Northern California
Downtown Revitalization Playbook

Downtown Revitalization & Vacant Property Management Resource Guide: Inspiration from Other Places

Overview

Many small towns and downtown districts across California, Oregon, and Montana have implemented programs to address vacant properties, strengthen downtown vitality, support local businesses, improve aesthetics, and encourage redevelopment. The examples below provide potential models and ideas that could be adapted to other communities.

1. Vacant Property Registration & Maintenance Programs

Gardena, California - Vacant Property Registry Program

Ordinance No. 1882

The City of Gardena requires all abandoned, vacant, or foreclosed residential properties to be registered through its Vacant Property Registration Program.

Ordinance No. 1882

Resolution No. 6698

Purpose

The program was created to:

- Preserve health, safety, and welfare
- Protect neighborhoods from declining property values
- Prevent aesthetic deterioration
- Maintain neighborhood character
- Ensure vacant properties are properly secured and maintained

Key Requirements

- Vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed properties must be registered.
- Registration is required within 10 business days of a notice of default being recorded.
- Property owners remain responsible for registration even if they do not receive notice from the City.
- Annual registration is required.

Fees

- Annual Registration Fee: **$245 per property**

Tools

- Ordinance No. 1882
- Resolution No. 6698

Potential Lessons

- Vacancy tracking system
- Dedicated enforcement mechanism
- Property owner accountability
- Registration fees help fund program administration

Jackson County, Oregon (Including Jacksonville Area)

Vacant & Foreclosed Property Registration

Jackson County administers a vacant property registry for unincorporated areas under Oregon's "Good Neighbor Law" (ORS 18.995).

https://jacksoncountyor.gov/departments/development_services/code_enforcement/vacant_and_foreclosed_property_registration.php

Purpose

- Protect public health and safety
- Increase neighborhood livability
- Track and monitor vacant properties
- Improve communication with property owners

Key Requirements

Property owners must:

- Register vacant or foreclosed properties
- Maintain current contact information

- Inspect the property every 30 days
- Post emergency contact information onsite

Maintenance Requirements

Owners must:

- Maintain structures and prevent deterioration
- Mow grass and maintain landscaping
- Prevent trespassing and squatting
- Eliminate standing water
- Remove junk, debris, and abandoned vehicles

Fees

- No registration fee

Potential Lessons

- Focus on maintenance rather than penalties
- Regular inspections create accountability
- Emergency contact posting improves responsiveness
- Registration can be implemented without a fee structure

Gridley, California

Vacant Building Standards

Gridley emphasizes owner responsibility for vacant buildings.

Requirements

Property owners must:

- Secure doors and windows
- Board vacant buildings when necessary
- Secure accessory structures such as sheds and garages

Rationale

The city explicitly identifies vacant buildings as potential:

- Public safety hazards
- Fire risks
- Targets for vandalism
- Illegal activity centers
- Contributors to blight and declining property values

Potential Lessons

- Strong nuisance-abatement framework
- Clear maintenance expectations
- Focus on public safety and appearance

2. Downtown Associations & Business Improvement Districts

Grass Valley, California - Grass Valley Downtown Association (GVDA)

Established in 1980, GVDA operates as:

- A Special Assessment District
- A California Main Street Program
- A National Main Street Program

https://www.grassvalleyca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/final_bl_handout.pdf?1635197558

Downtown Strategy

Grass Valley focuses on:

- Historic preservation
- Arts and culture
- Events and tourism
- Independent retail
- Food and hospitality businesses

Supporting Organizations

- Downtown Association
- Chamber of Commerce
- Special Assessment District

Potential Lessons

- Main Street affiliation provides structure and credibility
- Strong focus on events and placemaking
- Preservation used as an economic development tool

Lincoln, California - Downtown Lincoln Association

Lincoln utilizes a downtown association supported through public-private partnerships.

https://library.municode.com/ca/lincoln/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT8HESA_CH8.08NUAB

Beautification Projects

Recent projects include:

- Larger downtown parking signs
- Installation of 40 flower pots throughout downtown
- Ongoing maintenance of flowers and landscaping

Community Funding Model

While the City remains a partner, beautification efforts rely on private and community contributions.

Potential Lessons

- Small beautification projects create visible impact
- Public-private partnerships can leverage limited municipal resources
- Volunteer and community fundraising can support downtown improvement

3. Shop Local & Economic Development Campaigns

Lincoln, California - "Love Lincoln" Campaign

Love Lincoln is a local business support initiative that encourages residents to spend money within the community.

Messaging Focus

The campaign emphasizes that local spending supports:

- Police services
- Fire protection
- Libraries
- Parks
- Recreation programs

Potential Lessons

- Strong community education around sales tax retention
- Simple messaging that links spending behavior to community benefits
- Replicable model for local business promotion

Grass Valley, California - "Support Local, Live Local"

Grass Valley promotes community identity through:

- Local business support
- Stewardship of regional resources
- Celebration of local culture and character

Potential Lessons

- Brand local identity
- Connect economic development with community pride
- Reinforce downtown as a gathering place

4. Historic Preservation & Design Standards

Grass Valley, California - Historic Design Review Guidelines

Grass Valley utilizes formal design standards within its historic district.

Purpose

Guide:

- Building additions
- Renovations
- Infill development
- Alterations to historic structures

Benefits

- Maintains historic character
- Supports property investment
- Encourages compatible development

Potential Lessons

- Design standards create predictability
- Historic character becomes an economic asset
- Preservation can support tourism and unique business recruitment

Sisters, Oregon - Western Frontier Architectural Theme

The Downtown Sisters Urban Renewal Plan emphasizes architectural consistency through a western-themed design standard.

Goal

Promote high-quality development compatible with the community's identity.

Potential Lessons

- Strong branding reinforces sense of place
- Consistent design standards improve visitor experience
- Downtown character becomes a market differentiator

5. Urban Renewal & Redevelopment Tools

Sisters, Oregon - Downtown Sisters Urban Renewal Plan

Administered by the Sisters Urban Renewal Agency.

Core Goals

1. Strengthen downtown as the community heart
2. Improve circulation and accessibility
3. Promote mixed-use development
4. Enhance pedestrian spaces
5. Improve design quality
6. Encourage intensive property development
7. Promote year-round employment

Eligible Improvements

- Streets
- Sidewalks
- Public gathering spaces
- Parks
- Parking facilities
- Private rehabilitation projects

Potential Lessons

- Urban renewal districts can finance infrastructure
- Downtown-focused investment strategy
- Combination of public improvements and private reinvestment

Hamilton, Montana - North Hamilton Urban Renewal District (NHURD)

Hamilton uses tax increment financing (TIF) to support redevelopment and infill.

Focus Areas

- Redevelopment of vacant land
- Infrastructure improvements
- Downtown revitalization
- Corridor beautification

Key Strategies

- Infill development
- Facade improvements
- Murals and public art
- Pop-up shops
- Tree canopy expansion
- Event programming
- Parking management

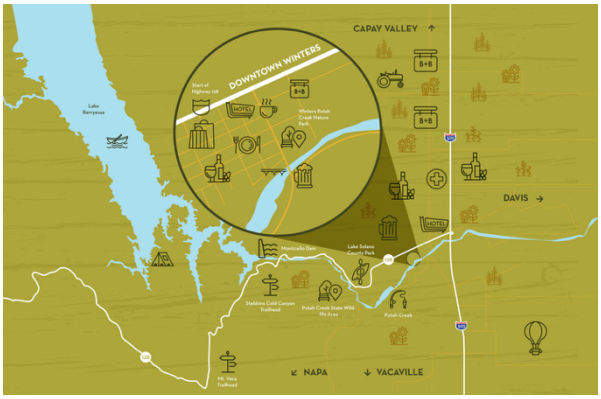
Potential Lessons

- TIF can support redevelopment infrastructure
- Urban renewal districts can encourage private investment
- Public improvements create conditions for infill development

6. Tourism & Place-Based Branding

Winters, California - Community Brand

Winters promotes itself through:



- Agriculture
- Outdoor recreation
- Farm-to-table experiences
- Wine tourism
- Craft beer and spirits

Potential Lessons

- Build branding around authentic local strengths

- Tourism marketing can support downtown businesses
- Culinary and agritourism experiences create destination appeal

https://www.discoverwinters.com/

Jacksonville, Oregon - Brand Position

Jacksonville markets itself as:

- Historic Gold Rush town
- Cultural destination
- Food and wine destination
- Outdoor recreation hub

Assets

- Britt Music & Arts Festival
- Independent businesses
- Wineries
- Hiking and biking opportunities

Potential Lessons

- Leverage history as an economic asset
- Combine downtown experiences with regional attractions
- Use events to drive visitation

Lakeview, Oregon - Community Identity

Marketed as:

"Oregon's Tallest Town"

Potential Lessons

- Distinctive branding creates recognition
- Small communities can differentiate themselves through a unique identity

7. Business Recruitment & Commercial Development

Auburn, California - Commercial Property Opportunities Program

Auburn actively markets available commercial properties and business opportunities.

Potential Lessons

- Maintain an inventory of available properties
- Create recruitment materials for prospective businesses
- Reduce barriers to business attraction

Gridley, California - Business Recruitment Messaging

Gridley emphasizes:

- Affordable real estate
- Utility advantages
- Highway visibility
- Labor force availability
- "Can Do" municipal culture

Potential Lessons

- Competitive advantage messaging matters
- Clear recruitment materials help attract investment

Emerging Themes & Takeaways

Across these communities, several recurring strategies appear:

Vacant Property Management

- Registration programs
- Annual inspections
- Maintenance standards
- Owner accountability
- Property security requirements

Downtown Beautification

- Flower program investments

- Streetscape improvements
- Murals and public art
- Tree canopy expansion
- Facade improvements

Economic Development

- Shop-local initiatives
- Main Street programs
- Property marketing
- Business recruitment efforts
- Pop-up retail strategies

Placemaking

- Historic preservation
- Architectural standards
- Public gathering spaces
- Events and festivals
- Community branding

Redevelopment Tools

- Urban Renewal Districts
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF)
- Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)
- Special Assessment Districts
- Public-private partnerships

Potential Models Worth Further Review

The strongest examples for replication or further study appear to be:

1. **Gardena, CA** - Vacant Property Registry Program
2. **Jackson County, OR** - Vacant Property Registration and Maintenance Requirements
3. **Grass Valley, CA** - Main Street and Downtown Association model
4. **Lincoln, CA** - Beautification and Shop Local initiatives
5. **Sisters, OR** - Downtown Urban Renewal Plan
6. **Hamilton, MT** - Comprehensive infill, downtown revitalization, and urban renewal approach

These communities collectively demonstrate that successful downtown revitalization typically combines property management, beautification, business support, placemaking, and targeted redevelopment incentives rather than relying on a single strategy.