

## **Let's talk about Gowrie's downtown**

I'm excited to be here, as several folks have been following me and our business SaveYour.Town and have put some of our ideas into action.

Today I'm going to share stories and ideas for your downtown. I'll be quick. Don't worry about taking notes, this presentation will be available for you to review after this dinner.

## **Got empty buildings?**

Every small town has empty buildings. There are many reasons why, some use them for storage, some had good ideas and no money, some use it for tax write-offs. You'll find some last resort ways to deal with those issues with the link I share at the end of this presentation.

Let's take a look at some ideas today that you can put to use quickly.

Coppes Commons, Nappanee, Indiana: An old factory with 100,000 square feet of space had sat empty for years. Made Hoover cabinets. There was little chance another big manufacturer would swoop in and fill it all up. So, a local family bought the factory, they've opened it up, a little at a time, for smaller uses. There's retail space, an ice cream shop, all kinds of cool and fun things. They now have 11 businesses, large and small event spaces and a business center. And they still have a lot more room to grow in the future. Rather than waiting until someone was ready to fill the whole thing, they split it up, and now they have a thriving retail space.

## **Art Residency**

Cord McMahon graduated college with an art degree and decided he would just keep working at the vet where he worked part time during school. Until his teacher Maureen Seamonds asked why he even went to school. A local non-profit in Webster City found an empty building owner who was willing to let an artist use his space for 6 months for free (or until someone was willing to pay for it.) Here was a chance for Cord to learn how to run a retail shop, create lots of art and do work you love.

## **Incubator**

I had an idea for an informal incubator project. We had a building owner that had several buildings downtown. I approached them with the incubator

project idea. Put your buildings in the program and you offer 3 months free rent and reduced rent the rest of the year. The chamber agreed to help the businesses that went into those buildings with marketing, and the SBDC (Small Business Development Center) came in to help the business with creating a valuable business plan.

Benefits to the owner: at the least their utilities were being paid by someone else. Every building needs love, and this provided that. The business could leave at any time (remember, it's a way to test out the business idea) or they could stay as long as they wanted!

Did it work? Yes. The first business was an Italian restaurant. The town loved it! It lasted a year until the husband got a job out of state. No worries though. The Mexican grocery store across the street wanted to open their own restaurant in the back of the store. They were saving for a commercial hood. They took advantage of the incubator project and tested their idea out. They tried new recipes. Played around with open hours. And got the word out they were going to open a larger spot soon. Which is exactly what they did.

## **Clothing**

Chicago Style rented a spot an incubator spot for a year, then bought a building in the same block and expanded to be 3x times bigger. They've also helped three other businesses get started in their new location.

## **Rent too high**

We hear about building owners who are **asking for rents that are much too high**. Often this is because the building owner is from a larger city where these rents make sense.

Julie Worley from Rocky Ford CO, population 3200 found a way to deal with this.

She took rent negotiation authority from building owners, and she filled buildings. She called the empty building owners, learned everything about the buildings and found out what they wanted for rent.

Then she offered to get the buildings rented, but only if they gave her the authority to decide what the rent would be.

Only one building owner said yes. He had 1 building with 4 storefronts, and he was an out of town.

She knew someone who wanted to open a coffee shop. But a lot of plumbing work needed to be done.

The owner wanted \$450 per month. Julie had the woman pay the owner \$100 in rent and use the other \$350 to pay against the plumbing until she had recovered her costs. It took her 18 months to pay it off. Julie filled all four storefronts that way.

In her ten years at Rocky Ford, she helped 17 Mom and Pop businesses open!

### **Wall for rent**

This was an empty space inside the coffee shop in a store in Minnesota – they used the wall to feature photos from a local photographer until they could rent it out. What other businesses could do this?

### **Host a pop up event**

Karen Anderson set up during a one night holiday event and sold out her hand made scarves, hats and gloves. She tested her market, there was one. She tested her product, and they loved it. She was set up in an empty building that was for sale.

Here's what she learned: she didn't want to do business full time in a store, like she thought she had. Too heavy on the production end! She saved a ton of money, didn't she? And she still makes products and puts them in stores around town for sale.

### **Pop ups**

Utilize all the spaces available. This would be a great place to take a break before shopping at the next store. Those plants could be for sale, in fact so could the chess set, the chairs, the table ... you get the idea. Create a

small scenario in front of your store. Mix it up too. This can be a welcome experience for your customers.

### **Pop ups**

Create a pop up at all your local events! Be sure it's an experience though. Don't just stand there (or worse sit there) behind your table. Give people something to do. A store that sells jewelry could set up a selfie station – let people try on the jewelry and take a cool pic. Give them a hashtag to use. These ladies from TownsEnd Winery gave samples.

### **What to do with empty lots**

If you don't want to build something on an empty lot, try this idea out. A small town in Rock Springs Colorado converted their empty lot into a mini golf location with a fab mural. It's run on the honor system and locals happily keep it up in good shape.

### **Adult Fitness**

Adult outdoor fitness is a big draw these days. Baby boomers want to stay in shape! Drive over to Webster City and take a look at theirs!

### **Porterdale burned out building**

Porterdale Georgia had a huge community center and gymnasium, 12,000 square feet. It was built in 1939, burned in 2005 and was stabilized in 2012 and 2013. Downtown Director Teri Haler said it's been a long, slow process, and has taken a lot of funding

### **Same place**

It's now an event space that has hosted concerts, food festivals, and weddings. For a town with only 1,281 people, it's now a huge asset instead of a huge eyesore.

### **Tiny Houses**

Pascagoula MS had a big ol dirty lot in town. After Hurricane Katrina, somebody had a great idea to use the leftover housing from FEMA to build out this Anchor Square. Put a deck around it too. The businesses that are in these buildings are encouraged to grow and move to a larger building downtown.

## **Pop-up a village of shops.**

Tionesta, PA, had a building burn down and the block long lot sat empty for 10 years. It's a tiny town of 500 people in the Alleghany Forest. One of the economic development board members had an idea. What if they put garden sheds on it and rented them out? Like a business incubator. Another board member suggested they put facades on them to match the rest of downtown.

## **Tiny market village**

So that is what they did. Today there are 11 garden sheds. The city provides electricity. It costs \$50 a month to rent one. There is a waiting list. They have a bakery popup, an artist, an American doll clothing maker, a guy who makes fishing lures in the winter, a barbecue place and more. It's now an attraction and people come from all over to shop there.

## **Pop Ups Temporary Businesses**

Create your own starting with what you're already working on! This is an idea from England your economic development folks are working on. This shopping center in London takes advantage of a previously empty space next to the Shoreditch station underground tube. These are shipping containers that have been converted.

You could create pop ups too, and these look to be on a more permanent basis and with a lot of seating too!

## **Beautification anyone can do**

This is in Lewisville, North Carolina in a strip mall closed restaurant. There is a thrift store next door— they filled the window of the old restaurant with local art.

## **Lights**

Shopping should be fun, it should be an experience. You can buy anything just about anywhere today. Just because you have a store in a small town doesn't mean the townspeople are obligated to shop with you. What will make it possible for more people to come shop with you?

Give them an experience.

Light up your stores – and create a place where people feel comfortable and safe at the same time. You can use solar lights too. This is Iowa City. In the winter, they could put Christmas trees in this outdoor seating area! What a great idea for a photo op.

## **Hashtags**

Want people to use your hashtags? Post them! You'll be getting more people to help promote your community.

When I visited Paulding, Ohio, population 3600, there was a big sign painted on the wall of an empty building whose owner lived in China. It was advertising a business that was no longer there. Before I left, we covered it by painting their favorite hashtag promoting the town. And no, we did not ask for permission! Lots of people honked and cheered when they drove by, including the county sheriff. This was a good way to make more locals aware of the My Paulding hashtag

## **2<sup>nd</sup> story**

The top part of this building is empty and needs lots and lots of work. The old windows were boarded up and looked awful. This is the building one of the incubator businesses bought.

The community vitality director found a program involving students at Univ of Iowa and they created this idea. An artist took large pieces of wood and drew on them, in paint by number style. They were taken out to the fairgrounds and were painted by anyone in town who wanted to help. They feature important people and things in Webster City.

## **Columbiana**

At least make it look better. A young man owns the building, and he didn't want to put in a new window until there was new business there. That way he could build the window to their specifications.

## **Local artist**

A local artist was hired to paint this scene and worked on this painting during an outdoor festival downtown – lots of people enjoyed his work and

got to tour the building. Today the building is rented and there's a new window.

### **Anyone can do this**

Your kids could do this! And they are the best at making up things! You could even partner the kids with the seniors and let the seniors teach them how to do it! Christmas in July anyone?

### **Create an outdoor museum.**

It could be anything! There's old cars in Nebraska buried  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way and they stand up tire to tire. It's out in the middle of nowhere, and now it's a tourist destination.

A town I visited in Minnesota has a collector (hoarder) and they are working with him to organize his outdoor old equipment into a museum.

What weather-resistant or happily-rusty artifacts would tell the story of your town?

### **Partnerships**

Don't do it all alone! What can you and a group of friends do?

This building in was in the incubator project, but the new renter couldn't use the back-room area because there was a flooring issue.

Instead of wishing the new renter well, telling her to contact the owners or file a lawsuit – we just made a ninja callout. On Friday I posted on Facebook that we need some help removing carpet, fixing the floor and pulling nails. On Sunday a crew of friends showed up and took over. The situation was handled that day.

### **Steal ideas**

Andrew Laddaslaw from Kittaning PA created a service project at his church. It started with a group of people just mowing lawns for folks who couldn't. Then they figured out how to add paint, fix a porch and some other small projects.

Andrew created a spreadsheet that had property address sorted by

- Amount of damage
- How simple would it be to fix

They've tracked the work each year and over the first two years had a 24% improvement in housing in the town!

### **Old geezers**

Old Geezers Club in Akron Iowa are a group of Retired farmers who brought in their woodworking equipment so they could work on projects together and teach other people how to use the tools.

They are in the basement of an empty hospital that was later a school, that was later a nursing home as well.

Now there are individual businesses on the first floor – and are expanding as they go.

### **Work Together**

In little Maple Hill KS, 600 people, Sam Capoun started her boutique from her home during the pandemic and it was only online. She was doing fine. Then she realized that many locals were reaching out to her for products and coming to her home. She decided to open a storefront but wanted it in a place where it would do the most good. She found a building across from the new Smokehouse in town. He had a lot of supporters from out of town, and drew visitors from the highway nearby. She thought she might get new customers too.

### **Work Smart**

Even more importantly she reached out to the owner of the smokehouse, and they coordinated hours, so they would both be open in the evening. They used social media together, creating videos featuring them both, and sharing lots of pics, hours and food and products! They shared each other's posts. She also opened a space in the back of her store for a local stylist. The art studio next door coordinates events with them too.

Sam said, "sometimes it's about working smarter and not harder."

### **Work Together**



The Villages of Van Buren County Host a Fall Festival weekend. Not just shopping - horseback riding, leather goods making, lunch with the firemen, pottery demonstrations, letter press business and more. It brings in more people than if it were just shopping only. This brings many new people to town to experience the county with no stoplights. Who could you partner with?

### **Let 'em loose**

Youth do care – but they care about their things, not so much your things. This was in Cold Springs MN and this group of young people didn't realize they could just do things. Like ninjas. Clean up. Power wash. Open new businesses. Ask your young people what they want, then encourage them to go do that. And get out of the way.

### **Open to new ideas**

Which small towns will survive? Research says it's the ones that are open to new ideas. Iowa State University studied 99 towns, following them over a period of 20 years. They found that rural communities that have managed to thrive exhibit one shared value: an openness to new ideas.

Communities that are “tolerant of different opinions and allow newcomers to be involved in decision-making and power structures tend to have better economic and demographic outcomes.”

**Thank you!**

**Links to explore:**

<https://learnto.saveyour.town/tour-of-empty-buildings-toolkit>

<https://coppescommons.com/>

<https://buildingpossibility.com/articles/where-are-they-now/>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/AndrewLaddusaw>

<https://saveyour.town>

**Read more about vacant building registries, liens and takeovers in North Carolina here:**

<https://ced.sog.unc.edu/maintenance-of-vacant-or-neglected-commercial-buildings-options-for-nc-local-governments/>

**Brownfield booklet with before and after's**

[https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-06/documents/bf\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-06/documents/bf_booklet.pdf)

**Smart Growth** <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/smart-growth-brownfields-and-infill-development>

### **Ordinance and inspections**

Centerville, South Dakota, adopted a local vacant building ordinance that makes it less desirable to use empty spaces for cheap storage. Fees are charged for run-down, dilapidated properties in an attempt to discourage absent property owners from holding onto properties that could be turned into businesses. They do not have a local enforcement officer. They 1099 someone from a larger town who no one knows.

### **Ordinance and inspections**

Fayetteville NC, a city with 200K population, targeted vacant commercial properties in their downtown, and started requiring inspection by the fire department every six months.

### **Incentives**

Instead of having only incentives for recruiting business, consider incentives to address the specific cost of compliance.

### **Property Maintenance Codes**

Callendar Iowa and Stanhope Iowa have changed their city code and added a Property Maintenance Code for both the exterior and interior of buildings. I like it because it sets forth a detailed plan of action, a fine structure and no nonsense “do this or we will take the building from you” attitude.

