



Why one Main Street community has the lowest unemployment rate in the nation

It should come as no surprise that the city with the lowest unemployment rate in the country is also a nationally accredited Main Street community. Ames, Iowa was admitted to

Main Street Iowa in 2009, after a lengthy application period. Over the past seven years public and private partnerships have been a driving force in creating a district that is a thriving heart to an economically healthy community.

Every month the Bureau of Labor Statistics releases numbers for seasonally adjusted civilian labor force and unemployment data for 387 cities with a population of at least 25,000 people. [According to Forbes Magazine](#), in December the national unemployment average was 4.8%, while in Ames it was just 2.2%. This is the number of people who did not have a job, but were job-hunting in the four weeks prior to the survey. Out of the nearly 400 cities, Ames was the lowest on the list.

You might wonder what it is that Ames is doing that makes it so successful when it comes to providing good employment for its citizens. Why does this community in the middle of Iowa have more jobs than people qualified to fill them? For Ames, quality of life initiatives have proven to be a big economic driver. Ames can boast of good health care facilities, many cultural institutions, vibrant public spaces, outdoor recreation opportunities, and excellent education options, including Iowa State University. All of these factors are crucial in attracting a skilled labor force and desirable employers with good paying jobs. But Ames has a little more to offer including a lively business district, a sense of place, and a deep pride in local character.

It is often said that a community is only as healthy as its core. For Ames, that core is the Main Street Cultural District. It is not only a nice place to visit, downtown Ames also represents a substantial share of the local economy with hundreds of jobs in a small geographical area, a

decent tax base, and many thriving businesses. Downtown Ames is successful because it has an “urban style” population base to support it. It is not uncommon to see people walking, biking, or taking public transportation to get to where they want to go. City Hall, the post office, and the library are all located in the downtown business district which brings people to the heart of the city, on a regular basis. A survey showed that half a million people a year visit the Ames Public Library, and 70 percent of those plan to go to somewhere else in downtown while they are making the trip. If there were not enough people wanting to shop or eat out in downtown, there wouldn't be as many good stores or restaurants. If there wasn't an audience for music, theater, or art, these activities would not flourish as they do in Ames. If the tax base was lean, schools and municipal services would suffer. Even parks need people to use them, and if the parks are deserted, they will not receive the upkeep they need to remain attractive. We have none of these problems in Ames.

Cities that prosper have learned to make the most of their existing assets. Because of its Main Street status, Ames has implemented historic preservation based economic revitalization in its core downtown area, on an incremental basis, utilizing the hard work of local people and pooling resources from many areas. It didn't happen overnight, but there is a working partnership with the people of a community. This has helped to start a dialog and create consensus around economic development that is actively attracting more partners, funders, and the help of countless individuals who want to be part of the vision for the future of Ames, Iowa.