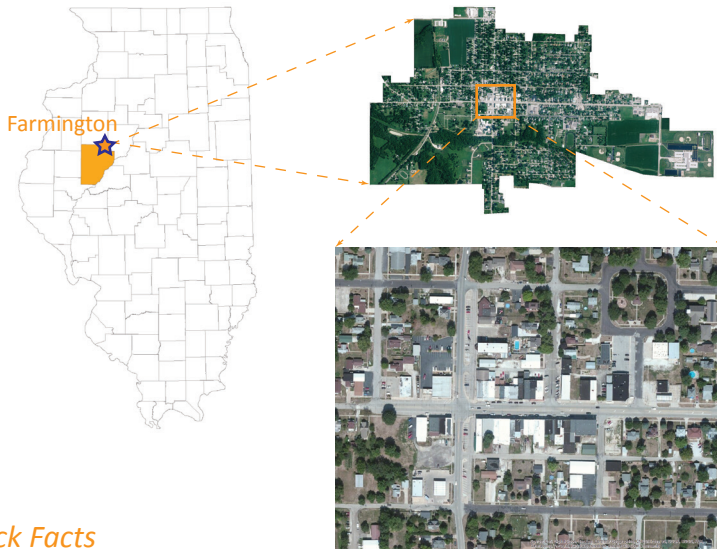


# Farmington, Illinois



## Quick Facts

Population: 2,328 Housing Units: 1,016 Median Household Income: \$50,833 Median Age: 39.6

## An Introduction to Farmington

Originally an Italian mining community, Farmington is now a quiet and pleasant place to live, with low crime rates, plenty of parks, friendly families, walkable streets and basic community amenities such as churches, libraries, medical facilities, and public recreation programs. The downtown had been in progressive decline, but due to a variety of efforts in recent years, downtown Farmington is gaining new life.

Around 1997, community members came together to try and make a change and revitalize the community. Spurred by involvement in a Western Illinois University program called “Mapping the Future of Your Community,” Farmington leaders participated in visioning and planning for their rural community and considered what a long-term vision for economic development might look like. Involvement in such a visioning program led to the origination of the Farmington Betterment Association (FBA) as a non-profit organization for community and economic development. These processes helped to bring major players together, which included the City of Farmington, community leaders, the

## Lessons for Success

1. Participate in federal, state, and regional programs aimed at local economic development.
2. Bring people together and work toward a common understanding.
3. Focus on community positives and find your niche.
4. Invest in physical improvements through TIF and facade programs.
5. Partner with nearby small towns that face similar challenges.

Chamber of Commerce, and the Bank of Farmington. These groups collaborated about next steps and initial goals for Farmington's revitalization.

## Farmington's Story

### Private Investments and Public Improvements

Farmington's initial revitalization process did not happen through financial investments by the city. All new growth came via private funds and investors. A group of individuals formed a private committee as an LLC and borrowed money from the Bank of Farmington to redo two storefronts. The Bank of Farmington was, from the very beginning, hospitable to new business efforts by offering low-interest loans. So while the city itself did not offer new businesses monetary support, the bank's presence did encourage entrepreneurial ventures in Farmington.

*"I think the strength of the bank has been important to everybody -- to know that they are putting dollar and cents assets behind the efforts to improve the community. A lot of people wanted to make it better; the bank gave us the means to make it better." - Mayor Kowal*

While the City did not provide financial investments, they did bring community leaders together in 2012 and revised the Comprehensive Plan from 2002. This led to the designation of the Downtown Historical District complete with Design Guidelines. They updated ordinances for vacant and neglected buildings, building codes, and signage. At the same time the City established the Community and Economic Development Commission composed of various facilitators within the community.

The City established the first TIF program in 2014 for the purposes of making targeted investments into the downtown for residential and industrial growth, and also for providing funds for a façade program. The structural and physical improvements that were made possible through the TIF program functioned to re-energize downtown. The TIF was used as a mechanism to entice an extended living provider to build a 31-bed unit in town that is at full capacity and brought in 20-25 new

jobs. Most of the remaining in-fill in the business district has been accomplished by the FBA and the assistance of the CEDC.

### Historic Capital

As mentioned, Farmington created the Downtown Historic District that included design guidelines for physical improvements. Leaders now make concerted efforts to invest in every single historic building that they feasibly can, recognizing that these buildings carry aesthetic, social, and cultural importance to the community. When possible, historic structures are included in TIF program for facades and are rehabbed to period-appropriate styles.

The success of the Farmington Historical Society and Museum reveals another reason why capitalizing on history is so important to communities like Farmington. Initially, a group of community members came together with the intention of documenting Farmington history but were unable to obtain non-profit status on their own. The city agreed to start a non-profit as a commission of the city. The museum is located on Main Street and the initial storefront was filled so quickly that the museum is now expanding into a second storefront. Financial needs of the Museum are supported by the City and the Bank of Farmington.

### Marketing and Communication

Farmington gets the word out about its programming through tapping into newspapers based in larger towns. For example, the Canton and Elmwood newspapers both send writers to Farmington council meetings. As changes have taken place to downtown Farmington, the city is in the paper with consistently positive stories. Furthermore, city officials post public notice of all meetings and try to be as open as possible about meetings and processes. A website is in the works, and Farmington has its own Facebook page, providing an additional avenue for digitally oriented people to participate in happenings in and around the town.

While Farmington is not yet ready to consider a full marketing campaign, city leaders have designed and distributed flyers that list programs and community

## Resilient Downtowns - Farmington, IL



MTZ Fitness is one of Farmington's recent business successes.

progress for the public. This shows that even without the funds and resources to mount major campaigns, cities can take small affordable steps to communicate with the community.

### Public Events and Programs

Farmington capitalizes on opportunities to attract tourists as well as provide local events for its residents and the area and many of these events are organized by the Farmington Chamber of Commerce. Small business Saturday helps promote Main Street retail. Seasonal events are scheduled such as the annual Santa Stroll in December which includes giveaways and a lighted parade. Farmington Open House is an event organized in partnership with realtors which opens up houses that are on the market for viewings. The Farmington Italian Festival had always been one of Farmington's most popular attractions. For many years it had always taken place on the outskirts of town and wasn't bringing traffic to the downtown. To address this, the festival was relocated to downtown and re-branded as Summer Fest. It continues to be a successful and important event for Farmington.

Farmington is also a coveted site as part of the Fulton County Spoon River Valley Scenic Drive. This regional recreational event capitalizes on natural, cultural and social amenities that exist throughout the county, and offers food, crafts, and entertainment that draws neighboring communities closer together. Held over two weekends, the event attracts up to 100,000 people to Farmington.

### Small Businesses and Main Street Retail

Farmington Main Street consists of specialty businesses that don't directly compete with big box stores. One of the greatest and perhaps more surprising successes is the fitness center that occupies three storefronts. This [fitness center attracts customers from out of town](#), making it a major draw for Farmington. Main Street is home to a diverse set of businesses: a computer and technology business, a furniture store, two hairdressing salons, a photography studio, interior designer, florist, advertising company, insurance agents and an upholstery business. Pat O'Brien's Park Side Deli and Diner is a Farmington favorite. These diverse Main Street retailers contribute to the unique character of downtown Farmington and occupy specialty retail niches that don't compete with larger communities in the vicinity.

## Lessons Learned from Farmington

### Participate in Federal, State and Regional Programs Aimed at Local Economic Development

New energy and changes in Farmington were initially spurred by involvement in a Western Illinois University planning program. Such a program helped bring people together through a dialogical process and kick started future efforts. Participating in federal, state, and regional programs, through entities such as University of Illinois Extension can offer a myriad of benefits including attracting new business, increasing housing, beautifying the community, expanding tourism and fostering entrepreneurship. In addition to the WIU led effort, Farmington leaders look to the University of Illinois Extensions' programs as essential to their growth and success.



# Resilient Downtowns - Farmington, IL

*“Every town wanting to regenerate or reinvigorate itself should begin with the ‘Mapping Your Community’ program. We are where we are today because of that program.” - Mayor Kowal*

## Bring People Together and Work Toward a Common Understanding

Farmington community members and leaders held meetings and discussed shared goals and intentions, thus building a community of invested leaders who were united in their understanding of their goals. This can be easier than it might sound; simply getting people together in a room to discuss their goals and ideas can help build momentum. People may also be moved to participate if, like in Farmington, a cataclysmic event such as the closing of a major retail business ignites interest in keeping other businesses in the downtown. Even seemingly negative events can help communities focus on the future and on building a vision for a new downtown.

While small victories can help keep people motivated, too much change can be confusing and frustrating to some. A great deal of change can also be opposed by those who are reluctant to see their community transform. For these reasons, there is a need for continual re-focusing and reconvening to recognize shared needs, desires and experiences. Community process is essential to consistent growth and processing any conflicts that emerge.

## Focus on Community Positives and Find Your Niche

Small towns are qualitatively different from larger ones and comparisons between unlike places can be self-defeating. By focusing on what is possible to be done in a given community, rather than on challenges that cannot be overcome, people can be mobilized towards action. Farmington leaders describe how they had to decide not to fight the battles they couldn't win. For example, they came to terms with the reality that there might be certain retail businesses that would no longer be viable in Farmington due to the proximity of other major retailers. Instead, they worked to discover their own community's assets and unique strengths.



A Farmington storefront in the process of a facade improvement.

## Invest in Physical Improvements Through TIF and Facade Programs

Physical changes such as facade programs may not immediately directly effect property values, but the affects they have on downtown cannot be discounted. As downtown gets beautified and historic structures are rehabilitated, the possibility of new development increases, while the desirability of the area for new business also increases. When a few storefronts are rehabbed, others soon follow. In Farmington, several new storefronts were given a new, improved facelift via the TIF program.

## Partner with Nearby Small Towns that Face Similar Challenges

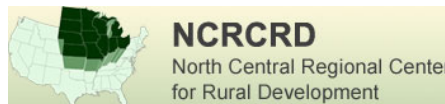
Farmington's neighbor, the City of Elmwood, faces similar small town challenges as Farmington. Officials representing the two cities have discussed the possibility of partnering for tourism and marketing purposes. Neither business district is big enough by itself to undertake and support a major tourism campaign. Finding associated businesses that are different and complementary could attract individuals to visit Farmington and Elmwood together. Rather than fostering

## Resilient Downtowns - Farmington, IL

greater competition between small towns, partnerships  
can help both communities succeed.

Look for These Other Resilient Downtown Case Studies:

Canton, Illinois  
Farmington, Illinois  
Galva, Illinois  
Silvis, Illinois  
Alexandria, Minnesota  
Lindstrom, Minnesota  
Mineral Point, Wisconsin  
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