



ANNUAL REPORT

THE 7th 2nd INITIATIVE

THE 712 INITIATIVE

The 712 Initiative's vision is to make Council Bluffs a dynamic healthy community where families and businesses choose to live, work and play.

OUR MISSION:

The 712 Initiative works to improve the economic vitality of Council Bluffs through investments in the built environment, activating public spaces and delivering programs that increase social engagement and healthy lifestyles.

OUR GOALS:

The 712 Initiative prioritizes efforts along seven goals.

Build quality housing and commercial stock

Attract new residents to Council Bluffs

Connect community members

Engage neighborhoods and the public in programs

Invest in new redevelopment projects

Sustain organization through partnerships

Energize community life and well-being

2020 - A Year of Pivots

We have all been in situations where we've had to ask for something and were uncomfortable doing so. A big one for me came this past year when I had to ask our Director of Programming & Events to find a way to continue our mission of activating public spaces and engaging the public during a once in a century world pandemic.

While we are a different nonprofit than most direct human service providers, our 2020 still had its challenges: events that once had the purpose to attract dense crowds had to invent a different set of rules for engagement, COVID pauses for capital asks in the foundation world jeopardized our downtown \$5.4 million project slated for 2021, 115 volunteers lined up early 2020 to infuse love and sweat equity into our neighborhood Rock the Block event slammed to a halt, and all time low interest rates flooded the real estate and subcontractor market right when we started our pilot housing revitalization program.

Still, I could not be more proud in reporting the pivots our staff contributed to push forward our work and mission for the Council Bluffs community. During strict early spring quarantine, the video series Building a Better Bluffs was formed to encourage and inspire our followers. We went from inspiring 450 runners for an annual 5K race to 1,000 participating in our #5kFriday group.

Our Rock the Block program took a different form with individuals and families working on smaller exterior projects. The most citizen engagement in our 24-year history, came with the support for 530 W. Broadway's local landmark designation and Urban Revitalization program support.

While we can all agree this pandemic has caused incredible hardships with lives lost, economic destruction and vast interruption with our everyday life, there is a very small part that I am grateful for its adversity to inspire sense of community and generosity in time, talent and treasure to our mission.

I am proud to say we gave individuals an outlet to contribute to their community. Father - son teams came out to clean out basements and rip out cabinets so we could do more with the resources we had, garden superstars tended our community garden and produced 303 pounds of produce for local shelters, and citizens advocated for our projects that will start construction 2021, energize our downtown, supply much needed housing units and increase our local tax base by 418%.

For all the new business and individual partners that came to our call this year, we thank you. To all those existing partners that stuck with us through this hardship and cheered us on, we thank you. Thank you for believing in us and lifting all of us up at the 712 so we can pay it forward for the community at large.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheryl Garst".

Sheryl Garst, CEO

2020 HIGHLIGHTS

424

volunteers who
gave their time

48

farmers market
council bluffs
vendors

8,204

square feet of livable space
purchased to be incorporated in our
Housing Revitalization Program



EVENTS & PROGRAMS

712 Day

1,007 Health Walk
Challenge

Adopt-A-Street

Backyard Movie Night

BIKEtober in the Bluffs

Block Party Trailer

Building a Better Bluffs

Clean Sweep

CreekTop Gardens

Downtown
Revitalization Fund

Fall Into Gardening

Farmers Market
Council Bluffs

Housing Revitalization
Program

Movie Night in
Council Bluffs

Rock the Block

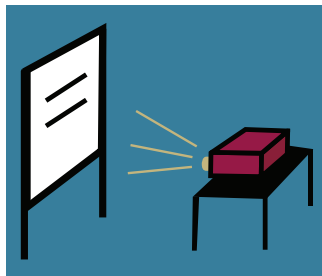
Rock the Block Tool
Trailer

Shoe Recycling Drive

Winterfest Holiday
Lights Tour

63

backyard movie
nights booked
last summer



1,063

participating in
#5kFriday



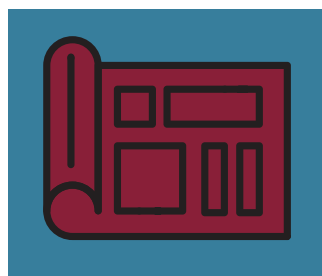
936

sq ft painted
in 100 Block
Passageway



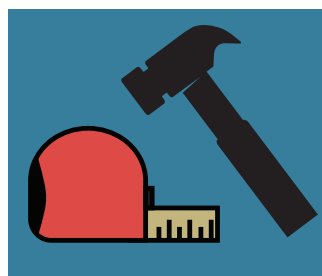
\$3.1 M

secured for
530 W Broadway
project



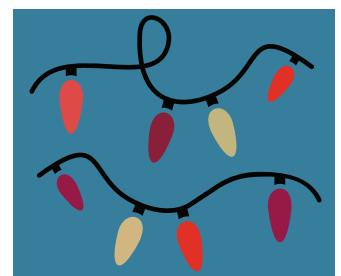
15

Rock The Block
projects lined up



87

Winterfest
Holiday Lights
Tour stops



Flashback to March 2020, the week prior to the Shamrock Shuffle, our annual 5k fun run.

This year has the largest registration in the history of the event with more than 450 people signed up.

Monday, March 9, we started to hear grumblings about a virus that may affect events. There wasn't much "real" information but went ahead and scheduled a meeting with the planning committee to discuss how (or if) this unknown illness would impact the 5K that was at the end of the week.

Thursday, March 12, the committee met over lunch at Barleys to discuss what, if anything, should be done in the light of this virus. As they met and talked, the Big East Tournament was playing in the background. The game breaks for half time and a nervous announcement was made saying "The Big East Tournament is *cancelled*." Right in the middle of a game no less.

Those words hit like a ton of bricks and it took a few moments to acclimate to the gravity of what had been heard. At that point we knew the Shamrock Shuffle needed to be cancelled for community safety.

April 2020. The next few weeks flipped us all upside down as people began social distancing and even sheltering in place. In return many people struggled with being cooped up and sedentary. In response to the need for community, the need for activity, and the need to get out of our homes and feel normal again, we created the Facebook group **#5KFriday - Fitness at a Distance**.



This group's aim was to get as many people as possible to walk, jog, run a 5K each Friday. The idea took off like wildfire, and what started as a small core group of 25 people quickly grew to over 1,000 people getting outside, exercising, and more importantly sharing positivity and encouragement with each other each week. On Fridays throughout the summer there would be as many as 250 people each week who posted their version of a 5K and comment on others posts, spreading the sense of togetherness and community that we all desperately needed.

If we were never forced to cancel the Shamrock Shuffle we would have never created such an amazing online community and weekly movement. We are proud to offer another platform to tie into our active events (Shamrock Shuffle and BIKETober in the Bluffs) in which our community can get outside, be healthy, and share positivity with their neighbors.



Our Rock the Block program was created to infuse a neighborhood block with hundreds of volunteers to help homeowners with exterior projects in a one-day event.

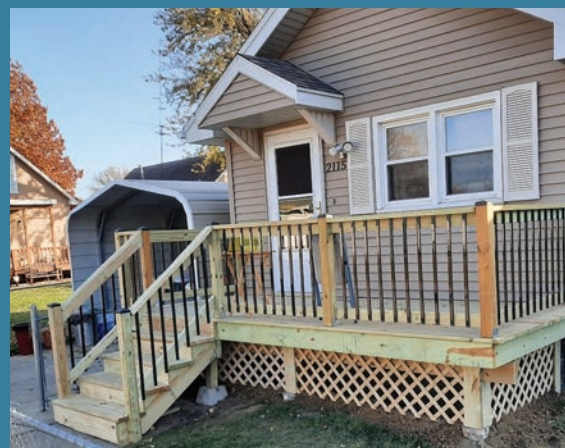
With grant money awarded from Iowa West Foundation and First National Bank, and a partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Council Bluffs, the stage was set for a great event along 3rd Avenue near Edison Elementary. *And then the world turned upside down.*

Determined to follow through for our neighbors, we made two major adjustments to our approach.

First, we used part of our First National Bank grant money to create the Rock the Block Tool Trailer. This provided us with the inventory necessary to tackle these projects professionally and safely. Keeping in line with our mission to build community – the trailer was made available for Council Bluffs residents ready to take on their own DIY projects.

Second, rather than a large event, we have been working in smaller volunteer groups to complete these projects one by one with a goal of 15 homeowners assisted. While a large event does provide a certain infusion of energy, we have really enjoyed being able to get to know the neighbors around the Edison Elementary School area.

We replaced a dilapidated front porch, tore down a garage that was split across property lines and falling apart, helped with landscaping, and replaced nonfunctioning windows and leaking gutters, just to name a few projects. Projects that these homeowners needed a helping hand with either due to lack of resources or having a limited income. The homeowner pride we see after finishing these projects really makes it all worthwhile.



2020 was spent putting together the many pieces needed for our mixed income 19-unit development at 530 W Broadway –

fundraising, building schematics, and site investigation to understand what historical/ original materials remain.

Over the summer we did a call to the public, via social media, to ask for support of the property being designated a local historic landmark. We were blown away by the number of comments received.

The post resulted in:

12,290 people reached

648 reactions 

333 comments 

This project became the one with the biggest citizen engagement in our 24-year history.

So many supported the building's reuse while others remembered patronizing one of the shops that once occupied the building. The building meant so much to Council Bluffs.



Through this citizen engagement, we learned more than we ever imagined possible.

Iowa Clothes was the longest serving business in 530 W Broadway, which closed its doors in 1996. Our call for stories introduced us to several individuals who worked at the store as well as Patty Nogg, the granddaughter of the original Iowa Clothes owner, Harry Cohen. Her first-hand stories of the store recreated the feel and importance of the business.

The 712 Initiative was thrilled when Patty reached out to make a large donation for naming rights of the building – henceforth making this property *The Cohen Building*.

In December the building was officially designated a local landmark by the city council. The property is noted as being “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history”. Especially since it sits at the west entrance of our downtown.

The official local landmark status not only highlights the building's significance to our local history, it also makes it possible for the building to apply for State historic tax credits – helping to complete fundraising for the project. An award of these tax credits ensures the historic character and materials of the building are preserved for years to come.

“I love our city. One of many reasons why is our history. Preserving buildings like these allow us to share with our children what our home town once was. Places like these draw us closer to our past. Seeing is believing. Believing creates knowledge and growth.”

- Stacey Smith, Council Bluffs resident

As the summer approached in 2020 we were unsure how we were going to be able to implement our programming.

Especially since “social distancing” was one of the most common phrases and large gatherings were definitely frowned upon.

It turned out our Backyard Movie Night program was the perfect fit for all the local families stuck at home wanting a safe activity to

do outside of the house. Even it was just in their backyard.

From May to September we had 63 check outs of the movie equipment. At roughly 3 per week, we were able to provide fun to Council Bluffs residents in need.

But our fun with movie nights didn’t stop there.

We had seen a few national articles about parks in large cities that had implemented “social distancing circles,” giving

“I can’t put into words the importance of hosting these types of events during what has been a very difficult year. To find a way for folks to still “get together” and connect while remaining apart is so important.”

- Cory Peters, Council Bluffs resident

park goes a designated space to sit with friends that were guaranteed to be six feet from others.

Combining this idea with the success of our movie night program we hosted a small Movie Night in Council Bluffs series in the fall.

With one movie night in Kirn Park and another in Cochran Park, roughly 100 residents came out for each event. We love the power of movies to bring people together and are excited to do even more movie nights in the future.



CreekTop Gardens had a great year despite having to change up programming due to pandemic. A video series of gardening tips was created for Council Bluffs Community School District students as a part of their summer programming. All 90 raised garden beds were planted for the first time in the history of the garden.

In addition to all these wonderful things a small community has formed at CreekTop. Several gardeners have volunteered countless hours to keep our garden space looking top notch, growing and donating over 300 pounds of food to local shelters, and keeping all the plots watered and healthy during the drought in July and August.

All of these individuals came together to help make a vibrant and accepting space for people in our community to grow fresh food.





If there is one market that hasn't slowed down with the pandemic, it's the housing market.

Homes on the market are usually swept up in less than 24 hours after a guaranteed bidding war. This is incredibly frustrating for first time home buyers, and for nonprofits looking to make an impact in Council Bluffs neighborhoods.

In 2020 we launched a Housing Revitalization Program designed to improve owner occupied housing in the community.

In our pursuit to acquire those worst houses on the block, the most fruitful avenue hasn't been Zillow or the local real estate websites... it's been the neighbors.

Behind every empty home there is a story – and as we've been assisting neighbors with our Rock the Block program, we've had the privilege to hear lots of them.

A project house that "got away" from the owner.

A property that was inherited and never used.

Divorce.

Mental health.

Financial trouble.

Hoarding.

We've heard it all.

Often at the end of the conversation there's a phone number to call, a family member to connect with, or another door to knock on.

Many people see vacant homes on their daily commute but our organization has the opportunity to do something about it.

Not every lead ends up in an acquisition, but when we've been successful the absolute best part is seeing the face of the neighbor light up when we tell them the news that we're going to remodel the home for homeownership.

No more living next to a "problem" property. Less concern about their neighborhood. Only hope and excitement for the possibilities on their block.

The goal is to rehab 25 properties over the span of 5 years.

Progress may have been slowed a bit due to the pandemic but the program is hardly at a standstill. In 2020 we were able to acquire six properties for the program and start work on four of them.

At the end of the day, these homes will be safe, clean, affordable, and will improve the neighborhood. With support from funders, the program specifically allows for a loss on the properties (a loss is often necessary to purchase and make the needed improvements which are then not covered by the sale price). This helps to address the appraisal gap.



GOOD NEIGHBOR AWARDS

Our annual volunteer awards recognize those who have gone above and beyond to help our organization through volunteer work in the year prior.

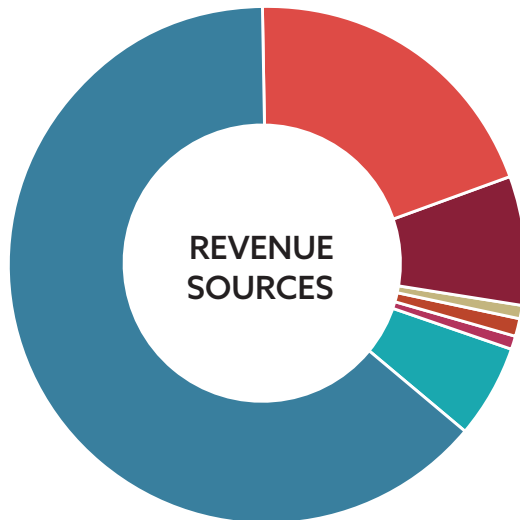
Top: Reivers Cheerleading were recognized as the 2020 Volunteer Group of the Year for their work at CreekTop Gardens and Farmers Market Council Bluffs

Left: PowerTech was recognized as the 2020 Business Partner of the Year for their work on the 100 Block Passageway

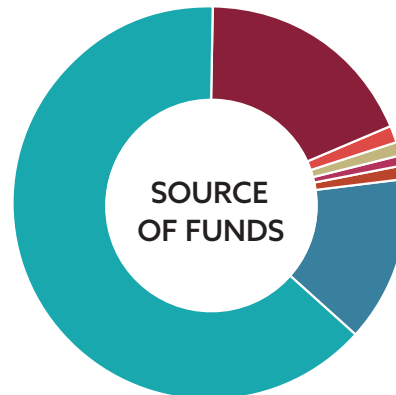
Right: Timm Bryant was recognized as the 2020 Volunteer of the Year for his work with the Housing Revitalization Program



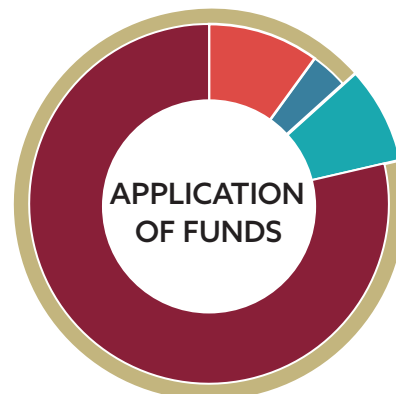
FY 2020 FUNDING



LAND SALES	\$2,550,000
GRANTS/DONATIONS	\$792,013
DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION	\$314,662
SPONSORSHIPS	\$18,674
EVENT PARTICIPATION FEES	\$24,100
HOUSING/COMMERCIAL RENTAL	\$14,055
OTHER	\$226,788



Sales	64%
Foundations	19%
Private Donations	2%
Sponsorships	1%
Event Participation Fees	1%
Rents	1%
Other	12%



Program expenses	92%
Administration	8%

Programming breakdown:	
Redevelopment	78%
Neighborhood Activation	10%
Quality of Life	4%

Well, we knew 2020 would have a lot in store for us.

Very quickly, The 712 Initiative, along with the rest of our community, learned that 2020 would be a year of unprecedented challenges.

While we are anxious to move on from the pain and heartache of the last year; we would be remiss if we didn't pause to be grateful for the good. At every turn, there were countless members of this community bravely, selflessly and generously taking care of their neighbors, demonstrating why this is a special place to live, work and play; even amidst a pandemic.

The team at The 712 Initiative quickly adapted to prioritize safety for all programming. Unfortunately, that meant cancelling some annual events, but their dedication to our mission paved way for creativity in continuing to bring the community together, encouraging healthy lifestyles, and taking on home improvement projects alongside homeowners.

Significant progress was made on our large downtown redevelopment project: 530 West Broadway. With construction set to begin in 2021, it will be an exciting and visible accomplishment resulting from three years of persistent planning and collaboration.

We are full of hope as we look forward to the year ahead. On behalf of our Board of Directors, I extend our utmost gratitude to all our staff, volunteers, donors, and community partners for navigating a trying year with grace, compassion and determination.



Kristen Blum
2021 Board Chair

THE 712 INITIATIVE STAFF

Chief Executive Officer
Sheryl Garst

Director of Marketing & PR
Rachel Kent

Director of Redevelopment
Lynn Dittmer

Construction Project Manager
Tammie Dodge

Director of Programming & Events
Jeff Snow

Neighborhood Coordinator
Turner Morgan

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The 712 Initiative is a proud Iowa West Foundation Initiative

