Written Testimony of Mayor Don DeWaard

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Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship
U.S. Senate

Hearing on "America 250: Main Street USA and the Contributions of Small Businesses"

Chair Ernst, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today as we celebrate America's 250th anniversary and recognize the vital role small businesses have played in building and sustaining communities across our nation.

My name is Don DeWaard, and I am honored to serve as Mayor of Pella, Iowa, a community of approximately 10,600 residents located in south central Iowa. As America approaches its 250th anniversary, there is perhaps no better time to recognize the role small businesses, entrepreneurs, and local communities have played in building this nation.

While Pella is known for our Dutch heritage and tulips, our story is ultimately one of entrepreneurship, hard work, innovation, and cooperation. Those values have shaped our community for nearly two centuries and continue to drive our success today.

Pella's Heritage and Entrepreneurial Spirit

Pella was founded in 1847 by Dutch immigrants seeking opportunity and the freedom to build a better future. The entrepreneurial spirit that brought those settlers to Iowa remains deeply woven into our community today.

Our history is filled with stories of individuals who started with an idea, worked hard, took risks, and built companies that now serve customers around the world.

In 1925, Pete Kuyper founded Pella Corporation. Today, that company employs more than 10,000 people and is recognized as one of the leading window and door manufacturers in North America.

In 1948, Gary Vermeer founded Vermeer Corporation in a small machine shop in Pella. Today, Vermeer is a global company generating more than $1 billion in annual revenue and employing over 4,000 people worldwide.

PPI, another company founded by local entrepreneurs, has grown into a global leader in engineered conveyor components. Today, it is employee-owned, serves international markets, and employs more than 700 people.

The entrepreneurial spirit that built these companies continues to thrive today. According to State of Iowa business registrations, Pella is home to more than 1,500 registered businesses and corporations. For a community of our size, that number speaks volumes about the culture of innovation, risk-taking, and business ownership that remains alive and well in Pella. New businesses continue to launch, existing businesses continue to grow, and entrepreneurs continue to find opportunities in our community.

Our community currently enjoys 100 percent occupancy in our historic downtown district, and many of those businesses are family-owned operations that have served generations of customers. In fact, several downtown businesses have been operating for more than 125 years.

From a community founded by Dutch immigrants in 1847 to a city that now supports more than 1,501 registered businesses and corporations, Pella's story is a testament to the enduring power of entrepreneurship in America.

As we celebrate America's 250th anniversary, Pella serves as a reminder that many of our nation's greatest success stories began as small businesses on Main Street.

Celebrating Heritage and Supporting Tourism

Pella's heritage is not only part of our history, it is also an important driver of our economy.

Each spring, we celebrate Tulip Time, one of Iowa's premier cultural festivals. What began as a local celebration of Dutch heritage has grown into a nationally recognized event that welcomes visitors from across the country and around the world.

In 2025 alone, more than 303,300 visitors came to Pella throughout the year to experience our unique culture, architecture, history, shopping, dining, and hospitality. Those visitors support hundreds of small businesses, including retailers, restaurants,

lodging establishments, attractions, and service providers. Tulip Time serves as the cornerstone of our tourism economy, but visitors continue to discover Pella throughout the year because of the authentic experience our community offers.

Tourism is often viewed as an economic development tool, but in communities like Pella it is also a way to preserve and celebrate our heritage while creating opportunities for local businesses to grow and thrive.

Volunteerism: The Heart of Our Community

Another defining characteristic of Pella is our culture of volunteerism.

The success of our community is not measured solely by business growth or economic impact. It is also measured by the willingness of people to give their time, talents, and resources to make Pella a better place to live.

Volunteerism in Pella is undeniable. It is woven into the fabric of our community and is one of the reasons Pella continues to thrive. From Tulip Time to youth programs, community events, faith-based organizations, and the many nonprofit organizations that serve our residents, volunteers are the driving force behind countless efforts that strengthen our community.

Each year, Tulip Time relies on hundreds of volunteers who help welcome guests, preserve traditions, and create an experience that draws visitors from across the nation. Their dedication demonstrates that community pride cannot be manufactured, it is built through service and shared purpose.

What makes volunteerism especially meaningful in Pella is that it spans generations. We see young people serving alongside those who are young at heart, each contributing their time and talents to causes they care about. Volunteerism creates opportunities for residents to become involved in their community, build relationships, develop leadership skills, and invest in the future of the place they call home.

Many of our nonprofit organizations, community events, and civic initiatives would simply not be possible without volunteers. Their contributions help create the quality of life that attracts families, supports businesses, and strengthens community connections.

As America approaches its 250th anniversary, volunteerism remains one of the clearest examples of the civic spirit that has helped communities across our nation prosper. In

Pella, we see every day how neighbors working together for a common purpose can create a stronger, more vibrant community for everyone.

The Power of Cooperation

Perhaps the most important lesson from Pella's story is the value of cooperation.

Every day, more than 6,000 people drive into Pella to work. Those employees support our local restaurants, coffee shops, retailers, service businesses, and community organizations. The success of our large employers helps sustain the small businesses that make our community vibrant.

At the same time, those small businesses provide the services, amenities, and quality of life that help attract and retain employees for our larger manufacturers and employers.

This relationship is not accidental. It is the result of decades of partnership and community investment.

Our major employers are outstanding corporate citizens. They support local nonprofits, sponsor community events, invest in workforce development, and contribute to initiatives that improve quality of life for residents and visitors alike. They understand that a strong community helps create a strong workforce, and a vibrant Main Street helps make Pella a place where people want to live, work, and raise a family.

The success of a community like Pella does not come from large businesses alone, nor from small businesses alone. It comes from recognizing that we are stronger when we work together.

When manufacturers, retailers, restaurants, service providers, schools, nonprofits, local government, and community organizations all invest in one another, the entire community benefits.

Conclusion

As America prepares to celebrate its 250th anniversary, communities like Pella represent the enduring promise of the American dream.

Our story began with immigrants who believed in hard work, entrepreneurship, and community. Those same principles continue to guide us today.

From small startups that grew into global companies, to family-owned businesses that have served generations, to community partnerships that strengthen our local economy, Pella demonstrates what is possible when people are willing to invest in their neighbors and work together toward a common future.

The entrepreneurial spirit of our businesses, the dedication of our volunteers, and the cooperation between public, private, and nonprofit partners demonstrate the values that have made Pella successful for nearly 180 years.

Small businesses remain the backbone of communities across America. They create jobs, preserve local character, support civic life, and provide opportunities for future generations of entrepreneurs. Their success is strengthened by engaged citizens, strong community organizations, and businesses that understand the importance of giving back.

As we look toward America's next 250 years, Pella's story reminds us that strong communities are built not only through economic success, but through shared purpose, civic engagement, and a commitment to helping our neighbors succeed.

Thank you again to Senator Ernst and the Committee for the opportunity to share Pella's story.