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New program looking to spotlight Iowa's Great Places

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Anita Walker and her team are trying to get Iowans to brag a little.

Everywhere she goes, Walker hears residents talk about how great it is to live in their town or region, whether it's because of a lake, the peaceful countryside, a historical neighborhood or the friendly people.

So, she tells them, why not let everybody else know about it?

That's idea behind the Iowa Great Places initiative, a program that will use the resources of 18 state agencies to help cities or regions showcase their strengths and unique features. The goal is to attract people, which in turn might attract jobs. Or at least draw tourists.

"When you have great places for people to live, they become great places for entrepreneurs to start a business," Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, said during an interview with reporters and editors from The Associated Press. "They become great places for businesses to locate because they know there is an ability to attract a work force."

Walker has been promoting "Great Places" since Gov. Tom Vilsack announced the program in March. A native of Southern California, Walker has found Iowans to be a self-deprecating lot. They're proud of their state, but reluctant to talk it up.

Part of her job has been prodding communities to speak out for themselves by taking part in Great Places.

"There is no shortage of creativity in this state," Walker said. "What we need is confidence."

That became apparent to Walker at a recent meeting for southwest Iowa communities, when participants were asked to describe a great place.

"Every single one of them described the place where they lived," she said. "So it isn't the fact that people can't recognize what's good. I think what's lacking is the confidence to take that and capitalize on it."

That where the Great Places program comes in, an effort Walker describes as one-stop shopping for help.

It starts with a community, organization or region submitting a proposal to make their area a better place to live. It doesn't have to be a new building or highway improvements. It could be extending a trail, showcasing a scenic byway, a main street business district or a neighborhood of Victorian homes.

Two consultants, called "coaches," then will work with local organizers to determine which state programs could help them.

Do they need a historical preservation tax break or assistance from the Housing Finance Authority? Maybe they need expertise from the Department of Transportation or Department of Natural Resources. The communities won't have to figure that out. That will be the job of the 40 state employees who are being trained as coaches.

"That's very creative and might work," said Jacky Adams, a preservationist in Red Oak who attended the southwest Iowa meeting. "They will take care of plugging in people that will help you. I think that will be good. One of the things rural communities lack is personnel. This may fill that gap."

Proposals must be submitted by July 1 and an advisory board will pick three as pilot projects in the fall. A major goal: quick results.

"We mean things that are measurable and clear cut," Walker said. "For example, a 10 percent increase in housing in the downtown or a connection to a trail that goes around the community to the business district.

"Very specific, clear results on a timeline. And we need them quickly. Since this is our test year, if we don't have success and results, we probably won't have Great Places the next year."

The Great Places team is holding 10 forums around the state to promote the program and gauge interest. Walker has

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been encouraged by the turnout — more than 200 people attended in Clear Lake — and hopes that leads to dozens of proposals.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's over 100," she said.

They'll hear from the Bellevue area for sure, said John Hoff, Chamber of Commerce president in the Mississippi River city of 2,350. Hoff said the city wants to promote its appealing riverside location, proximity to Dubuque and the Quad Cities and several housing developments under construction.

"Anybody who could see the sunrise I saw this morning would think there's no point in looking anyplace else for a scenic area," Hoff said. "I think we have the resources, I think we have the locale to attract people.

"I don't think we're trying to entice a lot of heavy industry. I don't think we'd have success. But we've got a quality of life we don't think a lot of other people can compare with."

The Legislature appropriated $300,000 for the program, money that will be used to cover the expenses of the coaches.

But not all the assistance has to be monetary. The Alcoholic Beverages Division offered the sides of its trucks as "moving billboards" to promote the program. Prison inmates might be able to perform some of the work.

For Walker, the cooperation among the state agencies has been as fulfilling as the program itself. Most arrived at the first meeting looking to protect their own turf. Then, when asked what they could contribute to Great Places, everyone jumped on board, she said.

"I get chills when I think about it," Walker said. "It probably was the most transforming experience I've seen in my years in state government. All of a sudden, we had the feeling that we really could transform communities."

In the months ahead, they'll all find out how well it works. Walker, whose energy for the program seems boundless, is eager to get it going.

"We can talk and talk and talk and have dreams and visions, but when's it going to happen? That's what people want to know," she said. "Dripping resources in a little bit, a little bit, to me that's just torture. Let's just focus, put what we need on the table and make something happen."