

HERITAGE WORKS!

CASE STUDIES FROM OREGON HERITAGE

INDEPENDENCE

Embracing heritage preservation through planning and partnerships
Summer 2019



An 1890 magazine labeled Independence “one of the most opulent of the small towns to be found in the Willamette Valley.” Today the small city is nationally recognized as a Preserve America community. With its riverside location, preserved buildings, and strong identity, Independence shows how a heritage focus can create a vibrant city through intentional choices.

Half the international hops harvest once passed through Independence, the “Hops Capital of the World”, but changing agricultural and transportation practices soon led to a downturn. As downtown became rundown, parents often forbade children from visiting. Today these same children own downtown businesses and visitors enjoy safe streets thanks to sustained community effort, each action building on and inspiring the next.

Engaging the Community in Planning

Community-focused planning is a critical part of Independence’s turnaround. The city has developed three vision/action plans since the 1990s to guide decision-making. Understanding what is and isn’t working, where people want to see their city go, and what actions are needed to get there has been key. Broad community participation allowed the best ideas to rise to the top.

Independence’s strength is their amount of outreach.

Some of the tactics they used during the Vision 2020 planning process and currently the Vision 2040 planning process include:

- Sending a survey in water bills
- Holding open houses, town halls, and stakeholder conversations in diverse locations like service clubs, worker housing, and churches
- Having an ice cream social
- Distributing surveys through social media and at events, parks, and carniceria
- Social media photo contests and text-based feedback through the Hello Lamp Post app

The end products of this work are vision/action plans that guide how the city allocates resources. Independence’s plans reflect that residents want their downtown to be a safe, fun place with a sense of history. Vision 2020 names “Enhance Historic Character” and “Develop a Vibrant Downtown” as top priorities. Action items include fixing downtown buildings, maintaining history, improving historic homes, and creating a downtown experience.

These plans are the rock upon which Independence’s success is built, setting a community-backed path for creating a livable downtown.

Preserving and Developing Key Places

While not always seen as a preservation tool, parks enhance Independence's downtown. A park had existed on the downtown waterfront since 1967. Land and Water Conservation Fund grants improved it over the years, but the 1996 vision plan saw the whole waterfront as a revitalization tool. The resulting \$275,000 in grants from OPRD leveraged with an EPA loan, US Bank grant, and National Guard labor built today's Riverview Park. The park's amphitheater now hosts dozens of events each year.

The renewed park sparked a connecting biker/boater campground funded through Cycle Oregon and a Recreational Trails Grant along with new dog and sports parks. All are connected by the City's multi-use Willamette River Trail. The riverfront's recreational amenities tie into regional assets like the Willamette Valley Scenic Bikeway and Willamette Water Trail.

The enhanced waterfront spurred further development cementing the downtown-river connection:

- Community input identified the need for a new civic center. It was built to match neighborhood character on a downtown riverside brownfield with help from DEQ and Business Oregon.
- Independence Landing is a partnership with Tokola Properties that's transforming a concrete lot into a mixed-use complex featuring the city's first hotel. Funding for an adjacent park came from State Parks. Further downtown investment and upper-story housing is expected as a result.

Preservation works in tandem with these efforts. A 2008 Opera House restoration inspired six more rehabs of major underused properties, including a drugstore recently turned sweet shop. One important project was the 20-years-vacant corner Cooper Block featured in the city's logo. It was cleaned and repaired, with original storefronts restored. It now houses retail, apartments, and offices.

The backbone of Independence's preservation work is the downtown National Register Historic District



resulting from a 1980s architectural survey. This provides recognition, access to grants, and a basis for planning. A Historic Commission to review building alterations was also created and provides protections. These efforts are all linked and have produced visible results.

- When a cinema arrived, a Register-listed Victorian house in its path was moved across the street with the help of city incentives. It's now a café.
- By identifying the Cooper Block as a planning priority, the city was ready with a \$50,000 Façade Restoration Grant – leveraged with a Diamonds in the Rough Grant – for the new owner.
- Independence has won six recent preservation awards, generating community pride, helping thank developers, and enticing prospective business investors. Success bred success.

Leveraging some of the following diverse tools has made this possible:

- A property maintenance ordinance gives the city power to compel owners to maintain buildings.
- The city Urban Renewal District bought a

BECAUSE STORIES MATTER...

Independence's 1996 action plan called for adding an amphitheater to their waterfront park. They reached out to the National Guard for construction help. Later, a city staffer called what he thought was a general Pentagon line to discuss the application. He shared how important the project was to the community before realizing he was speaking to a high-ranking official. Now the official was invested too. Soon after, the Guard arrived. The project had become a top priority!

defunct gas station, selling it with beneficial terms to an investor who made it a beer garden and popular spot to watch amphitheater concerts.

- The state Special Assessment program, combined with a CLG grant, helped rehab the Opera House. It's also been used by residents to maintain historic homes.
- CLG grants have been used regularly to fund everything from a historic district website to grants for district homeowners. They've helped develop city-wide design guidelines, walking tour brochures, and more. These grants often joined with others for deeper impact. Their combined \$84,000 has resulted in restored buildings and an appreciation of history.
- Additional grants from Oregon Heritage, often used together, have contributed \$138,000 to downtown development, including transforming an old garage into a distillery.

Embracing Local History

Preserving buildings is only part of Independence's commitment to history. They use their history, presenting it publicly wherever possible. This keeps history top of mind, and a storytelling approach keeps it relevant. The "brand" of Historic Independence used in welcome signs and marketing is possible because so many buildings have been preserved and differentiates the city from other places.

One leader in this work is the Heritage Museum. The city manages the museum. This provides the information needed to tell interesting stories unique to Independence. Housed in an old church, the museum has leveraged resources like CLG and Museum Grants to maintain its building and create exhibits. The Hops Heritage Trail was funded with an Oregon Heritage Grant and County Cultural Coalition money. It tells the local hops history and is displayed at the museum, amphitheater, and nearby Rogue Hopyard, bringing history outside the museum walls. An old hops press is even displayed at City Hall. This history focus is possible because city planning showed the community valued it. It has led to an authentic and relevant city.

Pursuing Creative Partnerships

A final thread connecting Independence's efforts is partnerships, which allow for resource sharing. A key partner is the Independence Downtown Association. An economic revitalization nonprofit, IDA is part of the Oregon Main Street Network. They work with the city, Polk County Tourism Alliance, and others on

TOOLS USED

CITY

Cultural Resource Inventories
Urban Renewal District
Façade Improvement Grants
Property Maintenance Ordinance
Historic Preservation Commission
Heritage Museum
Strategic planning
Community engagement
Local nonprofit partnerships

COUNTY

Clatsop County Cultural Coalition
Tourism Alliance

STATE

Certified Local Government Grant
Oregon Main Street
Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant
Diamonds in the Rough Grant
Preserving Oregon Grant
Museum Grant
Oregon Heritage Grant
State Parks Local Government Grant
Special Assessment Program
Recreational Trails Grant
Scenic Bikeway Program
SHPO individualized training
Business Oregon Rural Opportunity Initiative
Business Oregon Brownfields Program
Department of Environmental Quality
Cycle Oregon

FEDERAL

Land and Water Conservation Fund
National Register of Historic Places
National Guard Innovative Readiness Training
AmeriCorps RARE
AmeriCorps VISTA
National Water Trails System
Preserve America Program
Environmental Protection Agency

events, promotion, business development, and more.

IDA itself has leveraged a partnership with AmeriCorps RARE, which provided a succession of workers for the all-volunteer group. Seeing that dedicated staff built organizational capacity and led to more professional promotions, funding for a permanent position was recently allocated. This partnership produces more activity and spending downtown, drawing repeat events like Cycle Oregon's Joyride. IDA also partners with IndyIdeaHub, a Rural Opportunity Initiative-funded entrepreneurship hub located in the restored Opera House.

Today's Independence may have seemed impossible 20 years ago, but a can-do attitude, abundant community engagement, and calculated decision making brought downtown back bit by bit, spurring sympathetic development and enhancing quality of life. A long-time resident remembers the 1940s when Main Street was so crowded you couldn't walk down the sidewalks. Thanks to its commitment to heritage, Independence is filling those sidewalks again.

For more information on any of the state resources mentioned in this case study, visit www.oregonheritage.org or call (503) 986-0690.

