upwards per house, depending on condition and size of the home. Consider offering grants with a 50/50 match to homeowners, and perhaps a slightly lesser match to landlords that have a good track record in the community. Keep in mind that having quality rental housing is also important in Creston. Focus should be given to addressing structural needs and exterior improvements such as foundations, paint, siding, windows, roofs and gutters. You may also give consideration to improving or constructing garages or sheds for those that don't have them. Allow the homeowner or property owner to apply for funds and complete the work in phases, understanding that they may have limited funds to spend upfront.

Des Moines launched InvestDSM, a new nonprofit, to address housing conditions in targeted neighborhoods such as this Uptown project area. They provide a variety of programs that may be a model for Creston.



## NEW HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

The construction of new housing is vital to stabilizing and improving overall housing conditions in Creston. Based on a windshield survey conducted by the consultant team, to confirm or adjust assessor data, there are nearly a dozen houses in the residential study area that are in very poor condition. Thirty more are in below average condition. Depending on the interior conditions of these deteriorated structures, rehabilitating these houses may not make financial sense. In this case, identifying partners to acquire, demolish, and construct new housing units is advisable. A realistic goal is to target two to three houses for acquisition, demolition and new construction within the study area each year.

The cost of these activities is likely greater than what a new house can sell for under current market conditions. Depending on the cost of acquisition and demolition, a realistic gap is in the range of \$30,000 to \$50,000 per house.

It is worth noting that if the structure to be acquired is a rental property, relocation costs are an approved use of CDBG funds.





## INFILL DEVELOPMENT

It cannot be stated enough - Creston must grow its tax base if it wants to provide adequate levels of service to community residents now and in the future. While new housing is constructed on the edge of the community, the costs of providing physical infrastructure – streets, water, sewer and utilities – to those new developments are significant. Meanwhile, small and deteriorated houses sit on large lots in established neighborhoods near Uptown. The value per acre of these blocks is limited – the property taxes generated are only a fraction of the cost required to provide services there. This strategy is not financially solvent. The City must re-evaluate its position regarding the vacant lots that are pervasive through Creston and consider new strategies for infill development.

Unfortunately, many of these vacant lots were considered to be unbuildable due to their size, and as such they were sold to neighboring property owners for use as an expanded side yard. In reality, parcels as narrow as 40-feet in width are buildable. This is the benefit of the existing alley network present in Creston. Garages and driveways are serviced by the alley, saving valuable street frontage for the housing unit. Forty-foot and fifty-foot lots are very common in metropolitan urban neighborhoods. There is a market for buyers that prefer smaller yards and maintenance in return for compact, highly walkable neighborhoods.

In the study area, there are three vacant lots owned by Union County at the corner of Pine and Howard Streets. The combined lots have a total of 169 feet of street frontage. Union County has owned these parcels since 2000. As an exempt owner, no property taxes are collected on these vacant lots. The City of Creston should confer with the County to understand what the long-term plan is for these parcels. If the County does not plan to build a structure, it would be a measurable boost for the community to construct additional

housing here. If the County's intent is to construct a parking lot, the City should consider allowing the existing on-street parking spaces in lieu of off-street parking. Additionally, there is a church parking lot directly across from the Courthouse on the north side of Howard Street. A shared parking agreement between the County and the Church may be a win/win/win for the City, County, and church.



This bungalow court was constructed by Habitat for Humanity in Des Moines. Each house sits on a lot that is 42 feet wide. Drive access is provided in the rear of each home.



This vacant lot on Division Street measures 120 feet in width. The City sold it to a neighbor for \$300 in 2015. Constructing infill development on these vacant lots would create a more vibrant, walkable neighborhood, if re-acquisition is possible.





Development of this vacant lot could yield four single-family houses or five townhome units. With a valuation of \$900,000, the City would gain an additional \$7,000 in tax revenue annually. Creston Community Schools, SWICC, and the hospital also collect additional revenues.





## NEIGHBORHOOD CLEANUP

Many realize the importance of a clean community in Creston as well as the impression left on those who visit and pass through the area. The City of Creston, Creston Chamber of Commerce and Waste Management partner to sponsor Clean Sweep Days in May. During this time, Creston residents are able to pay an additional fee to have large items picked up from the curb. Costs range from \$6 for a sofa or mattress to \$30 for a console television.

Creston should expand the program to provide an annual event free of cost to residents. The City of Des Moines offers a SCRUB program that is worth modeling. The Des Moines program provides large dumpsters that are set out in accessible locations around the city. Those who show a proper form of identification with their local residency are allowed to dispose of their items free of charge. Hazardous waste items and tires are also collected at SCRUB. The City of Des Moines pays for this expense with CDBG funds. Provid



Many yards in the Uptown area have large items littered in lawns. Providing an opportunity for residents to dispose of these free of charge would help improve the image of Creston.

## VOLUNTEER HOUSING REHAB PROGRAM

When homeowners have deferred maintenance on their homes, it may be because they are physically unable to complete the work themselves. It can also be difficult to find contractors to perform the work. These hurdles were brought up in several of the focus group discussions. Creating a volunteer group dedicated to helping these individuals is a great way to boost the curb appeal of homes, help residents in need, and build a stronger sense of community. Habitat for Humanity's Rock the Block program, Hearts & Hammers, and Rebuilding Together are three nonprofit organizations that can serve as a model in Creston. Local employers, churches, civic organizations, and student groups are great opportunities to line up volunteers for work days. The program may go hand-in-hand with the Chamber's Paint Creston Beautification Program.



Volunteer with Habitat for Humanity Rock the Block  
Photo by Habitat for Humanity

## LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS

For revitalization efforts in Uptown to continue and be sustainable, it takes the work of many groups and individuals working together towards a common vision and goals. It became evident during the focus group meetings that while most residents and community leaders are very supportive of continued improvements in Uptown, Creston remains a divided community. As one survey respondent noted, “We all seem to work in silos.” It seems that misunderstandings may result from a lack of clear communication, confusion of responsibilities amongst the City and partner organizations, and perhaps even mistrust. Focusing attention on enhanced leadership and communications can work to unite - or at least better inform - the community. As cliché as it may sound, “Teamwork makes the dream work!”. Building the team of doers and supporters in Creston is instrumental in continued progress.

### BROADEN HOUSING DIRECTOR SCOPE

Gaps in communication between City staff and the outside community was identified as an ongoing challenge, primarily because of the limited capacity of existing staff who already wear many hats and are stretched thin. The City of Creston recently hired a new Director of Housing Development. Because of the City’s limited budget, the position is funded by donors with a three year commitment, and benefits provided by the City. If supported by donors, consider expanding the position and scope to that of “Housing and Community Development Director” or a similar role and title. A Community Development Director is typically responsible for working closely with community partners such as businesses, development organizations and the public in creating plans and strategies to advance community goals and initiatives. Formalizing this title designates the new staff as a point person for advancing community initiatives and projects such as those identified in this plan.

### STRENGTHEN OUTSIDE COMMUNICATIONS

Improving communication channels between the City, partner organizations, and the general public serves everyone’s best interest. Effective communication is a two-way street involving both giving and receiving of information. For those sharing information, this means that information needs to be proactive, repeated, and presented in numerous places to reach intended audiences. The City recognizes that improving its website to include more information on City projects and initiatives – including those in Uptown and city-wide – would be ideal, but with limited staff it is difficult to manage and prioritize given the many other critical tasks at hand. Likewise, websites of partner organizations can also be difficult to navigate, and it is also unclear what the individual responsibilities of each organization is. It is understandable that a community member seeking information may not know where to go or may otherwise receive mixed messages. Devoting continued time to newsletters and websites can help share information more broadly. Likewise, consider establishing regular forums such as quarterly coffees or roundtable discussions to share information.

### APPLY FOR MAIN STREET IOWA DESIGNATION

Main Street Iowa includes a network of approximately fifty communities across Iowa that work with staff from the Main Street Iowa program under the National Main Street umbrella. Communities are selected to join the network through a competitive application process. Main Street Iowa communities commit to having a paid Director and committees that are focused on the Four Points of main street revitalization: Economic Vitality, Organization, Promotion, and Design. If selected as a Main Street community, Creston benefits from specialized assistance from the Main Street Iowa team, which includes training workshops, architectural and design assistance, business assistance, and numerous other technical assistance opportunities. Having a staff person dedicated solely to the long-term revitalization and stability of Uptown, helping to leverage additional resources, is a great investment for the future of Uptown.



### DEVELOP A CITY LOGO AND MOTTO

As Creston works to boost its sense of identity and community pride, adopting an official logo and motto would be a great first step. A logo and motto affirm the values that Creston residents hold dear and paint the image that Creston residents wish to convey to visitors. It may be interesting to survey residents and visitors to understand how they celebrate Creston. The railroad, Historic Depot, Balloon Days, recreational amenities, “The Heart of the High Lakes”, and an arts hub are all themes that may be explored.

A fun way to develop a motto would be through a community contest. Ask residents of all ages to submit ideas. A task force can sift through the ideas and choose one to move forward with, or further engage with the community to select a final. A City logo should be developed in conjunction with the motto to reinforce the theme visually.

Once a logo and motto are adopted, consider using them on signage throughout the community, as well as on the City’s website and letterhead.







# 5 IMPLEMENTATION

"Find funding. A tech company, pharmaceutical, something. No matter what the answer is here, it will require funding. Our old building(s) have decades of maintenance deferred, infrastructure is heavily aged; the problem however is we cannot please everybody."

- Survey respondent, on their 'big idea' for Uptown

## IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

The Uptown Creston Revitalization Plan presents an ambitious and varied set of projects and programs that will help Uptown take advantage of its full potential. The Plan and its scheduling will inevitably change over time. Some projects may advance as opportunities, funding, or demands open, while others may take time to present themselves as priorities.

Moving forward, it is critical to employ an Implementation Task Force responsible for moving the ideas in this plan forward, whether IEDA grant funding is provided or not. The task force is charged with prioritizing projects, identifying and confirming partners, fundraising, and external communication. The Update Uptown Committee that is operating under the UCDA is likely a natural fit to continue this work. If not already represented, ensure that the task force includes a broad-based coalition of partners consisting of City staff, elected officials, and community partners as well as property owners, business owners, and representatives from community organizations.



## PRIORITY CRITERIA

Deciding where to start can be challenging. This plan establishes a wide array of projects and programs, large and small, for consideration. These projects and programs may be developed incrementally over time and will require setting priorities and evaluating conditions along the way.

The Implementation Task Force should continue to evaluate this plan annually to determine which programs or projects may be eligible for implementation, and which are highest priority based on priority criteria. The evaluative criteria may involve applying the following questions to specific projects at the time of consideration:

- Does the project respond to specific or high-profile community issues or needs?
- Does the project generate maximum private market response?
- What is the project's potential to transform the image of the area and community?
- Does the project attract residents and visitors, increasing business traffic and creating new reasons for people to be Uptown?
- Does the project support the growth of existing businesses?
- Does the project capitalize on established, but undermet, market needs?
- Can the project be realistically implemented within a reasonable time frame with potentially available resources?
- Does the project generate substantial community support or consensus?
- Does the project incorporate and leverage outside funding sources, such as state grants or charitable contributions?



**Table 5.1: Implementation, Commercial Buildings**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
Facade Improvement Incentive Program	\$500,000 - \$700,000	City, Property Owners	City, Grants, Private Funds
Building Stabilization and Weatherization	\$200,000 - \$300,000	City, Property Owners	City, Grants, Private Funds
Upper Story Housing	\$1,000,000 - \$1,300,000	City, Property Owners	CDBG, Grants, Private Funds
Develop Design Standards	\$20,000 - \$25,000	City, SICOG	City, Grants
Historic District Nomination	\$20,000 - \$25,000	City, Historic Preservation Commission, SICOG	City, Grants

**Table 5.2: Implementation, Business Environment**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
District Parking Strategy	Requires Study	City, Business Owners, Property Owners	City, Grants
Expand Small Business Grant Program	\$25,000 - \$50,000	UCDA, Creston Chamber of Commerce	City, Grants
Vacant Building Window Art Program	\$4,000 - \$8,000	Creston Arts, Property Owners	City, Grants
Wayfinding Signage	\$10,000 - \$25,000	City, UCDA, Creston Arts	City, Grants
Uptown Events and District Nights	Self-sustaining	City, UCDA, Creston Chamber of Commerce	N/A

**Table 5.3: Implementation, Infrastructure**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
Commercial District Sidewalk Replacement	\$250,000 - \$300,000	City, Property Owners	City, Private Funds
Lighting Assessment	\$15,000 - \$25,000	City	City
Residential District Sidewalk Replacement	\$230,000 - \$250,000	City, Property Owners	City, CDBG, Grants, Private Funds

**Table 5.4: Implementation, Housing**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
Rehabilitation Program (assumes 12 houses, match costs only)	\$240,000 - \$400,000	City, Greater Regional Health, UCDA, Homeowners	City, Private
Acquisition/Demo/New Construction (assumes 9 houses, gap)	\$270,000 - \$450,000	City, Greater Regional Health, UCDA, Developers	City, Grants, Private Funds
Infill Development (assumes 5 units, gap costs)	\$100,000 - \$200,000	City, Greater Regional Health, UCDA, Developers	City, Grants, Private Funds
Neighborhood Cleanup	\$15,000 - \$20,000	City, Chamber, Greater Regional Health, UCDA	City, Grants
Volunteer Housing Rehab Program	None	City, Chamber, UCDA, Habitat for Humanity, Civic orgs	N/A

**Table 5.5: Implementation, Beautification and Community Image**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
Caboose Park	\$120,000 - \$200,000	City, UCDA, Creston Arts, BNSF	City, Grants, Private Donors
Adams Street Linear Park	\$350,000 - \$450,000	City, UCDA, Creston Arts	City, Grants, Private Donors
Maple and Adams Streetscape Improvements (full design)	\$1,000,000 - \$1,400,000	City, UCDA	City, Grants, Private Donors
• Street Furnishings and Banners only	\$60,000 - \$100,000	City, UCDA	City, Grants, Private Donors
• Adams Street Bumpouts only	\$20,000 - \$40,000	City, UCDA	City, Grants, Private Donors
Pocket Park (assumes one)	\$250,000 - \$350,000	City, UCDA, Property Owners	City, Grants, Private Donors
Alley Lighting	\$10,000 - \$25,000	City, Creston Arts, Property Owners	City, Grants, Private Donors
Library Pavilion Enhancements	\$25,000 - \$50,000	City, Library	City, Library Foundation, Grants, Private Donors

**Table 5.6: Implementation, Leadership and Communications**

Description	Cost Range	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Mechanisms
Broaden Housing Director Scope	None	City, Conover Foundation, Greater Regional Health	N/A
Strengthen Outside Communications (websites)	\$5,000 - \$10,000	City, UCDA, Creston Chamber	City, UCDA, Creston Chamber
Develop a City Logo and Motto	\$5,000 - \$15,000	City, UCDA, Creston Chamber, Creston Arts	City
Apply for Main Street Iowa Designation	None	City, UCDA, Creston Chamber, Business owners	N/A



## GRANT FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Funding is what takes plans from paper to realization. Several options for additional grant funding opportunities are identified below, and may be used to launch the projects and programs recommended in this plan into reality.

### ALLIANT ENERGY FOUNDATION COMMUNITY GRANTS PROGRAM

The Alliant Energy Foundation Community Grants Program provides funding for health and wellness projects, public safety projects, playground equipment, culture and arts projects, and other local needs.

Administered by: Alliant Energy Foundation

Award Amount: Up to \$40,000

### EDA PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAM

This large grant program funds catalytic investments to help distressed communities build, design, or engineer critical infrastructure and facilities that will help communities reach economic development goals to promote regional prosperity.

Administered by: U.S. Economic Development Administration

Award Amount: Up to \$100,000

### IOWA COMMUNITY CATALYST BUILDING REMEDATION PROGRAM

The Catalyst Program provides up to \$100,000 of funding for the rehabilitation of an underused and/or deteriorated commercial building. This program funds up to one building per city, with small towns having priority.

Administered by: Iowa Economic Development Authority

Award Amount: Up to \$400,000

### IOWA GREAT PLACES GRANT

The Iowa Great Places Grant seeks to cultivate the local character and authentic qualities of Iowa neighborhoods, districts, communities, and regions. The program embraces “creative placemaking,” and builds upon local creative and cultural assets.

Administered by: Iowa Arts Council and the Iowa Great Places Citizen Advisory Board

Award Amount: Up to \$400,000

### ITC/IRDC “POWER OF CONNECTION” COMMUNITY GRANT

The ITC/IRDC “Power of Connection” Community Grant provides funding for capacity building, strategic planning, studies, or assessments for a variety of community programs and issues. Rural communities have priority in this program.

Administered by: ITC Midwest and Iowa Rural Development Council

Award Amount: Up to \$5,000

### REAP CITY PARKS AND OPEN SPACES GRANT PROGRAM

REAP provides money to cities through competitive grants. Three city size categories have been established to assure grants are distributed to all sizes of cities. Grants are 100%. Eligible projects include park land expansion and multi-purpose recreation development.

Administered by: Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Award Amount: Up to \$100,000

### RURAL REVITALIZATION ENRICHMENT GRANT

This grant program aims to support small quality of life projects that will create meaningful results in rural communities. Eligible projects must be open to the public and contribute to the vitality and engagement of the community.

Administered by: Iowa Economic Development Authority

Award Amount: Up to \$20,000

### SOUTH CENTRAL IOWA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Dedicated to improving the quality of life in Clarke, Decatur, Lucas, Ringgold and Union Counties

Administered by: South Central Iowa Community Foundation

Award Amount: Not specified

### UPPER STORY CONVERSION PROGRAM

The Upper Story Housing Conversion Program provides assistance for the conversion of existing downtown building space into new residential units. The maximum award under this program is \$600,000. The program is funded through the federal Community Development Block Grant and must primarily benefit low and moderate income individuals.

Administered by: Iowa Economic Development Authority

Award Amount: Up to \$600,000

