

Community planning + Iowa State + Red Oak = Progress + Pride

What do you get when you add 11 Iowa State University community/regional planning students, one ISU Extension specialist, one progressive community and 10 years? In downtown Red Oak you get an increase in property values of nearly \$500,000, a more attractive retail district, improved community cooperation and a growing sense of pride.

In fall 2008, Alan Jensen, now an ISU Extension geospatial technology and community development specialist, returned to Red Oak, where in 1996 students in an ISU studio course he was teaching developed a vision for the community's downtown area.

Back then, downtown Red Oak had seen its share of economic decline, building deterioration and, in general, loss of economic vitality, Jensen said. But, the community decided to take action. The Red Oak Chamber of Commerce asked ISU to propose ways to improve the downtown's appearance — with the cooperation of businesses, city leaders and community members.

The students conducted in-depth research. They photographed each building on the square, inspected those where they were granted access and shot hours of videotape to gain a better sense of the community and its business environment.



In addition, the class sought community input via a written survey, through public comment on various design proposals and through a formal presentation. The students' final report provided the basis for storeowners and the city to move forward with development of an incentive program for storefront renovations.

A downtown urban renewal ordinance was passed in late 1997 to help with the restorations. Tax increment financing (TIF) helped generate grant funding awarded to store owners.

Work began in 1998, and the changes since have been dramatic. Not only have appearances improved, but upgrades such as new windows, awnings and, in some cases, structural improvements have helped prolong the life of many buildings.

A limited liability company (LLC) comprised of local business owners and individuals was formed in 2004. The LLC purchases buildings in need of help, renovates them and then finds tenants for occupancy. Two projects were completed recently and two more buildings have been purchased for renovation later this year.

"We continue to improve our downtown business area one building at a time. The changes have been dramatic and very positive for the Red Oak community."

- James Sifford, President, Houghton State Bank

For more information about this and other Iowa State University Extension programs, contact Alan Jensen, geospatial technology and community development specialist, 515-294-2073, adjensen@iastate.edu, OR, Bill Drey, Montgomery County Extension Education Director, 712-623-2592, drey@iastate.edu.

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