



**Mid-America EDC Economic Development Awards**  
***Placemaking Category***

**Community Spirit and Innovation Revitalize Ripon's Main Street**

**Ripon, Wisconsin: Making downtown a place people want to be**

Ripon, a city of 8,000 in East Central Wisconsin, has always taken pride in its downtown. Known as the birthplace of the Republican Party—and the home of Speed Queen Washers, Ripon Good Cookies, and Ripon College—the city has long aspired to revitalize its historic downtown. But decades of neglect had produced a downtown business environment with a 24% vacancy rate that was concerning to business owners and local residents alike.

Efforts to revitalize downtown Ripon date back to the 1970s, with local groups initiating several "paint-up/fix-up" projects. However, these initiatives often lacked cohesive leadership and quickly fizzled out. While concerned citizens talked fondly of the "good old days" while reminiscing about "the way things used to be," business and property owners were dreaming of revitalizing the central business district, citing places like Cedarburg, WI, Galena, IL, and Red Wing, MN, to emulate.

**Overcoming obstacles, rising to challenges**

In 1988, Ripon joined the Wisconsin Main Street Program, becoming one of Wisconsin's first "Main Street communities." The establishment of the Watson Street Commercial Historic District in 1992 laid the groundwork for an extremely successful restoration initiative. After years of hard work, signs of renewed life were on the rise, thanks in part to the comprehensive Main Street approach.

However, by January 1992, Main Street was losing momentum, facing a \$24,000 deficit and a \$9,000 penalty from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for unfiled year-end income statements. After the organization hired a new director and restructured its management and fiscal policies, over the course of several months the deficit was eliminated, the IRS issues resolved, and the organization restructured to place a greater emphasis on the Main Street Four Points approach. The newly directed effort regenerated public support for the downtown revitalization program, and Ripon was even recognized by Budget Travel magazine in 2011 as one of the "Coolest Small Towns in America."

Unfortunately, progress was derailed for several years as a private development initiative sucked up more than \$6 million in public tax dollars, and then failed to complete most of the projects promised in a developer's agreement. The situation dramatically worsened in December 2013 after a devastating fire ripped through a part of the historic district, destroying two structures, heavily damaging three others, and leaving a gaping hole in the district. To make matters worse, Ripon was embroiled in court proceedings stemming from the failed large-scale development project. The months that followed were consumed with legal matters, leaving 14 storefronts vacant and deflating community spirit. Fortunately, the case was settled in late December 2016, clearing the path to move forward.

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Through all this adversity, the community didn't give up. Businesses, property owners, and residents worked together to purchase and renovate longstanding vacant buildings and establish exciting events and promotions. Dozens of new businesses were recruited and numerous upper-floor residential spaces were created, lending an air of excitement to the district. Today, the downtown offers an eclectic mix of architecture, shops, and dining in one convenient place. A short stroll through downtown takes visitors past kitschy boutiques, fine jewelry and furniture stores, funky vintage shops, and enticing dining options.



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Over the course of the revitalization program, the district has completed streetscape renovations, seen the renovation of more than 60 historic buildings, and implemented an aggressive business recruitment and retention program. Total property value in the historic district has increased from \$7.3 million in 1988 to more than \$19.6 million in 2023. Furthermore, annual foot traffic has doubled since 2019, including more than 75,000 individual visitors.

### **Making effective use of public, private, and volunteer resources**

Ripon Main Street now benefits from broad volunteer support, including staff, faculty, and students from Ripon College; downtown business owners and employees; service groups; retirees; homemakers; and more. Each year, more than 200 volunteers contribute their time to support the revitalization program, assist with events and projects, and serve on the board and committees. Financial support from both public and private sectors is strong, with private businesses contributing more than \$50,000 annually to support and sponsor downtown events, the City of Ripon allocating \$40,000 per year from the hotel room tax fund, and downtown business improvement district (BID) assessments generating more than \$65,000 annually.

Recent private sector initiatives have spurred more than \$7 million in additional restoration activity, including the redevelopment of several downtown properties, restoration of the Historic Mapes Boutique Hotel, and expansion of Knuth Brewing Company. More than a dozen businesses utilized the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's (WEDC's) Main Street Bounceback Grants to occupy formerly vacant spaces, reducing the vacancy rate to approximately 1%.

To bolster ongoing momentum, the Main Street organization has collaborated with local service clubs and property owners to launch new beautification projects including the Rotary Square enhancement, the Village Green beautification effort, and Watson Street festive lighting installation.

This last project, proposed as a result of streetscape analysis by WEDC, met with opposition when the idea was announced on social media—but downtown property owners liked the idea and raised \$8,700 toward the \$16,664 project using GoFundMe. After the Main Street organization covered the remainder of the cost with proceeds from its Summer Concert Series, 11 guidewires were installed across Watson Street to create a sparkling vista that captivates visitors. In a reversal of the initial social media response, users now frequently post selfies with glowing comments about their experience in the historic district.

In the Village Green expansion, Ripon Main Street spent more than \$160,000 to acquire and demolish adjacent property. A \$50,000 Vibrant Spaces Grant from WEDC also helped fund the improvements. The space's centerpiece is a new 20' x 80' pergola surrounded by festive lights, tables, and colorful umbrellas. The Village Green has become Ripon's central gathering place, hosting outdoor concerts, holiday celebrations, and ice skating during the winter months. The park is used for weddings, college gatherings, outdoor movies, and yoga sessions, as well as outdoor meetings and gatherings (particularly beneficial during the pandemic).

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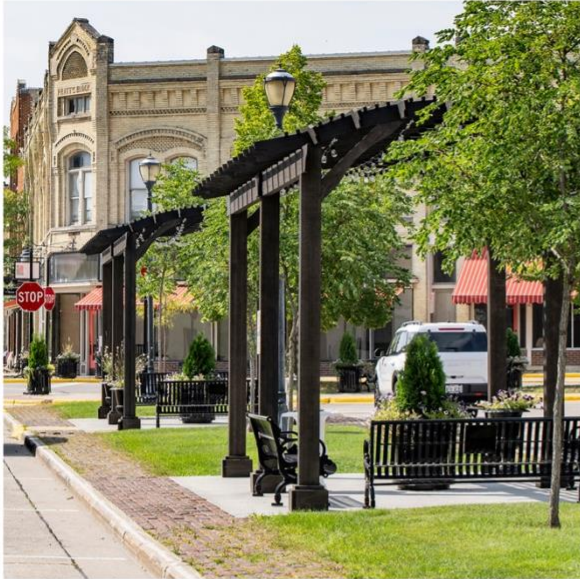
Rotary Square, meanwhile, represents an underutilized green space in the 100 block of Watson Street. After a visit by Wisconsin Main Street consultants, the square was identified as an ideal location for a placemaking installation to encourage pedestrians to cross the street to explore further, since this block typically logged the lowest foot traffic counts during daytime hours. The Main Street Beautification Committee brainstormed numerous potential installations that would be visible and usable for visitors. They ultimately landed on pergolas and benches, which would provide visual interest high enough to be seen above parked cars—and also shade for visitors during summer months. Partnering with the Rotary, the group raised \$30,000 to cover the cost of materials and—with significant volunteer labor—brought the plan to life. The final design included the pergola and benches as well as new trees, festive lighting,

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and brick pathways. The project was recognized as the Best Public Improvement at the 2020 Wisconsin Main Street Awards.

Historic downtown Ripon has once again established itself as a destination worth traveling to. A year-round assortment of unique special events—wine walks, summer concerts, holiday celebrations, and more—draws visitors to the district. Most notable is the renewed sense of community pride. Residents who once took their historic district for granted now see it as a vibrant symbol of vitality that other communities seek to emulate. Ripon Main Street Inc. placed itself at the forefront of the revitalization movement simply by rising to meet the challenges it faced.

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