**Build a Better Grinnell 2030
Community Visioning Project**

**USDA Rural Development
Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge**

October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2024

Final Report

Project Overview

The Build a Better Grinnell 2030 Community Visioning project (or BABG 2030) involved an assessment of Grinnell's strengths, needs and visions for people who live and work in the community, or rely on resources within Grinnell, as well as the development of a set of action plans to address community prioritized issues.

The project's goals included:
1) building community pride and facilitating positive branding by identifying community strengths,
2) enhancing organizational connections and community cohesion and building a commitment to action around a set of priorities through a collaborative and broadly participatory process, and
3) facilitating community growth and development for the next decade by identifying and illuminating the local context of a prioritized set of needs, together with community assets and policy options, that are actionable, impactful, and easy to understand.

The project was dedicated to a collaborative approach focusing on community input and engagement. Core project principles included: maintaining open communication and transparency with key stakeholders and the broader community; seeking out broad, inclusive participation; and showing respect for all.

BABG 2030 was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge program. Co-funding was provided by the City of Grinnell, Grinnell Mutual, Grinnell College, and the Claude & Dolly Ahrens Foundation.

Project Phases

Prior to initiating research, we formed a steering committee with over 20 individuals representing a broad range of local constituents and community members. We established a website

(www.buildabettergrinnell.org) and Facebook page, which we used regularly to help keep the community informed. Taking advantage of our steering community's knowledge, a long list of key stakeholders was generated and used to seed an opt-in mailing list, which was also used to provide regular updates on the project. We then announced the project through a press release and our other communication channels.

The project took place in four main phases: three research phases and an ongoing action phase. At each phase, the steering committee reviewed the research plans. Throughout the project, the research team and steering committee worked together to conduct regular process evaluations to ensure that each phase adhered to our core principles. The process was critical to achieving the project goals.

Phase I: The Community Visioning Survey (December 2022 – May 2023)

After the initial period of organization and preparation, the research team conducted a community-wide visioning survey from December '22 through March '23 with twelve open-ended questions. The goals of this survey were to identify community perceptions of Grinnell's strengths as well as to gain a sense of the range of needs and concerns that exist and a rough measure of how common these are in the community.

To help gain broad participation, we sent a direct mailer to every household in the zip code. We hired 17 "community engagement assistants" to recruit people to take the survey. We created and distributed a Spanish language version. Survey collection was incorporated into a research methods course at Grinnell College. We also asked leaders of local businesses and service organizations to encourage their employees to participate. The public school system also distributed the survey to parents and students.

The survey was intended to be taken either individually or by groups of persons working

together. In total, 603 surveys were completed. We also gathered 120 individual responses to a single question posed each week on social media or in person via "street-intercepts" performed around the community. Since many surveys were taken by groups (as large as 15-20 people, for example in high school "homeroom" classes), it is impossible to know precisely how many participated in total, but the research team feels confident that it was over 10% of the Grinnell population of approximately 9,500.

Every-door direct mailer (more info on back)

The research team then sorted responses into general categories (e.g., healthcare, or things to do) and identified and organized data into sub-categories (e.g., more mental healthcare services, more community events).

We selected the forty-six most identified needs or concerns to move forward to Phase II, in which the community would be able to select priorities for community action. The 46 issues can be seen below in Table 1.

To share our findings and prepare the community for Phase II, we published a summary report along with detailed data on our website along with a link to the new prioritization survey. Six community presentations were also held at the local library to present Phase I data and encourage participation in the prioritization phase. To update the community and encourage participation, we used our mailing list, social media, and published a press release.

While collected in Phase I, the strengths and assets data from the visioning survey were processed in Phase III. The idea was to provide this data as part of the final report as well as to make it available to those community groups engaged in action planning around the prioritized issues. Examples from this data are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. What Makes You Glad to Live in Grinnell

Figure 2. Tell us about a time when you felt particularly connected to the community or proud to live in Grinnell (Top 15 Responses).
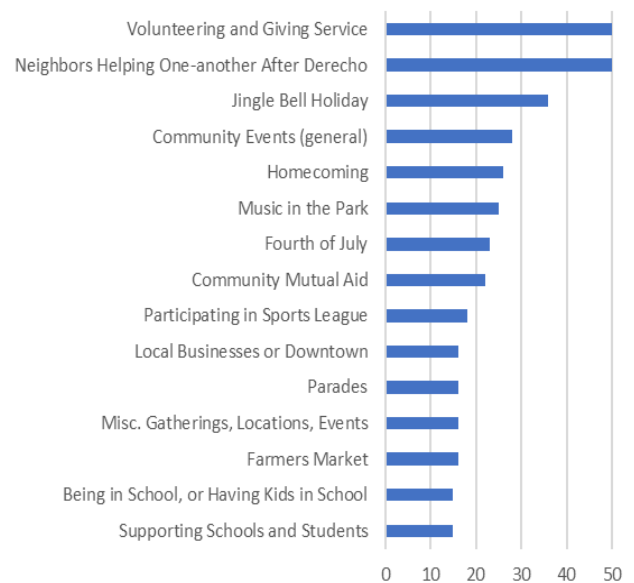
Phase II: Prioritization Phase (May 2023 – September 2023)

The second phase of research was to determine which of the forty-six issues are most important to our community. We developed a Needs Prioritization Survey that asked individuals to select and rank up to seven issues. The survey also collected demographic data so we could better determine who was most affected by the range of issues. We also invited individuals to provide their contact information if they were willing to participate in paid follow-up focus groups on the prioritized issues. This second survey was launched on May 9, 2023, and closed on July 16.

To distribute the survey, we followed similar strategies to Phase I and promoted it widely and frequently over ten weeks. We hired 20 "survey scouts" particularly with an eye toward accessing lower-income households. Prior to closing the survey, we undertook a demographic analysis of completion rates, which led us to keep the survey open an additional two weeks and intensify efforts to reach lower-income households through flyers and door knocking at community apartment complexes and use of steering committee social networks.

Posters encouraging participation in the prioritization phase were regularly distributed throughout the community.

We received 1270 complete surveys from individuals and identified the top choices for a range of demographic groupings using a rank-order voting method. This data is presented below in

Table 1 and is also available, along with additional details on the methodology, at our website.

The top five issues to follow through to Phase III were determined by taking the top two issues identified by lower-income respondents and the next three issues from all respondents. The selection process was determined and publicized prior to distributing the survey. Our definition of lower-income corresponded roughly to Iowa's definition for use with Medicaid eligibility.

The top five issues identified through the prioritization survey were: 1) improve quality of drinking water, 2) more variety of restaurants, 3) improve K-12 buildings and infrastructure, 4) improve or expand mental healthcare services, and 5) improve roads and road maintenance.
The steering committee selected the final two priorities from the remaining highly ranked issues taking into consideration issues of equity and the overall welfare of the community, as well as what other initiatives are already underway in the community. The two issues selected were: 6) less racism, and 7) higher wages or lower prices.

There were other issues that steering committee members discussed as important concerns for the community, particularly those affecting lower-income families, such as affordable housing and childcare. In the end, many felt that selecting *less racism* and *higher wages and lower prices* was respecting community input since these were the 6th and 7th highest ranked by the general community. Additionally, it was felt that exploring *higher wages and lower prices* would likely provide insight into the challenges of lower-income families. Also, it was ranked third by lower-income individuals.

We prepared a research report explaining the methodology and providing much of the data collected, which we published on our website. To help distribute this information in the community and prepare for Phase III (a deeper exploration of the 7 prioritized issues), we issued a press release and held five public presentations.

Table 1. Prioritization of issues by community and distinct demographic groups.

	All Responses	Lower Income	Racial and Ethnic Minorities	Under Age 26	Age 26-45	Age 46-65	Age 66 and Over	Female	Male	Commute to Grinnell	Rural Grinnell	Grinnell College students
More variety of restaurants	1	2	2	2	3	1	1	2	1	3	1	12
Improve quality of drinking water	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	4	9	14	3
Improve k-12 buildings & infrastructure	3	11	27	3	2	3	5	3	2	6	3	36
Improve or expand mental health care services	4	4	13	12	6	5	2	4	6	1	7	4
Improve roads & road maintenance	5	5	7	6	4	4	7	5	3	8	6	45
Less racism	6	22	3	10	14	18	17	15	16	13	18	1
Higher wages or lower prices	7	3	22	4	9	7	34	6	19	4	16	2
Reduce taxes & fees	8	7	24	17	10	6	8	7	8	22	10	46
Improve K-12 education programming	9	24	8	8	7	16	15	13	7	20	4	29
More recycling services	10	17	11	43	13	10	6	8	18	37	25	18
More housing options	11	8	5	24	8	8	19	11	10	2	17	27
Improve or expanded healthcare services	12	13	6	26	24	14	4	10	15	12	13	13
Reduce divisions in the community	13	34	23	28	21	9	11	14	22	25	21	9
Reduce GC influence in the community	14	19	15	5	11	11	23	16	9	17	2	42
More childcare or preschool options	15	25	30	29	5	19	12	9	17	10	5	41
Invest in or expand Grinnell businesses	16	27	17	18	17	12	13	19	5	21	9	28
Increase options for shopping (retail) & services	17	15	26	22	27	13	9	12	27	15	8	23
More things to do in the evenings and nighttime	18	14	25	9	19	20	37	23	12	39	12	8
Improve sidewalks & lighting	19	12	4	19	15	26	14	20	13	24	43	22
More Job opportunities	20	9	28	15	23	15	29	24	11	5	19	21
Increase public transportation options	21	10	10	38	32	22	16	18	34	16	37	7
More chain brand stores (such as Target or CVS)	22	16	31	14	18	23	27	17	33	14	11	16
More fast-food options	23	6	29	7	20	24	26	21	20	7	22	33
Build a more welcoming & less isolating social environment	24	33	14	21	33	27	22	28	21	19	36	6
More bike paths, lanes & infrastructure	25	30	19	42	25	17	30	32	14	26	30	17

Rankings of the other top 46 by "all responses"; 26) more community diversity; 27) clean up or improve homes & yards, & public landscaping; 28) more indoor recreation spaces or activities; 29) more activities for families or kids; 30) increase options for groceries & produce; 31) create a dog part; 32) more outdoor recreation spaces or activities; 33) increase attractiveness of city entrances & downtown; 34) more or improved parks & green spaces; 35) more activities or hangout spaces for teens; 36) more coffee shops/cafes; 37) improve work-life balance; 38) improve communication on community events & services; 39) more responsive leadership; 40) more community events; 41) enhance safety & security for residents; 42) more music events; 43) improve Grinnell College dining hall; 44) more indoor spaces for community events & gatherings; 45) improve college dorms; 46) improve Grinnell College academic programs.

* Issues are ordered by ranking by all respondents. Top seven issues of each demographic group are highlighted in green.

Phase III: Deeper Dive into Priority Issues (September 2023 – April 2004)

The final research phase focused on gaining more detailed information from the community to better understand the seven prioritized issues.

This was done primarily through community listening sessions, focus groups, and community hosted discussions. We scheduled one listening session and three focus groups per month between late September and mid-December 2023, for a total of twelve sessions for each of the seven prioritized issues. We frequently advertised these throughout the community. We also reached out to individuals who provided contact information on the Phase II survey indicating an interest in continued participation.

The 21 listening sessions were all held in public spaces in the Grinnell's Drake Community Library and open to the public on a walk-in basis. Each began with a brief overview of the Phase II findings. Focus groups were also primarily scheduled for the library, were limited to 6 participants, and required signing up. Attendees at these were paid. We also hired six individuals from lower-income households to conduct up to seven focus groups each (one on each issue) with their friends and family. We provided funding for a meal for the group and left it up to them how many and which issues they elected to address.

At all sessions, participants were asked to share their experiences and identify what they saw as the nature of the problem, its impacts on their lives, their thoughts on why it exists, what obstacles are faced in addressing it (for them and the community more broadly), their ideas for possible solutions, and strengths and resources in the community that might be helpful. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and then individually coded using the overarching questions to sort responses and identify recurring themes and unique perspectives.

Input on the prioritized issues was also gathered from community experts. Over the course of the project, we held over seventy interviews with individuals involved in a range of community services and community development. The goal was to gain input from a broad mix of community leaders and experts from a range of content areas (e.g., arts and entertainment, business, health, education, etc.). Each interview primarily focused on understanding the community needs, ongoing efforts, and assets related to that area. During each interview, individuals were also asked to comment generally on what they saw as key needs in the community and recent successful or promising community development efforts. Detailed notes or transcriptions were generated from every interview. After identifying the community priorities, the interviews were reviewed for any mention concerning each prioritized issue. All relevant information was extracted and coded into themes similarly to the community session data.

Throughout the research process, we also gathered and reviewed all nature of documents we could find associated with community development and assessments in general and a range of content areas common to comprehensive community assessments, and specifically related to the prioritized issues (once identified), through literature searches and requests to key stakeholders in the community.

To the extent possible, we also gathered data from four peer communities selected by the steering community (Decorah, Fairfield, Pella, and Waverly) to better understand Grinnell's relative strengths and weaknesses as well as to look at how those communities may have addressed similar issues. Once gaining a clearer sense of the nature of the issue from focus groups, we also looked for ideas for possible solutions from communities around the country, focusing on ones like Grinnell, as well as other non-local potential assets and resources (e.g., organizations and funding).

Once the prioritized issues were identified, we also returned to both earlier surveys (Phase I and Phase II). The open-ended visioning survey was reviewed to extract any data relating to the prioritized issue. Finally, we pulled information from the prioritization survey to show how different demographic groups ranked the issue.

Core Final Products: Prioritized Issue Reports and Summary Report

The core final products of the research process (in addition to the Phase I and Phase II data that was shared with the community) that are intended to support an ongoing action planning stage include seven prioritized issues reports and a final project summary report.

Each issue report is 30-50 pages in length and provides a detailed account of the data gathered through all phases of the research relevant to the prioritized issue. Our primary goal is to provide the community with information to help stakeholders make informed choices and address the prioritized need. At its core, these are participatory community-based needs assessments. The goal of the reports is not to provide a set of definitive solutions. Rather, the core of each report reflects the results of a community-wide brainstorming session. The review of problems, impacts, causes, and solutions are provided from the perspective of members of the community, not the research team nor the project steering community. We sought to gather input broadly from the community, particularly from those who may not frequently have a voice in decision making and to share that input to key stakeholders. We believe that listening to and giving voice to such community members is valuable in itself and can be a means to solve problems. To highlight this value, we share the following vignette. At the end of one focus group hosted by a low-income community member in her home, she asked if there was anything else the participants wanted to add. One responded, "I'm just grateful to be able to, to be allowed to participate, that maybe my opinion matters."

While the experiences and ideas shared by members of the community is the core of the report, we also share additional information to help decision makers reach conclusions about what part of the problem might be addressed and how. This includes an overview of the current Grinnell context related to the prioritized issue in terms of relevant infrastructure and resources, key measures, historical information, key inflection points, and ongoing efforts, as well as comparisons to our group of peer communities. In most cases we have also sought to provide our own input (making it clear when this is the case) to the community asset list when we have identified relevant organizations or other assets that did not come up in interviews, surveys, or community sessions. Finally, we provide some information on policy options pursued in other communities, and assets available outside of the community (e.g., funding resources or resource hubs), though these are not intended as endorsements.

The summary report is a 20-page glossy print booklet that provides an overview of the project, its methods, and a summary of the findings from each of the three phases. This includes community strengths, issue ranking data, and executive summaries from each of the seven prioritized issue reports.

We published all the final documents on the website and organized a community-wide presentation and action planning workshop. We informed the community through a press release, every-door direct mailer, our mailing list and social media. We printed over two hundred copies of the final summary report to share in the community.

Action Planning and Project Outcomes

Over 60 members of the community joined the project work session. After a brief presentation on the project and summary findings, each participant joined one of seven workgroups focused on the priority areas. Designated members of the project steering committee led

each group through a discussion of the findings and began developing draft action plans including timelines, who should be involved, possible funding, goals, and means.

Community members review the summary report and receive a brief presentation prior to action planning (Photo by Emlyn Yoon-Buck '25, Grinnell College).

Many initial ideas as well as some concrete plans came out of this community work session. For example, the workgroup focusing on "improving quality of drinking water" gave attention to a key finding in the report that despite the high-quality source of Grinnell's drinking water (the Jordan Aquifer) and a major city project underway to replace the treatment plant among other updates, many in the city lacked knowledge of where city water came from or the nature of the infrastructural improvements. The group developed a plan to develop materials and build educational curriculum for local schools on the city's water system with the idea that educating youth will serve to inform parents as well.

Most action plans remain at a relatively early stage. Organizations identified as key assets or stakeholders are now taking responsibility for the different priority areas. Community members are being invited to participate, and the research director continues to meet with relevant groups to assist in understanding and making use of the research results. For example, in early December, the Grinnell Area Mental Health Consortium, a group that brings together a range of key stakeholders around mental health, invited the research director to a meeting to discuss the findings and continue planning next steps.

Some tangible results from the project can already be seen. For one, comprehensive data collected on community organizations and service providers concerned with all manner of community issues (health, income, food security, recreation, etc.) was shared with an AmeriCorps member working with the public library to create an updated community resource guide. Since the beginning of the project, the town has also seen the establishment of four new restaurants. While we have no direct evidence that this was due to the project, the high demand for additional restaurants was clear and publicized since the first visioning survey. The information was also at a high level of awareness to the Chamber of Commerce, one of the organizing groups behind BABG and which was represented on the steering committee.

Community members work in small groups led by steering committee members to discuss research findings and outline action plans.

The most significant and clear direct impact thus far came from the project's identification that a critical cross-cutting issue seen in many of the priority issues was a lack of access to information or insufficient communication. For example, while *improve water quality* and *improve roads and road maintenance* were identified as a top priority, what the researchers found was that most people simply want better information and updates on these issues. As a result, the city created a new position and hired a Communications & Community Development Specialist. This was followed by a campaign to share information on the city's water projects making use of the local newspaper and an every-door direct mailer.

The project research director, Professor Monty Roper (Grinnell College), intends to continue working with collected data to support local organizations and development issues. While we have already published a significant amount of data, there are many more useful findings that can be gleaned from the surveys and interviews regarding issues outside of the seven prioritized issues as well as regarding ongoing programs and challenges of a range of community organizations. Professor Roper has already hired student research assistants to begin going back through the data to pull together policy briefs that can be useful to organizations. For example, one brief will likely address housing. These briefs are intended to be short (no more than a few pages) and provide community organizations with relevant information gathered through the course of the research. Additionally, Prof. Roper teaches two courses (*Research Methods for Community Development*, and *SPARK: Community-Based Social Innovation Challenge*) in which groups of students are paired with organizations in the community to conduct program evaluations and needs assessments, and to generate fundable project proposals and program innovations. Data gathered as part of the project will support these efforts.

Final Project Reflections

What went well, and possible insights for other organizations

Overall, project leadership feel good about the process and outcomes of the project. We have engaged with the community, built support and helped to bring together key stakeholders around a set of prioritized issues, created an understanding of community development priorities that will help to guide effective decision making for years to come, and are beginning to see intensified engagement and some tangible results around the core concerns. Areas where we feel the project has been particularly successful, and recommendations we have for other organizations include the following.

Community engagement and participation. At its core, this project was about community-based development, and we feel that we have done a good job engaging the community. There are several key strategies that supported this success. This included the organization of our steering committee, which was engaged throughout the process. They dedicated a significant amount of time to the project by meeting regularly, providing ongoing feedback on the research, helping release information to the public, and participating as facilitators in the final public information sharing session. Our communication strategy was also critical. We intentionally developed a mailing list that would engage key stakeholders that were not invited to join the steering committee, and then invited the community as a whole to opt-in. At each stage of the project, we used multiple methods (e.g. social media, press releases, personal networks, mailing list, local radio, every-door direct mailers) and public presentations to release information about the process and preliminary data. This helped to keep the community interested and more willing to be involved in various phases of the research. We also directly hired members of the community to help engage their own social networks and to participate in data gathering.

Project Leadership. Within the steering committee and research team, a small subset of individuals played a critical leadership role throughout the project. They kept the project focused and the steering committee engaged, and were essential to navigating the inevitable obstacles that a project of this scope experiences in a timely and effective manner (something that would be more difficult to do in a 20+ person committee). In particular, BABG found success through an innovative co-backbone model, where a higher education institution (Grinnell College) and a community foundation (Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation) worked together to provide strategic and logistical support. This also brought access to both financial and human resources, fostered an engaged and organized

steering committee, and ensured overall support for research and project implementation. This partnership approach can be highly effective in leveraging diverse strengths to achieve impactful outcomes and may be recommended for other rural areas with limited resources.

<u>What were the project's major challenges, and what might we have done differently?</u>

The most significant challenge for the project was the timeline. The 18-month timeline was long for some on the project steering committee. Keeping the timeline as short as possible would help to keep people interested and willing to participate. At the same time, completing the project's objectives while maintaining adherence to our core principles was difficult within the time frame.

To some degree this challenge can be linked to our greatest success. We endeavored to have a project that was community-based and that engaged with parts of the community that don't normally have input or participate in community decision making. This was difficult and time consuming. While we had considerable community input, we still did not get a proportional participation, particularly by lower-income households. It is hard to know whether this was due to a lack of interest or because the standard channels of communication are less relevant for some of those households. Knowing that this would be a challenge, we intended to hire upwards of 50 persons from the community to use diverse social networks to expand participation. Yet, despite continuous effort, we were never able to hire more than 20 for any phase of the project. At multiple steps, this led us to expand the duration of data collection longer than planned. It remains unclear what we might have done differently here.

Staying on scheduled proved difficult not just due to outreach efforts. Multiple aspects of the project took longer than anticipated or hoped. Transitions between phases is another case of

strengths linked to challenges. The steering committee was involved in evaluating whether a phase had sufficiently achieved its goals such that it could be closed as well reviewing plans for next phases, which in some cases could not be developed in full until the results of one phase were complete. In some cases, this required finding multiple meeting times for a very busy group of people.

Posters, social media posts, and job ads for recruiting community survey takers was not as successful as hoped.

Finally, processing of data (particularly transcription and processing of focus groups and listening sessions) was also very time consuming. This could have been avoided by using dedicated note-takers at these sessions. It is also likely that we were overly ambitious. We could have either reduced the engagement efforts in the final phase or limited the number of prioritized issues that we explored in depth.

Closing

We want to acknowledge the tremendous efforts of our community in helping to shape a brighter future for Grinnell. Their engagement and active participation are the driving forces behind our progress, and together we are building a stronger, more vibrant community.

Further details on this project can be found on our website, www.buildabettergrinnell.org.