

IOWA

Final Report

Leveraging Historic Assets in West Branch, Iowa

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Acknowledgments

This project was completed by a team of graduate students from the University of Iowa School of Planning and Public Affairs as part of the partnership between the City of West Branch and the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC). The Project Team members were Master of Public Affairs candidates. Professor Carrie Scheuttpelze and IISC Assistant Director Ashley Laux served as advisors to the project.

The Project Team collaborated with partners in West Branch and across the state through the duration of the project. Regular meetings and communication, site visits, and feedback sessions ensured that the deliverables aligned with community needs and the broader goal of historic preservation and downtown revitalization. These partners provided essential insight into visitor behavior, constraints, and the practicality of implementing the deliverables in West Branch.

The City of West Branch played a main role in shaping this project, primarily through engagement with the City Administrator, Adam Kofoed, who provided his guidance on processes, limitations, and long-term planning priorities. His perspective helped guide how deliverables can be integrated with existing city operations and future development. Jessi Simon, the Executive Director of Main Street West Branch, provided critical insight into downtown business needs, visitor patterns, and the challenges local businesses face. Her knowledge of MSWB's economic profile and community engagement strategies informed all deliverables on this project from identifying wayfinding routes to interpreting lessons from the Peer Communities Report in ways that align with local realities. Erin Laughlin, Director of Parks and Recreation, also contributed expertise on tourism and downtown connections, helping identify where visitors experience confusion or fail to move into the downtown area.

Historic preservation partners also played a significant role in this project. Members of the West Branch HPC include John Fuller, Dana Gafeller, Peggy Herman, Lou Picek, and Liz Seiberling. The HPC provided context on the city's historic assets and the importance of maintaining a cohesive visual identity across all public-facing materials. Their input ensured that each deliverable aligned with preservation values and supported the city's long-term goal of strengthening its preservation framework. The HPC was especially important in the update of the Historic Preservation Plan, offering feedback and helping clarify how the plan should function as the Commission's primary guiding document. At the state level, Allison Archambo, CLG Coordinator at the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office, offered guidance on CLG requirements, standards, and the documentation needed for West Branch to achieve certification. Her expertise ensured that the CLG deliverable reflected Iowa's expectations and positioned the City and the HPC to move confidently toward CLG status.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 - Executive Summary	5
2 - Topic and Significance.....	6
Deliverables Overview	9
3 - Community Profile	10
West Branch Demographics.....	10
Political Profile	10
City of West Branch Governance.....	11
Main Street West Branch (MSWB).....	12
President Herbert Hoover Organizations.....	13
4- Methodology	15
5 – Literature Review	18
6 – Public Engagement Analysis and Findings	23
High School Football Game Questionnaire	23
Town Hall Engagement.....	23
Community-Wide Survey	24
Main Street Business Survey	26
7 – Peer Communities Analysis	27
8 - Historic Preservation Plan: Existing Conditions and Recommendations	32
Goals and Strategies	32
Potential Future Actions	35
9 – Certified Local Government Status: Existing Conditions and Recommendations	37
10 – Wayfinding: Existing Conditions and Recommendations	39
11 – Conclusion.....	41
Appendix 1: Football Game Questionnaire.....	42
Appendix 2: Downtown Business Survey Questions	43
Appendix 3: Peer Community Analysis Contacts and Interview Questions.....	44

Appendix 4: HPC Workshop Results.....	45
Endnotes.....	47

1 - Executive Summary

West Branch, Iowa is the birthplace of President Hoover and home to the Herbert Hoover National Historic and Presidential Museum and Library. These historic assets generate economic activity for the community, but a major disconnect remains: many visitors to the federal sites do not engage with other historic assets, such as downtown Main Street and the local businesses. Therefore, West Branch is not capturing the full benefits of the community's tourism assets.

Survey and public engagement data reinforce strong community support for maintaining and enhancing West Branch's historic identity and assets. Community members largely agree that historic assets are a core pillar of the community, and the large majority say they should be utilized to support the local economy.

This project works to leverage West Branch's historic assets as a central focus of community development. West Branch has an opportunity unique among rural Iowa communities by utilizing its history to transform into a tourist hub for generations to come. The planned reopening of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in Summer 2026 presents a timely opportunity to implement the project's deliverables designed to enhance the community's historic assets.

This project seeks to address this challenge by mitigating barriers that limit the integration of historic assets within the local economy, with particular focus on three main deliverables:

1. Updating the community's Historic Preservation Plan (HPP)
2. Completing the community's Certified Local Government (CLG) application
3. A wayfinding plan

Together, these three deliverables form a coordinated plan to strengthen West Branch's institutional capacity and improve visitors' experiences. The HPP and CLG packet provide the institutional framework for the community to help protect and support its historic assets, and the wayfinding plan outlines a signage system to make Main Street more visible and accessible for visitors.

2 - Topic and Significance

West Branch occupies a distinctive position among small American towns- it is home to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.ⁱ According to the National Park Service, the Herbert Hoover National Historic Sites generated \$6.8 million in revenue for communities within a 60-mile radius of the site.ⁱⁱ

In West Branch, visitor spending supports local businesses and community betterment, particularly through the local option sales tax. While the economic impact across the area is significant, Main Street businesses report seeing lower visitor activity than expected given the visitor traffic at the Hoover sites. Consumer tracking software called Placer IA provides additional data to support their perceptions. For example, data analysis from Placer AI confirms that most Hoover site visitors are dining at chain restaurants along the highway instead of West Branch businesses. Placer AI also provides data about destinations most often attend following their trips to the Hoover sites, with the five most visited being in Iowa City or Coralville. While further analysis would be required to fully understand visitor behaviors, the initial impression suggests that West Branch Main Street businesses, just steps away from the Hoover site, are not fully accessing the full economic potential of the major tourist attraction.

Data from Placer AI shows that 58% of visitors to the Hoover Site do not visit Main Street West Branch businesses. Visitors arrive, engage with the presidential library and birthplace cottage, and leave without meaningfully interacting with the local businesses, restaurants, and shops that make up the West Branch Historic Main Street District. The missed economic potential presents opportunities for West Branch to better leverage historic assets by strengthening connections among historic assets, improving historic identity messaging to the public, fostering greater collaboration among local institutions to manage and promote that identity over time, and more.

This project aims to address the persistent gap between the tourism activity concentrated at the Hoover Site and the commercial vitality of the adjacent historic district, accomplished in part by enhancing the tools and mechanisms for promoting and enhancing West branch's rich history.

A key focus area is supporting the administrative activities related to historic preservation, which can sometimes receive less attention than other issues, such as infrastructure, public safety, and economic development. These other important issues tend to require a significant amount of limited staff time and public funding. Furthermore, historic preservation impacts can often take time to materialize, making them less visible to decision-makers who may focus more attention on short-term outcomes. These dynamics may help explain why historic preservation has been referred to as a "back burner issue" by stakeholders in West Branch. To work toward closing

those gaps, this project provides several key deliverables: an update to the City of West Branch Historic Preservation Plan; a fully developed application for Certified Local Government (CLG) designation; wayfinding strategies; and ideas from peer communities that share similar demographics and characteristics.

Efforts to draw in visitors to West Branch is built around the concept of “heritage tourism,” which emphasizes travel based on the unique history, culture, and landscape of a place (unlike general “leisure tourism”, which focuses on entertainment, attractions, and relaxation). Visitors who engage in heritage tourism tend to be older, more educated, and spend more money per trip than general leisure tourists. Heritage tourists spend an average of \$994 per trip, as opposed to the \$457 spent by general leisure travelers. The spending difference is primarily attributed to heritage tourists having greater income and taking longer trips. Interestingly, trends show that the 22-35 age group has seen the sharpest increase in heritage tourism participation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hoover site visitors demonstrate an interest in heritage tourism and willingness to travel for history-related experiences, yet many of them seem to not extend their visits beyond the boundaries of the federal site and into the commercial and civic life of the surrounding West Branch community. Strategies to encourage more exploration can both enhance the visitor experience and boost activity in local businesses.



Herbert Hoover

One strategy explored in this study is to strengthen the physical and informational connections between the Hoover Site and Main Street. Clear wayfinding, visible cues, or a compelling narrative that links these destinations can give visitors additional reasons to extend their stay or explore further. Because West Branch is a small community, historic attractions are not far apart, yet visitors may not be aware of other opportunities. Strategic investments in the visual and experiential infrastructure could invite visitors to see the broader West Branch community as a natural continuation of their experience at the federal site, rather than a separate and optional destination.

This project also refocuses attention and energy on historic assets through local government mechanisms, specifically by updating the Historic Preservation Plan and helping West Branch achieve Certified Local Government (CLG) designation, a service coordinated with the State of Iowa Historic Preservation Office that introduces opportunities for technical assistance and grant funding.

Historic preservation is not simply a matter of aesthetic or sentimental concern- it is an economic and civic strategy with a well-documented record of generating tangible community benefits. Preserved historic districts attract private investment, stabilize property values, support small business development, and serve as anchors for heritage tourism economies. For West Branch, the city's historic character is the foundation of its economic future. The Quaker settlement history, the abolitionist connections at Traveler's Rest Inn^{iv}, the Scattergood school housing Jewish refugees during World War II^v, the architecture of Main Street, and the birthplace of the thirty-first president constitute a coherent historic landscape whose value is greater as an integrated whole than as a collection of individual sites. The reopening of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in Summer 2026, following a year-long renovation, provides an optimal timing to design and implement strategies for celebrating the swell of interest in West Branch's rich history.

Deliverables Overview

The MPA Capstone Team focused on three primary deliverables: an updated historic preservation plan, a Certified Local Government (CLG) application packet, and a wayfinding plan.

Historic Preservation Plan

A historic preservation plan functions as the primary planning mechanism through which a community defines its historic assets, establishes the governance structures necessary to protect them, and coordinates preservation efforts with broader land use and economic development priorities. With a current plan, the city will have the institutional framework needed to make consistent and legally supportable decisions. The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) guided the update by grounding the plan in preservation values while City staff provided operational and planning support to ensure the document aligns with West Branch's long-term goals.

CLG Certification

Certified Local Government (CLG) certification builds upon this foundation by enabling more formalized recognition by state and federal partners. To qualify, the city must meet the standards established by the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) across commission structure, planning documentation, and administrative capacity. SHPO supported this process by clarifying CLG requirements and ensuring that the City's materials meet state standards. Certification provides access to federal Historic Preservation Fund grants and technical assistance.

Wayfinding Plan

The wayfinding plan builds on this analysis by translating those findings into a concrete and locally tailored intervention. It accounts for West Branch's geography, visitor behavior, and existing assets, creating a strategy that improves navigation and engagement. Parks and Recreation and MSWB provided important knowledge about local movement, trail use, and visitor behaviors which shaped the plan's route structure and decision-point recommendations.

Together, these components complement the institutional capacity developed through the preservation plan and CLG certification by ensuring not only that historic resources are protected, but that they are accessible and actively utilized by visitors.

3 - Community Profile

West Branch Demographics

West Branch is a growing rural community located in Eastern Iowa and just outside the Iowa City metropolitan area. American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates help illustrate sociodemographic changes in West Branch. Unlike many rural communities across the state, West Branch has experienced population growth in recent years. In 2018, the population was 2,061 and by 2024 it had grown to 2,594.

As the community grows in population, it has also become younger. Table 1 shows the percentage of the population that is comprised by age groups, in both 2018 and 2024. Over six years, age brackets 0-19 and 20-44 increased as a proportion of the population while the age brackets 45-64 and 65+ decreased.

	2018	2024
Ages 0-19	19%	26%
Ages 20-44	28%	37%
Ages 45-64	29%	20%
Ages 65+	24%	17%

Table 1: West Branch Age Brackets 2018 and 2024

Source: American Community Survey

Additionally, more young professionals are moving into the community, potentially introducing new opportunities for local economic growth. In 2018, the community's median household income was \$61,667; by 2024 it had grown to \$92,209.

Political Profile

Political profiles help build understanding of the context in which policy-making occurs. All three of the community's legislative and congressional elected officials are registered Republicans. U.S. Representative Mariannette Miller Meeks (Iowa's 1st Congressional District) has served the congressional district since January of 2021. At the state level, West Branch is represented by Kerry Gruenhagen in the Iowa Senate. He has represented West Branch and District 41 since

January of 2023. In the Iowa House, West Branch is served by Bobby Kaufmann, who has represented West Branch and District 82 since 2013.

Although all three major West Branch elected officials are Republican, the community has largely voted for the Democrat in recent presidential elections. In 2024, West Branch cast a total of 1,548 votes resulting in 58% (900 votes) for Kamala Harris and 39% (619 votes) for Donald Trump. This is a notable difference from Cedar County as a whole; the county cast a total of 10,644 votes resulting in 38% (4,075) for Kamala Harris and 60% (6,390 votes) for Donald Trump.

Results were similar in the 2020 election. West Branch cast a total of 1,446 votes resulting in 60% (870 votes) for Joe Biden (D) and 37% (542 votes) for Donald Trump (R). Cedar County cast a total of 10,703 votes resulting in 40% (4,337 votes) for Joe Biden and 57% (6,161 votes) for Donald Trump.^{vi}

City of West Branch Governance

The City of West Branch is governed by a mayor-council system with the community's day-to-day operations conducted by city administrators. The elected officials consist of the mayor and five city councilors, all of whom are elected to four-year terms. The government departments include administration, public works, parks and recreation, library, fire, and police. The staff members conducting day-to-day operations in the administration office include the city administrator, finance officer, and city clerk.^{vii}

For the fiscal year 2026, the city's budget is \$14.7 million; the top categories include capital projects, police, debt payments, water, and sewer.^{viii}

The community has multiple boards and commissions appointed by the mayor and city council, as well. The list includes animal control, library, parks and recreation, planning and zoning, zoning board of adjustment, and historic preservation.^{ix}

For this project, the most relevant group is the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). The HPC consists of a total of six members (with one vacancy) including Chair Dana Gafeller, Vice Chair Liz Seiberling, Secretary Karen Suchomel, and members Lou Picek, John Fuller, and Margaret Herman. The commission, "...promotes the use of and perpetuates, protects and preserves areas and structures of historic and architectural value for the education, pleasure and welfare of the citizens of the City of West Branch." In recent meetings, the group has focused its attention on various sign and awning permits and Traveler's Rest – a site important to the community for its connection to the abolitionist movement in the Civil War era.

Main Street West Branch (MSWB)

Main Street West Branch is a non-profit organization supported through a strong volunteer base. The organization works with public entities like the city's government and private entities like local businesses to benefit the Main Street district and broader community, increasing economic and social activity for tourists and locals. The nonprofit is one of many Main Street organizations operating within the state program in Iowa's Economic Development & Finance Authority. The mission is driven through the "Main Street Four Point Approach" including:

- Promotion, which focuses on advertising Main Street businesses and events.
- Design, which focuses on preserving Main Street's historic character.
- Economic Vitality, which focuses on supporting local businesses and expanding the community to new local businesses.
- Organization, which focuses on enlisting community members to volunteer and support funding.

Main Street West Branch has three major components of governance structure: executive director, board of directors, and advisory board. The executive director, Jessi Simon, is the only paid member of the nonprofit; she is tasked with carrying out day-to-day tasks including major community event planning, grant writing, and working with local groups and businesses. The board of directors has 11 current members (with two vacancies, at the time of this study) and consists of a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary. The advisory board works to engage the organization with other community entities. The board includes the Mayor of West Branch, the Hoover Site's National Park Superintendent, and a member from the Hoover Presidential Foundation and the Hoover Presidential Library and Museum.^x

Main Street West Branch organizes numerous community events. Three of the most significant are:

- Hoover's Hometown Days is held in early August to celebrate President Herbert Hoover's hometown with various activities, including the game Hoover-Ball.
- Fall Fest is a weekend full of activities including sidewalk sales for local businesses and a free outdoor movie.
- A Christmas Past is the community's annual Christmas celebration with activities like silent auctions and photos with Santa Claus.

Recurring events held multiple times throughout the year include Ladies' Night Out, Coffee and Collaboration, and Community Bingo Night. All events are designed to engage West Branch community members throughout the entire year while simultaneously supporting local businesses.^{xi}

President Herbert Hoover Organizations

The Herbert Hoover National Historic Site covers 187 acres, and includes numerous important sites, including:

- President Hoover's birthplace cottage.
- Presidential Library and Museum, which includes an easy-to-access visitor center to engage with visitors and answer questions regarding President Hoover or the site.
- Various other historic buildings including the Blacksmith Shop once owned by Hoover's father, Friends Meetinghouse – a Quaker place of worship, and the Schoolhouse – the community's public school.^{xii}

The National Park Service oversees the National Historic Site with Superintendent Peter Swisher in charge since early 2011. The Presidential Library was closed for renovations on January 20, 2025, and will re-open in early Summer of 2026. Although it is located on National Historic Site property, the Hoover Library and Museum is managed by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). It is one of only 13 active presidential libraries across the country managed by NARA. Locations of the libraries include:

- West Branch, Iowa: Herbert Hoover
- Hyde Park, New York: Franklin Roosevelt
- Independence, Missouri: Harry Truman
- Abilene, Kansas: Dwight Eisenhower
- Boston, Massachusetts: John Kennedy
- Austin, Texas: Lyndon Johnson
- Yorba Linda, California: Richard Nixon
- Ann Arbor, Michigan: Gerald Ford
- Atlanta, Georgia: Jimmy Carter
- Simi Valley, California: Ronald Reagan
- College Station, Texas: George H.W. Bush
- Little Rock, Arkansas: Bill Clinton
- Dallas, Texas: George W. Bush

Working with the National Historic Site and Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, the Hoover Presidential Foundation's mission is to support the library and historic site, along with other initiatives to promote and educate people about President Hoover.

The organization has a staff comprising of President and CEO Mundi McCarty and six other staff members covering important topics including grants and donations, digital outreach, and finance. The organization's budget comprises private donations from businesses, families, and individuals (both one-time and annual), and grants for specific projects like historic building renovations. The organization is guided by its large board of trustees, who total 45 members, including: a chair, two vice chairs, secretary, and treasurer.^{xiii}

Through the board's guidance, the foundation staff work to provide numerous awards and grants throughout the year. In the 2024 annual report, two grants and two awards were celebrated. A total of \$4,164 in school bus grants was awarded to various school districts to bring students to tour and learn from the Hoover Site. A total of \$2,921 in research travel grants was awarded to two individuals who traveled to the Hoover Presidential Library to study lesser-known aspects of his life and work.^{xiv}

4- Methodology

The Project Team used a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to learn about the challenges and opportunities for leveraging historic assets in West Branch.

- **Literature Review**

The literature review process provided an understanding of the important role historic preservation can play in community and economic development, as well as insight into heritage tourism and wayfinding. Evidence-based research and best practices informed the study through the project.

- **Public Outreach: High School Football Game and Town Hall**

In September 2025, a face-to-face survey was conducted with residents and visitors attending a West Branch High School football game. The questionnaire was a basic introduction of the project to the community, and it allowed for greater insight into the needs and desires of the community. Questionnaire prompts are provided in Appendix 1.

In November 2025, a town hall was held at the Black Rose on Main Street. The Project Team worked with three other West Branch capstone groups: the URP Comprehensive Plan team, the MPA Housing Needs Assessment team, and the MPA Capital Improvement Plan. About 30 residents participated in the town hall. Community members were invited to participate in several activities regarding the four capstone projects occurring in the community.

- **Community survey**

Throughout the fall of 2025, residents of West Branch shared thought on a wide range of topics through a community wide survey, which was also coordinated with other student groups. The total number of respondents was 185. This survey was shared on numerous community social media accounts, in the local newspaper, and student canvassed the whole town to distribute flyers at each household.

- **Stakeholder interviews**

Stakeholder conversations with Jessi Simon (MSWB Director), Adam Kofoed (City Administrator), Erin Laughlin (Parks and Rec Director) informed the process for developing the wayfinding plan.

The CLG process also utilized stakeholder engagement of West Branch’s city administrator Adam Kofoed, along with the Iowa Historic Preservation Office. A meeting was conducted with Allison Archambo from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to discuss feedback from West Branch’s previous Certified Local Government (CLG) application. Information from SHPO informed the process for updating West Branch ordinances related to historic preservation.

- **Downtown Business Survey**

A short survey of MSWB businesses was conducted to understand whether visitors were reaching downtown and to capture the day-to-day movement from the perspective of business owners. This survey helped identify when visitors arrived, if and how they found businesses, and whether they were aware of nearby destinations. Of the 47 businesses on MSWB, eight responded. The survey questions can be found in Appendix 2.

- **Historic Preservation Commission Workshop**

A structured engagement activity with the members of the West Branch Historic Preservation Commission provided input on the status of goals and action items from the previous Historic Preservation Plan, and whether to keep, discard, or edit them in the updated plan.

- **Peer Community Analysis and Interviews**

Peer communities were identified and selected by three basic criteria, followed by interviews with community representatives. Interview questions can be found in Appendix 3. The three criteria include:

1. Population under 10,000
2. Located in a Midwest state.
3. Historic prominence in the community – either a notable or notable history that shapes the community’s identity and inspires heritage tourism.

- **Spatial Analysis**

Fieldwork included walking and driving key routes to observe how visitors currently move through the community. This included finding and documenting existing signage, identifying signage gaps, and mapping locations where visitors may encounter

“confusion nodes,” which are areas where decision-making becomes unclear or not intuitive. Google Maps was also used to measure distances, identify trail connections, and visualize different routes and how the destinations relate to one another. Together, these methods created an understanding of the current wayfinding environment and shaped recommendations for a more cohesive and predictable system.

- **Inventory of Historic Properties**

Using local, state, and national records, the Project Team updated the historic property inventory list to match the most up-to-date information from both the state and West Branch.

5 - Literature Review

Literature on historic preservation demonstrates that preservation is not limited to protecting historic sites but instead serves as a tool for economic development and community identity. Historic assets contribute to tourism, local business activity, and long-term community sustainability when they are actively integrated into the broader community rather than treated as isolated destinations. For the City of West Branch, these assets represent a significant opportunity to strengthen economic activity by better connecting existing historic resources to the surrounding downtown environment.

The effectiveness of these efforts depends heavily on local governance capacity. In rural communities like West Branch, literature emphasizes the importance of clear policy frameworks such as historic preservation plans and programs like Certified Local Government (CLG) designation. These structures provide the administrative foundation necessary to support preservation over time, including access to funding, technical assistance, and consistent decision-making. Preservation is therefore best understood as an ongoing, coordinated process that requires institutional support, planning, and long-term commitment rather than a one-time initiative.

In addition to governance, accessibility and place-based strategies play a critical role in translating preservation into tangible outcomes. Wayfinding systems improve how visitors navigate and experience a community, helping connect key destinations and increasing engagement with local businesses and historic sites. Research on comparable communities further reinforces that revitalization efforts must be tailored to local conditions, as many small towns face similar constraints related to funding, marketing capacity, and changing tourism trends. Together, the literature suggests that successful revitalization depends on integrating preservation, governance, accessibility, and local context into a cohesive and coordinated approach.

Historic Preservation Planning

Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan, a section in the American Planning Association's PAS Report 450, provides a foundational overview of preservation planning and its role within broader land use policy.^{xv} The report argues that preservation planning must be tailored to the specific conditions of each community, emphasizing that no single model can be universally applied. Instead, preservation plans should reflect local development patterns, resource availability, and institutional capacity. The document outlines preservation planning as a flexible and evolving process that can exist across multiple policy instruments, including ordinances, comprehensive plans, and informal administrative practices. This perspective reinforces the idea that preservation

is not a standalone activity, but rather an integrated component of broader planning systems that include zoning, transportation, and economic development.

The report further identifies key components of effective preservation plans, including clear goals, resource inventories, legal frameworks, and implementation strategies. It stresses the importance of consistency across policy documents to ensure clarity and enforceability, highlighting the risks associated with fragmented or vague planning approaches. In addition, the report emphasizes the growing recognition of preservation as a driver of economic development, particularly through heritage tourism and neighborhood revitalization. By linking preservation to economic and political outcomes, the report underscores the need for public support and institutional commitment. This approach aligns closely with contemporary public administration theories that prioritize coordination, accountability, and strategic planning in achieving policy objectives. The most important takeaway that was applied to West Branch's Historic Preservation Plan was the importance of goal-oriented language. It is crucial that a plan has goals that the community can work toward both today and into the future. Historic Preservation is an ongoing process, not something that is finished once a list of tasks has been completed.

The Historic Preservation section of the *Township Master Plan* for Montclair, New Jersey presents a comprehensive framework for identifying, protecting, and integrating historic resources into broader municipal planning.^{xvi} The document defines historic preservation as a process of identifying, evaluating, and protecting resources that hold architectural, cultural, or historical significance, and situates this effort within a broader policy context shaped by federal and state legislation such as the National Historic Preservation Act and the New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law. The plan emphasizes that preservation is not simply aesthetic, but also economic and social, noting its role in strengthening community identity, promoting tourism, and supporting local economic development. By framing preservation as a tool for sustainability and community vitality, the document aligns local planning objectives with broader public administration goals related to long term economic stability and social cohesion.

The plan also provides a detailed inventory and evaluation system for historic resources, demonstrating a methodical and data driven approach to preservation. Tools such as the Historic Inventory Viewer allow the Township to map and categorize resources, improving accessibility and public awareness while supporting administrative decision making. In addition, the document outlines specific policy mechanisms, including local designation, zoning overlays, and redevelopment guidelines, to ensure that preservation efforts are integrated into land use planning. The emphasis on expanding local designation and conducting township wide surveys reflects a proactive strategy aimed at both protecting existing resources and identifying new ones. At the

same time, the plan acknowledges challenges such as balancing development pressures with preservation goals and ensuring adequate administrative capacity, suggesting that effective preservation requires continuous coordination between planning bodies, regulatory frameworks, and community stakeholders. These are the same challenges faced by West Branch, but a community like Montclair has demonstrated an ability to manage and plan around these challenges.

Certified Local Government (CLG) Status

The State Historic Preservation Office of Iowa presents the Certified Local Government program as the local implementation of a broader three-tier preservation system administered by the National Park Service, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and municipal or county governments. The program is designed to institutionalize preservation at the local level by requiring adherence to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, providing technical assistance, and facilitating access to funding. In doing so, it integrates national preservation priorities into local governance structures while maintaining a consistent regulatory framework.

The process of becoming certified is structured and procedural rather than discretionary. A municipality must adopt an ordinance, or in the case of a county, a resolution, that incorporates preservation goals into its legal and administrative framework. This includes establishing a preservation commission with qualified members, demonstrating the existence of a survey and inventory system that aligns with state standards, and developing a local preservation plan. Applicants must also submit documentation verifying commissioner qualifications and enter into a formal agreement with the state. Once submitted to the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, the application is reviewed and forwarded to the National Park Service for final approval, which typically occurs within a short timeframe. Although participation requires a baseline financial and administrative commitment, including an annual budget, staff support, and ongoing training, these requirements are intentionally modest in order to ensure accessibility for smaller communities.

The primary justification for this administrative structure is access to funding through the CLG grant program. These grants consist of federal funds distributed by the state through a competitive annual process and do not require a direct financial match, allowing communities to use volunteer labor and in-kind contributions to satisfy participation requirements. Over time, these funds have supported a substantial number of preservation initiatives, contributing to measurable economic outcomes such as increased property values, expanded tax bases, and revitalized commercial districts. The program emphasizes that these grants are not intended for direct physical rehabilitation, but rather for foundational activities such as planning, surveys, and regulatory

development. These efforts enable communities to qualify for additional funding sources, including historic tax credits and property tax incentives, thereby creating a cumulative effect that extends beyond the initial grant investment.^{xvii}

Recent reporting from the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) illustrates both the scale and distribution of Certified Local Government grant funding across the state. In 2025, the agency awarded \$93,000 of preservation grant funding. Typically, between 10 and 15 communities submit applications. In 2024, nine counties collectively received \$125,000.^{xviii}

Across Iowa, these grants are most often used to support surveys, planning documents, and resource inventories, which form the institutional foundation of local preservation programs. Recent awards illustrate how communities leverage relatively modest funding to build or strengthen that capacity:

- Red Oak — \$15,000 for an intensive survey of the East Hill Historic District, expanding the city’s documentation of historic resources and informing future designation and planning efforts.
- Des Moines — \$20,000 for a citywide historic survey, aimed at updating the city’s baseline inventory and identifying under-documented neighborhoods.
- Muscatine County — \$21,096 for a survey of the North Calhoun Street District, supporting research into potential National Register eligibility and guiding local planning decisions.
- Louisa County — \$12,000 for historic resource surveys in Columbus Junction and Wapello, providing essential data for long-term preservation planning in rural communities with limited staff capacity.

Taken together, these projects demonstrate how CLG funding operates as a catalyst for communities that would otherwise lack the resources to undertake preservation work independently. Survey and planning efforts often represent the initial stage in a broader progression toward designation, regulatory development, and targeted revitalization strategies. Iowa’s recent grant cycles reflect this pattern, underscoring the role of state-administered funding in sustaining and expanding local preservation capacity over time.

Wayfinding

According to Dalton et al., wayfinding is defined as the process people use to orient themselves, make route decisions, and navigate through areas. It is seen as a cognitive and social activity that involves spatial reasoning, memory, and confirmation.^{xix} The main toolkit used for this

deliverable, *The Inclusive Wayfinding Toolkit*, reinforces these definitions, saying that “wayfinding is the process of finding your way to a destination, using physical cues and information” such as maps, signs, and landmarks.^{xx} Current wayfinding systems place emphasis on navigation beyond just signage. This is a coordinated network of cues that help reduce anxiety, increase predictability, and support movement for visitors. The toolkit finds four main systems that have different functions:

- **The directional system:** Guides users at decisions points and helps them choose routes.
- **The awareness system:** Helps users understand what is around them before they begin their journey and shows walking times, destinations, and amenities.
- **The behavioral system:** Sets expectations for safe interactions on shared routes.
- **The distinctiveness system:** Uses consistent colors, typography, and materials to make recognizable identity.

These systems act as an active travel network of primary, secondary, and tertiary routes that organize movements into predictable paths and makes sure information appears where people need it. *The Inclusive Wayfinding Toolkit* explains that predictable and consistent information is required for reducing confusion and encouraging active travel, especially for people who already face barriers such as unfamiliarity, lack of cues, and safety.

Further research on small town revitalization supports a clear and connected wayfinding system. Main Street Iowa communities with a population of under 5,000 have stronger economic gains when structured design, training, and coordinated improvements are implemented.^{xxi} Similarly, Iowa communities are exceptionally perceptive to growth in employment and establishments when strong implementation aligns with local needs.^{xxii} These findings indicate that small towns do benefit when improvements, like wayfinding, are consistent and tied to placed-based strategies, which means approaches that build on current community assets, geography, and local identity. This supports the deliverable of implementing a wayfinding system to strengthen connections between key destinations, support downtown vitality, and enhance visitor experiences through predictable navigation.

6 - Public Engagement Analysis and Findings

High School Football Game Questionnaire

The Project Team attended a high school football game to gather initial data about perceptions of West Branch among residents. The game was well attended, and 65 people answered the questionnaire.

Results from the questionnaire indicate strong support for West Branch's existing identity. When asked about their favorite aspect of the community, 18 respondents identified family or the general sense of community, while 10 additional respondents highlighted its small-town character. Similarly, when asked what the community should resemble in ten years, 30 respondents indicated that it should remain largely the same. These findings suggest that residents prioritize stability and community identity over rapid change, indicating that future development efforts should be carefully implemented to preserve the town's historic character.

In addition, responses to investment priorities reflect a preference for targeted enhancements rather than large-scale transformation. When asked how they would allocate a \$1 million investment, 30 respondents identified parks and recreation as a priority. This aligns with findings from peer community research, which indicate a growing emphasis on outdoor and experiential activities. Together, these results suggest that expanding recreational opportunities may serve as an effective way to enhance community engagement while remaining consistent with broader shifts in tourism preferences.

Town Hall Engagement

A community growth visioning scenario asked participants to add their votes in respective jars to their preferred future of the community. Participants utilized three different kinds of beans to vote for: most preferred, moderately preferred, and least preferred. The options included:

- Stay Small, Stay Steady (No Growth)
- Built on Industry (Industrial Hub)
- Suburban Neighbor (Iowa City Suburb)
- Commuter Crossroads (Bedroom Community)
- Historic Homestead (Tourism Destination)
- Commercial Hub (I-80 Retail Node)

The community growth vision scenario indicated strong support for Option E: Historic Homestead. When it came to the most preferred option, Option E received 10 votes compared to its closest competitor Option C: Suburban Neighbor which received 5 votes. When it came to moderately preferred, Option E received 15 votes with its closest competitor being Option F: Commercial Hub with 5 votes. Least preferred votes are close in number but, overall, the Historic Homestead option strongly outweighed any other option. The results indicate the respondents' strong support for its historic assets.

Additionally, Option A: Stay Small, Stay Steady received 2, 2, and 3 votes in order of most to least preferred. This suggests the community is not opposed to growth, but it instead favors intentional growth. This type of growth can emphasize the community's historic assets, and it reinforces the deliverables of this project by protecting historic assets, improving wayfinding, and supporting peer community collaboration.

Community-Wide Survey

Several questions in a broad survey help inform perceptions about the role and importance of historic assets in West Branch.

Community vision

One question asked respondents to rank their preferences for the community vision drafts shown below, choosing from responses “like a great deal”, “like somewhat”, “neither like nor dislike”, “dislike somewhat”, and “dislike a great deal.”

- Commercial Hub: Development focuses on retail, restaurants, and services to increase tax base (e.g. Tiffin).
- Bedroom Community: Attracts residents through greater affordability while still providing access to nearby cities for most amenities.
- Historic Homestead: Emphasizes historical roots and invests in Main Street to become a cultural destination for festivals and events.
- Manufacturing Hub: Leverages access to I-80 to become a player in light manufacturing, logistics, and warehousing.

For this question, there were a total of 130 responses. Historic Homestead outweighed all others in terms of support, with 69 saying they like the statement a great deal and 41 saying they somewhat like the statement. This means that 110 of 130 respondents are in favor of this

statement. The second highest ranked vision was the Bedroom Community option, where a total of 90 were in favor of the statement.

These results indicate strong community support for growing the community in a way that celebrates historic preservation and tourism. These results support findings from earlier public engagement efforts, indicating the community's support for its history to be a community and economic asset. Lack of support for other growth scenarios showcases residents' preference in maintain the community's historic charm when growing in the future.

Consumer behavior

A second question asked how often respondents visit, shop, or dine at West Branch businesses with the choices of "multiple times per week," "once per week," "biweekly," "monthly," and "never".

A total of 129 answered this question with 41 answering multiple times per week and 43 answering once per week; this is a total of 84 out of 129 respondents interacting with community businesses at least once per week.

These results indicate residents are actively engaged in the local economy, so it seems to point to the aspect that engaging historic visitors into becoming active participants of the local economy is important.

Perceptions about historic preservation

Another question asked respondents to share how much they agree or disagree with statements about historic preservation and historic assets in West Branch. They could choose from "strongly agree," "somewhat agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat disagree," and "strongly disagree." The statements were:

- a. Historic buildings in downtown are important for West Branch's city identity
- b. Historic buildings in downtown need to be updated and/or renovated
- c. West Branch's identity is closely intertwined with the Hoover Presidential Library
- d. I am familiar with West Branch's history of being a part of the Underground Railroad

A total of 122 answered the prompt regarding these four statements. For statement A, 82 respondents strongly agree and 30 somewhat agree, meaning a resounding 112 of 122 people agree with the statement on some level. Statement C had similar sentiments, with 77 saying

strongly agree and 28 saying somewhat agree for a total of 105 of 122 responses. Statement B had a total of 83 agreed on some level; statement D had a total of 83 as well.

These results demonstrate a strong understanding of historic preservation in the community. An overwhelming majority indicate the importance downtown buildings have in the character of the community, and results showcase how important the Hoover Library is to the identity.

Respondents' understanding of historic building updates and local Underground Railroad history is not as strong; this allows for a great opportunity to educate and engage local historic assets and history for locals and visitors alike.

Main Street Business Survey

Responses to the Main Street Business Survey showed consistent patterns across respondents. Many respondents indicated that visitors often arrived without a clear understanding of what else West Branch has to offer, and many did not realize MSWB businesses were nearby. Most notably, responses to question five indicated that when tourists come in, they almost always ask what else is nearby, demonstrating a clear need for stronger directional and awareness cues to guide visitors toward downtown and other attractions.

These insights helped inform the Wayfinding Plan by identifying where visitors seem confused, what information they seek, and what locations need stronger directional or awareness cues to support movement.

7 - Peer Communities Analysis

The Project Team conducted interviews with leaders from five peer communities: Abilene, Kansas; Deadwood, South Dakota; Galena, Illinois; Kalona, Iowa; and Winterset, Iowa. These communities were selected based on shared key characteristics with West Branch: location in the Midwest, a population under 10,000, and an identity rooted in its historical assets. Several consistent themes emerged from the interviews about how historic communities are preserving their heritage, attracting visitors, and adapting to changing tourism trends. Rather than relying solely on history as the primary attraction, leaders from these five communities are working to integrate historic assets into broader visitor experiences that include events, outdoor recreation, entertainment, shopping, and local culture.

Peer Community Profiles

Abilene, Kansas is located in Dickinson County, in central Kansas with a population of 6,449. The community is directly located on Interstate 70. The community is the hometown of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and features tourist attractions like his boyhood home and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum.^{xxiii}



Deadwood, South Dakota is located in Lawrence County, in western South Dakota, with a population of 1,209. The community is located on the north side of Black Hills National Forest. Deadwood is located in the Rapid City-Spearfish metropolitan statistical area population of 156,227. The community is known for its gold mining history, where a wide range of people visited including Wild Bill Hickok – a well-known gambler and gunfighter in the 1870s.



Galena, Illinois is located in Jo Daviess County, in northwestern Illinois with a population of 2,931. The community is located on the Mississippi River and Illinois-Iowa border. Before and after the Civil War, Galena was the home of General (and later President) U.S. Grant. Today, the Grant Home in the community is open to the public for tours.



Kalona, Iowa is located in Washington County, in eastern Iowa, with a population of 2,692. The community is in the Iowa City MSA – population 182,711. Kalona is not known for a distinct historic figure but instead for its Amish and Mennonite heritage. Tourists can visit the Kalona Historical Village to learn and experience the lives of Kalona residents from the 1800s.



Winterset, Iowa is located in Madison County, in central Iowa. The community is in the Des Moines MSA – the largest of all the peer communities with a population of 75,391. The population is 5,416. Winterset is home to the John Wayne birthplace and museum. John Wayne was a notable actor best known for his roles in Western movies.



Peer Community Interview Analysis

History Remains Important, but Visitors Seek Additional Experiences

Each of the interviews identified history as a foundational part of the community identity. The interviewee from Galena described history as "absolutely a cornerstone" of the community, while the interviewee from Abilene noted, "Abilene *is* history." Deadwood's tourism economy is built around its historic character, and the Kalona interviewee views its museum as one of the community's most important assets. However, several interviewees acknowledged that history alone is often no longer enough to attract visitors. The interviewee from Winterset provided one example of this shift, noting that visitors are often drawn by events, recreation, or entertainment first, with history serving as a secondary experience. Interviewees emphasized the importance of "getting people here on the wings of other things" and then introducing them to local history once they arrive. This suggests that successful historic tourism strategies increasingly blend preservation with experiential tourism.

Events Serve as Economic Drivers

All five communities highlighted the importance of signature events in generating visitation and supporting local businesses. These events vary widely in scale but share a common purpose of creating reasons for repeat visitation.

Examples include:

- Galena's Halloween Parade, which attracts approximately 30,000 visitors annually.
- Winterset's Covered Bridge Festival, drawing roughly 17,000 visitors.
- Kalona's Fall Festival, which attracts approximately 6,000 visitors.
- Abilene's annual festivals and community celebrations.

A common shared experience was that events do not always need to be directly tied to history. Instead, communities often use festivals, arts programs, food events, and entertainment to draw visitors who then engage with historic sites, downtown businesses, and museums.

Personal Interaction Remains More Effective than Technology Alone

While many communities have experimented with QR codes, apps, digital passports, and online tools, interviewees consistently highlighted that personal interaction remains one of the most effective visitor engagement strategies. Several communities noted that visitor guides, maps, welcome centers, and conversations with staff are still essential tools for encouraging visitors to explore beyond their primary destination. The interviewee from Winterset reported limited engagement with QR codes despite installing them at all covered bridges. Other interviewees underlined that engaging visitors on a one-on-one basis to recommend businesses and attractions remains highly effective. This suggests that digital tools are most successful when they complement, rather than replace, traditional visitor services.

Self-Guided Tours and Passport Programs Encourage Exploration

Many communities have adopted self-guided experiences to help visitors discover additional attractions and stay longer.

Examples include:

- Deadwood's long-running self-guided tours and mobile app.
- Abilene's digital passport program that rewards visitors for exploring multiple sites.
- Galena's themed trails such as "Coffee and Culture."
- Kalona's transition from guided tours to self-guided museum experiences due to staffing constraints.

Several communities also use incentive-based programs, such as passports, bingo cards, stamps, or prizes, to encourage visitors to visit multiple locations. These approaches may provide useful models for West Branch as it seeks to connect historic assets, downtown businesses, and community destinations.

Accessibility and Infrastructure Remain Ongoing Challenges

Every community identified infrastructure concerns related to historic tourism. Parking shortages were cited by Galena and Winterset, while Deadwood noted the ongoing challenge of balancing accessibility improvements with historic preservation requirements. Kalona described a downtown

revitalization effort that addressed some infrastructure needs but now requires additional updates. These findings suggest that maintaining and improving the visitor experience requires continued investment in sidewalks, wayfinding, parking, accessibility, and public spaces, even in communities where historic preservation is a primary focus.

Tourism Trends Have Shifted Since COVID-19

Several communities reported lasting changes in visitor behavior following the COVID-19 pandemic. Key trends included an increased demand for outdoor recreation and authentic experiences and a greater interest in experiential activities rather than traditional museum-only visits. Communities including Galena and Abilene have responded by emphasizing trails, outdoor recreation, and experiential programming alongside historic attractions.

Implications for West Branch

The peer community interviews suggest that West Branch's historic resources are most likely to succeed when positioned as part of a broader visitor experience rather than as standalone attractions. Communities across the Midwest have found success by combining history with events, outdoor recreation, local businesses, arts and culture, and interactive experiences. Additionally, strong partnerships, coordinated marketing, visitor-friendly wayfinding, and opportunities for self-guided exploration appear to be critical components of successful historic tourism strategies. West Branch's connections to the Hoover legacy, historic downtown, local businesses, and recreational assets provide opportunities to apply many of these lessons while maintaining its unique identity.

8 - Historic Preservation Plan: Existing Conditions and Recommendations

West Branch's 2017 Historic Preservation Plan helped formalize preservation at the local level and establish a foundation for future planning efforts. When considered alongside modern standards outlined in the *Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan* guidance, the document presented clear opportunities to expand and strengthen that foundation. These standards emphasize the importance of a comprehensive and professionally evaluated resource survey, a clearly defined understanding of historic character, integration with zoning and land use policy, and an implementation strategy supported by measurable objectives. The West Branch plan engaged with many of these components, providing an initial framework that could be further developed to enhance its long-term effectiveness.

The update to the 2017 plan revisits the language and planning components based on current conditions. Some strategies and actions had been completed or were no longer relevant. The updated plan also collapses the number of goals and strategies into clear categories.

The Project Team reviewed historic preservation plans from other communities and best practices to inform their process. A workshop with the current Historic Preservation Commission members provided valuable insight about which actions to retain, edit, or remove from the 2017 plan, as well as any new ideas. Results of the workshop can be found in Appendix 4.

The final plan leaves opportunities for flexibility and creative thinking by the HPC and other contributors. To facilitate future discussions and activities, the plan includes an action table worksheet that can be utilized by the HPC, as well as sample actions based largely on the peer community analysis.

Goals and Strategies

The following goals and strategies developed for the updated Historic Preservation Plan will guide West Branch in protecting its historic resources, encouraging public appreciation of local heritage, and strengthening the community's economic vitality.

1. Identify, Protect, and Preserve the Integrity of West Branch's Historic Assets.

West Branch's historic resources form the foundation of the community's identity and sense of place. Protecting these assets requires a proactive approach that combines policy, documentation, sustainable funding, and ongoing capacity building. This goal establishes

the framework for identifying and safeguarding the full range of the community's historic character — from nationally recognized landmarks to locally significant properties.

- Strategy 1.1: Identify and protect West Branch's historically significant properties
- Strategy 1.2: Pursue Funding to Support Preservation and Revitalization Efforts
- Strategy 1.3: Build Preservation Capacity Among Commission Members and City Staff

2. Increase Public Education and Awareness of West Branch's History and Historic Resources.

The public's understanding and appreciation of local history are essential to sustaining West Branch's historic resources and long term preservation efforts. This goal focuses on expanding educational programming, improving access to historical information and documentation, cultivating meaningful institutional partnerships, and developing the next generation of preservation advocates in West Branch.

- Strategy 2.1: Develop and Expand Historic Preservation Educational Programming
- Strategy 2.2: Improve Public Access to Historic Preservation Information and Documentation
- Strategy 2.3: Archive Historic Preservation Materials and Community History Records
- Strategy 2.4: Develop Local Internship and Volunteer Opportunities in Historic Preservation

3. Promote West Branch's History to Maintain and Strengthen Economic Activity. West Branch's historic character is not only a source of community pride can be a meaningful driver of economic activity. Heritage tourism, a thriving historic district, and a well-connected downtown attract visitors, support local businesses, and encourage reinvestment in the community. This goal focuses on leveraging West Branch's historic assets strategically to strengthen the local economy, expand the boundaries of historic recognition, and create a more visible and welcoming experience for residents and visitors alike.

- Strategy 3.1: Explore Opportunities to Update West Branch's Historic Preservation District

- Strategy 3.2: Implement a Wayfinding Plan to Connect the Hoover Historic Site and West Branch's Historic Preservation District
- Strategy 3.3: Collaborate with Local Partners to Promote West Branch's Historic Preservation District

The City of West Branch and the Historic Preservation Commission should also implement a process to act on these goals and strategies and document progress beyond the CLG-required monitoring of preservation activity. Historic Preservation Commission could designate one meeting each year for tracking and reporting on progress on these goals.

Potential Future Actions

The peer community analysis and case study research provides examples of actions West Branch might consider to help advance historic preservation and historic activity in their community. The Project Team cultivated this list of potential future actions intended to facilitate brainstorming and workshopping among Historic Preservation Commission members and other contributors. The Project Team also recommends that the HPC utilize the Action Table included as an appendix to the Historic Preservation Plan. Using the action table format will help the commission turn ideas into actionable items that are specific, timebound, and measurable.

Historic Passport

West Branch could consider a historic passport program, like the examples from across the Midwest, either within West Branch or potentially even with the three nearest presidential library and museum communities:

1. President Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois^{xxiv}
2. President Truman in Independence, Missouri^{xxv}
3. President Eisenhower in Abilene, Kansas^{xxvi}

The passport system could be available both digitally and on paper to equitably attract participants across age ranges. West Branch and the other communities should identify multiple locations to receive stamps on the historic passports. For example, West Branch could include the Herbert Hoover Site, the Heritage Museum, and local Main Street businesses. After completing the stamps in each community, prizes should be made available. In the community of West Branch, a fun prize could be candy from a local store. Because of this historic passport system, it would connect similar Midwest communities and ideally increase visits.

Public Art

Like Abeline, KS, West Branch could expand its public art presence to help facilitate movement and activity between the Herbert Hoover Site, historic Main Street, and local trails. Mural Park, a few blocks from Main Street, is a small component of what could be a larger public art appeal to the community. West Branch could commission a local artist to celebrate President Hoover and/or related themes. Another example of a unique public art project is the bronze statue of President Herbert Hoover at the nearby school. More awareness of its existence could incentivize visitors to travel off the Hoover Site and into the community to take photos with the statue.

Bus Tours

Peer communities like Winterset, IA have noted the success organized bus tours can have on the local economy. West Branch could also organize bus tours, particularly from local metro areas including Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, and the Quad Cities. The bus tour package might include a standardized tour including visiting the Hoover Site and Main Street with listed options for dining. To coordinate this with local metro communities, West Branch should contact tourism organizations like Cedar Rapids Tourism, Think Iowa City, and Visit Quad Cities.

For the long-term, working toward hotel development can support organized tours and generate hotel/motel tax revenue.

Outdoor Activities

With an increased demand for outdoor activities, Galena has worked to increase walking and cycling trails including one successful walking journey called the “Coffee and Culture Trail.”^{xxvii} This trail invites visitors to walk throughout Galena and visit various local businesses, art and entertainment, and historic sites. Connecting outdoor activities to historic sites in West Branch is a fun and family-friendly way to encourage more visitors and longer visits to the community. The community should pursue external funding to connect the Hoover Trail to Main Street with good sidewalks and signage. The community should also develop themed routes like the “History Trail” to invite people to reach specific historic sites around Main Street. Much of this recommendation from the peer community analysis can be implemented via wayfinding signage.

Tour Guides

Previously, Kalona’s Historical Village had local retirees serve as volunteer tour guides throughout their site. This direct personal engagement in each building not only gave visitors historic education but allowed for questions as well (something you can’t do with an audio or reading tour). One unique and potentially untapped resource is the Heritage Museum on Main Street. The building is full of rich community history, but it is rarely open due to staffing capacity restraints. West Branch could implement a formal volunteer program with a simple, accessible online sign-up system for volunteers. The program would require training sessions which could be organized and managed by the Heritage Museum leadership team. This program could not only open this unique community resource to visitors, but it would also educate the community about its local history.

9 - Certified Local Government Status: Existing Conditions and Recommendations

West Branch's initial CLG application several years ago established a strong foundation and demonstrated a clear commitment to historic preservation; however, there were a few additional provisions that prevented it from being accepted. During the review process, the State Historic Preservation Office identified areas that would need to be revised for the next application. The first involved a provision that would have extended local authority to automatically add new construction within the West Branch Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places, a responsibility that is more appropriately maintained at the federal level. The second focused on improving regulatory clarity and consistency, particularly by defining a more structured design review timeline and expanding the approval process for certain signage to include broader oversight beyond a single administrative role.

In response, and in coordination with the Historic Preservation Commission and city staff, the Project Team updated the application and related ordinances to address these concerns. This work resulted in the adoption of two ordinances by the City Council on April 20th, 2026. Ordinance 834 served as the standard framework required for CLG participation and required only minor revisions to align with state expectations, including updates to commission structure, meeting requirements, and member qualifications. Ordinance 835 represented a more comprehensive addition, establishing clear permit requirements, defined review timelines, and a more structured signage approval process that incorporated both administrative and commission level input. Together, these updates strengthened the city's regulatory framework and aligned it more closely with state standards. With these revisions in place and the updated application under review, West Branch is positioned to secure a designation that has enabled comparable communities to access substantial project funding.

Following certification, maintaining CLG status will require ongoing administrative and programmatic activity. The commission must meet at least three times annually in accordance with open meetings requirements, complete approved training each year, and continue to advance preservation initiatives beyond these minimum expectations. These efforts are documented through the annual report, which records meeting activity, training participation, commission membership, and preservation work completed throughout the year. With the new Historic Preservation Plan in place, the Project Team recommends that the commission consider meeting more frequently in the short term to work on the updated goals, actions, and tasks.

Because the agreement is established with the city rather than individual participants, West Branch must also provide consistent institutional support. Operational needs such as supplies, printing, and training-related travel must also be supported locally, particularly since many funding opportunities require a local match. More broadly, the program encourages the city to continue expanding its inventory of historic resources, integrating preservation into planning decisions, advising elected officials, and engaging the public through outreach.

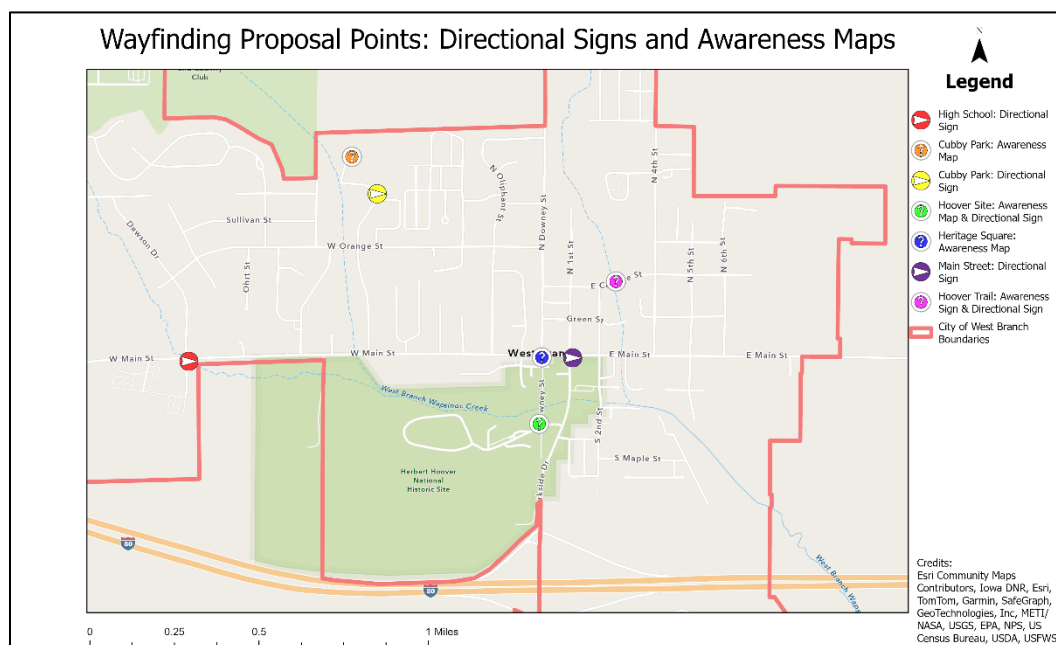
Looking ahead, future ordinances or regulatory updates that intersect with CLG requirements should be coordinated with the State Historic Preservation Office to ensure continued alignment. At the same time, expanding grant writing capacity will be an important next step in maximizing the benefits of certification. This could take the form of training a staff member or a representative from Main Street West Branch to effectively pursue funding opportunities. CLG certification creates access to dedicated federal and state preservation funding streams that are not currently available to the city, but the ability to utilize those resources depends on having the technical expertise to submit competitive applications. Peer communities of similar size have demonstrated that it is possible to secure substantial funding for targeted preservation projects, and West Branch's unique historic resources bode well for successful grant requests. Developing this capacity will be essential to fully realizing the opportunities created by certification and translating them into tangible preservation outcomes. With a strong foundation already in place and a clear administrative structure established, West Branch is well positioned to translate its historic resources into sustained preservation outcomes and long-term community investment.

10 - Wayfinding: Existing Conditions and Recommendations

In West Branch, the Hoover Site and Main Street are geographically connected to each other, but there is a gap between tourists traveling between them. Placer AI data shows that 42% of Hoover Site visitors travel to Main Street, meaning roughly 10,500 annual visitors do not interact with local restaurants and businesses

The *Inclusive Wayfinding Toolkit* previously mentioned guided the analysis and shaped the recommendations below. These findings use the toolkits four defined systems, the directional, awareness, behavioral, and distinctives systems, and apply them to the conditions that have been observed in West Branch.

The findings show that the lack of a coordinated wayfinding system contributes to low visitor flow on MSWB. Without clear cues, visitors cannot see what downtown offers or how close it is. This only increases uncertainty and reduces the likelihood of travel beyond their original destination. Directional and awareness signage would reduce this uncertainty by showing walking times, amenities, and routes between attractions. A cohesive system would strengthen the physical connection between all the identified major attractions. This system would improve navigation, increase visitors' confidence, and support MSWB vitality by encouraging more people to move beyond their initial destinations.



To address these gaps, the wayfinding plan establishes an active travel network of primary, secondary, and tertiary routes that will help organize how people choose to move through the

community. The network focuses primarily on walking and biking routes, with motor-vehicle routes playing a secondary role, because these active travel connections represent the highest-value visitor journeys and offer the greatest opportunity to guide people toward Main Street. By defining these routes, the plan ensures all signage, maps, and cues reinforce a simple structure that visitors can follow.

The plan recommends installing directional signage at key decision points where visitors pause or become uncertain. These include exits from the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, trail points, and sports complexes. The primary purpose of these directional signs is to support walking and biking navigation, but these signs may be placed near roads and can be visible to drivers, which will help motorists understand as well. This dual visibility approach is especially important in West Branch, where many visitors arrive by car but still need information on walkable routes. Directional signs can include walking or driving times, arrows, and universal icons for food, shops, and amenities to reduce uncertainty and encourage exploration.

Additionally, the plan recommends implementing awareness maps at major attraction points. These include Heritage Square, The Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, Cubby Park, and Hoover Trail Access points. Awareness maps support walking and biking by helping visitors understand their surroundings before they begin moving. These shows distances, walking times, and key amenities. West Branch has one existing awareness map at Heritage Square that is outdated and hard to see, so this plan calls for modern, standalone maps that are easy to read and placed where visitors will see it. These maps combined with the city's existing distinctive elements of deep red color, white lettering, and metal materials create a cohesive system that will reinforce local identity. Implementing these recommendations in phases will create a predictable travel experience that strengthens connections between key attractions and Main Street while supporting economic vitality and visitor confidence.

11 - Conclusion

The three deliverables produced through this project, an updated Historic Preservation Plan, a completed Certified Local Government application, and a wayfinding plan, provide concrete ways for West Branch capitalize on its historic assets. The Historic Preservation Plan provides the City and Historic Preservation Commission with a current, goal-oriented framework for protecting and promoting the community's historic resources. CLG certification builds on that foundation by connecting West Branch to state and federal technical assistance and funding streams. The wayfinding plan offers one a tangible, visitor-facing intervention to increase visitor traffic to Main Street.

West Branch is not starting from scratch. It has an engaged Historic Preservation Commission, a capable Main Street organization, supportive city leadership, and a community that has clearly signaled its values. What remains is implementation: adopting the updated plan's goals as living priorities, finalizing and maintaining CLG status, and phasing in the wayfinding infrastructure that will guide successfully guide visitors. With the Hoover Library's reopening creating renewed regional and national attention, the window to act is now. The recommendations in this report offer West Branch a coordinated, achievable path toward fully realizing the economic and civic potential of its remarkable historic assets.

Appendix 1: Football Game Questionnaire

1. Demographic questions include age, gender, race, and duration lived in West Branch.
2. Do you work in West Branch? Where?
3. What is your favorite thing about West Branch?
4. 10 years in the future, what community would you like West Branch to resemble? Why?
5. If West Branch received \$1 million, what would you invest in?
6. What additional community support do you think West Branch needs?

Appendix 2: Downtown Business Survey Questions

1. What is your business name and address? Are you the owner or an employee?
2. Who is your typical customer? Tourists, West Branch locals, or other?
3. What is your perceived busiest season?
4. When your customer is a perceived non-local resident, do you find that they spend money or often just look around and explore?
5. When a perceived tourist comes in, do they ask questions about West Branch? Do they ask what other businesses/shops are nearby?
6. Does the City of West Branch, Main Street West Branch, or any other local entity otherwise help your business financially or otherwise? If so, how?
7. How do customers from outside of West Branch typically learn about your business? (Signage, word of mouth, online, etc.?)
8. Are there specific locations in West Branch (or elsewhere) that you think additional signage, maps, or directional cues would help guide visitors to your business?
9. What could be improved to attract non-local residents to your business?
10. What communication channels do you use to communicate with your customers or to find new customers? Which get the most engagement?

Appendix 3: Peer Community Analysis Contacts and Interview Questions

Peer Community	Interviewee Name and Role	Email Address
Abilene, Kansas	Julie Roller, Director of the City of Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau	julie@abilenecityhall.com
Deadwood, South Dakota	Amanda Kille, Executive Director of Deadwood Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau	amanda@deadwood.org
Galena, Illinois	Terry Mattson, CEO and President of Galena Country Tourism	tmattson@visitgalena.org
Kalona, Iowa	Nancy Roth, Managing Director of Kalona Historical Village	kalonatours@gmail.com
Winterset, Iowa	Sarah Pugh, CEO of Madison County Chamber of Commerce	exec@madisoncounty.com

Interview Questions

11. How would you describe your organization and its role in your community?
12. Can you describe annual events your community does? What impact does that have on your local community?
13. How do you encourage people to go past your main tourism draws?
14. How do you make history a focal point of your community? If it isn't, why do you think it hasn't been? Do you want it to be in the future?
15. Have you utilized interactive tools at museums, websites, social media, etc. to promote historic sites and engage visitors? Does your community utilize any self-guided tours?
16. Have there been any investments made in terms of accessibility including sidewalks, parking, etc.?
17. What challenges have you seen in tourism (notably historic tourism) since the Covid-19 pandemic?
18. What communities do you look to for guidance or collaboration?

Appendix 4: HPC Workshop Results

Goal / Action Item	Adam Kofoed	Dana Gafeller	Peggy Herman	John Fuller	Liz Seiberling
Goal 1. Become CLG Certified and strengthen partnerships between municipal and state government agencies.	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G1 A1: Incorporate an updated 2017 Historic Preservation Plan as an amendment to the West Branch Comprehensive Plan	Completed	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Completed
G1 A2: Actively seek historic preservation training for all commission members and encourage citizens to receive additional preservation training	Revise	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G1 A3: Schedule and complete annual Historic Preservation Plan and Certified Local Government Reviews	Revise	Carry Over	Carry Over	Revise	Carry Over
G1 A4: Establish, update, and review enforcements of the Historic Preservation Ordinance in the HPC annual reviews		Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G1 A5: Evaluate the need for zoning changes in historic and conservation districts to promote neighborhood stabilization and enhancement	Remove	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Completed
Goal 2. Heighten public awareness of historic preservation in West Branch and provide preservation education	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G2 A1: Start, sponsor, or encourage historic walking tours highlighting West Branch history and preservation	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G2 A2: Partner with the Hoover Museum, the National Park Service, and the West Branch Heritage Museum to start a historic preservation educational event for students	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G2 A3: Request an annual historic preservation column for the West Branch Times in the month of May to highlight historic preservation month		Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G2 A4: Actively and regularly account for public concerns and innovative ideas regarding historic preservation in the community		Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
Goal 3. Improve public accessibility and documentation of historic properties		Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G3 A1: Add a section to the city's website highlighting historic preservation and the historic residential program	Remove	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G3 A2: Develop maps for the current historic preservation district and potential preservation buildings	Completed	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Completed
Goal 4. Sponsor a commission member, community member, or city staff person to obtain grant writing training	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Revise	Carry Over
Goal 5. Seek approval from the current owner of Traveler's Rest to add the site to the national registry, and, if approval is received, start the application process	Revise	Revise	Revise	Revise	Revise
Goal 6. Successfully complete an application for the Town Hall to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Remove
Goal 7. Establish a residential historic preservation program for housing and neighborhood development	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over

G7 A1: Create a Hoover Medallion Residential Program and a Century Medallion Program in partnership with the National Park Service	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G7 A2: Encourage historic preservation and revitalization of local preserved residential properties by establishing a historic housing incentive and financing program	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G7 A3: Develop a Historic Housing recruitment and real estate packet	Remove	Revise	Carry Over	Revise	Carry Over
G7 A4: Seek partnerships with Iowa City organizations to facilitate sharing of historic preservation techniques and materials	Remove	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
Goal 8. Develop a list of potential historic properties such as the Quaker Church, other downtown buildings, and other churches of historical significance to West Branch	Carry Over	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Completed
Goal 9. Partner with the Parks and Recreation Commission, Cedar County, and Johnson County to investigate the possibility of an Underground Railroad biking trail following John Brown's Freedom Route		Revise	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
Goal 10. Maintain and strengthen economic activity in West Branch's current Historic District in coordination with the West Branch Economic Development Group	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G10 A1: Collaborate with the Hoover Museum, the National Park Service, the Heritage Museum, local businesses, the Presidential Inn, and frequently visited regional locations to promote visiting West Branch's Historic District	Revise	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G10 A2: Partner and act in guidance with the West Branch Economic Development Group on ways to promote advertising and seeking grant/funding opportunities for historical properties	Revise	Carry Over	Carry Over	Revise	Carry Over
Goal 11. Start the process for story telling about West Branch, which could be done through a book, documentary, or other creative options	Revise	Completed	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over
G11 A1: Collaborate and coordinate with local newspapers, the Hoover Museum, National Park Service, and local historians to record their history of West Branch	Remove	Completed	Carry Over	Remove	Remove
G11 A2: By the end of 2023, recruit a committee tasked with telling the story of 175 years of West Branch	Remove	Remove	Remove	Carry Over	Carry Over
G11 A3: Archive historic preservation materials and stories of West Branch's history with the West Branch Library, the Herbert Hoover Library, and the Heritage Museum	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over	Carry Over

Blank section denotes a goal or action that did not receive a response

Endnotes

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