



# ***ALTOONA CONTAINER PARK: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED***

A case study in community revitalization and  
small business development

Written by: Wisconsin Small Business Development Center at UW-Eau Claire  
Lily Nugteren and Denali Volkman

## Executive summary

The Altoona Container Park—branded as The Yard—represents a forward-thinking approach to small business development, community placemaking, and downtown revitalization. Developed by the City of Altoona with significant support from the Wisconsin Neighborhood Investment Fund Grant Program, the project successfully transformed underutilized property into a vibrant mixed-use public space.

This report summarizes the best practices and lessons learned from the planning, design, and implementation of the project. It highlights key insights for other communities pursuing innovative redevelopment initiatives using modular construction, public-private collaboration, and creative placemaking strategies.



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## Project background

In 2021, the State of Wisconsin announced the Neighborhood Investment Fund Grant Program to support communities and industries disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Altoona responded with a proposal that embraced three core pillars:

1. **Supporting small businesses:** Lowering barriers to market entry through affordable, ready-to-occupy units.
2. **Revitalizing and strengthening downtown:** Expanding commercial activity and fostering cross-business collaboration.
3. **Creating a unique public space:** Developing a community hub for social, recreational, and cultural engagement.

Through strong partnerships, Altoona secured more than \$1.37 million in grant funding, supplemented by support from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation for environmental testing, site preparation, and public amenities. These coordinated investments enabled the City of Altoona to bring its vision to life with the opening of The Yard in July 2025.

## Project development and site design

The City of Altoona partnered with Containers Up, an modular upcycling construction contractor, and Visit Eau Claire to develop the project vision. The design reflects Altoona's railroad heritage while incorporating modern features, including:

- Three restaurant units, a taproom, and one micro-retail space
- A shared seating space, an outdoor stage, a volleyball court, and public gathering zones
- Integrated technology for Wi-Fi, audio, and security systems

The City of Altoona also acquired adjacent residential parcels, providing flexibility for future expansion and creating green space to enhance the overall visitor experience.





## Best practices

### A. Strategic Funding and Partnerships

- **Layered funding sources:** The success of the container park has been made possible through a mix of federal, state, and local grants. Early identification and pursuit of funding opportunities allowed the city to build critical infrastructure while maintaining affordable opportunities for entrepreneurial partnerships.
- **Partnership alignment:** Collaboration between city staff, state agencies, and private vendors has ensured a unified project vision and timely decision-making.
- **Community engagement:** Regular communication with residents and local organizations has built support and minimized resistance during planning and zoning phases.

### B. Innovative Site Design and Layout

- **Infrastructure readiness:** Installing all utilities and permanent systems up front has allowed new tenants to move in quickly, reducing startup barriers.
- **Flexible space design:** The modular layout enables future expansion and reconfiguration to accommodate new uses or vendors.
- **Aesthetic integration:** Architectural design choices that reflect local heritage—such as rail-themed elements and public art—help create a strong sense of community character.

## C. Construction and Contractor Management

- **Contractor selection:** Choosing an experienced firm was critical to ensuring compliance with building codes, ADA accessibility, and health standards specific to shipping container construction.
- **Clear deliverables:** Defining scope, materials, and warranty expectations early prevented disputes and ensured accountability.
- **Knowledge-building:** Project staff developed expertise in container retrofitting, establishing a knowledge base for future municipal projects.



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## D. Operations and Maintenance

- **Early planning:** Addressing logistics such as waste management, snow removal, and maintenance schedules in advance ensures operational sustainability.
- **Technology integration:** Incorporating reliable Wi-Fi, lighting, and security systems from the outset enhances visitor safety and tenant satisfaction.
- **Sustainability considerations:** Energy-efficient design and the reuse of shipping containers align with the city's environmental goals.



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## E. Business Mix and Tenant Recruitment

- **Curated vendor selection:** Recruiting locally owned businesses with complementary offerings strengthened the park's economic and social ecosystem.
- **Affordable entry points:** Offering below-market rents and move-in-ready units lowered barriers for startups and entrepreneurs.
- **Shared promotion:** Encouraging vendors to collaborate on marketing and events fosters a shared sense of investment in the park's success.



## F. Programming and Community Engagement

- **Diverse programming:** Events such as concerts, sporting leagues, and seasonal activities have been planned to keep the space active throughout the year.
- **Partnership in events:** Engaging vendors as co-sponsors of programming reinforce their stake in the park's long-term sustainability.
- **Inclusive design:** The space was intentionally developed to appeal to diverse audiences, supporting both economic and cultural inclusion.



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## G. Marketing and Branding

- **Unified identity:** The Yard's brand provides a consistent and memorable identity that resonates with residents and visitors alike.
- **Strategic promotion:** Collaboration with Visit Eau Claire amplifies regional exposure and positions the site as a destination attraction.
- **Continuous outreach:** Ongoing social media engagement earns media coverage; vendor-led campaigns sustain public awareness and momentum.

## Lessons learned and recommendations

1. **Funding is foundational.** Layered, early funding ensures feasibility and long-term affordability.
2. **Container construction requires expertise.** Retrofitting containers to meet code demands specialized design and engineering knowledge.
3. **Clarity in contracts matters.** Well-defined expectations, timelines, and deliverables are essential for managing contractors effectively.
4. **Operational details can't wait.** Address daily maintenance, staffing, and logistics before opening to the public.
5. **Technology is not optional.** Wi-Fi, security, and sound systems are vital components.
6. **Comfort drives use.** Weather protection, seating, and sociability determine whether people stay and return.
7. **Programming sustains momentum.** Continuous events and community partnerships keep the venue lively year-round.
8. **The vendor mix determines success.** Select businesses that complement each other and share an ownership mindset.
9. **Design details define the experience.** Art, color, signage, and landscaping create emotional connection and memorability.
10. **Marketing never stops.** Sustained promotion and cross-channel engagement are necessary for long-term success.



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## Conclusion

The Altoona Container Park demonstrates how small communities can use creative design and targeted investment to drive economic revitalization. The City of Altoona successfully transformed a vision for recovery into a model of sustainable, inclusive growth—one that supports entrepreneurship, celebrates local identity, and strengthens the downtown economy.

By integrating thoughtful design, strategic funding, and ongoing community programming, The Yard offers a replicable framework for other municipalities and development organizations pursuing similar mixed-use or modular redevelopment initiatives.

For ongoing updates, event information, and vendor highlights, The Yard maintains an active online presence. Community members, entrepreneurs, and visitors are encouraged to explore the following resources to stay connected and informed:

- **Official website:** [www.altoonayard.com](http://www.altoonayard.com)  
Visit for business listings, event calendars, rental information, and general park updates.
- **Facebook:** [@YardAltoonaWI](https://www.facebook.com/YardAltoonaWI)  
Follow for the latest announcements, event photos, and community engagement opportunities.
- **City of Altoona website:** [ci.altoona.wi.us](http://ci.altoona.wi.us)  
Learn more about the city's ongoing economic development initiatives, upcoming projects, and community partnerships.



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