

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

MADISON COUNTY HEART & SOUL:

Bevington, Earlham, East Peru, Macksburg, Patterson, St. Charles, Truro, Winterset, Iowa

POPULATION:
16,773

CHALLENGE:
Gather resident input that represents voices from all corners of the county to inform the comprehensive planning efforts of the county board.

FOCUS:
Understanding the different viewpoints of rural and urban residents and how it affects land use issues as the Des Moines metro encroaches into the eastern edge of the county.

Madison County is nestled in the rolling hills of central Iowa, a place of great natural beauty and rich history. A rural county with a population of 16,458, the county has a vibrant economy, strong schools, a thriving arts community, and numerous tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities. The county seat, Winterset, is home to a lovely town square and is famous as John Wayne's hometown. Madison County is just south of Interstate 80 and adjacent to the rapidly growing Des Moines metro area, so the community is working hard to maintain their smalltown feel while taking advantage of the amenities they can easily access in the close-by urban area.

Madison County “by the numbers”:

- Over 1000 surveys collected
- 155 students surveyed
- 58% of engagement took place in rural communities
- 20 volunteers trained to code data
- Over 4000 individual data points analyzed
- 13 Leadership team volunteers, including representation from each town in the county

Local conditions:

Due to its proximity to the Des Moines metropolitan area, Madison County was starting to see some pressure on land use for housing and expansion of urban areas that contrasted with some long-time residents' appreciation for small-town life.

There was also growing pressure to construct large wind farms. Local residents wanted to be sure the County Board of Supervisors had a mechanism for hearing the voices from all types of residents both in the towns and rural areas (farmers and non-farmers alike). Much of Madison County's identity was connected to its natural beauty and tourism, so residents wanted to find a way to balance those assets alongside robust economic growth.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Because the purpose of the project was to lift up missing voices from across the county, the leadership team worked very hard to get representation from all the towns in Madison County. They tirelessly attended city council meetings and other functions to spread the word and recruit participants. They tailored their surveys and story-gathering tools to measure how they were reaching rural residents, specifically if they were farmers or rural residents who didn't farm.

The team also engaged students in story-gathering exercises as part of their school curriculum. This was a particularly effective way to reach long-time residents and hear what mattered most to them. They also attended festivals, the county fair, and other events. Despite wrapping up their process during the COVID-19 pandemic, their methods were quite effective. After gathering surveys and stories, most of the

towns constructed their own Heart & Soul statements along with a set of statements that represented the voice of the whole county.

To ensure that the data analysis was fair, transparent, and objective, the team hired the consulting firm Thrivinci to help compile and code the data. Thrivinci produced a report that analyzed the demographics of the county, the story data, and connected the Heart & Soul themes to prioritized action items. The leadership used this report to create action planning tools that could be used by the County Board of Supervisors, nonprofits, schools, and businesses to guide their mission, vision, and decision-making to reflect what mattered most to Madison County residents.

The team also created a wonderful capstone video with gorgeous footage of Madison County to show how their Heart & Soul statements were created and could be used to create a cohesive, positive narrative about the future of their county.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

The Heart & Soul stewardship work continues to grow in strength.

- Strong collaboration with schools to conduct inter-generational story gathering with students and adults.
- Comprehensive engagement with town councils and other grass-roots leaders throughout the county.
- Close engagement from the County Board of Supervisors, the Economic Development Director, and the Community Foundation.
- The final report produced by Thrivinci provided comprehensive descriptions of their story and data collection processes and added a much-needed level of transparency and authority for their findings.
- The leadership team produced a high-quality video that encapsulated their Community Heart & Soul process and provided a comprehensive positive narrative about what matter most to the residents of Madison County.
- Created a toolkit that businesses and nonprofits can use to incorporate the Community Heart & Soul Statements and Action Plan priorities into their own strategic visions and work plans. They developed a common language that all organizations can use to tie their work and objectives to ideas that the community cares about.
- Prepared the Board of Supervisors for its upcoming comprehensive planning process.

