

Iowa Rivers Revival

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Central City named “River Town of the Year”

Iowa Rivers Revival says the N.E. Iowa town has been revitalizing its relationship to the Wapsipinicon -- improving recreation, drawing more visitors to the town, boosting its economy.

Central City, Iowa. “Iowa Rivers Revival,” a group that advocates for rivers, has named Central City as “River Town of the Year” in recognition of the community’s outstanding work to revitalize its connections to the Wapsipinicon River.

“Central City has been a river town since it was founded in 1839, of course, but the last dozen years have seen a remarkable renaissance and focus on the Wapsi,” said Roz Lehman, executive director of Iowa Rivers Revival (IRR).

“Central City has made enormous efforts to foster river-related recreation, tourism, and economic development,” Lehman said. “It’s a model for what a small town can do to strengthen its quality of life by embracing its river.”

Iowa Rivers Revival is presenting the award at a reception Monday morning at the Falcon Civic Center in Central City. Mayor Don Gray and other leaders are accepting the award for the community.

The Flood of 1999 was one turning point. Central City responded by working with FEMA to buy out flood-plain properties along the Wapsi to mitigate future flood damage -- and then dedicated the land primarily to be riverfront parks. The parks have steadily added attractions and drawn more visitors.

In 2000, Central City became a “Main Street Iowa” community, which involved a process of focusing on the town’s existing assets. “It was obvious to everyone that we were a river town and the river was our biggest asset,” City Administrator LaNeil McFadden recalled recently.

Over the last dozen years, Central City built on the recreational, tourism and civic opportunities provided by the river: Walking and biking trails were built, and recently were connected to Pinicon Ridge County Park and the new Mary Lundby Trail Bridge. More people are fishing, canoeing, walking, biking, kayaking, paddle-boating, and beautifying the parks with gardens and plantings.

The Farmer’s market has grown steadily. “Central City Live” community concerts are held every Friday night in August. Kids enjoy a July 4 fishing derby each year. The Mainstreet Design Committee organizes a City-Wide Cleanup each year of the river bank, trail, and downtown areas. More river-related projects are planned, and the Wapsi is a key part of the community’s vision of the future.

“Central City is proving that rivers are good for tourism, good for business, and good for quality of life,” Lehman said. Central City estimates it draws 400,000 visitors per year, a huge contribution to the local economy. And Central City’s population (about 1250) is growing.

“We commend the leaders and citizens, and commend Central City as River Town of the Year,” Lehman said.

“You make Central City a great place to visit, and a great place to live.”

More background and detail:

Previous “River Towns of the Year” recognized by Iowa Rivers Revival are Webster City, Elkader, Coon Rapids, Cedar Falls, and Charles City. IRR will name a much larger “River City of the Year” at the end of January.

Iowa Rivers Revival was founded six years ago to be a voice for rivers. IRR is committed to helping Iowans work on public policy to restore and protect Iowa’s rivers and streams.

“Central City is a superb example of public officials, community leaders, civic organizations and citizens who have refocused on their river to improve quality of life,” Lehman said.

“Central City has a remarkable collaboration of the Mayor and City Council, City Park & Recreation Board, City staff, Central City Main Street and the Mainstreet Design Committee, the Linn County Conservation Board and staff, civic organizations, and many other volunteers and citizens,” Lehman said. “It is truly a ‘Get-it-done and work together community.’”

More projects are coming soon in Central City: Trees and shrubs and native prairie-grass will be planted this spring. Linn County is looking at creating an “Iowa Water Trail” on the Wapsi. There are plans for a new gazebo near the Main St. Bridge, a new band shell for “Central City Live” and other community events, a fish cleaning station at the south end of the trail, a handicap-accessible fishing dock, and new safety and interpretive signage along the trail.

“Central City is a small town, but its people and leaders are creating a big and promising future, with the river right in the middle of the picture,” Lehman said.

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