



# PROJECT DOWNTOWN: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION

SUMMARY

## Downtown Wichita

### INNOVATION

It goes against human instinct to plan for growth when times are tough – especially during the worst recession in recent history. But in Wichita we pursued success against the odds – and it has paid off.

This year we are celebrating ten years of implementation for Project Downtown – the master plan of development for Wichita’s urban core. The planning process was initiated in 2008 – at the height of the economic recession – when Goody Clancy was selected as the planning design team.

In a vast majority of cities, public planning processes are led by the public sector. In Wichita, Project Downtown was initiated and led by the private sector. The business community and downtown stakeholders, led by the Downtown Wichita non-profit organization, joined in partnership with the public sector to lead and fund the majority of the plan. From initiation, the private sector had a vested interest in the plan’s process and the outcomes.

The Goody Clancy team included economists specializing in real estate markets (residential, commercial, hospitality and retail). Wichita’s market potential in each area was identified laying the groundwork for the community vision. Concurrently, the design team led the community through a robust engagement process.

Additionally, a strategic plan was developed for the Downtown Wichita organization to position it as the primary driver and implementer of the plan on behalf of the community.

This innovative approach created a plan that has driven \$1B+ of investment in a Midwest economy struggling to recover from the recession.

### OUTCOME

The impact of Project Downtown has yielded over \$1B of investment in the downtown district since the plan’s adoption in 2010. Success has been measured primarily against the forecasted market potential and objectives outlined in the plan.

Since 2010, \$88MM in public sector investment has catalyzed over \$600MM+ in private sector investment. Residential units have doubled, adding 1,228 new units. Retail space increased by 77%, doubling existing offerings. Occupied office space increased over 24%, with over 150,000SF of new Class A inventory being added for the first time in 30+ years with 300,000SF under construction. The hospitality market expanded, adding 368 new hotel rooms with several properties in progress.

The cumulative effect has been an overall transformation of downtown, with the urban core now being identified as the preferred location for commercial space by local real estate brokerages. Sidewalks – once void of street life – are activated with storefronts and pedestrians. Residents add vitality after five and overall perceptions of safety and activity have increased dramatically.

Due to the success of Project Downtown and the leadership of the Downtown Wichita, the scope of work for the organization has grown to include the ten country region. In addition, a new \$1B development plan for signature riverfront property is currently in progress to further the vision in Project Downtown.

This incredible growth has occurred in Wichita despite overall poor economic growth. Project Downtown, due to its deliberate, market-based strategies and leadership from the Downtown Wichita organization, continues to foster investment.

### EXECUTION

The execution of Project Downtown differentiates it from other planning processes across the country in many facets:

- Not only does the leadership role that the Downtown Wichita organization played in the plan’s inception and implementation unique, it is replicable in other cities.

- The community had its fingerprints on the vision from the beginning. A wide audience including property owners, lenders, developers, and businesses all had ownership in the plan and were a part of the process.
- There was buy-in from both the public and private sectors. Targeted strategies and responsibilities were identified for each, and each held the other accountable. Downtown Wichita has provided continuity in coordination and implementation amongst all partners since the plan's adoption.
- Strategic investment in public infrastructure (streetscape improvements, parking assets, and parks/open space) have served as catalysts for private development. Each of these investments were shaped and championed by Downtown Wichita.
- Downtown Wichita advocated for updates to public policy to develop clear processes and expectations in the market for developers.
- A dedication to transforming perceptions through rebranding, strategic communications and placemaking has effectively spurred "ownership" of the downtown story by the public.

## REPRESENTATION

Inclusivity is the foundation to the successful Project Downtown process, and is one key element of the plan's successful implementation.

Extensive participation in the public engagement process ensured that the plan truly reflected the community's vision. Over 500 people attended numerous public events during the year-long process. Deliberate strategies to engage a cross-section of the community during the engagement process were implemented with public participation impressively increasing at each event.

The Downtown Wichita organization, through the leadership of its Board of Directors and staff, has served as the ongoing champion for the plan. This unique leadership role of the organization has built trust with the public sector, local lenders, and the design and development community. This trust has proven to be an integral necessity for the community to achieve the goals and forecasted outcomes of the plan.

Concurrently with the development of Project Downtown, the Downtown Wichita organization assessed its strategic direction and reorganized its structure in order to equip the organization to lead the coordination and implementation of the vision set forth in the plan. It added additional staff with specific areas of expertise and refocused funding to ensure the organization could deliver on its objectives.

## REPLICATION

Downtown-focused organizations exist all over the world. Many have distinct missions they deliver on behalf of districts and stakeholders. Some – like Downtown Wichita – have the opportunity to lead major community planning efforts and positively impact both public and private development to transform downtowns.

Through the implementation of Project Downtown, the Downtown Wichita organization was able to foster positive change in Wichita's urban core in an otherwise stagnant economy. We positioned ourselves as the champion of a community vision, which allowed us to positively influence development.

This strategic approach can be achieved by other organizations, who can equip themselves to lead similar planning initiatives in their communities. Plans often set a vision for 15-20 years, and elected leaders and administrations can and typically do change during that time period. In many cases, downtown-focused organizations are best suited to lead these processes and serve as stewards of the plan on behalf of the community because they can provide continuity for the duration of the plan. Being a champion for the vision set forth in the plan while providing ongoing expertise can ensure that a plan's objectives are realized. Other downtown organizations can reinvent themselves to lead such planning efforts.

## COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Whenever a community tackles a master plan of this magnitude there will be challenges, setbacks and potential skepticism. Wichita, compared to other cities, was hit hard at the height of the recession, making fundraising extremely challenging. In addition, there were multiple stakeholders and voices who needed to be at the table to drive the planning process forward – adding another layer of complexity. Lastly, we had to overcome a skeptical real estate community; developers and real estate professionals discounted projects in downtown simply because they did not believe the economic forecast outlined in the plan could be achieved.

To mitigate these challenges, we employed several strategies including being proactive with public perception. This included ensuring we had a public sector leader (the Mayor) champion the process. He promoted both the planning process and the vision. The Project Wichita team also worked to encourage positive public perceptions around the planning process and its implementation through proactive public relations strategies.

Following the plan's adoption, the public sector funded a full-time staff member to facilitate development projects and work seamlessly with the Downtown Wichita organization. Overall, having one organization lead the initiative on behalf of the community helped us simplify the plan's implementation.