

# Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

## MENDOTA, ILLINOIS

Located in north-central Illinois, Mendota (pop. 6,980) is a hub of industry, agriculture, and rail. Once a major junction for multiple railroads, the city thrived as a shipping point for corn, beans, and manufactured goods, fueling local jobs and growth. With a history steeped in hard work, local pride, and community celebration—including the long-running Sweet Corn Festival—Mendota is a place where families stay for generations. Today, the city reflects a blend of legacy and change, with a growing Latino population and an enduring spirit of resilience that continues to shape Mendota's path forward.

### POPULATION:

6,980

### CHALLENGE:

Disaster recovery following a series of downtown fires

### FOCUS:

Economic development

Community revitalization

### KEY TOOL:

Data acquired

Process to gain input

### Mendota “By the Numbers”:

- **3,782** households reached through a mailer promoting Community Chats and project
- **20** middle school students trained to conduct interviews with seniors, city workers, and school faculty
- **300+** coloring sheets collected from elementary students showing what they love about Mendota
- **29** in-person listening opportunities conducted
- **25%** of population provided input into the development of Heart & Soul Statements
- **17** grants totaling \$10 million awarded in the first year of using data acquired

### Local Conditions:

In recent years, Mendota faced some of its most difficult challenges. In 2022, the downtown experienced two devastating fires, wiping out years of revitalization efforts and leaving behind empty lots, uncertainty, and hopelessness. These losses came just a few years after the closure of the Del Monte packaged food plant in

2019, which resulted in the loss of over 100 full-time and 300 part-time jobs—deeply impacting the local economy and families at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**But Mendota is more than its setbacks and is rising from the ashes.**

In response, the community came together to chart a new path forward. Through the launch of **Community Heart & Soul**, they embraced a resident-driven approach to rebuilding—not just buildings, but identity and pride. This initiative invited everyone in Mendota to have a voice, ensuring that future decisions reflect the hopes, values, and needs of all who call Mendota home. Together, they're shaping a stronger, more connected, and more resilient future.

### Partnership:

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque supported the Community Heart & Soul work in Mendota by contributing a Certified Heart & Soul Coach and shared learning opportunities from other midwestern Heart & Soul towns.

## Volunteer and Community Response:

Powered by a dedicated team of volunteers, **Mendota Heart & Soul** connected with more than 25% of the city's population through meaningful conversations about what residents love most about their community—and what they envision for its future. Volunteers attended events like the Farmer's Market, Cinco de Mayo, YMCA Healthy Kids' Day, the annual Sweet Corn Festival, and other local activities, including school band concerts and sporting events, to gather feedback and build strong personal connections.

In partnership with the Mendota Area Chamber of Commerce, the team hosted a Business After Hours event and shared flyers at local restaurants to expand their outreach. They also worked closely with local schools to train youth leaders to conduct interviews and follow the Community Heart & Soul process, capturing the hopes and ideas of students directly.

Through a wide variety of outreach efforts—including surveys, public meetings, and creative tools like children's coloring sheets—the team ensured that voices from all ages, backgrounds, and experiences were heard and valued. These voices came together during a special Community Day, where more than 200 residents participated to help identify shared priorities based on the collected feedback.

Key partners have played an essential role in making this work possible, including the Mendota City Council, Mendota Area Chamber of Commerce, local schools, and civic groups. A special thanks goes to the local newspaper, the Mendota Reporter, which consistently supported the initiative by promoting events, sharing stories, and keeping the community informed every step of the way.

## Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Mendota's engagement with the **Community Heart & Soul** initiative has led to numerous positive outcomes that align closely with the community's core values. Below is an overview of achievements tied to each Heart & Soul Statement:

**Community.** Residents shared that when the community comes together, it creates a true sense of home. There is strong enthusiasm for revitalizing the downtown area into a vibrant destination, with amenities such as a pavilion, outdoor seating, dining options, specialty shops, and expanded events.

One of the spaces left vacant by the fire will be transformed into a pavilion and community gathering space. Fundraising is currently underway, supported by a \$100,000 matching donation from a local manufacturer to help build the new pavilion. In keeping with the Heart & Soul model of involving everyone, residents are being asked to contribute ideas for the design and desired features of this space.

**Businesses.** To promote economic growth, Mendota is actively recruiting new industries, restaurants, and businesses. The city secured a grant to refurbish one of the fire-damaged buildings into an indoor public market featuring a mini-kitchen and co-working space to support local entrepreneurs and professionals. Additionally, the city offers business coaching to help ensure successful business start-ups and long-term sustainability.

**Families.** In 2022, the city secured a five-year grant of \$375,000 annually to support drug prevention youth mental health initiatives. In 2025, Mendota was designated as a Dementia Friendly Community, providing valuable resources and support for families.

**Atmosphere.** Appreciating the small-town feel and safe community, many residents voiced a need for improved walkability. In response, a Mendota volunteer team was chosen as one of four teams in the state to attend a CDC-sponsored Walkability Academy. As a result, the city received an implementation grant to add sidewalks around one of the schools. In addition, Mendota secured funding for a 2-mile bike path connecting downtown and the Amtrak depot to key retail areas, parks, the community pool, and recreational lakes.

Residents also expressed a desire for more public art to create a heightened energy and vibrant town feel. In response, an Arts Commission was established, and the city received a \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to install two murals downtown.

**Events.** Events are instrumental in bringing people together and fostering community connections. A popular idea that emerged from the surveys—Food Truck Monday Mania—is now in its second year. Picnic tables are provided to encourage communal dining and conversation.

In 2024, the city hosted its first Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony and a tree-decorating contest. Collaborating with the Chamber of Commerce, Mendota also launched a community calendar to coordinate and promote local events. The city continues to attract and support more than 40,000 visitors annually for the Sweet Corn Festival, which features carnival rides, a parade, and free sweet corn.

**Recreation.** Residents identified the disc golf course as needing an upgrade. Following a Facebook post seeking volunteer input, an international professional with local ties offered to design a new 18-hole course—now enjoyed by local and regional leagues. The city also secured two grants to upgrade parks and is working on additional improvements based on community feedback.

**History & Traditions.** Mendota is dedicated to celebrating its rich history and diverse community. In collaboration with Reimagine Mendota and the Hispanic Partnership Council, the city launched the first annual Amigo Fest in 2024, celebrating cultural traditions, national anthems, music, and history. The Mendota Historical Society and Museum continues to host events celebrating local agricultural and rail history, as well as notable figures and inventions. A video documentary capturing the migration stories of Hispanic residents is currently in production.

**Location.** Known as the “crossing of the trails,” Mendota remains a hub with valuable transit access. However, surveys revealed that these assets are under-promoted. To address this, the city launched the “Meet in Mendota” campaign to highlight the advantages of travel via Amtrak, interstates, and major highways—encouraging both tourism and relocation to Mendota.

**Campaign: “Why I Love Mendota”** Another campaign born from community input is “**Why I Love Mendota.**” Residents enthusiastically shared reasons they love their hometown, inspiring the creation of displayed **Heart Word Art** now available on window clings and merchandise. In addition, a video series was developed, featuring residents expressing their deep affection for Mendota which can be seen here: <https://www.mendota.il.us/why-mendota>

**Looking Ahead.** While there are still areas for growth and development, the **Community Heart & Soul** initiative has empowered Mendota residents to come together, celebrate their strengths, identify opportunities, and work collaboratively to **Reimagine Mendota.**

