

# Downtown Walk Around Summary – Whittemore, Iowa

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*This report is a summary of the observations and recommendations resulting from an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Whittemore, Iowa on July 31, 2019.*



WHITTEMORE (population 504) is an example of classic small-town Iowa. The community has enthusiastic city leadership and an economic development committee that want to make positive things happen. The group that assembled at the fire station during our visit SHOULD be proud. The neighborhoods demonstrate clean well-kept homes and quality pride in place. This community of just over 500 has quality amenities like the local library and swimming pool. The American Legion was shared to be the most active in Kossuth County demonstrated by the presence of the county's freedom rock and a wonderful park area downtown. There is a collection of unique, quality, destination businesses downtown in which to build upon. The 400 Rustic Station (operates out of a former gas station), Pitchers (the Place to Eat – the Place to Meet), Schmitt Hardware, Supplies 'N More, Mighty Midwest Tattoo, Bonnsetter Auto Body and of course Farmers State Bank.

## DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES, BUILDINGS & MAINTENANCE

Downtown Whittemore has several businesses, not all of which project an "inviting" storefront image. It is difficult to determine if some are "open or closed." The metal siding salesman must have had a heyday when he visited Whittemore. Be careful, many times the siding traps water in between it and the storefront. Water is the worst enemy of downtown buildings.

- Take a walk downtown to look specifically at business signage. Identify businesses with "no signage or confusing signage" that does not communicate what exactly the business sells. Develop a small grant program for downtown signage (perhaps blade signage) that adds creativity and color to the downtown and projects a business' presence. Get assistance from talented, local artists or college students. Good signs can be dramatic and should accurately reflect the merchandise/service of a business.
- Remove obsolete signs as they confuse shoppers and reflect negatively on the health of the downtown.
- Post business hours. Customers shouldn't have to wonder when a store is open. Businesses need to be open when they say they will be open. Don't make it harder than it already is. Be sure you're serving the needs of your customers.



Vacancy and recruiting a good business mix are certainly challenges for smaller communities like Whittemore.

- Start small....work to make the buildings "more attractive" to potential new businesses. Currently, not many are in "move-in" condition.
- Inventory the vacant buildings in downtown Whittemore and keep the list updated. Collect information such as building owner contact information, square footage, previous use, building condition, etc. and take photos inside and out. Be ready to respond proactively when you have an interested business owner or investor.
- Work with property owners to clean up their spaces. Wash the windows. Clean out junk. Make them "marketable." Put displays in empty windows whenever possible. Hang catchy, "Business Opportunity" signs in the window or signs that say, "I Would Make a Great Coffee Shop" (or whatever business type that is needed). Have a city sponsored cleanup day where bins are put out front encouraging owners of empty buildings to start cleaning up.
- Create a "wish list of business types" based on your market and community needs, conduct focus groups, and develop a plan to lure businesses downtown. Consider your strengths.
- Make sure you have an ordinance prohibiting storefront residential. Nothing stops a downtown faster than turning your business spaces into apartments. Enforce that ordinance.



- Many of downtown Whittemore's buildings are considered as having nice "bones". Some need maintenance work. Others require more extensive rehabilitation projects to bring the structures up to a level where they can be marketed to potential businesses, owners, and even upper floor residents. This should be a priority for Whittemore. Some of the "best buildings" are in the "least favorable condition." Strong downtowns almost always have housing in the upper stories. Brag about the apartments you have and develop even more. This isn't a quick fix, but – if the city can proactively address these buildings one-at-a time, downtown will be in a better position for business growth. Incentivizing these kinds of projects will be KEY.
- Apply for a [Community Catalyst Building Remediation Grant](#) from the Iowa Economic Development Authority to spur further development. This grant provides up to \$100,000 for one rehabilitation project in your downtown.

- Develop a small grant program for minor design projects such as paint, signs, awnings, etc. Even small grants can leverage larger projects. Set a goal to do three in a year.
- Consider applying for a [CDBG Downtown Revitalization Fund \(DTR\)](#) grant from the Iowa Economic Development Authority. These grants are designed to make positive change to the character of a downtown by implementing multiple facades under one project. A DTR grant can dramatically impact the character of the entire district.
- Adopt a minimum maintenance ordinance. Implement it equitably to all properties.
- Research options for design technical assistance from [Iowa State University's College of Design](#) or the [Iowa Architectural Foundation](#). Show building owners the possibilities.

## EVENT CALENDAR & COMMUNICATION

The City of Whittemore has a calendar of events, second to none. This is very impressive. You're taking advantage of the opportunities presented to you like Western Iowa Tourism, Kossuth-Palo Alto County Economic Development website, Algona Publishing, Whittemore's website, the digital sign at city hall, KLGA-FM "Community Calendar, and Whittemore's Local Cable channel 907. Having created your Calendar of Events for 2020 is very impressive. Keep up the great work. Whittemore could (and should) be an example for the region and the entire state of Iowa. The "At -A-Glance Assets" provided to the walk around team is equally impressive. Together you have positioned Whittemore to be on the RISE. Your investments into your community will pay dividends well into the future.

## DOWNTOWN HOUSING

Take a proactive approach to downtown housing. Upper-story housing will not be the solution to your housing issues, but it should be PART of the solution. Upper story housing in downtown buildings not only provides cash flow for building and business owners but creates a built-in consumer base looking to shop, eat and play in downtown businesses.

- Know what opportunities exist. Include upper story spaces – both completed and potential – in the building inventory form.
- Look for inspiration. Take city leaders and downtown stakeholders on tours of nearby communities that have had success with upper story housing projects.
- Consider a residential tax abatement program to include downtown housing or create incentives specifically targeted to upper story housing projects.
- Owner occupied units downtown are becoming very attractive to baby boomers and young professionals alike. These units can become a hot ticket for your real estate market but only if you create some examples.



## SUMMARY



We appreciate the hospitality while visiting Whittemore. The community has so much potential to build on its strengths and complete initiatives that will bolster its appearance and business viability. The historic building stock and an interesting mix of destination businesses are a great combination for future success. The mobilization of people in the community to take an interest, roll up their sleeves and get involved in this planning, leadership, and volunteer work is also crucial. The route to make this happen usually starts with a "big picture" vision along with "small" action steps. You're on the right track by asking for assistance, as evidenced by inviting us to do this downtown walk around. Now it's time to roll up your collective sleeves and get to work! Good luck with your future efforts.

**"Never doubt that a small group of committed dependable citizens can change the world.**

**Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."**

**-Margaret Mead**

## CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Iowa Downtown Resource Center.....	515.348.6180.....	<a href="https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/idrc">https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/idrc</a>
Downtown Revitalization Fund CDBG Grant.....	515.348.6208.....	<a href="https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/DowntownFund">https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/DowntownFund</a>
National Trust for Historic Preservation.....		<a href="https://savingplaces.org/">https://savingplaces.org/</a>
National Park Service Preservation Briefs.....		<a href="https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm">https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm</a>
State Historic Preservation Office.....		<a href="https://iowaculture.gov/">https://iowaculture.gov/</a>
Community Catalyst Building Remediation.....	515.648.6183.....	<a href="https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/Catalyst">https://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/Catalyst</a>
CDBG Downtown Revitalization Fund.....	515.348.6208.....	<a href="http://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/CDBG/DowntownFund">http://www.iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/CDBG/DowntownFund</a>
Iowa Architectural Foundation.....		<a href="http://www.iowaarchfoundation.org/">http://www.iowaarchfoundation.org/</a>