

## Downtown revitalization pushes toward success

By Morgan Chilson

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Revitalization plans for downtown Topeka have not been in short supply over the last 100 years.

In 1935, a plan was put forth to develop a mall in downtown Topeka like that in Washington, D.C., with streets lined by government buildings. Decades later, another downtown renovation proposed building a roof over five blocks along S. Kansas Avenue. Yet another plan involved a tunnel.

In October 1998, an eight-page special section in The Topeka Capital-Journal explored why downtown revitalization wasn't happening.

Recently, though, revitalization plans have been met with enthusiasm and a feeling that downtown is building toward its potential.

"This time it was different. There was much more of a commitment. There was a strong community buy-in," Mayor Larry Wolgast said. "I think that was the difference. You had to overcome that inertia, people saying this will never happen, they will never come downtown again."

### Inter-city visits spur ideas

Several people pointed to the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce inter-city visits in the early 2000s to see what other communities were doing. The trips gave people good feelings about what Topeka could do. Mike Morse, partner in KS Commercial Real Estate Services Inc., went on several of the visits and found his downtown muse.

Officials in Springfield, Mo., "started talking about their downtown revitalization efforts, how it's important to quality of life, how it retains employees," Morse recalled. "That, for me, was the first buy-in. My dad was a huge proponent of downtown and had been on the board of DTI from the '80s

up. I was somewhat of a naysayer. This can be done. When you leave those tours, there's nothing there that says, 'Oh my gosh, we're not smart enough to do that.' ”

Even then, with building interest and a contingent of people working on downtown redevelopment, pessimism continued.

“We're not crazy,” Morse recalled trying to tell people. “Look at what these other towns are doing, and none of them have the assets that we do in our downtown. They weren't anchored by the Capitol, by Cap Fed, they weren't anchored by Westar, they weren't anchored by all the state employees being downtown. Their downtowns were vacant, and they turned it around.”

Morse said the idea to create Heartland Visioning was born out of one of those inter-city visits.

“You have to get an organization together that helps focus ideas and get the community involved, and get people excited about these projects,” he said.

“NOTO is the result of an inter-city visit,” he added. “712 Innovation is the result of an inter-city visit.”

Morse was frustrated by slow progress over the years. “We did our first tour in '01; it took us seven years to have our summit on the downtown,” he said.

But that event drew 60 or 70 people, who began to talk about possibilities.

John Hunter, executive director of Heartland Visioning, remembers well those early years. Although he wasn't leading the organization at that time, he has been involved from the beginning.

Hunter tracks the shift toward today's downtown to a specific time, when the city announced that it was going to put an overlay of blacktop down S. Kansas Avenue. A small committee was already exploring infrastructure in the area and considering what could be done.

“This came out the city was going to spend all that money for another overlay – we had raw sewage that was backing up into our buildings downtown. We had water lines that had little or no pressure at different times during the day, and

the electrical that we had put in during one of the past renovations to light up Christmas lights wasn't working.”

The group started asking questions about the age of the water pipes – 100 years old in some places – and what the city could do, Hunter said.

“As that all started moving forward, that's when Vince Frye and a group got together and formed the Downtown Topeka Foundation, and that's the group that raised \$3.4 million for the beautification component to all of this,” he said.

Private investment makes the leap



Chris Leinberger, an expert on downtown revitalization who works with the Brookings Institute, said the tipping point to many projects like Topeka's is private investment. Sometimes that comes from individuals wanting to make a difference in their communities, while sometimes it comes from major companies moving downtown and bringing employment and new buildings.

Such investment came downtown in Capitol Federal's decision to renovate its headquarters and stay on Kansas Avenue, to the tune of \$18 million. Daryl Craft, of BOK Financial and a downtown investor, pointed to Debra and Randy Clayton's investment in the building for their business, Clayton Financial.

It was their "beautiful job" with a historical renovation that pushed Craft and his partners to invest in the old Karlan's Furniture Building at 900 S. Kansas, he said. They bought it in 2009 and did a complete, expensive rehabilitation.

"At the time that we did this building, and even to this day, this is the most extensive private historic rehab in downtown Topeka," Craft said. "The Capitol building blows everybody away, but behind that, we were the most extensive."

Craft said he and his partners see the potential in Topeka's downtown, and they knew private investors needed to commit.

"Unless people like us are willing to bite the bullet and take a risk on it, it's not going to get done," he said. "We thought it was an opportunity for the right building, we thought it was an opportunity for downtown to stabilize. After we did ours, Jeff Carson (of Gizmo) did his, and gave us credit. It kind of becomes a chain of people."

John Dicus, CEO at Capitol Federal, sits in an office where the windows overlook Kansas Avenue. His company's decision to stay downtown was important to the bank, he said, because they've had a presence there since 1893. He feels the difference in this revitalization effort.

"I think there's been a concerted effort for a long period of time, a lot of different starts and stops, and a lot of different projects that people have looked at and worked on and thought this would be what would bring people back down," he said. "Some have worked for maybe a short period of time, but unfortunately nothing has worked in the long run yet. I think this time, we've got a chance."

### Envisioning the future

The leadership from Heartland Visioning was also a much-cited tipping point in the revitalization process. Hunter said the organization came about during a time when "there was a pretty clear understanding at that time that something had to be done to move this community forward."

“If you look politically at that time period, we had some tremendous squabbles going on between the city council and the county commissioners,” he added. “It was in the paper all the time. Nobody saw visioning coming from the political side.”

The beginning years were “tough times,” Hunter said. “People kept saying, ‘I thought you were going to do downtown.’”

For Pat Michaelis, of the Midwest Housing Equity Group, things began to change with one simple shift.

“Sort of the tipping point was where there were more believers that could overcome the doubters,” he said. “Finally, the momentum, and I’m a big believer in leadership, and so, I think we have the right leadership in place, whether it’s the chamber, the newspaper, downtown, the mayor, the city council, the county commission.”

The next critical point is to maintain momentum and make what’s happening downtown sustainable, Michaelis said.

“It’s easy to get things built. The hard thing is over time, generating the revenue to pay the bills, to keep the doors open,” he said. “Once we get this all done, now we’ve got to use it and make it viable and sustainable. But I also see people investing money and doing things downtown that have got enough capital that they’ve got staying power.”

Wolgast agreed. “That’s the challenge – if you build it, will they come?” he said. “The leadership that we have there, the corporations are just involved so much more, they want to see it. Even Mars, when they moved here, they said, ‘You have got to upgrade your downtown in order to help us recruit good people.’ We didn’t think of that 20 years ago.”

Wolgast said he has seen dramatic shifts in attitude from people who originally said “it won’t work,” and who now say, “Why didn’t we do this 20 years ago?”

“People feel good, which is what you want,” he said. “They feel pride in what they’re seeing.”

Morse doesn’t want anyone to let up on making the vision a reality.

“The battle continues every single election cycle to make sure we maintain positive council members that support growing Topeka and understand that in order to grow Topeka, you will offend some people,” he said. “If it was easy, we’d have done it. We need to keep positive people on the council that understand how important it is. Right now, we’re at that teetering point. We’re really at a very, very important crossroads. If we take this next step, watch us go.

“Watch us grow.”