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Guest Column

Agencies want to help you create Great Places

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What do you think of when you imagine a great place?

Is it the heart of a historic downtown, where funky new shops fill old spaces and the charm of the past drives an authentic new lifestyle?

Is it a bustling urban center or a quaint neighborhood?

Is it a quiet spot along an Iowa lake or stream, surrounded by the natural beauty of a native prairie and the sounds of wildlife?

Wherever it is, you know it when you're there; it radiates an energy that is almost tangible.

A great place ignores boundaries such as county lines and city limits. Its spirit defines its existence and connects its heart and soul – a lake, arts district, history, culture – with its trails and streets and housing and parks.

And it connects with you.

A great place can be beautiful or coarse, high brow or street corner strange. Its power and greatness are in its ability to offer visitors and residents an experience.

In January, Gov. Tom Vilsack launched an unprecedented initiative: Iowa Great Places. He called on Iowans to be bold, innovative and entrepreneurial; to transform this state into a magnet for people. And he called on state government to become a true partner with the people of Iowa.

A team of 18 state agencies is launching a new kind of partnership with Iowans. The goal is to collaborate with local leaders, combine resources for greater impact and deliver results.

Great ideas for great places will connect the present with the possibilities. But connecting government programs at the right place and the right time can be a daunting task for the heartiest Iowans.

Recently, I was approached about a small Arts Council grant to create a music commission. The idea called for creating a festival in a new outdoor amphitheater, which would be connected to housing for artists by a new trail system.

Applying for the Arts Council grant is relatively easy. But there are probably a dozen state agencies with programs and services that could help deliver the rest of the vision. Sorting out which agencies offer what programs could exhaust and discourage anyone.

With Iowa Great Places, the state will help you access the services you need to fulfill your vision – a virtual one-stop shop that comes to you.

With this new approach, local leaders and groups in a place – a neighborhood, scenic vista or multi-county corridor – will invite the state to be a partner. In response to the invitation, we will send a team of coaches to you to listen and learn about your hopes, dreams and vision.

Once the coaches understand the needs to be addressed, a Great Place team representing various state agencies will work with you. Rather than asking you to navigate the maze of government, the Great Place team will deliver relevant programs and resources to you. We will work together to synchronize and streamline our programs to fit your vision, not to make your vision fit our programs.

Together we will negotiate a partnership that combines the capacity of government and local resources to turn your great idea into a Great Place. We will deliver programs and services to do the job from start to finish instead of one piece at a time.

The first phase of this initiative begins this month as we create a new kind of partnership with three pilot Great Places. This first year will be a learning experience, where we will test our concepts.

Just last month, I toured our state to talk to you about Great Places. In Fort Dodge, I visited a shopkeeper who left a thriving store in Chicago to fulfill her great idea in an old Main Street building. She sees great possibilities in the historic brick structures that now stand empty.

Her specialty shop – "Wild Abandonment" – offers unique, high-end yarns from all over the world, and she's giving her place a new spark of life.

But she's doing more than selling a product. She's offering her customers an experience. People of all ages are learning how to make trendy scarves and ponchos. Children have parties in her back room. Teenagers stop by to talk and browse after school.

In another part of the state, one person asked me if Iowans need to be more creative. My answer is no. We have more creativity than corn. What we need is confidence to turn our great

Details

Muscatine will be host to one of 10 Iowa Great Places forums around the state. The event here is scheduled for 3:30-5:30 p.m. Thursday, May 26, at the Stanley Consultants Auditorium, corner of Third Street and Iowa Avenue.

ideas into great places. And we can do that with a little "wild abandonment."

So, let your imagination run wild. Talk with your family and friends at home and work. What is special about your place? What would make it a great place?

Brainstorm and develop your great ideas; then bring them to one of the forums. You'll talk; we'll listen, and together we'll decide how to turn your great ideas into reality.

Anita Walker is director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. For more information about the Great Places initiative, visit www.iowagreatplaces.gov

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