

# Rural Research Report



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## LeClaire, Iowa: What Revitalization Can Accomplish

The past few decades have seen many downtowns across the U.S., especially in small rural cities, experience declines. Adding to the problem, globalization has changed the Midwest forever with offshore competition for routine jobs. Traditional small family farms are vanishing, steel mills have closed, and many factories have shrunk or moved overseas. The Midwest, which was once a symbol of stability and permanence, now struggles to adapt to global changes (Longworth 2008).

### The Current State of Small Towns

Downtowns have historically been the central location for important human interaction, business development, culture, and history in many, if not most, cities. Robertson (2001) states “all cities see a healthy core as integral to their overall heritage, tax base, sense of community, identity, economic development and image” (9). Downtowns share many common characteristics that add to the importance of a healthy community. Like in LeClaire, Iowa, many downtown districts are near the city’s important historic buildings, and are often near a body of water or other key natural resource (Robertson 2001).

Rypkema (2003) claims that downtown areas are a critical link to the future for small towns, and many strategies have been developed after studying the wants and needs of communities. In a reactive strategy, community leaders often develop the city’s strengths to address areas of concern as they arise. While this approach can be effective in some cases, there are other proactive steps that can help revitalization efforts succeed in small towns with a defined population of 500 to 10,000 (Goudy 1995).

### LeClaire, Iowa

Located in eastern Iowa along the Mississippi River and at the intersection of Interstate 80 and Highway 67, leaders in LeClaire, Iowa (pop. 3,765 in 2010), found that working together resolves many of the challenges plaguing other communities. The transformational efforts brought a culture that encourages stability and growth in the community. Using leadership principles of inclusion in transparent decision-making with openness and honesty in change initiatives helped LeClaire achieve success (Bennis, Goleman, and O’Toole 2008).

Although previous renewal projects had been attempted, noticeable differences in the downtown were not realized until the emergence of a community-wide effort involving all relevant stakeholders. The lessons learned from these extensive efforts may provide a useful model for other small towns or communities in their own transformations.

## Recognizing the Problem

A growing awareness by many community leaders demonstrated that physical improvements and cosmetic approaches alone were inadequate for addressing the declines in the commercial area. A holistic approach with an explanation of relationships among persons and places (quantitative) with interpretive observations of community individuals (qualitative) is a strategy for revitalization that is quickly becoming accepted as necessary to realize any real long-term success (Rypkema 2003). While quantitative approaches to assess stakeholder needs and infrastructure were implemented, an equally important qualitative approach to place-making strategies was also used in LeClaire.

Maddin (2001) declared that the various quantitative components of place-making strategies such as desired stores, services, restaurants, and general aesthetics are necessary for revitalization support. LeClaire leaders also recognized that the downtown must be a place where

people socialize, hold activities, are comfortable, and have a strong sense of place with a desired qualitative image. When a holistic revitalization approach is used, it addresses individual and community quality of life desires to achieve place-making success.

The Four-Point Approach and eight guiding principles in the national Main Street program fulfill many of the needs to create place-making strategies (National Trust for Historic Preservation 2009). The four points include (1) business improvement, (2) design, (3) organization, and (4) promotion. The eight guiding principles are (1) incremental process, (2) comprehensive Four-Point Approach, (3) quality, (4) public and private partnership, (5) changing attitudes, (6) focus on existing assets, (7) self-help program, and (8) implementation-oriented (Mills 2010). LeClaire used the Four-Point Approach in its revitalization and place-making strategies.

## Demands on Local Leadership

To successfully revitalize the downtown, LeClaire leaders recognized that various stakeholder needs must be embraced through place-making strategies and by using a Main Street program approach. While initially encountering resistance to revitalization from some community members, leaders understood that a divergence of opinions would always exist. These differences were celebrated as opportunities to find common ground to build consensus.

Recognizing that a majority of stakeholders would be needed to gain support for revitalization funding, transformational leaders formed the LeClaire Revitalization Committee (LRC) early in the process. The LRC's responsibilities were to brainstorm and visualize how the downtown could be revitalized and what impact it would have on the city as a whole. Faculty and staff from Iowa State University helped design a P.L.a.C.E. (Planning Landscape and Community Enhancement) program. An architectural firm helped with a strategic plan to direct the LeClaire revitalization efforts

(Community Success Initiative 2015). Protocol and policy dictated that the plan be presented to the public in monthly open door, community-wide meetings for a year and a half.

By using a Main Street approach and guiding principles, revitalization plans gained over 66% super majority stakeholder support through a continued process of transparency and inclusion. The effort to have community-wide input proved essential to gaining revitalization support and success. Once super majority support was reached, the LeClaire City Council was able to move forward with structuring nearly \$7 million in financing from Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district funds and bonding. Bid proposals were received, firms were chosen, and revitalization construction was begun. With revitalization, LeClaire became the fastest growing city in Iowa between 2000 and 2010 with a population increase of 32.2% (Community Success Initiative 2015).

## Before and After Revitalization

It seems that many Americans still want a livable community center, one that is best represented by the vibrant down-

towns of the past (Bradley 1996). Research by LeClaire volunteers demonstrated that the community was ready

for a vibrant downtown. Concerns about outdated lighting; non-compliant ADA crosswalks and access; broken sidewalks; very difficult parking angles; distracting overhead power, cable, and phone poles and wires; poor signage; deteriorating or vacant buildings; and limited number of businesses in the downtown area had to be addressed.

A cooperative public-private partnership (PPP) helped in forming a collaborative arrangement between the public and private entities that benefitted all concerned (Phillips and Pittman 2015). The PPP was even able to facilitate a successful conversion of abandoned properties into productive uses. Private investments in existing downtown buildings with cooperation and help from TIF district money spurred reinvestment in both existing and new buildings.

Support and encouragement of entrepreneurship has been instrumental to revitalization and development strategies. Even during the difficult and challenging economic downturn across America, LeClaire was able to attract small businesses as a positive outcome in its revitalization plans.

Prior to the successful transformation, the downtown area had 14 businesses and four restaurants. After the revitalization, it had blossomed to more than 50 businesses and 12 restaurants. In addition, the Green Tree Brewery and the Barrel House restaurant are scheduled to open in the downtown area in 2015.

### Branding as a Marketing Strategy

Prior revitalization efforts focused on physical improvements and beautification but often did not address the broader range of issues and concerns of a depressed commercial area such as market appeal. Public concerns and ideas expressed in open public meetings demonstrated a high priority on creating a community identity for communicating with stakeholders, including marketing the community through logos, photos, imagery, and events. Proven branding strategies in marketing generated a community identity that honored the rich history of LeClaire

while also promoting a vision for the future (Community Success Initiative 2015).

While previous revitalization attempts had been limited primarily by budget constraints, the new plan found a cooperative city council and civic organizations willing to work together with the public. An informal partnership between public and private ownership in identity and community investment held the best possibility for success with a new attempt at revitalization.

### Cable TV Show

LeClaire has certainly benefitted from serendipity. While not planned, good fortune played a role in LeClaire's successes. When serving on the LeClaire City Council, Mike Wolfe was an advocate for historic preservation before becoming host of the History Channel's popular show *American Pickers*. The show was not a part of the revitalization plan, but LeClaire has without doubt benefitted from being the hometown of *American Pickers* and Wolfe's retail store, Antique Archeology.

Tourism Manager Cindy Bruhn (personal communication, May 17, 2015) estimates that of the 250,000 visitors to LeClaire each year, as many as one-third visit because of the *American Pickers* show. This attraction added significantly to the nearly \$7 million investment in the downtown infrastructure.

### Housing Developments and Recreation

As part of the revitalization effort and planned growth, asset mapping and research disclosed inadequate housing available for lease or purchase, including both high-end residential properties and limited income, affordable housing.

The revitalization successes quickly caught the attention of many housing developers. Subsequent development resulted in the rehabilitation of six existing commercial buildings with living quarters, more than 600 new homes, and 10 new commercial buildings with living quarters. The

revitalization outcome gave developers the confidence to invest more than \$150 million in LeClaire, including one new golf course, two upgraded golf courses, a bike path, boat docks, a riverfront park area, and other attractions.

With these improvements, new residents continue to move into the community; more development is taking place; and entrepreneurs are expanding or starting new businesses in LeClaire.

## Volunteerism

Revitalization has also elicited and encouraged new volunteer efforts throughout the community. With renewed hope, pride, and vigor, civic organizations have grown in membership, participation, and active volunteerism. Volunteers annually donate well over 60,000 hours to various community organizations and events. With the help of

a dedicated volunteer pool, a LeClaire Information Center has also opened to serve the increased tourism trade in the downtown area. These efforts are a result of a cooperative agreement between the LeClaire Tourism Board and concerned volunteers.

## Streetscaping

Sustainable development of a downtown area often requires community developers and professionals to use focused approaches. Surveys of stakeholders revealed that streetscaping improvements were a top priority. Working with Iowa State University's P.L.a.C.E. program, local architects, and interested parties, a streetscaping plan was developed. This effort resulted in a \$7 million investment in new roads, a paved levee with permeable

pavers, sidewalks, lighting, kiosks, benches, trash receptacles, railings, steps, trees, plantings, buried power lines and conduit, a speaker system, bump-outs, and safety crosswalks. The streetscaping projects promoted a sense of place and helped connect diverse interests among shopkeepers, consumers, tourists, organizations, surrounding neighborhoods, and individuals.

## Lodging

A city SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis revealed that lodging expansion would be needed for increased tourism. Communications between leaders and well-established motel operators resulted in three new motels and six guest houses. Along with designated TIF districts, local revitalization benefitted from *Code of Iowa 423A* and Iowa's maximum 7 percent hotel and motel tax rate that must be used to promote tourism.

The resulting revenue from lodging has greatly helped to market the community to current stakeholders, tourists, and potential business owners. With an annual budget of more than \$130,000, LeClaire has been able to market itself through various media channels in both local and regional markets. These activities helped foster a steady tourism growth from 75,000 visitors a year in 2004 to an estimated more than 250,000 in 2014.

## Public Services

In 2004, LRC members determined that with projected growth, the current infrastructure would be inadequate to serve residents and tourists, so an investment would be needed to respond to growth in the community. A strategic analysis identified city structures that had to be updated to

complement and support revitalization efforts. An investment of \$2.6 million provided a new police station, fire station, city hall, and public library with higher personnel budgets to support the planned growth.

## Cultural Heritage

Local groups in the revitalization efforts also recognized that reclaiming history “can be a powerful and catalyzing force providing numerous positive impacts (including) building social capital, enhancing community identity and sustaining the environment” (Phillips and Stein 2001, 2). Chartered in 1834, LeClaire was hometown to “Buffalo Bill” (William F. Cody) and many famed river rapids pilots. Listed in American Forestry Association’s famous trees,

LeClaire’s “Green Tree” elm was one of the world’s largest Dutch Elms ever recorded. Highway 67, the Great River Road, also travels through the downtown, and its nine block Cody Road Historic District is listed on the *National Register of Historic Places* (leclaireiowa.gov 2015). Understanding LeClaire’s rich place in history, leaders made securing its cultural heritage and national importance a priority (LeClaire, Iowa 2009).

## Events and Destination

Long-standing events such as “Tug Fest” and “Christmas in LeClaire” have always been a tremendous draw for tourism, bringing thousands of visitors. Shops, restaurants, and motels have profited, and increased tax revenues for the city.

An asset-based community development approach (ABCD) to community planning showed that supportive

community volunteers and planned monthly events would significantly help revitalization efforts. Through cooperative agreements among all parties, promoting monthly events was instrumental in defining the area as a destination point. To date, involved residents and groups have creatively developed more than 20 annual events and several singular events to promote the community.

## Revitalization Timeline

In reviewing local efforts, an online timeline at <https://prezi.com/hy33imqybyai/leclaire-iowa-revitalization> helps viewers understand the process(es) used. Gould (2001) claims that “the wealth of the community is measured not in economic but in human terms. Its currency is relationships, networks and local partnerships. Each

transaction is an investment which, over time, yields trust, reciprocity and sustainable improvements to quality of life” (69). The wealth of LeClaire lies within its residents who unyieldingly pursue their vision for the future while building relationships.

## Get Started – There Is Help

Downtown revitalization requires involved leadership and stakeholder efforts committed to much more than projects or incremental changes and looks beyond current needs. For positive effects to be realized, approaches to revitalization must build on the past, while looking toward the future. To yield positive outcomes, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTFHP) “Main Street Program,” the Downtown Development Authority Program, and TIF Acts can be of significant help.

A wealth of information is available from the local Chamber of Commerce, economic development boards, County Administrators Office, civic organizations, visitor bureaus, higher education institutions, and other places. On a regional and state level, regional commissions, Illinois Economic Development Association, Western Illinois University, and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs can provide assistance. National government agencies supply grants, information, and secondary data such as the U.S. Census Bureau statistics (Community Success Initiative 2015).

## Conclusion: Implications and Recommendations

LeClaire's revitalization has implications for the future direction of small Midwestern communities. While globalization and challenging economic conditions continue to plague much of America, the stability cherished by the Midwest can be regained, but the Midwest and its many small communities must reinvent themselves to make this happen. While it cannot reclaim what is lost, it can determine its future direction.

LeClaire's community transformation provides important implications for revitalization. Age, gender, and residency are not barriers but opportunities to be embraced for inclusiveness and active involvement. Visionary, transformational, servant leadership encourages open and transparent communication with everyone involved in the rebuilding efforts.

Lessons learned for a revitalization process:

- Create a vision to gain support.

- Develop Main Street strategies.
- Create alliances with others.
- Communicate with intent.
- Remain open and transparent.
- Make follower involvement and commitment a priority.

Important recommendations for any community transforming its downtown include the following:

- Become a strategic thinker and planner.
- Remain open, transparent, and positive.
- Be inclusive, collaborative, and relentless.
- Know your market via a SWOT analysis and research.
- Develop a great brand—logo, marketing, and ad plan.
- Assist businesses/property owners.
- Create a relationship network.
- Be innovative and creative.
- *Embrace the journey and ask for technical assistance or help when needed!*

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