



Valley Junction, West Des Moines, Iowa: A-May-Zing Revival



artists to decorate newspaper racks in their own signature styles, and then urged locals to vote—and even bid—for their favorites.

This event followed up on the community-building success JMS had with the Wall Dog Murals project in 2006, where 60 sign painters from across America, and even two from abroad, created 10 downtown murals reflecting aspects of local history and beautifying once-blighted walls. Jacksonville continues to expand its arts and entertainment scene, with a new Arts Center planned for a downtown location and proposed expansions to existing theaters and museums.

More than 5,000 people attended the rededication party for the town square. Seeing how popular it was among townsfolk and tourists alike, JMS is seeking to turn the Downtown Turnaround Celebration into its signature annual festival. This year's event was also a huge success, featuring an Eli Bridge Company Scrambler ride, beer and wine tents, and Spiderman.

As long-time resident Donald Widdows says, “the Main Street project allows me to relive part of my childhood and show my grandchildren a little of what I enjoyed as a child.” To give the Bendorfs of the Pink Palace and other young families the opportunity to show their own children a piece of Jacksonville's downtown history, the city is continuing to reinvent itself, even as it basks in the rewards of Main Street revitalization.

Jacksonville by the Numbers

Main Street began: **1999**

Population: **19,466**

Net new jobs: **131**

Net new businesses: **57**

Building rehabs: **65**

New buildings: **1**

Vacancy rate when

Main Street began: **27%**

Vacancy rate now: **6%**

Housing units: **13**

Public investment: **\$7,600,000**

Private investment: **\$17,600,000**

Turning north from Railroad Avenue onto Fifth Street in West Des Moines, Iowa, you know that you've entered the historic Valley Junction district when the landmark Gateway Arch heaves into view. Built out of steel girders to resemble a railroad trestle bridge, the Arch evokes West Des Moines's early years as a busy railroad hub. Today, Valley Junction is just as busy as when it was buzzing with the switching facilities and repair shops of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad in the 1890s.

As self-described son of Valley Junction, Vincent Valdez puts it, “Valley Junction is many things—a historic community, an arts community, a business district, an entertainment district, and a place that is progressive and welcoming to so many.” With newly renovated and expanded streetscapes, spruced-up historic buildings, and more than 150 independent businesses, Valley Junction is truly a place where “great things come together.”

It wasn't easy to get to where it is today. Ever since it was incorporated in 1893, Valley Junction has struggled with numerous threats to its existence as a community. During the Great Depression, the relocation of the Rock Island Railroad left Valley Junction a ghost town. In the mid-1970s, the opening of the Valley West Mall drew shoppers and retailers away from downtown, and Valley Junction gained the rough-and-tough infamy of a railroad town. Then, in 1993, just as Valley Junction got all dolled up for its centennial celebration, the Raccoon River flooded its banks and poured into the city. Not a single building escaped damage. Businesses had to cope with up to six feet of water, broken doors and windows, warped floors—and, for a time, dampened spirits.

But Valley Junction did not simply survive these challenges—it thrived on them. Each crisis united the community further, under the common goal of revitalizing the district. Guided by the Historic Valley Junction Foundation (HVJF), which was accepted into Main Street Iowa in 1987, local property owners and merchants persevered in building up West Des Moines's one and only downtown. Today, like the multimillion

dollar levee built in the wake of the Great Flood of 1993, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® is a bulwark against blight in Valley Junction.

Celebrating Community

From a district with only three annual promotional events, Valley Junction now hosts more than 65 event days that bring in scores of residents and visitors each year. The district prides itself on being safe and family-friendly, with festivals that cater to people from all walks of life—a far cry from its rough-and-tough days as a railroad town, when the only stores on Fifth Street were dive bars and liquor stores. Among Valley Junction's offerings are a weekly farmers market and concert series, Gallery Nights that showcase brand-new art, a Cinco de Mayo festival that celebrates the town's large Latino community, and, of course, A-May-Zing Days, West Des Moines's signature month-long celebration of the city's heritage. There is truly something for everyone.

These events bring shoppers who become so enamored with Valley Junction's charm that they come back again and again. More than 50 percent of HVJF's annual \$500,000 budget comes directly from special events revenue, not to mention the many intangible, long-term benefits that come from a vibrant roster of events. The Tallgrass Grocery Co-op, for example, a cooperative retail store with more than 800 member-owners, decided to set up shop in Valley Junction in 2011 because of the success of its weekly farmers market.

“The farmers market provides an opportunity to reach out to local growers already delivering produce to the open market,” say owners Linda and Carlyn. “It also [has] a captive audience of consumers who support locally owned businesses.” With its efforts to educate consumers on the health benefits of local, in-season foods, Tallgrass adds greatly to the quality of life in the community.

The strong partnerships that come out of these events are also invaluable, weaving HVJF and Valley Junction even tighter into the social life of West Des Moines. HVJF's Executive Director Jim Miller regularly



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Above: Valley Junction Gateway Arch on a winter's night. Below: Valley Junction's popular Cinco de Mayo event pays homage to the community's Latino population, which has helped shape the diverse district since the late 1800s.



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The Farmers Market, which takes place every Thursday from May through September, is Valley Junction's signature event.



© HVJF

Two storeowners relax outside their business. Historic Valley Junction has been called a "small town in a big city," and these merchants are just two of the many friendly faces that keep customers coming back for more.

attends city council meetings to stay informed about major decisions being made in the city. Countless volunteer hours are donated by West Des Moines city staff, the chamber of commerce, and the historical society. Seniors at West Des Moines Human Services, along with students and their parents from Phenix and Hillside Elementary schools, also volunteer regularly with HVJF. Indeed, the strong, cooperative partnership that enables HVJF and the city of West Des Moines to share manpower, expertise, and experience makes Valley Junction a model Main Street community.

Preservation Goes Green

HVJF's partnerships with Iowa's State Historic Preservation Office and Main Street Iowa have raised the standard of historic preservation in Valley Junction. With most buildings dating to the early 1900s, façade and building improvements are reviewed by HVJF's Design Committee and city staff to ensure that the original character of the district is maintained. For the same reason, HVJF partnered with the American Institute

of Architects to create and implement a Design Pattern Book to guide homeowners in their home restoration projects.

HVJF also offers sign and awning grants to qualified businesses to encourage historically appropriate signage. This program complements a recent initiative to install hundreds of directional signs throughout the Des Moines metro area to usher visitors into Valley Junction. The visual harmony of Valley Junction made HVJF's 2010 comprehensive branding initiative a success—“Great Things Come Together in Valley Junction!”

More than 240 building rehabilitations have taken place in Valley Junction under the stewardship of HVJF. One of the district's biggest success stories is the Historic City Hall. Built in 1905, it housed West Des Moines's fire department, city jail, and the city council chambers until 1952. Today, re-opened to the public after more than 50 years, the old city hall serves as HVJF's headquarters and the visitors welcome center. When the city purchased the building in 2007, however, it had been left in deep disrepair by successive private owners. HVJF stepped in to help.

Supported by funding from 14 different sources, including a state Historic Preservation Grant and a Main Street Challenge Grant, work began in 2010 on restoring city hall's past. Masonry repairs on the exterior recreated the original brickwork, and doors and windows were refitted to their original specifications. On the inside, the carpeting was removed to restore the earlier cement and wood flooring, and replicas of the original tin ceilings were installed.

Though one eye was focused on the past, the other was directed toward the future. On a structural level, efforts were made to reuse existing materials or to use materials with recycled content as far as possible. This could be subtle—the countertops in the welcome center, for example, have the sheen and speckled strength of granite. In actual fact, they were constructed from beer bottles and walnut shells.

More overt measures were also taken to make Historic City Hall the model of sustainability it is today. Having won a \$557,000 Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant, the city equipped the building with four geothermal heating wells, daylight sensors to control lighting, water-conserving



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Above: Valley Junction has more than 150 independent businesses, including many galleries that attract shoppers from outside the district.

Left above: The restoration of Valley Junction's 1905 city hall is one of the district's biggest success stories. While the building was restored to its original appearance, it was also brought into the 21st century through installation of energy-efficient "green" technology, including 20 solar panels on the roof (left).

fixtures, and 20 photovoltaic solar panels on the roof. Completed in May 2011, the restoration, which won Preservation Iowa's "Sustainability in Preservation" award, balances historic preservation with green technology.

Small Business Development

At the May 2011 grand opening of Historic City Hall, the building received a unique tribute—a delicious cake replica of itself. This custom cake edifice was created by Carefree Patisserie, a bakery specializing in gourmet cupcakes, and a great example of HVJF's small business development efforts over the years.

Carefree Patisserie began as a booth in the weekly farmers market in 2006, with owners Jennifer and Christine lovingly crafting their cupcakes at home. By the end of the season, they decided to set up a permanent storefront in Valley Junction. With HVJF's help in all stages of the startup process—lease negotiations, business plan reviews, design assistance, cooperative advertising, and so on—the bakery experienced rapid growth and success. After just five years, the business had to move to a larger location downtown to meet the demand for its products.

And this is but one of the many local businesses that have flourished under HVJF's care. The organization offers Valley Junction merchants a business development revolving loan fund, which can be used for equip-

ment, fixtures, inventory, working capital, and other approved business expenses. On a larger scale, HVJF was also a founding member of a similar scheme for all Main Street communities in Iowa—the Main Street Development Loan Fund.

Streetscape amenities, including pedestrian lighting, benches, flower planters, and trashcans, make Valley Junction a pleasant place for after-dining strolls and window shopping. All of these amenities were part of HVJF's 1999 Valley Junction Streetscape Master Plan, which continues to guide the beautification of downtown. Recently, HVJF also spearheaded a state-of-the-art shared sprinkler project on Fifth Street, where a central sprinkler control room was installed and extended to serve groups of contiguous buildings. The sprinkler system enables businesses to share the costs of underground work and risers, encouraging more property owners to rehabilitate buildings along the street.

Nineteen years after the Great Flood of 1993, the Valley Junction community has made a full recovery. Or, more accurately, it has surpassed what it was before. In Valley Junction today, you can snap photos of the historic caboose in Railroad Park and relive West Des Moines's railroad past, while checking out the latest local artwork at a nearby gallery and doing your part for the "buy local" movement. It only takes one visit to know that in the years to come, Valley Junction will continue to survive—and thrive!

Valley Junction by the Numbers

Main Street began: **1987**

Population: **56,609**

Net new jobs: **406**

Net new businesses: **197**

Vacancy rate when

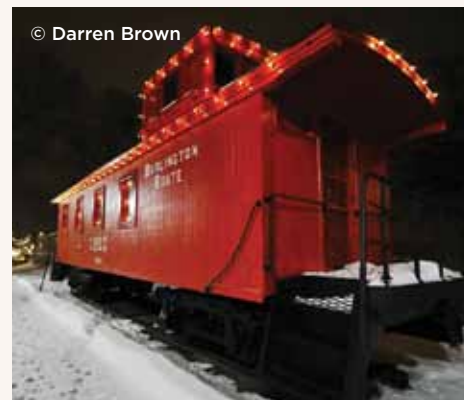
Main Street started: **10%**

Vacancy rate now: **3%**

Housing units: **23**

Public investment: **\$43,000,000**

Private investment: **\$13,800,000**



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This historic caboose located in Railroad Park at the south end of the district is a popular photo destination in Valley Junction and speaks to the community's railroad roots.