



**BUILD A BETTER  
GRINNELL**

**Priority Need Report  
More Variety of  
Restaurants**

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# Table of Contents

## Executive Summary

### Background, Purpose, and Scope

- Build a Better Grinnell 2030 Project
- The Prioritized Issue Reports
- What this Report Is, and What it Is Not
- Who is this Report for?
- How to Use the Data

### Methods

- Phase I: The Community Visioning Survey
- Phase II: Prioritization Phase
- Phase III: Community Sessions (Listening Sessions, Focus Groups, and Community Hosted Discussions)
- Interviews with Local Experts and Key Stakeholders
- Review of Archives (Web and Paper)
- Review of the Visioning Survey and Prioritization Survey

### The Restaurant Scene in Grinnell, Iowa

- Grinnell's Restaurant & Food Landscape
- Shifts in Restaurant Landscape over Time
- How Grinnell Compares to its Peers

### Community Input: Perspectives on Restaurant Variety

- The Concern for Restaurants
- What Is the Nature of the Issue?
- What Are the Impacts or Consequences?
- Who is Most Impacted?
- Is the Problem Getting Better or Worse?
- Causes: Why Do these Problems Exist? What Obstacles do You See to Addressing Them?
- Solutions: What Could be Done to Resolve the Problem or Alleviate Their Impacts?
- Who should be involved?
- What are Grinnell's Strengths Concerning Restaurants?

### Summary and Discussion

**Appendix 1:** What are Grinnell's Peer Communities Doing?

**Appendix 2:** Policies and Practices from Other Communities

**Appendix 3:** Funding Options

**Appendix 4:** Questionnaire Guide for Community Discussion Hosts

# Executive Summary

- *More variety of restaurants* was ranked as the #1 priority to increasing quality of life in Grinnell's Build a Better Grinnell prioritization survey.
- Grinnell has seen a significant decrease in the number of restaurants over recent years, dropping from 34 in 2019 to 26 in June of 2024.
- While the number per capita is still high relative to Iowa, it is low relative to Grinnell's selected peer communities, and community members have a strong sense of loss with recent closures.
- In community sessions, participants also shared concerns for limits in the hours restaurants are open and rising prices.
- The recent closures and the perceived lack of variety exacerbate a sense that there is not enough to do in town. Research participants reported that they more often stay home or leave town to dine, which can negatively impact the Grinnell economy. The lack of restaurants is also felt to impact Grinnell's ability to recruit and retain labor and college students, as well as to host events in town.
- Participants believe that the impacts affect everyone and the community collectively. Particular challenges were seen as being faced by workers looking to grab a quick lunch, people wanting to eat later in the evening (such as late shift workers), and businesses looking to recruit and retain staff (or students).
- The core obstacles perceived to increasing the number of restaurants include the limits of demand that come with a small town, the challenges of starting and running a restaurant (particularly financing and staffing), and the lack of business support available.
- Participants suggested a range of ways to enhance restaurant options, as well a handful of alternatives to new restaurants that might fill the perceived gap in food-based entertainment and dining options. The former included diversifying existing restaurant menus and expanding services on the weekend, Mondays, and evenings, while the latter included more food events or events with food and increasing the presence of food trucks.
- Most believe getting more variety requires increasing demand by attracting more visitors from surrounding areas and off I-80, as well as getting more community members and college students to frequent restaurants. Marketing is seen as critical, and more community events would help as well.
- Most also felt that attracting and sustaining additional restaurants, in addition to supporting what is already present, would require a range of supports including help with available space, clear information on the process to start a restaurant, business services/knowledge, funding, and a generally welcoming and supportive environment.
- There was little consensus on a specific type of restaurant that was most desirable, though the range of suggestions cluster around three areas: 1) ethnic foods that will bring diversity to the community, 2) more fast foods or quick lunch options, 3) and a casual sit-down restaurant nice-enough for a range of occasions, but not too pricey.
- The most requested spaces for a new restaurant were something in the Depot (which has since been filled by El Cascabel), and something by the interstate to support workers in the commercial strip, attract traffic from the highway, and provide an additional option for the community.
- Most participants felt that some organization was necessary to help support this process. The Chamber of Commerce and city were obvious contenders for many. Others felt that some other economic development group such as Pow I-80 or a community-based group of knowledgeable and invested businesspersons might be more appropriate.
- Many believe that the community has good restaurant options, and everyone seems to be thankful for the restaurants that have sustained a footprint in Grinnell.

# Background, Purpose & Scope

## Build a Better Grinnell 2030 Project

This Prioritized Issue Report represents one product of the non-partisan Build a Better Grinnell 2030 Community Visioning project (or BABG 2030). The broader project has involved an assessment of Grinnell's strengths, needs and visions for people who live and work in the community, or rely on resources within Grinnell, through a collaborative approach focusing on community input and engagement. The project's ultimate goals include:

- Building community pride and facilitating positive branding by identifying community strengths
- Enhancing organizational connections and community cohesion and building a commitment to action around a set of priorities through a collaborative and broadly participatory process
- Facilitating community growth and development for the next decade by identifying and illuminating the local context of a prioritized set of needs, together with community assets and policy options that are actionable, impactful, and easy to understand.

BABG 2030 is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge program. Co-funding is provided by the City of Grinnell, Grinnell Mutual, Grinnell College, and the Claude & Dolly Ahrens Foundation. The project is guided by a 20+ person steering committee representing a broad range of local constituents and community members.

The BABG research has taken place in three main phases, all involving significant community input: 1) an identification of the range of assets, strengths, and needs in the community; 2) selection of seven priority needs; and 3) a deeper assessment of each of the prioritized needs. The methodology is discussed in greater detail under the methodology section. The main products of this research will include:

- A broad-based assessment of Grinnell. This document will cover a broad range of themes and community services (e.g., healthcare, childcare, aging, food, housing, recreation, education, etc.), providing an overview of community strengths, assets, and needs.
- A community-based identification and prioritization of needs.
- Detailed assessments of each of seven top prioritized issues.

## The Prioritized Issue Reports

The seven needs, in rank order based on all voting by the community,<sup>1</sup> were:

1. More variety of restaurants.
2. Improve quality of drinking water.
3. Improve k-12 buildings and infrastructure.
4. Improve or expand mental health care services.
5. Improve roads & road maintenance.
6. Less racism.
7. Higher wages or lower prices.

This document represents the detailed assessment for *more variety of restaurants*.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes weighting Grinnell College responses, which is explained in the Methods section.

### What this Report Is, and What it Is Not

Our primary goal with this report is to provide the community with information to help stakeholders make informed choices and address the prioritized need. At its core, this is a participatory community-based needs assessment. It is an effort to bring in diverse voices of persons who live, work, or rely on Grinnell for resources, together with input from individuals who have worked in the community to service the needs in question or otherwise might be considered experts. Our goal in seeking community-wide input is both to empower community members to participate in community development, as well as to better understand the experiences surrounding each identified need, how the need affects members of the community, what underlying causes people see leading to the issue, the obstacles they personally face and that the broader community may face in resolving the issue or ameliorating its impacts, ideas they have for what can and should be done, and what they see as strengths and assets in the community that may contribute to solutions.

The goal of this report is not to answer each of these questions definitively. In some ways the core of this report reflects the results of a community-wide brainstorming session (e.g., where everyone in a room shares ideas on Post-it notes that all go on a board and are then organized by themes). The review of problems, impacts, causes, and solutions are provided from the perspective of members of the community, not the research team nor the project steering community. We have sought to gather input broadly from the community, particularly from those who may not frequently have a voice in decision making, and to share that input here. We believe that listening to and giving voice to such community members is valuable in itself and can be a means to solve problems. To highlight this value, we share the following vignette. At the end of one focus group hosted by a low-income community member in her home, she used our provided script to ask if there was anything else the participants wanted to add. One responded, “I’m just grateful to be able to, to be allowed to participate, that maybe my opinion matters.”

As is good practice in brainstorming sessions, we have not attempted to edit or filter input, nor are we trying to be arbiters of whose ideas are correct or not. Rather we have gathered lots of ideas and sorted them into themes. We do attempt to make note when there are contradictory views, or when there are clear factual inaccuracies. However, we believe it is valuable to represent all the voices who shared their ideas with us. Experiences differ, perspectives differ, even experts can disagree on underlying causes, and there are usually multiple possible solutions to any problem. Additionally, people make decisions on how they understand a situation, so even if all experts agree that some perspective represents a misunderstanding, knowing what the misunderstandings are and how common they are can be valuable to decision makers. Also, we expect that those who take on these issues will have expertise at the table.

While the experiences and ideas shared by members of the community is the core of the report, we also share additional information to help decision makers reach their own conclusions about what part of the problem might be addressed and how. This includes an overview of the current Grinnell context related to the prioritized issue in terms of relevant infrastructure and resources, key measures, historical information, key inflection points, and ongoing efforts, as well as comparisons to a selected group of peer communities. In most cases we have also sought to provide our own input (making it clear when this is the case) to the community asset list when we have identified relevant organizations or other assets that did not come up in interviews, surveys, or community sessions. Finally, we provide some information on policy options pursued in other communities, and assets available outside of the community (e.g., funding resources or resource hubs), though these are not intended as endorsements.

### Who is this Report for?

Each issue report is intended for those organizations and individuals interested in addressing some aspect of the issue or well positioned to do so. The Build a Better Grinnell Steering Committee plans to help as necessary to bring such persons together to discuss the findings and consider next steps, though any group is welcome and encouraged to make use of the findings of this report.


In most cases, multiple action priorities can be identified with a diverse range of possible solutions for each issue. It is possible that a single well-positioned group or organization will elect to take on all priorities related to a single issue. It is also possible that different groups will tackle different action priorities and possible solutions. It is possible that only one or a limited number of action priorities will be taken on. It is possible that new coalitions or interest groups will form to take on issues with no other “home,” or alternatively with many possible homes. In the spirit of community-based development, we hope that members of the community most impacted by these issues will continue to be included in decision making in ways that positively inform the details of action plans. While we provide a review of community input below, we mostly review the challenges or concerns that exist under current systems, not potential ones. Users of the services in question can provide valuable insight.

### How to Use the Data


The experiences on the nature of the problem and its impacts or consequences should help to understand where some of the key areas of concern are within each of the broader issues. Those sections of the report address who is affected and how. Causes or obstacles that people have identified can be looked at as possible intervention points suggesting areas for solutions. These, together with community members’ specific suggestions for solutions as well as policy options tried elsewhere, provide a range of ideas.

In determining what ideas to pursue, one might start by considering which of the impacts or problem areas should be prioritized, and what causes or solutions relate most closely to those. A policy analysis approach is to start with a specific problem or part of the problem, identify a number of possible solutions (evidence-based or community generated), and then compare the options in terms of key criteria such as cost, feasibility (could this approach be used in Grinnell given things like available infrastructure and the political or cultural climate), and efficacy (if the solution could be implemented, how much of the problem is it likely to solve). This weighing of options can benefit from considering the resources and strengths available in the community or those that could be brought to the community that might support different solutions. Those making use of the document should also apply their own understanding and experience of the community. Another strategy is to apply force-field analysis, which considers what the forces are both in favor and against a particular solution, and considering how forces in favor might be strengthened and forces against diminished to enable action.

In each section where we report on community input, we provide data on the number of community sessions, interviews, and surveys in which an idea was identified. Such counts can be useful for getting a sense of where there is consensus on who is affected and how and may indicate good areas for intervention. Relatively high counts may also indicate areas where there is consensus on obstacles and possible solutions.



We suggest thoughtful caution on how much weight is given to the “counts.” Much of the detail in this report is gained from the listening sessions and focus groups. These are very useful for gaining a sense of the diversity of concerns, experiences, and ideas. They are also useful in getting people to talk to one another. They do not serve, however, as a random or representative survey. Not everyone participates equally, and just because an issue isn’t raised in a session doesn’t mean that no one agrees with it or is thinking about it. The potential of bias decreases some the more sessions that are held. Still, something raised in 10 sessions is not necessarily more common or important than something raised in 8. Additionally, just because something was raised in many sessions doesn’t mean that it was more impactful than something raised only by a few persons. Also, minority opinions are not necessarily less valuable in considering solutions. Innovation often reflects a change from the consensus view on how to do something. This is not to suggest that the counts are not useful, just that they should not be used to apply too much nuance and should be considered with other factors in mind. It is up to those who organize to take action to review the data provided and decide what solutions seem most important and probable given the totality of evidence.



# Methods

Research was conducted through three primary phases, though some of the data collection (particularly gathering archival materials and key stakeholder interviews) has continued over the entire research period.

## Phase I: The Community Visioning Survey

A community-wide visioning survey ran from December '22 through March '23 and asked individuals who live or work in Grinnell, or rely on Grinnell for key resources, twelve open-ended questions concerning what they felt were the strengths and needs in the community. In total, 603 surveys were completed, and 120 additional individuals provided a response to a single question posed on Facebook or in person. Since many surveys were taken by groups (as large as 15-20 people), it is impossible to know precisely how many participated in total, but the research team feels confident that it was over 10% of the Grinnell population.

To process the data from the open-ended surveys, the research teams sorted responses into general categories (e.g., healthcare, or things to do) and then identified and organized data into sub-categories (e.g., more mental healthcare services, more community events). There were many cases in which the same distinct response was only provided by a few people. Rather than creating hundreds of sub-categories, we looked for ways to group many of these responses together under a shared theme. For example, individuals asking for Indian, Thai, Vegetarian, or a wide range of restaurants were all grouped together under "more variety of restaurants."

Subcategories that reflected more than 1% of all responses or had a high number of very specific responses (e.g., events for teens or teen hangout spaces) were selected to move forward to a prioritization phase. Forty-six issues were identified in the open-ended survey. The data from phase one is available at [www.buildabettergrinnell.org](http://www.buildabettergrinnell.org).

## Phase II: Prioritization Phase

Our next step was to determine which of the forty-six issues were most important for those who live, work, or rely on Grinnell for resources. The follow-up *Needs Prioritization Survey* asked individuals to select and rank up to seven issues. The survey also asked for demographic data so we could better determine who was most affected by the range of issues, and we invited individuals to provide their contact information if they were willing to participate in follow-up focus group on the prioritized issues. It was launched on May 9, 2023, and closed on July 16. We distributed the survey widely, promoted it frequently over ten weeks, and received 1270 complete surveys from individuals.

We identified the top choices for a range of demographic groupings using a rank-order voting method. This data, as well as additional details on the methodology is available on [www.buildabettergrinnell.org](http://www.buildabettergrinnell.org). The top five issues to follow through to phase three were determined by taking the top two issues identified by lower-income respondents and the next three issues from all respondents.<sup>2</sup> Our definition of lower-income corresponded roughly to Iowa's definition for use with Medicaid eligibility (varying by household size). The steering committee selected the final two issues to move to the next stages from among those highly ranked needs that did not make the top five through the prioritization survey. The committee took into consideration issues of equity and the overall welfare of the community, as well as what other initiatives are already underway in the community. The method and the selection process were determined and publicized prior to distributing the survey.

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<sup>2</sup> Grinnell College student responses were multiplied by .3 to weight their responses relative to their population as a proportion of Poweshiek County.



The first two issues identified by lower-income respondents.<sup>3</sup>

1. Improve Quality of Drinking Water
2. More Variety of Restaurants

The next three issues identified by all respondents.

3. Improve K-12 Buildings and Infrastructure
4. Improve or Expand Mental Health Care Services
5. Improve Roads and Road Maintenance

The final two issues selected by the steering committee.

6. Less Racism
7. Higher Wages or Lower Prices

There were other issues that steering committee members discussed as important concerns for the community, particularly those affecting lower-income families, such as affordable housing and childcare. The final two issues were selected in part because they represented the #6 and #7 choices in the overall community voting. Each also represented an issue of high-level concern by relatively marginalized communities. *Higher wages or lower prices* was seen by many as a good final pick both because it was ranked third by lower-income participants and because it was seen as a potentially good way to hear more from those members of the community about their primary economic concerns.

### **Phase III: Community Sessions (Listening Sessions, Focus Groups, and Community Hosted Discussions)**

The final research phase focused on gaining more detailed information from the community to better understand the prioritized issue. This was done primarily through community listening sessions, focus groups, and community hosted discussions.

For each issue, we scheduled one listening session and three focus groups each month between late September and mid-December 2023, for twelve sessions total per issue. We frequently advertised these throughout the community, and specifically reached out to individuals who provided contact information in the prioritization survey and indicated an interest in participating in this stage. Listening sessions were all held in public spaces in the Grinnell's Drake Community Library and open to the public on a walk-in basis. Focus groups were also primarily scheduled for the library,<sup>4</sup> were limited to 6 participants, and required signing up. Attendees at these were paid. We also hired six individuals from lower-income households to conduct up to seven focus groups each (one on each issue) with their friends and family. We provided funding for a meal for the group and left it up to them how many and which issues they elected to address.

For greater variety of restaurants, we had 14 sessions in total, including 6 focus groups (we were unable to generate a group for three scheduled sessions), 3 listening sessions, and 5 sessions that were hosted by low-income households. Most sessions ranged from three to five attendees. Session participants primarily included individuals attending from the perspective of potential restaurant patrons, though there was also a mix of expertise including an individual who successfully started and runs a restaurant in the community, one who had unsuccessfully investigated doing so, and a couple of individuals closely

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<sup>3</sup> These were also the first two issues voted by all respondents, but in reverse order.

<sup>4</sup> Some other arrangements were made when in the interest of scheduled participants for some issues.

involved with real estate development and tourism. Participants also included individuals responsible for hosting guests and recruiting for Grinnell College and one other large local employer.

At all sessions, participants were asked to share their experiences and identify what they saw as the nature of the problem, its impacts on their lives, their thoughts on why it exists, what obstacles are faced in addressing it (for them and the community more broadly), their ideas for possible solutions, and strengths and resources in the community that might be helpful. A full list of questions used to guide these is provided in Appendix 2.

In listening sessions, all participants were given an opportunity to respond to each question. The goal was to give everyone a chance to contribute what they would like, but it was not required that they respond at all. Focus groups are generally intended to be more dynamic. A list of questions served as a guide, but participants were also encouraged to have a conversation, and the sessions were given more flexibility to explore directions that might not have been foreseen by the facilitator. Because attendance was typically not too large at the listening sessions (under a dozen for each), these often had more of a character of a focus group with discussion amongst members.

Focus groups have weaknesses and strengths as a research tool. They are not intended to get every participant to respond in detail to every question. They cannot be used in the same way as a detailed questionnaire where we can generate a random sample and have statistically valid conclusions about a population. They are very useful for fleshing out a range of experiences and ideas on a topic, somewhat like a brainstorming session, particularly taken in their totality (i.e., across a handful of sessions, lots of ideas get raised). Thus, after a set of focus groups, a researcher usually will have a good sense of the right questions to ask for a questionnaire and the range of possible responses, but they would not necessarily be accurate in determining whether there might be a statistically significant difference in how a population responds to the questions. Focus groups can help to understand when there is a broader cultural understanding of an issue (e.g., shared ideas about it), and what the cultural norms or shared ideas are. This is in part because they are useful in getting people to talk to one another about an issue, creating a context for group analysis where an idea can be more fully explored and where new ideas or understandings may be generated.

Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and then individually coded using the overarching questions to sort responses and identify recurring themes and unique perspectives.

### **Interviews with Local Experts and Key Stakeholders**


Early in the research process, before identifying the prioritized issues, we held over seventy interviews with individuals involved in a range of community services and community development. The goal was to gain input from a broad mix of community leaders and experts from a range of content areas (e.g., arts and entertainment, business, health, education, etc.). Each interview primarily focused on understanding the community needs, ongoing efforts, and assets related to that area. These were largely intended to inform the project's broader, but less detailed, community assessment. During each interview, individuals were also asked more generally to comment on what they saw as key needs in the community and recent successful or promising community development efforts. Detailed notes or transcriptions were generated from every interview.

After identifying the community priorities, the interviews were reviewed for any mention concerning each prioritized issue by using a range of search terms (including word bases) associated with the issue (e.g., restaurant, eat, food, ethnic, vegetarian, breakfast, lunch, dinner, meal, etc.). All relevant information was extracted and coded into themes similarly to the community session data. The list of all organizations interviewed is provided below. While none of these specifically focused on restaurants, a number of them commented on relevant issues such as business development, things to do downtown, and community strengths and weaknesses. After a preliminary review of session responses, we also held additional interviews with two restaurant owners in the community, which allowed us to gain some feedback on some of the suggestions we were hearing.

- Bayer Crop Science
- Capstone Behavioral Health (multiple)
- Central Iowa Community Services (CICS) Grinnell Iowa
- City of Grinnell (Multiple)
- Claude W. and Dolly Ahrens Foundation (multiple)
- Community Support for Immigrants (CoSi)
- Davis Elementary
- Door of Hope
- Drake Community Library
- First Presbyterian Church
- Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation (multiple)
- Grinnell Area Arts Council
- Grinnell Area Chamber of Commerce
- Grinnell Area Mental Health Consortium-JPK Fund
- Grinnell City Council
- Grinnell Community Early Learning Center
- Grinnell Counseling
- Grinnell College (multiple)
- Grinnell Christian Church
- Grinnell Fire Department
- Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance
- Grinnell-Newburg School District (multiple)
- Grinnell Parks and Recreation
- Grinnell Police Department
- Grinnell School of Music/Studio E
- Grinnell State Bank
- Healthy Homes Family Services, Int. Mental Health Counseling
- Hey Grinnell Did You Know (Facebook)
- Imagine Grinnell
- KGRN Radio
- Iowa Kitchen
- Link Grinnell
- Mayflower Community
- Mid Iowa Community Action (MICA)
- Poweshiek County Emergency Management
- Prairie Lakes Church
- Region 6/People Rides
- Rotary Club
- SeaJae Properties
- Total Choice Shipping and Printing
- United Way Grinnell College
- UnityPoint Health
- Welcoming Communities

### Review of Archives (Web and Paper)

Throughout the research process, we gathered and reviewed all nature of documents we could find associated with community development and assessments in general and a range of content areas common to comprehensive community assessments, and specifically related to the prioritized issues (once identified), through literature searches and requests to key stakeholders in the community. These materials were primarily used to produce *The Restaurant Scene in Grinnell, Iowa* section below. They were also reviewed for mentions of concerns and needs, as well as assets.



To the extent possible, we also gathered data from four peer communities selected by the steering community (Decorah, Fairfield, Pella, and Waverly) to better understand Grinnell’s relative strengths and weaknesses as well as to look at how those communities may have addressed similar issues. Once gaining a clearer sense of the nature of the issue from focus groups, we also looked for ideas for possible solutions from communities around the country, focusing on ones like Grinnell, as well as other non-local potential assets and resources (e.g., organizations and funding).

### **Review of the Visioning Survey and Prioritization Survey**

Once the prioritized issues were identified, we returned to both earlier surveys. The open-ended visioning survey was reviewed to examine all comments relevant to restaurants to identify what, beyond “more restaurants” was said. All responses were extracted and coded similarly to community session data. Finally, we pulled information from the prioritization survey to show how different demographic groups ranked the issue.



# The Restaurant Scene in Grinnell, Iowa

## Grinnell’s Restaurant & Food Landscape

As of April 2024, Grinnell had 26 restaurants, defined as establishments to procure prepared foods, either with seating, or to-go meals, including chain restaurants, bakeries & coffee shops, but excluding establishments serving primarily as gas stations or bars with food options. Grinnell College dining establishments are also counted separately. There are 42 establishments in total that are available to the general public to regularly serve prepared foods.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 provides a full listing of all food establishments in Grinnell.

**Table 1: Restaurants & Food Establishments open to the Public in Grinnell, Iowa<sup>6</sup>**

<p><b>Sit Down (9)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Casa Margaritas</li> <li>▪ Chuong Garden</li> <li>▪ El Cascabel</li> <li>▪ Hometown Heroes</li> <li>▪ I-80 Dhaba</li> <li>▪ Los Girasoles</li> <li>▪ Maria’s Fresh Mex</li> <li>▪ Pagliai’s</li> <li>▪ Prairie Canary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ McNally’s Deli</li> <li>▪ Montgomery’s</li> <li>▪ West Side Family Dining</li> </ul>	<p><b>Coffee or Bakeries (2)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Saint’s Rest</li> <li>▪ Grin City Bakery</li> </ul>	<p><b>Gas Stations (with prepared food) (6)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Caseys (6<sup>th</sup> Ave N)</li> <li>▪ Casey’s (6<sup>th</sup> Ave S)</li> <li>▪ Caseys (I-80 Exit)</li> <li>▪ Caseys (West St)</li> <li>▪ Kum &amp; Go (West St)</li> <li>▪ Kum &amp; Go (I-80 exit)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Diners, Cafes &amp; Deli’s (7)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Comeback Café</li> <li>▪ Frontier Café</li> <li>▪ Hy-Vee Market Grill</li> <li>▪ Jay’s Deli</li> </ul>	<p><b>Walk-up or by-order (2)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dari Barn</li> <li>▪ Ritu’s Delicious Food</li> </ul> <p><b>Fast Food Chains (6)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Jimmy Johns</li> <li>▪ McDonalds</li> <li>▪ Pizza Ranch</li> <li>▪ Subway I80 Exit</li> <li>▪ Subway West St</li> <li>▪ Taco Johns</li> </ul>	<p><b>Bars (with food) (7)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eagles</li> <li>▪ Grinnell Craft Brewhouse</li> <li>▪ Grinnell Pub</li> <li>▪ Prairie Canary Speakeasy</li> <li>▪ Rabbit’s Tavern</li> <li>▪ Solera Wine Bar</li> <li>▪ The Periodic Table</li> </ul>	<p><b>Grinnell College (3)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Marketplace/Dining Hall</li> <li>▪ Spencer Grill</li> <li>▪ HSSC Global Café</li> </ul>

In addition to the food establishments listed in Table 1, there are additional temporary or seasonal food options such as summer farmers market booths that frequently include baked goods and limited prepared foods, occasional food trucks, and occasional events with food (e.g., Ag Days, Fireman's Breakfast, Grinnell College events, Prairie Burn 100). Food and meals are also offered in the public schools, and through the Mayflower and St. Francis Manor & Seeland Park communities. Grinnell also has mutual aid programs (e.g., Iowa Kitchen, Community Meal) that have weekly meals available for free to the public.

<sup>5</sup> This also excludes catering services, irregular food trucks, and in-house food services at businesses or retirement communities.

<sup>6</sup> Google Maps, search “food in Grinnell, IA,” combined with local knowledge.

### Shifts in the Restaurant Landscape over Time

Figure 1 shows the broadscale changes in the number of Grinnell restaurants from 1999 to 2024 by five-year increments. Table 2 provides the detailed accounting of the restaurants that existed at each of these five-year marks. The fewest restaurants (21) were seen in 1999, while the greatest number of restaurants (34) was seen at three of the five-year marks (2009, 2014, and 2019). Grinnell has seen a considerable drop of eight restaurants, or nearly 25% since 2019. At the time of the needs prioritization survey, two of the currently listed restaurants (El Cascabel and I-80 Dhaba) were not yet established, meaning that there were 10 fewer than has been seen at any five-year mark in 20 years.

**Figure 1. Grinnell Restaurants and Population over Time by Five-year Intervals**

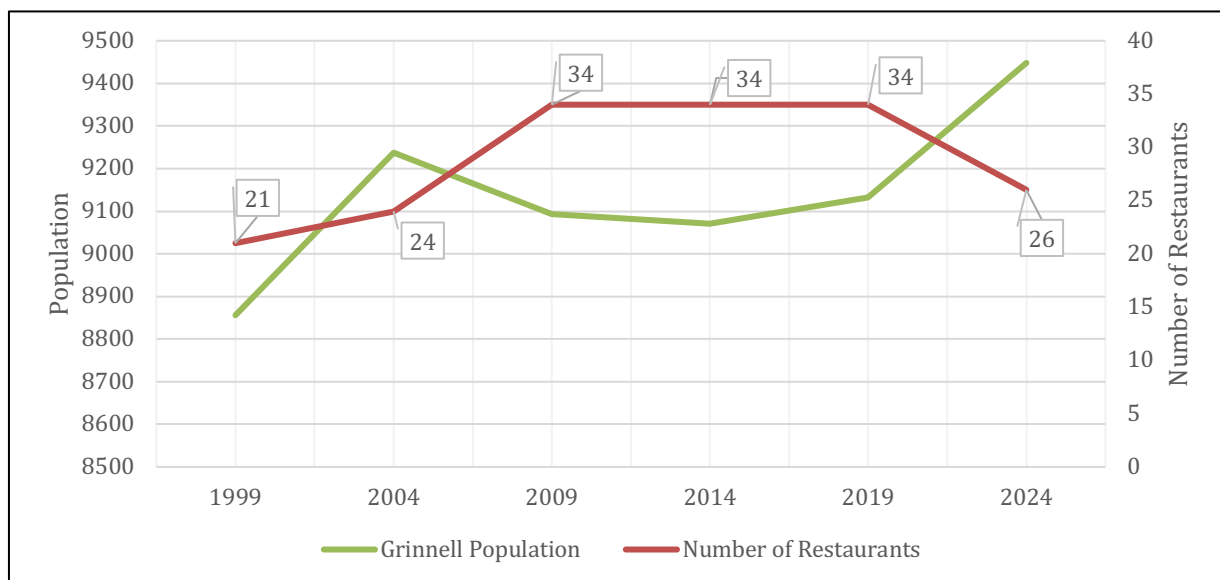


Table 2 below shows the details of the shift of restaurants. Restaurants are indicated as starting (green text) if they had commenced operations by the end of the given year. Since data is only recorded by what existed every five years, in some cases, a restaurant may have started as long as four years before the listed starting date. Similarly, restaurants are listed as ending under a given date if they were still operational at the start of the date, but not by the next five-year mark. Restaurants that may have started and ended in between the five-year marks are not listed. Restaurants that changed names but maintained location and ownership are shown in a single row. Restaurant locations that are replaced by new ownership with new names are shown as distinct restaurants. Over the last 5 years, Grinnell has lost the following restaurants (excluding changes in ownership of restaurants that maintained their location): A&M Café, Candyland Station, Dragon Wagon BBQ, El Molcajete, Grinnell Steakhouse, Hardee's, Game Time, Kentucky Fried Chicken/Taco Bell, Lonnski's Pub & Deli, Michael's, and Peppertree at Depot, and Relish. During the same period, Grinnell has gained the following restaurants: El Cascabel, I-80 Dhaba, Maria's Fresh Mex, and Ritu's Delicious Food.

**Table 2: Grinnell's Specific Restaurants Over Time by Five-year Intervals<sup>7</sup>**

1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
<b>Total #: 21</b>	<b>Total #: 24</b>	<b>Total #: 34</b>	<b>Total #: 34</b>	<b>Total #: 34</b>	<b>Total #: 26</b>
				1854 Deli	
AJ's Steakhouse	AJ's Steakhouse				
A&M Café	A&M Café	A&M Café	A&M Café	A&M Café	
		Back Alley Deli	Back Alley Deli		
		Bourbon Street			
Café Phoenix	Café Phoenix	Café Phoenix	Relish Local Foods Global Flavors	Relish Local Foods Global Flavors	
			Candyland Station	Candyland Station	
		Casa Magarita's	Casa Magarita's	Casa Magarita's	Casa Magarita's
China Sea	China Sea	China Sea	China Sea		
		Chuong Garden	Chuong Garden	Chuong Garden	Chuong Garden
				Ciliano's	
		Comeback Café	Comeback Café	Comeback Café	Comeback Café
Dairy Queen	Dairy Queen	Dairy Queen	Dairy Queen		
Dari Barn	Dari Barn	Dari Barn	Dari Barn	Dari Barn	Dari Barn
Depot Crossing	Depot Crossing	Depot Crossing			
		Dragon Wagon BBQ	Dragon Wagon BBQ	Dragon Wagon BBQ	
					El Cascabel
				El Molcajete	
			Frontier Café	Frontier Café	Frontier Café
Godfather's Pizza	Godfather's Pizza	Godfather's Pizza			
				Grin City Bakery	Grin City Bakery
	Grinnell Coffee Co.	Grinnell Coffee Co.			
		Grinnell Snack Shack			

<sup>7</sup> Created using a combination of yellow pages listings, online restaurant reviews, Facebook pages, Iowa Secretary of State Business filings, and other online sources. 2024 listing includes those restaurants functioning as of April 2024.

1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
		Grinnell Steak House	Grinnell Steak House	Grinnell Steak House	
Hardee's	Hardee's	Hardee's	Hardee's	Hardee's	
				Hometown Heroes	Hometown Heroes
Hy-Vee Market Grill	Hy-Vee Market Grill	Hy-Vee Market Grill	Hy-Vee Market Grill	Hy-Vee Market Grill	Hy-Vee Market Grill
					I-80 Dhaba
				Jay's Deli	Jay's Deli
	Jimbo's Pizza & Pub				
			Jimmy John's	Jimmy John's	Jimmy John's
Game Time	Game Time	Game Time	Game Time	Game Time	
Kelcy's Fine Foods	Kelcy's Fine Foods	Kelcy's Fine Foods			
KFC	KFC	KFC	KFC	KFC – Taco Bell	
		La Cabana	La Cabana		
		Las Fajitas			
		Lonnski's Pub & Deli	Lonnski's Pub & Deli	Lonnski's Pub & Deli	
				Los Girasoles	Los Girasoles
	Main Squeeze Juice Bar and Café				
					Maria's Fresh Mex
McDonalds	McDonalds	McDonalds	McDonalds	McDonalds	McDonalds
			McNally's Deli	McNally's Deli	McNally's Deli
Michael's	Michael's	Michael's	Michaels	Michaels	
Montgomery Maid-Rite	Montgomery Maid-Rite	Montgomery Maid-Rite	Montgomery Maid-Rite	Montgomery's	Montgomery's
Pagliai's Pizza	Pagliai's Pizza	Pagliai's Pizza	Pagliai's Pizza	Pagliai's Pizza	Pagliai's Pizza
			Peppertree at Depot	Peppertree at Depot	
Pizza Hut	Pizza Hut	Pizza Hut			
			Pizza Ranch	Pizza Ranch	Pizza Ranch
			Prairie Canary	Prairie Canary	Prairie Canary
					Ritu's Delicious Food
Saints Rest Coffee House	Saints Rest Coffee House	Saints Rest Coffee House	Saints Rest Coffee House	Saints Rest Coffee House	Saints Rest Coffee House
Subway	Subway	Subway	Subway (x2)	Subway (x2)	Subway (x2)
Taco John's	Taco John's	Taco John's	Taco John's	Taco John's	Taco John's
		Thai Basil			



1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
			The Purple Cucumber		
Westside Family Dining	Westside Family Dining	Westside Family Dining	Westside Family Dining	Westside Family Dining	Westside Family Dining
		Yumi's Bakery and Deli	Yumi's Bakery and Deli		

Nationwide, the Covid pandemic, subsequent inflation, and workforce shortages have been very impactful on the restaurant industry. At the end of 2022, restaurants per capita in the country had dropped to a twenty-five-year low.<sup>8</sup>

Support for businesses in Grinnell is available through the Chamber of Commerce, a member-based non-profit organization. Eleven of Grinnell's 26 restaurants are chamber members.<sup>9</sup> According to one local restaurant owner, the chamber helps to provide media and advertising for members. According to its website, the Chamber of commerce also offers services for potential businesses including.<sup>10</sup>

- Identifying business opportunities
- Developing a business plan
- Selecting a site
- Introducing possible investors to people/businesses in the community
- Connecting potentially businesses with community resources
- Promoting new businesses
- Advertising job openings and more

In 2012, the Chamber sought to attract a new restaurant to the town after Bourbon Street closed on Main Street in the Central downtown area by holding the "Best Bite" competition where four finalists prepared meals and shared their restaurant concepts with a group of selected community members who then voted on their favorite. The winner was offered "\$10,000 in start-up cash, \$15,000 in dishes and silverware, \$15,000 in food, three months of free rent, a marketing package from Art A La Carte and mentoring from the company group that runs Centro, Django and Zombie Burger."<sup>11</sup> The winner, a restaurateur from Des Moines, opened and operated Prairie Canary for a little less than two years before leaving, at which time it was taken over by a local chef.

<sup>8</sup> MUFU Bank, Ltd., "U.S. restaurants per capita at lowest point in 25 years, MUFU says," PR Newswire, Jan. 4, 2023, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/us-restaurants-per-capita-at-lowest-point-in-25-years-mufu-says-301712682.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Directory," Grinnell Chamber of Commerce, Business Directory, Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.grinnellchamber.org/directory/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Chamber of Commerce Assistance," Grinnell Chamber of Commerce, Accessed June 20, 2024, [https://www.grinnellchamber.org/en/business\\_resources/starting\\_a\\_business/chamber\\_of\\_commerce\\_assistance/](https://www.grinnellchamber.org/en/business_resources/starting_a_business/chamber_of_commerce_assistance/).

<sup>11</sup> "Four finalists selected in restaurant giveaway contest," KCCI Des Moines, Updated July 19, 2012, <https://www.kcci.com/article/four-finalists-selected-in-restaurant-giveaway-contest/6870607>.

### How Grinnell Compares to its Peers

With 26 restaurants and up to 42 eating and drinking establishments, Grinnell has a large number of restaurants for the size of its population relative to the country as a whole. In 2023, Iowa had 6,435 restaurants (based on the census and defined as eating or drinking establishments),<sup>12</sup> or approximately 20.1 per 10,000. A 2018 study ranked Iowa as having the 16<sup>th</sup> most fast-food restaurants per capita with 4.7/10,000.<sup>13</sup> The four states with the highest number of restaurants and bars per capita in 2023 had just over 25 per 10,000.<sup>14</sup> Grinnell’s population is just under 10,000.

Compared to its peers, Grinnell is average in terms of fast-food options and bars, but has fewer restaurants overall, particularly in terms of coffee shops and chain restaurants. Table 3 compares Grinnell to the selected peer communities on several basic economic measures as well as providing a comparison of the restaurant landscape. The restaurant information for all towns in the table is based on Google place searches. Additional search criteria are provided in the footnotes.

**Table 3: Peer Community Comparisons for Restaurants and Eating Establishments**

	Grinnell	Decorah	Fairfield	Pella	Waverly
<b>Population</b>	9,513	7,867	9,653	10,414	10,278
<b>Labor shed Population Likely to Accept Employment<sup>15</sup></b>	25,725	11,764	21,248	34,226	30,497
<b>Median household income<sup>16</sup></b>	\$49,045	\$55,480	\$43,006	\$80,270	\$70,688
<b>Total retail sales per capita<sup>17</sup></b>	\$20,615	\$31,791	\$14,052	\$20,280	\$19,963
<b>Food Establishments (most inclusive)<sup>18</sup></b>	40	56	51	51	50
<b>Restaurants<sup>19</sup></b>	25	32	41	33	30

<sup>12</sup> “State Statistics,” National Restaurant Association, Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/research/industry-statistics/state-statistics/>.

<sup>13</sup> Joe McGauley, “Here are the states with the most fast food restaurants per capita,” Thrillist, June 26, 2018, <https://www.thrillist.com/news/nation/states-with-most-fast-food-restaurants-datafiniti>.

<sup>14</sup> Stacker, “States with the highest concentration of restaurants,” KTVZ.Com, Nov. 3, 2023, <https://ktvz.com/stacker-lifestyle/2023/11/03/states-with-the-highest-concentration-of-restaurants/>.

<sup>15</sup> Iowa Workforce Development. Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://workforce.iowa.gov>.

<sup>16</sup> Data USA, Accessed June 20, 2024, <https://datausa.io/>.

<sup>17</sup> QuickFacts, US Census Bureau, 2017 data, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts>.

<sup>18</sup> Search of Google Places for “restaurant in [town name] Iowa.” This tends to include almost anything that serves food or drinks of any kind. This includes bars, gas stations with food, grocery store Delis, etc. For Grinnell, it left out two establishments from our list of all food establishments in Table 1 and did not include anything additional.

<sup>19</sup> Search of Google Places for “restaurant in...” edited down to fit our working definition of restaurants and exclude anything defined primarily as a bar or gas station. Includes cafés and coffee shops.

	Grinnell	Decorah	Fairfield	Pella	Waverly
<b>Bars<sup>20</sup></b>	9	10	6	6	11
<b>Coffee Shops<sup>21</sup></b>	1	7	5	7	4
<b>Fast food<sup>22</sup></b>	6	3	5	12	7
<b>Chains<sup>23</sup></b>	6 Taco John's, McDonald's, Jimmy John's, Subway (x2), Pizza Ranch	7 McDonald's, Culver's, Subway, Pizza Hut, Pizza Ranch, Scooter's Coffee, Starbucks	8 Taco John's, Pizza Ranch, Burger King, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Subway, Jimmy John's, Scooter's Coffee	16 Pizza Ranch, Applebee's, Bredeaux Pizza, Taco Bell, Culver's, Chick-fil-a, Burger King, Arby's, Taco John's, Jimmy John's, McDonald's, Domino's, Subway (x2), DQ Grill & Chill, Scooter's Coffee	10 Applebee's, Domino's, Pizza Ranch, McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King, Subway, Taco John's, Scooter's Coffee, Dairy Queen

<sup>20</sup> Search of Google Places for “bar in....” Includes establishments serving primarily as bars as well as restaurants that include bars, so there is some overlap with restaurants.

<sup>21</sup> Search of Google Places for “coffee shops in....” Included only those places specifically listed as “coffee shop,” or cafes with limited menus primarily serving coffee.

<sup>22</sup> Goggle Places search for “fast food in...,” edited to include only places that include “fast food” in descriptor.

<sup>23</sup> Review of Google Places “restaurant” listing. Not including restaurants that might be Iowa regional chains. Excluding gas chains (Casey's, Kum & Go) and Grocery Stores (Hy-Vee Market).

# Community Input: Perspectives on Restaurant Variety

This section of the report details the input collected from members of the community through community sessions (listening sessions, focus groups, community hosted discussions), the open-ended visioning survey, the prioritization survey, and interviews. The information shared here does not represent the views of the researchers or the Build a Better Grinnell Project steering committee. Nor are we trying to be arbiters of what belongs or doesn't or what is true or not. We are presenting experiences and views held by participants in this study.

The core of this section comes from the community sessions, where we specifically asked participants to talk in detail about their concerns with restaurant variety, how they are impacted by their concerns, who they feel is most affected, why they think these problems exist, the obstacles they anticipate in addressing them, their ideas for addressing the situation, who should be involved, and what they see as the community's strengths and assets. We also include all relevant information from the initial visioning survey, but that data is mostly limited to the nature of the problem and is often vague (e.g., greater variety of restaurants), so it does not consistently appear throughout sections below. Input available from interviews is also included.

## The Concern for Restaurants

In our initial open-ended Visions of Grinnell survey, 339 distinct surveys (56%) noted a desire for more restaurants, dining options, or places to eat. Most of these were not specific, just asking for "more." A significant number noted a desire for more variety, or for specific ethnic food options, and a good number also requested more fast-food options. More specific input is noted in the sections below.

The prioritization survey included both *more variety of restaurants* and *more fast-food options* as choices among 46 others. *More variety of restaurants* was the #1 ranked choice by the community as a whole (with Grinnell College students weighted), and *more fast-food options* was ranked #22.

A desire for a greater variety of restaurants was also raised in three community expert interviews in relation to general needs for the community. We had 14 community sessions, which tied for most along with one other issue. Five of these were held by our paid community hosts, who had the option of which issues they wanted to host. This was the most of any issue.

## What Is the Nature of the Issue?

In our Visions of Grinnell survey and interviews, we used several questions to help identify what things people would like to see changed in Grinnell (e.g., what things have frustrated you, and what changes would you like to see). In community sessions and interviews specifically focused on the issue, we asked participants to discuss what they see as the "nature of the problem" (e.g., why do you think we need more variety of restaurants, or what is the concern with Grinnell's restaurant scene). Below are the general areas of concern that were shared.

### 1) Lack of variety or options.

In all sessions (14/14), the crux of the problem was seen as a lack of variety or options. In the community sessions, many provided specific suggestions regarding what is missing. These are reviewed in the *solutions* section below, along with such input provided in survey 1.

### 2) Hours and days.

a) In half of the sessions (7/14), participants noted a concern that, apart from the lack of variety,

there are few options on Sunday and Mondays, which makes hosting events and recruiting over the weekends difficult. This was particularly noted in regard to sporting events, and with families and prospective students visiting the college.

b) Another concern raised in half the sessions (7/14) were limited hours of many restaurants. In particular, there are no late evening options for dining. The bakery is only open a couple of days a week, and there is no evening coffee shop or similar hang out.

3) High prices.

Many participants highlighted high prices as a concern (9/14 sessions).

4) Slow or poor service.

Participants noted that another concern is the slow or poor service at restaurants (6/14 sessions). This was particularly noted as a problem during the lunch hour, when it can be difficult to get a lunch within the space of one's lunch hour.

### **What Are the Impacts or Consequences?**

Participants in community sessions were asked how they were impacted by the issues they were identifying as concerns and what they saw as the impacts on the broader community. The following are their responses.

1) Drive out of town, which is bad for local economy.

The most common impact is that people simply leave Grinnell to go dining (high agreement across 10/14 sessions). Many participants noted that, while they are out of town, they also spend their entertainment money and often do their other shopping (9/10 sessions). Many pointed out that it is an opportunity cost for Grinnell's economic growth and economy in general. One participant who is often responsible for organizing events for their business noted that they often have to use out of town caterers as well.

2) Interferes with hosting and recruiting.

a) Participants noted that the lack of variety and limited hours of restaurants makes it difficult to host out of town guests (10/14 sessions). This includes friends from out of town (3/14 sessions), visitors being hosted by a business (4/14 sessions), and community events (e.g., sporting, HS band, college) (5/14 sessions).

b) Participants also noted that recruiting employees to town and students to Grinnell College is more difficult because of the limited options and lack of hours overlapping with some visits (7/14 sessions).

3) Stay at home.

Participants noted that they are more likely to stay home and eat out less due to the limited options (7/14 sessions).

4) Nothing to do.

a) Participants felt that the lack of restaurants and limited hours exacerbated a sense that there is a lack of things to do in Grinnell (6/14 sessions). Several also noted that it limited places where people could spend time together and socialize.

b) This connects to another major issue that was raised in the first open-ended survey. There were

238 responses that identified a desire for more “things to do” or “places to go,” or that noted “there’s nothing to do.” These responses were vague enough that they might have referred to more restaurant options but were instead categorized under a miscellaneous “things to do” group. Many session participants saw restaurants as potentially fulfilling the gap of things to do and places to go. In addition, the importance of restaurants as community gathering spaces was discussed in a handful of sessions.

5) Bad for Grinnell’s reputation.

Some participants noted that the lack of options, particularly in terms of hosting events and people visiting town is bad for Grinnell’s reputation (3/14 sessions).

6) Other.

Other impacts mentioned included:

- a) Crowding at restaurants, particularly during the lunch hour (3/14 sessions).
- b) Less competition leading to higher costs (1/14 sessions).
- c) Difficulty eating healthy (1/14 sessions).

**Who is Most Affected?**

In community sessions, there were a range of restaurant ideas that were suggested to support specific demographic groups (college students, international students, teens, families, those on a fixed budget, evening shift workers). These are noted under the solutions section below. Those groups ranged in terms of age, income, and other variables. As one participant noted, “it is little kids, older adults, or everybody. It’s all ages.” Table 4 shows the ranking of *more variety of restaurants* by demographic groupings, which also suggests that the issue is important to a broad range of persons. Only Grinnell College students did not rank the issue among their top three priorities.

The groups most frequently identified in sessions as likely most affected were workers looking for somewhere to eat over lunch, visitors to Grinnell, and Grinnell’s business community that is affected by the loss of patronage to out of town and the difficulties recruiting, hosting, and retaining staff (and students in the case of the college).

**Table 4: Ranking of More Variety of Restaurants by Demographic Group**

#1	All respondents, excluding Grinnell College Students (N=882)
#1	Men aged 19-55, excluding Grinnell College Students (N=156)
#1	Aged 66 and over (N=153)
#1	All respondents identifying as rural (N=121)
#2	Lower income (N=102) <sup>24</sup>
#2	Under age 25 (“Gen Z”), excluding Grinnell College students (N=76)
#2	Racial & ethnic minorities, excluding Grinnell College students (N=61) <sup>25</sup>
#3	Aged 26-45 (N=301)

<sup>24</sup> Household income under \$25,000, or \$25,000-\$50,000 in households of 2+, or \$50,000-\$75,000 in households of 6+. Excludes respondents under the age of 19 and all Grinnell College students.

<sup>25</sup> Identifying with one or more race/ethnic categories other than White, as well as those identifying as being of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin.

#3	Women aged 19-45, excluding Grinnell College students (N=222)
#3	Identifying as commuters, excluding those living in Grinnell's rural outskirts (N=72)
#12	Grinnell College students (N=388) <sup>26</sup>

### Is the Problem Getting Better or Worse?

In most community sessions, participants felt that the problem had gotten worse in recent years and associated this with a string of closures. Many mentioned one or multiple of the restaurants that have closed in the last ten years. In none did participants feel that the situation was improving. One interviewee also noted that it seemed that there had been a lot of business closures recently, referring to issues of concern for the community. Among session participants, the closure of the Depot was particularly singled out as a significant loss of a restaurant space (6/14 sessions). (Note: since the sessions were held, the space has been occupied by the restaurant El Cascabel.)

### Causes: Why Do these Problems Exist? What Obstacles do You See to Addressing Them?

In every community session, as well as interviews focused on the core issue, we asked questions to get at perceptions of underlying causes. These included asking why the issue exists for the community, why it has not been resolved, what difficulties individuals have in resolving the issue or alleviating its impacts for themselves or their family, and what they view as the likely obstacles in addressing the concerns. Focusing on underlying causes can be one strategy to resolve a problem.

Participants are experts in their own experiences and likely have a good understanding of the obstacles that exist for them personally to alleviating or resolving a problem. Most are not necessarily experts on the issue as a whole and may not be aware of broader underlying causes (though some experts did participate in some community sessions, and two of the interviews focused on restaurant owners). As a result, many participants may be speculating on broader causes. At the same time, non-experts may have valuable insights on the obstacles that exist to addressing a problem in the community, and there is often a "wisdom of the crowd" or shared cultural knowledge on how things work. Even when causes and obstacles perceived by community members reflect misunderstandings or misinformation, these can be valuable for decision makers as they may reflect opportunities for education. Those misunderstandings may also present obstacles themselves to the feasibility of various options. For example, if community members don't think that solutions are getting at the right problem or causes, they may be less likely to be supportive and the solution may be less likely to succeed.

The following perceptions on causes were shared.

#### 1) Difficulties in opening and running a restaurant.

The biggest suggested set of obstacles concerned the challenges of opening and sustaining a restaurant. These were addressed by many participants including those with specific relevant expertise (12/14 sessions, 2 interviews). Specific challenges included the following.

- a) Staffing was seen the most significant obstacle (12/14 sessions, 2 interviews). In addition to Covid, the owners of Relish noted in a published interview that the labor market made it very difficult to hire for positions.<sup>27</sup> One restaurant owner also shared that hiring trained or trainable staff can be a major obstacle for restaurants in Grinnell, suggesting that restaurants may face

<sup>26</sup> While 388 Grinnell college students participated in the prioritization survey, each vote counted as one-third of a vote (explained in methods) in determining the ranking by all respondents including the college students.

<sup>27</sup> Ella Labarre, "Relish closes after over a decade of service," The Scarlet & Black, Sept. 12, 2022, <https://thesandb.com/42390/article/relish-closes-after-over-a-decade-of-service/>.

particular difficulty hiring locally for specialty positions (e.g., cooks) or attracting such staff because they don't want to come to Grinnell. Turnover and training needed to provide quality service can create an additional burden for some.

- b) The costs – particularly start up and rent (6/14 sessions, 2 interviews).
- c) Difficulty of finding funding (3/14 sessions, 2 interviews).
- d) Two restaurant owners stated that start-up costs can be significant, but having financing to stay open is even more challenging.
  - i) Both identified the cost of utilities as significant. One noted that, in talking to chefs in cities, or even other rural places, the energy/utilities costs in Grinnell seem a lot higher.
  - ii) One noted that taxes, fees, and rent can be a challenge for some owners, but not all.
  - iii) Another noted that most restaurant owners often account for the startup costs, but don't always budget for the early months to a year when their debt may be rising faster than their earnings, adding that having deep pockets or financial backing can be critical to success.
  - iv) One suggested that it can be particularly hard for local businesses, which don't have the immediate brand loyalty that a chain does.
- e) Long hours, hard work, and ongoing management challenges (3/14 sessions, 2 interviews). Apart from staffing and training (addressed above), restaurant owners suggested that the following can be some of the challenges for restaurants in Grinnell (or generally).
  - i) Providing a consistent product that meets client expectations.
  - ii) Maintaining the menu.
  - iii) Navigating weekly spending patterns with lighter business early in the week.
  - iv) Sourcing products at reasonable prices (many distributors require minimum orders that can be hard to meet for small businesses).
  - v) Stress of worrying about rising costs, particularly fixed costs like rent or utilities.
- f) A general lack of space downtown (2/14 sessions including a local realtor, 1 interview). One restaurant owner noted that there aren't enough storefront locations downtown and most retail spaces are too small for a restaurant. They suggested that anything not in walking distance of the college could lose a big part of the market.
- g) Regulations and the permitting process (1/14 sessions, 1 interview). One owner discussed the stress and time that came with what felt like complicated and sometimes obscure regulation process.
- h) The seasonality created by the college (1/14 sessions, 1 interview). One restaurant owner noted that they lose 25-30% of their business in the summer when Grinnell College is out of session.

## 2) Lack of demand.

Participants identified various ways in which the demand in Grinnell might not support more restaurant variety (7/14 sessions, 2 interviews).

- a) The most commonly identified issue was that the town is relatively small.
  - i) Some saw this particularly as a hindrance to franchises, and some felt that this made sustaining more niche foods less likely.
  - ii) Restaurant owners in two interviews indicated a concern that the demand is currently at its maximum and that "there's only so many pieces of the pie to go around."
  - iii) In several sessions, participants pushed back on the notion that the "pie" is fixed, noting that getting more people to downtown through more restaurants could help all businesses.



- b) Two restaurant owners felt that people are already spending what they are willing to eating out and, while spending may initially increase with a new restaurant, it would likely fall back to its steady state. People are also limited by their work pay, which limits how often they can eat out.
- c) Grinnell is not seen as a destination (1/14 sessions, 1 interview). One restaurant owner noted that Saturday is their slowest day because people from the community are often not around, and the town is not seen as a destination place.
- d) Other issues identified as possibly reducing demand, or the number of possible restaurant patrons included the following.
  - i) Homogeneity in town and resistance to new types of food (2/14 sessions).
  - i) There is little “downtown life” through retail to draw customers, particularly in the evenings (2/14 sessions).
  - ii) Commuters don’t stick around after work (1/14 sessions).
  - iii) Hotel guests by the interstate don’t venture to town (1/14 sessions).
  - iv) The entrance to the town is not sufficiently inviting (1/14 sessions).
  - v) There is opposition to franchises (1/14 sessions).

### 3) Lack of support, or resistance to potential investors.

Participants identified a lack of support for new businesses as an obstacle to increasing restaurant variety, particularly in light of all of the challenges identified to starting a restaurant (7/14 sessions, 3 interviews).

- a) Some session participants suggested that there can be a lack of support from both the city council (4/14 sessions) and the Chamber of Commerce (4/14 sessions). This included a participating restaurateur, an individual who had tried to investigate the possibility of starting a restaurant in town, and an individual with knowledge of local real estate development in relation to restaurant efforts to open in Grinnell.
  - i) Some believe that chamber members have a preferred status and, because some members are concerned over possible competition, there may be a conflict of interest on the part of the Chamber of Commerce in pursuing new businesses. (More saw the Chamber as a potential asset, discussed in sections below.)
  - ii) In the case of the City Council, some session participants felt that there can be an adversarial rather than supportive environment and that there may be protectionism of existing businesses leading to resistance of new ones and a lack of support. One participant with knowledge of real estate development in the community noted that getting a space for a new restaurant needs to go in front of the City Council for approval, and that the Council has at times applied a level of scrutiny that can be discouraging. One restaurant owner interviewed noted that for some, it can feel like the city is discouraging people from trying to open new restaurants due to “red tape” and a general lack of cooperative effort.
  - iii) One session participant shared that they were told by the owners of a Thai restaurant in Newton that they had wanted to come to Grinnell because of the college, but that the city didn’t seem interested, so they gave up.
- b) One community expert interviewee commenting on the lack of restaurants noted that it doesn't seem like there's a push towards any kind of like business incubating in town.
- c) Participants noted that lack of support in communication and marketing was also an obstacle in growing demand (4/14 sessions, 1 interview).
  - i) The perception is that there is little effort to promote the Grinnell restaurant scene either in town or more broadly, for example at the hotels by the interstate.

- ii) One restaurant owner noted that their biggest issue or primary obstacle in sustaining business is marketing – getting people to know about the location and to walk through the door, getting the restaurant on social media, etc.

#### 4) Covid.

Participants identified Covid as likely a contributing factor in recent closures (4/14 sessions). As noted above, Covid had a significant impact on restaurants nationally. This was also identified in a published interview by the owner of Grinnell’s Relish as a key factor in their decision to close,<sup>28</sup> and one of the restaurant owners we interviewed also noted that it had significant impact on business patterns in Grinnell.

#### 5) Inflation.

Participants noted that high inflation has driven up prices and affected demand, and likely also represents an obstacle to opening a new restaurant right now (4/14 sessions, 2 interviews). Two restaurant owners identified recent inflation as creating significant challenges. One noted that since Covid, they have seen a 25-30% increase in most costs, and it’s always a worry how much of this can be passed on to the customer before they stop coming.

#### 6) Retirements.

Participants noted that many of the recent closures in Grinnell reflected retirements, with participants specifically noting the cases of A&M Café, Candyland, Michaels, and Relish (2/14 sessions). In some cases, owners tried to keep the restaurant afloat, but were unable to find a buyer or successor.<sup>29</sup>

- a) Both Candyland and Michaels were unable to find a buyer.
- b) According to news reports, Kelcy’s also closed after the retiring owner was unable to find a buyer.<sup>30</sup>

#### 7) Other.

- a) Lack of competition was suggested as a possible reason for high prices and lack of changes in menus (2/14 sessions).
- b) High levels of social or political division in the town was suggested as potentially limiting clientele for restaurants associated with a particular ideology (1 interview).

### **Solutions: What Could be Done to Resolve the Problem or Alleviate Their Impacts?**

The following are suggestions that were provided in community sessions, interviews, or the first visioning survey. We also include an appendix on strategies and solutions tried elsewhere, including from Grinnell’s four selected peer communities, which may be useful in considering strategies. The

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<sup>28</sup> Ella Labarre, “ Relish closes....”

<sup>29</sup> According to research, this can be common in rural towns where there is often more risk aversion than larger urban areas on the part of existing business leaders and a lack of entrepreneurship development available. Studies suggest that communities are more successful in maintaining vibrant retail services when networks are created between current and business owners and those interested in going into business. Steven Deller and Tessa Conroy, “Survival Rates of Rural Businesses: What the Evidence Tells Us,” Choices Magazine, 1016 Quarter 4, <https://www.choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/submitted-articles/survival-rates-of-rural-businesses-what-the-evidence-tells-us>.

<sup>30</sup> Barry Hurto, “Grinnell dining establishment to close in Dec.,” Newton News, Letters to the Editor, Nov. 14, 2011, <https://www.newtondailynews.com/2011/11/14/grinnell-dining-establishment-to-close-in-dec/aibrawz/>.

solutions presented in this document do not reflect the views of the research team or the Build a Better Grinnell steering committee.

As we addressed in the background and scope section, we caution those reviewing the document not to assume that the most suggested solutions are necessarily the “best” or most likely to succeed. This is not intended as a comprehensive list. These are the range of ideas that came up in our community-wide “brainstorming sessions.” Those making use of this document may have additional ideas to address causes or alleviate impacts.

#### 1) Increasing demand.

In response to the concern that there may not be sufficient demand in Grinnell currently, ideas for increasing demand were provided in many sessions. Most suggestions included getting more people to Grinnell or to the downtown. One restaurant owner noted that while they were concerned that the size of the pie might be fixed, increased traffic flow to downtown benefits everyone.

- a) The most common suggestion was to increase marketing for the restaurant scene in Grinnell as well as for Grinnell events (9/14 sessions).
  - i) Suggestions included trying to bring more people to Grinnell as a destination, bringing people from the hotels into town, as well as promoting local dining and packaging things to do in town in a way to appeal to and bring residents downtown.
  - ii) In a couple of sessions, participants discussed the value of finding something that is uniquely Grinnell for the region, or some gimmick (“like Pella does”). One session suggested celebrating diversity. Another suggested a kind of restaurant that can’t be found nearby to be able to attract people.
  - iii) Some noted that there are lots of things happening in Grinnell that aren’t sufficiently broadcast, suggesting greater use by outlets such as the Herald Register, Hey Grinnell Facebook page, or some other source.
  - iv) Two restaurant owners interviewed also highlighted marketing, both for restaurants and the town in general, as a key that would support their current businesses. One noted that they would like support in this, stating “*as a restaurant owner, marketing has to be delegated out, we don’t have the expertise or time to be doing the restaurant marketing.*” They added that finding someone qualified to do good marketing work in town can be difficult.
  - v) Despite suggestions of more marketing, some sessions participants and a restaurant owner suggested getting rid of the signs on the interstate stating that Grinnell has 57 restaurants, feeling that it is misleading and does not reflect well on the community.
- b) Some participants noted that the key to getting more restaurants is economic and population growth of the town (3/14 sessions, 2 interviews with restaurant owners).
- c) Increasing community events and tourism (including food events) was seen as another way to bring people to Grinnell and raise demand.
  - i) Two restaurant owners highlighted that bringing more people into town for events and tourism was important to creating the demand needed to add restaurants (or population growth, or higher wages).
  - ii) One participant noted that Ridiculous Days used to be a huge affair where the town would block off the whole downtown, and that it was really good for businesses downtown.
  - iii) Another suggestion was that the town could capitalize on the art scene and other community features or take greater advantage of youth sports tourism since the town is halfway between Des Moines and Iowa City.

- d) Other suggestions to increase demand raised in community sessions included the following.
  - i) Increasing efforts/incentives to get students downtown such as by expanding dining dollar options (2/14 sessions).
  - ii) A community “dining card” promotion similar to what some sports teams at the high school do (1/14 sessions).
  - iii) Expanding delivery services (such as Door Dash, or Grub Hub) (1/14 sessions, 6 surveys).
  - iv) Have a weekly downtown night with stores open later (1/14 sessions). One restaurant owner also noted that greater demand for restaurants would benefit from more things happening downtown in the evenings in general.

## 2) Support for possible investors and existing restaurants.

Participants had a range of ideas across most sessions for ways to attract and support possible restaurants to town.

- a) Provide support through some centralized organization (8/14 sessions). A range of potential supports are discussed throughout this section (marketing, education, funding, etc.). Ideas for who might provide such support varied.
  - i) The top suggestions were the Chamber, the city council, an economic development entity (e.g., Pow-I80), or some new group of capable businesspeople in town. (Additional notes on who should be involved are provided under a distinct heading further below.)
  - ii) One restaurant owner noted that support for existing restaurants is also important and that it would be helpful for someone from the city, Chamber, or economic development office to stop by and check in on the businesses and their needs, and then act on that info.
- b) Prepare spaces and recruit restaurants. Identifying and preparing spaces for potential restaurants and actively recruiting new restaurants to town was discussed in several sessions.
  - i) One participant involved in local real estate suggested that some organization, perhaps the city or an economic development group, could identify and purchase vacant properties and actively recruit restaurants. Some participants suggested that these available spaces could be marketed more broadly (2/14 sessions).
  - ii) Participants suggested that the town could hold a competition or a start-up fair for food as a way to recruit (4/14 sessions).
  - iii) In several sessions, participants noted the efforts that were used to recruit the original Prairie Canary to town, though some worried that such a level of support could create resentment by existing businesses.
- c) Include restaurant planning as part of holistic community planning (2/14 sessions, 1 interview). Participants noted the importance of city planning – of thinking holistically about where and what kinds of restaurants might work. One interviewee noted the potential value of the land plan committee, run by the city’s building and planning department, which every 20 years brings in engineers to brainstorm ways to better the community, adding new restaurants or building a downtown or other resources.
- d) Provide more information and options to develop business knowledge (5/14 sessions, 3 interviews). Participants discussed the importance of providing current and potential restaurateurs with information and knowledge.
  - i) Several sessions talked at length about the need for a single location to gain information on what is needed to start a restaurant, including funding options. A restaurant owner suggested the need for a “road map” for anyone who wants to open a restaurant.

- ii) Business training or support was discussed, perhaps available through the city, community college, ISU extension, or the high school (2/14 sessions).
  - iii) Participants noted the important role that mentors could play in helping to navigate the challenges of starting and sustaining a restaurant (3/14 sessions).
  - iv) Clear information and business knowledge was noted by some as a particularly valuable complement to potential financial support.
  - v) One restaurant owner noted that they look forward to seeing the results of this study, as they feel such information is not otherwise available.
  - vi) Associated with development of business knowledge, the need for incubator or start-up services was noted in several sessions and interviews. One restaurant owner noted that a restaurant incubator would allow people to try it out without massive financial commitment. Ideas for an incubator space included a food court, food trucks, or a rotating available kitchen.
- e) Provide funding support (10/14 sessions). Suggestions included the following:
- i) A community development fund (e.g., similar to Pow-I80, or available through city). Some noted the funding used to start Prairie Canary as an example (5/14 sessions).
  - ii) Federal fundraising for community development.
  - iii) Fundraising in the community, perhaps like a go-fund-me (5/14 sessions).
  - iv) Grant funding. Participants noted that there are strong grant writers in town (3/14 sessions).
  - v) Tax relief (4/14 sessions).
  - vi) Rent support (1/14 sessions).
  - vii) Support for signage (1/14 sessions).
  - viii) Membership model, for example where individuals provide funding up front and get reduced prices, special benefits, or free food (1/14 sessions). Phoenix/Relish was mentioned as a model.
  - ix) Greater discretionary spending by city to support businesses (1 interview).
  - x) Small improvements funding. One restaurant owner noted that it would be helpful to have a small improvement fund available for things like interior renovations and energy efficiency upgrades (electrical, HVAC, windows, insulation, etc.), noting that there are funds in town/county that help people repair their houses if they can't afford it, but nothing like that for restaurants.
- f) Support for recruiting staffing to town (2/14 sessions, 1 interview). When asked "what would need to happen in Grinnell for there to be more restaurants," a restaurant owner noted that the number one thing would be to have more people able to work.
- g) Decrease utility costs (2 interviews). Two restaurant owners suggested the decreasing utility costs or increasing energy inefficiency in buildings would strengthen their bottom line.

### 3) Alternatives to restaurants.

In many sessions, participants discussed possible alternatives to additional brick and mortar restaurants that would still fulfill their interest in more food options.

- a) Food trucks were identified as a desirable option (9/14 sessions 5 surveys). Many commented positively on times when trucks had come to Grinnell. Some saw this as a possible intermediate step to evaluate what new foods would be most popular in Grinnell.

- b) Interest was also shown in more food events in town (6/14 sessions). Many suggested that these could involve food trucks. Other suggestions including a food tasting fair, food competitions, cooking classes, and an ethnic food fair. Over 90 surveys also identified a desire for more community events or festivals, though only some of these specifically mentioned food.<sup>31</sup>
- c) We asked the two restaurant owners what they see as the challenges or considerations for having more food events in town. Neither was particularly interested in participating in these. One noted that they already have enough to do and would need to be assured that they would make money in order to participate. They both felt that events that draw more people to town is a very good thing. They noted that the challenges for these kinds of events include ensuring sufficient marketing to get people to show up, ensuring food safety when you're outdoors, and ensuring adequate infrastructure (e.g., electricity, water). One noted that people ask for a lot of things, but don't always show up to support them and that combining it with other activities such as music or other events might give it the best chance of success.
- d) (Post research note: for the 2024 Music in the Park series, two food providers – Hy-Vee Grill and Papparoni's (a new food truck in town) – were contracted as food providers. The Grinnell Area Arts Council plans to interview them post-event to find out what season sales were like, and whether they want to return.)

#### 4) Enhancements and support to existing restaurants.

In a handful of sessions, participants provided suggestions for how Grinnell's current restaurants could better meet the demands for more options and variety, though these interests could also apply to new restaurant options. Suggestions were also provided for how existing restaurants could be supported to help reduce closures.

- a) Later hours/more days.
  - i) Participants were interested in some options with later hours that could meet the needs of those who work late (e.g., shift work) and those who want evening spaces to hang out (7/14 sessions and one interview). In the initial visioning survey, 43 surveys identified an interest in more things to do in the evenings and nighttime. Ten specifically requested increased restaurant hours, and 9 requested an evening coffee option.
  - ii) Options for Monday (and to a lesser extent Sunday) were also recommended (7/14 sessions, 2 surveys).
  - iii) A restaurant owner noted that one of the biggest complaints people make about restaurants is changing hours. People want consistency. They also noted that their hours are driven by traffic, and they won't staff later unless they meet a baseline of sales. They were hopeful that the new downtown dorm might benefit this.
- b) Some participants recommended offering alternative menu options more frequently as a way to expand variety (2/14 sessions, 1 interview).
- c) Some participants discussed strengthening existing restaurants by exploring revenue diversification strategies, particularly during slow months (such as take-and-bake meals) or by partnering with businesses to provide regular catering options (1/14 sessions).

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<sup>31</sup> This only includes when individuals referred generally to community events or specifically to festivals. It does not include those that asked for more events for families, teens, or kids.

- d) Enhance Grinnell College dining. Nineteen of 33 complete surveys (58%) by Grinnell College students requested changes to their dining options. Thirty-five suggestions were provided, including the following. Greater diversity of food (3), more d-hall options (1), better d-hall food (6), more free/healthy snacks (1), shorter lines (1), improve d-hall (2), fresh food (1), more healthy food (1), fresh fruit (5), make bigger (1), nutritionist (1), better vegetarian/vegan (3), more vegetables (1), sushi (1), more dining halls (2), longer hours (1), Lower d-hall cost (1), bigger take-out box (1), gluten free options (1).

5) Updates on efforts.

Participants were interested to learn more about what the city or community was doing in relation to trying to attract and support restaurants and were interested in a way to get updates (3/14 sessions).

6) Additional research.

Participants suggested additional research to determine exactly what kind of restaurant the community might want (like a survey), and a market study for the possibility of a franchise (3/14 sessions).

7) Specific ideas for new restaurants.

A range of specific suggestions and requests were provided across all community sessions regarding what additional options or variety of restaurants might include.

- a) Location. Suggestions were provided for what location would be ideal for a new restaurant.
  - i) Participants suggested doing something near the interstate (5/14 sessions). This was perceived as having less reliance on existing demand in town as it could attract traffic from the highway. Some felt that this may also be the best option for a franchise restaurant.
  - ii) The other most identified locations were the depot (4/14 sessions), something by Walmart (3/14 sessions), and something in Hotel Grinnell (2/14 sessions).
- b) Other suggested spaces included the following.
  - i) Repurposing downtown buildings (1/14 sessions).
  - ii) Using the vacant restaurant spaces created by KFC, Hardees, A&M, 915 Main Street, the old Wells Fargo Drive through (1/14 sessions) (Note that three of these spaces have become unavailable since the sessions.)
- c) Specific categories or type of restaurants. Table 5 provides all specific suggestions regarding type, category, or name-brand restaurant made in community sessions and those pulled from the initial open-ended survey. While “fast food” appears as the single largest category or suggestion, it should be noted that both *more fast-food* and *more variety of restaurants* appeared as options in the prioritization survey. More variety was selected as one of the top seven issues by 483 respondents (46%), while 143 respondents (13.6%) selected more fast food.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Numbers are modified to reflect that Grinnell College students were each counted as 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of a vote to adjust for a disproportional sampling.

**Table 5: Specific Suggestions Regarding Type of Restaurant from Community Sessions and Surveys**

Suggestions	Number of mentions <sup>33</sup>		Suggestions	Number of mentions	
	Comm. Sessions	Surveys		Comm. Sessions	Surveys
Affordable		5	Fast food (no specification)	7	41
Applebee’s or Applebee’s “like”	4		Food court, possibly with start-up kiosks	6	
Arby’s	2		Hamburger place		1
Boba Shop		1	Healthy	3	2
Bagel Shop	1	2	Ice cream	1	
Bakery		6	Indian	7	5
Barbecue		1	Internet café	2	
Bars		8	Italian	3	
Bar n Grill	1		Japanese (or sushi)	2	3
Breakfast options	3		Jeffersons	1	
Buffet	1		Lunch option	2	
Canes	1		Mediterranean	1	
Carry-out options	1		Middle scale	1	
Casual sit down	6		Upscale alternative	4	5
Chain restaurant (no specification)	6	3	Olive Garden	1	1
Chicago Hot Dog	1		Pizza (sit down)	3	
Chick Fila (or other chicken)	11		Ramen	1	
Chinese (or open sit-down in Choung)	2	1	Sandwich & salad place		1
Chipotle	1		Seafood	2	
Coffee shops or cafes (general)		25	Starbucks		2
Comfort food	1		Steakhouse	1	2
Culvers	1	2	South American		2
Dairy Queen	1	1	Tacos		1
Dave and Busters		1	Thai	3	5
Denny’s	1		Vegan		1
Dietary restrictions (something catering to)	2	1	Vegetarian		5
Drive through option	6		Vietnamese (Pho)		1
Ethnic food (no specification)	5	2	Young people (intended for)	2	
Family friendly	4	3			



### Who Should be Involved?

In every community session, participants were asked who should be involved in addressing the issue. As noted above, most participants thought that some support organization was important. Most felt this would be the Chamber, the city, or some economic development organization. Some also thought that some kind of restaurant or business support group could be helpful.

#### 1) Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber was suggested in many sessions as a likely candidate to lead on attracting more restaurants and providing support, information, and a more welcoming environment (6/14 sessions). According to one restaurant owner, the Chamber does provide media and advertising for members, but not everyone joins as some feel the costs are high. The Chamber states on its website that it offers business support. In a couple of sessions, participants questioned Chamber involvement, noting that it may have a conflict of interest because it primarily supports existing businesses members.

#### 2) The city.

The city government was also identified in many sessions as having an important role to play in attracting potential restaurants, providing a welcoming environment, simplifying and/or making clearer the regulation process, planning, and potentially investment. One restaurant owner believed that the city might need to invest to attract additional restaurants if it is going to happen, as it did with the start-up contest that led to the Prairie Canary.

#### 3) Economic development organization.

Participants suggested that some economic development organization distinct from the city and Chamber, but likely collaborating with them, might be the best candidate. POW-180 was mentioned as one possibility, as was creating a group of knowledgeable local business leaders.

#### 4) Business collaboration, or restaurant association.

Participants suggested that there would be value in having greater collaboration among Grinnell businesses, particularly restaurants, and that perhaps a restaurant support group could be formed to provide mentoring and help to understand the challenges of starting and sustaining a business. A restaurant owner agreed that the owners don't really talk to one-another, but also thought that a lot of them had distinct circumstances, and that they might not feel comfortable sharing details of their businesses.

#### 5) Other.

Other key organizations identified as possible assets included the following.

- a) The college for funding and other supports and its efforts to connect further with downtown. One restaurant owner felt that the college could give more concerted attention to downtown businesses, noting that, while there are many benefits to the college's presence, these often seem like "happy byproducts."
- b) USDA, community college, high school, or ISU extension, for business training.
- c) Other businesses in the community to partner with restaurants for more regular patronage.

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<sup>33</sup> Mentions for community sessions in this table refers to number of times the suggestion was made including all mentions across all sessions. It does not solely refer to how many sessions something was raised in.

### What are Grinnell's Strengths Concerning Restaurants?

In community sessions, we asked participants what they believe are the assets that are available to support additional restaurant variety, or existing businesses that they see as a strength in the community. In the initial visioning survey and in community interviews we also asked community members more generally what they feel are strengths and things that improve their quality of life in the community. General strengths that were shared are noted immediately below. Table 6 provides an alphabetized list of organizations and food establishments in the community that were raised as strengths in community sessions, interviews, or through surveys.

#### 1) Restaurant scene as a positive for the town.

While *more variety of restaurants* was the number one issue identified in prioritization survey, in our initial open-ended *visions of Grinnell* survey, the current restaurant scene was also identified as an important strength. In our question, "what are the things that make you glad to live in Grinnell" approximately 10.3% of surveys identified food or drink establishments. This was the 8<sup>th</sup> most identified strength identified for that question. Nine percent of respondents identified such places as having the "greatest impact on your quality of life."

#### 2) Availability of college students (and potential expansion of dining dollars).

College students provide important potential demand, particularly if the use of dining dollars could be expanded. Some also noted the challenges created when students are not on campus.

#### 3) Commuters.

Grinnell has a lot of commuters to town between the school system and businesses.

#### 4) Community funding and grant knowledge.

Grinnell has a number of organizations that provide funding support to the community and have knowledge of possible grants and grant writing experience, including the college, grant organizations, and local businesses.

#### 5) Cost.

Compared to larger city, prices at restaurants don't seem high. (Though many more noted that they felt the prices had become too high compared to other towns or Grinnell's past.)

#### 6) The Depot (old train depot).

Identified as space and as a previous restaurant. As a space, many noted it as nice sit-down atmosphere and good space for entertaining. (Since the sessions, this has been occupied by El Cascabel restaurant.) Many also referred to previous restaurants in this location, noting positives of mid-range pricing with a range of food options.

#### 7) Empty storefronts.

Restaurant additions don't have to be big. The community could look to some of the smaller storefronts that are available.

#### 8) Existing family restaurants.

Families with strong ties to the community who have dedicated themselves to the town and their business. They keep more money in community than franchises.

9) Experienced community members.

Some were uncertain whether the Chamber or city were the appropriate entities to lead on attracting a new business to town and noted that Grinnell has a number of individuals in the business and non-profit community with relevant experience that could serve to lead a development group to attract and support new businesses.

10) Food trucks.

Many indicated interest in food trucks and noted appreciation for those that currently visit, including at Brownells, ones that stop at hotel Grinnell, the Dari Barn truck, the Acai Truck, and a Sushi truck that comes every other week behind Brewhouse.

11) I-80 location and hotels.

Located half-way between Des Moines and Iowa City right off I-80 provides opportunities for tourism (e.g., sports, events, destination restaurants). Additionally, hotels seem to fill every night and could provide greater opportunity to support additional restaurants by directing guests into town and/or supporting a restaurant by the highway.

12) Mexican.

Most sessions noted that Grinnell has a strong representation of Mexican restaurants.

13) Post-Covid.

Demand is increasing again since the Covid pandemic (1 restaurant owner).<sup>34</sup>

14) Space by the interstate.

Many noted this as an underutilized area that could pull traffic from the interstate, serve workers in businesses and plants close to the highway, would provide additional variety for community members, and would likely have less competition with downtown spaces. Some saw this space as the most likely for a franchise restaurant. A downside was noted that it might not serve college students.

15) Supportive community.

People want to support local businesses.

16) Vacant commercial kitchens.

Several spaces in town have existing kitchens or are set up as restaurant spaces (e.g., KFCs, Hardees, A&M, Relish) (not all remain available since holding the community sessions).

17) Youth.

Youth could use jobs provided by restaurants but may have higher price point than previous generations.

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<sup>34</sup> National data also indicates that demand and employment in restaurants returned to pre-pandemic levels by mid-2023. John Mariani, "The US Restaurant Industry has Bounded Back from Covid at Every Level from Fast Food to Fine Dining," Forbes, March 27, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmariani/2023/03/27/the-us-restaurant-industry-has-bounded-back-from-covid-at-every-level-from-fast-food-to-fine-dining/>.

**Table 6: Specific Organizations and Food Establishments Noted as Strengths or Assets**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Comments Provided – Reason for Being Seen as a Strength</b>
Bread Tree	Home delivery of fresh bread and soup.
Brewhouse	Provides a hangout space where groups can get delivery from some local restaurants (e.g., Pagliai’s, Hometown Heroes). Pho and Sushi truck that comes.
Build a Better Grinnell	A good start to figuring out what people want and addressing it.
Caseys	Fast lunch option and pizza alternative.
Chamber of Commerce	Seen by many as an organization that could provide support to increasing restaurant variety and supporting restaurants.
Choung Garden	Only ethnic food option other than Mexican (at the time of the sessions). <sup>35</sup> It was a relatively fast lunch option. Many lamented the loss of being able to dine inside. (It has since re-opened indoor dining.)
Comeback Café	Open for lunch downtown. Open on Mondays.
Dari Barn	Open later. Good place to bring visiting family (though only open seasonally). Has a food truck for events.
Door Dash	Identified as a positive way to create additional demand for restaurants.
Eagles	Barbecue pork catering option.
Frontier	Open every day for breakfast and lunch. Reasonable priced. Good variety.
Grin City Bakery	Popular with “good product at a reasonable price.” (But limited hours/days.)
Grinnell College	Brings in students and lots of visitors who use town dining. Dining options available to the community. Funding support. Could be more supportive in allowing students to use downtown dining. Alumni may serve as investment option.
Hotel Grinnell	Doing well. Has appetizer-like food options. Would be a good space for additional dining option.
Hometown Heroes	Downtown lunch option. Burger option.
Hy-Vee	Lunch and hang out space seen as underutilized.
Iowa Kitchen	Trains young adults to prepare nutritious meals on a budget. Serves a weekly free meal to Grinnell community.
Jay’s Deli	Gluten free options. Downtown lunch option. Open on Mondays.
Jimmy Johns	Good fast-food option. One of three drive through options. Catering option.
Kum n Go	Has helped fill option for fast lunch options and off hours.
Maria’s	Good, fast (“food-truck like”).
Mayflower	Catering option. Has restaurant for Mayflower community.
McDonalds	Core fast food option with drive through. Available through Door Dash.
McNally’s	A good fast lunch with grab and go or sit-down option. Nice food options including healthy options. Popular gathering space.
Montgomery’s	Good for reunions.

<sup>35</sup> Ritu’s was apparently not known to many session participants.

Olmstead Sweet Treats	Enthusiasm for this new restaurant and its expansion in meal options. (Has since closed).
Pagliai's	Good for reunions and events (can host a larger party). Popular, and a Grinnell attraction. Good option to bring out-of-town visitors. Take-out and sit down. Good service. (But not open for lunch.)
Pizza Ranch	Drive through pick up option.
Pow-180	Noted for helping with economic development visioning and a revolving loan fund.
Prairie Canary	Popular upscale option. Downtown lunch. Key location for out-of-town visitors. Opened with town support.
Rabbits Tavern	(no comments)
Saints Rest	Popular gathering space. Only coffee shop in town. Serves as a breakfast option.
Solera	Good gathering space. Good for "date night." Used to do events with wine tasting & food. Good homemade pizza option.
Subway	Can manage large volume orders.
Taco Johns	One of few fast-food drive-through options.
Walmart	Has a food counter.
Westside Diner	Popular with town folk. Serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

## Summary & Discussion

As with much of the country, Grinnell has seen a significant decrease in the number of restaurants over recent years. After recording 34 restaurants in 2009, 2014, and 2019, the town dropped 10 or nearly 30% by the start of 2024, before picking up two more. While the town's per capita average is high relative to the country and Iowa, it is low relative to its selected peer communities in terms of total restaurants, chain restaurants, and coffee shops, while average in terms of bars and fast food.

This loss of availability is clearly felt by the community, which ranked "*more variety of restaurants*" as the top issue for increasing quality of life in the Build a Better Grinnell community prioritization survey. Forty six percent of survey respondents placed the issue in their top seven, and it ranked in the top three of every identified demographic group except for Grinnell College students. In addition to a concern for recent closures and the lack of variety and options, community members also highlighted limits in the hours that restaurants are open (particularly late evenings, Sundays, and Mondays), rising prices, and slow or congested service particularly during lunch hours.

Apart from the lack of options or variety, the main impacts are believed to be that more people now have to drive out of town to satisfy their dining interests, often combining this with other shopping, which can negatively impact on the Grinnell economy. Others simply stay home, or commuters just return home without eating in town. The lack of dining options also exacerbates a general sense of "limited things to do in town" that was also a top issue raised in the first visions of Grinnell Survey. The lack of restaurants is also felt to be an obstacle to recruiting and retaining labor and college students, and to hosting community events on the weekends or family and friends from out of town, all of which is feared to generally reflect poorly on the community.

Apart from workers looking to grab a quick lunch, people wanting to eat later in the evening (such as late shift workers), and businesses looking to recruit and retain staff (or students), there was little sense that there is any specific demographic group affected. Everyone is experiencing what they perceive as limited options, though, as is clear through the range of suggestions provided, they don't necessarily feel it in the same way.

While Covid and recent inflation were likely issues that affected the shift in Grinnell's restaurant landscape, as it did in the rest of the country, a number of the core restaurants to close were due to retirements in a context in which there was no succession and a failed effort to sell. It is possible that the difficulty in finding willing buyers or replacing the loss more quickly was impacted by the broader national issues.

Apart from these broader issues, the core obstacles to increased restaurant variety in Grinnell that were suggested by participants in community sessions aligned with those shared by several restaurant owners. Grinnell's demand is limited by its size, though most felt that the potential demand was not being fully realized (e.g., I-80 traffic, college students, hotel guests, potential tourists). The challenges of starting and running a restaurant are also significant. One realtor noted the high cost of property and renovation. While many participants imagined that start-up costs were high, restaurant owners noted that, while true, ongoing financing needs are even more complicated and often under-appreciated by those looking to get into the business. Labor shortages are also a current problem, with skilled jobs being particularly difficult to fill. There is also a lack of support for potential restaurants or investors to navigate these challenges and no ongoing business incubation.

Participants suggested a range of ways to enhance restaurant options, as well a handful of alternatives to new restaurants that might fill the perceived gap in food-based entertainment and dining options. The former included diversifying existing restaurant menus and expanding services on the weekend, Mondays, and evenings. The latter included more food events or events with food and increasing the presence of food trucks. The interest in food events or events with food (including trucks) seems to reinforce the idea that the interest in restaurant variety overlaps with entertainment and “things to do.” The restaurant owners were interested in the idea of more events in town as a way to build tourism and get people downtown, but not particularly interested in participating in food events as vendors. Suggestions also included more availability on Sundays, Mondays, and late evenings.

One core set of suggestions for attracting greater variety to Grinnell provided by the restaurant owners and session participants focused on increasing demand, particularly through marketing support – something the restaurants are hard pressed to do by themselves – and adding community events (though not exclusively food) to increase tourism and community activity. The second core set of suggestions focused on a range of support in recruiting and supporting potential restaurants, including help with available space, clear information on the process to start a restaurant, business services/knowledge, funding, and a generally welcoming and supportive environment. A food court or other type of restaurant start-up incubator was one common idea put forward. Support for existing restaurants would also help to ensure less turnover and impact caused by potential newcomers.

There was little consensus on a specific type of restaurant that was most desirable, though the range of suggestions generally cluster around three areas: 1) ethnic foods that will bring diversity to the community (note that this research was conducted before the start of I-80 Dhaba); 2) more fast foods or quick lunch options (Chick-fil-a was by far the most requested); 3) a casual sit-down restaurant nice-enough for a range of occasions, but not too pricey. Apart from the categories of food people would like to see, the most requested spaces were something in the Depot (which has since been filled by El Cascabel), and something by the interstate to support workers in the commercial strip, catch the extra demand from the highway, and provide an additional option for the community.

Most participants felt that some organization was necessary to help support this process. The Chamber of Commerce and city were obvious contenders for many, particularly given the history of attracting the original Prairie Canary through the best bite competition in 2012. Others felt that some other economic development group, such as Pow I-80, or a community-based group of knowledgeable and invested businesspersons might be more appropriate.

Despite the loss of a handful of restaurants, many still feel that the community has good restaurant options, and we did not experience anyone in the research process who is not thankful for the restaurants that have sustained a footprint in Grinnell. The effort to attract additional diversity could benefit from a set of important community assets including a supportive set of foundations and organizations, Grinnell’s location on I-80 combined with multiple hotels, the town’s centrality to the county and region, including a large number of commuters, and Grinnell College’s students and programming.

# Appendix 1. What are Grinnell's Peer Communities Doing?

Grinnell's self-selected peer communities (Decorah, Fairfield, Pella, and Waverly) exceeded Grinnell on most restaurant measures, so we called the Chamber of Commerce in each town to ask how they have managed to have so many restaurants and what support they might be providing. We were able to connect with every chamber except for Decorah. Following is a summary of those conversations. Except for the count of restaurants, the information provided comes exclusively from those conversations.

## Fairfield (41 restaurants, 8 chains)

### 1) How does Fairfield manage to have so many restaurants for the size of the town?

Fairfield gets a lot of visitors and that helps to sustain the large number of restaurants. They also host a *Restaurant Week* in April to revitalize downtown restaurants. The Maharishi University attracts a lot of visitors (parents, new students, etc.), who provide substantial business to restaurants. Many restaurants and coffee shops are owned and/or run by spouses of teachers at the University, so a lot of restaurants are home-grown.

### 2) Has Fairfield used any kind of funding to attract or support restaurants? Any other kinds of incentives?

There is some funding available through the Chamber of Commerce, but they are designed for small businesses overall, and not specific to restaurants. The Chamber hosts Weekly Traction Thursdays where speakers are invited to talk about different aspects of running small businesses (including crowdfunding strategies). There are also events specifically catered to small businesses. After all these events, there are a couple of hours kept aside for networking.

There are some employers who are larger, and they partner with the Chamber to provide funding for opening small businesses. They are also able to provide low-interest loans through the city and the partners.

### 3) Do they have any franchise restaurants? If so, how were they able to do this given the city's population?

Population has not been a big consideration for franchises. Jimmy John's just opened, and McDonald's is a long-time partner, which is active in the programs of the Chamber. They have a group in the Chamber of all retail managers, and they meet annually to talk about new programs and initiatives for the city.

### 4) Do they have any regular or annual events that highlight food or local restaurants, or for which food plays a significant role?

There is a 'Food Truck Frenzy' event in April where several restaurants will bring their own food trucks and other food trucks from outside Fairfield will also come. There are several events with food involved in the Square that happen all around the year. There are also gravel rides that attract food-businesses. Restaurants usually have their own trucks, and Chick-Fil-A comes from Des Moines to participate in these regularly.

## Pella (33 restaurants, 16 chains)

### 1) How do they manage to have so many restaurants for the size of the town?

There are some big employers who invest in the community and that helps bring new restaurants. There are partnerships with developers and restaurant companies facilitated by these big employers. These employers also bring people from outside to visit. These employers also got Chick-Fil-A to the town, and they also bring in restaurants from Des Moines to open in Pella.



2) Have they used any kind of funding to attract or support restaurants? Any other kinds of incentives?  
The incentive is the 'promise of being busy' since there are so many people willing to eat at restaurants in Pella. Employers give grants and funding. There is also crowdfunding from the community.

3) Do they have any franchise restaurants? If so, how were they able to do this given the city's population?

It's a big deal for Chick-Fil-A to open in Pella. This was possible only after doing a couple of studies. These studies focused on the traffic that Pella receives and proving that the population of the town is not reflective of the total traffic that Pella has (since a lot of people visit or come in to work from surrounding communities but don't live in Pella). After doing these studies, proving there is a bigger workforce than those who live there and that there are several visitors, they were able to get Chick-Fil-A to come and open up.

4) Do they have any regular or annual events that highlight food or local restaurants, or for which food plays a significant role?

There is a Food Festival which gives a big economic push to restaurants. There are several summer food truck events, in which many restaurants participate, and some food trucks come from outside of Pella. There are also many mini festivals every week of June and July in which there are food trucks/tables set up by restaurants. There are also collaborations between retail businesses and restaurants in the form of 'Shopping and Food' events.

### **Waverly (30 restaurants, 10 chains)**

1) How do they manage to have so many restaurants for the size of the town?

Waverly is a college town, so the influx of visitors helps to keep restaurants busy. Most of the restaurant traffic is college-related (college programs, families coming in, visiting students).

2) Have they used any kind of funding to attract or support restaurants? Any other kinds of incentives?

There are general façade-improvement grants that are available and other funds for renovations. These are not specific to restaurants, but a lot of restaurants use these. The façade improvement grants are used for Main Street restaurants quite often.

3) Do they have any franchise restaurants? If so, how were they able to do this given the city's population?

There are a few franchises like Jimmy Johns, McDonalds, Applebee's, and Taco Bell. The population is not a big issue since the college brings in high traffic for these franchises and it works out well for them. There are no programs specific to restaurants or franchises.

Do they have any regular or annual events that highlight food or local restaurants, or for which food plays a significant role?

There are no events in particular. Sometimes restaurants and coffee shops will collaborate but its sporadic and rare.

## Appendix 2: Policies and Practices from Other Communities

While Grinnell community members provided a number of ideas, it is also useful to look for inspiration from what other communities with similar needs have done. Below some “best practice” suggestions from literature as well as examples and links to sources on what other communities have done to diversify restaurants or provide food events in their communities, particularly looking for smaller, rural, and Midwest examples. This is not intended to be comprehensive, nor are these intended as recommendations from Build a Better Grinnell.

### Food Fairs & Competitions

A food fair is an event where attendees can explore and enjoy a wide range of foods from various vendors, highlighting culinary diversity and culture. Regional Examples Include the following.

- 1) Rhubacue on the River (Manchester, IA, pop. 5k): Put on by Manchester Area Chamber of Commerce. Celebrates all things rhubarb, including a rhubarb stand with rhubarb brats, rhubarb wine tasting, and a Manchester rhubarb cookbook.<sup>36</sup>
- 2) Ice Cream Days (Le Mars, IA, pop. 10.5k): Le Mars is home to Blue Bunny. Includes a parade, ice cream flavor creation contest, and a Grill 'n' Chill Rib Rally. IA.<sup>37</sup>
- 3) Bicycle, Blues & BBQ (Clear Lake, IA, pop. 7.5k): Three-day festival beginning July 9. Includes all-you-can-eat Belgian waffles followed by barbecue, and bike races.<sup>38</sup>

### Restaurant Weeks

A limited-time, city-wide event featuring local food establishments, with special promotions/menus aimed to increase support of local dining options and promote development/tourism in the area. Restaurant Weeks can bring in new guests, even for already-established restaurants. It is an opportunity for community members who enjoy dining out but have never gotten a chance to try all the places in which they were interested. Restaurants have set all-time business records during such events.

- 1) Niles Restaurant Week (Niles, MI, pop. 11k+): Greater Niles Chamber of Commerce started an annual Restaurant Week in 2021 and declared March their “restaurant month.” Niles has the “NODE” – Niles Outdoor Dining Experience – a downtown street that has been repurposed for outdoor dining (picnic tables, a fireplace) with community funding and support. The following people/organizations were involved in this effort: Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, Berrien County Board of Commissioners, The Greater Niles Chamber.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Manchester Rivers Days,” Delaware County, Iowa Tourism, Accessed August 3, 2024,

<https://delawarecountyiowatourism.com/events/manchester-river-days/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ice Cream Days, Le Mars, Iowa. Accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.icecreamdays.com/>.

<sup>38</sup> “Bicycle, Blues & BBQ Festival,” Facebook, Accessed March 23, 2024,

<https://www.facebook.com/BicycleBluesBBQ/>.

<sup>39</sup> John Gonzalez, “Here is what Restaurant Week looks like in small town America,” M Live, Updated Feb. 27, 2021,

<https://www.mlive.com/michigansbest/2021/02/here-is-what-restaurant-week-looks-like-in-small-town-america.html>;

Mary Caltrider, “Niles celebrating “restaurant week” to promote local businesses,” ABC 57, March 1, 2021, <https://abc57.com/news/niles-celebrating-restaurant-week-to-promote-local-businesses>.

- 2) Escanaba Restaurant Week (Escanaba, MI, pop. 12k+): Organized by Escanaba Downtown Development Authority. They want to use this event to boost local businesses in the winter, where there is slower traffic. Escanaba Downtown Development Authority was involved in this initiative.<sup>40</sup>

### **Taste of (the Town)**

For one low price, guests can sample appetizers, entrees, desserts, pastries, and drinks from the area's restaurants, caterers, bakeries, and beverage companies. Taste of the Town events are often a fundraiser for a cause in the community.

- 1) 18th Annual Taste of the Town 2023 Plymouth, MA (pop. 60k): 20 participating restaurants. Had 8 sponsors helping to cover event costs and 20 restaurants willing to participate.<sup>41</sup>
- 2) Taste of the Town 2023 State College, PA (pop. 40k): Centre County United Way's (CCUW )Taste of The Town is back! Sunday, November 19 at The Penn Stater Conference Center.<sup>42</sup>
- 3) 18th Annual Taste of the town Hagerstown, MD (pop. 44k): Included raffle packages, tables, and sponsors.<sup>43</sup>

### **Food Tours**

Food tours are guided culinary journeys through an area's food scene. Participants can stop at several different venues, which might include restaurants, street food stalls, markets, and specialty shops. They generally focus on an area's culinary cultural identity and local history.

### **Cooking Classes**

Cooking classes in small cities or towns offer community-focused experiences. The instructors are frequently local chefs or experienced home cooks.

- 1) Cooking in the Kitchen with Nina in Robins, IA, was started in 2006. Participants are seated around the counter and presented with a copy of the recipes to be featured in the class. Nina demonstrates each recipe, offering nearly a full serving of every item prepared in the class and an accompanying beverage.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Restaurant Week focuses on downtown Esby dining," Daily Press, March 4, 2024, <https://www.dailypress.net/news/local-news/2024/03/restaurant-week-focuses-on-downtown-esby-dining/>.

<sup>41</sup> "Taste of the Town 2023," Plymouth Public Library Foundation, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://pplfdn.org/taste-of-the-town-2023/>.

<sup>42</sup> "Taste of the Town," State College, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.statecollege.com/event/taste-of-the-town/>.

<sup>43</sup> "Reach's Annual Tasting Event is Back in Town!," Taste of the Town, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.tasteofthetownwc.com/sponsor-a-table>.

<sup>44</sup> Cooking in the Kitchen with Nina, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://cookingwithnina.net/cooking-class-schedules/>.

### Enticing Chefs to Small Cities

There has been a trend of chefs from bigger cities aiming for smaller towns to open their new restaurants. Small towns are less competitive, have more eager residents who want to try their food, and have cheaper rent. In the case of a college town, it can be easy to get waitstaff.

RopeSwing, an Arkansas-based hospitality group, has found success by focusing on rebuilding and developing the downtowns of small cities. This includes attracting new talent for restaurants from nearby cities. Challenges include having to train staff that enables them to wear multiple hats (Front of the House manager may have to serve and servers may have to be behind the bar). Success is dependent on the volume of sales - this means the restaurants need to have cheaper specials that change regularly, and a decent-enough system for home-deliveries. Restaurants also need the support of locals to promote it and attract customers from nearby towns for food festivals, etc. Winslow, Arizona (pop. 8900) developed a town-wide rewards/loyalty system for all eateries.<sup>45</sup>

### Pop-Ups

Pop-ups are cost effective ways to invite new eateries to town. These could be from established eateries or be organized by aspiring food-business-owners who wish to test their product. They could be standalone and operate for a few days or be part of a larger event. Pop-ups often become full-time restaurants.

- 1) Some pop-up examples which have been successful (not small town specific):
  - a) Themed pop-ups (TV show, etc.)
  - b) Changing cuisines every day/week
  - c) Outdoors/picturesque
  - d) Farm-to-Table
  - e) Dinner paired with massages, etc.
  - f) Paired with retail stores (jewelry, flowers, etc.)<sup>46</sup>
- 2) Pop-ups will generally need several licenses if they serve food. These include:
  - a) Sales License.
  - b) Zoning permits.
  - c) Food handler's license.
  - d) Catering license.
  - e) Health and safety inspections.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Marisa Upson, "Restaurants Finding Success by Focusing on Small Towns," Emerging, Sept. 19, 2019, <https://cookingwithnina.net/cooking-class-schedules/>; "High end fine dining restaurants moving into small towns has become a new fad," The Pasta Nation, Accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.thepastastation.restaurant/high-end-fine-dining-restaurants-moving-into-small-towns-has-become-a-new-fad/>; Hilary Dixler, "What Happens when Big-city Chefs Open Small-town Restaurants," CNBC, Updated Sept. 15, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/05/06/what-happens-when-big-city-chefs-open-small-town-restaurants.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Tiffany Regaudie, "Your Ultimate Pop-Up Restaurant Inspiration List: 13 Restaurants You Need to See," Touch Bistro, Accessed March 23, 2024, <https://www.touchbistro.com/blog/restaurant-pop-up-inspiration-list/>.

<sup>47</sup> Allie van Duyne, "What is a Pop-up Restaurant & How to Open One, Toast, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://pos.toasttab.com/blog/on-the-line/pop-up-restaurants>.

- 3) Sometimes, pop-ups take the form of food trucks for established businesses. They could also be housed in local stores that have some of these licenses and are willing to share equipment and infrastructure. Some businesses will run on an entirely pop-up based model.<sup>48</sup>

### Food Trucks

Food truck events are popular as one-night-a-week events (e.g., Food Truck Tuesday), for festivals, events, and to complement sit-down restaurants. A food truck festival can be a way to advertise and promote new restaurants that want to start their own small business and provide the community with more variety at lower cost.

Most examples of weekly events come from larger cities. For example:

- 1) In 2020, the City of Montgomery in partnership with the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce and other local businesses, launched Food Truck Fridays featuring four local food truck vendors. The city aimed to attract a diverse range of residents and visitors.<sup>49</sup>
- 2) Eagan MN (pop. 69,000) is planning a large food truck summer event (The Eagan Truck Festival).<sup>50</sup>

Information on permitting food truck for Grinnell can be found at:

<https://www.grinnelliowa.gov/413/Food-Truck-Permit>

### Home Cooking Chefs (e.g., in Grinnell Ritu's Delicious Food, Bread Tree Bakery)

Home cooking chefs work out of their home and may work for special occasions or everyday meals. An example is Friend That Cooks, an in-home personal chef service in Des Moines. The services also offer in-home parties and in-home cooking lessons. They recruit local chefs with huge repertoires of ethnic and classic dishes.<sup>51</sup>

### Culinary Training

In 2014, Grinnell College and the Iowa Valley Community College launched a Culinary Arts Apprenticeship program, which trains community college students to be certified chefs. The program takes three years, part time to complete.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Allie van Duyn, "What is a Pop-up...."

<sup>49</sup> "New food truck event coming to downtown Montgomery," City of Montgomery, Alabama, Posted, Aug. 7, 2020, <https://www.montgomeryal.gov/Home/Components/News/News/3973/16?arch=1&npage=3>.

<sup>50</sup> "Food Truck Festival – August 9, 2024," City of Eagan, Accessed August 4, 2024, <https://cityofeagan.com/foodtruck>.

<sup>51</sup> "In-home Personal Chefs in Des Moines <https://www.weeklymealprep.com/des-moines/>.

<sup>52</sup> "Iowa Valley Grinnell cooks up Culinary Arts Apprenticeship program," the Scarlet & Black, Sept. 12, 2014, <https://thesandb.com/16377/community/iowa-valley-grinnell-cooks-up-culinary-arts-apprenticeship-program/>;

### College Contributions to Community Dining Diversity

Grinnell College catering can host community cooking classes and workshops, which offer culinary education to both students and community members.

Cornell's dining services are managed by Bon Appetit, which offers catering services for both on-campus and off-campus events, with a special menu available for students and student groups/organizations.<sup>53</sup>

### Bed and Breakfasts

Bed and Breakfasts already have the real estate to attract customers and serve food. Revitalizing existing B&Bs and bringing new ones in with a focus on food can offer a solution to increasing variety of restaurants.

- 1) The Urstad House B&B in Minnesota has proven to offer great value to visitors and tourists by focusing on the food. People come in for staycations and cheap travel.<sup>54</sup>
- 2) Kentucky has some of the best B&Bs in the country (linked). They attract local crowds to visit and eat while also getting visitors to come and stay with them. Their main focus is the quality of the food.<sup>55</sup>

### Expanding Diversity offered by Existing Restaurants (Diversifying Menus, Seasonal or Special Events)

Special events and seasonal menus can expand diversity offered by existing restaurants, increase demand among existing customers, and bring in new customers.

- 1) Deluxe Cakes and Pastries & St. Burch Tavern & Basta Pizzeria, Iowa City, IA, prepare for the season of love by carefully planning the perfect dishes for their Valentine-themed menus.<sup>56</sup>
- 2) Farm to table harvest dinner, in Clear Lake, IA, celebrates Autumn's bounty of local food with a ticketed dinner served amidst the Garden's fall glory.<sup>57</sup>

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"Culinary," Marshalltown Community College, Iowa Valley Community College District, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://mcc.iavalley.edu/program/culinary/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Dining Services," Cornell College, Dining Services, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.cornellcollege.edu/dining-services/>.

<sup>54</sup> "6 Reasons Why a Minnesota Bed and Breakfast Makes a Great Local Staycation or can be the Perfect Getaway Destination!," Turning Waters, Bed, Breakfast & Brewery, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.turningwatersbandb.com/blog/2023/08/6-reasons-why-a-minnesota-bed-and-breakfast-makes-a-great-local-staycation-or-can-be-the-perfect-getaway-destination>.

<sup>55</sup> Rachel Shulhafer, "These 9 Small Towns In Kentucky Are Home To The Most Relaxing Bed And Breakfasts," Only in Your State, Updated on Nov. 21, 2022, <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/kentucky/small-town-bed-and-breakfasts-ky/>.

<sup>56</sup> "Iowa City restaurants show the 'love' of the season through a special Valentine's menu," The Daily Iowan, Feb. 13, 2024, <https://dailyiowan.com/2024/02/13/iowa-city-restaurants-show-the-love-of-the-season-through-a-special-valentines-menu/>.

<sup>57</sup> "Farm to Table Harvest Dinner," Central Gardens of North Iowa, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.centralgardensnorthiowa.com/event/farm-to-table-harvest-dinner/>.

- 3) Seasonal menus provide the ideal opportunity to experiment with new flavors and food products driving demand. It can be an opportunity to start or increase the use of local suppliers and farms.<sup>58</sup>

#### Miscellaneous Strategies to Increase Sales<sup>59</sup>

- 1) Signature dish and daily specials. Restaurants in small towns may benefit from small menus. A restaurant can become a fixture with a couple of dishes done really well and a signature dish that people associate with the restaurant. This simplifies inventory and reduces waste, allowing chefs to focus on quality.
- 2) Offer delivery and pickup. Rural areas or small towns might not have that many dine-in customers to begin with. Restaurants can expand their reach by offering takeaway. This can broaden the customer base and introduce the restaurant to a wider audience.
- 3) Special offers and promotions for regulars. Keeping regulars happy is fundamental to the success of a small-town restaurant, often contributing most of the profits. Recognizing loyal customers can be achieved through personalized service, recognizing their preferences, and perhaps offering loyalty rewards or special promotions. Engaging with regulars, asking for feedback, and making them feel like a part of the restaurant's family can foster a strong sense of community.
- 4) Market locally. From flyer distribution to local TV and radio ads, community networking, events, press releases, and sponsorships, many offline marketing ideas still work to support success. Additionally, collaborating with local colleges for student discounts or special events can create a buzz among the younger demographic. Hosting themed nights that resonate with local interests or celebrating local milestones and achievements can also strengthen community ties.
- 5) Attract new customers with exclusive deals. Constantly attracting new business is necessary for any restaurant owner. Referral programs incentivize regulars to bring in new patrons, turning the loyal customer base into a marketing tool. Hosting special events or participating in community festivals can also serve as an opportunity to showcase offerings to potential new customers and embedding the restaurant further into the local culture and economy.

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<sup>58</sup> Nicole Georgiev, "Seasonal Menu: Benefits of Having a Seasonal Restaurant Menu," Blue Cart, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.bluecart.com/blog/benefits-of-having-a-seasonal-menu>.

<sup>59</sup> "How to Make a Small-Town Restaurant Successful," Oracle Gloria Food,

## How Cities Can Help Foster New Retail or Restaurant Businesses<sup>60</sup>

### 1) Develop and promote marketing strategies.

Use local email lists, social media pages, and websites to promote a new business in town. Communities with the ability to communicate with effectively with local residents can be more successful in attracting tenants. The capability needs to be marketed via economic development, or planning, and brokers and owners that have listings in the city.

### 2) Expedite/eliminate/waive the CUP process.

More uses are subject to a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) and the costs in most cities have increased. Cities could either reduce or eliminate the fee or agree to refund the fee if the use is not approved.

### 3) Show empathy.

Encouraging municipal staffs to have empathy for the challenge and risk that each entrepreneur wants to take would be very helpful. Employees that are encountered often have a “roadblock” type mentality vs a “guiding” mentality, forgetting that they are in a position to “serve” and bring new business to the city.

### 4) Provide atypical office hours.

Many people who want to start a business are already working normal business hours. Providing early morning or Saturday hours can be supportive of budding entrepreneurs.

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<sup>60</sup> “How Cities Can Help Foster New Retail or Restaurant Businesses,” Progressive Real Estate Partners, Accessed March 23, 2024, <https://progressiverep.com/how-cities-can-help-foster-new-retail-or-restaurant-businesses/>.



# Appendix 3. Funding Options

## Revolving Loan Fund Program

- 1) The Economic Development Administration (<https://www.eda.gov/grant-resources/economic-development-directory/ia>) provides businesses access to revolving loan funds when they cannot obtain traditional bank financing for capital.
- 2) Poweshiek Iowa Development Revolving Loan Fund (Pow I-80) is open to existing, or start-up businesses located in Poweshiek County that have 50 or fewer employees and less than \$1 million in projected gross revenue. The applicant must contribute their own cash into the business and have 10% equity outside bank financing. The funds come from local industry, utilities, municipalities, development organizations, and a grant from USDA Rural Development. Applications must demonstrate diversification of the local economy or job creation/retention.<sup>61</sup> (<https://www.powi80.com/index.php?pageid=746f7069635f69643a3132>)

## USDA Rural Business Development Grants

The purpose of the program is to promote economic development and job creation projects through the awarding of grant funds to eligible entities. Applications will compete in two separate categories, business opportunity grants and business enterprise grants, for use in funding various business and community projects that serve rural areas. (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-business-development-grants>)

## USDA Rural Business Investment Program

This program provides a Rural Business Investment Company (RBIC) license to newly formed developmental capital organizations to help meet the equity capital investment needs in rural communities. (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-business-investment-program>)

## Small Business Administration

Option for Food Truck Owners who have a vested interest and have exhausted other funding options.<sup>62</sup>

## Iowa Small Business Grants

Iowa Small Business Grants provides financial assistance to small businesses in Iowa, including food truck businesses. <https://www.usgrants.org/iowa/small-business-grants>

## More Information on Funding Options

Fundera provides a guide on restaurant loans for small businesses: <https://www.fundera.com/business-loans/guides/restaurant-loans>.

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<sup>61</sup> One local business expert notes that historically they have not funded restaurants due to their volatility/risk. The organization is under new leadership. Interested persons should inquire about current funding options.

<sup>62</sup> "How to Start a Food Truck Business in Iowa," IA Source Link, Accessed March 24, 2024, <https://www.iasourcelink.com/guides/industry-specific-guides/start-a-food-truck/>.

# Appendix 4: Questionnaire Guide for Community Discussion Hosts

The following is the discussion guide that was provided to hired community discussion hosts. A similar set of questions was asked in listening sessions and focus groups.

## More Variety of Restaurants

### **Part 1: The nature of the problem**

- What is the problem here? What is wrong with the restaurants that we currently have?
- How bad is this problem?
- Are there specific kinds of restaurants that are missing?
- Is this always a problem or is it worse at particular times (of the day, week, year)?
- How long has this been an issue? Is it getting better, worse?

### **Part 2: The Impacts or consequences.**

- How does the lack of variety of restaurants affect you or your family?
- Can you give some specific examples of when and how you have been affected?
- Given the lack of variety of restaurants in Grinnell, what do you do to fulfill this need?
- What challenges do you face in filling this need in other ways?
- How does it affect the community?
- What happens if nothing is done?

### **Part 3: The Causes**

- Why are we in this situation? Why don't we have a greater variety of restaurants?
- What will be the obstacles to getting this need met for the community?

### **Part 4: Solutions**

- What ideas for solutions do you have for individuals, families, or the community as a whole?
- Are you aware of any efforts to address this issue in the past? What happened?
- Are you aware of any current efforts to address this issue? Please share.
- What do you see as the community's strengths in regard to this issue? (What is working well? What might we build on?)
- Are there groups or individuals in the community that would be helpful or central in addressing this?
- Are there funding sources available to help with this?

### **Part 5: Other**

- What else do you want us to know or be thinking about in relation to this issue?