



WOODBINE, IOWA

AMERICANA
ALIVE
AND WELL



A small town of less than 2,000 people, Woodbine, Iowa, is a slice of Americana. “Where else can you shop for antiques, fill a prescription, stare into a glass-blower’s furnace, check grain prices, look at upholstery swatches for your Model T, and slake your thirst at the new brewery, all in less than 52 steps?” extols Deb Sprecker, Program Director of Woodbine Main Street.

This iconic Midwest town features brick streets, flags on porches, no stop lights, and a friendly, funky Main Street district. It is also a major stop on the historic Lincoln Highway, a transcontinental roadway that runs from New York City to the West Coast.

Woodbine’s section of the highway, the longest remaining portion in Iowa, was bricked in 1921. As far back as the 1990s, city leaders valued the charming brick streets enough to embark on a multimillion dollar, phased restoration of the highway. In January 2013, the restoration, now in its third and final phase, received an enormous boost when the Woodbine Lincoln Highway and Brick Street Historic Districts were listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Woodbine joined the Main Street Iowa family in 2008. When Woodbine became a Main Street town, says Main Street Board President Roger Kenkel, “downtown was hurting. Some businesses were closing.”

“The condition of Main Street had deteriorated and we knew it,” adds board member Bob Stephany.

Since it joined Main Street Iowa, Woodbine has never looked back. Its Main Street success is a story of resilience and resolve, of a community willing to take a hard look at the hand it’s been dealt, then dig in to make something better out of it.

COMMITTED, CONVINCED, AND CREATING CHANGE

Woodbine Main Street, the City of Woodbine, and the Woodbine Community Betterment & Development Corporation have joined together to implement the Main Street Four Point Approach®. City officials, including the mayor, city administrator, and city clerk, and educators serve on the Main Street board

To celebrate the completion of a 23-building façade rehab project, Iowa Governor Terry Branstad came to town for a ribbon cutting. The community restaged a 1911 Chautauqua Parade, complete with vintage vehicles from ascending decades and a large John Deere tractor bringing up the rear.





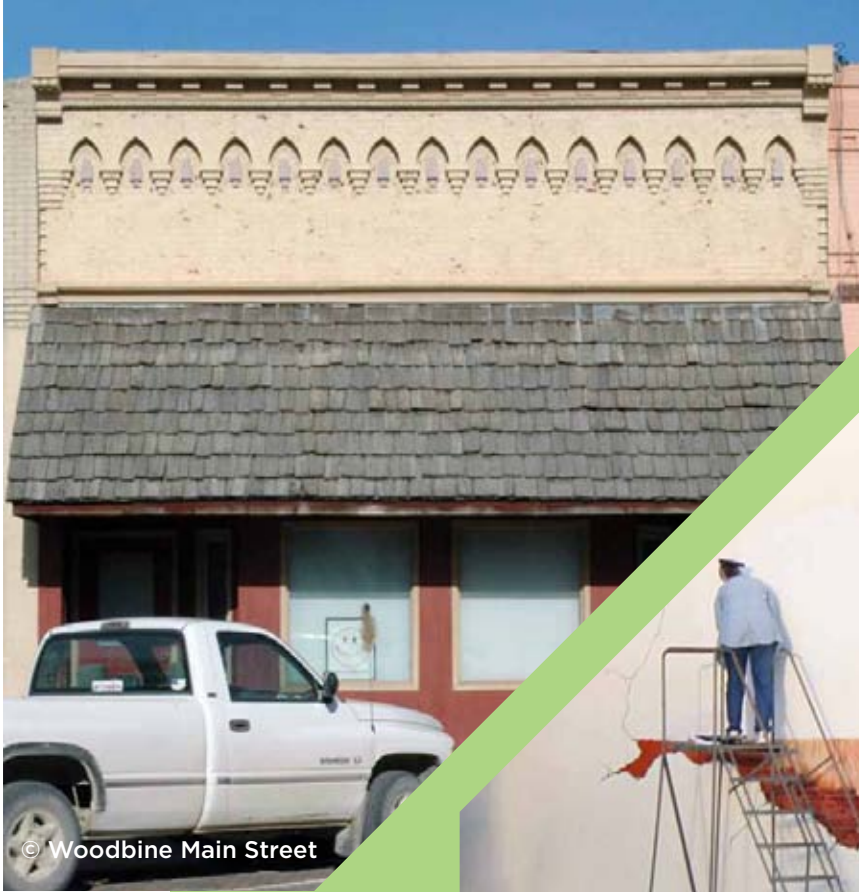
This 1928 canopy gas station, rehabbed in 2010 (bottom), features an architectural eyebrow roofline and houses the Main Street office and a community meeting room in the garage bays. By retaining many service station elements, such as the garage doors which were left in the raised position, and the auto lift as the pedestal for a glass conference table, the building is not only functional but faithful to its original appearance.

and four-point committees, while Woodbine Betterment works in tandem with Main Street and the city to recruit businesses, renovate commercial space, and share the management of upper-story housing.

Action plans laid out by the Main Street committees have produced dramatic building improvements from “paint and polish” projects to substantial building renovations.

One of the major tools Woodbine has leveraged to revitalize its commercial district, says Main Street Iowa State Coordinator Michael Wagler, “has been the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG).”





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Two layers of shake shingles and other coverings were peeled away from the Movers & Shakers building (above left) to reveal a beautiful intact storefront (above right). A mural is being painted on the side of the building (above) where the storefront is lit up every weeknight to spotlight tap dancers and karate kids.

The City of Woodbine was awarded a \$500,000 Downtown Revitalization Community Development Block Grant as part of a \$900,000 Façade Master Plan to renovate 23 buildings in the Main Street District. Completed in January 2012 through a partnership of individual business owners, the City of Woodbine, and Woodbine Main Street, these rehabs have had a significant economic impact on the downtown, as underscored by the restoration of the Odd Fellows Building.

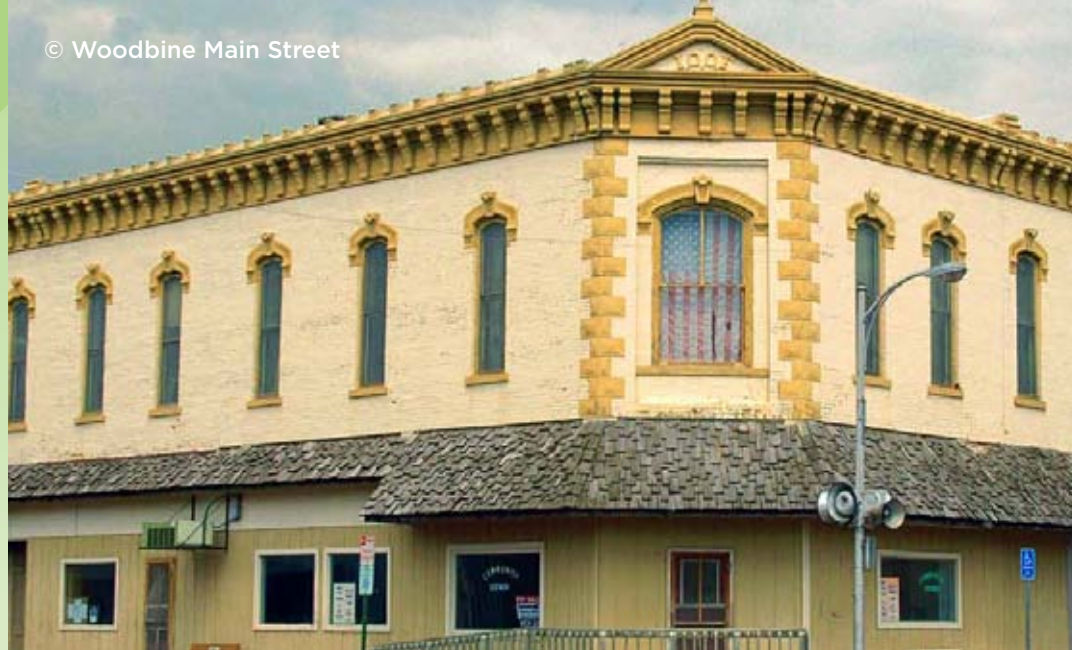
The owners redeveloped this late 19th-century, Italianate brick building using private funds, historic tax credits, and a number of grants. When the project began,

the two-story, flat-roofed building suffered from mortar damage, crumbling interiors, and an ill-conceived façade remodeling. Once a well-known regional department store as well as an Odd Fellows Lodge, the building holds strong memories for many older Woodbine residents, one of whom recalls thinking that the store's "oak stairway was the biggest, grandest thing ever."

The finished project added six two-bedroom apartments on the second floor, one apartment on the entry level, a full-service restaurant, and several office/retail spaces to the commercial district. Economically, the project not only has



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When the owners of Woodbine's 19th-century Italianate Odd Fellows Building began redeveloping the structure (above and above right), it suffered from mortar damage, crumbling interiors, and an ill-conceived façade remodeling. The finished project (right) has added seven apartments, a restaurant, and several office/retail spaces to the downtown, as well as restoring the beauty of one of Woodbine's iconic buildings.

brought new jobs and services downtown but has pushed up the value of downtown real estate, its assessed value rising from \$18,038 in 2010 to \$205,968 in 2011.

Winner of the 2011 Iowa Preservation Award for "Best Commercial Rehab" and the 2011 Main Street Iowa Award for "Best Design–Total Building Rehab," the Odd Fellows restoration has helped spur other major projects.

The Woodbine Savings Bank project rescued an 1890s National Register

building. In 2008, the two-story brick structure, which housed several apartments, faced serious structural issues, so severe that the owners were seriously pondering whether to renovate or raze the building.

Working with Woodbine Main Street, the city, and a local development group, the owners put together a \$2.2 million renovation plan. Today, the building houses 11 affordable apartments, three office suites, an outdoor deck, and a communal area. All of the apartments were leased within six months.

Aaron Pryor, owner and manager of the Woodbine Savings Bank Apartments, is optimistic about downtown's future, thanks to the planning efforts and partnership between the city and Main Street Woodbine: "It's a lot more vibrant downtown, not just our building, but all the other buildings in town with the new façades and the façade master plan. A lot of people from neighboring towns are somewhat envious of the downtown we've created."

People like Pryor are the town's best business recruiters. The owner of a local antiques store, for example, convinced an out-of-town shopper to open a dental clinic and rehab two upper-story apartments in a

building that had been vacant for 10 years.

These and other projects have doubled the number of housing units downtown, from 16 apartments in 2008 to 32 today. And Woodbine's downtown housing is a hot commodity, rapidly becoming the preferred residential choice for newcomers, retirees, and downtown workers.

The allure of these downtown residences is not just their appearance; it's also their focus on sustainability.

The Woodbine Savings Bank project rescued an 1890s National Register building that was in such bad condition that the owners seriously considered razing the structure. Today, after a \$2.2 million renovation, the building (below) houses affordable apartments, office suites, an outdoor deck, and a communal area.





Greeting travelers at the city's gateway, a restored milk-carton-shaped grain elevator (right, historic photo; opposite page, today) beckons them to turn off the highway and explore Woodbine. Main Street teamed up with the farm cooperative and the city to turn an eyesore into public art through the use of sustainable materials.



GREEN SCENE

In 2008, the Iowa Department of Economic Development (IDED) selected Woodbine as one of two Main Street communities to serve as pilots for its Green Streets Initiative. With the help of the city, IDED, and Cenergy, an independent and nationally certified business energy-use rating firm, Woodbine Main Street provided energy audits for the downtown's buildings. The audits assessed the amount of energy used by each building and suggested measures for improving energy efficiency.

"All 50 businesses had energy audits done," says Darin Smith of Arch Icon Development, noting that at first there was skepticism because of doubts about the return on investment.

These doubts were eventually outweighed by the value of the opportunity to revitalize the downtown. "Once we got going as a community" says Smith, "we couldn't stop."

Woodbine's focus on sustainability guided the design paths for downtown residential projects. The Woodbine Savings Bank Apartments has geothermal HVAC and other efficiencies that have garnered an energy savings of up to 35 percent.





A Sustainability Community Master Plan, commissioned by Woodbine Main Street in cooperation with the city in 2010, is being used to guide development by applying Iowa Green Streets criteria to downtown building improvements and residential development. Woodbine's focus on green infrastructure has led to projects that have improved livability in this small town:

- Use of native plants and landscaping downtown;
- Geothermal for historic rehabs;
- Rescue of a 1940s historic grain elevator as public art through the use of sustainable materials; and
- Storefront designs that apply energy efficiencies through restoration of inset doorways and transoms and the use of colorful awnings.

The arts scene is steadily growing in Woodbine, thanks to such galleries as the Artisan (below right). Restored in 2012 (below), the Artisan is a funky mix of an artist-in-residence co-op, craft store, gallery, and creative center. It also features a glass blowers' shop where artists from Omaha and the surrounding area convene. The Artisan hosts First Friday Community Gallery events where visitors can select art by dropping donations in a bucket.

Board President Kenkel looks at all of these accomplishments with pride and a bit of awe: "Some of the things that we thought could happen over time, maybe 10 years—the façade rehabs and [other projects]—have happened so quickly."

But while Woodbine's ride to Main Street success has been rapid, it hasn't always been smooth. In September 2013, Woodbine's downtown faced a disaster that would test the community's commitment to the district and its businesses.

RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE

On September 26, 2013, two days before Applefest, the community's biggest annual





Woodbine is not only a community of great pride but also of fierce resolve as their reaction proved after a devastating fire swept the downtown in September 2013, two days before the town's biggest event.

event, a devastating fire swept through the downtown. "The wind was strong out of the south and it was spreading," recalls Main Street Board Member Bill Hutcheson.

Council Member Randy Vandemark was one of the first people on the scene and says, "The first thing I thought of was this fire's going to be more than our community can handle."

But Woodbine is a community of fierce pride and strong resolve.

"I remember clearly that Thursday," says Nicole Eilers of Brick Street

Brewing. "Everybody was running down the street. We looked down there and there was the fire.... It was amazing to see the community pull together and show support for the businesses and the families that were affected."

Roger Eby of Eby Drug can attest to that support firsthand. "Not very long after the fire started down the street," says Eby, "people from the town showed up here and they were carrying totes and boxes. Even the high school volleyball team came down. The people in this town, in less than an hour, emptied this entire store."



As the fire roared through downtown, Woodbine residents rushed to the rescue of downtown businesses, emptying stores of merchandise to save their inventory (right). The fire damaged four buildings (opposite page), closing three businesses. While the damage was severe, it could have been much worse, noted one Main Street board member. “It could have been a whole block.”



The fire damaged four buildings, closing three businesses and forcing relocation of services for the senior meal site. “It could have been much more serious,” says Hutcheson. “We lost four storefronts, but it could have been a whole block.”

Twiners, as Woodbine residents are affectionately known, showed their resiliency as scores of volunteers came to the victims’ aid and began to think about rebuilding. “The people here in Woodbine will come together,” says Kimberly Jacobs of Roots and Rumors. “They will rebuild and bring it back, just like they rebuilt Main Street when it was starting to deteriorate.”

But the rebuilding has been thoughtful and focused on preserving the town’s historic assets. Instead of rushing in with a “hurry up and replace” mentality, Woodbine Main Street, Woodbine Betterment & Development, and the city pooled their resources to help owners restore their buildings and restart their businesses. Quick action was taken to stabilize the two-story façade of an 1880s building so it could be restored.

“Our partnership is focused on saving and restoring as many of the historic structures as possible,” says Main Street Director Deb Sprecker. “Without the experience derived from six years as a Main Street community, we might be on a different course.”



“I believe a key to Woodbine’s successes to date has been its ability to inspire and exert a consistent positive attitude. Through this messaging, Woodbine Main Street has been able to inspire community leaders to buy into the process, inspire downtown stakeholders to invest in their built environment, inspire community members to re-envision and experience what their downtown can be, and inspire other communities to take action in their own downtowns.”

MICHAEL WAGLER, STATE COORDINATOR, MAIN STREET IOWA



“Front and center in our mission statement,” she adds, “is to promote historic preservation, champion hometown vitality, and build community partnerships. Historic preservation is ingrained in our community psyche and embedded in our partnerships.”

So is strong resolve and optimism. Two days after the fire, Applefest, the town’s largest event, which attracts up to 15,000 people to this tiny town, went on, offering visitors a warm slice of pie and an even warmer welcome to Woodbine’s craft, flea, farmers, and fine arts markets.

The fire and its aftermath highlight what has been Woodbine’s story all along, says Sprecker. “Twiners take a hard look at what isn’t working, then dig in to make something better out of what they’ve been handed—and have a good time doing it.”

THE WOODBINE EFFECT

Woodbine’s accomplishments reflect the town’s pride and willingness to apply creative problem solving. While historic rehabs and building renovations kicked off the program’s early years, the six-block downtown has also

Woodbine’s strong will and optimism were never more apparent than two days after the fire when the community hosted its largest event, Applefest, which attracts up to 15,000 visitors to the tiny town. Visitors were greeted with candy apples, a warm slice of pie, and an even warmer welcome to craft, flea, farmers, and fine arts markets and the annual classic car show!



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The story of Woodbine’s achievements is spreading throughout western Iowa, attracting visitors from all over the region. This mobile workshop tour group (above) steps off their bus and is welcomed by a “Spirit Tunnel” formed by Woodbine Community School students and their pep band. Students also put together “Why I Love My Hometown” welcome bags full of information, come-back coupons, and other treats for tour groups (right).

realized significant net gains in jobs and business starts and expansions: up 39 jobs, representing 23 percent of the current downtown employee base of approximately 200; and 22 business startups and expansions, 43 percent of the total number of storefront businesses. Presently, there is only one vacancy, “a 10-by-20-foot sliver of a storefront,” says Sprecker.

Main Street has also hit key investment milestones from 2010 to 2012, receiving Main Street Iowa Reinvestment Mile Markers of \$2 million, \$3 million, and \$5 million in each of those years.

The story of Woodbine’s achievements is spreading throughout western Iowa. Once we began work on our Façade Master Plan, Sprecker notes proudly, “our Main Street

volunteers hosted many regional visitors. One large group arrived in a school bus; others came in pairs or by carload. We welcomed them and told them our story.”

These tours have created what some call the “Woodbine Effect.” People returned home inspired by Woodbine’s success. They began organizing community leaders, researching revitalization approaches and completing Main Street applications, says Sprecker. “Our philosophy—share our story with whoever will listen, whenever we can!”

And Woodbine has an important story to tell other small towns in which Main Street district boundaries can easily blur. “Students, families, businesses, and seniors ‘get it,’” explains Sprecker. “The loss or deterioration of one sector seriously affects the whole. We



never discount the power of simply working together to accomplish our priorities.”

Woodbine’s revitalization comeback, concludes Sprecker, “boils down to a few important components: a fierce pride of place, an attitude that welcomes change; and stubborn, active community members who identify priorities, establish shared goals, and then get to work”

“While many small towns are declining in population, our community has grown,” says Tracy Lee Kelley, a third-grade teacher at the Woodbine Community School. “It has grown not only in size but in visionary leadership fostered by community vitality and volunteerism. This is due to the Main Street program.”

Woodbine is proof that small-town life is alive and well in America and facing the future with eagerness, enthusiasm, and the determination to make their downtown the best that it can be. ★

Linda Glisson is the consulting editor of Main Street Now. She was a staff member of the former National Trust Main Street Center. Before joining the National Trust, she was a senior editor at US News & World Report Books and a free-lance editor for National Geographic Books. She has an associate of arts degree from the American University in Paris and a bachelor's degree in journalism from the George Washington University.

Watch the Woodbine GAMSA video.

Commitment to Woodbine Main Street’s revitalization efforts involves “Twiners” of all ages. The program has a strong partnership with the local school. Students learn the art of window washing and take part in a grant-funded event that enables them to engage with business owners and learn about downtown’s historic buildings (below left). Adult volunteers not only contribute their time, talent, and energy; they contribute financially as well, as in this successful fundraiser that auctioned off more than 25 delectable desserts (below).



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BY THE NUMBERS

PROGRAM FOUNDED: 2008
CITY POPULATION: 1,459

BUSINESS MIX
RETAIL: 10
RESTAURANTS: 3
SERVICE BUSINESSES: 19
OFFICES: 11
ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT: 5

39
NET NEW JOBS

22
NET NEW BUSINESSES

44
BUILDING REHABS

1
NEW BUILDING

14
HOUSING UNITS ADDED

10
vacant storefronts
VACANCY RATE WHEN
PROGRAM STARTED

1
vacant storefront
CURRENT VACANCY RATE



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