

Staff Report

STAFF REPORT ON 2026 NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIONS INITIATIVE

February 24, 2026

BACKGROUND:

The City Council held its annual goal-setting retreat in January 2026, updating [its goals](#) to continue including the statement, "We Value Communication and Engagement with the Public." To support this value, the City Manager's Office is proposing the 2026 Neighborhood Connections initiative, focused on building strong, thriving neighborhoods, and increasing engagement with residents regarding major City projects, studies, and policy changes.

This initiative aims to:

- Strengthen civic trust and communication between residents and the City
- Build new social connections amongst neighbors and with City staff
- Identify community strengths while learning about neighborhood priorities
- Provide residents with resources to create long-lasting community relationships amongst one another
- Educate residents about City of Ames services
- Conducting outreach regarding City services, projects and programs

As proposed, the 2026 Neighborhood Connections will consist of four strategies, listed below along with their associated completion timelines:

Strategy 1: Connecting with and Strengthening existing Neighborhood Associations - Completed by March 2026

This strategy will initially focus on reaching out to known active neighborhood associations through a survey to learn more about their current membership, how they operate, how they receive information from the City, and how the City might support their group. Based on information gathered, staff will follow up with additional information about City services that may be relevant or of interest to members, such as the free weatherization offerings through the Green Iowa AmeriCorps program, utility rebates, and more. Staff will also update the contact list for neighborhood associations.

Strategy 2: Refreshing the Neighborhood Improvement Program - Completed by June 2026

The Neighborhood Improvement Program (Program) was established on [January 23, 1996](#). The City Council has annually allocated \$50,000 in the Capital Improvements Plan budget towards the Program. The purpose of the Program is to: 1) strengthen a neighborhood's appearance with the addition of permanent physical improvements, and 2) promote a greater sense of community through resident participation in a neighborhood project.

For the last two fiscal years (FY 2023/24 and FY 2024/25), no major projects were completed, and the majority of the funds were not expended. Staff believes the primary reason for the underuse of this program is due to fewer active neighborhood associations and a lack of awareness about the program. Neighborhood associations are less common nowadays and less influential than they were twenty years ago.

While the program has seen many years of success in the past, in keeping with City staff's Excellence through People value of continuous improvement, staff believes with the recent underutilization, it is an appropriate time to reevaluate this program. With modifications to the grant program, it can continue to be a catalyst for building social connections amongst neighbors and strengthening neighborhoods (the original intent). Investing in this effort can increase the quality of life in Ames.

With Strategy Two, staff will engage with previous applicants who have received funding to learn about their experiences. Staff will also develop an engagement plan to seek feedback from residents regarding what to consider in an updated program. From the input received, staff will propose an updated program and bring it before Council for final approval this spring.

Strategy 3: Road Trip through Ames: Stops to Build Connections - Conducted between May - September 2026

A proposed new strategy called "Road Trip through Ames" will consist of informational block parties where City staff will travel through Ames and make five separate neighborhood "stops". This City's mobile command trailer and the block party trailer will be used to provide a welcoming and inviting space to engage and interact with residents about City programs and services. Family-friendly activities will also be provided.

Staff has proposed five zones (see Attachment A) where a "stop" will be hosted. The exact locations are yet to be determined, however staff will strive to find a willing community partner (such as a nonprofit agency) within that zone to co-host the event. If a community partner is not available, staff will find a local park or a safe street to block off to host the event. Final locations are anticipated to be secured by April with the first event occurring in May and throughout the summer months.

Outreach Stops:

Attachment B contains a proposed layout of each stop, which highlights the different components at each event including several engaging presentations and activities. Additionally, staff will provide light refreshments as an incentive to draw neighbors to engage.

The Mobile Crisis Command Trailer will be set up as a station where community members can provide input about current projects. This trailer will also be available for participants to tour, and a portion of it will be set up for residents to participate in recording an episode of the "Up Close" podcast facilitated by a communications staff member. Participants will be asked to share how they arrived in Ames; what they think of when they hear the word "Ames"; what hidden gems they have found in Ames; and how their perspective of Ames has evolved over time.

The Neighborhood Block Party Trailer will also be used since it is stocked with tables, chairs, games, and other supplies to ensure the event can be successful.

The list below contains the other possible educational and outreach activities. Selected activities for each stop will ultimately be based on the time of the year of the stop, the ongoing City projects at the time, and the available department representatives to staff the events. It should be noted that these engagement sessions will also be a Council Connect opportunity.

Education and outreach activities:

- Display boards outlining the structure of the City of Ames and its services, along with key staff contacts
- Tabling opportunities for City departments
- AHRC or other board/commission presence to promote their mission
- Posters describing how residents can sign up for e-notifications, reserve the block party trailer, apply for City grants, and more
- Neighborhood connection building kits that provide participants with easy-to-use connection tools and information demonstrating why building social connections with neighbors matters.
- Activities to facilitate neighbors exchanging contact information with one another.

Additionally, at each stop, staff will provide a large map of the area and engage participants in pinpointing community assets and resources nearby.

Strategy 4: Connect with Existing Groups and Events - Starting in April 2026

There are many active community groups in Ames already that bring people together for various reasons. With strategy four, staff will compile a list of known social groups that convene regularly and make a concerted effort to connect with leaders of these social groups to explore the possibility of attending their meetings or events. This would be an opportunity to share information about City services and gather input on City programs and projects during occasions where people are already gathering. Examples of these groups may include service clubs, faith congregations, cultural organization, nonprofit gatherings, and more. Building connections with community leaders also has the potential to provide new methods of disseminating City information.

STAFF COMMENTS:

To support the City Council's 2026–2027 goals, staff will kick off the 2026 Neighborhood Connections initiative with the four strategies outlined above. Additional strategies may be added over time as the initiative grows. Staff welcomes feedback and suggestions from Council.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Attachment A.pdf](#)

[Attachment B.pdf](#)