

"They have a chance to get their feet wet with a new business without renting main-floor space, which in many cases is not readily available."

One likely target for renovation, the low-income Sheldon-Munn apartments on Main Street's 300 block, has a number of rooms left empty after tenants have moved out. New tenants aren't yet able to move in because the spaces aren't up to city code.

Bill Malone, who owns Café Diem on the 200 block of Main Street with his wife, Jennifer, lives in a custom-built loft above the business with the couple's son, Cole. Malone said the last record he found of anyone living in the space was from 1962. The loft, he said, was worse off than many currently vacant upper-levels spaces because it had lacked electricity and working plumbing.

In addition to improvements he did with the help of his friends, what he called a "passion project," Malone spent "upwards of \$30,000" for electricity and plumbing.

"Any revitalization of Main Street is solely born, generally, by the property owners," Doyle said, although he said the city does have one program, which provides a matching \$15,000 grant for property owners to update their building facades in the interest of historic preservation.

"They were doing parades on Main Street back in the 1800s," Malone said. "It's living history, and by putting people into it, you're keeping this history around for the future. I think Main Street really wants to be a reflection of what our city is."

Main Street Cultural District membership and tours

- The Main Street Cultural District's general membership meeting will be at 8 a.m. Tuesday, Aug. 4, at Youth and Shelter Services, 420 Kellogg Ave.

- The Iowa Downtown Summit will be hosted by the Main Street Cultural District from 5 p.m. Monday, Aug. 24, through noon Wednesday, Aug. 26, with plenary sessions at Ames City Hall auditorium, walking tours and smaller breakout sessions at City Hall. A complete schedule can be found at www.iowalifechanging.com.

MID-IOWA BUSINESS

Government is getting it

More than 130 people, consisting primarily of government employees, from across the United States, gathered in Des Moines for three days in June to share best practices and listen to experts discuss removing waste from processes. By observing the energy and commitment of speakers and participants at the Lean Government Exchange, hosted by the state of Iowa, one could quickly conclude that "lean government" is not an oxymoron.

One of the primary speakers at the conference was Ken Miller, author of "We Don't Make Widgets." Miller has dedicated a significant portion of his career to battling the perception that keeps government managers and their teams from reaching their full potential, namely that "we're different, so the same process improvement techniques that work within industry don't apply to us." The book is required reading for any government manager.

Fortunately, the state of Iowa and various municipal governments are starting to get the message. The state has partnered with some of Iowa's top companies and has completed roughly 100 focused, rapid-improvement projects since 2003 with several projects boasting significant improvements, including reducing the time:

- Required to obtain an air quality permit for a new facility from 62 days to six days.

- For a clean water construction permit from 28 months to 4 1/2 months.

- For a corrective action decision on a leaking underground storage tank from more than three years to 90 days.

It's important to realize that in each of these situations, the environ-



RICK BRIMEYER

mental criteria was not relaxed. Rather, wasteful activities that didn't contribute to the end result were identified and eliminated by the employees working within those processes. The results are leaner processes that make our state much friendlier to prospective businesses wishing to build a new facility here. (Additional information on Iowa's Lean efforts is available at <http://lean.iowa.gov/>.)

Municipal governments also are getting in the act. During an April all-employee meeting, Fort Dodge City Manager David Fierke shared his vision of attacking waste within city services in an effort to take advantage of upcoming retirements to painlessly reduce headcount and expenses. He said this was clearly the superior alternative compared with raising taxes or laying off employees and cutting services.

Fort Dodge employees have responded with several employee-initiated improvements. For example, various reports completed by police officers and signed by victims and witnesses must be notarized, but only law enforcement supervisors were registered notaries. This meant every time a patrol officer completed a report requiring a citizen's notarized signature, they had to call and wait for a supervisor to make a special trip. By notarizing all officers, the city estimates it will convert more than 2,700 hours of waiting and special trips annually (more than

the equivalent of one officer) into important police work. A nice byproduct is \$9,000 a year in gas savings.

The city of Dubuque recently aggressively attacked how it produces, copies, transmits, stores and retrieves documents. Governments produce lots of documents. Dubuque ultimately replaced more than 200 standalone printers, copiers, fax machines and scanners with 62 multi-function machines that are much cheaper to operate. More importantly, city employees began challenging the need for paper copies, opting instead for electronic documents. The latter are not only less expensive, they can be retrieved quicker and more reliably. Best of all, they're a greener option. All told, Dubuque estimates it's saving about \$120,000 per year from the project.

In Ames, concerns were raised regarding the appearance of park turf areas. The Parks and Recreation Department determined that parks were getting mowed once every 11 business days. A team studied mowing processes and identified several improvements including increasing the size of some mower decks, changing mowing methods and reducing travel time by eliminating team mowing. The result is that parks are now mowed once every five business days without adding staff.

Few are ready to claim that government is ready to go head to head with the top lean companies, but they are entering the game. With revenue-funding shortfalls stemming from the extended recession, that will become more important than ever.

Rick Brimeyer is the Iowa division manager for PDG, a business consulting firm in Story City.