

## **The Re-Birth of Main Street: Downtown Rejuvenation**

*Published in Highway 24 magazine 2016*

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It's a revolution of revitalization. Desire to live, work and play in creative regions is stronger now than dissipating dreams of white picket suburbia. People are seeking the unique and cities across the nation are taking note, including five Kansas areas along Highway 24. The most effective way cities prosper and small towns survive is to invest in downtown.

Beginning with the big, Topeka and Manhattan use far-reaching resources to coax businesses into zones of commerce. Ending with the small, Rossville, Wamego and St. Marys strive to sustain mom-and-pop shops and lure a younger generation towards rural life.

### **A Capitol Investment**

In 2008 Topeka residents determined that what they wanted most for the future of their city was a rejuvenated downtown. The Capitol building entices 100,000 visitors each year, but many don't explore the area. With 230 members and 52 years under its belt, Downtown Inc. went to battle to turn that perspective around.

"Downtown used to be the place, but like any downtown throughout the entire United States, people moved to the suburbs," said President and CEO of Downtown Inc. Vince Frye. "Now we see people moving back to the core."

In 2012 the Topeka City Council approved \$5 million for infrastructure improvements. Between sixth and tenth streets on Kansas Avenue considerable alterations went towards new streets, curbs, gas and sewer lines. Traffic lanes were reduced from five to three to encourage walkability, crafting a pedestrian-friendly look.

Infrastructure under Kansas Avenue was 75 to 100 years old, which ate much of the allotted funds. Downtown Inc. then had to come up with a new plan.

With the "Imagine Downtown" campaign, \$3.3 million was raised from private contributions, well surpassing the estimated \$1.8 million needed to continue.

The Kansas Avenue Project was born to expand business, entertainment and residential areas. Some Topekans had their doubts, but were assured as pocket parks began to form.

"When we cut the ribbon on the very first one at Westar, they were able to think that this is definitely going to happen," Frye said. "They realized that the buildings that were empty were all sold and they see that momentum and see the reality of what's ahead."

A total of eight pocket parks will be up by the end of summer. Life-sized sculptures of famous Topekans will tell the city's story up and down the avenue, along with bronze medallions that show off the state symbol. Plans for outdoor dining and music are at the forefront. Frye hopes that these aesthetic operations will breathe life into a new entertainment-focused identity.

“When this is all said and done, downtown is going to look different, it’s going to feel different, and it’s going to be something that the community will take great pride in,” he said. “This is going to happen and it’s going to be a very positive thing for this community.”

### **Rossville’s Revival**

It began with a Reader’s Digest contest. Residents of cities across the nation nominated their communities and voted as much as possible to win prize money for improvements. Rossville, a town of about 1,200, united in 2012 for a third place finish in the “We Hear You America” contest, gifting them \$10,000 towards renovations.

Rossville’s Main Street had not received a facelift since the early 1970s. Much work was needed to fix crumbling infrastructure to keep downtown safe.

The community is a prideful one, which is showcased quite literally with the Rossville PRIDE volunteer group, which worked on promoting the contest. PRIDE collaborated with Shawnee County Extension to develop a survey for townspeople to voice what they wanted to see improved, which peaked interest towards the cause.

“If a town is growing a little bit, it helps everything. [The renovations] won’t hinder anything. It will only help down the road,” said Rossville Mayor Ken Wichman.

Another volunteer group, the Rossville Community Foundation, got on board with fundraising. Charming efforts such as serving breakfast at the town’s annual Tall Corn Festival and holding a “Charity Chair Auction” raised money.

With an estimated cost of \$658,053, the city researched funding opportunities through Kansas Department of Transportation. Out of 91 applicants, Rossville’s project was picked for a grant that covered 80 percent of the cost. The city agreed to pay 20 percent in order to be selected.

Construction for the Main Street Beautification Project began in late spring 2015. Though most of the street was blocked off last summer, it was a small price to pay for new sidewalks, curbs and walkways. Adding seasonal pole banners, bike racks, sturdy benches, vibrant flower planters and better lighting livened up the area. Some business owners even personally renovated their storefronts.

“We’ve tried to keep this community going,” Wichman said. “Hopefully this keeps all the businesses there and maybe add a new business or two.”

Phase two will include a new area on the south end of Rossville’s park. The land was donated by Terry Andrick’s family and will be in memory of him.

Locals won’t flock downtown much more than they already do— to visit the library, mail a letter from the post office, eat a burger at the Legion or visit the pharmacy— but now the walk is a little better, a little brighter, because Rossville came together.

## **Manhappenings**

Over 260 businesses reside in downtown Manhattan. Recent developments encourage entrepreneurs to plant themselves in the “Little Apple.” Downtown is made up of multiple areas, including the North and South ends, Manhattan Town Center, Historic Downtown and Poyntz Avenue.

Beginning with the “Downtown Tomorrow” initiative in 2000, it was determined that strengthening the city’s economic base, consisting of retail and housing amenities, would be needed to sustain overall quality of life. Collaboration and market research led to the city creating a tax increment financing district for the North and South areas in 2004.

The North End Redevelopment Plan broke ground with the opening of Best Buy in 2006. Over \$62 million from private investors went towards advancement of the North end (aka: Manhattan Marketplace).

Following Best Buy, various other businesses added their namesake to 20 acres of commercial land. Also in 2006, the city acquired South end properties with hopes of morphing it into an entertainment mecca. The Hilton Garden Inn and Manhattan Conference Center opened there in 2011. The development is a powerhouse with 30,000 square feet for the conference center and 135 hotel rooms.

The Flint Hills Discovery Center, an area focus, opened in 2012. The facility celebrates geology, ecology and cultural history of the Flint Hills. Over 85 percent of the building's materials and labor came from within 50 miles of the building site.

The final area of development for the South end was Lot 9. The area was developed into Candlewood Suites hotel in 2012. Blue Earth Place popped up that same year and a Holiday Inn Express hotel opened five minutes from the Discovery Center in 2015, added 76 sleeping rooms for travelers.

The redevelopment of Poyntz Avenue addressed safety concerns, particularly improving the streets for walkability. Irrigation enhancements and electrical upgrades were part of the strategy.

Manhattan’s economy continues to thrive as it welcomes new businesses into the area. Astoundingly, 92 percent of businesses part of the city’s Chamber are small. This adds a unique feature to a city that maximizes neighborly charisma with big city amenities.

Movers are taking note. Manhattan’s population has increased 20 percent since 2000 and urban housing is a growing trend. In recent years over 200 residential units were added to the North end.

Redevelopment of downtown was funded through a tax increment financing district, a transportation development district and STAR bonds. Private investors contributed as well. No

public tax dollars were used to construct private businesses or residences. Overall, the costs were estimated at over \$200 million.

All of this contributes to Manhattan living up to its slogan of being a “great place to live, work and play.”

### **Strike While the Iron is Hot**

Though small in size with 4,700 residents, the town of Wamego has one of the most animated event atmospheres in the state. Year-round festivities garner attention from sightseers who readily take in downtown Lincoln Avenue.

Known primarily for its “Wizard of Oz” themed shops like Toto’s Taco, Totos Treasures, the Oz Winery and the Oz Museum, the strip welcomes one more yellow brick road-themed business to the collection this May.

Iron Clad channels the Tin Man with an industrial vibe boasting 110-foot limestone walls, open ducting and conduit, hardwood floors and steel furniture. The event venue and co-working space will play host to business collaboration and community projects to inspire Kansans from all walks of life.

Owners Heather and Darin Miller envisioned a space of creativity. The couple’s goal is not to bring in products, but people, who will enrich Wamego’s imaginative spirit.

“What downtown Wamego adds to this area of the country is a picture of what can happen when we root for each other,” Heather explained. “If one person does well, so does another, and then another, and then another, and so on. We have had support from all sides through this endeavor, and we hope to give support to others should they feel compelled to bring their own projects to the area.”

Iron Clad’s name itself is borrowed from Wamego originals. George Trout and L.B. Leach brought to life the Iron Clad Store and later Iron Clad Lumber and in 1884 erected the current event building as a rental property. The Millers decided to use the name to show appreciation for the structure’s past.

As the Highway 24 corridor expands, unique renovations like Iron Clad promote innovation, which in turn attracts inventive people who are willing to work for sustainability to small towns in need. The business is a needed addition since it also closes a gap on main street next to the library.

“Not only do we hope to offer a place for new businesses to start up and current businesses to have off-site conference space and training areas, but we also hope to offer people a beautiful setting in which to get married, have a reunion, or celebrate a birthday,” Heather said. “Our tagline is, ‘Marvelous things happen when you get together!’ Wamego needs a place to gather. We hope to fill that need.”

Heather has a belief that downtown areas remind people of their history, show them their present and give them a taste of what the future can be. Alongside longstanding staples like the Columbian Theatre, Wamego Drug Store and Vanderbilt's boot and clothing store, Iron Clad settles in to pursue those ambitions.

### **Strengthening St. Marys**

St. Marys presents itself as a quintessential small town. A stretch of main street is the focus with two major high schools and a liberal arts college complementing its depth of history linked to missionary work and a population of 2,700.

Visitors of St. Marys witness unique attempts of industry, from the longstanding B & B Café with its juicy burgers, the elegantly casual clothes of Florence Adams, artisan roast at MJ's Coffee House and antique collectibles at Robin Birdsong. Downtown renovations occur organically as new businesses come in. It's a classic scenario, letting go of the old to attract the new.

In 2015 the town's Streetlights Project emerged. Businesses and individuals pledged over \$80,000 to get the project going. Subsequently, Ken Moats, owner of KG Moats & Sons, a manufacturing company that spearheads most downtown projects, presented the proposal to the city. The city agreed that replacing existing lights with vintage-style fixtures in the fall of 2016 will be beneficial for the town's aesthetic.

"I believe beautification projects in almost any form raise hope for the community at large," Ken said. "It is my hope that the downtown improvements being made will help the community to prosper as a whole and will make living in a small town a unique and enjoyable experience for our children."

A main street project that has the town talking is the renovation of the old "Urbansky Building." Once an early 20<sup>th</sup> century dry goods store with a grand storefront, the building is being transformed into the "Sugar Creek Country Store" by town local Dan Hohman.

Hohman's longtime dream of family-owning a general store will come to life at the end of spring. After two years of searching, Hohman saw that the downtown building was available and knew that Ken, the building's owner, would be the perfect work companion.

"We realized that the best approach would be to find a partner to work with who shared our interest in bringing back the original beauty of the building which was in serious disrepair," Hohman explained.

Pottawatomie County Economic Development is offering a revolving loan to finance the building up to \$45,000 operated through Network Kansas. Through this offering, individuals and businesses receive tax credits from donated funds that go towards reinvestment in Pottawatomie County.

A few years back, KG Moats & Sons did the same thing right down the street. Currently housing Florence Adams, the corner building once contained a dress-making business and later on was a gathering sport for the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus. After being on the market for many years, it deteriorated into what would seem like a money pit. That's when Ken stepped in.

"As a family, we have spent quite a bit of time strategizing about what we can do personally to help reinvigorate our community. The Florence Adams project was an out-growth of those discussions and attempt to expand a local business," he said.

The shop now vaunts vibrant colors and great browseable windows. Most aesthetic work was finished by local artists and the building has been received favorably by locals, including Ken's son, St. Marys Mayor Adam Moats.

"Each renovation that happens downtown or anywhere in town is encouraging for others that might be considering something similar," he said. "Renovations, and the businesses that drive them, are a concrete indicator of the growing vibrancy of the city."

The challenge for small town America, Ken notes, is "finding a way to improve upon progress secured by previous generations."

St. Marys is up for the challenge. And so are four other Kansas communities fighting the good fight to keep their names on the map. So if you're up for the battle— forget all your troubles. Forget all your cares. Go downtown!