

Your First Ten Steps to an Idea Friendly Town

Introduction

You love your community and want to make it better. But you're tired of hearing "we tried that once" or "nothing ever changes here." You're frustrated with endless meetings that go nowhere and committees that move at glacial speed.

Instead, you can start making positive changes right now, without waiting for permission, support or perfect conditions.

The ten steps in this guide are designed to be immediately usable. **You don't need special skills, big budgets, or official approval to get started.** Each step has been tested in real communities, like yours.

Some of these ideas might seem too simple to make a difference. That's exactly why they work. Small actions create momentum. Momentum builds community support. Community support leads to bigger changes.

Pick one or two steps that appeal to you and try them this week. You'll be surprised how quickly small actions can shift the energy in your community.

Your town's future isn't controlled by a few organizations, leaders, or naysayers. It's created by people like you taking small actions every day.

Let's get started.

Step One: Coffee and Calendars

Build connections and end the “I wish I’d known about that!” dilemma

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Ever find out about an event or project in your town only after it was happening? Ever wish you could have helped with something or offered some insight, if you only knew it was coming?

Even in a small town, we don't keep each other informed like you'd think. Organizations work in silos, missing opportunities to collaborate, support each other, or simply avoid scheduling conflicts.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Get folks together to compare organization calendars over coffee. That's it. Just share coffee and calendars.

How to Do It

Keep it simple:

- Invite some local people to coffee
- Ask them to bring their calendars
- Go somewhere comfortable (not a boardroom) and get coffee
- Each person can go over their calendar and share what they have going on

Who to invite: Start small. Who do you want to coordinate with? Who puts on events in your town? Think of arts or history groups, town or county government, the chamber of commerce, or nonprofit organizations. You can start with a few folks and grow over time.

What to talk about: The only goals (at first) are to share what you have planned and get to know each other better. Coffee and calendars.

As people begin feeling more comfortable with each other, they will start talking about cooperating, doing shared projects, or noticing when they have shared goals. Conversations may even lead to collaborating in bigger ways.

It all starts with just a few folks sitting down for "Coffee and Calendars."

Avoid This Common Trap

Don't try to replace the in-person get-together with a combined printed or online calendar. The calendar is not the goal. **The conversation is the goal.**

You're there for community building, not for creating a unified calendar system.

Your Next Step

Invite one person who is working on good things in your town to join you for Coffee and Calendars. Suggest a specific day next week to get together.

Yes, declare it as an official public meeting of government groups if the law requires. Whatever you need to do to stay legal, but keep the coffee discussion itself informal.

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Step Two: Start a Community Success List

Be prepared for those folks who say, "We're a dying town."

The Challenge You Are Addressing

It's pretty common to hear people say something like, "There's nothing here!" or "Nothing good happens in this town!"

That's because they aren't remembering all the new business activity, or they maybe aren't paying attention. Or maybe they're only thinking of big new employers, the kind that come with visiting dignitaries for ribbon cuttings and announcements. Most small towns don't have many of those big announcements, but you probably have a lot more small business activity than folks realize.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Keep a running list of every good thing that happens in your community. When someone complains about nothing happening, share the list.

How to Do It

Put every new business on your Success List, including:

- Home-based businesses and traveling businesses
- Businesses inside another business (like craft items in a local store)
- Hard-to-see businesses that people might not notice

Add even more to your list

- Business expansions and successions
- Community improvements and public projects
- Grants received by your community
- Awards or recognition or your town
- New residents who moved to town
- Renovations and remodels

Real example: Carol Peterson from Milnor, North Dakota, population 700, has kept a list for 12 years. Her town added 25 businesses they didn't have before, received over \$2.3 million in grants, and has solid proof of progress when the naysayers start complaining.

Carol's list includes specific entries like "electrical/HVAC with 15 employees," "veterinarian with 4 full-time and 6 part-time," "childcare center with 16 employees," plus business expansions, new construction, community projects, and public improvements. You can see her complete list at SaveYour.Town/First10Steps

Keep track of grants too: You'll be amazed how much outside money people and groups in your community have brought in when you add it all up.

Where to Share Your Success List

- Post it online and share on social media
- Include highlights in your newsletter and a link to the full list online
- Print copies for the coffee shop, bank, and other gathering places
- Submit it to the local newspaper
- Make a giant poster version for business windows or empty buildings
- Bring copies to community meetings and events
- Email it to local leaders and organizations

Your Next Step

Start your list today. Write down every new business, expansion, improvement, or positive development you can remember from the last month, then keep it going. Ask others to help you remember what you've missed.

Pro tip: Make this a community effort. Ask chamber members, city staff, and longtime residents to help you build the most complete list possible.

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Step Three: Make a 'What to Do' Board

Answer those people who say, "There's nothing to do here"

The Challenge You Are Addressing

How many times have you heard it? Someone lamenting, "There's nothing to do here!"

Worse yet, hearing someone tell visitors that. "What is there to do around here?" "Nothing, really. I don't know."

Even locals don't always know about all the activities, attractions, and experiences available in their own community.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Make a "What to do in (your town)" Pinterest board. It's simple, visual, and easily shareable when people ask that dreaded question.

How to Do It

Set up your board:

- Create a new Pinterest board
- Name it "What to do in [your town name]"
- Make it a public board so anyone can find it

Pin everything there is to do:

- All the tourism attractions and lodging
- Local events and festivals
- Murals, public art, and creative studios
- Restaurants, breweries, wineries, and local hangout spots
- Parks, trails, and outdoor activities
- Shopping and unique local businesses

Hot tip: Make it a group board. You don't have to know everything if you'll invite others to help. Invite local business owners, event organizers, and community boosters to contribute pins.

Promote your board

- Share it in your newsletter and social media
- Email it to friends and ask for suggestions
- Make a poster with a QR code for convenience stores, motels, and around town
- Bring it up at gatherings and community meetings

Why Pinterest?

Pinterest has grown and endured since the 2010s as a platform that generates real action from people of all ages. When visitors search for "what to do in [your town]," your board will show up in results.

Your Next Step

Create your Pinterest board today with just a few pins to get started. Then invite at least three other people to help you add to it.

If you're reading this online, why not do it right now? Open Pinterest, start with 5 pins and build from there.

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Step Four: Network at Local Events

Help people connect to create future jobs and opportunities

The Challenge You Are Addressing

You've always heard that everyone knows everything about everyone in a small town, but do we really? People are always moving in and out, and some people you haven't talked to meaningfully in years.

When it comes to doing business together, a casual "Hi, how are ya?" at the post office just doesn't cut it. To create new jobs and opportunities, people need to connect with customers, suppliers, collaborators, and people who help them think of new ideas. No one creates jobs in a vacuum.

Your town has different kinds of people, different businesses, and people with differing ideas. But they're not connecting with each other in ways that spark innovation and new opportunities.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Add more deliberate networking to things you're already doing. When you bring people together and help them connect, you're spurring innovation and generating future jobs.

How to Do It

Do you have a conference or workshop coming up? Add networking.

- Schedule specific networking breaks between sessions
- Try speed networking, where people rotate through quick introductions
- Create discussion tables by topic or industry
- Make sure even people who know each other have structured time to talk

Do you hold a business fair? Add networking.

- Set aside time for vendors to meet each other, not just customers
- Encourage businesses to learn about each other's services
- Create a "hidden businesses" showcase for home-based or lesser-known businesses

For any community event:

- Build in time for introductions and mingling
- Encourage cross-pollination between different groups
- Help people discover what others do and how they might work together

Real Examples

Speed business networking at an economic development symposium in Norfolk County, Ontario, led to people finding jobs, businesses finding new employees, and several firms starting to do more business with each other.

A business fair held in an empty building in a small Ohio town created connections that resulted in two new businesses opening.

Your Next Step

Look at your next scheduled community event, workshop, or meeting. Add 30-45 minutes of structured networking time to the agenda.

Remember: Adding networking isn't just about people talking to each other. It's about building the connections that can create new jobs and opportunities.

Step Five: Be a Ninja

Take positive action without waiting for official permission

The Challenge You Are Addressing

You see things that need fixing around town, but the "official" process is slow, complicated, or non-existent. Meanwhile, small eyesores and maintenance issues pile up, making your community look uncared for.

You're waiting for someone else to take action, but what if that someone could be you?

The Idea Friendly Solution

Become a ninja in your own town. Ninjas are folks who slide in, do the work unobtrusively, and slide out. The city doesn't have to do everything - and neither do you, if you get others involved.

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How to Do It

Choose ninja-appropriate projects:

- Weed-whacking around neglected areas
- Cleaning dirty windows on businesses or empty buildings
- Picking up trash in public spaces
- Painting over old graffiti or outdated advertising
- Small repairs like fixing broken planters
- Cleaning and painting picnic tables

Think bigger with group ninja projects:

- Organize park ninjas to trim edges, pull weeds, and clean benches
- Get adults and students working together on community beautification
- Tackle yard cleanup for elderly residents who need a helping hand
- Paint positive messages or hashtags on blank spaces. Use your best judgment about permission, or just use chalk!

For any community event: Just pick up what's around you. It takes a few minutes. Do your part. Don't try to fix everything, just improve what you encounter.

Real Examples

In Paulding, Ohio, volunteers painted their positive community hashtag over outdated and misleading business advertising on an empty building. People honked and cheered when they drove by, including the county sheriff.

In Annville, Kentucky, when someone noticed an elderly grandmother raising grandchildren needed help with yard cleanup, three people immediately volunteered for a half-day ninja project.

Your Next Step

Pick one small improvement project you can tackle this week. Bring a friend if possible, but don't wait for a committee or official approval.

Remember: You're not trying to replace official services, just filling in the gaps with positive community action.

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Step Six: Make a Ninja List

Make it easier for just anyone to be a ninja

The Challenge You Are Addressing

People like you want to help improve your community, but they don't know what needs doing or where to start. Meanwhile, you see dozens of small projects that could make a difference if someone just tackled them.

Without a clear list of opportunities, willing volunteers don't know how to help out, and small problems stay small problems instead of becoming small victories.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Create a community "honey-do" list: a running list of little jobs or tasks that anyone could take on for the benefit of all. Think of it like a to-do list for your whole town.

How to Do It

Start your ninja list with these types of ninja-appropriate projects:

- Pressure wash picnic tables in the park
- Paint railings along walking trails
- Weed flower beds around public buildings
- Clean up litter in specific areas
- Touch up paint on park equipment
- Sweep sidewalks in the business district
- Plant flowers in public planters

Make it accessible:

- Post the list online where people can easily find it
- Include varying skill levels - from "anyone can do this" to "need some tools/experience"
- Estimate the time required for each task, at least roughly
- Allow people to add suggestions to the list

Coordinate with officials:

- Share your list with city staff so they know what's planned
- Ask what projects are already scheduled (avoid duplicating work)
- Get their input on priority projects

Real Examples

After anonymous volunteers replaced a dangerously dilapidated footbridge in a city park, the city posted on Facebook asking people to turn in the bridge builders, as though they had committed a crime. The city got roasted in the comments and had to backtrack. A community honey-do list could have channeled that good energy into coordinated action instead of controversy.

Your Next Step

Write down 5-10 small projects around town that someone could tackle in a few hours. Post your list somewhere others can see it and add to it.

Remember: You don't have to be an official to start a list, but definitely invite your officials to get involved.

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Step Seven: Paint Something

Transform eyesores into conversation starters

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Every town has them: cracks in the sidewalk, boring utility poles, empty lots that look neglected, or plain surfaces that could use some life. These small eyesores drag down the whole feel of your community.

You don't need a strategic plan or a big committee to brighten up a sad space. You just need some paint and a little creativity.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Find something that needs color and personality, then paint it. You'll be amazed at how a small splash of creativity can transform both the space and people's attitudes about it.

How to Do It

Crack art projects:

- Find cracks in sidewalks or buildings
- Paint around them to create art that incorporates the crack
- Make it look like animal tracks, rivers, or whimsical designs
- Turn an eyesore into something people stop to photograph

Utility pole makeovers:

- Get permission to repaint boring utility poles downtown
- Let different community groups do different poles with their own designs
- Match themes to nearby businesses (medical symbols near the clinic)
- Use bright colors that reflect your town's personality

Dress up functional items:

- Paint traffic bollards as cartoon characters
- Add decorative elements to pipes and infrastructure
- Transform plain surfaces into canvases for local pride

Empty lot improvements:

- Put up a fence and paint it with community scenes
- Add flower boxes and decorations
- Create temporary art installations that draw positive attention

Real Examples

Colfax, Washington, turned sidewalk cracks into clown tracks and painted their utility pipes to look like a choir.

Waynoka, Oklahoma, let community groups paint utility poles with creative designs. Each group did their own pole with different themes.

See photos of crack art, painted pipes, and utility poles project at:

<https://SaveYour.Town/First10Steps>

Your Next Step

Walk around your downtown and identify one boring or damaged surface that could use some paint. Start small with a simple project you can complete in a few hours.

Don't worry about paint fading or flaking off over time. Fading fun stuff beats fading boring stuff every time.

Step Eight: Have a Ribbon Cutting

Celebrate each step of the process, even the boring ones

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Community projects take forever, and people lose interest or forget what's happening. By the time something is finally finished, the momentum and excitement have died.

Meanwhile, you're missing opportunities to keep people engaged, informed, and invested in the progress along the way.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Hold ribbon cuttings and ceremonial events for every step of a project, not just the grand opening. Celebrate the mundane milestones that usually go unnoticed.

How to Do It

Expand what deserves a ribbon cutting:

- Groundbreaking for infrastructure projects (culverts, sidewalks, street improvements)
- Completion of project phases (foundation poured, framing done, utilities connected)
- Equipment delivery or installation
- Permit approvals and funding announcements
- Volunteer milestone achievements

Keep the celebrations proportional:

- A culvert installation gets a 15-minute ceremony, not a full festival
- Focus on progress and momentum, not pomp

Make it meaningful, not just ceremonial:

- Involve the people who will benefit from the project
- Instead of just officials with golden shovels, have everyone bring their own shovels
- Include kids who will use a future ballfield at the groundbreaking
- Let community members share what the project means to them
- Take photos and share the story widely

Real Examples

In Deary, Idaho, they planned a ceremonial groundbreaking for a culvert installation, then a community softball game once the field was mowed (even though it wouldn't be finished). Each celebration keeps people engaged and invested in the project's success.

In Walla Walla, Washington, for a housing project ribbon cutting, they planned to stake out the layout of the future house right on the lot where they planned to build. They even thought of throwing some kids' toys in the yard to help people picture a real family living there.

Your Next Step

Look at any ongoing community project and identify the next "boring" milestone that deserves recognition. Plan a simple 15-30 minute celebration around it.

Every single step of progress can build community interest, even the mundane ones that keep projects moving forward.

Step Nine: Pop-ups

Want more people to come to your event? Add pop-up businesses!

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Your community events need more energy and draw. Local entrepreneurs need low-risk ways to test business ideas and connect with customers.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Add temporary pop-up businesses to your events. Pop-ups create concentrated bursts of new activity that draw crowds and give aspiring business owners a chance to try their ideas.

How to Do It

Group your pop-ups for maximum impact:

- Concentrate 4-6 pop-ups in one area rather than spreading them out
- Create a market feel with multiple vendors in adjacent spaces

Keep the number of pop-ups proportional to the event::

- Add pop-ups during holiday events for extra shopping options
- Set up in empty lots to activate unused spaces
- Host pop-ups inside existing businesses during special events
- Use empty buildings as temporary retail spaces

Make it easy for vendors:

- Provide basic infrastructure (tables, power if needed)
- Keep fees low or free for first-time participants
- Offer flexible time commitments (one day, one weekend, one month)
- Help with promotion and marketing

Where to Find Potential Pop-ups

- Look in the beauty salons for local items on display.
- Look in other stores in town for locally-made items.
- Look in the hands-on classes in high school and technical schools.
- Look in youth education groups with entrepreneurship components.
- Ask the librarians. Ask faith leaders. Ask the Chamber. Ask stylists and barbers.

Get More Help

For detailed guidance on organizing successful pop-ups, check out the Pop-ups Toolkit at: <https://learnto.saveyour.town/pop-up-fair-course>

Your Next Step

Look at your next community event and identify space for 3-4 pop-up vendors. Start recruiting entrepreneurs who want to test their business ideas.

Remember: One pop-up is just a pop-up, but a group of pop-ups becomes a market.

Step Ten: Shared Spaces and Sheds

Turn those pop-ups into permanent businesses without breaking the budget

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Pop-up vendors who are successful want to become permanent businesses, but full-size retail stores are too expensive or too big for their needs. Meanwhile, you have empty buildings still waiting for those mythical big retailers to come to town.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Create shared retail spaces where multiple small businesses operate under one roof, or develop shed markets where entrepreneurs can afford their own tiny building.

How to Do It

Shared mercantile spaces:

- Convert one larger building into 10-15 retail spaces, some larger and some smaller
- Let multiple businesses share rent, utilities, insurance and checkout duties
- Include a mix of products and services to create discovery shopping
- Provide common areas like checkout counters or seating areas

Shed market villages:

- Build or buy small sheds
- Cluster them together in one area for maximum impact
- Keep rents affordable for part-time or seasonal businesses
- Hold special events nearby like mini concerts or kids' arts shows

Make it work financially:

- Partner with building owners willing to experiment with lower rents
- Start with pop-up events on a weekend to test the concept
- Encourage local products and services that fill gaps in your community

Real Examples

Colfax Mercantile in Washington turned a 15-year vacant building into home for 15 different businesses, from frozen yogurt to upcycled furniture.

Walker Mercantile in Oklahoma features Made in Oklahoma products and includes a one-wall bookstore.

Kuna, Idaho, built their shed market with high school students learning construction skills through a project offered by a home improvement store.

Your Next Step

Identify either an empty building that could house multiple small businesses, or a vacant lot that could accommodate 4-6 small sheds. Reach out to the people who organize arts or crafts fairs locally about doing a pop-up in that location to test the shared market idea.

Remember that even tiny and temporary uses are better than leaving a building or lot empty for another decade.

Step Eleven (Bonus): Fill Empty Buildings

Show them off instead of trying to ignore them

The Challenge You Are Addressing

Empty buildings make your town look abandoned and discourage new businesses from considering your community. Meanwhile, potential entrepreneurs don't know what spaces are available or might be intimidated by the process of finding and leasing commercial space.

You're missing opportunities to match available buildings with people who want to start businesses.

The Idea Friendly Solution

Host a Tour of Empty Buildings. Instead of hiding your vacant spaces, showcase them as opportunities. Make it easy for entrepreneurs, residents and visitors to see what's possible.

How to Do It

Organize the tour:

- Contact building owners to get permission and participation
- Work with real estate agents to build cooperation
- Include a mix of building types and price ranges
- Plan a 2-3 hour self-guided tour with hosts in each building

Make buildings tour-ready

- Clean up and wash windows (this alone makes a huge difference)
- Provide basic information about square footage, utilities, and rental terms
- Have building owners or agents available to answer questions
- Include community volunteers to share history and possibilities

Promote beyond just real estate:

- Invite high school and college business classes
- Share with recent graduates who might want to move back home
- Include it in regional economic development newsletters
- Promote to entrepreneurs in surrounding communities

Follow up after the tour:

- Keep talking about the buildings and possibilities
- Share photos and stories on social media
- Connect interested people with building owners
- Plan follow-up events to maintain momentum

Real Results

Webster City, Iowa, filled 10 out of 12 buildings on its Tour of Empty Buildings within 18 months. The tour shifted community conversation from "what used to be" thinking to "what could be" thinking.

Get more help:

For complete guidance on planning your own tour, check out the Tour of Empty Buildings Toolkit at: <https://learnto.saveyour.town/tour-of-empty-buildings-toolkit>

Your Next Step

Walk downtown and count your empty buildings. Call or text your friend who is always ready to help with your big ideas to see if they'll help with this one.

People are curious about empty buildings. Tours give them a reason to look inside and imagine possibilities.

What's Next

If you've tried even one or two of these steps, you've already started transforming your community. You've proven that positive change doesn't require committees, budgets, or years of planning. But maybe you're wondering: Is this enough to really matter? How do you deal with naysayers waiting to pounce and shut you down? What about officials who have to follow the rules? How would you apply this mindset to bigger ideas?

That's where the complete Idea Friendly Method comes in. **The ten steps you just learned are practical applications of a deeper framework for creating communities where new ideas are welcomed, supported, and celebrated.**

When you're ready to dig a little deeper and unlock even more possibilities for your community, we're here to help: (and you'll find all these links at <https://saveyour.town/First10Steps>)

Want the friendly guide with even more simple recipes like this ebook? Get Deb's workbook "[From Possibilities to Reality: Save Your Small Town](#)" and use it with friends.

Want more depth and answers to those pressing questions? Get Becky's book [The Idea Friendly Guide](#) for deeper strategies and solutions.

Pop-ups Toolkit: Ready to add pop-up businesses to your events? Get step-by-step guidance, vendor recruitment strategies, and everything you need to create successful pop-up markets. Get the [Pop-ups Toolkit here.](#)

Tour of Empty Buildings Toolkit: Turn vacant buildings from eyesores into opportunities. This complete guide walks you through planning, organizing, and following up on a tour that fills empty spaces. Get the [Tour of Empty Buildings Toolkit here.](#)

Your community has everything it needs to thrive. Sometimes it just needs someone like you to take the first small step.