



18775 Fisher Ford Road, Siloam Springs, AR 72761

Cell 479.238.5158

Ron@RonDrakeConsulting.com

RonDrakeConsulting.com

Watonga Chamber of Commerce,

Thank you so much for the invitation to work within your downtown. Your downtown is so intriguing and has a lot of potential! Your community has tremendous opportunities all around you, hopefully they will be captured more effectively moving forward. I really enjoyed my time there, and I know that your downtown is poised for positive development. The time is now, the opportunity is here.

The pages that follow is my best interpretation of the current state of Watonga, where you would like to go in the future, and what I feel it will take to get you there.

Please use this as a motivational tool to inspire your downtown community to take action! I would love to come back Watonga and assist with any area I can. I am still amazed at how quickly the "Ugly Baby" is already looking better! Restoration is possible!

Again, my time in Watonga was amazing. Thank you so much for the final watermelon reception! You should be proud of your community spirit; even given the challenges you do face.

Please let me know if there are any questions or comments from my analysis!

Keep up the good work downtown!

All the best!

Ron Drake

INSPIRE•EQUIP•RESTORE



Watonga Gap Analysis

Current state of Watonga:

1. The people I talked with see the opportunity, yet don't believe great things can happen in Watonga. They don't believe that revitalization will work in their small town.
2. Possibly double the population is or will be working all around the surrounding areas. Is Watonga fully capitalizing on that?
3. There's little for students and young people to do in town, especially the downtown. There is potential places and spaces in the downtown core, yet it is underutilized.
4. City Hall appears to be developer friendly. The City Hall and Code Enforcer appears to be willing to work with developers. The problem is, there are no developers.
5. Some of the quality of life opportunities are evident; good schools, low cost of living, low crime, great park nearby & outdoor lifestyle could be more than realized.
6. Most of the buildings downtown look sketchy. Visitors won't enter these buildings to see what is inside. Reality is, those businesses would struggle in any town based upon their condition.
7. Only a couple of restaurants in town. Mostly fast food on the highway. No night life.
8. Only a few retail service shops downtown. The ones that appear to do it right are very successful and have been for year. Others appear to barely be open, which is evident before walking up to the business, and more evident once you enter.
9. Many of the downtown buildings are in a dire need of repair and updates.
10. Watonga has a culture that is averse to change.
11. Downtown buildings have an epidemic of using buildings for storage. Very dangerous situation as many of them are basically filled with fire kindling.
12. Although there is an obvious need for housing, there is very little available downtown.
13. The school system seems to be a great source of pride in the community!
14. Although homeownership is very affordable, there is a shortage of homes in the middle income bracket. This is considered the real estate sweet spot.
15. There is a belief that students move away to college, and most don't come home due to a lack of work and things to go. There's an apparent lack of an entrepreneurial spirit for young people.
16. There is a general lack of belief in something great being/happening in Watonga.
17. It is widely accepted as ok for people to live, shop and eat in Watonga. Traveling there for dinner is very common for many of Watonga. There is a lot of retail and residential leakage.



Vision for the future/What you want to be as your reality:

1. Strong downtown organization with support from all major industry in the area. Many downtown events annually that attracts tourists from all over.
2. The quality employees of the industries are living, shopping and eating in downtown Watonga.
3. The downtown is filled with young people of all ages creating and enjoying a fun and vibrant cultural center for families and adults to enjoy.
4. Watonga has plenty of options for corporate and family entertaining. On a Friday night people can hang out at "Movies in the Park." Others go to the revived bowling alley while others have a great craft beer playing cornhole in the new play area!
5. Watonga is open for business! Proper zoning with a concise plan for building.
6. Watonga capitalizes off of the excellent quality of outdoor life by having a third place for citizens...that place between home and work. The place you go to relax, or visit, or shop or eat. Entertainment of the mind and soul.
7. The coffee shop is open downtown! Multiple areas for children of all ages to hang out.
8. The existing veteran businesses mentor the new ones, and the streets are filled with successful business that attracts folks from multiple states into Watonga.
9. The community believes in themselves and wants to invest in Watonga. They believe that cool restaurants and residential will work, and trust in the statistics that show there is a need.
10. People driving along the highway stop in the downtown to shop and stay. The gateway into the community is warm, inviting and very progressive to the consumer.
11. There is a great hotel located within Watonga, and it is packed out every week due to the abundance of activities outdoors and in for the tourist to enjoy.
12. College students are moving back home after college! Watonga is a great place to raise a family, start a business and buy a home. Downtown living is also a great option.
13. Downtown Watonga is known for its eclectic vibe. It's an artsy center with affordable works completed by local artisans.
14. There is a great connection between Roman Nose Park and the downtown. People that stay at the park can come downtown for an excursion and vice versa. Possibly bike trails from downtown leading from the local bike shop to the park.
15. The city population is growing with the downtown being full of people living in every available second story space, as well as any infill location available. Developers are now looking at Watonga due to its excellent quality of life, progressive attitude, developer friendly and with the new annex to add more land into the city limits.



Vision for the future continued:

16. The citizens of Watonga are open to ideas and change, as long as the root ideals of good citizenship and community pride are not compromised. #OneWatonga is the new way of thinking.
17. With all of the people having ownership in downtown, and the type of people living downtown that fully embrace the ideals of recycling, lower fuel use, healthy living and supporting local economy. Their front yards are clean, and the city has restored crosswalks alongside the restoration of the buildings, and the streets are beautiful and quaint.
18. Main Street is very pedestrian and bicycle friendly! The traffic lanes are down to just two lanes with attractive landscaping and possibly bike lanes added. People feel safer crossing from side to side as they spend the afternoon shopping and dining downtown.
19. The population has grown, and new people are moving in.
20. Community pride is at an all-time high. There is a volunteer base of over 100 people with new projects events and events occurring monthly.
21. The people of Watonga know their story, and they collectively know how to tell their story.



Roadmap to get there. The agent of change:

1. HOUSING!! Creating infill housing that is not government subsidized may be one of your most critical components in this effort. In order to bring *Life* downtown you need to bring *Lives* downtown. With the shortage of housing in Watonga, trying to entice mixed use within the buildings will work, especially for the artists and creatives you hope to bring to life downtown. They don't want the cookie-cutter homes in the burbs, they want unique. Build it for them.
2. A downtown organization comprised with community leaders and the "Movers & Shakers" of Watonga needs to be formed to champion this effort. Historically, City Hall cannot do this alone; this must be grass roots from the community itself. I suggest the focus group starts planning to expand into a downtown organization or partnering with Main Street. This group must also go to City Hall and support the tough changes in code enforcement against blight.
3. The downtown group needs to communicate the importance of a vibrant downtown. Meet with local business people, including every business in the downtown core and stress/question the importance. Educate and share the vision. Create posters with the "OneWatonga" brand and place them throughout downtown. A clear vision creates excitement.
4. I suggest you have a community vision session. Again, get the community leaders in a room, along with opening it up to the public and bring someone to facilitate a vision for Watonga. The amazing result of this is over 100 people leave the room in one accord. With that momentum alone you start checking items off the list that you collectively agree needs to happen, according to the new vision for your community. Change happens with a clear, concise vision.
5. It's obvious there needs to be more communication with the local industry. Their needs are not being met within the city limits of Watonga, so they are going elsewhere. They need housing options, they need restaurants and entertainment venues. Do you know how many people these businesses bring in annually? The number is staggering. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being lost every year due to a lack of amenities in Watonga. Fix that.
6. You have a great community partner with the group that purchased the bowling alley. I believe their desire is to create a space that the community will enjoy. Introduce them to the industry leaders and encourage them to use their space for entertaining rather than traveling out of town. Be intentional.
7. Ask the industry and oil company leaders for data. Try to determine the actual amount of nights spent out of town. Determine how many meals are purchased monthly. Find the needs of the employees and managers and be intentional about working to fill the needs within the boundaries of Watonga.
8. What is your brand? Often overlooked is the importance of a unified and strong brand. When people drive into Watonga they should see a welcome sign, the gateway into downtown, the City Hall and throughout town with the same brand. Show visitors and locals alike that Watonga is unified and progressive, yet in the same quaint setting.



Roadmap to get there. The agent of change continued:

9. I encourage you to work on creating brick paved sidewalks, or some other significant feature that will tell the motorist they are in the heart of the community. You need better signage along the highway encouraging drivers to check out your town and learn your story. Insist your Main Street to be pedestrian friendly.
10. Engage in social media! Educate store and restaurant owners on the importance of Yelp and Facebook reviews. More Yelp reviews will cause the stores to show up on Google maps and iPhone maps. Print out "Rate us on Yelp" cards and place them in every location.
11. Assistance is needed in helping with design ideas as well as financing options. Continue to work with the local banks and work to create a consortium with monies set aside for financing. With the new relationships being harvested between the City and developers, a steadier, accurate action plan is in place for the developers to be able to take to the bank. Build it and they will come, they are waiting in the wings.
12. Look around town at the outdated signs, the disrepair of some of the businesses. Encourage them to add new paint. Encourage them to replace the old signs. Celebrate the ones that do!
13. Look at incorporating a façade grant. Many of your buildings have incredible charm under the ugly facades that exist today! Be aggressive, make them cute on the outside so you'll want to go into the inside!
14. People are wonderful in this community; all that is needed is a consistent message that Watonga can be a small town that's progressive. #OneWatonga- Get younger people involved, they will spread the message for you. Utilize social media!
15. Ownership or at least the feeling of ownership downtown is critical. Have movies in the park! This was a community space that felt as if it belonged to the people. Find other places in the downtown that do the same. Ownership, or the feeling of, is a powerful thing.
16. It was said to me while in Watonga, "We are behind the curve. Other towns seemed better prepared, our town seems junky." What are you doing about that? Be intentional, use the hashtag to start a campaign for cleaning up your town. Aggressively attack blight!
17. Get a project started, and then celebrate the heck out of it! Get the press involved, start the message that downtown restoration is happening in Watonga!
18. Be certain your building permits are more streamlined and encourage your building officials to fully understand the Existing Building portion of the IBC. The City appeared to be very willing to work with building owners and developers downtown. Be sure that message is told, that Watonga is developer friendly and willing to help.



Roadmap to get there. The agent of change continued:

19. The flooring company downtown is awesome! Engage them in this effort. Ask them to teach other retail shops their secrets to success. They do things right, and they receive the rewards. They are proof that Watonga can be a destination shopping district.
20. I have not been to a community that has more buildings filled with storage than I have in Watonga. There is a need for the City to enforce the use of buildings as tax producing, not storage facilities. Educate on the fire risk of buildings used as storage. **Create code that protects the ones making investment, not the ones causing the most harm.**
21. There is a need for affordable homes, yet there is a disbelief in the need for downtown lofts. Encourage developers to build small scale loft projects and see what happens. They will rent.
22. Consider a Fire Sprinkler Grant to encourage the use of fire suppression systems. The City can do the street cut for the developer at a much lower cost than the sprinkler company.
23. Find more ways to utilize the downtown community theater. Partner with the group that operates the facility to have events occur there at least twice a month. Children's programs with the schools, maybe a projector and play old movies, find ways to give the community things to do. Partner with the winery next door to be open on those nights.
24. Find small areas to have hang out places! I identified several locations where a taproom could have a small outdoor space. Develop the space behind the winery. Keep it simple but cool.
25. During the first focus group meeting, the following ideas were suggested:
 - Create a blog or social media account relating to the revitalization effort
 - Create a hashtag- #OneWatonga #MorethanCheese
 - Network with other communities that have experienced restoration
 - Create an inventory list of available buildings
 - Create a list of buildings currently used as storage
 - Create a blight ordinance (I have already sent an example to Teresa)
 - Get channel 9 to Watonga talking about this effort-make a shout out to the surrounding area the need for qualified contractors in Watonga. There is workers needed in Watonga!
 - Make a list of community assets-EX: Watonga is a biking destination
 - Have transparent communication through TV, newspaper and social media
 - Start a "Did you know?" campaign. EX: Did you know Roman Nose sees over 500,000 visitors per year? Did you know Watonga is a biking destination? Did you know Watonga has excellent Library/Police/Fire services?
 - Start a "Welcome to Watonga" class, teaching employees at the local gas stations and restaurants all of the great things of Watonga that can be shared with newcomers.
 - Start a Watonga Leadership Class through the Chamber.



The key takeaway for me on this week is the word INTENTIONAL. It seemed that many could see and explain the community faults, yet almost nothing is being done to work on them. Watonga is just on a path of survival, rather than being intentional about taking the road to thrive. It seems there is a paralysis by analysis in the decision making, therefore things aren't happening. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Decide who you want to be then be intentional about making that happen! Do something every day towards this goal.

There's a lot of suggestions in this report, and it's up to you to determine the importance. In my opinion, here are the top 5 of the above mentioned to work on ASAP.

1. Have a community meeting to go over this report. From this meeting, make a list of importance and a list of attainable one-year goals.
2. Work on the blight ordinance. This is going to be tough, don't procrastinate.
3. You've started the Focus Group, now make it more visible to the community. Open it up for smaller groups to help in this effort. Speak about it at civil groups.
4. Create the building inventory list. This will open your eyes to the amount of buildings that are available, the amount of buildings that are used for storage and give you an accurate count of buildings that are currently in use.
5. Start planning a Community Vision Session. Have a non-biased facilitator that is accustomed to leading a vision session. I would be willing to come help with this.

All of this is brief synopsis of my findings in Watonga. It's amazing what can be discovered in just three days, yet a realization that there is yet so much that can be learned. As a professional consultant I can assist in nearly every single aspect of downtown revitalization, and have faced many of the challenges you are facing now. I would love the opportunity to work again in Watonga. Please contact me if there is anything I can help you with as you work to revitalize your beautiful downtown.

All the Best!

Ron Drake

INSPIRE•EQUIP•RESTORE