The term “Main Street,” has come to mean so much in our society. To some, it’s just the name of a street. To others it’s the collection of old buildings, maybe that place where people used to go shopping. In some cases, the words Main Street are used as a synonym for “downtown.” More recently, the term “Main Street” is used to represent small business or, more directly, the opposite of big business. No matter how you interpret it, Main Street symbolizes so much of who we are as a people. Main Street is a direct connection to our history, an indicator of a community’s economic health, as well as a representation of an evolution of our culture that is constantly occurring.

That evolution, and the acceptance of a place’s progression over time, becomes an important element that is often overlooked in the revitalization process. How many times have you heard something like this: “I remember when everyone came downtown. We had two men’s clothing stores, three women’s clothing stores, and a general store. You could really get anything you needed right here in our downtown.” That idealistic memory of downtown is just that, a memory. A recollection of what once was, but may never be again.

Too many times, we use the memory of the past as our vision for the future. This becomes a road block, as a place begins to evolve. We must realize that after a place has deteriorated incrementally over time, it often reaches a point (economically, physically, and/or socially) where it’s just not the same. It has changed into something new we didn’t plan for, expect, or at least at the beginning, want. The old hotel has been adaptively used as apartments; “Well that’s great, but it’s not a hotel anymore,” or the old hardware store is now an artist incubator; “It’s wonderful the space is being
used, but now we have ‘those people’ here.”

Our instinct is to retreat to what is familiar, what downtown was in the past. The reality is that downtown will be different in the future. It will be changed. That change will welcome new types of businesses, new uses for downtown spaces, and new faces as leaders. The acceptance of change can be one of the most difficult elements when working with a place. But, like a grieving process, we must learn to accept that the old ‘us’ is gone before we can be open to the idea that the new ‘us’ will be different. Different in exciting new ways that will position our downtowns to thrive in the next chapter of our community’s evolution.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

In the early 1980’s, the National Main Street Center’s Main Street America™ program introduced a pioneering approach to downtown revitalization. The Main Street Approach™ offers community-based revitalization initiatives with a

Nearly slated for demolition 30 years ago, downtown Cedar Falls has experienced an amazing transformation through its revitalization journey using the Main Street Approach.

The rehabilitation of the E.E. Warren Opera House in Greenfield became an important turning point in the community’s confidence to tackle big downtown challenges.
practical, adaptable framework for downtown transformation that is tailored to local conditions. The approach was designed to help communities get started with revitalization and grows with them over time.

Main Street empowers communities to set their own destinies. While revitalization is challenging work, the Main Street program offers a roadmap for locally-owned, locally-driven prosperity. Across the country, thousands of communities have used the Main Street Approach to transform their economies, leverage local leadership, and improve overall quality of life. Through this empowerment, the approach assists communities with the evolution and changes that will inevitably occur during revitalization efforts.

THE APPROACH AT WORK
Successful communities have learned to hone the Main Street program’s balance of historic preservation, creativity, business support, and organizational basics. The following section will explore snapshot case studies from three central Iowa Main Street programs. These stories demonstrate rural revitalization against all odds, a diverse urban program utilizing community-initiated development to lead by example, and a successful traditional retail district in the midst of its continued evolutionary process.

GREENFIELD (POPULATION 1,982)
Greenfield is the prototypical rural, county-seat downtown. With its central, tree-lined courthouse square, intact one to three story early 20th century commercial buildings, and locally-owned businesses, downtown Greenfield has an intimate historic district character. Dominated by the grand E.E. Warren Opera House, downtown had seen its better days when the community entered the Main Street program in 1995.

From the beginning, the revitalization of the long vacant opera house was a primary goal of the local Main Street program. Understanding the daunting task ahead and the community’s uncer-
tainty of the badly deteriorated building’s future, the local program embarked on a process built on incremental improvements and creative use of the undeveloped space, all while working towards a long-view vision. Through the 20+ years of the active revitalization process, desired end use of the spaces evolved as opportunities arose, partners were added to the vision, and passionate volunteers joined the effort.

The E.E. Warren Opera House officially reopened in 2012 as the Warren Cultural Center. The creative use of the spaces, including a partnership and the simultaneous rehabilitation of the adjacent Hotel Greenfield, enabled the project team and community to reimagine what the future use would be for the grand building. Including a retail space, leasable office spaces, overnight lodging options, and the main entertainment venue, the Warren Cultural Center was able to diversify its use of space and sources of income to be more financially sustainable. The size, scale, and sophistication of this amazing project provided the opportunity for the community and region to experience how Greenfield would not let major challenges stand in the way of a bright future. Greenfield demonstrated the payoff of an incremental process paired with a bold vision for the new chapter of downtown. The Warren Cultural Center project serves as a catalyst for other projects in the district, to think big and take action incrementally.

DES MOINES’ 6TH AVENUE CORRIDOR (POPULATION 203,433)

Des Moines’ 6th Avenue Corridor Main Street district is located just north of downtown Des Moines and is one of the state’s most culturally and socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods. Once the center of the independent community of North Des Moines, the corridor evolved in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a mixed-use street with two strong commercial nodes. Bisected by a major north-south connector street and burdened with a series of demolitions and deteriorated structures, the 6th Avenue Corridor is visually no longer a traditional historic commercial district.
This presents a number of challenges and opportunities that require an adjusted implementation of the Main Street Approach.

Beginning its Main Street program journey in 2009, 6th Avenue Corridor invested its first years into developing capacity for the program and finding new ways to engage with district stakeholders. Through the years, the program has helped facilitate many new construction projects that have begun to change the appearance of the corridor. Facing difficult rehabilitation realities, the Main Street program is positioning itself as a development lead for some of the district’s most critical and catalytic projects.

Currently spearheading the redevelopment of the historic North Des Moines City Hall building for mixed-use opportunities and the redevelopment of a late 19th century carriage house that will serve as the organization’s office, the program is demonstrating a new perspective of investment on 6th Avenue Corridor. This model of leading by example, in combination with strengthened city partnerships and a leadership role with streetscape improvements, is positioning the district to experience a major economic, physical, and social transformation in the coming years.

WEST DES MOINES’ VALLEY JUNCTION (POPULATION 56,609)

Valley Junction, West Des Moines’ original name, is the historic core of one of Iowa’s fastest growing communities. With the feel of a small town, the historic Valley Junction district is tucked away in a central location in the Des Moines metro. Through the years the economic niche of the Valley Junction district has evolved from its neighborhood-serving roots to an antique-dominated focus in the 1970s-80s, to its more recent retail destination niche. It is safe to say that the district has always seen some level of economic success. A major reason for this continued success is the ability of community leaders to be proactive as economic opportunities and trends evolve.

This progressive mindset is now positioning Valley Junction for its next evolution; one that is proactively adding capacity and opportunity to an already strong foundation of neighborhood assets. Initiatives to add urban-style living options, new dining and nighttime establishments, and revised utilization of downtown spaces have sparked major adaptive reuse projects that are challenging the norms of district residents’ emotional ties to the Valley Junction area.

Projects like the reuse of a historic neighborhood elementary school as affordable, artist-oriented housing have brought some of these emotions to the surface. This highlights the reality that our built environment plays a much more important role than merely as physical structure. In this case, the school’s closing marked the end, the death, of a community’s shared memory of that space. While the continued use of the structure does support its continued life, without an opportunity for the community to collectively grieve the loss of that past reality, the openness to accept its new use becomes difficult.

This evolutionary challenge of historic preservation is replaying repeatedly in Valley Junction. These projects are driving the district’s continued evolution but also forcing local partners to balance elements of change with an acknowledgement of the past. This is being demonstrated through increased outreach and connection with the neighborhood, celebrating history through new National Register listings, and creating financial incentives to support historic rehabilitation of the district’s unique architecture and character.

EMPOWERING CHANGE

The American journalist Sydney J. Harris once said, “What we really want is for things to remain the same but get better.” This quote sums up a difficult reality for local revitalization efforts. In order to be successful, revitalization needs to be a positive force for change, but also a mediator of emotional connections to a community’s comfort.
Development processes, whether personal or communitywide, will never be linear. There are going to be periods of time when change comes easy, other times when it feels that nothing is going to done, and still other times when we feel that sense of déjà vu, that sense that we have tried this before.

As each place walks through its own process of evolution, acceptance, and change, it is important for a community to build a foundation of tools to navigate the emotional connections of change. Those tools include:

1. Building an inclusive, diverse, and transparent network of support. This network of support, communication, and encouragement becomes the basis for an honest relationship with the community.
2. Working to collectively develop a vision that provides a long view for the district, but focuses on a strategy of incrementalism to celebrate small wins throughout the process. These minor, consistent wins not only build confidence but also demonstrate change in a more digestible fashion.
3. Strengthening the community’s “collective emotional intelligence” to build awareness of the changes ahead, the challenges that accompany them, and how those changes will impact the strongest asset of any place, its people.
4. Developing leaders with the perseverance and patience to lean into the many challenges throughout the journey. Developing leaders with these qualities at all levels creates a sustainable leadership network as well as a dispersed broader base of people to deal with challenges, rather than one key volunteer or staff person.

These tools are inherently built into the Main Street Approach and are characteristics of local places that have experienced revitalization success. By acknowledging that revitalization is more than simply driving change but also about supporting the personal connections to a place, local leaders can use the emotional impact of change as an empowered tool. This can position a local revitalization program to be more engaged through honest conversations with the community. It can also give residents of a place permission to celebrate the past in a different way and to build acceptance that new versions of who we are going to be is different. And that is not only okay, it’s exciting. That is, until things change again.