
WAYFINDING PLAN FOR WEST BRANCH, IOWA



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS WAYFINDING?

Wayfinding is the cognitive and physical process that people use to orient themselves, which makes routes decisions and navigating through areas simpler. Research defines it as the planning and decision-making aspect of navigation, memory, and spatial reasoning. ¹ Modern wayfinding practices emphasize navigation is more than just implementing signage. It is a coordinated system of maps, symbols, cues, and information that help people move efficiently through an area. Research shows that effective wayfinding can reduce stress, increase confidence, and improve the overall visitor experience. ²

NETWORKS VS. SYSTEMS

Within this wayfinding framework, active travel **networks** (primary, secondary, and tertiary routes) define where people move, and the **systems** show how people receive information along the network routes.

Each system plays a different role:

- Directional: Helps at decisions points
- Awareness: Provides broader context
- Behavioral: Guides interactions in shared spaces
- Distinctiveness: Makes everything cohesive and recognizable

Together, these systems support the travel network by making sure each route is predictable and easy to follow.

WEST BRANCH APPLICATION

Implementing a wayfinding system in West Branch would strengthen connections between key attractions and Main Street West Branch, support local businesses, and create a more welcoming and intuitive environment for residents and visitors. Directional or awareness signage can guide people from major visitor attractions including the Hoover Site, sports complexes, and the Hoover Trail to toward Main Street West Branch (MSWB). Without these cues, visitors may overlook opportunities to visit Main Street, which reduces economic activity and limits the visibility of local businesses. |

COST OF IMPLEMENTATION

While costs vary depending on materials and installation, directional and awareness signs are generally the most manageable for small communities. Comparable systems show vehicular directional signs range from \$2,000-\$4,000, pedestrian directional signs range from \$1,600-\$2,500, trail signs range from \$250-\$350, informational: directory maps (awareness maps) range from \$2,000-\$5,000, and informational: kiosks (awareness kiosks) range from \$1,000-\$3,500. ³ These prices are relatively low for a long-term investment that will enhance navigation and support economic vitality.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

1 – BUILD AN ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORK

An active travel network organizes walking and biking routes into a simple, predictable structure that visitors can understand quickly. The toolkit identifies three types of routes:

- 1) Primary (major, predictable, high usage)
- 2) Secondary (connectors)
- 3) Tertiary (local paths, alleys, trails)

All of these help communities maintain clarity and consistency across their wayfinding systems. Because West Branch is compact at just 2.6 square miles ⁴, creating a clear, intuitive network is both achievable and highly impactful for visitors who may only experience one part of town.

For West Branch, the active travel network should highlight the most important visitor journeys: connecting the Hoover Site, Cubby Park, the High School, and the Hoover Trail to MSWB. These routes represent the highest-value opportunities to guide people downtown, support local businesses, and strengthen the visitor experience.

Potential West Branch Travel Networks:

Route	West Branch Route	Purpose
Primary walking route	Hoover Site to MSWB	This is the ideal visitor journey; This needs to be safe, intuitive, and well designed; It is the route that every visitor should be able to follow without hesitation
Primary cycling route	Hoover Trail to MSWB	Trail users pass through without stopping; a clear, direct cycling route would encourage them to enter downtown to shop, eat, or use amenities
Secondary routes	Cubby Park to MSWB; West Branch High School to MSWB	These routes serve sports visitors who miss downtown entirely; clearer secondary connections help redirect traffic toward local businesses
Tertiary routes	Local paths; Sidewalks; Other trail connections	These smaller paths support local movement and feed into the primary and secondary routes; they do not require heavy signage but should be aligned with the network

2 – PLACE DIRECTIONAL INFORMATION

Directional information helps visitors make clear choices at decision points, which are places where people naturally pause, look around, or lose their sense of direction. These “confusion nodes” often occur where trails meet streets, where visitors exit major attractions, or where multiple paths converge. In West Branch, directional signs are especially important because many visitors arrive for a single destination and may not realize how close they are to MSWB. Strategic directional signs will help guide heritage tourists, sports visitors, and trail users toward downtown.

Example of Clear Directional Signage:



Potential Confusion Nodes and Recommendations:

Confusion Node (Location)	Why This Location Needs Directional Support	Recommended Signs	Content Rules
Hoover Library/Site	Heritage tourists often leave the site without visiting downtown which is a short walk or drive away	Directional posts	“MSWB →”, include walking time, and universal icons for food or shops
Hoover Trail Access Points	Trail users are unsure which direction may lead to downtown and skip it altogether	Directional posts (could be attached to awareness map)	“MSWB →”, include distance and bike friendly icons
Busy MSWB Intersections	Visitors pause at crossings and may need guidance towards downtown destinations	Smaller directional posts	Keep messages simple and short, for example: “destination and →”
West Branch High School (near road/exit)	Sports visitors leave without realizing how close downtown is	Directional posts near exit	“MSWB →” and driving time
Cubby Park (near parking lot/exit)	Sports visitors return the highway without passing through downtown	Directional posts near exit	“MSWB →”, driving time, and universal icons for food or shops

3 – IMPLEMENT AWARENESS MAPS

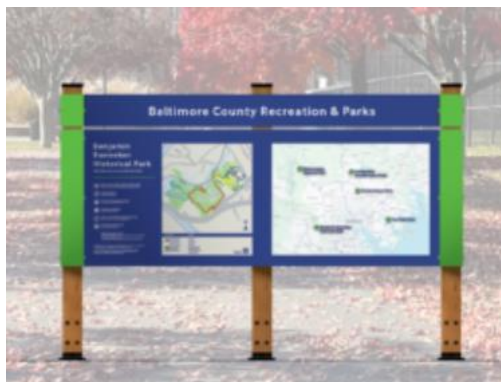
Awareness maps help visitors understand what is around them before they begin moving. This shows them key destinations, walking times, and nearby amenities. They also reduce uncertainty, support first-time visitors, and help people form a mental map of the community. In West Branch, awareness maps are especially important because many visitors arrive for a single destination (the Hoover Site, Cubby Park, or the Hoover Trail) and may not realize how close they are to MSWB.

West Branch currently has one small awareness map in Heritage Square. New, standalone awareness maps could be installed at key visitor points to help guide people toward downtown and other destinations.

Existing Awareness Map in Heritage Square:



Example of Modern, Standalone Awareness Map:



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Potential Awareness Locations and Recommendations:

Awareness Location	Why This Location Matters	Recommended Sign Type	Content Rules
Heritage Square	Main downtown point with a currently outdated, small, and hard to find awareness map	Standalone map panel	“You are here” notes, pointing to key destinations with walking times, amenities, and the Hoover Site connections
The Hoover Site	Heritage tourists leave without realizing other historic assets are nearby	Standalone map panel or kiosk	“You are here,” walking time to MSWB, and icons for food and shops
Cubby Park	Sports visitors visit here and leave without visiting the nearby downtown	Map panel or kiosk	Driving time to MSWB with emphasis on playgrounds, parking, food, and shops
Hoover Trail Access Points	Trail users either bike or walk through without stopping downtown	Standalone map panel	Downtown connection, distances, bike parking, and amenities such as water or restrooms

4 - MONITOR THE NEED FOR BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

Behavioral signs are used in some communities to guide how people interact in shared spaces. For example, reminding cyclists to slow down, yield, or signal when passing. These signs help reduce conflict and increase comfort when paths are crowded. Currently, West Branch's trails and sidewalks do not experience the level of traffic that would justify investing in behavioral signage. As visitation and trail use grow over time, the City can reassess whether targeted behavioral cues are needed to support safe and predictable movement.

Potential Future Behavioral Sign Examples (if needed):

Location	Why Behavioral Messaging Might Be Needed	Example Behavioral Sign	Content Rules
Hoover Trail	Increased walking or biking may eventually create points where guidance helps reduce conflicts	"Slow Down" "Yield if Passing"	Keep the messages short and easy to understand and use universal icons

5 – STRENGTHEN THE DISTINCT LOOK

The distinctiveness of a system gives West Branch’s wayfinding network a recognizable identity that feels cohesive, local, and rooted in the community’s historic character. West Branch already has an established visual style which is deep red as a primary color, white lettering, consistent metal sign materials, and a simple, legible typography. These elements create familiarity for residents and visitors and help distinguish official signage from other visual information in the environment.

This section documents the existing visual identity and recommends certain refinements to strengthen accessibility, consistency, and clarity for future signs. The improvements should focus on increasing sign legibility, particularly sizing of the actual signs, expanding the use of icons, and ensuring that typography and spacing are the best choice for older adults and all visitors.

Current Signage Appearance:



Currently West Branch, does not have a formal style guide for its signage beyond following the general Main Street Iowa and Downtown Design Guide principles, which emphasizes legibility, quality materials, and simple color palettes. These guidelines outline best practices, but they do not define a specific visual identity for West Branch. ⁶ Based on these standards and the appearance of existing red directional signs, it is recommended that the city continue using this established look. The following style guide documents the existing visual identity and provides a consistent frame for future signage.

Suggested Style Guide:

Category	Specifics
Color	Primary background: Deep, muted red (HEX #A32020) Text & arrows: White (HEX #FFFFFF)
Typography	Typeface: Geometric sans-serif (e.g., Highway Gothic, FHWA Series E, Interstate) Characteristics: All caps, bold weight, wide letter spacing, simple forms consistent with Main Street Iowa guidance
Layout and Structure	Orientation: Vertical rectangular panel with rounded corners for directional signs; larger rectangular panels for awareness maps Arrow placement: Right-aligned, arrows placed after text Text alignment: Left-aligned Spacing: Even vertical spacing between destinations; generous top and bottom padding Contrast: White text on red background for maximum visibility
Materials	Panel: Weather-resistant metal Post: Steel Finish: Matte or low-gloss to reduce glare; non-reflective, high-quality materials
Iconography	Arrows: Simple arrows matching text size and stroke weight Icons: Not currently used, but future signs may incorporate simple, universally understood icons

Distinctiveness Recommendations:

Element	Purpose	Application in West Branch	Recommended Improvements
Colors	Creates visual consistency and recognizability	Deep red background and white lettering is used consistently on existing signs	No changes as this is already a recognizable, distinct look
Icons	Communicate quickly across ages and languages	Existing signs rely on text with no use of icons except a few arrows	Add simple, understood icons to reduce text (Example: restroom icons)
Materials	Reinforce local character and durability	Metal materials are consistent and withstand weather	Continue using this material but possibly consider a matte finish over gloss to reduce glare
Typography	Ensures readability	Typography is consistent and simple on existing signs	Increase font size, letter spacing, and line height for better visibility
Cues	Make the system feel rooted in place	Color and material already provide cues that are tied to West Branch	No improvements needed at this time

6 – IMPLEMENTATION OF ELEMENTS

Implementing this system in phases will allow West Branch to reduce cost, test ideas, and refine elements based on perceived visitor behavior. A phased approach is effective specifically for smaller communities because it ensures that each component accurately reflects how people move through town. Starting small, gaining feedback, and expanding slowly will help the city build a cohesive system without overcommitting resources.

Potential Phasing:

PHASE 1: The Pilot Phase (3-6 months): The goal of this section is to test wayfinding elements at the highest-impact locations

- Awareness maps
 - Heritage Square
 - Standalone map panel with “you are here”, walking times, and amenities
 - Hoover Site
 - Standalone map panel (or kiosk) with “you are here”, walking times to MSWB, and icons for food and shops
- Directional Signs
 - Hoover Site/Hoover Exit
 - Directional Post, “MSWB →” with walking time and icons
 - Hoover Trail Access Point
 - Directional post, “MSWB →” with distances and bike friendly icons

The purpose of this phase is to establish the core structure of the system, test placement, test clarity, and observe how visitors respond to the new cues.

BEFORE PHASE 2: Collect Feedback

After the initial installation, the City should gather feedback from:

- Visitors (through informal conversations or QR code forms)
- MSWB Businesses
- Parks and Recreation Staff/Hoover Site Staff
- Residents

This feedback should be focused on whether visitors notice the signs, if the signs change movement patterns, whether walking/driving times are accurate, and whether additional locations need support. This helps ensure that Phase 2 will be targeted and effective.

PHASE 2: The Expansion Phase (6-12 months): The goal of this phase is to extend the system to further strengthen connections.

- Awareness Maps
 - Cubby Park

- Map panel (or kiosk), with driving time to MSWB, icons for parking and food
- Hoover Trail Access Point
 - Standalone map with distances, bike parking, and water/restroom icons
- Directional Signs
 - MSWB Intersections
 - Small directional signs, with simple messages like “Destination →”
 - West Branch High School (near exit)
 - Directional post, “MSWB →” with driving time
 - Cubby Park (near exit)
 - Directional post, “MSWB →” with driving times and icons

The purpose of this phase is to strengthen the network between parks, schools, and the downtown, capture sports visitors and trail users who miss downtown, and improve clarity at intersections.

PHASE 3: The Full Network Phase (12-24 months): The goal of this phase is to complete the system and ensure consistency across all routes.

This phase includes:

- Filling remaining gaps in the travel network
- Adding secondary and tertiary directional signs
- Ensuring all maps have consistent design, colors, and materials

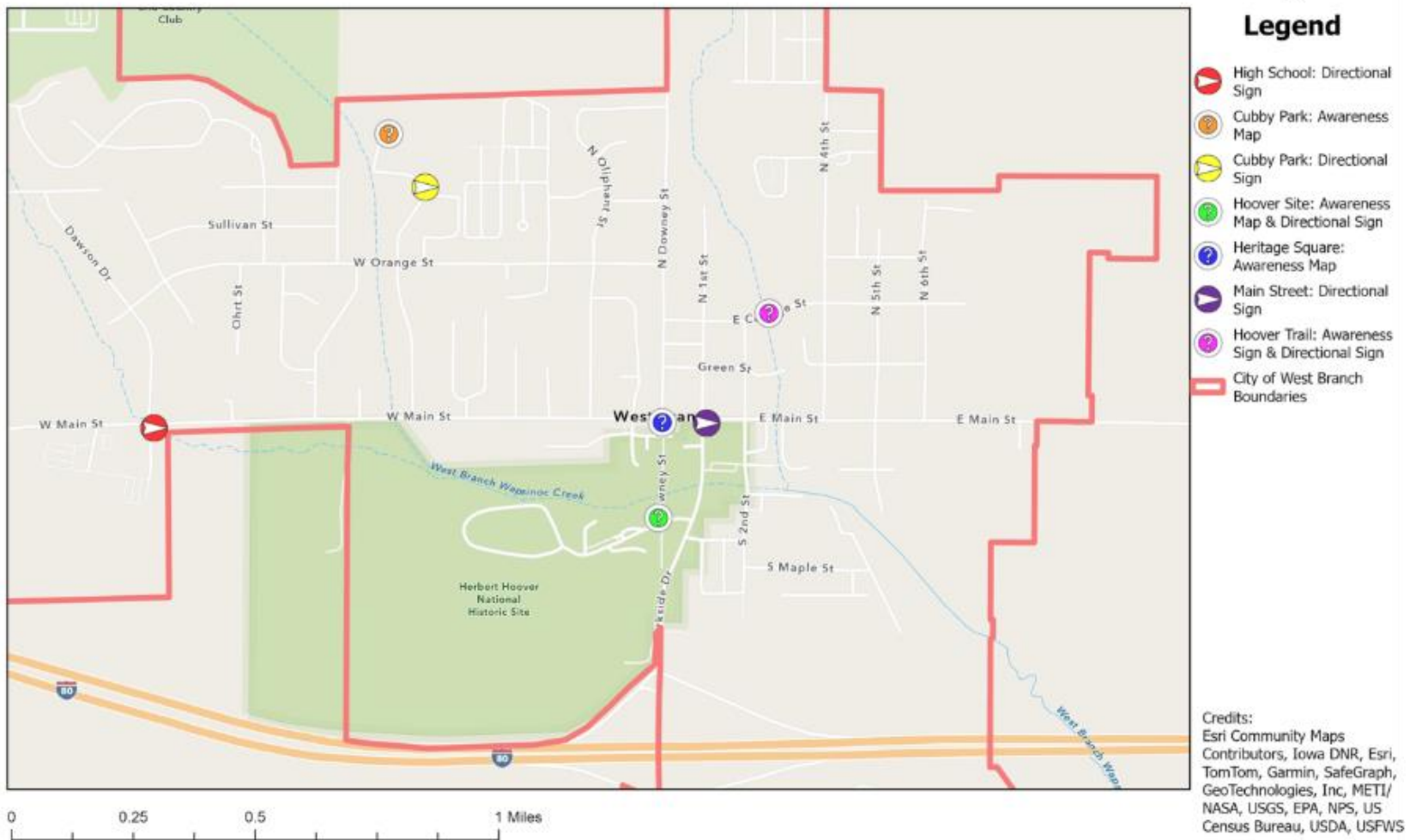
The purpose of this phase is to create a fully predictable and legible system, reinforce MSWB as the main hub for visitors, and ensuring long-term maintenance and consistency.

MAINTENANCE REQUIREMENTS:

Maintenance for this system will focus on keeping signs clear, consistent, and in proper condition over time. This includes regularly checking for weather damage, fading, vandalism, or outdated information. If any of this occurs, then replacing or repairing the elements becomes a priority. The City, MSWB, and Parks and Recreation should share responsibility for these inspections and ensure that all signs remain accurate and aligned with design standards.

PROPOSAL POINTS MAPPED

Wayfinding Proposal Points: Directional Signs and Awareness Maps



The following map shows all designated awareness maps and directional sign locations, providing a spatial visual of how the full wayfinding system fits together across West Branch

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Explanation of The Inclusive Wayfinding Toolkit Used to Guide This Plan⁷

This toolkit originated from the United Kingdom, and it a prototype designed to produce a consistent and predictable system for walking, cycling, and wheeling. Although designed in the UK, its core principles align well with West Branch. This toolkit is built around the needs of older adults as the research and testing was centered primarily on people aged 60+. This aligns with West Branch as 33% of visitors in 2025 were aged 55+, and the older adults are one of the target groups. The principles of this toolkit emphasize simple communications, reduced anxiety, and confidence-building for people who are unfamiliar with travel routes, which is not only beneficial for older adults but for all ages. The main focus is on uncluttered design, predictable sign placements, and awareness of local destinations which makes this a strong model for improving navigation in a historic, tourism-based town such as West Branch, IA.