

Ironton, Ohio: Planting Pride With America in Bloom

By Kristin Pategas, AIB Judge



America in Bloom's collaborative national awards program has helped hundreds of communities realize their potential in becoming thriving places of work, play and living. Ironton, Ohio is just one of the many towns that have embraced America in Bloom principles and ideas to generate programs that provide the motivation and energy to plant pride in their community.

Ironton is a community that has experienced many economic setbacks throughout its history, from the 1970s with the closing of numerous industries due to the implementation of environmental standards, the exodus of jobs overseas, low employment, and finally the city's fall into bankruptcy in 1982. Ironton, though, was true to its name and stood strong through

these obstacles and used the promise of flowers to hearten its residents and create a symbol of rebirth. From its initial Downtown Clean-Up Days and spring plantings, Ironton discovered a path to raise spirits and rally support.

Kudos goes to sister America in Bloom community Gallipolis, OH for sharing with Ironton the guiding principles and resources of the America in Bloom program. Nine years ago Ironton in Bloom (IIB) planted the seed that has been nurtured by city government, businesses, and residents to become the catalyst for new business growth, improved property values, and a sense of pride. Ironton has seen its property values increase, derelict commercial properties redeveloped into thriving businesses, and the downtown beautified with hanging baskets, containers, decorative street furnishings, and weed-free sidewalks. This transformation not only benefits businesses and home owners, but encourages Ironton to present its best to visitors, investors, potential residents, and new businesses. Ironton has a number of future projects in the furnace: the Riverfront Park, a gateway for the new bridge over the Ohio

River and the Iron Furnace Trail.



Ironton in Bloom knew in order for their dreams of a transformed community to come true, they needed to develop programs that guaranteed success, from design to funding, implementation and on-going maintenance. Too often such beautification projects in the past failed due to lack of funds and maintenance strategies. Today, nine years after its inception, IIB has an annual \$50,000 budget for their floral displays supported by the city, local businesses, civic organizations and individuals. Members of IIB continue to work with the city to improve and expand Ironton's design standards to include floral and landscape requirements. They have also developed the OPT Program: Opportunity, Partnership and Teamwork, that recognizes sponsor

donations and continued monetary support.

Much of the remaining open space within Ironton remains under environmental mitigation, but as these brownfields are cleaned, IIB, along with the city and other re-development agencies, have channeled revitalization efforts towards projects that benefit the community. Gateway Centre includes the city's first hotel, a family restaurant and space for a future brewery. Landscape enhancements include shade trees, floral displays, lighting, seating, bike racks and an interpretive display on the history of Ironton and the Ohio River.



To create additional public spaces, in 2010 an America in Bloom judge recommended the creation of "pocket parks", transforming vacant residential lots into green spaces. Today, a number of these green respites have become important neighborhood centers, community gardens and connection hubs for healthy walking and biking trails.

Ironton has embraced its heritage by designating three residential historic districts and restoring two historic sites for reuse: the Ro-Na Theater and the Veterans Memorial Hall. Historic homeowners and churches annually open for tours and the Lawrence County History Museum provides docents in period costume and character.

Ironton in Bloom has developed an Annual Inventory Program where volunteers walk the city's streets each spring assessing

cleanliness and maintenance needs including litter, weeds, sign maintenance, storm drain blockage and sidewalk repairs. These reports are passed on to the respective city departments to address as time and budget allow during the fiscal year.

Ironton is proof of the benefits of implementing America in Bloom's framework for improvements.

