



QUESTIONS FOR AMES CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES

All answers are posted verbatim; the Chamber did not edit responses, nor correct typos or grammatical errors.

The following responses are from Peter Orazem:

1. What do you see as the top three issues facing the City of Ames?

- A) Thirty-eight percent of our employment base is in the public sector with 25% in state government. Large permanent cuts to state support for Iowa State University and coming cuts to local government mean that the city must encourage private sector growth to replace lost public sector jobs. Story County has had no net growth in proprietorships since 1990 – we cannot afford to prevent entrepreneurship.
- B) Correcting for inflation, Ames retail sales have not grown since 2000. We need to improve the climate for retail by fostering a true regional retail center capable of attracting interstate travelers, by using better signage and enhancements to make Campustown and Main Street visitor destinations, and by halting policies that create excess supply of empty business storefronts.
- C) We need to improve access to green spaces by making use of our waterways that could link all our parks and by making our existing bike trails safe.

2. What ideas do you have for growth and economic development in Ames?

Ames has many factors that have yielded growth elsewhere: we host a Research I University; we have interstate frontage; and we are near but not in a metro area. We have failed to exploit our locational advantages. We need to:

- A) Develop an Industrial Park on the Interstate. To get the return on interstate presence, we need to be willing to invest in the infrastructure that businesses need to get established in Ames. Our current available commercial space is quite limited and in small sites relative to the needs of even moderate sized firms, and Ames is just not competitive compared to other communities.
- B) Present an attractive retail environment on the Interstate. Ames is unique in its inability to exploit our Interstate Frontage. Signage heading south from Minneapolis includes two signs trumpeting the National Animal Disease Lab and none mentioning Iowa State, Reiman Gardens, Main Street, or any other reason to turn right. Better signs would help, but locating retail capacity along the Interstate would be better. To get more people to Main Street, we first need to get them off the Interstate.
- C) We need a development presence in City Hall. It is fine for the Chamber and the AEDC to get new firms interested in Ames, but only the City can address questions of policy. We have many people whose job it is to regulate firm entry and expansion plans, but there is not a single employee whose job is to make those plans happen. We need personnel whose job is to guide new firms through our maze of bureaucracy and code requirements. Where it is apparent that

- variances or Council Action may be necessary to allow a project to go forward, those conflicts need to be identified early and immediately resolved rather than waiting for long periods. The average length of time from application to permit in the U.S. is six days—we need to be able to make decisions within that time frame.
- D) The application process needs to be transparent, clear, and fairly administered. Each firm needs to be treated the same. Regulations cannot go beyond the written code. Once the firm is told the conditions for approval, those conditions cannot be changed. Too often we violate the Smart Growth principle that city decisions on applications must be timely, cost-effective and predictable. The more our approval process creates uncertainty, the more firms look to other communities where they feel they will be treated more fairly.
 - E) Every day, 6,000 Story Country residents commute to Polk County and 4,000 residents of Polk County commute to Ames. We should help make that commute as easy as possible by helping to coordinate van pools to and from Ames. The weak growth in the Ames job market means that more and more Ames residents have had to commute for work. An easier commute will lower the chance that they move to where the jobs are.
 - F) Campustown and Main Street have the opportunity to become destination shopping areas. Main Street has good retail outlets and needs more visitors to Ames. Better efforts to get visitors off the Interstate would help, and that increased traffic could justify other investments such as improvements to parking and traffic flows. Campustown needs a complete facelift, and the Transit Hub Proposal which I helped write would be a huge improvement to the economic viability of that area and a gem attracting visitors to the City.

3. What has been your personal involvement in economic development and growth for Ames?

- A) For four years, I have been conducting research on economic growth in Ames. I have also shared my research to interested parties in Ames either in talks or in occasional essays published in the local paper. I believe the research has improved the community's understanding of our current economic circumstances, threats to our quality of life, and possible approaches to resolve difficulties.
- B) Along with my colleague Dan Otto, I was asked to provide economic analysis for the Ames Inter-Modal Facility Proposal.
- C) I am a member of the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau Board.

4. What are your views on the City's rental assistance program?

As a small town in Iowa, Ames is blessed with residents from every corner of the country and the world. This exposes us to cultures, languages, cuisines, customs and religions that are unknown in most places in Iowa. We must never forget our mission as a community to welcome all who would come. As a center of education, we must do our best to offer the best educational services we can at all levels, from pre-school to PhD. We need to strive to associate the names of Ames and Iowa State with quality education, friendship, safety and acceptance for all.

Ames Section 8 Housing Program presents an opportunity to attract families to Ames that cannot currently afford housing but who have potential to benefit from the schooling and employment opportunities that Ames has to offer. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development allows local Public Housing Agencies to set priorities regarding whom to offer a housing voucher. We should set those priorities to target families that can particularly benefit from the range of services and employment opportunities that Ames has to offer, presumably families with young children, with skills needed in local businesses, or with an interest in training programs available in the community. At the time that we offer a voucher, we should already have identified other social service the family would require so that the school system, various social services, churches, and any other family needs are already set to ease the transition to Ames.,

We need to analyze our past experiences with the program to identify which households have benefited the most from the program. Although the original Gautreaux program (the original Supreme Court ruling that led to the issuance of housing vouchers that allowed households to leave their city of residence) appeared to have successes, the outcomes of the succeeding “Moving to Opportunities” program has been disappointing. One lesson is that random assignment into the voucher program has not worked, but carefully targeted programs might benefit recipients. With applicant backlogs exceeding 300+ families, we should have a well-defined set of priorities to decide whom to offer a voucher.

Ames Section 8 Housing program has become controversial because the city has not been forthcoming with information on how the program is managed and where it has succeeded. One aspect where the city’s management of the program is most suspect is in its refusal to conduct parallel background checks on resident and nonresident applicants. In the interest of fairness, every recipient should be subject to a criminal background check in the state in which they reside. To conduct background checks only on Iowa residents is discriminatory. The City’s contention that background checks on residents of other states are too expensive is simply not credible. Such checks are done routinely in Cedar Falls, Dubuque, and Eastern Iowa for the state in which the applicant resides. Iowa City conducts a national background check on each applicant. In fact, the Ames Police Dept. recommends that all Ames landlords conduct such back ground checks on their tenants.

5. What are your views on the Land Use Policy Plan?

I agree with most of the goals of the Land Use Policy Plan, but I disagree with some of the policies that were implemented in the hopes of attaining those goals. In some instances, the policies have backfired.

I believe it is time to revisit the emphasis on Village-style Multiuse and Multi-family style development. Last year, 63% of the housing units built in Ames were multi-family units. The all Iowa average was 25% and the Iowa City average was 24%. The emphasis on high density housing development has made it expensive to build the owner-occupied housing that people want, leading to the proliferation of houses built immediately north

and south of Ames. Rather than preventing sprawl, our overly restrictive housing policies have led to sprawl.

One area where the Land Use Policy Plan (LUPP) needs revision is in restricting logical growth of some of our largest employers. As one example, the Mary Greely emergency room is space constrained and has inadequate facilities to garage the ambulances. However, there is no space in the current zoning that would allow an emergency room along Duff. Similarly, the plan restricts McFarland Clinic from placing administrative and technology support staff in adjacent areas so that the Clinic site can be dedicated to patient care. In adjusting the LUPP, we should accommodate reasonable expansion instead of forcing those institutions to construct much more expensive high rise installations or move as currently suggested.

The LUPP mentions that Ames should be a regional center 28 times in the first chapter alone. If we want Ames to be a regional retail center, where would we locate that center? Our current regional center is located four miles from the interstate and four miles from U.S. 30. That made sense when it was built on the edge of town when US69 was the main north south highway, there was no interstate, and U.S. 30 was a two lane. Regional shoppers no longer travel along US69 – they are driving by us at 70 miles per hour. If we want to be a regional retail center, we have to get people off the interstate or they will drive by. One way to get them off the interstate is to locate some visible retail business on the interstate.

We have designated two priority areas for growth on the Northwest and the Southwest. Neither has experienced much growth compared to areas immediately outside the restrictive Ames policies. I believe that the Southwest would grow faster with less restrictive minimum density requirements, but I think we have to accommodate growth to the North in our LUPP. That growth will happen whether we plan for it or not, so why not plan for it?

6. What image do you think Ames has for potential developers or new businesses? What would you do to change or improve this image?

With a Research I University, interstate access, and location near but not in a metro area, Ames has all the potential in the world to foster new business. The fact that we have failed to make net additions to the number of proprietors in Story County since 1990 is amazing, given those advantages.

To correct the problem, we do not need more advantages. We just have to be willing to invest in the infrastructure that allows us to exploit the interstate with readily available industrial sites and we have to have a ‘can do’ attitude toward business inquiries in City Hall. Items A-D) in my response to question 2 would greatly improve our image:

- A) Develop an Industrial Park on the Interstate.
- B) Present an attractive retail environment on the Interstate.
- C) Hire staff to aid new firms through our maze of bureaucracy and code requirements.

D) Treat all firms equally with codes that are easily understood and transparently administered.

7. What are your thoughts on financing needs of the City of Ames, including water, electricity, library and parking?

For water and electricity utilities, we would use revenue bonds funded through rising utility rates. My understanding is that we do not have much choice for upgrading the two utilities – both are needed to meet expected demand. This time, however, we should incorporate anticipated plant depreciation into the rates to gradually build up a fund that would be tapped for future upgrades and repairs. Failing to do so is underpricing the true cost of the utility services while setting us up for future sudden increases in utility rates because we have failed to plan for maintenance and expansion of the water and electricity services.

The Library Board is currently undertaking a study of willingness to pay for a new library. If the citizens are willing to pay back \$36 million worth of bonds issued during a recession, I would be willing to go along. I suspect there will be some resistance. If so, I would want to reexplore the possibility of expanding across Douglass Avenue at the current library site. My recollection is that would be considerably cheaper than building a new library, although I would want reassurance that the new mechanical systems could be retrofitted into the current site.

If we are to build a parking structure Downtown, it makes sense to make it fit more than just the needs of the library. A parking structure near Main Street could serve the needs of Main Street businesses and the YSS campus as well as the library. If possible, I would like the parking structure to solve other problems as well. If the Union Pacific were amenable, a structure that straddles the railroad track with an entrance from south of the tracks would eliminate bottlenecks caused by the frequent trains. Such a structure would improve the look of the railroad right-of-way and would allow us to carry the look of Main Street south of the railroad tracks. That would go a long way to solving a third problem, the lack of an obvious Main Street entrance on Lincoln Way. If visitors know to turn off Lincoln Way to find Main Street, we would greatly improve customer traffic for our Main Street businesses.

8. What challenges do you think there are in developing the Main Street Cultural District as a residential center as well as a commercial/entertainment center?

The Village style development is attractive to some people in Ames, but most families do not want to live above commercial developments. It is not obvious that there is excess demand for above business residences in West Ames and Somerset where parking is plentiful. Parking is already a problem on Main Street, and more residential spaces would only add to the problems. The need for parking is a major impediment to renovating the Sheldon Munn Hotel.

I have no problem with developers creating additional residential spaces on Main Street, and I believe the City should provide faster and more accommodating code approval than they have in the past. I have doubts about how successful such ventures would be.

9. What processes would you like to see in place to proceed with an Inter-modal Transportation Hub?

With 27,000 Students and 14,000 employees across Lincoln Way, Campustown should be a vibrant and exciting commercial center. Campustown should attract potential students and their parents, particularly nonresident students whom ISU must attract in order to maintain current enrollment levels. Campustown should be a popular attraction for visitors and conventions, particularly as 80% of convention business in Ames is related to the University. An attractive Campustown would keep visitors in town after games and cultural events. Unfortunately, the reality is that Campus town is not an attraction. Poor parking, lack of any commercial anchors, absence of specialty retail stores and lack of any real sense of place make Campustown common rather than a showpiece for the city.

The Campustown Study commissioned by Iowa State and the City of Ames shows how an improved Campustown would look. With College Creek meandering through green spaces rather than being buried under Lincoln Way, we can link the beauty of the campus and the ISU Arboretum to an improved Campustown to make Campus town a destination for students, faculty, visitors and residents.

I helped provide the economic justification for the Transit Hub Grant Proposal. If approved, we could get \$39 million in federal funds to provide the shot in the arm that Campustown needs. Unfortunately, if the grant is denied, it may be several years before the federal government would have a similar call for proposals. Nevertheless, there may be other federal programs aimed at reducing the costs of interurban commuting that we could tap. An improved Campustown could raise employment in all of Story County by roughly 1%. While many of those jobs are higher paying professional and managerial positions, the improvements would also create almost 200 part-time jobs that our college students need to help support their studies.

Only a coordinated public and private sector effort will improve the area, and the city will need to take a leadership role to make that change happen. The city needs to be prepared to make the investments needed to make Campustown a suitable neighbor to the largest employer in Ames.

10. How can the City be involved in encouraging the development of additional/renovated conference space?

The Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau commissioned a study to examine the feasibility of convention flat space – how much additional business would exhibit space generate and how much would such space cost. Often such space would be attached to a convention hotel. That report was also going to identify potential funding sources. As of

this writing, I have not been given a copy of the final report although it should be available shortly.

If the cost-benefit assessment suggests that the City will be a net beneficiary from building exhibit space, I would expect that securing sufficient funding would require a joint investment between the City and the University. I suspect we would not find a private source of funding for the exhibit space but we might be able to attract a private developer interested in building the hotel. State funding had been available through the Vision Iowa Fund, but the state may have committed that funding source to pay for the I-Jobs bonds. If so, it would be much more difficult to obtain state funding for the project.

11. What would you do to support the existing business community in Ames?

I believe my research has been instrumental in raising public recognition that Ames has been growing atypically slowly compared to comparable communities, that the slow job growth has contributed to our loss of schools in Ames, that continuing weakness in the public sector atypically threatens a community where 38% of the jobs are in state, local and federal government, and that fostering faster private sector growth is our only option for replacing lost public sector jobs.

The same strategies to improve the transparency and fairness of City handling of permit applications and the hiring of personnel who help guide projects through the city approval process helps existing businesses expand as well as helping new businesses become established. That, and relaxing overly restrictive zoning requirements, would help the local construction business. Efforts to increase the number of visitors who stop in Ames rather than driving by would benefit existing retailers. Improvements to Campustown and Main Street would have clear benefits to existing firms.

The main benefit I offer existing firms is an end to the dysfunctional relationship whereby Ames businesses feel they cannot complain about how they are treated because they would face retaliation by the City Council or the City staff. Whether that fear is valid or not, the fear exists and it is not a healthy relationship for fostering better city policies. Businesses should expect a fair hearing from the City, and I intend to insure that every business is treated fairly.