



downtown strategies

TOLONO, ILLINOIS

5-Year Strategic Action Plan

JULY 2025

About Us



Who We Are

Downtown Strategies, a division of Retail Strategies, exists to provide realistic, implementable strategies to communities for revitalizing their downtowns. Led by a team of downtown revitalization practitioners, our combination of real-world experience, plus expertise in real estate and retail uniquely qualify us to assist communities with backfilling vacancies, increasing tourism, and enhancing the sense of place in their downtowns. Serving rural communities in 26 states, Downtown Strategies is the leading national firm for downtown revitalization planning with an emphasis on real estate and retail.

5-Year Plan

At Downtown Strategies, we believe that action and implementation are more important than a flashy 20-year vision. Our process is based on our team's experience as practitioners. Our team members have been in your shoes as community leaders and how what it is like to manage downtown revitalization efforts.

Most communities do not suffer from a lack of ideas, they struggle with knowing where to start when it comes to implementing their ideas. Rather than brainstorming everything that you could ever potentially do in your downtown, we focus on a five-year timeframe. This plan is designed to help you identify where your community should focus its energy and effort in the near-term. Implementing these short-term, doable strategies will incrementally shift the trajectory of your downtown and create the spark that you desire.

Our Team



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Our Partnership

In the winter of 2024, the Village of Tolono partnered with Downtown Strategies to develop a short-term strategic vision for Downtown Tolono.

The focus of the vision was to enhance and accelerate the current revitalization efforts occurring downtown; provide a shared vision for community organizations and stakeholder groups; and spark action from existing master plans and long-term visions.

As part of the Discovery Phase of the process, Downtown Strategies conducted an in-market Strategic Visioning Workshop including a Stakeholder Input Session that hosted a diverse mixture of business owners, property owners, active volunteers, and downtown residents. The input and observations gathered throughout the Discovery Phase informed the strategies outlined in this 5-year Action Plan. The strategies are practical, tactical, asset-based, and market-driven.

Partnership Began	November 2024
Strategic Visioning Workshop	March 2025
Market Analysis Presentation	May 2025
Strategic Plan Delivered	July 2025



Focus Areas

In this 5-Year Action Plan created for Downtown Tolono, Downtown Strategies identified 4 Focus Areas for downtown initiatives. Each focus area was identified based on feedback received during the in-market Strategic Visioning Workshop, as well as the consultant team's expertise and analysis. The 4 Focus Areas for this 5-Year Action Plan include:



Policy & Administration

Policy & Administration involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for downtown.



Design

Thoughtful design supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that create a vibrant and inviting place for people.



Tourism & Promotion

Smart promotion initiatives position downtown as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases the community's unique characteristics.



Economic Vitality

Economic Vitality involves analyzing the retail and real estate as the foundation of downtown's redevelopment opportunities and creating a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators.



downtown strategies

FOCUS AREA 1

Policy & Administration

Policy & Administration involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

1.1 Action Teams

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

How many times has your community been through strategic planning? Are they jaded that not enough was accomplished afterwards? Implementation is a key focus of our process at Downtown Strategies. In our combined decades of practical experience, creating Action Teams is the most proven method to successful implementation. As the accompanying Project Mapping Workbook details, the Core Team should eventually assemble an Action Team for each Focus Area in this Action Plan. These teams may be represented by existing committees or boards, or they may be newly created groups of volunteers and staff. At the core, following the process of working through the workbook within each team will set your community up for maximum success.

In Tolono

In Tolono, the first Action Team should be formed with the mission to rejuvenate the downtown, thereby creating a vibrant atmosphere for business and social activities. The Action Team should identify areas of need and steps to take to move forward from the 5-Year Strategic Action Plan. Action Team structure should eventually follow the focus areas of this plan; thus, the following teams should be established over time: Policy & Administration, Design, Tourism & Promotion, and Economic Vitality.

The team should rely on recommendations and strategies within this plan as their work plan, meet regularly, encourage collaboration and diversity, and keep themselves accountable for realistic timing of implementation of their various work plan. Having merchant representation on the Action Team will be critical, and communication with stakeholders is key, and notes and minutes should be kept for accountability and transparency.

The consultant team has developed a Project Mapping Workbook, which will be provided during the Implementation Jumpstart and demonstrates how Action Team members can use this plan to spark action and guide revitalization efforts in the focus area of Downtown Tolono. The next phase of our partnership will provide support in getting the Action Team launched.



Underperforming Properties

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

Downtown areas are often seen as the economic and cultural heart of a city. Underperforming properties can have a negative impact on the overall economic health of the area. They may contribute to lower local tax revenue and economic activity, as well as the perception of blight, potentially affecting nearby businesses and property values.

There are a variety of strategies that can be used to elevate underperforming properties, and many times, a “carrot and stick” approach is most holistic and effective:



“Carrots” refer to positive incentives, such as financial incentives, recognition and awards, and support for redevelopment.



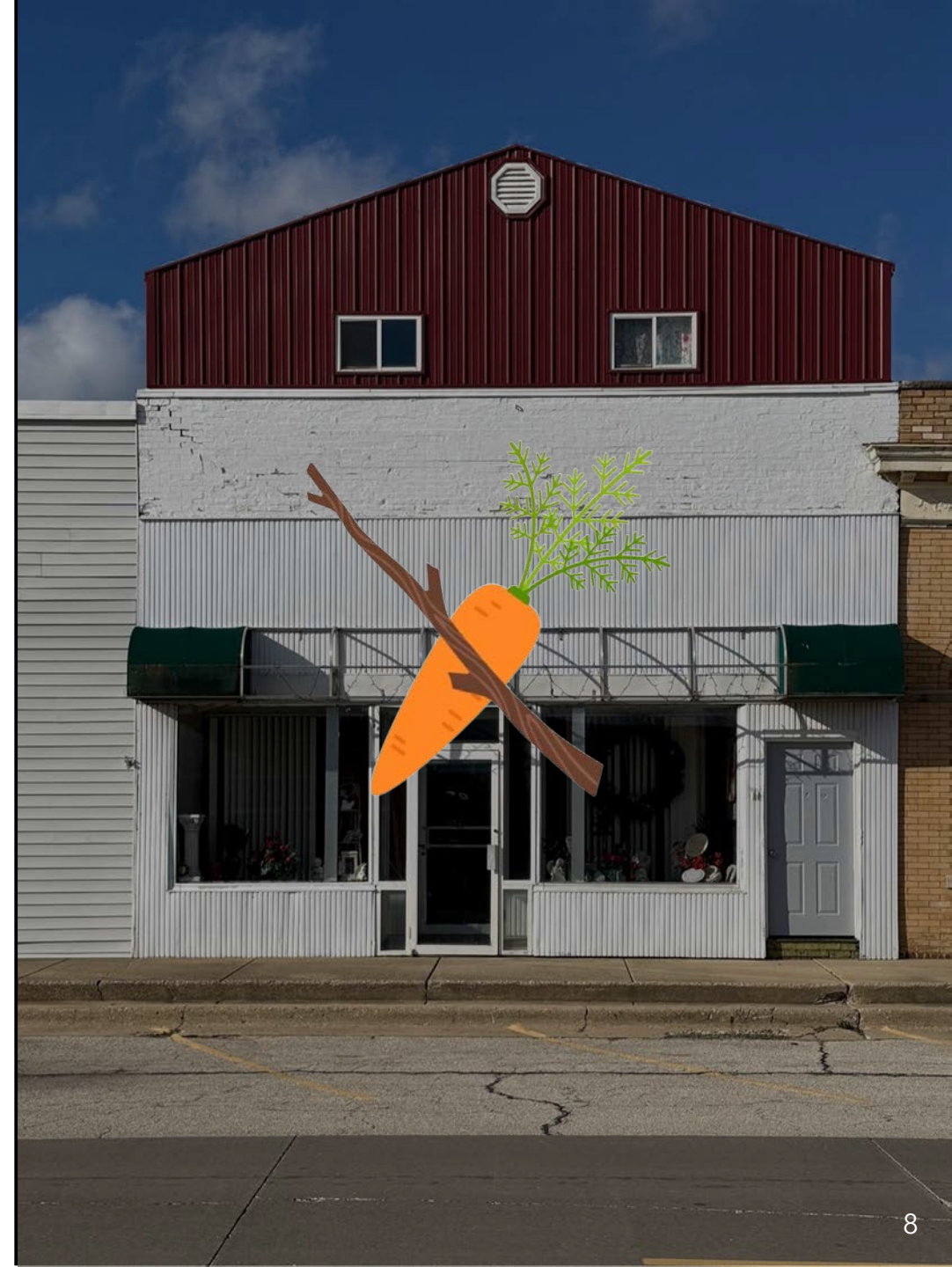
“Sticks” refer to negative consequences, such as code enforcement, taxes and assessments, and eventual loss of property.

In Tolono

In Tolono, the consultant team recommends a “carrot and stick” approach to elevating and improving underperforming properties. The mix recommended is:

Carrots: Implement Façade Grants and a Small Business Activation Fund

Stick: Utilize Minimum Maintenance Requirements, a Vacant Property Registry Ordinance, and proactive code enforcement as a deterrent for holding dilapidated properties.



1.2 Incentives for Property Activation

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

Property activation incentives are financial and regulatory tools that encourage private investment in downtown buildings and businesses. These incentives help bridge the gap between development costs and potential returns, making projects financially viable that might otherwise remain stagnant. In smaller communities like Tolono, strategic incentives can be the catalyst that transforms underutilized properties into vibrant contributors to the downtown economy.

Effective incentive programs focus resources on specific outcomes that align with community goals while ensuring accountability and measurable results. Rather than offering broad, unfocused assistance, successful programs target particular types of improvements or business categories that will have the greatest impact on downtown revitalization. The key is starting with manageable programs that can demonstrate success and build momentum for larger initiatives.

In Tolono

Tolono is uniquely positioned to implement meaningful property activation incentives due to recent revenue from the water department sale. This one-time influx of funds provides an opportunity to establish creative financing mechanisms that can have lasting impact on downtown revitalization. Currently, the village's primary economic development tool is the TIF District established in 2002, but additional targeted incentives could accelerate private investment and business attraction.

The village should implement a phased approach to property activation incentives, starting with a proven program and expanding based on success and community needs:

Phase 1: Facelift Façade Grant Program (Years 1-2)

Launch a Downtown Facelift Façade Grant Program to create immediate visual improvements and demonstrate the village's commitment to downtown investment. This program should offer the Program Structure and Eligibility Requirements detailed on the right side of the page.

Note: This recommendation is also explored in Strategy 2.5.

Program Structure

- Matching grants up to \$5,000 for exterior building improvements
- 50/50 cost share between village and property owner
- Focus on façade improvements, signage, windows, doors, and exterior lighting
- Each funding cycle could focus on specific façade components for maximum visual impact:
 - Cycle 1: Exterior Facades - Building cleaning, painting, masonry repair, and structural improvements
 - Cycle 2: Signage Improvements - New business signs, wayfinding, and exterior branding elements
 - Cycle 3: Lighting and Awnings - Exterior lighting, canopies, and weather protection features
 - Cycle 4: Windows and Doors - Window replacement, storefront improvements, and entrance upgrades
- Simple application process with quick turnaround
- Before and after photo documentation for promotion

Eligibility Requirements:

- Properties within designated downtown
- Compliance with building codes and zoning requirements
- Property owner must maintain improvements for minimum 5 years
- Business must remain operational for minimum 2 years (if applicable)

Similar programs in communities like Haskell, Texas have generated significant private investment leverage, often seeing \$3-4 of private investment for every \$1 of public funding.

1.2 Incentives for Property Activation

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

Phase 2: Small Business Activation Fund (Years 3-5)

Building on façade program success, establish a more comprehensive Small Business Activation Fund that combines grants and low-interest loans:

Grant Component

- Business startup grants up to \$10,000 for new businesses in target categories
- Interior build-out assistance for retail, restaurants, and service businesses
- Equipment and inventory assistance for qualifying businesses

Revolving Loan Component:

- Low-interest loans (2-3% below market rate) for larger renovation projects
- Loan amounts from \$10,000 to \$50,000
- Structured as revolving fund using water department revenue as seed capital
- Loan repayments recycle back into fund for ongoing sustainability

Strategic Partnerships:

- Partner with Busey Bank (local branch) for loan administration and underwriting
- Leverage bank's expertise while village provides favorable interest rate subsidy
- Create shared risk model that protects village investment while encouraging bank participation



Target Business Categories

Focus incentives on businesses that will have the greatest impact on downtown vitality:

Priority Categories:

- Restaurants and food service establishments
- Retail businesses serving daily needs
- Professional services that generate daytime foot traffic
- Entertainment and recreation businesses

1.3 Property & Maintenance Initiatives

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

Minimum Maintenance Standards

Minimum maintenance standards are essential for establishing baseline expectations for property upkeep and ensuring that all buildings contribute positively to the downtown environment. These standards protect public health, safety, and welfare while preserving property values and community character. When properties fall into disrepair, they can create a negative perception that affects neighboring businesses and discourages investment throughout the district.

Effective minimum maintenance standards provide clear, enforceable guidelines for property owners while offering a framework for consistent code enforcement. These standards typically address exterior conditions including structural integrity, façade maintenance, signage requirements, and basic safety features. Having such standards in place demonstrates a community's commitment to maintaining quality development and can serve as a powerful tool for encouraging property improvements.

In Tolono

While Tolono has minimum housing standards that address basic health, safety, and welfare issues in residential areas, there currently appear to be no specific maintenance standards for downtown commercial properties. Additionally, enforcement of existing standards seems inconsistent, as evidenced by properties in poor condition located directly across from the Tolono Township Hall and other prominent locations throughout the downtown area.

The community needs to establish clear minimum maintenance standards specifically for downtown properties that address both interior and exterior conditions. These standards should be designed to ensure that all downtown buildings meet basic safety requirements while contributing to an attractive, welcoming business district.

Key components of downtown minimum maintenance standards that should be included are detailed to the right.



Interior Standards

- Basic habitability requirements for occupied structures
- Safety and accessibility compliance
- Electrical, plumbing, and HVAC functionality
- Fire safety and emergency egress requirements

Enforcement Framework

- Regular inspection protocols
- Clear violation notification procedures
- Graduated enforcement measures
- Appeals process for property owners
- Coordination with existing state building code requirements

Since Illinois requires all municipalities to follow state building codes, Tolono should ensure that any local minimum maintenance standards complement rather than conflict with state requirements. The village should work with legal counsel to develop standards that enhance state codes while addressing local community needs.

1.3 Property & Maintenance Initiatives

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

Vacant Property Registry Ordinance (VPRO)

Tolono should also consider implementing a Vacant Property Registration Ordinance (VPRO) to address abandoned or vacant properties that often become maintenance problems.

A VPRO typically requires owners of vacant properties to:

- Register vacant properties with the municipality
- Pay annual registration fees
- Maintain properties to minimum standards
- Provide local contact information for property management
- Submit maintenance and security plans

The state requirement to adopt the Illinois International Code Council codes should be researched to understand any implications for VPRO implementation, but this should not prevent Tolono from moving forward with appropriate property maintenance standards.

The village should utilize its existing nuisance property submission process as a foundation for enforcement while developing more comprehensive minimum maintenance standards that create clear expectations for all downtown property owners.

Several Illinois communities have successfully implemented VPROs, including:

- [Park Forest](#)
- [Riverdale](#)
- [Rockford](#)



1.4 Modernize Village Website

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

A modern, user-friendly website serves as the digital front door for any community, creating first impressions that can significantly influence residents, businesses, and potential investors. For growing communities, an outdated or difficult-to-navigate website can create barriers to economic development and make essential government services less accessible to citizens. A well-designed municipal website streamlines communication, improves transparency, and demonstrates that a community is forward-thinking and ready for growth.

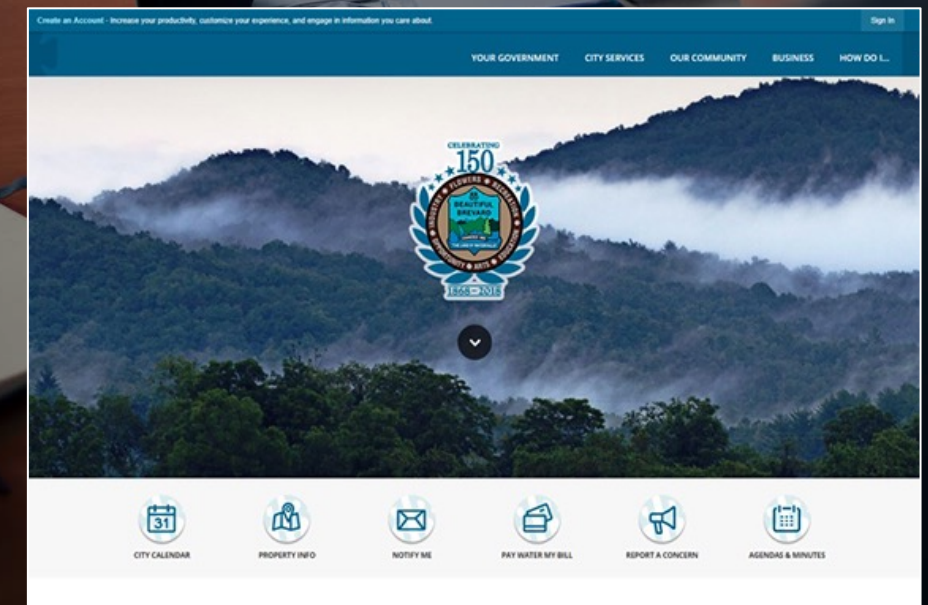
Modern municipal websites go beyond basic information sharing to become comprehensive platforms that support economic development, enhance citizen engagement, and improve operational efficiency. They should provide intuitive navigation, mobile responsiveness, and easy access to frequently needed documents and services. For communities positioning themselves for growth, a professional web presence signals competence and readiness to support new development and business investment.

In Tolono

Tolono's current website (www.tolonoil.us) requires significant modernization to support the village's anticipated growth and development goals. As the community prepares for expansion, the website needs to serve as an effective tool for attracting businesses, supporting residents, and streamlining government operations. The current site structure and design do not adequately reflect a community ready for modern development and business investment.

A modernized website should address several key areas, which are detailed on the following page and include:

- 1.) User Experience and Navigation
- 2.) Business Development Resources
- 3.) Resident Services
- 4.) Transparency and Communication
- 5.) Digital Zoning Maps



1.4 Modernize Village Website

Focus Area 1: Policy & Administration

User Experience and Navigation:

- Intuitive menu structure with clear pathways to information
- Mobile-responsive design that functions well on all devices
- Fast loading times and modern visual design
- Search functionality for easy information location
- Accessibility compliance for users with disabilities

Business and Development Resources:

- Dedicated economic development section with clear contact information
- Easily accessible zoning maps and development guidelines
- Permit applications and approval processes
- Available properties and development opportunities
- Contact information for key staff and decision-makers

Resident Services:

- Online forms and document access
- Event calendar and community announcements
- Utility information and payment options
- Meeting agendas, minutes, and live streaming capabilities
- Emergency notifications and important updates

Transparency and Communication:

- Budget information and financial transparency
- Ordinances and municipal code access
- Staff directory with clear roles and responsibilities
- Project updates and community planning information

Digital Zoning Maps:

A critical first step in website modernization should be digitizing Tolono's zoning maps. Many other villages and cities in Champaign County have successfully implemented digital, GIS-based zoning maps through partnerships with the Champaign County GIS Consortium. The village should:

- Partner with the Champaign County GIS Consortium to digitize existing zoning maps
- Explore collaboration opportunities with the University of Illinois for GIS services
- Integrate digital zoning maps directly into the village website
- Ensure maps are regularly updated and easily accessible to developers and residents
- Include parcel information, zoning classifications, and development guidelines

This digitization effort will provide immediate benefits for both staff efficiency and customer service while positioning Tolono alongside other progressive communities in the region.

POLICY & ADMINISTRATION Action Team

Focus Area	Identifier	Strategy	Timeline	Level of Investment	Implementation Partners
Policy & Administration	1.1	Create a series of 4 action teams organized around specific projects within the 4 key Focus Areas of this plan (Policy & Administration; Design; Tourism & Promotion; and Economic Vitality). Each team should complete the Downtwon Strategies Project Mapping Workbook to assist with implementing at least 1 strategy from this plan each year. Begin with one team and build over time.	NOW	-	Village
Policy & Administration	1.2	Establish a Facelift Façade Grant Program to spark renovations and enhancements to downtown properties.	Years 1-2	\$\$	Village
Policy & Administration	1.2	Establish Small Business Activation Fund to spark the activation of downtown storefronts.	Years 3-5	\$\$	Village
Policy & Administration	1.3	Establish Minimum Maintenance Standards for downtown commercial properties.	NOW	-	Village
Policy & Administration	1.3	Establish a Vacant Property Registry Ordinance (VPRO) to address long-term vacancies.	Years 1-3	-	Village
Policy & Administration	1.4	Modernize the Village website to enhance the first impression for prospective residents and businesses; enhance efficiency for customers; and provide key information for residents, businesses, and visitors.	Years 3-5	\$	Village

* - No cost strategies | \$ Tactical/low-cost strategies | \$\$ Strategies that require resources that are typically within existing budget parameters
 \$\$\$ Strategies that may require funding outside of the typical budget parameters





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FOCUS AREA 2

Design

Thoughtful design supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the downtown district apart.

FOCUS AREA 2

Design

Add the Charm

Tolono's proximity to Champaign and Urbana presents tremendous opportunities for the economic growth of the community. While competing with larger cities is challenging, Tolono offers something different in quality of life and a small-town lifestyle. Rather than copying the larger cities, Tolono should focus on creating an authentic sense of place and unique experiences in order to attract visitors, potential businesses, and future residents to the community.

As a basis for the long-term vision of the community, leaders should focus on creating an experience and environment that exemplifies "The Village of Tolono." *What do people envision when they think of a "village?"* They likely think of quaint towns with picket fences, charming storefronts, tree-lined streets, brick streets and sidewalks. Tolono should prioritize efforts, initiatives, and projects that add the charm and character of a village in order to create a unique and authentic atmosphere. While a full transformation will take time, *adding charm should be a driving factor for decisions related to beautification, infrastructure enhancements, policies, incentives, and other initiatives.* This should include short-term enhancements as well as a commitment to future enhancements explored in at the end of this chapter.

Currently visitors' first impression of Downtown Tolono is not necessarily a positive one. The streetscape is dominated by hardscape, the sidewalks are empty, and many of the buildings are in disrepair. While addressing some of these challenges will require large-scale projects, short-term enhancements that add charm and vibrancy to downtown can be implemented to create a more welcoming impression.

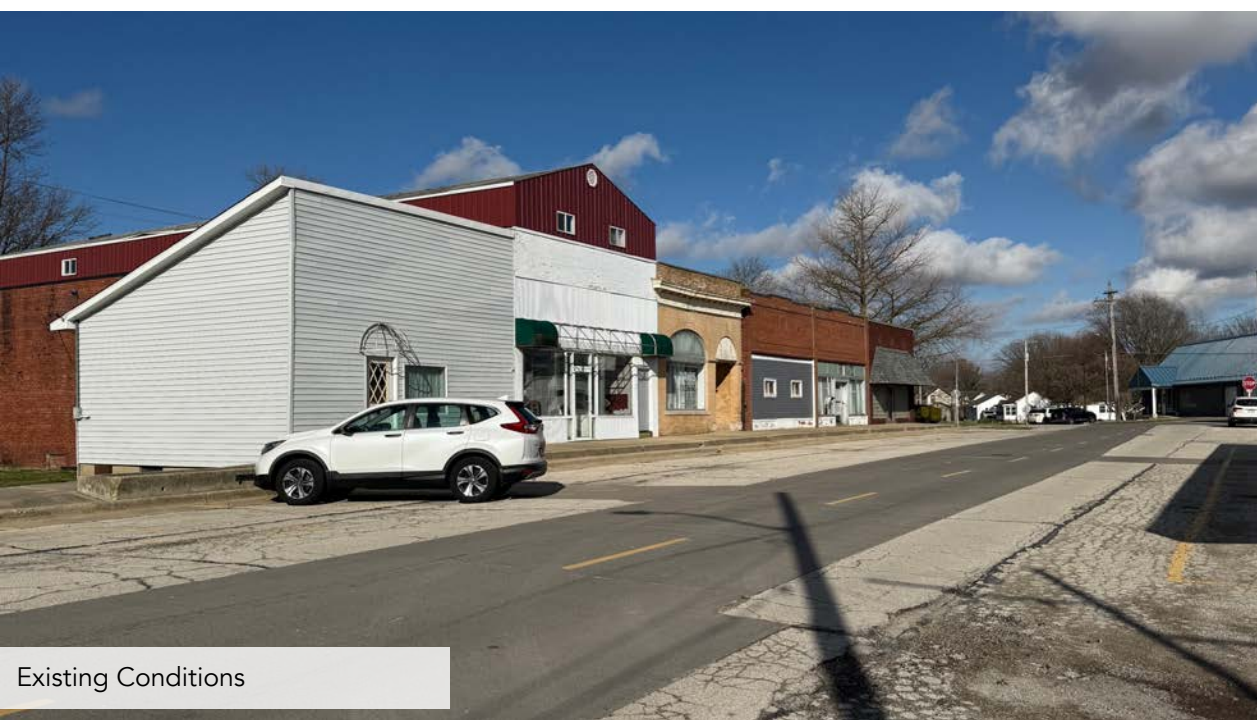




Existing Conditions



Traditional Village Atmosphere



Existing Conditions



Traditional Village Atmosphere

2.1 Custom Streetlight Banners

Focus Area 2: Design

Custom Streetlight Banners

Add colorful streetlight banners to utility poles throughout the downtown core to create a sense of entry into the district. The banners will also create visual connections to Main Street from Holden Street. Banners should be installed along Holden Street from Highway 45 to Bourne Street and then expanded to Bourne Street, Main Street, and Vorcey Street.



2.2 Add Signs of Life

Focus Area 2: Design

Signs of Life

The sidewalks of Downtown Tolono desperately need “Signs of life” to add vibrancy, create a positive first impression, and serve as a distraction from the derelict properties. This should include involvement from the public and private sectors and include the four streets within the downtown core: Holden Street, Bourne Street, Main Street, and Vorcey Street. Elements such as potted plants, planters, seating, outdoor dining, sandwich board signs, etc. should be added to the sidewalk to create life in the downtown district.

The village, civic organization, or Action Team should add **overside planters evenly spaced along the downtown sidewalks**. Main Street should be the initial priority and then expand to Holden, Bourne, and Vorcey as resources allow.

It is critical that the private sector (business owners and property owners) must engage in these efforts as well. Adding potted plants and sandwich board signs is a simple low-cost way to add life and interest. **Educational campaigns, training sessions (lunch-and-learns), planter kit program, or incentive programs (vibrancy grants) should be used to encourage downtown stakeholders so add potted plants, sandwich board signs, seating, merchandise displays, or other details to downtown sidewalks.**



Oversized Planters



Sidewalk Vibrancy

2.2 Add Signs of Life

Focus Area 2: Design

Signs of Life Examples




2.2 Add Signs of Life

Focus Area 2: Design

Case Studies

Deer Park, Washington is similar to Tolono. It is located near a larger city (Spokane) and has a downtown core that is not living up to its full potential. Downtown Deer Park was actually blessed with some quality small businesses and boutiques, but there were no signs of life on the sidewalks. The Core Team's first focus was launching the "Downtown Beautification Blitz" campaign to encourage property and business owners to do the basics (spruce up and make minor repairs to their storefronts) and add vibrancy to the sidewalks. They hosted evening social events to promote the campaign and educate stakeholders on the need for these efforts. As a way to jumpstart the program, the chamber of commerce organized a planter program where businesses could purchase a ready-made planter for their storefront. The chamber supplied the pots, plants, soil, and even a watering can. They even updated the plants and decorations 3 times a year. All the business had to do was water the plants and keep them maintained. Within a few months their sidewalks were transformed with potted plants, outdoor dining, colorful bistro umbrellas, sandwich board signs, and merchandise displays.

The Historic Harrison Business Association (HHBA), City of Harrison, and the Master Gardeners of Harrison partnered to install oversized metal planters along a key corridor in Downtown **Harrison, Arkansas**. A local fabricator created the structures, the Master Gardeners provided plant material, and various volunteer groups assisted with the installation. This public sector investment helped beautify a downtown block dominated by vacant derelict properties.

 **City of Harrison, Arkansas – G...** · Follow
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As part of the Downtown Beautification Project, the city added some planters to the west side of the square. The city will add rock and dirt, and the Master Gardeners have agreed to fill them with beautiful plants.

Harrison, AR Oversized Planters



Deer Park, Washington - Before



Deer Park, Washington - After

2.3 Activate Storefronts

Focus Area 2: Design

Storefront Activation Campaign

Storefronts play a major role in the character of the downtown. No matter if the storefront is filled or empty, it is important for the storefront displays to be activated in some way. This could include merchandise displays, art installations, curated displays, or window clings or art, graphics, or historic photographs. For example, the Madeline Wilson Photography building has been updated with fresh exterior paint and attractive signage; however, the storefront windows are blocked with a curtain, which does not add interest to the downtown streetscape. It also makes it difficult for visitors to distinguish between an empty building and an active business. Moving the curtains back 18" would maintain privacy for the photography studio while creating opportunities to activate the display with an art installation, example photography, or other activation.

Tolono should **coordinate and launch a storefront beautification and activation program**. Some communities partner with the local arts council to establish an Art in Public Places Task Force that helps connect local/regional artists with storefronts. Others establish an Action Team to coordinate efforts with local property and business owners with trainings, educational sessions, or just to manage the installation of window clings. Downtown leaders have also organized a coordinated window painting program as a temporary installation. A qualified artist paints seasonal or topical artwork on several of the storefront windows at the same time. The unified appearance and theme creates a unified look throughout the downtown.



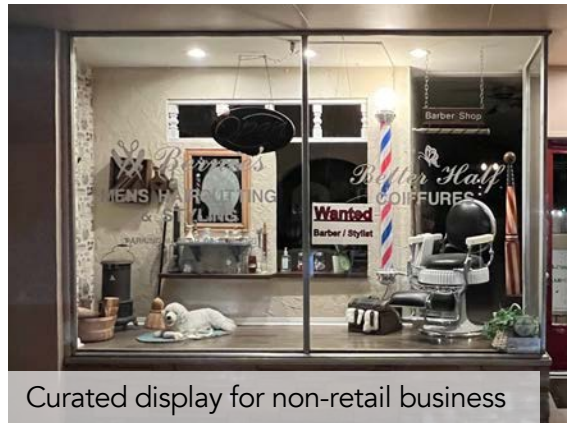
2.3 Activate Storefronts

Focus Area 2: Design

Storefront Activation Campaign Examples



Privacy screen with display



Curated display for non-retail business



Window painting



Window clings with historic photographs



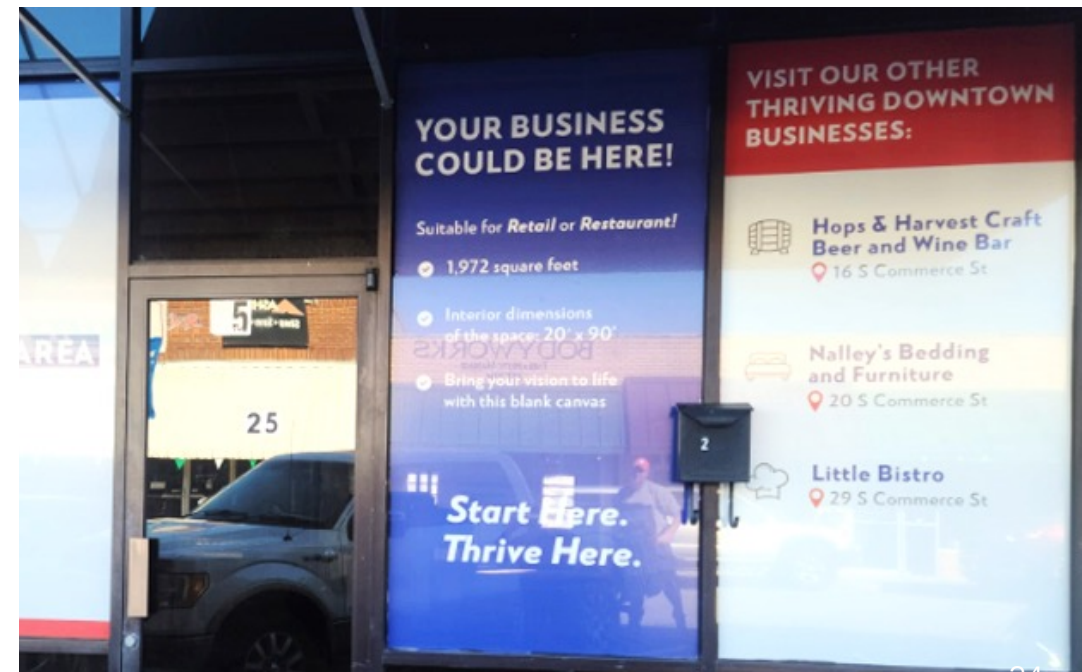
Local art display



Art display



Window clings with art



Window clings with information about the building and downtown

2.3 Activate Storefronts

Focus Area 2: Design

Case Studies

The **Fountain Fletcher District in Downtown Indianapolis** uses window clings featuring vibrant artwork from local artists as a way to activate vacant and underutilized storefronts. This is a great strategy for adding vibrancy and creating a distraction from the poor condition of the buildings.

As part of the Downtown Beautification Blitz program, **Deer Park, Washington** hosted a storefront decorating contest that was heavily promoted on social media. This encouraged local businesses to participate, created positive marketing for the downtown and businesses, and created a short-term spark in the district. It was also a great way to bring awareness to the beautification program.

Cheney, Washington coordinated a window painting installation throughout the entire downtown area. A local artist painted fun, graduation-themed messages using school colors to congratulate the local high school students on their recent graduation. This installation activated storefront windows and showed community pride.



Fountain District, IN artistic window cling program



Cheney, WA temporary window painting installation



Deer Park, WA storefront decoration contest

2.4 Embrace the Arts

Focus Area 2: Design

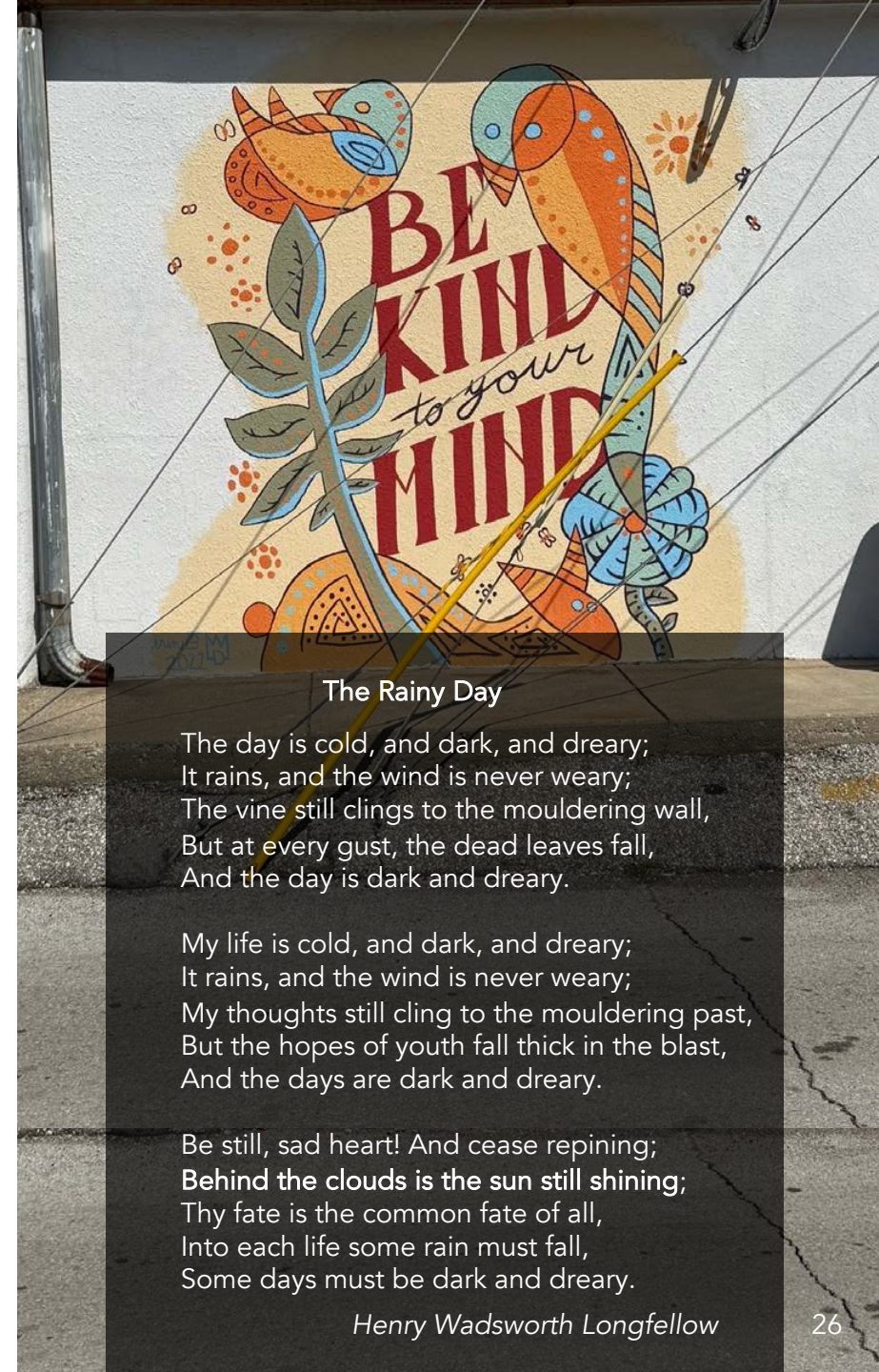
Public art can be used to showcase the personality of the community and create visual connections with the arts community. Tolono has some roots in the arts with the live music scene, connection to the Boneyard Arts Festival, Earth Analog Recording Studio, and the artist studios in the former IGA Building. While there is a foundation in the arts in Tolono, the artistic community is somewhat hidden and there is a local desire to showcase the creative, whimsical personality of the community in a more visual way.

There are tremendous opportunities for using public art as a way to add vibrancy to Downtown Tolono. Downtown Tolono should embrace the arts through a variety of mediums. **Performing arts like concerts are the anchor, but visual arts can build the atmosphere.** Murals, small artistic installations, creative displays, and three-dimensional artwork will add vibrancy to the district, showcase the community's unique personality, and create opportunities for engaging regional visitors. Tolono could become the quirky, artistic village for the region. The arts could also open avenues to connect with the college student population in Champaign.

Selfie Wall Mural

Installations that engage visitors and encourage social media promotion should be prioritized initially. "Selfie Wall" murals are commonly used to create photo op destinations with simple bold graphics, attractive color palettes, and creative messaging or quotes. Tolono has the potential to tap into local history when creating a selfie wall. Abraham Lincoln traveled through Tolono on several occasions, but most significantly, on February 11, 1861, Tolono was the site of Lincoln's last formal address to the people of Illinois before becoming president. The specific site is located outside of the downtown core on Highway 45 and is delineated with a "Looking for Lincoln" marker and custom plaque. Although the actual site is outside of downtown, the should be used as a canvas to tell the story of one of the most influential presidents.

A selfie wall should be installed in a highly visible, prominent location in Downtown Tolono, preferably along Main Street. The Village Arts and Artisans (former IGA Building) façade is a potential location for the mural since it is centrally located, and the artwork would call attention to the artistic use of the building. The mural should use simple and bold graphics with a paint-by-number style. During his address to the people of Tolono, Lincoln quoted Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Rainy Day" which could serve as inspiration for the mural. Specifically, the line **"Behind the cloud, the sun is still shining."** This would become a popular photo op destination for visitors and locals since the quote is timeless and promotes a positive message.



The Rainy Day

The day is cold, and dark, and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
The vine still clings to the mouldering wall,
But at every gust, the dead leaves fall,
And the day is dark and dreary.

My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
My thoughts still cling to the mouldering past,
But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast,
And the days are dark and dreary.

Be still, sad heart! And cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
Thy fate is the common fate of all,
Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

2.4 Embrace the Arts

Focus Area 2: Design

Post Card Mural

Next, a welcome or post card-style “Welcome to Tolono, Illinois” mural should be considered in a highly visible downtown location. Potential sites include the west wall of the Tolono Historical Society and Veterans Museum building to serve as a gateway welcome feature into downtown or the east wall of the building on the northwest corner of the Main Street and Bourne Street intersection. Town leaders should form a partnership with the 40 North Champaign County Arts Council and the University of Illinois School of Art and Design for guidance, assistance, and potential funding.



2.4 Embrace the Arts

Focus Area 2: Design

Music Themed Murals

To further showcase Tolono's foundation in the arts, **music-themed murals and artwork could adorn the façades of the former IGA Building**. Whimsical and colorful artwork will showcase Tolono as a live music destination as well as highlight the vision of the facility as a future arts hub. Artwork could include quotes from song lyrics, imagery of musical instruments and artistic mediums such as paint brushes, and imagery related to the history of the community. Murals that utilize quotes and bold graphics often become popular photo op destinations and attract visitors to the downtown area. This style could especially appeal to college students as well as the existing music-loving tourists that currently visit Tolono's concerts. The modern architecture of the building contrasts with the traditional architecture of the other downtown buildings so a brightly colored and whimsical façade will further that contrast in an interesting way.



2.5

Plan for mid-term enhancements

Focus Area 2: Design

Facelift Component Grant Program

Establishing incentive programs to encourage the improvement and renovation of downtown buildings is a necessary step in sparking redevelopment in downtown properties. These types of programs are mentioned in more detail in Strategy 1.2 can take many forms such as façade grants, vibrancy grants, or component grants. As an initial focus, **Tolono should launch a Facelift Façade Grant Program that prioritizes specific components of the building facades each funding cycle.** For example, cycle 1 could focus on exterior paint; cycle 2 could focus on signage; cycle 3 could focus on updated awnings/canopies; and cycle 4 could focus on windows, doors, and storefronts. This yearly focus would create a stronger visual impact for the district. Three new awnings would make a bigger “splash” in the appearance of Downtown Tolono than 1 fresh paint, 1 sign, and 1 awning. All are impactful, but the yearly focus will be more noticeable.

Parapet Lighting

Parapet lighting, also called rooftop or skyline lighting, has been a long-standing downtown revitalization strategy because it adds immediate impact and vibrancy. **String lights should be added along the top edge of the front building facades to accentuate the architecture of the building, create nighttime ambiance, and add interest to the downtown district.** These projects are relatively low costs relative to the visual impact. They do require a signed legal agreement with the property owners which can be challenging. Typically, the lights are connected to the streetlights, and the local government covers the cost of power, installation, and maintenance, while the property owner grants permission to access the property.



2.5

Plan for mid-term enhancements

Focus Area 2: Design

Street Furniture

Other key streetscape elements such as decorative benches and trash receptacles have been discussed in Tolono but have been tabled due to a lack of consensus on the style. The addition of these types of elements adds to the character of downtown and set the standard for other furniture, fixtures, and details. The style of the furniture should add to the charming village aesthetic that Tolono can become. Additionally, these types of investments can be done in the near-term despite plans for long-term infrastructure enhancements. **The village should move forward with acquiring and installing decorative benches and trash receptacles throughout the downtown core. Repairing, repainting, and replacing damaged or outdated signage and other equipment should also be prioritized.**

Street Striping

While the plans for large-scale infrastructure enhancements are being finalized, street striping can be used to better define key intersections. **Bold crosswalks should be added to the key downtown intersections in order to enhance the walkability of the district as well as to better visually define the intersections and downtown district. As a short-term treatment, areas for future curb extensions could be defined with street paint using a street mural or basic striping. Rather than the existing yellow paint, white paint should be used for crosswalks and parking striping because it provides a better contrast and is more aesthetically pleasing.**



The background image shows a street scene in Downtown Tolono. On the left, there's a storefront with a sign that says 'UPPER CLOTHING' and an anchor logo. A person is walking on the sidewalk. In the center, a semi-transparent green rectangle contains the title 'Long-term Enhancements' in white text. To the right, there's a two-story house with white siding, green shutters, and a large American flag hanging from the side. A car is parked on the street in front of the house.

Long-term Enhancements

The village has developed and received multiple master plans, various iterations of streetscape designs, and proposals for Downtown Tolono. The plans have been the topic of much debate amongst downtown stakeholders and the general public. The village paused these efforts in hope of reaching a consensus on an acceptable vision for the downtown core.

While their attempt to find a perfect solution is commendable, village leaders must recognize that there is likely not a single plan that will satisfy the desires of everyone. Decisions will have to be made based on what is best for the long-term future of Downtown Tolono. There is room to debate the options for details like light fixtures, paving materials, and landscaping; there are basic urban design principles that can be used to guide decisions related to the overall design and layout of the downtown streetscapes. It is important that these infrastructure and streetscape enhancements happen as soon as possible, so the following recommendations have been included to provide some general direction to the village leaders to help guide their decisions about the final streetscape plans.

Convert Village Parking Lot into a Flexible Plaza

Focus Area 2: Design

The village-owned parking lot on the north side of Main Street prevents a tremendous opportunity to create a special place for people in the heart of downtown while meeting the parking needs of the community. Currently the gravel parking lot only serves a single use and detracts from the aesthetics of downtown. Through various master plans, the best use of the property has long been debated. Should it remain a parking lot, or should it become a community space? Why not both?

This area has the potential to serve multiple needs by **converting the property into a flexible public space that can be converted to various uses depending on the immediate needs**. The space could be designed in a matter that allows for a variety of uses including public parking, a plaza event space, or a social yard.

The property could utilize brick pavers to create a multi-use surface with colored pavers to mark parking spaces. Moveable social yard amenities such as outdoor dining, seating, outdoor games, etc. could also be added. Elements such as overhead string lights, trees, and landscaping should also be added to create vibrancy. Bollards can be added to the entrance so that it can be easily blocked off for events and activities. Fencing or other type of screen should be used along the northern edge of the property to block views to the back sides of the adjacent properties. This flexible design will allow the property to adapt to the needs of the community over time and create a higher return on the investment.



Convert Village Parking Lot into a Flexible Plaza

Focus Area 2: Design

Case Study

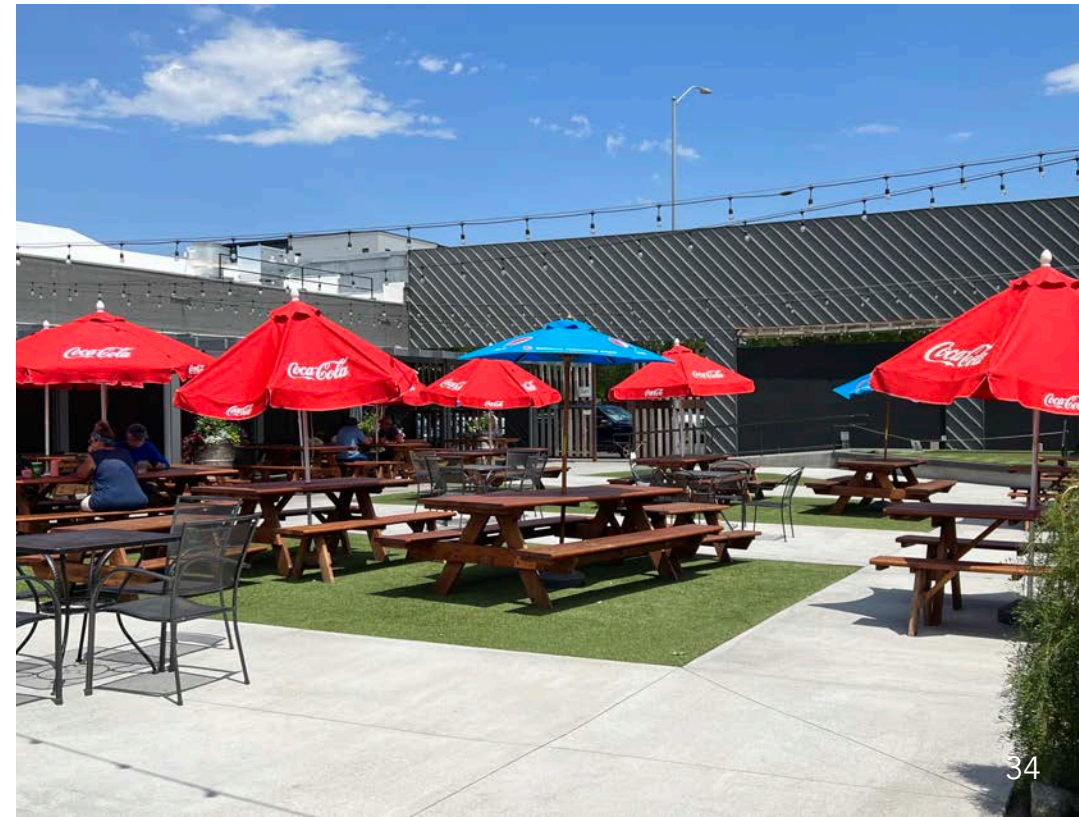
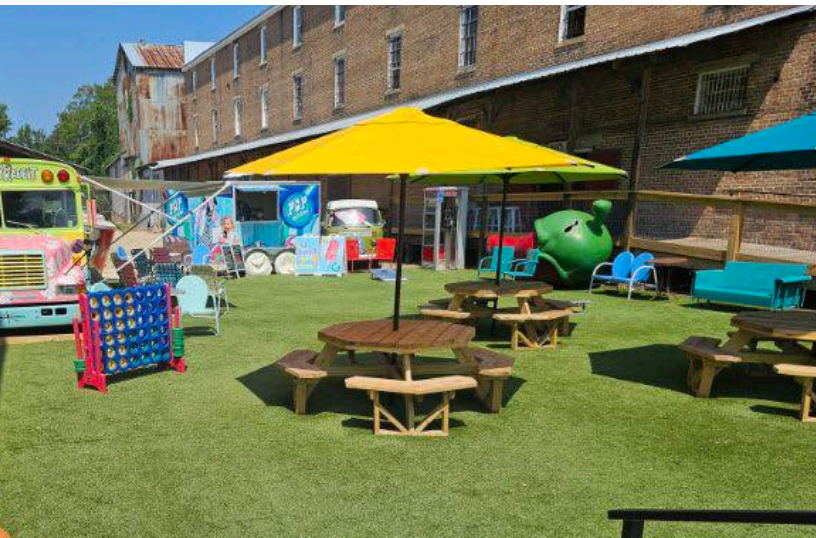
Firefighter's Plaza at the corner of North College Avenue and St. Clair Street in the Bottleworks District of Indianapolis, Indiana is an excellent example of a plaza that also serves a parking lot. This space is designed with brick pavers, turf areas, and landscaping so it can be used for events and activities as well as a parking lot when not in use. This concept can be used as inspiration for the property in Tolono.



Convert Village Parking Lot into a Flexible Plaza

Focus Area 2: Design

Social Yard Examples



Invest in Long-term Streetscape Enhancements

Focus Area 2: Design

In Tolono

Tolono has been debating various master plans and potential streetscape enhancements for several years. Plans have been paused largely due to a lack of consensus among downtown stakeholders and the overall community. As with most civic projects, it is nearly impossible for everyone to agree on a single solution, which has been the case in Tolono. However, it does seem evident through the various input sessions and surveys that the overwhelming majority of citizens care deeply about the community and downtown. While they may not agree on the specific answer, most want to see Downtown Tolono revitalized for the next generation and citizens want to see progress of some type.

The Village of Tolono should move forward with infrastructure and streetscape enhancements that value pedestrian activity, prioritize creating spaces for people, create an attractive and inviting downtown environment, and follow proven and sound urban design principles. These public sector enhancements will create a firm foundation for private sector investment in the coming years. Downtown Strategies is available to provide detailed analysis and critique of existing plans in order to provide direction to village leaders. **In general, the projects should use the following principles:**

Prioritize pedestrian activity

Yes, visitors will need to drive to and around the downtown core, but pedestrian activity should be the top priority. Widen sidewalks where possible, provide appropriate crosswalks, and ensure the district is accessible and walkable.

Balance travel lanes, parking, and sidewalks

Any design plan is restricted by the existing Right of Way (ROW). The space available must be shared between travel lanes, parking stalls, and sidewalks. Travel lanes should be designed as narrow as possible for low-speed traffic. The [National Association of City Transportation Officials](#) (NACTO) recommends a maximum width of 11-feet for travel lanes and a maximum width of 7-9 feet for parallel parking stalls in walkable urban districts. Using these maximum dimensions could potentially allow for expanding the downtown sidewalks to create space for additional streetscape elements such as outdoor dining, furniture, displays, etc.



Invest in Long-term Streetscape Enhancements

Focus Area 2: Design

Maintain two-way traffic

Although one-way streets are utilized in downtowns large and small, ideally properly designed two-way traffic is preferred. One-way traffic encourages speeding, is less pedestrian-friendly, and more challenging for visitors to navigate. For a city the size of Tolono, two-way traffic should be manageable when properly designed with the principles listed above.

Include trees and planters

Softscape elements like street trees, landscaping, and seasonal color are critical to creating an attractive, welcoming, and comfortable environment. The design plan should include proper areas for street trees along the sidewalk and curb extension planters at the intersections.

Add details where possible

The layout of the streets, parking, sidewalks, and planters are the most important elements of the plan. However, other details such as paver crosswalks, banded sidewalks, and decorative intersection treatments add a tremendous amount of character to the downtown streetscape. Obviously, these details expand the costs of a project and may not be feasible but should be explored as potential upgrades where possible.

Parking is important but should not be the driving force

Parking is a perceived issue in nearly every downtown in the country. Cities have sacrificed countless historic buildings, neighborhoods, districts, and sites in the name of parking. Tolono is a small town and must maintain the small-town charm. Even with success and growth, the downtown district should be able to adequately accommodate parking for the near future. Properly striped on-street parking on downtown streets and shared use agreements with existing surface parking lots will be sufficient given the small footprint of Downtown Tolono. This should not be a driver of the master plan or of the decisions related to downtown infrastructure enhancements. If the downtown core becomes a true destination, customers and visitors will find a way to park and visit.



Invest in Long-term Streetscape Enhancements

Focus Area 2: Design

Light it up

In addition to the decorative streetlights that have been explored, overhead string lights should be added along Main Street. These types of installations add instant vibrancy, create a special atmosphere in the district, and become popular photo op sites. String lights would also create the village charm that is needed in Tolono. An additional note regarding the decorative streetlights, ensure that the style chosen includes the ability to add streetlight banner and/or flags for future vibrancy initiatives.



2

DESIGN Action Team

Focus Area	Identifier	Strategy	Timeline	Level of Investment	Implementation Partners
Design	2.1	Add colorful streetlight banners to utility poles throughout the downtown core.	Year 1	\$	Village
Design	2.2	Add overside planters evenly spaced along the downtown sidewalks. .	NOW	\$	Village or Action Team
Design	2.2	Use educational campaigns, training sessions (lunch-and-learns), and incentive programs (vibrancy grants) to encourage downtown stakeholders to add signs of life to their storefronts and downtown sidewalks.	NOW	-	Action Team
Design	2.3	Coordinate and launch a storefront beautification and activation program. A vinyl wrap or art display program should be considered initially.	Year 1	\$	Action Team
Design	2.4	Install a selfie wall mural in a highly visible, prominent location in Downtown Tolono, preferably along Main Street. Artwork could include the Lincoln quote from the Wadsworth poem “The Rainy Day.”	Year 2	\$\$	Village
Design	2.4	Install a simple post card-style “Welcome to Tolono, Illinois” mural in a highly visible downtown location.	Years 3-5	\$\$	Village
Design	2.4	Install music-themed murals and artwork on the façades of the former IGA Building to highlight Tolono as a music destination and the building as an arts hub.	Years 3-5	\$\$	Matt Talbot
Design	2.5	Launch a Facelift Façade Grant Program that prioritizes specific components of the building facades each funding cycle. (Note: recommendation also referenced in Strategy 1.2)	Years 1-3	\$\$-\$\$\$	Village
Design	2.5	Install string lights to the top edge of the front building facades to accentuate the architecture of the building, create nighttime ambiance, and add interest to the downtown district.	Year 3	\$\$	Village
Design	2.5	Move forward with acquiring and installing decorative benches and trash receptacles throughout downtown.	NOW	\$\$	Village
Design	2.5	Repair, repaint, and replace damaged or outdated signage and other equipment in the downtown core.	NOW	\$	Village
Design	2.5	Use striping and street paint to add bold crosswalks to key downtown intersections.	Years 1-3	\$\$	Village
Design	2.5	Use street paint to define curb extension areas with basic striping or street art as a short-term measure.	Years 3-5	\$\$	Village and Action Team



downtown strategies

FOCUS AREA 3

Tourism & Promotion

Smart promotion initiatives position your Downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community's unique characteristics.

3.1 Promote Outdoor Dining

Focus Area 3: Tourism & Promotion

In Tolono

Nothing gives the appearance of vibrancy and attracts people like seeing other people. Outdoor dining areas creates prime opportunities for people to gather and add vibrancy to the downtown. The small footprint of Downtown Tolono is fortunate to host three restaurants/bars: Loose Cobra bar, Jack's, and Traxside. **Encourage business owners to add new or enhance existing outdoor dining areas to add vibrancy and showcase activity in Downtown Tolono.**

Outdoor dining areas should include elements of "social yards" or "beer gardens" to create a unique and authentic experience for visitors. This could include various types of seating, overhead string lights, planters and landscaping, outdoor games, and other amenities. Brightly colored shade sails or bistro umbrellas could also be used to add pops of color and vibrancy to the downtown district.

Investments in creative outdoor dining spaces will help elevate the experience for visitors and create a more vibrant and interesting atmosphere in the downtown core. Business and property owners should be encouraged to add or expand outdoor dining spaces. A small incentive program could be developed or added to a vibrancy grant program to offset the cost of these additions.



3.2 Build a Social Media Presence

Focus Area 3: Tourism & Promotion

Love it or hate it, social media is a regular part of daily life. While there are definite challenges with social media, communities can utilize the power of social media to expand its brand and promote activity to a wide audience...for free. Social media is the best way to begin promoting the downtown and changing the perception of your community. Posting regularly on social media about events, improvements, activities, etc. will allow the excitement about the community to build.

Simply posting photographs of events or notifying followers of a new business opening can generate engagement. The Main Street Association in Water Valley, Mississippi would often post with the tagline "As seen in the Valley..." and would include quirky happenings in the community. In an ideal situation, an experienced social media manager would deploy an organized campaign with a brand. However, simple and authentic posts can have a tremendous impact. The key is to be consistent.

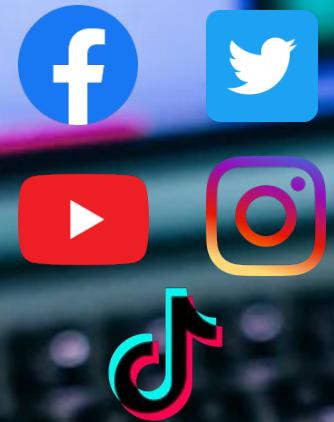
In Tolono

Currently the Village of Tolono is the main social media handle for the community. The account is very active and contains a mixture of content including governmental business, weather updates, promoting events, etc. The only profile dedicated to tourism-related activity is the Tolono Fun Day account. This profile actively promotes the various events throughout the year. Content includes a mixture of promotional graphics and photo albums.

Social media will continue to be a vital promotions tool as the community continues to grow. Events, retail promotions, campaigns, and other outreach efforts will evolve into a major component of tourism efforts in the community. Social media can also help change the perception of the village in the short-term through positive messaging and highlighting the smalltown quality of life.

Tolono needs a social media account specifically dedicated to promoting the community with engaging, positive, tourism-focused messaging. The tone and messaging of this account is different than the village account. The tourism-focused profile should use engaging messaging to highlight quality of life amenities, events, promotions, activities, "day in the life," and other activities. This should create the appearance of a vibrant community and use highly visual content with photography and video. Since the Tolono Fun Day profile has grown to promote more than the single event, **perhaps it could shift to become a "Visit Tolono" or "Visit the Village of Tolono" page in order to promote the community as a whole.**

Current staff and volunteers may not be equipped to manage content across all of the platforms, but reserving the profiles will ensure that unified messaging is possible in the future. **Explore potential partnerships with University Illinois departments to hire a Marketing or Communications student as an intern to generate content, build a content calendar, develop a scope of work, etc.**



Hint: If possible, use the same handle for every social media platform. This makes advertising much easier in the long term. Sites like namecheckr.com and brandsnag.com allow you to quickly search across the multiple platforms for options.

3.3 Host Regular Micro-events

Focus Area 3: Tourism & Promotion

In simple terms, tourism involves connecting visitors with retailers, restaurants, and other businesses. This can take place through large community-wide events and festivals or small-scale retail promotional events such as wine tastings or farm-to-table dinners. Rather than large events and festivals that require extensive planning and resources, the largest return on investment can often come from small, simple but targeted promotional events. These are often referred to as micro-events or small-scale promotions.

Micro-events do not require the extensive planning, resources, and energy that festivals and large-scale events require. Alternatively, they rely on coordination amongst local merchants to ensure participation and consistent operating hours and promotions, mainly on social media. These types of events are much more manageable for volunteer groups. Examples include seasonal or holiday-themed open house events, block parties, sip-&-shops, art crawls, scavenger hunts, or other types of events. Small-scale promotions capitalize on every creative opportunity to invite customers downtown. Quirky holidays like National Selfie Day, National Margarita Day, National Reading Day, etc. can be used as a fun reason to invite locals and visitors downtown.

In Tolono

The existing Tolono Fun Day Committee is arguably the most active volunteer group in Downtown Tolono. The committee began with the goal of organizing and hosting the successful Tolono Fun Day event but has expanded to include a slate of other community events such as Christmas and Halloween events. *This committee should engage downtown merchants, business owners, and stakeholders to create a slate of micro-events and small-scale promotions throughout the year.* The goal is to program activities to constantly attract visitors into Downtown Tolono and connect the dots to local businesses.

Tolono's current lack of retail businesses presents a challenge to shopping-themed events. Partnerships with existing retailers like the Krossing Korner Boutique will be key. In the short-term, retail options will need to be supplemented through vendors and pop-ups until the customer base is consistent enough to attract more brick-and-mortar merchants. The farmers' market could be used as a foundation for a micro-event or event series.



3.3 Host Regular Micro-events

Focus Area 3: Tourism & Promotion

Some examples of interactive and engaging micro-events could include:

Reoccurring Events

Monthly (or quarterly) events are a great way to build a customer base and predictability for visitors and businesses. First Fridays, Last Fridays, Second Saturdays, etc. are examples of reoccurring events that communities organize to drive traffic into the downtown core. These types of events can also be hosted seasonally as open houses which can be great for retailers once Tolono grows the downtown retail base.

Pop-Up Events

Any style event could be promoted as a “pop-up” event in order to generate excitement and drive activity to the event. If visitors see it as a limited time opportunity, they may be more likely to attend. Pop-ups also drive excitement which could attract visitors from nearby Champaign-Urbana and other communities. A pop-up 80s night, for example, could include karaoke, live music, open mic, trivia, dress up contests, window paintings, etc. to create a limited-time atmosphere and experience. A quarterly pop-up event could help promote Tolono and create a spark for the downtown.

Art Crawls

Artists and/or musicians can be located throughout the downtown inside or outside of storefronts. This could also include art students from the U of I. Visitors explore downtown to view and purchase artwork. This could include live art demonstrations from painters and sculpture artists.

Lincoln-themed Promotions

February 12th is National Lost Penny Day and April 1st is National One cent Day. Either of the quirky holidays could be used as the basis for a Lincoln, themed promotion. Activities could include a penny scavenger hunt to find oversized pennies hidden in local establishments; a Lincoln-themed dress up contest; the “Lincoln Loop” crawl where visitors dress in Lincoln gear (top hats, beards, etc.) and visit local restaurants/food trucks/vendors around the downtown loop (Holden, Bourne, Main, Vorcey); or a “Lincoln Dash” could be organized where visitors dressed like Lincoln race down Main Street in a fun, light-hearted event that could include artists, live music, and food/beverages.

Tracks of Tolono

A play on words with “tracks” referring to Tolono’s railroad history and “tracks” as a musical term. This small-scale live music series could bridge the gap between larger Loose Cobra concerts. Tracks could include a variety of acts throughout the year including acoustic street buskers, open mic nights, jam sessions, or even non-music acts like comedians. The events should be informal where visitors bring their own chairs. Local restaurants should be involved in the event so that visitors patronize them while downtown. Restaurants and other businesses could host live music, open mic night, karaoke night, or other forms of entertainment themselves rather than a central stage in order to create a multi-stop experience for visitors and encourage them to explore the entire downtown.

3.4

Connect the Dots with Music Events

Focus Area 3: Tourism & Promotion

In Tolono

Other than Tolono Fun Day, the largest tourism draws for Downtown Tolono are CobraFest and the other live music events managed by the Loose Cobra. Some events attract hundreds of visitors into the heart of downtown. These events as well as Tolono's inclusion as a 40 North Boneyard Festival destination strengthen the village's reputation in the regional arts community.

This connection to the arts is a current strength of Tolono's that needs to be used as an anchor for downtown in the short-term. It is important for downtown businesses to fully capitalize on the traffic generated by these events. Oftentimes visitors attend concerts or festivals without patronizing other local businesses. **Intentional and targeted efforts should be made to connect the dots between visitors (customers) and businesses or vendors in order to capitalize on these high traffic events.** Connecting visitors to other businesses and destinations also enhances their experience which improves the perception of the downtown. Further capitalizing on this strength could include:

Connecting the dots with downtown businesses

When visitors are in town participating in live music events, there must be opportunities to connect them to other downtown businesses. This involves ensuring that local businesses are open during the hours of the event (or strategically for the hours leading up to the event); offering promotions to event attendees; and showing "signs of life" on the sidewalks with merchandise displays and signage. Pop-up retail vendors can be used to supplement the present lack of retail offerings. These vendors can be placed along the sidewalks or inside of vacant or underutilized storefronts.

Creating add-on experiences

Sometimes the best way to capitalize on a high-traffic event is to create add-on experiences rather than competing with the event itself. These experiences can occur hours prior to the event as a pre-show experience, the night before, or the day after. Activities could include street dances, scavenger hunts, culinary events, Main Street markets, block parties, etc. The goal is to encourage visitors to spend extra time downtown in addition to the main event and provide opportunities for other businesses to capitalize on the visitors.



3

TOURISM & PROMOTION Action Team

Focus Area	Identifier	Strategy	Timeline	Level of Investment	Implementation Partners
Tourism & Promotion	3.1	Encourage business owners to add new or enhance existing outdoor dining areas to add vibrancy and showcase activity in Downtown Tolono.	Years 1-3	-	Action Team
Tourism & Promotion	3.2	Establish a social media account specifically dedicated to promoting the community with engaging, positive, tourism-focused messaging.	NOW	-	Village and Tolono Fun Day Committee
Tourism & Promotion	3.2	Explore potential partnerships with University Illinois departments to hire a Marketing or Communications student as an intern to generate content, build a content calendar, develop a scope of work, etc.	Year 1	\$	Village and Tolono Fun Day Committee
Tourism & Promotion	3.3	Engage downtown merchants, business owners, and stakeholders to create a slate of micro-events and small-scale promotions throughout the year.	NOW	\$	Tolono Fun Day Committee
Tourism & Promotion	3.4	Coordinate intentional and targeted efforts to connect the dots between visitors and businesses or vendors in order to capitalize on existing high traffic events.	Years 3-5	\$-\$\$	Tolono Fun Day Committee





downtown strategies

FOCUS AREA 4

Economic Vitality

Economic Vitality focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.

4.1 Assistance for Start-ups & New Businesses

Focus Area 4: Economic Vitality

Supporting new business formation is essential for downtown revitalization, particularly in communities where property ownership challenges create barriers to traditional development approaches. Start-up assistance programs can bypass problematic property owners by directly incentivizing entrepreneurs to locate in downtown, creating market pressure for property improvements while activating vacant spaces. These programs work most effectively when they address the primary barriers new businesses face: high upfront costs, lease negotiations, and initial cash flow challenges.

Successful business assistance programs focus on reducing financial barriers while providing ongoing support that increases the likelihood of long-term success. Rather than simply offering grants, the most effective programs combine financial incentives with technical assistance, mentorship, and market development support. This comprehensive approach helps ensure that public investment results in sustainable businesses that contribute to downtown vitality over time.

In Tolono

Given the challenges with some downtown property owners, Tolono should implement a comprehensive start-up assistance program that empowers entrepreneurs to negotiate directly with property owners while providing substantial support for business establishment. This approach creates market demand for vacant spaces and can incentivize even reluctant property owners to engage with potential tenants.

Start-up Business Incentive Program

Financial Assistance Package

Lease Assistance Component:

- First-year lease assistance up to \$6,000 (\$500/month maximum)
- Security deposit assistance up to \$2,000
- Lease negotiation support through village economic development staff
- Legal assistance for lease review (partnership with local attorney)

Infrastructure & Utility Support:

- Waived utility connection fees (water, sewer, electric hookups)
- Expedited permitting with waived permit fees for qualifying improvements
- Free business license for first year of operation
- Reduced parking requirements or shared parking arrangements

Interior Improvement Grants:

- Matching grants up to \$10,000 for interior build-out (50/50 cost share)
- Additional \$5,000 available for storefront improvements
- Equipment financing assistance through partnerships with local lenders
- Professional design consultation for space planning

Target Business Categories:

Focus assistance on businesses that will generate the greatest downtown impact:

- Restaurants and food service (highest priority given regional draw potential)
- Retail businesses serving daily needs (grocery, pharmacy, services)
- Professional services that generate daytime foot traffic
- Arts and creative businesses that complement existing cultural activities
- Service businesses needed by residents (childcare, fitness, personal care)

4.1 Assistance for Start-ups & New Businesses

Focus Area 4: Economic Vitality

Program Structure

Eligibility Requirements:

- New businesses locating in designated downtown district
- Commitment to minimum 3-year lease term
- Business plan review and approval by village
- Participation in mandatory small business development program
- Agreement to participate in downtown marketing and events

Application Process:

- Pre-application consultation with village staff
- Business plan and financial projection review
- Site visit and space assessment
- Lease negotiation support and assistance
- Ongoing mentorship and check-ins during first year

Accountability Measures:

- Quarterly business performance reviews
- Employment and revenue reporting
- Community engagement participation requirements
- Clawback provisions for early closure or non-compliance

Strategic Partnerships

Small Business Development:

- Partner with University of Illinois Small Business Development Center
- Utilize SCORE mentorship programs for ongoing business support
- Connect entrepreneurs with regional business networks and resources

Financing Partnerships:

- Work with Busey Bank and other local lenders for equipment financing
- Explore microfinance options for small-scale business needs
- Connect businesses with state and federal small business loan programs

Property Owner Engagement

- Use the program to create positive pressure on property owners:

Market Demand Creation:

- Pre-qualified pool of supported entrepreneurs seeking space
- Village backing reduces risk for property owners
- Professional lease negotiation support facilitates agreements
- Infrastructure improvements benefit property owners long-term

Incentive Alignment:

- Property owners benefit from stable, supported tenants
- Village improvements (utilities, permits) add property value
- Successful businesses increase surrounding property values
- Program creates competitive pressure between property owners

4.2 Business Modernization Assistance

Focus Area 4: Economic Vitality

Existing businesses form the foundation of any downtown district, yet many small business owners lack the resources or expertise to adapt to changing market conditions and modern business practices. Business modernization assistance helps bridge this gap by providing training, technical support, and resources that enable established businesses to improve operations, expand their customer base, and increase revenue. This type of support is particularly critical for businesses that have been operating the same way for years without adapting to digital marketing, modern customer service practices, or contemporary operational standards.

Effective business modernization programs address common challenges including outdated marketing approaches, limited online presence, inefficient operations, and lack of business planning skills. By connecting existing business owners with professional development resources and technical assistance, communities can strengthen their economic base while improving the overall customer experience throughout the downtown district.

In Tolono

Tolono's existing retail, commercial, and restaurant businesses represent significant untapped potential for downtown growth. Many of these businesses operate using outdated methods and lack knowledge of modern marketing techniques, particularly digital and social media promotion. Rather than creating new programs from scratch, the village should leverage existing regional resources and university partnerships to provide comprehensive business modernization support.

Regional Partnership Strategy

University of Illinois Resources:

Small Business Development Center (SBDC):

- Free one-on-one business counseling and consulting services
- Workshops on marketing, financial management, and operations improvement
- Market research assistance and business plan development
- Technology adoption and e-commerce guidance

University Extension Programs:

- Business development workshops and training series
- Industry-specific guidance for retail and restaurant operations
- Financial planning and cash flow management assistance
- Succession planning for family-owned businesses

Student Partnership Programs:

- Marketing capstone projects with College of Business students
- Graphic design and web development through Art & Design programs
- Social media strategy development through Communications students
- Business analysis projects providing fresh perspectives on operations

Champaign-Urbana Regional Resources

Champaign County Economic Development Corporation:

- Business retention and expansion services
- Access to workforce development programs
- Networking opportunities with regional business community
- Grant writing assistance and funding resource identification

SCORE Mentorship Program:

- Experienced business mentor assignments
- Industry-specific expertise in retail and food service
- Long-term relationship building for ongoing support
- Workshop series on business fundamentals and growth strategies

4.3 Google Business Profile

Focus Area 4: Economic Vitality

Having a current Google Business Profile is essential for a local mom-and-pop business because it enhances visibility and credibility in an increasingly digital marketplace. This profile allows businesses to appear in local search results and Google Maps, making it easier for potential customers to find essential information such as operating hours, location, contact details, and services offered. An updated profile can significantly influence customer decisions, as it provides an opportunity to showcase positive reviews and high-quality photos, helping to build trust and attract new clientele. Google Business Profile can differentiate a local business and contribute to sustained growth and customer loyalty in the following ways:

Increased Visibility: Businesses with a complete Google Business Profile are 70% more likely to attract local visits compared to those without.

Customer Engagement: About 56% of consumers who find a local business through Google search are likely to visit the business within a day.

Call to Action: Listings that include a phone number can see up to a 25% increase in call volume, as consumers prefer to connect directly for inquiries.

Positive Impact of Reviews: Approximately 84% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. A high number of positive reviews can significantly boost conversion rates.

Enhanced Local Search Rankings: Businesses with optimized profiles can rank higher in local search results, driving more traffic. Listings that rank in the top three local search results can account for 30% of click-through rates.

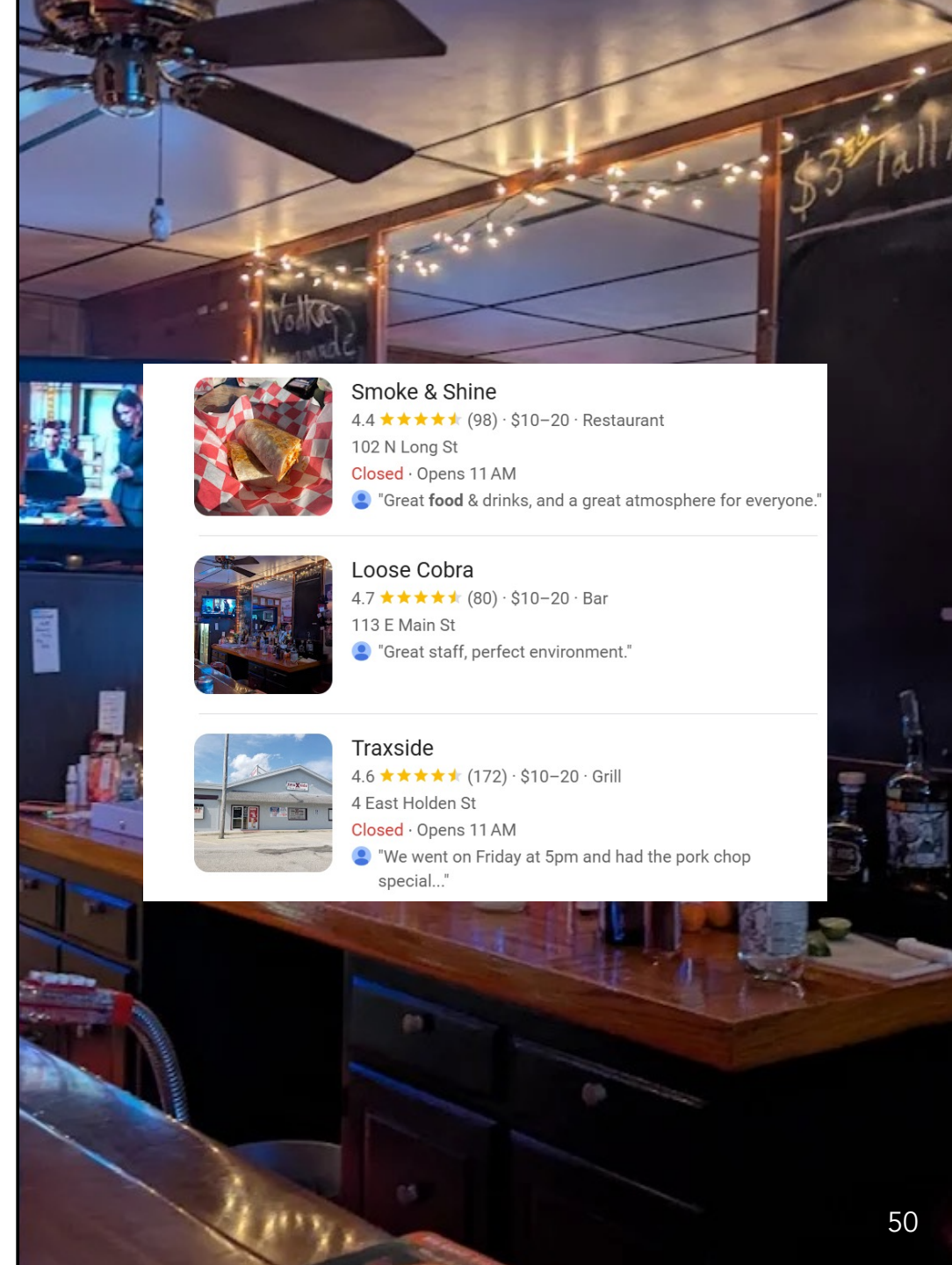
Click-Through Rate (CTR): Listings with photos receive 42% more requests for directions and 35% more click-throughs to their websites compared to those without images.

Conversions from Posts: Businesses that regularly post updates on their Google Business Profile can see up to a 10% increase in engagement from potential customers.

User Intent: Around 78% of mobile local searches result in an offline purchase, indicating that a strong online presence directly influences consumer behavior.

In Tolono

The Village should share the [Google Business Profile Guide](#), provided by Downtown Strategies as a supplement to this Action Plan, with downtown business owners to encourage them to claim their presence on Google and update their own Google Business Profile.



Smoke & Shine

4.4 ★★★★★ (98) · \$10–20 · Restaurant

102 N Long St

Closed · Opens 11 AM

"Great food & drinks, and a great atmosphere for everyone."



Loose Cobra

4.7 ★★★★★ (80) · \$10–20 · Bar

113 E Main St

"Great staff, perfect environment."



Traxside

4.6 ★★★★★ (172) · \$10–20 · Grill

4 East Holden St

Closed · Opens 11 AM

"We went on Friday at 5pm and had the pork chop special..."

4

ECONOMIC VITALITY Action Team

Focus Area	Identifier	Strategy	Timeline	Level of Investment	Implementation Partners
Economic Vitality	4.1	Establish a Start-up Business Incentive Program to support entrepreneurship and business growth.	Years 1-3	\$\$\$	Village
Economic Vitality	4.2	Leverage existing regional resources and university partnerships to provide comprehensive business modernization support.	NOW	-	Village in partnership with regional agencies
Economic Vitality	4.3	Share the Google Business Profile Guide provided by Downtown Strategies as a supplement to this Action Plan, with downtown business owners to encourage them to claim their presence on Google and update their own Google Business Profile.	NOW	-	Action Team



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