

FOCUS GROUP SURVEY REPORT

FINAL SURVEY FINDINGS AND RESULTS

CITY OF NEOSHO, MISSOURI

June 22, 2007



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION AND ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE FOR
MISSOURI (DREAM) PROGRAM SPONSORS:



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SECTION I FINAL REPORT

As part of the research for the DREAM Initiative, UNICOM-ARC conducted three focus groups in Neosho, Missouri. The purpose of these groups was to learn more about the priorities of the Neosho community in regard to the downtown area. The three groups included the following: 1) downtown business owners, 2) city officials, and 3) residents.

Participants of each group are from a variety of backgrounds, and all have some interest in downtown revitalization.

This report summarizes the responses of the members of all three groups to the posed questions. Attached are the complete transcripts of the three meetings.

A. Questions Posed to Business Groups

The following questions were included in the discussion guide for building owners:

General Questions about Neosho

01. Generally speaking, how would you describe this area to someone visiting from another city? Would you say things are moving in the right or wrong direction?
02. What are the main shopping areas for area residents? From how far away do people come to do their regular shopping (groceries, household items)?
03. What about dining and entertainment options? What are popular choices for local residents? When friends or relatives visit from out of town, where do you take them?

Downtown Specific Questions

04. Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Neosho is headed in the right direction or wrong direction? Why?
05. Why did you choose to locate your business or make an investment in property downtown (or not in downtown, for other business/property owners)?
06. From what you hear from your customers, how “user-friendly” is downtown? Are business hours and locations convenient? Is there enough parking and is it convenient? Is it easy for people to find what they’re looking for?

07. How do you communicate to your customers about information about what's going on downtown (about shopping, special events, other entertainment and recreation) or with your own business? How would you like to be communicated with regarding what is going on downtown from the City of Neosho?

Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

08. As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Neosho. We'd like to ask you what direction you would like the downtown to take in a few different areas over the next few years. What...

- Additional/types of businesses would you like to see downtown?
- Dining and entertainment?
- Parks and outdoor recreation?

09. Now we would like to talk about the look and feel of downtown. Do think there needs to be improvements in the following areas?

- Street repair?
- Landscaping/beautification?
- Green space?
- Building repairs, renovation, upgrades?

10. Of all the potential improvements we've just talked about, what do you think the highest priorities should be for the city?

11. What could the City do to help your business thrive or keep your property values strong over the next few years?

12. Would you be willing to support a "special business district" in which an additional sales tax would be collected that would provide services specifically for downtown?

B. Questions Posed to the General Groups

The following questions were included in the discussion guide for general groups:

General Questions about Neosho

01. Generally speaking, how would you describe this area to someone visiting from another city? Would you say things are moving in the right or wrong direction?

02. What are the main shopping areas for area residents? From how far away do people come to do their regular shopping (groceries, household items)?

03. What about dining and entertainment options? What are popular choices for local residents? When friends or relatives visit from out of town, where do you take them?

04. What kinds of recreation are popular with local residents? What kinds of opportunities are there to participate in these activities in Neosho?

Downtown Specific Questions

05. Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Neosho is headed in the right direction or wrong direction? Why?

06. What are the major reasons you visit downtown? How often do you visit downtown Neosho? Is there anything that you used to do downtown but now do elsewhere or vice versa? Why?

07. How “user-friendly” is downtown? Are business hours and locations convenient? Is there enough parking and is it convenient? Is it easy for people to find what they’re looking for?

08. How do local residents and visitors get information about what’s going on downtown (about shopping, special events, other entertainment and recreation)?

Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

09. As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Neosho. We’d like to ask you what direction you would like the downtown to take in a few different areas over the next few years. What...

- Additional/types of businesses would you like to see downtown?
- Dining and entertainment?
- Parks and recreation?

10. Now we would like to talk about the look and feel of downtown. Do think there needs to be improvements in the following areas?

- Street repair?
- Landscaping/beautification?
- Green space?
- Building repairs, renovations, upgrades?

11. Of all the potential improvements we’ve just talked about, what do you think the highest priorities should be for the city?

12. What other downtowns in the area would you say Neosho's is most like? What downtowns or areas of other communities would you most *like* it to resemble?

C. The Neosho Area

Generally speaking, how would you describe this area to someone visiting from another city? Would you say things are moving in the right or wrong direction?

The participants described Neosho as beautiful, friendly, and a great place to raise a family. The geography and topography of Neosho define the town in many ways, with its hills and water providing natural beauty that draws potential new residents there, older residents back, and visitors. Regarding the people in Neosho, there is a sense of community that all the participants identified, and the residents have a positive attitude toward problem-solving. The groups also mentioned that Neosho is a good, safe place to raise a family, with a good school system, a feeling of safety, and many beautiful parks.

The participants were in consensus that Neosho is moving in the right direction. They all felt that the renewed interest and development in the Downtown Square was a step in the right direction not only for downtown Neosho but also for Neosho as a whole. The participants also mentioned the increasing diversity of residents and visitors as a progressive step in the right direction. Some participants felt that, although Neosho is moving slowly in the right direction, the residents and business owners should get together to more clearly define the direction in order to make the development in the next few years as organized and cohesive as possible.

What are the main shopping areas for area residents? From how far away do people come to do their regular shopping (groceries, household items)?

According to groups, the major Neosho shopping area is the Wal-Mart in Southwest Neosho. Neosho residents do their grocery shopping in Neosho, since there are grocery stores. Beyond shopping for groceries and staples available from Wal-Mart, though, residents go to Joplin, Missouri, fairly often for shopping. Joplin has a number of larger chain stores such as Home Depot and Lowe's, and also has a variety in women's and men's clothing, shoes, and other apparel. Since Joplin is so close to Neosho, Neosho residents find it very convenient to drive to Joplin for shopping options.

Since Neosho is surrounded by a number of smaller towns, particularly across the state border in Arkansas, some people do come into Neosho to shop, especially at the Wal-Mart. The participants did say, however, that while these people come into Neosho for some shopping, they very likely drive up to Joplin as well.

Neosho Square, the main downtown area, has a number of smaller specialty gift shops, but Neosho residents, according to the groups, do not often shop downtown because of the inconvenient business hours and the lack of parking, but also because Wal-Mart has such selection and convenience. While a number of participants said they try to patronize downtown shops as much as possible, they felt that with a greater convenience in business hours, parking, and variety, more people would patronize downtown businesses more often.

What about dining, entertainment, and recreation options? What are popular choices for local residents? When friends or relatives visit from out of town, where do you take them?

The groups cited a number of restaurants in Neosho, including Café Angelica and Sam's Cellar, as dining options in Neosho. There are, according to the participants, restaurants and places to eat in Neosho, but it is not unusual for residents to take their guests to Joplin for shopping and dining, as well. Neosho also has a movie theater, which provides yet another entertainment option.

Since Neosho is so well-defined by its land and its natural beauty, parks, walking trails, biking, golf, and fishing—outdoor options of many kinds—are popular for residents and visitors. The groups described the parks as beautiful and full of options for different age groups.

What kinds of recreation are popular with local residents? What kinds of opportunities are there to participate in these activities in Neosho?

The participants were in consensus that there are a lot of great recreation options for residents. For outdoor recreation, they enjoy the parks, walking trails, bicycling, golf, fishing, the fishing pond, the skate park, baseball and soccer fields, the archery range, and walking around through the town. The participants also described indoor options, and were especially satisfied with options offered by the recreation center and the YMCA. The recreation center offers pottery classes, sewing classes, and other educational programs, and the YMCA offers the usual extensive services.

D. Downtown Neosho: Describing the Present

Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Neosho is headed in the right direction or wrong direction? Why?

The focus groups felt that downtown Neosho is headed in the right direction, particularly with all the building renovations. They also saw potential in some of the new apartments and residences opening up, since they felt that residents in the area can only help the downtown Square in its revitalization. One group mentioned that the following five

services give the downtown area a great deal of stability: the courthouse, the community bank and trust, Freeman Hospital, Division of Family Services, and the library.

All of the participants were pleased with the direction of the downtown renovations within these last five years. Some participants suggested that a more cohesive aesthetic plan for renovations, streets, and sidewalks, would be a good thing, since up until now, the renovations have been mostly focused on individual buildings.

Business Owners: Why did you choose to locate your business downtown (or not in downtown, for other business owners)?

The business owner focus group participants cited cost, history, and availability of living space above their shops as reasons for locating their businesses downtown. Because buildings are so affordable, many own the buildings in which their shops are located.

General Public: What are the major reasons you visit downtown? How often do you visit downtown Neosho? Is there anything that you used to do downtown but now do elsewhere or vice versa? Why?

People visit downtown primarily on weekdays during the day, when the stores and services are open, for antique shops, to have lunch, and to do business at the bank, the courthouse, the library, or the hospital. According to the participants, the people who most often patronize downtown businesses are residents who work downtown and visitors. The residents who work downtown are able to eat lunch downtown during their lunch break and perhaps do a little shopping.

Many of the participants remember a time when Neosho Square was more crowded with people, and when young people would “cruise the square.” They have noticed, however, more people in the square and a more crowded atmosphere in the past few years than ten or twenty years ago.

How “user-friendly” is downtown? Are business hours and locations convenient? Is there enough parking and is it convenient? Is it easy for people to find what they’re looking for?

The participants suggested a number of possible ways for the Square to improve its user-friendliness. The topics they discussed included extended business hours, parking, signage, and making it easier to find downtown for people in cars, on bicycles, and who are walking the trails.

The groups all felt that business hours are currently inconvenient downtown, mostly 9:00 to 5:00 on weekdays, which makes it difficult for residents who do not work downtown to patronize downtown businesses. They also suggested that the weekend hours are extremely limited, and that they would be more likely to shop downtown if business hours

were expanded during weekday evenings and during weekends. This would also benefit the tourism in Neosho, encouraging people from surrounding areas to come in for antique shopping, restaurants, and other entertainment options.

All three focus groups discussed parking as a major area for concern. They felt that parking is inconvenient, especially during the weekdays when everything is open, as employees of the businesses in Neosho Square often park in most of the available street parking spots. While there are a few parking lots, participants felt that the parking lots are hard to find, and therefore visitors might get discouraged. Some suggested that parking deters people from shopping downtown, especially since the Neosho Wal-Mart and larger chains in Joplin have an abundance of parking.

Participants described signage as something that could be more “user-friendly.” They felt that visitors have a difficult time finding their way into downtown, and that signs on the nearby highways as well as within Neosho directing people downtown would help tremendously. Within downtown, signage to help people find the businesses and parking they may be looking for, according to the participants, would also help downtown become more “user-friendly.”

Another suggestion from one group to make downtown more user-friendly is to make it more accessible to people walking or bicycling in the parks, creating a more pedestrian-friendly downtown.

How do local residents and visitors get information about what’s going on downtown (about shopping, special events, other entertainment and recreation)?

People primarily get information through the newspaper, radio, flyers and direct mail, and the Chamber of Commerce. All of the groups agreed that newspaper and radio were probably the two biggest sources of information for the community to find out what is happening downtown. Some participants suggested that a web page for downtown events and businesses, a central Internet resource for residents and visitors, would help the town market events, shops, restaurants, and services.

E. Downtown Neosho: Looking to the Future

As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Neosho. We’d like to ask you what direction you would like the downtown to take in a few different areas over the next few years. What additional types of businesses would you like to see downtown? Dining and entertainment? Parks and recreation?

The groups were in consensus that additional shopping and dining options would be a good improvement for downtown Neosho. They suggested more specialty shops, including upscale men’s and women’s apparel, home décor, and gift shops. The groups

also suggested a variety of dining options, including coffee shops, restaurants of various kinds. They felt that the options should be diverse enough to draw different kinds of people from surrounding towns as well as residents, and the groups looked at certain aspects of Joplin, Missouri as a model. The participants expressed the idea that if there are a variety of shops and restaurants, downtown Neosho will become more of a destination.

In addition, some of the groups suggested attracting more artists, artisans, and craftspeople to downtown Neosho, and highlighting the ones that already reside or teach in Neosho. This, the participants felt, will highlight the already rich culture and history of Neosho, and will draw people into downtown for unique items and unique experience that is not in competition with Wal-Mart.

One group made a suggestion that addressed a concern that all of the groups brought up: the lack of connection of the parks to downtown. A few participants in one focus group suggested creating a walking path connecting the parks to downtown, thereby drawing the bikers and walkers into downtown. While the groups are all very happy with Neosho's parks, there was a sense that connecting them to downtown would make the parks and the downtown more accessible.

Now we would like to talk about the look and feel of downtown. Do think there needs to be improvements in the following areas: street repair, landscaping/beautification, green space, and building repairs, renovations, and upgrades?

Regarding repairs and renovations, the groups felt that the City should continue to repair the sidewalks, putting bricks in to give the sidewalks an old-time feel, and that the lighting should be consistent and match that historic look. In addition to the sidewalks, the streets were a concern for some groups, who felt that street repairs would make the downtown more attractive and easier to navigate. The drainage was an issue as well. In addition, building repairs were a high priority. Neosho's downtown, according to the participants, already has some newly renovated buildings, and the ones that are not yet renovated still need investors and attention.

As far as aesthetics are concerned, participants felt that utility lines should be buried, suggesting that above-ground utilities take away from the historic feel of the downtown. They also suggested flowing water or fountains, flower boxes and trees, and banners. The groups also expressed concern over some property owners who have not cleaned up their properties, but feel the City is moving in the right direction by continuing to enforce the relevant codes. One other concern was the aesthetics of the side streets leading into downtown. Participants felt that improving the side streets should be a secondary focus, but is still important.

The groups feel that the downtown area could also be more easily navigable: improved sidewalks and bicycle paths would make it more foot-friendly and bicycle-friendly, and

more strategically-placed signage would make downtown easier to find and to navigate. Parking is also a major concern in navigation, and the participants felt that more, easier-to-find parking would help both residents and visitors get around downtown.

Of all the potential improvements we've just talked about, what do you think the highest priorities should be for the city?

The focus groups agreed that one of the highest priorities is improving parking, both creating more parking and making the existing parking easier to find and navigate. In addition to parking, the participants prioritized all the aesthetic improvements described above: sidewalks, street repair, lighting, burying utility lines, building repair, the addition of landscaping and greenery, walking and bicycling paths, and banners. They also made suggestions regarding what types of businesses to attract, and prioritized specialty shopping and a variety of food choices. In addition, they felt that attracting residents to downtown is important, as well as continuing to attract artists, artisans, and craftspeople.

General Public: What other downtowns in the area would you say Neosho's is most like? What downtowns or areas of other communities would you most *like* it to resemble?

The biggest point of comparison that all of the focus groups used was Joplin, Missouri. They cited ways in which Joplin attracts visitors and shoppers from nearby towns, restaurants in Joplin that Neosho could emulate, and a variety of shopping and dining that keeps people coming to Joplin.

Other downtowns that the participants found admirable in many ways included the following: Carthage; Pinnacle Hills, Arkansas; Jinx, Oklahoma; Cape Girardeau; Asheville, North Carolina; Eureka Springs, Arkansas; Carmel, California; Crested Butte, Colorado; Pigeon Forge, Tennessee; and Parker City, Oregon. In describing these downtowns, the participants focused on the cohesive themes, the ability to attract and showcase artists and craftspeople, the variety of shops and restaurants, and the way these towns have found a unique way to be a "destination."

Business Owners: What could the City do to help your business thrive or keep your property values strong over the next few years?

The downtown business owners focus group felt that improved parking, signage, and banners would help their businesses over the next few years. The parking would make it easier for customers to come downtown and come into their businesses, the signage would make the downtown and the businesses easier to find, and the banners would aesthetically beautify the downtown area.

The group also cited some of the overall concerns in aesthetics and repairs—such as sidewalks, street repair, drainage, and utility poles—as priorities. They felt that an overall improvement in the downtown area would be a great benefit to their businesses.

Business Owners: Would you be willing to support a “special business district” in which an additional sales tax would be collected that would provide services specifically for downtown?

The business focus group was in consensus that they would not support additional sales tax in a “special business district,” because it would deter new businesses from locating themselves downtown and would deter shoppers from spending money downtown.

F. Key Points

Key points about the Neosho area:

- ◆ Neosho is safe, friendly, and a good place to raise a family.
- ◆ The Neosho community generally has a positive and proactive attitude toward problem-solving.
- ◆ The natural beauty of Neosho is a draw for residents and tourists, since Neosho is hilly, has streams and lakes, and has beautiful parks and trails.
- ◆ Neosho as a whole is moving in the right direction. Participants felt that the development of downtown is going in a good direction, and would like to see the direction for the future more clearly defined by the community for future change.
- ◆ Neosho residents do their grocery shopping at grocery stores in town, and do a lot of their general shopping at the Neosho Wal-Mart. Residents often visit Joplin, Missouri for more extensive shopping at larger chain stores, and for variety in clothing stores.
- ◆ The downtown Neosho Square has smaller gift and specialty shops, and some residents do shop downtown, but, according to the participants, not as often as they would if the shops had later business hours, the Square had more convenient parking, and downtown had a greater variety of shopping and dining options.
- ◆ The Neosho area has good restaurants that residents frequent, but they also take their visitors into Joplin for dining and entertainment options.
- ◆ Neosho has a number of recreation options, many of which involve the outdoors and the Neosho landscape: parks, walking trails, bicycling, golf, trout fishing, the fishing pond, the skate park, baseball and soccer fields, the archery range, and walking around through the town.
- ◆ Participants felt that the recreation center and the YMCA offer a variety of excellent recreation options, both indoor and outdoor.

Key points about downtown Neosho in the present:

- ◆ Downtown Neosho is headed in the right direction, according to the focus groups. The new residences coming up downtown, the building renovations, and the community interest in revitalizing the downtown are all positive.
- ◆ While downtown is moving in the right direction, the participants felt the need for the direction from this point forward to be more clearly defined to make the efforts over the next few years as organized and cohesive as possible.
- ◆ The downtown has stable businesses and services that are essential, including the courthouse, the community bank and trust, Freeman Hospital, Division of Family Services, and the library.
- ◆ Business owners find downtown attractive because of the low cost of the buildings, the ability to live above their shops, and the history of Neosho Square.
- ◆ People visit downtown primarily on weekdays during the day, when the stores and services are open, for antique shops, to have lunch, and to do business at the bank, the courthouse, the library, or the hospital.
- ◆ The people who currently most often patronize downtown businesses are residents who work downtown and visitors.
- ◆ The groups all felt that downtown business hours are currently inconvenient downtown, mostly 9:00 to 5:00 on weekdays, which makes it difficult for residents who do not work downtown to patronize downtown businesses.
- ◆ The focus groups felt that parking downtown is inconvenient, since street parking is mostly filled when downtown is busy during weekdays, and available parking lots are hard to find.
- ◆ The participants discussed signage as a high priority in improving the “user-friendliness” of downtown, both signs to help people coming into downtown and signs within downtown to direct people to businesses and parking.
- ◆ Encouraging a downtown that is more accessible to pedestrians is also a priority for some focus group participants.
- ◆ Residents and visitors primarily get information about downtown events and businesses through the newspaper, radio, flyers and direct mail, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Key points about the future of downtown Neosho:

- ◆ The focus groups would like to see a variety of shopping and dining options, including upscale apparel, home décor, gift shops, coffee shops, restaurants, and nightlife.
- ◆ Downtown Neosho should showcase, highlight, and attract artists, artisans, and craftspeople.
- ◆ The downtown should be better connected to the parks, so hikers and bicyclers can easily access downtown.
- ◆ The City should continue to repair the downtown sidewalks and lighting, giving them a consistent, historic look.
- ◆ Building repair, street repair, drainage, and burying the utility lines are all major structural concerns, according to the participants.
- ◆ The downtown area would be beautified by more flower boxes and trees, flowing water or fountains, and banners.
- ◆ The City should continue, according to the participants, to enforce codes forcing building owners to clean up their property.
- ◆ The aesthetics of the side streets leading into downtown affect the look and feel of the downtown itself, and should be a focus as well.
- ◆ More and clearer signage, both bringing people into downtown and helping people navigate within the Square, would help downtown be more “user-friendly.”
- ◆ The availability and convenience of parking is a major concern and is of the highest priority in determining a plan for downtown.
- ◆ Attracting residents downtown is important for stability and for having people patronize downtown business.
- ◆ In discussing other downtowns, the participants admired the cohesive themes, the ability to attract and showcase artists and craftspeople, the variety of shops and restaurants, and the way these towns have found a unique way to be a “destination.”
- ◆ Business owners, according to the business owners focus group, would not support a “special business district” additional sales tax.

SECTION II

DOWNTOWN BUSINESS OWNERS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

My name is Mike Franks, with my wife Tammy, we have two properties on the Square, and we've developed one into a multi-use. We rent the first floor out to a bookstore and coffee shop, and we live on the second floor, and the other we've just recently bought and are getting ready to develop it.

Tammy Franks.

My name's J.R. Penn, and I own and operate a real estate appraisal company, in a building I own off the Square, and I own a couple other commercial buildings on the direct south side of the Square that I use as rental.

I'm Jenna Penn, I'm J.R.'s wife, and I'm chairperson of planning and zoning.

I'm Bill Simms, I have Newton County Title Company, on the southwest corner of the Square.

I'm Jenny Raim, the director of the Newton County Library.

I'm Dwight Douglas, and I have a law office on Wood Street. I began practicing there in 1968, my father started practicing on Neosho Square in 1937, so we have a long history and association with downtown Neosho.

(side conversation.)

Moderator: Let me start off with a really basic question. Today is the first day I've been in Neosho, so tell me a little bit about your town. Tell me about Neosho.

I moved here in the 70's, and I came from a small community, and when we drove into town, I instantly felt at home, even as a teenager. Came down Big Spring Hill, and I went, "Yup, this is where we want to live." It was important for...well, we stayed here until 82 to 84, and we left the area, but then we had children, and they had to go to school, and we actually chose to pack up and move back to Neosho just to raise our kids. I feel like...as a teenager, I felt instantly at home, and I think other people feel like that.

The biggest thing I can say about Neosho is that when it has a big problem, it generally solves the problem with a positive attitude. It's always interesting in seeing ideas of how to do that. The best example I can give is, a few years ago, I was close to the region's administrator of EPA, and he said, "I want to come into Neosho and talk to your businesses and schools about asbestos." I put together a group, about 50 people, and

we all went to lunch, and he said, "Would you do the same thing for me in Caswell?" And I said yes, and I called 3 community leaders in Caswell, and they said, "Why would we want to talk about those issues?" Later, we had an issue in this community—it was because of Neosho's positive attitude, not looking to lay blame, but what do we do to solve problems. That's one of the best things about this community.

I think one of the important things is topography. It has a lot to do with the type of city it is. If you go just a few miles north to Joplin, it's a pretty flat city. As you move south and east, the topography of the Ozarks takes over, and it's that topography that defines Neosho. We're built on a series of hills, near flowing water, and that's really shaped a lot of this town in the past. It makes it a prettier town, in general, and that's been part and parcel of the personality of this town. I mean, people know a lot of the slogans from the past like the "flower pot city," and those come from the fact that it was a compact and pretty town, and outside people were always struck by that... (unintelligible)...we're just not a flat city like Springfield or Joplin. I think as a result of that, we have had generations of people who've taken pride in the town and have the type of attitude that Dwight's talked about, trying to work together to solve problems. In general, I think it's that kind of past that we draw on, that people were here to kind of build something and do something.

I'm a newcomer here, but I found it to be a very friendly town.

I agree with what Dwight said. I think you get a real sense of community here. I think everybody's willing to work together. I'm a third-generation Neosho person, and Dwight's second generation...I think there are a lot of people here that have come back, gone off to college, worked someplace else for a number of years, and decided this is where they want to raise their family. I think that's the feeling that a lot of people have, that it's a place they want to come back to and raise their children, people that have grown up here.

Moderator: Do you sense that it's moving in a good direction, or moving in a negative direction?

I think we're at that point where we need to establish a direction first, and I don't know that that direction's been established. You have a lot of groups that are all trying to do some positive things, and I think (unintelligible noise), we haven't had a true communal conversation yet on what we really want the direction to be.

(noise, unintelligible). We're probably torn between development in Joplin and development to the South in northwest Arkansas. We were one community that supported the expansion of the northwest Arkansas regional airport, and Joplin did not, so we're right on this dividing line on tremendous growth from the South coming this way and growth from the North coming this way, and we have to decide how we fit the image of both.

It's certainly changed. I think back to when I was a child growing up in this town. I probably never heard a person speak a foreign language til I was in high school, and we have that diversity coming in now. It's certainly a different place than it used to be. I think we need to try to make the best of that. I think there's some opportunities there, as well as some problems... (noise, unintelligible)

I see the town kind of torn in one way. I see the big money development where Wal-Mart has planted its roots, and the town itself does not want to give up the downtown Square. I see that as very, very positive. That's mainly from the people, like Dwight and the Franks, who have many generations here. This has always been the hub to this town. I remember as a young person...it was exciting for me to come cruise the Square! It was a big deal. Of course time and regulations has really cut that off for the young people. Probably, in a sense, for positive situations, I remember that just being right off a movie screen. If you wanted to go somewhere and see lots of people, you came to Neosho and you cruised the Square, and it was great fun. I always wanted to live here.

My son Stephen, who's now a shift commander in the police department, one night drove 157 miles cruising the Square!

(laughter)

I wish that we could still offer kind of that for the young people without it being a nuisance... (noise) because that was great fun. And you would end at the Square, then you'd go back down the boulevard to the second location of Wal-Mart, come back down the boulevard, and end back down at the Square. It was roughly 2.5 miles.

That was before 3 dollar gallons of gas.

(laughter)

It was very nostalgic to me.

(side conversation.)

I've been real involved with Habitat for Humanity, and the one thing I've seen through the community is they're not a bit afraid to step up to the plate financially. That's something that we have always seen, that everybody has stepped up to the plate. We've never not been able to build a house because we didn't have funds. We may not have had the volunteers, but we had the funds.

That's turned out to be a very positive thing.

We've cleaned up a lot of areas. We're trying to get into some real distressed areas and work with them.

When things need to be done here...we've always been able to find the money to do major projects, whether it's build a Y, build the Merritt Center or the College. There's enough money in town, and when people are spending the money, good things are happening. On the flip side, the bad side is, my other job is I'm a municipal judge, and we do 4000 cases a year, and along with those Hispanics, we begin to see the criminal side of problems of a small city. We begin to see drug possession and many arrests, one or two high-speed pursuits a month, more assaults, more stealing...you know, not on a huge scale, but the problems of a small city are here, and they're here for law enforcement, and we have to be attuned to those, and we have to have the resources to address those.

Moderator: Where are the main shopping areas? Where do people go to do their shopping?

Only two shopping areas in town, really. Regardless of how many people love downtown...there's some shopping on the boulevard, but that's limited to some small service sectors and grocery store and some fast food, and then there's the Wal-Mart area, and that's really pretty much the shopping.

The first thing I thought of when she said that was Joplin. That was the first thought, is Joplin.

That's a good answer.

If I wanted to go buy a dress today to wear to work, I couldn't buy one in Neosho.

People buy their necessities in Neosho, but if you want clothing or appliances or furniture or major household items... (unintelligible)

I think we have enough business in town that we should be able to go downtown, somewhere, and buy a dress. And you can't do it. And hardly at Wal-Mart can you buy a dress. Not anything you can wear to work.

If it's like this last week, my wife, people go to Springfield. And the mall. It just happens in a lot of smaller towns.

That's exactly right (unintelligible).

I think it's a proximity, the proximity to Joplin...If we had a dress store or a men's clothing store, I don't think it would last.

I think they would be hard-pressed to keep their doors open.

We've talked a lot about this with visiting West Plains frequently, and because they're an isolated community, they have retail there, because people can't drive...

...two hours to Springfield.

People come there to shop, probably, from surrounding towns.

That's been one of the downsides to the new highway—it's made the shopping even closer.

(side conversation. Laughter.)

And I don't think at this point in our town, we're going to be able to compete with that. What we're going to have to find for retail in our community will be specialty shops.

Moderator: Do you do grocery shopping in town?

I do mine here.

I try to leave as much money here as I can.

I think many people do their grocery shopping here. There's two supermarkets, and some smaller places.

Actually, that's one of the things that's gotten better in the last few years. A few years ago, Wal-Mart was the grocery store in town.

I can remember about at about 8 to 10 years old, we lived in Angerstrom, and my mother would drive to Neosho, because there was more variety in Neosho.

That's pretty much human nature.

I think Wal-Mart here in Neosho has been the largest store as far as capital, in like a huge area, and that was because we were feeding so many sleeper communities. Now with the new Wal-Mart down in Jane, I'm sure the numbers here dropped off...

That's absolutely true. I've talked to the guys in Bentonville about that, and that parking lot, the first five years it was opened, you would have seen almost as many out-of-state license plates, Arkansas and Oklahoma (unintelligible noise). And all that was bound to happen.

I would think that that's changed.

You know, some of it may depend on, it's no secret that Lowe's is looking at locating in the community. If they decide to do that, that would be a big boon to the community, because all that money's going to Joplin right now.

(many people agreeing)

You know, at T.H. Rogers, if you're buying wood products a lot, they can be competitive, but when you get away from the wood products, then you really need to shop other locations.

With more and more people working, more people are shopping on the weekends. I was at Lowe's in Grove on Sunday buying some stuff. The weekend opportunity is more important.

And too, at Lowe's, it's more of a complete shopping experience. They have supplies to do projects, but they also have tools, outdoor tools, you name it, it's there. So it's kind of a one-stop experience, whether you buy anything or not.

It's made people do more do-it-yourself, because of HDTV and all of those shows. More people want to do that stuff.

A lot of the time, people had to do it, you were there on Sunday. (noise, unintelligible) I try to give Rogers as much as I can, but it may not be conducive for me.

I didn't even know 84 Lumber was gone until long after it was gone, and I was really embarrassed.

That was far enough out of town that I didn't think about it.

That was probably a casualty of highway 71 south.

Moderator: What about dining and entertainment options? Do you do that here, or out of town?

(many people talking at once.)

We do actually have a pretty good hotel.

We have a couple.

Dining options...

Angelica's is what I would consider a specialty. People come for out of the area to eat at cafés.

We've been hurting for good restaurants other than fast food. We have a couple specialty like Angelica's or Sam's Cellar, and they do very well. They serve pizzas, with beer, and it's a sports bar...we have some specialty unique things, and they're done right, and they seem to do okay. But we've been hurting for...

It's the steakhouse that everybody wants. That's what I hear most.

I think the same is true as would be with a dress shop. I think people go to Joplin because they've got a choice.

Particularly when you go to South Joplin, as many restaurants as there now are.

If somebody started a nice restaurant here, I don't think the people in Neosho would support it. I think they'll go to Joplin with two or three places, and go to Lowe's, and go to Sam's.

Which we do often.

We make it an experience. I was over a weekend in North Dallas in a town called Addison, and within a two-mile stretch, there were 200 restaurants. I could not believe it.

It's a little town.

It was nice. Everything was new.

(many people talking at once.)

I actually think a small specialty restaurant would work, because they do it in lots of towns.

(many people talking at once.)

And the Grotto did great. They just couldn't...

That person was trying to hold two jobs.

They had a great business there...

I personally think that you can't just open. This is what happens with so many small businesses. They just open, and they think that's it's all going to happen, and they don't have to give people a reason to shop them versus somebody else, and where you see people develop things like that, they just try to open up and want to be in the restaurant business. There's plenty of restaurants. There aren't good restaurants, though. To give you an example, (unintelligible) shouldn't be as successful as they are. They do what

they do very well, and they keep improving themselves all the time. So the Rogers crowd don't hurt them because they've developed a following. There's plenty of room for that. I think you're going to have more reason if you ever build up a core offering inside the town, where people have two or three choices in town, you're going to be less likely to get in your car and go to Joplin. Right now, you assume there is no offering, so you go up there with multiple offerings. If we had two or three, you'd be less likely to go up there. It can't just be one good place. There has to be more than one good place. You have to get a group of restaurants here. We have this kind of critical mass.

And it's got to fit Neosho.

I agree. It does have to fit this market. The thing that's unique about Sam's Cellar is that it's not a lunch place as much as an evening place. It actually draws people from out of town. Why did the old Myers Inn last as many years as it did where it was? It was so inconvenient! But they were really good at what they do. If had three or four of them together here, they'll each have their own little niche here downtown, and none of them would be very big, you could even get people from other areas down here.

Moderator: Let's talk about downtown. Is it heading in the right direction or wrong direction?

We've had so many dollars invested here in the last 5 years. It's a huge turnaround from where we were.

It's not retail that you see, but when people are spending that kind of money, good things happen. We're getting these apartments, and other services...it just a good direction, to spend that kind of money.

It's all been good, but it's all unorganized. I don't care which project you talk about downtown, whether it's...just pick one...it's all happened, and it's all been good and positive, because 10 years ago, we were going no place down here, and I guarantee that today downtown would look horrible if this hadn't happened. But what we haven't had is what this project is all about now, is kind of a coordinated effort. The only coordinated thing we've done was the bricks in sidewalks. Everything else was done by individuals, someone grabbed a building and did something. They've all done a very nice job, but I hope we're getting close to this critical mass of having enough going on downtown to make it a success...it's probably time for us to put a unified plan together that allows us to name the things that need to be done that we haven't done, and to market what we've done successfully as well. It's just been...I can't explain how it's happened, it's just happened.

When I bought my building, across from the school, I had several people tell me I was crazy. They said it was just Hotel California over there. And I said, you know, the city's not going to let that go. In six months, the project was started, and I had no inside information, but that's kind of where I was at.

(people talking, unintelligible)

I couldn't have hedged a bet better than that building.

There's an old high school that's been turned into senior citizens' apartments, and they did a great job.

It's just beautiful. There's never been any trouble, and the tenants say very positive things.

(many people talking at once, side conversation.)

And there's about 5 essential services that are that are essential to downtown, and that's the courthouse, the community bank and trust, Freeman Hospital, Division of Family Services, and the library, and those are within the area, they're all essential services, and we need to be planning that whatever those do, because if any one of them leaves, it's a blow. If the Hospital decides to go out and move, if...at one time, the county government talked about moving it out to Crowder, and that would be horrible for downtown. We need to keep developing those 5 core businesses, and make it easy for them to stay and develop their business. They're all substantial employers...

I would say the same.

That's right. The courthouse is the mainstay of the town.

And that's kind of what Fayetteville went through several years ago, and now it's basically very professional. They do have niche businesses, niche restaurants, and they do a real nice job, and for a while, Fayetteville didn't have a great downtown.

Even the large cities, even St. Louis, and they're at the edge in developing downtown, but most of those places have had a draw, whether it's government or whatever, as a core to hold it together while you built everything else, and what they're building it back with is residential, which is the only thing that makes sense. If you get enough people down there, the demand for the services would follow. In the 60's and 70's, we tried to attract businesses downtown, but it was the death warrant, because there wasn't any business for them to do. Now, we've finally got a little smarter and figured out if people live down here, the services will follow. Tammy and I will go up and spend a week with our kids every summer downtown. Last year, we saw a real turning point. There's a grocery store that's been put in downtown St. Louis. It's just one of those signs...you couldn't put that in if there wasn't anyone that needed it.

There would have to be at least 60 families around the Square to fund a family-style little deli, because they, your meats go bad so quickly, and your produce, and your milks.

I agree. You've got to have the demand for the service. That's why I'm glad to see so much residential involved in what's going on downtown, because that's the key. It will never be the retail hub it was, and it couldn't be. It's physically the wrong kind of property. No matter what we did downtown, you could never park as many people as Wal-Mart can park in their lot, so you can never have that kind of large-scale mass retail. We could never offer large buildings, because we don't have large buildings, and we'd have to tear down what we're trying to keep to build them. That's why residential's got to be the key, and retail would follow.

Parking, compared to other places that I'm at everyday or traveling around, our downtown parking is probably the worst. Carthage, of course, has the courthouse in the middle of the Square, but it's never an issue to find a parking spot.

They probably don't let their employees park there.

That's the key.

I remember when I first got into Carthage square, I thought, "Is everything closed?" because there wasn't any traffic. It's a problem to park in the Square.

Not on a day when the courthouse is closed.

We have all sorts of off-Square parking...

(many people talking at once.)

If we're going to put the residential down here, though, that's going to take that much more parking.

I think the residential, as it's developed, they're going to have to help to supply parking. With the Burger Block, they did. They built parking on the back side. I just think you hit the nail on the head. One thing that has to happen, that should have happened 40 years ago, is to develop off-Square parking for county employees.

Or even our employees. If they have to walk a block—there's no reason they cannot utilize the parking lots for them rather than our bank lots.

There are several that are within a block.

It's not that the spaces aren't there. We just need to get them utilized appropriately.

I think that's going to be something we're going to have to address. I know we've tried it before. Once they had A-M on certain days, but people forgot.

I'd like to list this issue under "Duh!"

There are some ladies that work at the courthouse that park in front of her business everyday. What do you do about that?

There's someone who's trying to survive off of walk-in traffic, and there's someone who has a monthly salary and is hurting that person who's trying to survive. That will stifle even a niche business from not developing within the area we're wanting them to develop in.

The other thing Carthage has is parking regulation. They mark your tires and you get two hours. We don't have any parking control at all.

We used to.

We should give them county employees stickers that they have to put in their windows, and there shouldn't be anyone parked on the Square with those stickers.

(many people talking at once.)

Because economic activity is what's going to create taxes and keep their salaries paid.

If you've got to cruise the Square three times trying to find a place, and you're in a hurry to buy one specific thing, after the third time, you're going to go. You're not going to...that's just going to be too much.

It's not that it can't be done. It's that, for some reason, nobody wants to accept any flack.

You yourself have a parking lot for your company.

And do you have problems with other people using it?

No. And I made a deal with the city that after-hours, they can use it for the auditorium. And that's worked well.

Moderator: So why did you choose to locate your business or property downtown?

My decision was made 100 years ago.

(laughter.)

I wanted to be part of the downtown area. I truly did. I looked until I found a building I could afford.

And that's probably why we bought the other ones.

(unintelligible talking.)

And now it is something, and to me it's valuable.

I think we looked for, we drove the alleys for weeks deciding which building we wanted, because we wanted that lifestyle, the freedom of not having a yard, because we lived on 6 acres and were spending all of our time on maintenance. We like to travel. This offered us...

And I hope that somebody else will be just as stupid, and so far there have been a lot of other stupid people!

(laughter.)

It's an opportunity. You can come here at reasonable cost and buy a building, and they've done a lot themselves to get those buildings fixed up, and improved the value of those buildings, and so they've seen the opportunity down here with properties that were run-down, and we want to continue to attract that kind of interest to do that.

Moderator: Other than parking, from what you hear from your customers, how user-friendly is downtown? Business hours, navigation?

There's not much down here. Just walk around the Square and do a survey, but if you're trying to do shopping, there's not that much. There's a host of flea market places, a discount clothing place that because of its business model does pretty well, a couple of niche gift shops and niche food. There's really not that much downtown. I don't think we have the critical mass that those issues are there yet. If we were a true shopping area, I think the hours would be a problem. But it's not really much of a retail draw right now. This is an 8 to 5 downtown. You come down here for the license bureau or government services or attorneys. Most of the businesses close in the middle of the afternoon on Saturdays.

Is there anything even open past 3?

No. And we've got title companies...people come in here for that. And the banks.

You talked about difficulties—it's difficult to tell somebody how to get downtown. I still can't tell somebody very well how to get to the boulevard, or...

You can't tell people how to get anywhere in town.

There's one through street in town...

Once we build the overpass, we'll have a second.

And it goes north and south, so if you want to go east-west...

That's true.

And if you're a stranger, it's hard to get out.

That's all true if you're a stranger, but if you live in town, it is for whatever reason, it's the center of the east-west axis of town. The most important streets that go to the east and west run through the Square, and so it has more traffic than you would think it ought to have. That's just, I think, it's just a lucky thing.

They run through the Square...

(side conversation.)

I do think there's a real potential for downtown if it has the right services and retail, to help do things for people who live on the east side of town, where it's not as convenient to get out to the stuff on the west side of town. You drive through or around town to get out there, and I think that's a market that downtown businesses...you know, people are, if you had a good solution that's a lot closer and easier to get out of, they'd do it. That's one of the things about T.H. Rogers, is you can just pop in and out. I don't think those services exist today, but if I were building businesses and market, I would market very heavily to the east side of Neosho, because it's just more convenient for them. Somebody out west, you have to drive past a lot of retail to get downtown, whereas somebody from the east...

One store that I miss downtown is True Value. I mean, if they didn't have it, I didn't need it.

There was a day in town where they didn't even need everything there.

I can remember, they had a ladder in the back, and you walked down into a dirt-style basement, and they had stuff down there too.

(side conversation.)

Moderator: About marketing, what is done to promote downtown?

I guess, my question would be, what are we going to promote?

Like Mike said, there's not much down here to promote.

Each individual business has tried their own thought pattern at promotion.

Now, we did form a committee that was to try to hold events down here to draw people down, but then the committee was not made up of retailers, and our thought process was we get the people here and you get them into your store, and it's your responsibility to market to them, and we just did not have any cooperation on the retail side.

I think the more events that can be held downtown, the better our downtown area will be.

And that's part and parcel with fixing the auditorium and getting more friendly and easier.

The lady that rents from us, the coffee shop, one of her best days is the Christmas parade. Hundreds of people downtown.

Something that's helped downtown is the library. The library was not very widely used at another location, and it was moved here, and it's a better location and a better building, and it improved. The library has, in my opinion, an unqualified success story, and it's just limited by its physical scale. If it were 2 or 3 times the size, that I have no question, that would just be another big thing for downtown. The demand surely seems to be there.

It's growing. The increased usage over the past two years...we don't have meeting rooms or studying rooms, we don't have space for children's services...we're so limited in what we can do right now.

(many people talking at once.)

I think that everybody in town would tell you it's an unqualified success, but the question is how can they allow it to grow? Because that's a pretty modest-sized structure.

It's pretty small. And it's actually a county library, not just a city library. Looking at numbers, it should easily be 3 times the size it is to meet minimum standards for service for that size population.

That was one thing that was disappointing when we moved back here...we were living in Muskogee, which was the county seat also, and the kids went to the library like twice a week, and I came here. The books were beyond...that was one of the first projects we did when we got here, was put a lot of money in the children's section, and I would hope we have other people help out.

(many people talking at once.)

We're out of space. We have to take something out.

It has been a real success. It gets the people being more active.

Libraries are important. They're important for economic development.

It's an area to take your children.

Moderator: As we talked about earlier, the point of the DREAM project research is to come up with a master plan for downtown. What do you think should be in that plan? Let's start with the basics. Toss some ideas out, and let's start with: what are the kinds of businesses you'd like to see downtown?

(jokes, side conversations.)

I would like to see it be specialty. I think our buildings aren't meant to hold anything bigger anyway. I think if we stay with the specialty businesses, which even our current services are, I think that's what I would want to see.

And maybe it will be an event or adventure to go downtown, to these specialty places.

What do you have in mind by "specialty"? You can have one or two gift shops...

...and that's probably enough...

What kind of shops do you have in mind?

I think the flea markets...I'm not crazy about them, but I think they do very good business. I run into a lot of people in Carthage and all that who come to Neosho on the weekend to shop at flea markets. People from Joplin and Carthage...

You can have specialty home décor as well, specialty apparel, but I'll tell you, one of the things you're going to have is food. Food's going to drive an awful lot. I'll give you an example... Tammy and I really noticed something over the weekend. We were at the Pinnacle mall at Rogers, which is a big development, a lot of big stores...it hasn't been drawing real well at this point, and one thing we noticed was that there's very little food service there. You guys say you like to have dinner, and it takes all of that to make it work. They have a real problem right now, because I'm not sure food isn't a bigger draw than shopping. Think about when were kids, a lot of people would go window-shopping after dinner.

And to walk.

(many people talking at once.)

It would be easy to have modest-scale restaurants and all that. I consider all those as “specialty.” The food, the apparel, the décor, the gift, all those things.

Nothing’s open in the evening now, and people have double-income families.

We need a coffee shop, a Starbucks or something, and more specialty to bring in even the younger...we have a generation out there...

You’re right. The ones that have opened downtown and been successful, they draw business during the day, they just don’t want to open at night. Café Angelica’s an example. He does well at night when he opens at night, but he’s too busy. I’m not sure they think it’s worth the extra effort. Grotto was another example. It’s not that it won’t work. But as I said earlier, you really do need a critical mass of places to make it work. If there were 3 real good places downtown, they’d all be much more successful. You’d have people get in their car and go to the Square...if there’s enough things there.

If you think about it, the malls aren’t what’s making money anymore, it’s those strip centers like the landing in Branson. We have the perfect opportunity to supply that. We’ve got it down here, and the facilities are the right size.

And parking’s not an issue at night. There’s tons of parking at night. You’ve got to get the right people to make it happen, though. I think a lot of this is a critical mass thing, but if you add 60 housing units downtown here or so, and you could fill those up, you’ve got 120 to 180 people living at that point to add to everything, and then you don’t need that many driving in. You’d get a few driving in, a few local...that’s why I’m glad that residential’s such a key part of what’s going on.

If you added—to bring in a specialty, say, clothing store, that’s something that we don’t have, and I don’t think one would survive. Would the citizens give that extra money, because they don’t have to drive? Because they can’t, somebody who’s a specialty shop that would carry something is going to be a little pricier.

There’s a lot of ways you can make this happen. Let’s say you get everything remodeled, and there are buildings out there that can afford to give somebody subsidized rent for the first two or three years, they’ll be over that hurdle. If all of a sudden, you have to make \$1500 a month to keep going, that’s a hurdle, but if you have to make \$500 a month, that’ll give you time to build your clientele. I personally think retail comes after a lot of other things are done...I think you’ve got to get the residential thing down and everything else in line, too. Retail’s probably the hardest thing to get done. I do think that if you look at other towns our size, if you have good entrepreneurs down there that bring something different that you can’t just buy at Wal-Mart, you’ll have people come to shop.

I think you need to target certain age groups too. I think there's 20-30 that have a lot of disposable income. Between probably 16 and 30. That's what I see, anyway. I don't remember us having that kind of income, but they seem to.

And the pool halls are gone.

(laughter.)

When I was talking about dress shops a minute ago...there were 5 down here in the 70's.

(many people talking at once.)

People would come in here to go to Tres Chic.

And that was in the 70's when there was 5. That was before Wal-Mart.

Then you're getting into...the thing about Wal-Mart is that you're competing for people's time, and Wal-Mart's fast. You get your groceries and you get your other stuff.

That's when you're shopping for everyday essential. We're talking about new stuff down here. (unintelligible). We're never going to have Wal-Mart-type business down here, but we can have other stuff. Especially if we have this core of people living down here...

But they need a reason to be down here, because they don't have time.

Moderator: What about the aesthetics of downtown? Streets, etc.?

I think all the utilities need to be underground.

You're asking for a lot.

We're dreaming big. It's called a DREAM city. I think utilities overhead look tacky.

And the ones that have been done have made a big difference.

We all know, there's a lot being done now. I think in a year or 18 months, the Square is going to look a lot different. It should be very very nice.

It's already moving its way off the Square to Spring Street. It's going to look pretty good.

And talking about sidewalks, and on other side streets...it's gotta emanate off the Square. It can't just stop there.

Some of the significant improvements that need to be made and could be made easily are some of these curbs that are falling apart, a couple up at the hospital. They're not only dangerous, they look bad, and those could be fixed inexpensively by the city. We're not getting with it and fixing some of the curbs that have deteriorated or the driveways at the corners, and we need to do that.

We're very fortunate that J.R. sits on, we actually have a historical commission, and we've actually adopted a set of ordinances that will help us in very small areas—we started small at this point. So I think the aesthetic downtown is going to begin to happen. If you look at all the people who've done renovations these past years, they've tried to do the right thing, and I think we have a tool that will help us ensure that that's what we grow and build on there. But I do think that's an essential part of downtown. There has to be...we need all these things to be different than a Wal-Mart or any strip center, so we have to build all those differences up, and I think the aesthetics are a big one. I also thing we have to try to make downtown as foot-friendly and bicycle-friendly as we can, because you're going to encourage a walking culture that will spend more time. Those are the types of things we're going to have to take into account as we plan for the future.

And shop windows.

You remember Bertram (name unintelligible). He always had a setup in there with lights and things, and it was always interesting to drive by at night and see. He's unique in his own way, but he can set up...

(many people talking at once.)

The other thing that, since we've had a change in city management, we've been working on is code enforcement on accesses to downtown. You have a lot of places where you've had junk cars and junk in the yard, and we just need to force the codes and clean up the junk. And we need to be especially attuned to those areas that are accesses to downtown. A lot of work is being done and has been done in the last 9 months, and that needs to continue.

I agree. From the court all the way from down needs to look good, Spring Street needs to look good, coming in from the east is the same. I think we need to do anything we can to encourage traffic from the east coming downtown.

Cleaned up, and the place is looking nice, the more likely it is...

You know how bad the building we just bought is, and we haven't done anything yet. It's bad. We got a letter that we were out of code in our building because we didn't have our address on the building in 3-inch letters. And that was the only violation! That's a minor violation!

(laughter.)

It's just, we're not paying attention to the important things.

I think one of the other things, we've bought some properties down here...

(side conversations.)

You know, the one thing we've got to make sure is for people like us to make that kind of investment, there are certain things we can't do. One of the things that made us go, "Oh my gosh, what's that going to cost?" is sidewalks. We don't own the sidewalk, but it's my understanding that we have to pay for the sidewalks. I have an issue with that.

We've all paid for ours.

I think that limits the number of people who can make investments in the downtown market.

But that's a one-time shot, we hope.

And they've really made it financially easy, because you only have to pay 30% and it's a tax deduction.

But it will deter people.

It's a financial hurdle. What's going to happen that everyone that comes after you's going to benefit from it.

But it is something that I think some people will go, "Oh gosh, that's a big investment." I'm hoping with the DREAM city that some of those things we hit will have somewhere down the road, that we'll have some help in figuring out how to go at these things.

The other part is the money for the municipal auditorium. It's got to be renovated. We used to have a number of meeting rooms downtown that were utilized a lot, and most are gone. The bank, the library, they're all gone. If we get the auditorium in with more meeting rooms, work on the parking, renovate that whole facility, that'll help draw people in.

I think long-term, it can help for Morris Park to be continued to be developed.

The park needs quite a bit.

(many people talking at once.)

I think there are a lot of issues in the park right now...

The bathrooms have been an issue for a long time.

It needs a major investment, but it's being used, and I'm really not sure it's being used as much as 4 or 5 years ago. There's some real wear issues that need to be dealt with. But when they do use it, it has hosted more weddings than ever before, and there's a lot of good things there, but it's a mixed bag.

It's a beautiful little park.

It needs some attention. It needs to be on our list to renovate. The best thing that ever happened to it was the ice storm, because of the cleanup.

And we got the hillside cleaned up.

(side conversation.)

Moderator: What are some things that the city could do to help your business or your property? You've talked about sidewalks, but what else?

Sidewalks. Pave my parking lot.

What they could do, they could do sidewalks and curbs, they could do municipal auditorium improvement. They also need to...for a lot of reasons, it would help downtown...they need to look at a place (unintelligible, many people talking at once.) You put up a new building downtown, and I don't want to see it go anywhere else.

I want to see us put the banners on the poles we paid for.

I'd like to see those banners to change regularly.

We only have one set, but we can't even get them up.

We need a really firm plan at this point. The Square, a huge part of the Square's going to be done, in the next 18 to 24 months. I think we need to then be looking at how we market them, and how we make it more friendly to host events. I'll give you an example. Whenever we get ready to host the Christmas parade or anything like that, and they want to do singing, they always have to bring a trailer in to drop it down there. We should be able to go on the east side of the courthouse and build a little level—I won't call it a stage—but you know, we've got a walking level up there. Let's go ahead and put a concrete surface on there, and you can always have shows up there. That would be a very natural thing to do. People are going to use it.

And actually put electricity out there that's going to be needed.

When they go to set up, then.

(many people talking at once.)

Those big panels there already, those are outlets.

We've already addressed one of the big issues, which is drainage. The new drainage system...

Now, I think we need to look at more on the east side of the Square, but that did make a big difference.

It's made a huge difference.

(many people talking at once.)

As we develop the auditorium (unintelligible, many side conversations.) parking plan...if you're going to end up having 1000 people downtown, you do need to make sure that you got parking down there. And to me, there's a fairly obvious thing.

Empty church west of there isn't going to be...you know, churches aren't very usable buildings.

They've had a hard time trying to sell it, and when you go into the school and talk to them about heat and A/C, they've found out that's almost impossible.

It'll make a great parking lot. Otherwise, it's just going to be another empty building.

Does that church have any aesthetic value?

No. You know what it looks like. It's 50's, 60's. I grew up with it, but it's—the church that was in the parking lot to the south of it that was torn down was a much prettier church. I don't think there's a big aesthetic there at all. I think it's use as a parking lot would be much stronger.

That's a problem. We see this whenever people move out to bigger churches. There's one big opening there, and they just don't work...they'll work for a library, but not very well. But regardless of how they address it, the parking thoroughly needs to be address, because if people come down for events and park two blocks away in the rain, they're going to have issues.

For a social center event like the auditorium should be, you got to have adjacent parking right there. You can't have it off and away where people have to hunt for it, or else people will come a time or two, but they'll get burned and not come back.

Right now, if you want to have an event of any size in the daytime, you'd be totally locked out because all that parking's spoken for. You just need to develop a parking plan.

One of the things that came up on the comprehensive plan was to have trolley service available for downtown events, and then they came back around and said "no, we really want a walking downtown." That's great and fine and dandy if it's not raining, but...

You need both. One's event-oriented, and the other's lifestyle-oriented. By the way, the walking's started downtown. We've got quite a cadre of walkers downtown. We need to do both those things.

I think with the Shaker building being bought, that's going to take care of that side of town.

I think Twin Rivers needs to move south, because...

We have a reasonably-sized poultry processing plant a block from the Square.

It's needs to be an industrial park.

It could be worse.

(laughter.)

The odor is not bad like it was 10 years ago.

But still, if you want Morris Park to balloon and downtown to balloon...

It needs to go.

(many people talking at once. Side conversation.)

Moderator: I have one more question. I've heard some talk about a special business district that might use an additional sales tax that would go directly to revitalizing downtown. Is that something you would be interested in?

(mumbling from everyone.)

Not in the whole city? Just that district?

Moderator: To my knowledge, yes.

Not going to raise much money down there.

There's mainly service...

And the shops that are down here, you're penalizing them for being down here.

We're reaching that tipping point with sales tax that we should raise sales tax for a while. We've done a good job getting things done with the sales tax, and everything has a limit, and I think we're pushing that limit right now... (mumbling, unintelligible.) I think we need to build it first before we can...

(side conversations, laughter.)

I think there's only a certain amount that you can put on the district. You're discouraging people from coming in.

I think the other thing that has to happen is that the historical preservation committee, and they may be working on this, has got to have options for people that are affordable so that it's not too expensive to do historic renovation. They should say, here's some options for you in brick or in colors and panels that are as reasonably priced as metal siding. I think everybody's got to keep in mind that as we do this preservation, if we really want it to happen, the cost of it can't drive people away.

Does that group have power to stop you from doing certain things? I thought it was just an advisory.

It's an advisory. There's been some misconception that there was more than advisory, but it's truly advisory. What happens is, you want to do a specific thing to your building, what's supposed to happen is if it's to the front or side that faces the street, you're supposed to fill out what you're wanting to do, turn it into the city, the city brings it to the historical commission, and we review it, either in front of you or not, and then we can give recommendations to you or to the city, but it's up to the city what they want to do. If they want to tell you no...

Basically, I think you have to have a building permit even to paint downtown. That being the case, the city can actually stop the process.

But we can make recommendations to the city. It's up to the city what the city wants to do.

I think they're going to get more stringent on building permits.

I think that's a long-term goal.

(many people talking at once.)

Once you (unintelligible) about having cost diversity for choice, we ran into that...they took the façade off and found that there was little or none there, and they had a complete plan already in action, and CBMT did a tremendous thing. They went back with visiting the historical commission and they went back and redesigned that one façade there when the training center or whatever it is called, and they stepped to the plate, and they did a tremendous job. I thought that was far and beyond, because they already had a budget and plans, and in my opinion, that would've been tough to not go forward.

I think we have been very lucky that in the initial few years of this, people have all had the right attitude towards it. There were a lot more cost efficient ways to do what (name unintelligible) did.

That's a good example of a specialty store.

And it was a nice mix what they came back with, with the architect.

(side conversations.)

Moderator: Thank you.

SECTION III

CITY OFFICIALS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Jeff Wernicke, Neosho City Council.

Debbie Wernicke, business owner on Neosho Square.

Nikki Dexter, city human resource director.

Kim Messer, planning technician for the city.

Shanna Meadows, I'm in accounting.

Shawna Griffin, I'm the director of the Chamber of Commerce.

Pat Johnson.

Gib Gerrol, director of economic development.

Rudy Carver, chairman of Community Bank & Trust.

Warren Langland, local business owner and also on the city council.

Moderator: If you were describing this area to someone from out of town who is thinking of moving here, how would you describe Neosho?

Very historic community.

Friendly.

Good place to raise a family.

We have a good school system.

It really is a safe community. You have a good sense of well-being here.

Moderator: Would you say things are moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

Right direction.

Right direction.

Moderator: What kinds of good things are going on in the city?

I think we actively pursue ways to increase our business, our attractions and businesses and jobs, and that's (unintelligible).

We take a proactive stance on planning, which I think is good.

From a tourism aspect, because we have the visitor's center and the George Washington Carver visitor's center, and that's good.

Probably one unique thing that's happened in the last four or five years is we started to look at different ways to promote the area other than just the historic aspect. In the past, we've always looked for what the standard was, and we're kind of branching out into different objectives and trying to promote the golf course more, different things that appeal to business people, not just what appeals to people who live here.

Moderator: What are the main shopping areas in town for area residents? Where do people go to get their everyday household items?

Wal-Mart.

(Laughter.)

Moderator: Is that in Neosho, or is that in a surrounding area?

Southwest Neosho.

There's, you have the Square that has limited unique shops, then you have the boulevard that has all of basically fast food and some of that, and the new supercenter has (unintelligible).

Moderator: Is the shopping in Neosho a draw from surrounding areas as well as the town itself?

It's increasing on the Square. We're starting to get a lot more on the Square from Arkansas and Carthage area...

I don't know about now, but I have a study from 2003 that says that only 43% of money in Neosho stays in Neosho.

Moderator: What about dining and entertainment options? What are popular options here in Neosho?

We have a lot of fast food and a little evening more formal, more...

Yeah

We have a movie theater now.

Moderator: Where do you take people when they come to visit from out of town?

George Washington Carver.

Big Spring Park.

That's the problem. When you're real vocal as far as the natural beauty of the town, people are drawn to Big Spring Park. People come from Tulsa. You go into a store in Tulsa, and they'll know where you're from, and they'll know Big Spring Park, and it's just off downtown.

The north area of town. (unintelligible.)

The question is a little confusing. Where do you take them to do what?

Moderator: It was meant as a general question. Whether it's dining or entertainment or tourist attractions...I'm curious as to what the attractions are in town.

You take them to the golf course, because we have a very nice facility there.

For exercise, you take them to walk.

Well, we have some really good walking trails, too.

You bring someone in from out of town, a relative, chances are you'll end up in Joplin sometime during that day. You show them the natural beauty, you can go out and play golf, but you'll probably end up in Joplin. There's that gap in that whole experience of the town. There's always something we're needing to go to Joplin for. Like home projects you're doing on Sunday, chances are you'll end up at Lowe's or Home Depot in Joplin. That's what we're missing is that complete connect where people just think of this...

If they come in from a distance or from another city, you might end up even as far as Branson, if they're from an area that has a lot of things.

Moderator: Let's talk specifically about downtown. Do you feel the downtown area is moving in the right direction or wrong direction?

Right direction.

I think that you can tell that by the private investment.

Moderator: Any other things you would point to about why downtown is moving in the right direction?

I think just the revitalization, what we're doing downtown, has helped a lot. The biggest thing that's hurting us now downtown is getting directions, directing people downtown. Neosho's not the easiest town to go around in, but there's no directions to the Square. I think that's probably the biggest downfall right now.

And they even took down the arrow to Nino's.

(many people talking at once.)

I think, too, some of the signs that say "to downtown" go a certain distance, and then you kind of go... "what?"

That's what we need to focus on is to get people down there. The investment, the personal interest in downtown, it's a great investment. It's definitely changing. Now, if people could find it easily...

I don't think for, I mean, it depends on business, but I don't think we're at the point where you put a business on the Square and it's successful because it's there. Without some corporate business, what I call business of the back door, those front-door businesses are having a hard time surviving. That's not to say we're heading on the wrong direction, it's just to say that we've been on life support with the courthouse for so long that people don't see it as a business area, they see it as a courthouse area with a few shops... (unintelligible.)...

We have a hometown motel. We had a planning session, and the number one priority that came out of that is the signage for not only the downtown but around it, so we're wanting the DREAM consultants to tell us what signs and where. We're not going to do anything until someone from our, professional consulting, tells us what direction to go and how to design it...theme, size, all those things.

(unintelligible, side conversation.) ... People come from out of town and they don't see em.

If you find the signs, you're usually lost already.

(laughter.)

That's right, though. We don't have any single well-established, well-marked corridor to get from Highway 86 or 71 to downtown. In fact, I was talking with (name unintelligible), who is taking over the management, and he said that, he didn't know that there was a downtown. He's from Dallas, and had been up here a number of times, and he said "about two weeks ago, I discovered downtown Neosho."

(many people talking at once.)

I don't think that's uncommon. You look at Branson, and there's been a disconnect there for years from the downtown and the music center.

And if they leave the Wal-Mart area from that area, they end up on the boulevard and into downtown.

She was making some postcards and trying to get directions that, the directions that she was given to put on there were "find your way to the downtown Square."

And we tried to create direction, and you'd have to have a postcard this big, to tell you turn here, turn here, turn here, so you can't get there from here unless...

Moderator: Well, aside from the signage issue, how user-friendly is downtown? Are business hours convenient, is parking convenient?

Parking is an issue.

Courthouse...people that work for the courthouse just always park wherever they want to in the Square, and it's kind of an issue when people come down.

Nobody wants to say it, but we need two-hour parking and it needs to be enforced.

It's not just the courthouse. If you look around, people who work down here park right in front of other people's shops, and those parking places are very valuable to the merchant who is behind that spot.

I think we need a wider variety of shopping...we're beginning to see a wider variety, but maybe a wider variety of hours too, whether that means weekends or evenings. People might come here for the day, and there's nothing to keep them through the whole day through the evening, to make them stay here all night. If there were enough things to do here, they wouldn't have to go stay in Joplin for the night.

The niche that the downtown can someday fulfill, the last 20 or 25 years, I've been on the periphery of professional artist and craftsman type guild stuff, and there is a demand for a place where a craftsman or an artist can have a shop downstairs, live close by, even if it's the loft upstairs, and use that as their sales base while they travel from show to

show. Some communities have done that successfully. What keeps us from marketing to that clientele, because of our geographic location, just as it's good for production it's good for those craft people, and that's something that Wal-Mart can't replace. I know that the demand's out there, but how do you get those people to come here.

I think we're doing the right thing by adding housing downtown. I think once we do that, too, though, we need a little family market type thing a little closer to the Square so they have a place to go and shop and stuff like that. I think that's, they all have to go to Wal-Mart.

(noise, phone...unintelligible.) ...a wider variety. You get a more diverse group of people in downtown, with different cultural ideas and... (unintelligible.)

The trick will be getting that critical mass of people coming, and new people with ideas.

I know the merchant group has discussed doing night hours or longer weekend hours, but crowd's just not here, and it's just really hard to make that commitment. You've taken away that family time from them. I know a lot of them, we do sales and things, and stay open longer...a lot of the evenings we'll stay open longer. I know we've been looking at that, but just trying to get people down here into the shops has been an issue.

Now, what about Sundays, because we have four or five churches within walking distance of the Square open every Sunday...

A lot of those people, I believe, are your antique shoppers, and we haven't been able to get the antique owners into our meetings. They don't want to show up, participate in advertising, they kind of want to do their own thing, so it's been really difficult to try to change some hours or add some hours.

I would think that Sunday afternoon, you might have more traffic than evening. If somehow that could be...

I'm up for any suggestions. I'm part of the downtown merchant group, and I don't know...

It's hard to not have your day off, I know.

Not so much that...I just, it's very hard for people to let go of any advertising dollars down there.

I was just thinking, though, because it is so dead at night, that you might have more people moving around on Sunday afternoon. To tie into what you had said...

We need to draw them in on the evenings and weekends, to keep them here and entertain them and make them want to stay.

I think it's true, I think it needs to be destination-oriented. Something along those lines... (unintelligible.) Something to cause people to come downtown. They're not going to come just because you have merchants downtown.

To lead into that, I think probably the park, granted that it only comes into play when the weather's nice, but you don't have to have a lot of man hours into having a nice park, and you can market that to people, and you might have people that want to go shopping. Just hanging a sign out there saying you're open on Sunday won't work—people won't come to one or two shops on Sunday, unless they're specifically wanting something. Antique shopping...antique shoppers want antiques. They don't go around shop to shop. They look for antique shops and then they leave the area. They've got a lot of publications that list the antique shops in different areas. They may be going to four or five communities. They go in, they look for antiques, and they get out. But the park is a nice, you know, full-time open area that you don't have to have the man power, that might draw them. We have nobody capitalize on that natural beauty, Big Spring Park. And I think the auditorium might bring people who might hang out in the park and go see a show.

I think that downtown dining has a lot to do with all of that...

We've had eating establishments that have tried to do it themselves, and it's almost like bricks in a wall...you can't just have one brick. It almost takes all of those together to make it work.

(unintelligible...) It's a matter of what's the niche, what's the draw.

I think that's the same thing we talk about, it's the reasons we studied for years and the reason we did the auditorium...not only does it need to restore the auditorium, it needs to have a full-time person to promote the Square, and we never had the revenue, and we learned years ago...it wasn't to have a sale, Kohl's has a sale every week...so it's about having events. You get a crowd on the Square and they learn that, my goodness, my sister brings people from Tulsa, and they just love these flea markets on the Square, and the prices are totally different than anything around Tulsa, but that's a limited amount, but it's an example of telling this story, it's like you guys are doing the fall thing with kids back to school, and it's just a matter of, it's that same thing with retail...we talk to Applebee's and all them, and they say you've got to have more population to support that whole thing, and you have that same thing when you say "we need a market on the square" but until we get the population living there...we know some of those things, and hopefully what we're doing moves us in the right direction, but I think a lot of it has to do with us telling our story. It's like anything you read in the city council, and every meeting they talk about it and they take a vote, and everybody's like, "I didn't know that." And it was in the paper or on the radio for weeks, but people just don't...how do you get that presence for people?

I think this community has poor communication skills in the population in general. Coming here from a big city, I knew everything that was going on all the time because it was in my face. And here I see it after it on the 10:00 news, and I think "I would have went there!" I think it's just a lack of communication, getting the information out.

Moderator: That actually leads into my next question. How do people get information about what's going on downtown?

One newspaper, one radio station.

They either don't get the paper or they don't listen to the radio.

(many people talking at once.)

If I didn't listen to the radio...

And it's not that they don't give press releases and everything, but...

That's one thing Van's done since he's been here is to create a press release for the city so at least that information is available to people in the community, as far as the city's duty, but I don't think we have that throughout as far as merchants and from all facets...they are press releases, and they are at the discretion of the media what they decide to choose, but at least that information is provided to them. I think that if the paper didn't happen to be at the spot at the time, it just didn't happen, historically. And if it's not communicated, it really didn't happen. But I think we still have a long way to go, and I think web-based information is probably key to that, and if people come to where they have a homepage they can rely on for this community, I think that will help, because that's the population we're dealing with. It's changing. You want to know the weather, you go to the Internet. You don't wait for the weather channel to tell you.

Another thing I think that we already touched on is, we're talking about marketing this town to other people. I think we have a big job with marketing this town to this town. There are people who've lived here 2 or 3 years, and they've never been downtown. They don't know anything about what's down here, so there's no reason for them to come down here. It's not just outside that we need to market. We need to make sure that people here learn.

Moderator: What are the other reasons that people come downtown, other than courthouse business and antiques?

Court.

Attorneys.

License bureau.

(many people talking at once.)

The library.

Yeah.

(many people agreeing.)

Chamber's downtown.

You know, earlier, we were talking about communication, and I think that we have cable in town, and you know, I don't have cable, I could get cable, but I just don't like what I see on cable so I have satellite, and there are functions with satellite that you can't do with cable, but it would seem to me that if you could create a more user-...instead of just getting what they offer, because larger communities have nicer cable, I mean, they have channels for, I was at my sister's house in Wichita, and the school district had a channel and the county and the city, and all that information that we were talking about, you could just...I think what sparked that is when you said when you want to see what the weather's doing, you get on the Internet...well, if you're not in front of the computer, you're in front of the TV...but I think it has to be, it can't be what we have now, which is a few, and they're all good channels, but now with DVRs, and people like that stuff, you can get that in cable, you just can't get it here.

Another thing we can probably capitalize on is the Merritt Center, which is kind of a hub for development and education on solar energy and alternative energy sources, and that will be based right here in town, so it's something I think the city and the community could probably grab a hold of and kind of ride along with, because I think there will be a lot of press and a lot of...that's something unique for a town this size to have that kind of technology in town, and if you have something like that out south of town, and you come find 1970's lighting and things in the downtown...I think we ought to harness that technology a little bit and put it in our community, not just have it in a building south of town. That's something that's completely unique to our town that we haven't capitalized on.

I think another thing we haven't capitalized on is we have Camp Crowder up here, and there's 60,000 troops that come through there every year...if we could just get them to come a little further north while they're here...

And if there were directions...they know how to get to Camp Crowder, but...I easily get 5 to 10 people asking for directions to Camp Crowder or the College...

Moderator: I know we've been talking about this as we go along, but let's talk specifically about the future of downtown and the direction you'd like to see it go. What additional businesses would you like to see in the downtown area?

Dining.

Specifically, I'd like to see an upscale sandwich shop, because I think people want in-and-out food, because if you're working at City Hall on a weekday, you've got Angelina's that closes at 2:00 and what else...? That's pretty much it...

Charlie's grill.

The last time I went to Sam's Cellar...it's good.

We need more of that.

I think Janet hit it on the head, kind of a craftsman, I think around here people think a craftsman...a blacksmith shop or something. Something that's made on site or in the community, people are drawn to that because it's so unusual to find anything made in the US, let alone in your town or community. I think if we've got hand-crafted things, it would be a real draw.

A coffee shop.

(many people talking at once.)

I've heard people coming to the shop wanting more upscale-type clothing places, too. Not your Wal-Mart, but something...

That's pretty hard for clothing people to do in upscale towns.

Entertainment...we need entertainment.

A pool hall.

We did forget to mention our miniature golf course...it's pretty nice. It's an upscale...

Batting cages.

(laughter, many people talking at once.)

We also need a path from the downtown to the parks, where there's stores or places for people to gather along the way so that there's kind of an actual path to lead them from one place to the other. You could easily come here for downtown and not know about the parks, or vice versa.

As a new person in town—I've only lived here about a year—I noticed the entire area changes as soon as the weather turns. I've always lived in warm areas, but you start seeing people out and about, where were they all winter?

(many people talking at once, laughter.)

And the beauty of downtown is that it has these beautiful, wide sidewalks...

I think the sidewalk issue is important. In the old part of town, there are sidewalks, and the further south you get, they just disappear.

I think everywhere I've lived, the newer the development, the less likely there is to be a sidewalk, and I'm not sure why.

It is something that came out...people wanted more sidewalks. (unintelligible...)

I think it creates a community where they're willing to go out and see what's there, more willing to hop on their bike or take a stroller and go down the street, rather than risking being on the road.

That's another thing that's been mentioned, but a corridor between the YMCA and the Crowder area to the downtown, you've got a college crowd there, and you've got the Crowder people coming in, but we need a pedestrian corridor where you can get from there to here, because it's nearly impossible as a pedestrian. It would be dangerous right now to ride a bike from Crowder College to downtown. We have lots of trails already established, but we need some pedestrian paths.

And with the communication...Janet does a great job with the weekly (noise, unintelligible.) That can be a very effective tool, I think. If it's done on a more frequent basis... I think a wide variety...the Internet's going to be more effective for more people...

Moderator: What about the look and feel of downtown? Do you think there needs to be improvements made in terms of street repair, landscaping, green space? What are the key areas?

We need a stream into downtown.

(many people talking at once. Laughter.)

You know, I've thought that so many times, that wherever there's flowing water, there's activity. And it doesn't need to be a lot of flowing water. There's a lot of truth to that...

I think downtown's looking a lot better as far as the sidewalks...I think we need to get rid of the electric wires and all of that (unintelligible.)

Several people have come to me and want to see banners hanging from the lights. Not just downtown, but they also want it on the boulevard.

I get a lot of complaints about side streets. People say it's dangerous trying to get on the Square because you can't see.

Going with that, it's important that people know which direction to go. I don't know how many times I've come downtown where people are going the opposite way.

I've seen that too.

The only problem is that takes away from things to watch!

(Laughter. Many people talking at once.)

And really, there's nothing on the pavement or around that's very obvious that would say, "you need to go this direction."

The city's going to spend close to a million dollars on the streets, and it's going to be really helpful. I think people are going to see progress on the streets, and they'll come down here... (unintelligible.)

There are any entrances to downtown, so if they did get here, they wouldn't know how to get downtown anywhere. There needs to be roundabouts or fountains or something at the entrances.

I think fixing will help tremendously. I know when I have people come in from out of town, they're afraid they're going to lose their cars. They're like, "Wow, these roads are really bad." I think nice roads will help people want to stay here and tootle around town and try to see what Neosho has to offer.

There are certain areas around the downtown area that are rental property, and we have basically no rental codes, and so many of these properties are relatively ill-maintained and overpopulated for the condition of the house, and this does not lead to desirable results in the downtown itself.

Moderator: What about the general condition of buildings in the downtown? Are there particular buildings or areas that need improvement, or have shown improvement?

It's spotty, but all in all, it's in pretty good condition.

Light years ahead of where we were just a few years ago. Light years.

We have some buildings that probably ought to be condemned as being unsafe. Particularly along Spring Street, there are a couple structures that I think are basically not inhabitable and I'm not sure they could be brought back.

And that's pretty much all the way down Spring Street, that's the worst. The other streets, most everything is all right.

I think that once you can see the potential of the Square because you have the projects going on, I think that people...we've seen in some of the bigger cities, St. Louis and stuff, they've over the years, we had residential areas around the Square, and over the years, as things moved out, they became rental property. I think we need a program that turns those pieces of property back into ownership, versus building more rental units because people moved out farther from the Square. In the cities we've seen some of the projects they've done, and that was their whole concept, to abating property taxes and doing things to bring people back down to live there with homeownership. I think that would change those pieces of property.

As recently as this morning, I've had this question. "I'm wanting to buy this building or start this business, and what can DREAM do for me?" I guess I'll just have to wait and find out, but knowing would be nice. What are my options to buy a building, or if I own a building, or if I want to start a business? That would be handy.

Moderator: What other downtowns would you say Neosho's is most like, and what downtowns have you seen that you would like Neosho's to resemble?

Probably Carthage.

(many people talking at once.)

They have a traditional Square-type downtown, and they were a few steps ahead of us as far as having some shops.

I think of Pinnacle Hills in Arkansas, they have a real downtown or main-street atmosphere. They have a wide variety of shops, not all high-end or low-end, a wide variety to bring different people. You could do that in any arena, or any atmosphere, with artists or culture, whatever you wanted to do that with. They had a wide variety to attract many different types of people, not just high-end shoppers or just one kind of shopper.

That's one thing...especially in big cities, a lot of times they're creating a downtown environment, they're creating what we've already got in place, and they've had dollars and dollars to make it look like what we already have but don't have the dollars to make

it what we want. It's kind of a backwards attack. We've got a lot of history, and we have to realize that people in cities really do crave this...they try to create it. There is a market for it, or else they wouldn't be building those subdivisions around the model of this.

I think one of the things, we had a weekend here when we had the Missouri Arts Council here, they talked about driving by and never noticing it, but if you can market the downtown as part of the town...(unintelligible). I think Cape Girardeau also has a thing, they have the wine-cheese on a Friday night, they go from shop to shop. Years ago, in the 80's, Jinx, Oklahoma had 80% vacancy on the Square, and they got the building owners to forgo the rent, but pay into a pool, and they just created themselves, and if you see the billboards, they say Jinx, Oklahoma, Antique Capital of Oklahoma. They just made it up. They got antique people to come from all over to go downtown. They created themselves. They were just down to nothing downtown, and I think that's one of the things, is we at some point are going to have to land on that. Cape Girardeau, Jinx, the idea of crafts may be that thing, but I think at some point hopefully we'll come up with some kind of theme thing that drives part of that. We have a lot of artists...

That's something we haven't touched on, but we want to bring murals to bring people and artists, not just tourists.

Asheville, North Carolina, does a very good job of bringing artists to their area, and at one time their downtown was suffering, and they've done a wonderful job of bringing people to the community from all walks of life. You go down there, and anyone can find something down there to buy.

I feel like people in Neosho, as taxpayers, if we're not telling the story, we're not having visitors. It's a town that's always welcomed visitors. We like visitors. People come here, and they say, "This is the friendliest town I've ever been to." It's really a different thing here, and it's the same with the volunteers in the community. There's a high percent of active volunteers. This is my seventh community I've lived in.

Jeff's right, it really is a great town, and you've got to sell it that way.

Those will be the hardest people, they know every nook and cranny, they know every brick and crack all around town, and those will be the hard sell.

(unintelligible...) I'm always trying to be involved somewhere, do something, and hopefully from there they see that things are changing.

I've said this several times, but I think that this is the "show-me" community. People here are stubborn, but when they finally buy in, they put their heart and soul in it, but you have to convince them it's the right thing... once they go ahead and buy into it, then...any successful business in town, they had some downturns, but boy when there were people who bought in, they're there.

There's a location sometimes we overlook, but the creative marketing...when you go to Arkansas, people will tell you (unintelligible). They all just talk about the houses and the attractions, and people come.

When you look at the town populations in Southwest Missouri, Hot Springs, Bentonville's slowing down, Harrison, you have to almost go to Texas to find places that are growing as rapidly as the Ozarks. There's two aspects to that—younger people bringing their businesses that can go anywhere they want because of the way they've set up their businesses, whether it's consulting...there's lots of people that fly out from Joplin to wherever they're going and come back...but also the people who are retiring now are retiring with substantial assets, so how does the downtown get its share of those people migrating from Florida, California, and northern climes, those retirees looking for places that have four season. You have that. You're going to have to figure out what's going to get them downtown and attract them here in the first place.

(unintelligible...)

Lots of places are the kind of the place where they have no trees or anything, like Joplin. We really have some of the Ozark beauty here.

Moderator: Thank you.

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SECTION IV RESIDENTS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

I'm Roderick May, and I've lived in Neosho for eight years.

Liv Anderson, I've lived in Neosho for 25 years.

Mel Langton, I've lived in Neosho for 28 years.

Lynn Dale Hughes, I've lived in Neosho most of my life.

Nina Eades, and I've worked in Neosho for a total of seven years.

Pam Lysely, I've been associated with Neosho for 30 years. But my children grew up here, went to schools here...

(Name unintelligible), I've lived here for most of my life.

Sheila Ellis, I've been in Neosho for 20 years.

Dale Ellis, 55 years.

Dave Corr, and I've been here almost seven years.

Moderator: As I mentioned, I'm from St. Louis, and if you were describing Neosho to me or to somebody who was thinking of moving here, what would you tell us about it? What would somebody need to know before they moved here?

I kind of call it country living in town. You know, I've lived out in the boonies and I've lived places like West Palm Beach, and this is like some place in the middle.

It's a wonderful town to raise your children.

It's hilly and it has just what we think of as true beauty, and such a community feeling.

It's friendly and safe, also four seasons that are all tolerable...it's not...until this year...

(laughter.)

You have a little winter and a little bit of summer, but it's wonderful.

Beautiful parks, and throughout the town there's beautiful parks, places to walk and take your kids, in North Forest Park, there are like 5 different playgrounds that the kids can play on, and Big Spring Park is a beautiful park. Lots of ambiance. It's also a great place to raise your family...(unintelligible)

I think it's charming. It has a lot of charm to it.

It has a good industry base.

We have good schools, too.

Moderator: Generally speaking, would you say that Neosho is moving in the right direction or wrong direction?

I think it's moving in the right direction.

School-wise, I think we could upgrade the schools...overall the instructional level (unintelligible)...in the past, the Neosho school system, and they're well-prepared for college. They also felt safe in this community, and they knew a lot of people, and you could stop and ask for help if you had car trouble. You have that small-town feeling, and it was progressive enough that you felt that they could go on from here should they choose to move on to other areas...

Moderator: What would you say are the main shopping areas in or near town? Where do people go for their everyday shopping?

Supercenter.

If you want to go shopping for clothes, there isn't much.

There's some on the boulevard, grocery especially.

We're in the middle of everything. Northwest Arkansas, we're close to a lot of larger communities.

We're 15 minutes from Joplin, so there's, we'd like to keep as much of the shopping as possible here, though.

I don't think that (unintelligible).

Moderator: Do people from surrounding areas come to Neosho to shop?

Only from the countryside.

We're challenged when it comes to our retail base. I think we pride ourselves for going to Joplin to the home center, or for shoes...

Joplin is so close...

I have to say that I drove down to Wal-Mart, and we actually sort of serve all the needs of the community somewhat, when you look at the buildings down to Wal-Mart and beyond, that was probably how it once was around the Square, so I think what happens now with our retail needs as a consumer, these are instant needs for us, but when we want specialty, we go to the larger place like up to Joplin or down to Arkansas or wherever, not here.

I find that a lot of people go, since the downtown district has been designated historic, especially with the antique shops, they come down to Neosho a lot to come to the Square. There's a uniqueness about the buildings being restored that is somewhat nostalgic, but also very much something that people want to experience, and with the extra specialty shops that are coming in, they can walk around the Square and have lunch at Angelina's or something, and I can see that as a developmental thing. As it comes along and people see that they have these unique shops down there, that it won't be the mass retail of Wal-Mart, but it'll be things like Nick's art gallery or specialty shops like that. That's another thing I see coming to this area. There's a need for a larger cultural base, and trying to launch an area-wide art program...we have the Southwest Missouri art alliance that is coming along, but I also see other towns looking at Neosho with a new eye, seeing the things that we're doing here (unintelligible), and we have the Thomas Hart Benton state art competition. I'm bringing in people from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, and they're looking to us to make connections with other artists... (unintelligible). It's a very centralized place that they can all come for major workshops, and that's part of what nationally known artists come in for very reasonable fees, and they understand what I'm trying to do, and they kind of adjust their fee schedules, so that we can make available good art instruction workshops to people in the area, and people come in from all over just for the art side of things. I think in the future, as the auditorium begins to show itself, that there will be more cultural events coming in, would draw even more people downtown to those events, and generate more of an appreciation and awareness of art to the general public and the kids coming up...(unintelligible)... one of the things they did identify that was lacking in Neosho was culture, and we have it here, we just have to paint the picture...

Moderator: What about dining and entertainment in the area? What are popular places that you all go to? Where do you take people when they're visiting?

If it's during the day and during the week, we like to do Café Angelica, which is off the Square.

Or Sam's Cellar.

The Boulevard maintains mainly fast food. I think the only owner-operated place is the Sonic... and Big Daddy's pizza. But most of it is fast food. And on the Square, we have just three places.

(many people talking at once.)

But at nighttime, nothing's...

(many people talking at once.)

Sam's Cellar.

Not too far out of town in Joplin is a really nice place called the Undercliff, and it's very unique in that it's built under a cliff into the cliff, and it's kind of a nostalgic place, and it used to be a chicken house that burned a long time ago, and they rebuilt it, and there's a campground nearby.

I'm going to say real quickly that presently I'm living in a motel because of my circumstances. However, I've been here for three months, and I've been hearing these people comment that they wish that there was better dining, from these people who are staying in the motel.

When we have people coming into town, the out of town invasion, I take them out to Daddy Gino's, kind of a fishy place with fishy people...

(laughter.)

We have the Tree Service in town for several months, with our ice cleanup, and they made the comment of a lack of places to dine.

Moderator: What kinds of recreation are popular with local residents that you can do here in Neosho?

We have bowling, and we have a skate park now.

Walking.

(lots of people agreeing.)

Walking the trail that's a recent addition to North Forest Park, and it goes about two or three miles next to the river.

(many people talking at once.)

Bicycling. There's a lot of biking that takes place. (Noise, unintelligible). There's a golf course.

Baseball. There's a recreation center also. It has all kinds of...

We have the Y.

For the children, they have baseball...

(many people talking at once.)

A gun range and an archery range.

Lots of hiking available.

We have our natural fishing pond.

But you can't fish in there most of the year.

(laughter.)

Hickory Creek is a trout stream?

I think the white river is something like that.

(side conversation.)

The trout stream is one of the major changes in the last 5 or 7 years, and the cleanup, and the park rejuvenation, it's just beautiful.

(many people talking at once.)

We have kids soccer everywhere, and baseball fields.

(many people agreeing, many people talking at once.)

Skate park.

The rec center has pottery classes, art classes, the American sewing guild is up there... and they're refurbishing the pool, and putting a new roof on it... (noise, unintelligible)...they're going back in and taking out a section of the pool and putting a new floor in there so that it's not leaking anymore, and it's supposed to be ready soon, and making that whole facility so it doesn't leak anymore, to match the rec center itself. And actually people have come from Arkansas to look at our rec center as a model for

their own. It was built back in '72, and is one of the few in Missouri that's still built in that period of time with the HUD grants that is still operating and serving, and we're really considered a small town... so that is a big plus, because that pool...there's a lot that we have in place that could be developed further should we see a need for it. Tennis courts, too.

I think one of the challenges with all this beautiful park area that we have is, and I know Janet's been addressing it, that you could actually live in this town for years and never see it, because there isn't any roadway that gets you back in there unless you're purposely planning to go back, back to the baseball diamonds or park, you'd never even know it was there, the way our community's set up now.

(many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Let's move on to downtown specifically. Let me start by asking you if downtown Neosho is moving in the right or wrong direction. Would you say it's moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

I'm very excited about the rejuvenation of the buildings. Since we live downtown, we were one of the first ones to buy a building downtown, and it's off the Square, but there's obviously a lot of work being done to the buildings on the Square, major projects being done on about three or four of them. We feel like it's been moving in the right direction. There's been a lot of change to the buildings, and there's still more to come, more buildings that are going to be redone, and we're hoping to get more eating places, it would be nice... I think the more you have down on the Square, the more it entices people to come down here. I don't think it hurts one's business to have another business come in...I think just brings more people.

Places like the Landing in St. Louis, where they all converge in one spot. Bring everyone down to one spot.

It would be nice if, when they get those concerts and performance things coming in, there might be some street side cafes that open after the shows. People could go down and eat before they went or after.

Shows in the park is another thing we have that's really nice. It's like the old drive-in theaters, where we all sit in the park and watch a movie in the park.

Regarding that restoration of the downtown, I'm serving on strike commission at the school, and I've had an interest in historic preservation at various times in the history of this city. When they first had a committee formed for preservation, back in '89, I was on it along with about 25 others, but that's when we got the historic district designated. One of the things I recall them saying at that time was how we had so many great buildings that needed little if any fixing, because they were still original. Some of them have

changed or have been taking down since then, but there's a lot remaining, and some of the stuff that's now being done is some of the major restoration efforts, but I could think of some of the north side of the Square that if they just painted their brick differently or took that off and did a few things, it would be remarkable, and it would change the character of the Square.

Moderator: What would you say are the major reasons that people visit downtown Neosho?

They're lost.

(Laughter, many people talking at once.)

It's basically a service.

The courthouse, during the week.

(many people talking at once.)

Antique shops.

You find so many people are so satisfied with everything Wal-Mart has that they don't come downtown and see the specialty stores down there. Too late to get rid of Wal-Mart.

But Wal-Mart seems to be changing some of its philosophy, too... (unintelligible)...they're going to tailor that to what they specifically want, and that will open doors for another generation...

Probably the main reason that someone would come from out of town downtown would be to go to the antique shops. For a place to eat, they would eat at one of the three or four places, but the majority of people are down here in the daytime because they're working at the courthouse or the bank or the city.

(name unintelligible) here within the next two years will become a major draw...the training center's going to be at that location.

What hurts the Square is the parking and being able to find it if you're from out of town. You're going to have to stop someplace for directions, because the signs are...

(many people talking at once.)

We've been talking about the bricks and the lights down on fourth streets, and you'd notice the difference, and you'd come down on Spring Hill into the Square...

That was a particularly pretty—

(many people talking at once. Unintelligible.)

As far as culturally, I think that's a big possibility. They're beginning to talk about Neosho if it has an umbrella as a communications center to all these outlying art groups, and I know the Missouri Art Council (noise, unintelligible)...that's an interactive network. (noise.) There's revenue in that, classes, people staying over for two or three days for workshops or events, and there goes some lodging and food and other expenses and things, and we've got it coming right to us, you see.

Moderator: How user-friendly is downtown? You mentioned a need for signage and parking. Could you describe the parking?

There's not enough of it. When court is in session, especially on Tuesdays, I think that's the day...there's people parked all over, on both sides of the Square, and for the people that work down here, if they park on the Square, then customers can't find a place to park around the Square, so that's a problem.

Doesn't the city have some off-the-Square parking lots that need to just be developed?

I think people wanting to walk is the problem. They don't want to have to walk.

Part of it has to do with weather, too.

The employees of the county and the stores downtown, they've choked out parking.

It's probably worse right now, too, because (many people talking at once.) If it's raining, it's kind of hard to cross streets around here.

(many people talking at once. Side conversation.)

Parking is a major, major issue that they need to address in some way. We used to own the variety store, and we would see people circle and pretty soon leave, so I assume that they went out to Wal-Mart, because the people who work here took up all those parking spots and they had no place to park and they got discouraged.

(noise, unintelligible.)

The renovations downtown, with more apartments or office spaces, it takes the parking situation and makes it worse than it is now. A new business is not going to be able to come in and survive. Whether that means people have to walk a block to get in, they'll walk a block and a half to get into Wal-Mart, but they want to park right in front of where they work.

Wal-Mart has something they want to go for or they really need. (Many people talking at once, unintelligible.)

It's probably going to take some business owners and the County commissioners, the commissioners are going to have to take a stand, and if they don't, well... the losers are the shop owners. The shop owners are the ones that don't have the employees—maybe one or two people.

Moderator: What about business hours and locations? Are those convenient?

There's so many businesses that close at 5:00 during the week that aren't open on weekends.

Until there's enough to draw people down after 5:00, it wouldn't do much good for the businesses. Even on Saturday afternoons.

We came down Saturday afternoon, and it was very dead.

(many people talking at once.)

In an ideal world, that would be your prime time for those antiquers to be down walking around the Square, eating, pulling into all those antique stores and specialty stores...

In the retail environment, it seems like there's one big draw like Wal-Mart or Lowe's, and then the other businesses that don't spend the big dollars in advertising feed off the traffic coming into those locations. Now, if you're downtown, you don't have that big one to draw in a group. So they're faced with doing their own advertising, or offering something that they can't get someplace else.

Special items.

When Wal-Mart came in, somebody held a seminar on how to live with Wal-Mart, and as a retailer trying to think about how they could compete against them, and one of the things that came out of that session that I remember most was that 1/3 of the consumers buy between 9 and 5 in the afternoon, the other 1/3 is after work until 9:00, and the other 1/3 is Saturday. And Neosho isn't meeting but 1/3 of what the consumer was wanting, at that time.

Moderator: How do local residents and visitors get information about what's going on downtown, whether that's sales or special events or cultural events or anything?

Radio.

Radio ads.

And newspapers.

Flyers.

And the Chamber of Commerce.

(many people agreeing.)

If you're a Chamber member...they do...

But that doesn't get to the other cities, and that's what we want.

(many people talking at once. Side conversation.)

Sometimes it's hard to get things in the local paper.

They might report it, but it's the reporting of the event after it happened rather than promoting it.

Right. (many people agreeing.)

I feel that in serving the community, and in letting you know what's going on... for example, the bloodmobile was setting up but no one knew or anything.

(many people talking at once.)

The daily news and the radio station are a public service, but their whole goal is to be profitable.

You'd think if they started putting more human interest things in there, they'd get more sales and subscription.

I think we're very fortunate that we have a daily newspaper.

(many people talking at once.)

And they normally advertise and talk about the information they're given. If the people having the events aren't telling the papers or the radio...

...that's a problem.

I have to say that Dave's been great on a few things I've tried to promote. People don't think of him as putting the word out, they go more towards the paper, and personally I've had more problems getting things in the paper. I know that some of the people are upset about something that they've been wanting things in the paper, and it's not getting in there...

Moderator: Let's talk a little about the future of downtown. Let me ask you first, what other kinds of businesses would you like to see downtown? I know we talked about this a bit already, but let me ask you directly. What sorts of businesses would be good for downtown?

I'd like to see some nightlife, restaurants, music, a place to go on a Friday or Saturday night that would tie into, would bring people down there for entertainment, for dining, but would also introduce those that show up to everything else that's there, that there are shops and such, and that they'd come back...

And then you would have the parking problem too, if you had a whole nother evening thing going on after the courthouse is gone, then you'd have like a second show... (laughter.)

If we could get people within walking distance from downtown, at that lot...

It's going up that hill going back.

(laughter. Many people talking at once.)

I agree. If we had something nice for eating and entertainment, that if it was really successful, then everything else would probably follow, and it would fill in the empty spaces which are really not that many, but they are there.

I lived in a community with a downtown street, difficult to navigate because of the traffic, and there were 4 or 5 restaurants that during the summertime, they got together and got themselves a band. Those restaurants were full. Every Friday, people wanted to go downtown to listen to bands and eat. I could see something like that really working here.

Has anyone gone down lately to Branson, to the Landing? Bass Pro Shop came into there, and it's a small shop, it's in kind of a quaint little... what do you call them?...it's almost like a little walking plaza or something.

Right on the river.

(side conversation.)

In Arkansas, (town unintelligible), it's like you're walking down the street of a little town. All the shops are outside, it's an outside mall. And it has a beautiful fountain. They play music to the water display over there.

(many people talking at once. Laughter.)

Even on the Landing, they still put the big draw places in strategic locations so that the rest of it can feed off of it. Bass Pro's the one... and the carpet store...

...and Phelps.

So that they let them do the advertising, and then the ones in the middle don't do the radio and the TV ads...

And that's built around those little condos, they're right there, very expensive condos that face out toward the river.

Moderator: This is getting a little ahead of ourselves, but while we're talking about it, what other downtowns or other cities have you seen that you would like Neosho to take after?

Eureka Springs. They have these little shops that just intrigue people.

Artsy little specialty gift shops, not the stuff that you can buy at the Supercenter.

(many people talking at once.)

With art, I see a scaled-down Carmel even, where you have galleries on the streets, where it's just...

Or jewelry, or...

Yeah!

(many people talking at once.)

More art.

And chocolate.

Ice cream and a bakery.

(laughter. Many people talking at once.)

I was in a town Crested Butte, Colorado. There's all these wonderful shops there.

Eureka Springs is like that.

Pigeon Forge has almost a colony of artists, that you can go shop to shop and find things that you can never find everywhere else.

Everybody's focused on having some kind of attraction. I saw this town in Oregon, I think it's Parker City, and this town was—I still think about—it was so nicely restored. It was in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't a Wal-Mart around or anything.

She commented about the Undercliff. That's the perfect example of good food and atmosphere, and it's hard to find, but it's always packed and you always have to wait, but people always talk about it.

We just need something like that on the Square, something with great food.

(unintelligible talking.)

Sam's Cellar could be that.

(many people talking at once.)

Isn't it connected to an underground tunnel?

(many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Let me back up to what we were talking about before. Are there other things besides dining and entertainment that you'd like to see downtown?

Specialty shops that would help draw people.

A really nice bakery, or a Panera Bread, or something. Not as a store, but just a bakery where you could go and get bread.

There are people around here that bake so well, their pies and wonderful baked goods, but we don't have a place here...

(many people talking at once.)

A variety store...

(many people talking at once.)

Yeah, something more with specialty and gifts, and a bakery, maybe, and it's just...

Now we do have one specialty gift shop that's wonderful.

Yes it is. And Debbie's imaging place is a wonderful specialty shop. She has great gift ideas in there. We just have to get people down here to go see that.

You've got two different things. You want specialty items and renovated buildings to do it in. So you got a high cost to get the structure ready, because the fronts, well, their roofs, their floors, the structural issues... you pay \$50,000 for a building and you'll spend another \$200,000 getting it ready to try to sell cakes, so you there's no balance. The balance is not there for that. Four years ago, when Wal-Mart came in, the stores came in with even larger square foot, less expensive square foot, space. What happened then was the buildings started to deteriorate because you're paying X amount of dollars for rent, or you're buying your building and your business will only support that much. So if you want to spend \$250,000 and bring a bakery in, there better be some good stuff. They'd be smoking some weed.

(many people talking at once.)

But the housing development, that over the stores must bring in some reimbursement. If you had... it may be okay.

Like the Garden (name unintelligible) had a great idea. Did a great job restoring the building, made it absolutely beautiful, the courtyard, the apartment upstairs, the restaurant, the beautiful gift shop, but it was such an expensive venture, and people have to come down here to support it.

They didn't have enough room in their restaurant to support it.

If they had twice the floor space, it would've taken twice the money to renovate things.

(many people talking at once.)

But that illustrates that there was a need, you know, for somebody, I mean, having a nice restaurant and everything, you know. So how do we address that?

Nice restaurant would be good. Punch a hole through the next building and you'd have plenty of space to make a restaurant.

Restaurant, bakery.

Coffee shop (many people agreeing).

Moderator: What about the look and feel of downtown? Do you think there needs to be improvements in street repair, landscaping, etc.?

Flower boxes. I don't see a lot of flower boxes.

We could do more of that.

Everybody participating in the flower boxes and keeping that theme going is a good idea, and we usually do. People usually put out flowers in their yard or around the Square. They do try to participate. We have the city flower boxes. We have the world's largest flower box in our park. Just more participation with that would be really good.

Well, I think as far as downtown, I think the last five or ten years, they've been working on restoring the fronts of the buildings downtown, which has been really, there for a while, nothing was ever done...it's just really... it's really improving, and as long as they keep on doing that, I think that will entice people to come down and do something.

I think that with what's happening is a domino effect, with all this going on.

It's just getting someone now to be in those buildings, a business.

As far as the flower pots, that could be a small business venture by a group of young people that would want to keep flower pots, and you pay so much for the summer, and they make sure they're watered and there's fresh flowers and whatever.

I knew a business that did just that, and I lived in Tennessee for a while, and there was a business that actually leased plants, if you liked plants but you didn't have a green thumb. They would bring plants to your place, come and water them...all you did was look at them. If they got sick, they'd take them out and back to the store, and they would...I bought a lot of them.

(many people talking at once.)

Again, that's a service industry job that's waiting to happen. It can be done.

(side conversation.)

One of the things I've heard, and of course you could see it too, is that as we improve or renovate the Square, we also need to be looking at a block or two blocks off, around, whether it be personal residences and other buildings that need attention, but you'd instill that sense of pride so that hopefully it'll kind of spread out through the whole community and be a place we can be proud of.

Moderator: What about basics like streets and sidewalks?

When I first came in here, you guys were starting the bricks in sidewalks process.

They're all really new around the Square, and now they're branching off on the different side streets, new sidewalks and lights.

And there were trees, too, but they proved to be a problem.

They were a problem. They were so pretty, but they were a problem.

(many people talking at once.)

We've come a long way, but we have a long way to go.

We should all probably be planting some more trees, those that have yards, and with all the ones I'm sure we lost, you know... with the ice storm. It was detrimental to a lot of our trees, a lot of the pretty ones. Red buds and dogwoods. Lots of pretty dogwoods and red bud trees were damaged, but they don't want anyone to cut anything down. I've seen a number of trees... so they're way behind...

(many people talking at once.)

You know the positive side? Big Spring Park looks beautiful right now. You can see things in there that you couldn't see before. You can see the pool, and you can see it from above when you come down, so maybe in a roundabout way it did us a little bit of a favor. I was seeing buildings I didn't know existed.

(side conversations.)

Moderator: Well, we talked about a lot of different potential improvements that you might like to see for downtown. If you had to make a list of the top few highest priorities, what sorts of things do you think should be on that list? What's the highest priority for downtown?

We need to address parking.

Yeah, because you can't build up unless you have a place to park.

Probably with the auditorium renovation, bring in cultural events.

Maybe some eateries for people coming downtown for that to keep them downtown.

I think flags on the poles that we have that accent and give character.

That would be a great way to advertise what's going on.

I think the problem with some of those is some of the metal poles were falling on people's cars.

Somebody said there was a piece missing that would prevent that from happening.

That would solve the parking problem!

(laughter.)

They need to coordinate something like, when they have the cultural center...

...coordinate the events.

I think the new County tourism commission really moved ahead with DREAM, Newton County and focus in other areas, especially with the Thomas Hart Benton days... it just seemed like this whole county was public, and it really made it look like we were moving forward.

...on more than just one thing.

It gave us history with Carver... (unintelligible)... we have so many things in Newton County developing, with Neosho the center of, that it just seems like Neosho could become a magnet, you know?

We need events.

We even have an RV park in that green space, too. That would encourage people coming through to stay.

(many people talking at once. Laughter. Side conversations.)

Moderator: Anything else to add to that list?

Finish the construction.

I think direction signs are way, way up there, and I think it's already being addressed. Signage.

(many people talking at once.)

We're actually planning on doing more signing on 44 to direct people to Neosho and to the Hatchery. We've got a lot of history. We have the oldest Hatchery in America here, and they actually built it here because of the water sewers and the railroad. Those two issues were the major attraction. There's lots of wroughtwork over the town. Everything we build new, it looks old. We always try to match the old history. This town has a lot of history, and that should be built upon, and should be one of the focuses.

(many people agreeing.)

For the first time, we have a bed tax in place, and that's going to help tremendously. That's where the signage money is coming from. That'll help to start promoting...

(many people talking at once. Laughter. Side conversations.)

You know, we get a lot of people just passing through. If they stop for soda, gas, or a burger, the locals ask, "You're not from here, are you?" and they'll say, "You should check out the Fish Hatchery."

When someone comes to town to visit, one of the places they go by is the Fish Hatchery.

One of the things I noticed staying out at Big Spring Best Western, there have been several meetings in the conference room, but it's probably 20 or 25 people that are meeting in this room every other week or so. If we had a facility like an auditorium that would address these people who are going to Best Western for a conference room, you'd be bringing out-of-town people downtown, and we have this nice Square, and there's a lot of beauty and charm about Neosho, and they could go back and by word of mouth and say, "You should go to Neosho." There are people from Europe! France, and Germany, Japan. It's interesting.

Moderator: Anything else we haven't talked about that you'd like to discuss?

One advantage to Neosho is we have the nicest civic organization, and the nicest people here. The community comes together for any cause.

I think it shows that this is a caring community... at Christmastime, for example, a group comes together and has a Christmas dinner for people who don't have a home to visit or can't get to their relatives' homes. It's like 350 people.

And Habitat for Humanity...

When there's a problem, the whole community comes forward.

I think we experienced that during the ice storm. Everybody checked on their neighbors, made sure that people were okay...