

# CREATIVE USES FOR DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS IN SMALL TOWNS



2017

A sample of ideas to bring people back downtown

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**UW**  
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# Creative Uses for Downtown Buildings in Small Towns

## A SAMPLE OF IDEAS TO BRING PEOPLE BACK DOWNTOWN

### ABOUT

This report provides a sample of how downtown buildings in small towns can be put to productive use in generating activity and community pride. It is intended to stimulate new ideas for reusing buildings for retail, food and beverage, services, and community spaces.

### SITUATION

Small town downtowns (in municipalities with less than 5,000 people) often struggle with empty storefronts and underutilized buildings. These downtowns were once the hub of commerce and community activities. A full range of retail stores once occupied the main street and served as the shopping center for the community.

During the 1970s, things began to change in these small towns. Regional shopping centers and large discount stores were being developed in larger communities often an hour or less away. With improvements in the transportation system, and increased reliance on automobile travel, more and more small town consumers looked to the bigger town down the road as the place to shop.

With these consumer changes came the demise of main street retail as it once was. Clothing, shoe, variety, jewelry and other downtown anchor stores have disappeared. Today, many small town downtowns face the following challenges:

- Highway bypasses that have changed traffic patterns.
- Growth in large-format retail.
- Remaining downtown businesses that are often limited to restaurants, taverns, salons, and gas stations.
- Loss of essential grocery, pharmacy, and hardware stores.
- Business operators that have no transition plan.
- Vacant real estate that is owned by absentee landlords.
- New competition from an online market.
- Changing consumers' preferences coupled with decreasing spending power.

While change continues in many rural places, there are opportunities to rejuvenate downtowns through the attraction and nurturing of creative building uses. This publication will help us explore new opportunities for downtown. The intent is not to reinvent the past, but to stimulate ideas for the future that will contribute to the economic health of the community.

## CURRENT DOWNTOWN BUSINESS MIX IN SMALL TOWNS

Today, small rural downtowns have unique issues that are often very different from those in larger communities. Long gone are the one stop downtown shopping districts with products ranging from apparel to hardware. It is helpful to look at the current business mix in small town downtowns to understand what businesses are currently functioning there. The following tables present the number of businesses located within a half-mile of the center of downtowns in small Wisconsin communities. All retail categories and selective service business categories for two population categories are included.

Cities/Villages with 1,000-2,500 Pop. <sup>1</sup>	
NAICS Description	Avg. Number Per Community
Full-service restaurants	3.19
Drinking places (alcoholic bev.)	2.17
Beauty salons	2.15
Gasoline stations	1.08
Auto. Mech. & electrical repair	1.08
Grocery stores	1.01
Other amusement (bowling, golf)	0.98
Gift, novelty, & souvenir stores	0.92
Used merchandise stores	0.64
Auto. parts, accessories, & tire stores	0.54
Auto. body, paint, interior, & glass	0.54
Florists	0.53
Specialty food stores	0.52
Barber shops	0.50
Hardware stores	0.47

Cities/Villages with 2,500-5,000 Pop. <sup>2</sup>	
NAICS Description	Avg. Number Per Community
Full-service restaurants	4.57
Beauty salons	3.52
Drinking places (alcoholic bev.)	3.08
Gasoline stations	1.72
Other amusement (bowling, golf)	1.63
Auto. mech. & electrical repair	1.30
Gift, novelty, & souvenir stores	1.08
Used merchandise stores	1.08
Grocery stores	1.07
Auto. parts, accessories, & tire stores	1.05
Appliance, tv, & other electronics	0.93
Florists	0.88
Barber shops	0.78
Sporting goods stores	0.73
Pharmacies & drug stores	0.72

Source: *Retail and Service Business Mix Analysis of Wisconsin's Downtowns*. Bill Ryan, Beverly Stencel, and Jangik Jin. University of Wisconsin – Extension.

The current business mix in small towns of Wisconsin is heavily represented by food, beverage and personal care businesses. There are typically few comparison-shopping businesses such as apparel or home furnishings. Many are also missing important convenience businesses such as hardware stores or pharmacies. Service businesses, civic uses and churches are also important anchors, but are not included in this analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Average of 143 Downtowns in Wisconsin

<sup>2</sup> Average of 60 Downtowns in Wisconsin

## EXAMPLES OF CREATIVE USES

Although current downtown tenants provide a good base of locally owned businesses, they are often not sufficient to fill storefronts vacated by previous retail uses. The following section explores a sample of possible building uses that add life to the downtown, while serving local residents with goods and services that's currently offered. Most of the examples are from small towns with less than 5,000 people.

Examples represent retail, food and beverage stores, services, and other community uses. For each example a one-page case study is presented that describes how it got started, who it serves, building improvements made, and if available, financing information.

Case studies include:

- Grocery Store
- Gallery, Dining, and Entertainment
- Fitness Center
- Community Gathering Space
- Food Truck
- Pet Adoption Center
- Artistic Studio and Showroom
- Art Space
- Performing Arts School
- Audio Engineering School
- Retail Incubator
- Outdoor Retail Market Place
- Pop-up Shop
- Community Marketplace
- Coffee Shop and Bistro
- Museum
- Pet Food Store
- Bed and Breakfast
- Destination Quilting Business
- Tele Pharmacy
- Antiques
- Floral Shop
- City Government

Additional ideas:

Ag. Tourism Businesses (winery, cheese, beer, etc.)  
 Artist Spaces  
 Automotive Repairs  
 Carpentry Shop  
 Consignment Store  
 Co-Working Space for Entrepreneurs  
 Day Care  
 Ebay Selling Center  
 Education Center (Adults)  
 Elderly Care Center  
 Farmer's Market (Inside)  
 General Store  
 Gift/Local Art Destination Businesses  
 Hair Salons  
 Laundromat  
 Music Studio/Lessons  
 Photographer  
 Public Library  
 Repair Service  
 School Business Incubator  
 Small-Scale Manufacturing  
 Tourism Visitor Center  
 Used Car Showroom  
 Used Merchandise  
 Youth Center (After School)

More case studies are available in the University of Wisconsin-Extension Innovative Downtown Business Clearinghouse.  
<http://fyi.uwex.edu/innovativedowntownbusinesses/>

GROCERY STORE:

**CEDAR STREET MARKET**

TIGERTON, WI (POP. 728)

Founder and Owner, Judi Hegewald, brings a large variety of food items to Tigerton, WI, a community previously without a grocer. The grocery store offers residents a wide selection of products, while also saving them money.



**How it got started:**

As the owners are from nearby Birnamwood, they knew that the surrounding area needed a local and affordable grocery store. Hegewald became aware of a suitable location in a long-vacant former Red Owl store in Tigerton, centrally located downtown. Although the building had been stripped of most of its systems and the ceiling was falling in, Hegewald negotiated a suitable price on the property with plans to restore it for use as a grocery store.

**Who it serves:**

The business draws “value” customers from surrounding towns due to its national and private label brands, closeout products, surplus and overstock products, items that are short dated or slightly past the “best buy” dates, cans and boxes with minor damage, quality meats, produce, and dairy. These products provide local residents with food products that are held to high standards.

**Building improvements:**

Although it was built as a grocery store with appropriate layout and loading areas, the building had been long vacant and required full renovation, including new electrical and HVAC, roof replacement and interior and exterior improvements. Additionally, all new coolers, freezers, and deli equipment were installed to create a modern grocery store.

**Funding:**

Funding for the project came from personal savings and a small business loan from a local bank, as well as significant sweat equity from Judi, husband Roger, and the couple’s six children.

**Website:** <http://www.csmtigerton.com/index.php>

GALLERY, DINING AND  
ENTERTAINMENT

**ARTS  
EMPORIUM/ESSENHAUS**

WABENO, WI (POP. 1,100)

Founders and Owners, Tim & Connie Friesen, bring excellent food and drink to rural northeast Wisconsin. The business offers live music, art to explore, and dinner theater shows.



**How it got started:**

The Arts Emporium/Essenhaus, established in 2014, occupies the former Eagle Saloon. The building was in a serious state of disrepair when the Friesens took over.

**Who it serves:**

The business draws customers from communities throughout northeastern Wisconsin and has become a destination for both locals and visitors.

**Building improvements:**

The ruined drop ceiling and all associated lighting and wiring had to be removed. Additionally, the original tin ceiling was patched and new lighting was added. A second restroom was needed, as well as the front and back bar (salvaging some of the original details). In addition, a stage and theatrical lighting were added. The kitchen had to be completely remodeled and all appliances replaced. The outside of the building was repainted, and owners added a mural that graces the front of the building.

**Funding:**

Building renovations were done with considerable help from community members putting their expertise and sweat equity, with no outside financing.

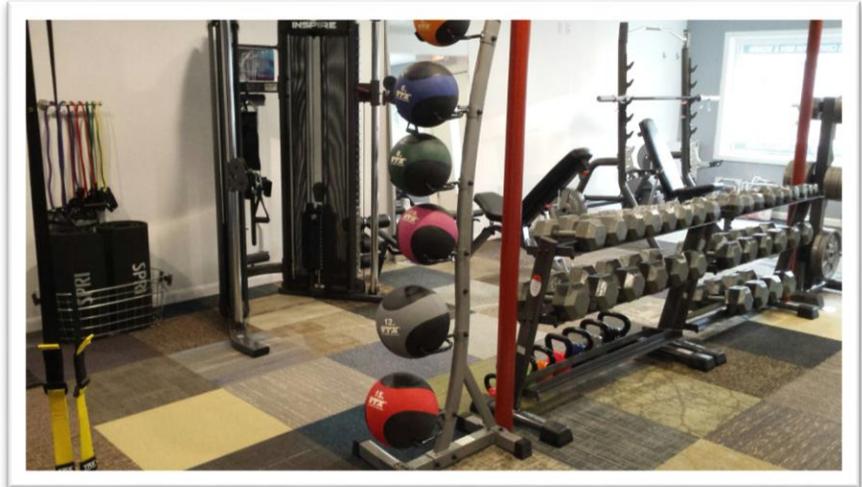
**Website:** <http://essenhauswabeno.com>

## FITNESS CENTER

### FIT BOX

CENTRAL CITY, IA (POP. 1,257)

Owner and founder of Fit Box LLC, Stacey Colledge, wanted to provide rural communities in n Linn County with a clean, modern fitness facility that is appealing to both men and women. Eventually she plans to partner with independent contractors to offer classes and personal training.



#### How it got started:

Stacey purchased the building in the fall of 2015, with the intent of renting out the commercial space and upper story apartment. However, the local Main Street program had just completed a market analysis which identified a fitness center as a top need in Central City. With limited time to operate a store and manage staff, a self-serve fitness center seemed like a good fit.

#### Who it serves:

Fit Box is geared toward fitness conscious people within a 10-minute drive of Central City who do not want to waste 40 to 60 minutes driving to and from a comparable fitness center in Cedar Rapids. The equipment (which includes treadmills, ellipticals, bikes, free weights, weight machines, TRX and resistance bands, and more) is wide ranging to appeal to the broadest customer base possible, while keeping within a smaller budget and building footprint.

#### Building improvements:

The building had not been updated since the early 90's when it was a lawyer's office. Stacey hired a contractor to do substantial renovations. This included removing all the interior walls, installing a support beam, new electrical with motion sensors for the lighting, plumbing, HVAC, data cables for security cameras, a key card access system, expanding the bathroom, and installing new insulation and doors to cut down on the sound transfer between the upper apartment and the first floor.

#### Funding:

Stacey created the logo, website, marketing design, and construction finish work to cut costs. She also privately funded the building purchase, renovations and equipment. Currently, Stacey is applying for grant funding for renovations to the exterior of the building and new windows on both floors.

**Website:** <https://www.ccfibox.com/>

## COMMUNITY GATHERING SPACE

### THIRD PLACE

GOODHUE, MN (POP. 1,200)

Located in a former bank building with striking windows, the Third Place serves as a community gathering space that accommodates local meetings, events, and individual users. The owners of the building created this public space to benefit the community.



#### How it got started:

The owners of the building are truly good neighbors in Goodhue. Regina Poncelet is a teacher, while her husband operates the local convenience store. They saw an opportunity to purchase a landmark building downtown. Not wanting the commitments of another business, they decided to create a community space that would add to the quality of life in Goodhue. Inspired by their daughter who is a student of urban planning, they create the “Third Place” in September 2015.

#### Who it serves:

The Third Place serves community groups and individual users much like a public library. The unattended facility can be reserved for school groups, card groups, showers, class reunions, and other organizations.

#### Building improvements:

The Third Place has been renovated as a quiet space for reading and studying, much like a library. Public Wi-Fi is available. A selection of books occupies one wall and a pay-as-you-go coffeemaker is available on an honor system. It is open from 7:30 AM to 6 PM daily. While unattended, it has security cameras.

#### Funding:

The owners purchased the bank building after it was listed on the market. They are considering renovating the upstairs as a rental income apartment.

## FOOD TRUCK

### HORSERADISH FOOD TRUCK & ALLEY CAFE

PRINCETON, WI (POP. 1,192)

Founder and owner, Matt Trotter, serves creative sandwiches and salads from an old school bus next to his popular retail shop, Teak & Soxy, in central Wisconsin. The business - operated by himself, his mother, brother and partner - offers local ingredients with craft beer and wines for a unique street side experience.



#### How it got started:

The family has always enjoyed food and cooking. The winter after Teak & Soxy's third season, they got the food truck bug. After some additional research, the owners found a dilapidated school bus, which they had to move from Northern Wisconsin to its current location outside the store. Before long, they were applying for licensing and conducting research on the industry. Green Lake had a community kitchen available, which made the risk and initial investment easier to bear for the owners.

#### Who it serves:

Horseradish Food Truck has a large following of loyal locals who dine weekly. In addition, the food truck receives numerous spikes in business through the summer tourist months. Tourists often come from Chicago, Milwaukee and Madison.

#### Building improvements:

The body of the bus received little improvements. The main improvements were a simple striped awning, wooden bar and the "horseradish" sign. The owners invested in the cafe furnishings to resemble a casual "European-style" sidewalk cafe. In 2016, they added a lattice-walled tent to house their "beer garden", which was required by the City to serve alcohol outside and has turned out to be a favorite hangout.

#### Funding:

The owners funded the food truck privately and saved a considerable amount by using the community kitchen, versus having to outfit the truck with a full on kitchen. This way, they only needed minimal refrigeration and equipment to be able to hold and finish off the food.

**Website:** <http://Facebook.com/horseradishalleycafe>

## PET VIEWING WINDOW

### PET ADOPTION NONPROFIT

NEILLSVILLE, WI (POP. 2,400)

A pet adoption marketing concept has been proposed for the empty storefront of the H&W Building in this central Wisconsin Community.

#### How it got started:

This concept has been recommended to help fill a beautiful and prominent storefront on the corner of Main Street at a busy intersection. It features adoptable pets of the Clark County Humane Society, a valued organization that has a lot of public support. Adoptable pets would be featured in the windows of the storefront on Thursdays and Saturdays when there are other activities in the downtown area, such as the Farmers Market. Volunteers of the Clark County Humane Society would transport adoptable shelter pets downtown to be featured in the storefront for a few hours to help draw visitors, while also increasing the exposure these pets receive to potential families.

#### Who it serves:

This project helps the community, downtown area, and the local non-profit Humane Society. It encourages people to walk downtown, facilitates conversation, and connects them to the community.

#### Building improvements:

The building has been vacant for three years, but its most recent use was a community thrift store and food pantry. Since the front display window areas are the only spaces being utilized, there are few improvements necessary at this time. Improvements would include housekeeping and touch up paint. Volunteers would help to keep the area neat before, during, and after the visits.

#### Funding:

The only funding for the proposed project would be paint, and proper containment for the pets while they are visiting the storefront during the featured times.



ARTISTIC STUDIO AND  
SHOWROOM

**RED IRON STUDIO AND JON  
MICHAEL ROUTE STUDIO**

FREDERIC, WI (POP. 1,110)

Father and son, Jack and Michael Route, work independently side by side bringing artistic and custom metalwork to rural northwest Wisconsin. Their buildings together house two metal studios and a showroom.



**How it got started:**

In 2008, the empty buildings were owned by the Village of Frederic and were slated for demolition. Michael wrote a proposal to acquire the property for very little, which was eventually approved. Jon Michael Route Studio moved into the space in 2012 and recently developed the showroom in the front of the building.

**Who it serves:**

Their businesses have done work nationwide through commissions and craft fairs. They have recently added the showroom so that it become a stop for tourists and locals who may purchase their metalwork.

**Building improvements:**

The buildings were essentially gutted and ready for demolition. The roof leaked, along with the back wall that was rotted. A new roof was added along with a 10-foot addition to the back and a separate studio space. They replaced large service doors with windows, and have greatly improved the landscaping. The front showroom got new windows and a door, along with a stucco façade. The owners still have many more plans to keep improving their property.

**Funding:**

In addition to sweat equity and the owners' investment, some funding for the buildings have come from the Regional Business Fund – Façade Loan. This program helped improve the exterior of the buildings.

**Websites:**

[www.redironstudios.com](http://www.redironstudios.com)

[www.jonmichaelroute.com](http://www.jonmichaelroute.com)

## ARTS SPACE

### 314: RIPON COLLEGE PROJECT SPACE

RIPON, WI (POP. 7,733)

314: Ripon College Project Space is a multi-use community venue for art exhibits, concerts, poetry readings, lectures, performances, speakers, classes, community events, and more.

#### How it got started:

Zach Messitte, the president of Ripon College, conceived of this space as a way for the college to develop a greater presence in downtown Ripon and with the community. He reached out to the three faculty advisors, who found the space, contacted student leadership, and oversaw the space's opening.

#### Who it serves:

College and community members alike are invited to submit their ideas for using this dynamic new space. Upon approval, use of the space is completely free.

#### Building improvements:

The space is located on the main street in a reclaimed building beautifully restored by downtown manager and owner Craig Tebon after a devastating fire in December of 2013. The fire destroyed one building, severely damaged two others, and displaced many residents.

#### Funding:

314 is made possible in large part by a grant from the Kemper Foundation.

**Website:** <https://www.ripon.edu/314-ripon-college-project-space/>



PERFORMING ARTS  
SCHOOL

**THE RUMPUS  
ROOM**

MAZOMANIE, WI (POP.  
1,652)



Founders Marcia Miquelon and Jacob Mills teach circus arts, stage performances and create an engaging community for kids.

**How it got started:**

Owner Marcia had a desire to teach performance arts for artistic and personal reasons. She found a vacant building with low rent and a high ceiling. Her first location was only part time to break even on the expenses. In 2008, Marcia became self-employed and in 2013 bought the building, which is now called the Rumpus Room. The first summer after opening, she partnered with Jacob Mills to start circus camps.

**Who it serves:**

The Rumpus Room draws heavily from the Madison area. Approximately 20 percent of attendees are local residents. They serve a large age demographic spectrum, offering camps to children and classes to adults. In addition, they hold 2 - 3 long weekend workshops throughout the Upper Midwest region and host a festival in January every year.

**Building improvements:**

The vacant building required new paint. Furthermore, the owners needed to put in a dance floor specifically for the dance workshops. Lastly, they updated the wiring in the building.

**Funding:**

The project so far was entirely self-funded. The Rumpus Room is in a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district and the owners have potential to gain access to some funds for a larger renovation, which they have planned for in the future. This future project would include exterior building improvements.

**Website:** <http://therumpusroom.org>

## AUDIO ENGINEERING SCHOOL

### SOUND HAVEN LEARNING CENTER

LAKE MILLS, WI (POP. 5,708)

Michael & Laurie Allison founded Sound Haven Learning Center with the intent to bring an audio school to Lake Mills, Wisconsin. This learning center offers locals lessons in audio engineering.

#### How it got started:

Michael travelled throughout his career in the music industry and eventually settled in Wisconsin. There was a vacant church in Lake Mills that continuously went up for auction. He decided that this 11,248 sq. ft. building would be a great space for an audio school.

#### Who it serves:

The Sound Haven Audio School serves the local community in Lake Mills. They offer classes that range from basic to advanced programs and are designed to aid in a student's development as a top trained audio engineer.

Sound Haven offers consultation services and space to neighboring churches, schools, and businesses to ensure the volunteers and staff understand the basic components of audio engineering and how to operate with both basic and more complex systems.

In addition to audio classes, Laurie runs Sound Haven's events such as weddings, receptions, showers and parties.

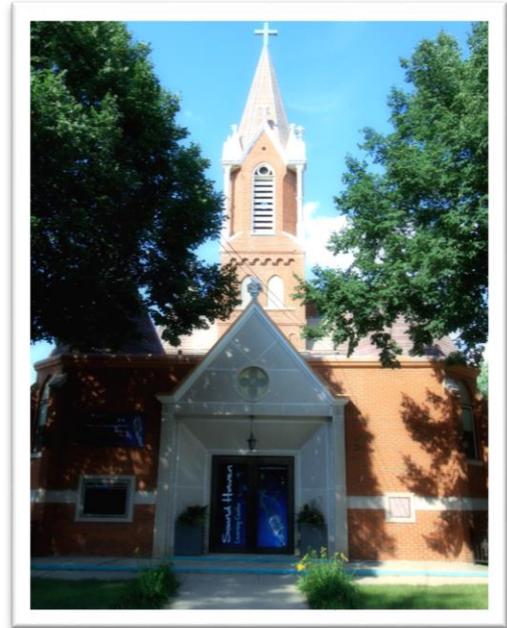
#### Building improvements:

Numerous renovations were needed before the church could function as a studio. The building received a thorough cleaning, new carpeting, new electrical, paint, plumbing and heating. Most importantly, the church needed new boilers, which was a significant expense.

#### Funding:

The renovation of the church was entirely funded by Michael and Laurie Allison.

**Website:** <http://www.soundhavenlearningcenter.com/>



## RETAIL INCUBATOR

### THE VILLAGE

WASHINGTON, IA (POP. 7,200)

Owner and founder, Cathy Lloyd, created The Village with the intent to bring life back to downtown by giving startup entrepreneurs a chance to test out their business model on a smaller scale.

#### How it got started:

An old department store building with over 15,000 square feet sat empty for years. Cathy Lloyd saw the opportunity to partner with the building owner who was renovating the second floor.

#### Who it serves:

Customers include residents and tourists who drive for the experience of shopping in the unique setting. The Village generates new business activity among residents, giving potential business owners a chance to experiment and learn at a small scale before growing larger.

#### Building improvements:

The first floor was converted to a retail complex consisting of small boutique-type shops surrounding a central courtyard. The shops are designed with wood façade fronts to resemble a turn-of-the century Iowa village. Each shop features traditional clapboard siding, awnings, window boxes, and every front is unique. Additional smaller vendors occupy tables and push carts in the central courtyard. A wall is lined with bookshelves, operating as a mini-bookstore. Another wall is used to display local art for sale.

#### Funding:

Lloyd rented the main area from the building's owner, divided it at her own expense, and collects rent from the individual merchants.

**Website:** <http://www.thevillagewashingtoniowa.com/>

*Read more about it:* <http://smallbizsurvival.com/2013/08/one-downtown-building-many-new-retail-stores.html>



*OUTDOOR RETAIL  
MARKETPLACE*

**TIONESTA MARKET  
VILLAGE**

TIONESTA, PA (POP. 500)

The Tionesta Market Village was once a group of buildings that were destroyed by a devastating fire.



**How it got started:**

A local effort began in early 2012 to rebuild the marketplace. They drew inspiration from seasonal kiosks in the mall and created temporary use retail spaces with garden sheds. The goal was to provide a unique shopping experience and entertainment for residents and visitors. The community, businesses, and locals have all been supportive and made this venture possible.

**Who it serves:**

Their website says it well: This "mini Main Street" gives residents and visitors a place to shop and relax, and gives small retail businesses the opportunity to get started selling their products in a high-visibility and high-traffic location. It's an opportunity for the local person who makes fishing lures to sell his product as well as the winery that is located out in the country to sell wine in town. Visitors and locals alike shop here and it's an added boon to the community.

**Building improvements:**

A local Amish company, Cypress Clock and Gift Shop, built the sheds and they sit on what was an empty lot. The buildings are 1800's in design.

**Funding:**

The total cost including site preparation and sheds was less than \$40,000 and was provided by the industrial development authority. Today the project generates revenue through building rental, and there is a waiting list for perspective vendors.

**Website:** <http://marketvillage.forestcounty.com/>

Read more about it: <http://smallbizsurvival.com/2015/04/rural-economic-development-idea-tiny-business-villages.html>

## POP-UP SHOP

### VIROQUA CHAMBER MAIN STREET HOLIDAY POP-UP PROGRAM

VIROQUA, WI (POP. 4,362)

The Viroqua Chamber Main Street Pop Up Shop initiative was a response to increasing vacancies in an otherwise active downtown. The program allowed people in the community with innovative ideas to occupy vacant storefronts free of charge for a three-month period.

#### How it got started:

The Viroqua Chamber Main Street applied a model used throughout the country that focuses on education of entrepreneurs, their mentoring, and financial assistance. The program was designed as a creative answer to fill vacancies for holiday shopping.

#### Who it serves:

The community supports new businesses by offering assistance during the start-up phase and then buying from these local retailers. This initiative has a long-term impact on the community by keeping the downtown vibrant and alive, while also creating a strong retail and service industry. A pop-up shop is open for a short period of time, to test the format and see if the business is something that the community will support.

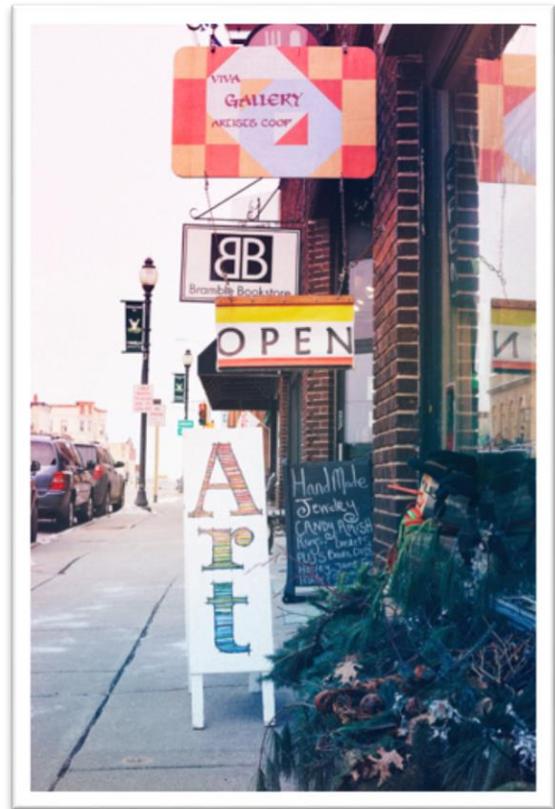
#### Building improvements:

In most cases, the Chamber used buildings that needed some updating and change. Having foot traffic in vacant buildings is excellent for selling real estate or negotiating future leases, so the arrangement benefited all parties.

#### Funding:

The Viroqua Chamber Main Street invested staff time and \$1,500 initially. In 2016, the chamber received a grant from Vernon County to assist with rent cost in the amount of \$2,500. Nearly every property owner or landlord invested in the program by discounting rent and working with the Chamber.

**Website:** [www.viroqua-wisconsin.com](http://www.viroqua-wisconsin.com)



## MARKETPLACE, LOCAL ARTISTS, AND RETAIL

### THE HISTORIC VIROQUA PUBLIC MARKET

VIROQUA, WI (POP. 4,362)

The Historic Viroqua Market opened in 2004 with the intention of providing locals an opportunity to sell their goods. Today, the market offers unique retail space and generates business.

#### How it got started:

The old Peterson Motors building came up for sale and owner Tony Macasat saw the potential to invest and turn it into something the community could use. The Macasat family ended up purchasing the building shortly after. Originally, the market started out by holding festivals because they did not have enough vendors when it initially opened. It evolved over time to host permanent vendors and their booths.

#### Who it serves:

Viroqua Public Market started by serving local residents. Over the past 12 years, the word has spread and the market now serves a three state area. The markets serve customers interested in lifestyle retail including VIVA Art Gallery, and Rooted Spoon Kitchen Table, Once Read Books (a tiny bookstore) and Essence of Clarity (a new age healing center).

#### Building improvements:

The old building was covered in soot from years of being a mechanic repair shop. The owners had to spend a great deal of time cleaning the floors and rafters before adding a structure inside the large building.

The old auto garage was very large, so the owners created three separate storefronts. They added walls inside the building to create different sections and also added four mini suites. The mini suites act as stores, which have held numerous types of businesses.

The street lamps, large fountain, and occasional tree add to the ambiance and give the impression of being outside, at a quaint European street market; with details down to hand-painted brick walls and a real pair ring-neck doves.

#### Funding:

The project was self-funded by the Macasat family and through loans.

**Website:** <http://www.viroquapublicmarket.com>



## COFFEE SHOP, BISTRO AND LOCAL FOODS

### WATER HOUSE FOODS

LAKE MILLS, WI (POP. 5,708)

Owners Shawn and Rae Rediske offer a piece of city life to rural Wisconsin. Their store represents a modern bistro business approach, while supporting local farms and insuring high quality ingredients.



#### How it got started:

Neither Shawn nor Rae had experience in the restaurant industry before opening Water House Foods in Lake Mills. A recently retired resident wanted to start baking, but quickly realized that he would rather spend his retirement doing something more relaxing. This opened up an opportunity for the owners to use the previous baking kitchen in the activity center basement as a test kitchen for their Coffee Shop. This business has now been in operation for eight years.

#### Who it serves:

The coffee shop brings people to downtown Lake Mills for tastings, baking classes, business meetings, concerts, open mic nights, art shows, book signings and monthly fundraisers. The café partners with local businesses to sponsor, support, and coordinate local events. In addition, Water House Foods partners with several farmers' markets, which broadens their market segment beyond Lake Mills.

#### Building improvements:

The café occupies a building originally built in 1853, which provides character to the historic downtown. The business originally started by renting out retail space, while using the activity center as their kitchen. Eventually the owners wanted to own their own building and purchased two adjoined properties that sat vacant.

Many improvements were needed in order to make the space suitable for their coffee shop. One building is used for their kitchen and store space; while the other building is being rented out as retail space. The owners came across asbestos and insulation problems when the renovation began. They also needed innovative solutions for the large amount of flooring needed to fill the 2,500 square foot building.

#### Funding:

Their local bank mostly funded their project.

**Website:** <http://waterhousefoods.com/>

## MUSEUM

### WILD ROSE HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

WILD ROSE, WI (POP. 725)

In the early 1850s, Welsh, Norwegian, and English immigrants walked into the wilderness of central Wisconsin that had "never known the mark of an ax."

The Pioneer Museum displays their tools, arts, and crafts while also offering guided tours of the eight building complex: Elisha Stewart House, Smoke House, Gift Shop, Barn and Blacksmith Shop, Carriage House, Pioneer Hall, and Country School.

#### How it got started:

The Elisha Stewart house was bought from the Keppler family in 1964. The deal included a building that is now a blacksmith shop on one side and a barn on the other side. The old harness shop came along with the property, which houses three sections: a gift shop, a weaving room plus a general store.

#### Who it serves:

Wild Rose Historical Society Museum gives tours in the summer and hosts school tours in the spring. In addition to serving the local community, they have had visitors from Norway and Australia.

#### Building improvements:

The old Progressive school and smokehouse were moved onto the site. A carriage house was built on the property. The first Wild Rose bank from 1901 was bought when the new Post Office was built. The building now houses a pharmacy, ice cream parlor, and Pioneer Hall.

Owners have added siding to the gift shop/general store/weaving room building. Additionally, they painted the windows and fixed the roof on Pioneer hall. The Elisha Stewart house received new paint and a new roof. The carriage house, barn/blacksmith shop and school also received a paint job. Lastly, the owners added a cement sidewalk that looks like brick from the back of the house and goes past the school and weaving room.

#### Funding:

Finances have included fundraisers like re-enactments of the 1905 Wild Rose robbery, two different cemetery walks, an ice cream social/ folk music event, brat fry as well as donations from visitors. The village helped finance some of the building, but was eventually paid back. Lastly, they received some funds from the village from the Tax Incremental Finance district for repairs to Pioneer Hall and split costs on the roof with the village.

**Website:** <http://www.travelwisconsin.com/history-heritage/wild-rose-historical-museum-203925>



## PET FOOD STORE

### ZOE'S PET DELI & DOG WASH

MT VERNON, IA (POP. 4,583)

Diana Crowley offers a holistic approach to animals' health. She brings healthy food options for cats and dogs to Mt. Vernon. They offer natural foods, raw diets, treats and vitamins while only using local resources.



#### How it got started:

Zoe's Pet Deli opened in its first location in 2014 and moved in 2015 to a larger location. Diana wanted to open a natural food store based on what she saw when she worked for large chain pet stores in Southern California. It was clear in her experience that a healthy diet can do a lot for a pet's life span.

Mt. Vernon only had two places for residents to buy dog food. Both places did not have many options for pet owners. Diana knew that there had to be a market because the town had a dog park. With all this in mind, she decided Mt. Vernon was the perfect place to start her business.

#### Who it serves:

The pet deli and dog wash largely serves the Mt. Vernon area; however, people come from all over the state because they are one of only two places that carry Fromm Family Foods.

#### Building improvements:

The new location had been sitting vacant for a while and required the owner to rip up the carpet, paint all the walls and remove clutter. She eventually added a \$4,000 dog wash addition. In the future she hopes to add a dog bakery.

#### Funding:

The owner privately funded the project.

**Website:** <http://zoepetdeli.com/>

## LODGING

### BLUE DOOR INN

ALMA, WI (POP. 800)

The Blue Door Inn is a licensed “bed & breakfast.” It offers guests a unique atmosphere in a historic building. An 1857 Blacksmith Shop has been revamped into space for continental breakfast.

#### How it got started:

The Blue Door Inn started as a retirement project for the owner. Loving old houses and history she relocated from the Washington DC area to Buffalo County, Wisconsin where her Great Great Grandfather settled in 1851. The building was perfect for an Inn. Removing layers of renovations, the building revealed its original stone walls, the red pine flooring and the charm of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Who it serves:

The inn serves visitors seeking relief from the stresses of everyday life. It provides visitors an opportunity to explore Alma's historic Main Street, enjoy the views from Buena Vista and experience the Driftless Area and the Upper Mississippi River Valley.

#### Building improvements:

This 19<sup>th</sup> century single-family home went through a four-year restoration project. Once it housed a blacksmith shop below and later a hardware store. Today lodging options range from a choice of suites, an apartment or the whole house.

#### Funding:

Building renovations were done with the owner's retirement funds. All improvements were completed on a pay as you go basis. As the Inn makes money the profits are reinvested into the property to continue to preserve its historical perspective and importance in Alma's National Historical District.

**Website:** <http://www.bluedoorinalma.com/>



DESTINATION  
QUILTING BUSINESS

**ALL IN STITCHES**

ZUMBROTA, MN (POP.  
3,300)

Owner Sandy Evans, provides southeastern Minnesota with a destination quilting and sewing center. This colorful retail store specializes in quilting fabrics, supplies, dyed wools, and specialty threads.

The store offers events, hosts clubs, and conducts classes to engage its community of quilters and sewers.



**How it got started:**

All in Stitches occupies an historic 1899 building that has had many uses over the years. The building has housed a general store, a jewelry store, a shoe store, and a harness shop. The building was renovated to draw in new business to Zumbrota. The current business operator rents from the building owner who has a business in the building as well.

**Who it serves:**

The business draws customers from all over the United States. It has become a destination for quilters and management stays in contact with customers through social media, newsletters, and events.

**Building improvements:**

Building improvements included a new roof, electrical, plumbing, new windows, and brick tuck-pointing. The interior was refurbished, while maintaining historic features.

**Funding:**

Building renovations were owner financed.

**Website:** [www.allinstitchesmn.com](http://www.allinstitchesmn.com)

## TELEPHARMACY

### NUCARA PHARMACY

STATE CENTER, IA (POP. 1,479)

Telepharmacies offer a unique way to make health products and services easily accessible to residents in small towns. A telepharmacy is the delivery of pharmaceutical care via telecommunications to patients in locations where they may not have direct contact with a pharmacist.

#### How it got started:

State Center conducted a city assessment and found that residents wanted a pharmacy. The city contacted numerous pharmacies, but found that their small community size detracted many companies from investing in their community. Eventually, two telepharmacy companies contacted the city suggesting that State Center was an optimal location.

#### Who it serves:

“A tele pharmacy utilizes modern audio / visual technology to allow a pharmacist to provide care remotely. A NuCara pharmacist in Ames, IA is responsible for the safety and care of all patients at the State Center tele pharmacy”.

#### Building improvements:

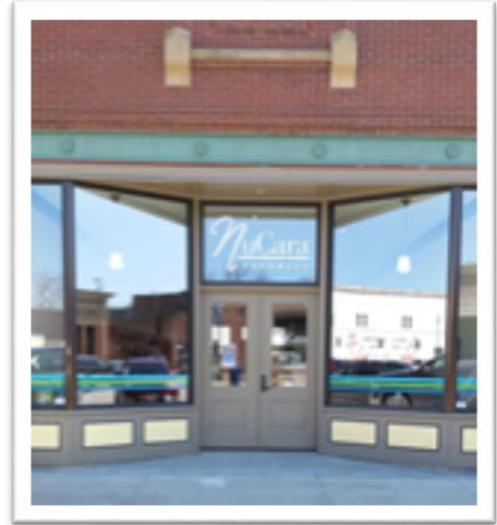
NuCara came to State Center for a site visit and wanted a full size building on Main Street. The city did not have a building that met this criterion at the time; however, they recently started renovating a dilapidated building in their historic district. NuCara suggested this as the proposed site as long as the building was renovated to the same high standards as other buildings in this district.

The project took over a year to complete. Contractors were hired for new electrical, plumbing, heating and air conditioning. In addition, they hired a contractor to renovate and finish the basement. The basement floor was mud and the contractor needed to dig it out, tile and add a sub pump. Lastly, the city hired one carpenter to finish the rest of the renovations. They lowered costs by having volunteers help the carpenter with the majority of the tasks.

#### Funding:

The city had already received a \$75,000 grant from Main Street Iowa before the project even began. The local nonprofit main street organization also applied for state tax credits.

**Website:** <http://www.nucara.com/Locations/1166/State-Center-Ia-50247>



## ANTIQUES

### ROCKING CHAIR ANTIQUES, COLLECTIBLES & MORE

NEILLSVILLE, WI (POP. 2,400)

This store offers antiques, collectibles, home décor, and gifts in a vintage 1897 building in historic downtown Neillsville.

#### How it got started:

Owners Dan and Denise Clough bought the building as an investment with intentions of renting it out as commercial space. The couple enjoys going to auctions, so when it took longer than expected to find renters they started having monthly antique sales in the space. It was so well-received by the community that they started opening every Saturday. Today, they are open four days a week.

#### Who it serves:

Customers are a mix of local customers, tourists, through travelers and even other antique dealers.

#### Building improvements:

The building had been renovated and features original tin ceilings and crown moulding. It has been updated to increase the retail space, and includes period-appropriate beadboard paneling and light fixtures.

#### Funding:

The building was purchased with personal funds.

**Website:** [www.rockingchair.jimdo.com](http://www.rockingchair.jimdo.com)



## FLORAL SHOP

### AROMA FLORIST & CAFÉ

THORP, WI (POP. 1,621)

Owners John and Lana Ciolkosz were both born and raised in Thorp. Lana has worked in the floral business since the age of 15. They purchased an existing floral business in 2001.

#### How it got started:

The building had been a bank since 1928 and when Lana learned that the building was going up for sale she thought “someone has to save that old building.” John and Lana purchased the building in July 2013 and spent over a year renovating it and moving their business in October 2014.

#### Who it serves:

Lana has a local customer base and helps play a part in special events of the people she knows. Her connection to the community encourages repeat and word of mouth business.

#### Building improvements:

The building was gutted, saving the original ceiling, which had become a victim to a drop ceiling during a 1970s remodel of the bank. Lana painstakingly handpainted the original ceiling medallions and stained the woodwork. The original ceiling and plaster dental work was restored and some original lights were kept. They added staircases to make the loft areas accessible to the public, and one area serves as a tuxedo fitting shop. They incorporated many original features of the bank including the staircase railings and original vault.

John’s focus was on making the building energy efficient, including pouring a concrete floor with in-floor heat, insulating the building, and installing a modern sound system. Some windows were also replaced. A fireplace was added for ambiance near the café.

Because the building had originally served as a bank, John and Lana incorporated the drive-through in the café, which serves coffee and sandwiches. John updated the speaker system for the drive-through, and now most of their café business comes through this window.

#### Funding:

They received a façade loan through the county for the exterior work and a business loan from their bank. They did as much work themselves as “sweat equity.”

**Website:** [www.thorpflowers.com](http://www.thorpflowers.com)



## CITY GOVERNMENT

### MUNICIPAL BUILDING

WEYAUWEGA, WI (POP. 1,900)

The City of Weyauwega completed a major municipal building expansion project on Main Street in 2016. The project included the remodeling and expansion of City Hall and the police department.



#### **How it got started:**

Space limitations at City Hall combined with underutilized neighboring buildings were factors that led to this major downtown redevelopment. The options included renovating City Hall, or constructing a new building on one of various sites. After reviewing various options, the Weyauwega Common Council decided to keep City Hall downtown because they believed it was the central location and best fit for the community.

#### **Who it serves:**

The building was converted to three different functions. One part of the building is dedicated to local government, another section to the police department and the bottom floor as community space.

#### **Building improvements:**

Several years earlier, the city purchased the two lots next to City Hall in preparation for the expansion project. The completed project resulted in a two-story building on the three lots with space for City Hall, the police department and also a community center. City Council ensured the improvements to the building would complement downtown architecture.

#### **Funding:**

Weyauwega Common Council approved the final financing for the City Hall project through the issuance and sale of \$3.095 million General Obligation Refunding Bonds. The total project approximately cost \$3.4 million dollars.

**Website:** <http://www.cityofweyauwega-wi.gov/>

Source: *Waupaca County News and City of Weyauwega*

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to offer a sample of creative ideas that are bringing activity back to small town downtowns. The intent was to provide communities with a variety of examples as a catalyst for idea generation.

The following are some observations from the case studies.

1. Most of the retail businesses do not compete directly with big-box chain stores.
2. Many businesses combine various retail categories in one location.
3. Approximately half of the case studies represented services.
4. Businesses often serve a larger geographic market beyond the local trade area.
5. Tourism is an important market segment in a third of the case studies.
6. The property owners and operators typically have a strong connection and bond with the community.
7. The majority of funding was provided by owners' investment followed by loans and grants.
8. In some cases, community financing or construction assistance made the project feasible.
9. Sweat equity was an important financing component in most of the businesses.

Small town downtowns face numerous obstacles leading to empty storefronts. However, even against these challenges, creative entrepreneurs and community leaders have demonstrated success in reusing buildings that might otherwise be empty. Hopefully the case studies in this publication stimulate new ideas for reusing buildings in your community.

## DO YOU HAVE AN EXAMPLE OF A CREATIVE DOWNTOWN BUILDING USE?

If you know of a business or noncommercial use that you want to include with our case studies, please contact Bill Ryan at the University-Wisconsin Extension with the business name and owner's contact information.

[bill.ryan@uwex.edu](mailto:bill.ryan@uwex.edu)

### Authors and Contributors

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