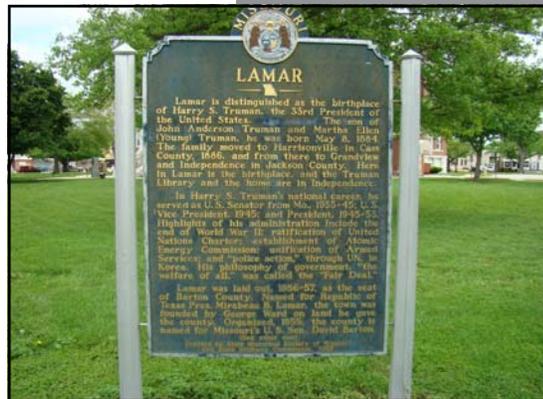


FOCUS GROUP SURVEY REPORT

FINAL SURVEY FINDINGS & RESULTS

Lamar, Missouri



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 Lamar, Missouri. The purpose of these groups was to learn more about the priorities of the Lamar community in regard to the Downtown area. The three groups included the following: 1) City staff, administration, and elected officials, 2) Downtown business owners, and 3) long-time residents. Participants of all three groups are from a variety of backgrounds. Originally a fourth focus group was planned consisting of an additional group of Downtown business owners; however the two similar groups were ultimately combined into one.

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

A. QUESTIONS POSED TO THE BUSINESS GROUP:

The following questions were asked of the business group:

General Questions about Lamar

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 Lamar 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 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? What is communication like between business (or business groups) and the City Administration and elected officials?

Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

08. As you know, the City is in the process of developing a Strategic Plan for Downtown Lamar. 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 you 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 administration or elected officials 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 asked of the general groups (this includes the "Long-Term Residents" and "City Staff, Administration, and Elected Officials"):

General Questions about Lamar

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 Lamar?

Downtown Specific Questions

05. Generally speaking, would you say that Downtown Lamar 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 Lamar? 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 Strategic Plan for Downtown Lamar. 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 you 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 Downtowns or areas of other communities would you most like Lamar to resemble?

C. THE LAMAR 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 groups described Lamar as a friendly small town with a good sense of community, good education, a strong sense of history, and many nearby outdoor recreation opportunities. In addition to being the birthplace of Harry Truman, Lamar also has strong ties with Wyatt Earp and with military history. The Truman Birthplace, located near the Downtown Square, proves to be a strong tourist attraction for Lamar.

Lamar is the county seat of Barton County and a regional hub for surrounding, very small rural towns for employment, and shopping at the Wal-Mart Superstore. Since Lamar is a short drive from Joplin, Springfield, and Kansas City, Missouri, residents feel that they have access to the luxuries of bigger towns. The Downtown Square is, according to participants, among the largest in the state. They see it primarily as a professional district, with offices related to the courthouse and with a few retail businesses as well.

Participants felt mixed about the direction Lamar is moving. The recession has affected Lamar, causing businesses to close throughout town, most notably O'Sullivan Industries, Lamar's largest employer. The loss of jobs and businesses was, according to participants, a large step in the wrong direction. However, many participants felt that Lamar is moving in the right direction in other ways, including many of the initiatives to improve the Downtown.

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

The main shopping area in Lamar is the Wal-Mart right off the highway coming into town. Downtown is mainly a service area but does have a very small amount of retail.

According to the groups, people come from much smaller towns around Lamar to do their shopping at Wal-Mart, and some tourists do some shopping after either coming to Lamar for the Truman Birthplace or stopping in Lamar to eat at the Blue Top restaurant on their way south to other destinations.

Many residents try to shop in Lamar, but have trouble finding certain specialty or high-end items. For these, residents travel to Joplin, Missouri, or shop online. These items include a variety of clothing, shoes, books, and other specialty items.

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?

There are a number of restaurant options in Lamar, including fast food chains, Mexican food, casual dining, and coffee shops. The Blue Top restaurant, in Lamar since the 1930's, is a draw for travelers driving north or south through the Midwest. There are a few locally-owned restaurants that residents visit, but participants generally felt that there is not enough variety.

Many visit Joplin, Missouri, when dining out for special occasions or to find a larger variety of dining options. They would welcome a fine dining option in town, a wider variety of restaurants, restaurants that serve alcohol, and longer business hours from existing restaurants.

For recreation and entertainment, Lamar has the Truman Birthplace, many special events, a movie theater, live theater, and plenty of outdoor recreation. A local coffee shop, the Java Mule, hosts open mic nights and has live music on occasion. Many people, however, travel elsewhere for entertainment, especially for higher-end nightlife.

D. DOWNTOWN LAMAR: DESCRIBING THE PRESENT

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

The groups, overall, felt mixed about Downtown Lamar's direction. A number of businesses have closed in Lamar, some in Downtown. Participants were disheartened by the number of empty buildings on the Square and Downtown's aesthetics—the aluminum façades, the metal awnings, and the number of buildings in disrepair. However, there are thriving professional businesses Downtown, mostly related to the Barton County Courthouse and local banks.

Participants felt that there is a lot of unrealized potential that would make Downtown Lamar move in the right direction—improving building façades and filling empty spaces with retail businesses and restaurants were of the highest priority. Other priorities included adding second-story residential space, giving Downtown a cohesive aesthetic appearance, improving signage and navigation, and populating the 11th street path from the Truman Birthplace to the Square with businesses.

Business Owners: Why did you choose to locate your business or make an investment in property Downtown (or not in Downtown, for other business owners)?

Business owners cited low cost, tradition, and proximity to the Barton County Courthouse as major reasons they located their businesses Downtown. The participants indicated, at different points in the discussion, that new businesses might be attracted if the City considered a business incubator, a rent-sharing program for smaller shops, or subsidies and loans for new businesses.

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

The groups mentioned a few reasons that they visit Downtown, including the Courthouse, services such as attorneys and banks, and frequent special events. The history museum is also located in the basement of the Courthouse.

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? Is there a need/demand for more housing Downtown?

Participants expressed a few concerns about user-friendliness. The major concern was business hours. Other concerns included signage and housing.

The business hours in Downtown, according to participants, are a significant problem, especially regarding evenings and weekends. Most of the shops are open only from 8:00 or 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM on weekdays, which makes it difficult for people who have jobs with a regular weekday schedule to shop in these businesses. The problem is compounded by the fact that the chain stores in town, such as Wal-Mart, are open in the evenings and on weekends. The participants also felt that restaurant hours are inconvenient, since few restaurants are open late.

Traffic navigation around the Square, according to participants, is not terribly difficult for newcomers, but could be improved by larger and clearer signage.

The participants feel that there is plenty of parking Downtown, not only for the current volume of business, but also for any projected growth in the area of the Square.

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

The participants mentioned the newspaper, the Chamber of Commerce website, the local television station, the Internet, and word-of-mouth as the major ways they get information about Downtown business and events.

E. DOWNTOWN LAMAR: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As you know, the City is in the process of developing a Strategic Plan for Downtown Lamar. 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 participants suggested a variety of new businesses Downtown, focusing on independently owned specialty-type shops and restaurants rather than larger chains. They suggested apparel, knick-knacks related to Harry Truman and Wyatt Earp, a variety of restaurants including fine dining, Italian food, a beer garden, and casual dining, a bookstore, and any other business that sells specialty items. Some participants also suggested dividing large spaces within buildings into mini-shops, creating a rent-sharing and utility-sharing situation for a number of very small shops. They suggested focusing primarily on keeping tourists in town after they have visited the Truman Birthplace.

For entertainment, the focus groups felt that a variety of restaurants and shops with later business hours are important. Lamar already has a number of festivals, and the participants felt that Downtown should continue these special events and improve marketing efforts.

Some participants focused on adding residents to Downtown, suggesting that second-story lofts would help fill the buildings and keep a number of people Downtown to patronize businesses.

Some participants suggested that Downtown's purpose is not to compete with Wal-Mart and other large chains, nor is it to compete with the larger malls in other nearby cities; rather it should offer a unique experience to customers. Regarding this idea the groups felt strongly that small business should be encouraged, and the City should find and offer incentives to building owners to fix up their buildings into usable retail and office spaces.

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?

When asked about the look and feel of Downtown, the participants responded that aesthetics should be a top priority. Some building façades, made of metal and put up in the 1980's, cover the historic character of the building and have fallen into disrepair. Façade improvement and building repair were of the highest priority to participants.

Filling the empty buildings was also a priority, not only to give people reasons to come Downtown and spend money, but also to improve the aesthetics of the Square.

Suggestions all focused on giving Downtown a historic and cohesive look and feel while making it still feel safe and maintained. They suggested that building repair, filling buildings with retail businesses, adding public restrooms, and improving signage should be high priorities. Again, according to participants, the aesthetics of Downtown should emphasize the City's strong history and classic feel to visitors.

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

Participants in every group felt that attracting businesses of all kinds (to Downtown and to Lamar as a whole), improving marketing and signage on the highway into Lamar, encouraging small business, repairing old buildings, and improving building façades should all be of the highest priority. Other noted concerns included adding green space, moving the history museum to a more prominent location, and emphasizing the City's ties to Wyatt Earp in addition to Truman.

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

Downtown business owners felt that the City could help by attracting new business into Lamar as a whole, improving the aesthetics of Downtown Lamar, giving loans and subsidies to attract small retail businesses, and strongly encouraging delinquent building owners to address building upkeep.

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?

No business owners indicated support for such a special district. Many business owners expressed that a Special Business District would not be a good idea, and that the additional sales tax would be detrimental rather than helpful.

General Public: What Downtowns or areas of other communities would you most like Lamar to resemble?

Participants mentioned a few Downtowns whose aesthetics, marketing, and mix of businesses they admired: Carthage, Missouri; Neosho, Missouri; Joplin, Missouri; Branson, Missouri; Portsmouth, Maine; and Fort Scott, Kansas.

F. KEY POINTS

Key points about the Lamar area:

- ◆ Lamar is a friendly small town with a good sense of community, good education, a strong sense of history including ties to Harry Truman and Wyatt Earp, and many nearby outdoor recreation opportunities.
- ◆ Lamar is the county seat of Barton County and a regional hub for surrounding, very small rural towns for employment, and shopping at the Wal-Mart Superstore.
- ◆ The Downtown Square is among the largest in the state, and it is primarily a professional district, with offices related to the courthouse and with a few retail businesses.
- ◆ The participants felt mixed about the direction Lamar is moving, citing the recession and the loss of industry and jobs as a negative direction, but the initiatives to improve the Downtown as a positive direction.
- ◆ The main shopping area in Lamar is the Wal-Mart right off the highway coming into town and many residents in surrounding rural towns come into Lamar to shop at Wal-Mart.
- ◆ Residents shop in Lamar but have trouble finding certain specialty or high-end items in town. For these, they travel to Joplin or shop online.
- ◆ Restaurants options in Lamar include fast food chains, Mexican food, casual dining, coffee shops, and the historic Blue Top restaurant.
- ◆ Participants felt that there is not enough variety for dining in Lamar, and would welcome a fine dining option in town, a wider variety of restaurants, restaurants that serve alcohol, and longer business hours.

- ◆ For recreation and entertainment, Lamar has the Truman Birthplace, a history museum, many special events, a movie theater, a live theater, coffee shop open mic nights and music, and plenty of outdoor recreation within a short drive to parks and lakes.
- ◆ Residents sometimes travel elsewhere for entertainment, especially for higher-end nightlife.

Key points about Downtown Lamar:

- ◆ The groups, overall, felt mixed about Downtown Lamar's direction, citing the closing of businesses due to the recession, the building façades, and the empty retail spaces as negative; they felt positive, however, about the current businesses that thrive Downtown.
- ◆ There is a lot of unrealized potential that would make Downtown Lamar move in the right direction—improving building façades and filling empty spaces with retail businesses and restaurants were of the highest priority.
- ◆ Other priorities included adding second-story residential space, giving Downtown a cohesive aesthetic, improving signage and navigation, and populating the 11th Street path from the Truman Birthplace to the Square with businesses.
- ◆ The business owners cited low cost, tradition, and proximity to the Courthouse as major reasons they located their businesses Downtown.
- ◆ New businesses might be attracted in the future if the City focuses on attracting a higher number of shops in the area and perhaps considers a business incubator, a rent-sharing program for smaller shops, or subsidies and loans for newer businesses.
- ◆ People visit Downtown for the Courthouse, services such as attorneys and banks, frequent special events, and the Truman museum.
- ◆ The business hours in Downtown, according to the participants, are a significant problem, especially regarding evenings and weekends.
- ◆ Parking and navigation are not problems for residents or visitors, but clearer signage may help make navigation even easier.
- ◆ Residents get information about Downtown businesses and events from the newspaper, the Chamber of Commerce website, the local television station, the Internet, and word-of-mouth.

Key points about the future of Downtown Lamar:

- ◆ Downtown Lamar should focus on independently owned specialty-type shops and restaurants rather than large chains; the participants felt that Downtown's purpose is not to compete with large chains, but to offer a unique experience to customers.

- ◆ Residents and visitors would welcome apparel, merchandise related to Harry Truman and Wyatt Earp, a variety of restaurants including fine dining, Italian food, a beer garden, and casual dining, a bookstore, and any other business that sells specialty items.
- ◆ Participants also suggested dividing large spaces within buildings into mini-shops, creating a rent-sharing and utility-sharing situation for a number of very small shops.
- ◆ Downtown should focus on keeping tourists in town after they have visited the Truman Birthplace.
- ◆ Marketing of festivals, businesses, and opportunities was a high priority to the participants.
- ◆ Second-story lofts would help fill the buildings and keep a number of people Downtown to patronize businesses.
- ◆ Small business should be encouraged, and the City should find and offer incentives to building owners to fix up their buildings into usable retail and office spaces.
- ◆ Façade improvement, building repair, filling empty buildings with retail businesses, adding public restrooms, and improving signage should be high priorities.
- ◆ Downtown should have a historic and cohesive look and feel while making it still feel safe and modern; the aesthetics of Downtown should emphasize the town's strong history and classic feel to visitors.
- ◆ The groups unanimously felt that attracting businesses of all kinds (to Downtown and to Lamar as a whole), improving marketing and signage on the highway into Lamar, encouraging small business, repairing old buildings, and improving building façades should all be of the highest priority.
- ◆ Other important concerns included adding green space, moving the history museum to a more prominent location, and emphasizing the town's ties to Wyatt Earp in addition to Truman.
- ◆ The City could help Downtown business owners by attracting new business into Lamar as a whole, improving the aesthetics of Downtown Lamar, giving loans and subsidies to attract small retail businesses, and forcing delinquent building owners to address building upkeep.
- ◆ Business owners were not in favor of a special business district with additional sales tax.
- ◆ Participants mentioned a few Downtowns whose aesthetics, marketing, and mix of businesses they admired: Carthage, Missouri; Neosho, Missouri; Joplin, Missouri; Branson, Missouri; Portsmouth, Maine; and Fort Scott, Kansas.

SECTION II

CITY STAFF, ADMINISTRATION, AND ELECTED OFFICIALS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: Tell me a little bit about your community. Describe the area.

Slow-paced.

If you're coming here looking for a job, we're over 10% unemployed, probably among the top 3 in the state. There's a big problem... Loss of an industry. O'Sullivan Industries went out business. They had 12, 1300 employed.

I'd say an extremely friendly community, lots of active civic and fraternal organizations.

A lot of the locals stay around the area hoping for something else to take place in the O'Sullivan building. They're dedicated to staying here.

Also, Wyatt Earp was first constable in Lamar, so there's history there.

Beautiful park. And lake.

Good schools, and overall just a good community. Safe. You feel safe at night.

Moderator: What's the primary employer here? Where do most people work?

The largest employer is Forco Industry who makes products for Wal-Mart, Target... and the hospital out here hires several people. And we've got Epic Industries that's been here 5 years. They do wood products.

Farming is the biggest employer in the county. Agricultural.

(unintelligible)...

The city and the county and civic groups all work together very well. If there's some issue building the school, people will get behind it, get a bond issue passed. There's good cooperation, and that's a big plus.

Low crime.

Moderator: My next question centers around shopping. Do you stay here to do your shopping? Do you go elsewhere? Where do you do your shopping?

For food, it's here. For clothing, it has to be outside.

I agree.

The local furniture store and the local car dealership just closed.

A lot of people go out of town just for entertainment, and they do their shopping out of town.

About 10 or 12 years ago, the state average sales tax per person, we were only collecting 1/3 of normal, so almost 2/3 of our shopping was done outside of the county.

I shop here for my groceries for everything I can, but anything that's specialized, you either have to shop the Net or a larger community. I do a lot of Internet shopping.

Moderator: What kind of retail shopping do you have here?

One grocery store.

The Dollar Store.

The Wal-Mart.

There's several Ag stores like Rachel's and Midwest Hardware.

Two implement dealers.

We go to Joplin for shopping. It's the biggest trade area around.

It's probably about 45 miles, 45 minutes from Joplin.

Moderator: How often do you go to Joplin?

My wife just went this morning.

Jasper County, which was Joplin, averaged over 3 times the state average for sales tax.

Now that gasoline is down, most people travel out of town every two weeks on average to do some type of shopping.

Moderator: What about a lot of surrounding communities? Do you serve as a hub?

We're a mini-hub for the smaller towns.

Towns to the east don't have a Wal-Mart. They don't have access to that type of store. There are a lot of people who come this way, because the next closest Wal-Mart is in Springfield.

Moderator: Let's talk about entertainment. Where do you go for entertainment?

We do have a local theater that's been renovated and runs first-run movies. I think a lot of people stay home to go to the local movie. But there are different places to eat here, a variety of food, Chinese, Mexican, American, but a lot of people like to go out of town for the conversation of going wherever and eating somewhere else for a change.

A lot of local eating places are used for lunch, so... (unintelligible).

Well, and the reality is, this group is policy makers, you have to find a place to go for dinner where people won't hunt you down and complain about their water bill or their t-ball team, so you have to go somewhere else. It's an escape from the norm.

And you combine things. You go to Joplin to go shopping and for entertainment. I spend a lot of time in the mall there with my grandkids.

We have a local bowling alley, but in the way of entertainment, like a nightclub or something, we don't have it.

The youth entertainment, I still feel, they drive around the Square.

Summer nights.

Yeah.

(many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Do you have restaurants that stand out?

Mostly franchise restaurants. The Blue Top has been out here since the 1930's.

We've got some localized restaurants. A couple of non-franchise Mexican restaurants. We've got Taco Bell and Pizza Hut. The oriental place is local. We don't have an Italian place, though. We've got East Side, a mom and pop hamburger place. But we don't have an Italian place.

We don't have seafood.

Barbecue. We don't have barbecue.

Everybody barbecues at home.

Moderator: What about recreation?

We've got year-round programs, baseball, softball, basketball, football, soccer. We've got an aquatic park.

Open year-round.

Moderator: Do you get a lot of hunting and fishing?

Yes.

Our city lake out here, a 600-acre lake, there's fishing there but no swimming.

Moderator: *So that's a big draw for people?*

Yeah.

We have people coming and renting a boat slip from as far away as Joplin or Neosho. They're coming here instead of Stockton Lake.

We have a golf course.

We have a community theater. And a relatively active Arts Council.

Moderator: *Do you get a lot of visitors to Truman?*

Yeah, about 20,000 a year. A lot of people were doing more day trips.

Moderator: *Do you have a lot of overnight visits?*

Mostly day trips.

But the Super 8 stays pretty busy with visitors.

I think the Super 8 here has won several awards.

There's a state park over there with free-range buffalo. Bison and elk.

And we have weekend events during the summertime, too. We have a lot of home school activity.

Also the largest free fair in the state.

It's in September. It starts on a Sunday and goes through the whole week, and the whole Square is loaded. There are probably 18 or 20,000 people out there on Saturday night.

The Square's closed off for it.

Moderator: *Let's talk about the Downtown area. Do you feel your Downtown is moving in a positive or negative direction?*

Well, the furniture store closing wiped out a lot of business.

We've definitely seen a decline in retail. Overall, there's decline on and around the Square. And it's great to have service businesses, but we need to focus on retail so people don't go out of town for shopping.

Well, we lost half of one side of the Square to one store closing. On the other side, we have two empty buildings. On the north, we have an empty retail site. We've seen a complex that was bequeathed by one family to the community betterment council, and they're basically empty—it's about 4 buildings. On the east side, everything's full, isn't it?

Yeah, I think all are full.

In the yesteryear, you'd have your son or daughter take over your business, but now that's not happening. They want to do something different, the money's someplace else, and...

I think from the Downtown aspect, you want to kind of locate where the traffic is along the highway. It's kind of a struggle.

I was involved with a department store on the Square for 18 years, and it got less and less, and when Wal-Mart hit Lamar, and Joplin picked up and got bigger, I think that's why we had to close that down. It's just tough.

Moderator: When was the heyday of the Square?

50's and 60's.

You'd have 4 or 5 grocery stores. Sears, Western Auto, a lot of individual stores up there. They gradually went away.

I don't know if TV was part of that, but Saturday night in the 50's, the Square was packed. Stores stayed open late. But people started staying home when they got a TV.

And unless stores purposely stay open, there's not a lot of foot traffic after 5:00. One of the outcomes of our analysis was that we need to draw people back in the evening. The Market Square Café and Nathan's Place draw people. Drawing foot traffic back... The Plaza draws a crowd, but once they go to a movie, there's no reason for them to stay. No piece of pie and cup of coffee.

I think that's a change from the small retailer to the big box stores. Like Wal-Mart.

(agreement.)

Now you can drive to Joplin in 30 minutes, and that's nothing.

There used to be 3 bars on or near the Square, and they've all closed. And that's a good thing.

When you talk about eating and entertainment, I've looked at surplus and leakage, and there's about 85,000 dollars leakage for by-the-glass drinking. A glass of wine with dinner, that kind of thing.

Moderator: Where can you eat on the Square before seeing a movie?

The coffee shop is open, but not into the evening.

5:00, they close it.

There is going to be a restaurant opening in April.

It's mainly noon meals, though.

We have a donut shop, but they're closed by noon.

The thing of it is, Downtown you don't have near the traffic as out on the highway, so your Denny's and your Blue Top and your fast food is all out there. It's hard to have something Downtown.

There's no advertising. You go Downtown and find some of those little ones, but they're not advertising. People aren't going to waste time trying to find them.

Younger families are all looking for that Wal-Mart and Sonic and McDonald's. The older people are looking for that little mom-and-pop place.

Moderator: How often do you go Downtown, and why?

We work here.

The Courthouse is here. You've got attorneys and insurance and all that working here. It's just a central business district.

Lumberyard.

Moderator: An average person, how often would they go Downtown?

A couple times a week?

The post office is there.

And the banks.

Moderator: So the issue is getting them to stay, not to go?

Yeah.

They come here, but they go back home.

Between all the services, it's pretty well traveled, but once they get their business done, they go somewhere else.

Moderator: How user-friendly is your Downtown? How convenient are the hours?

It's 8:00-5:00.

(agreement.)

Probably 9:00-5:00, most of them.

Pretty much, just ends at 5:00.

There's a little excitement at the Java Mule on those open-mic nights. 2 times a month or so. Acoustic music and poetry. People come and stay until 10 or 10:30. Some of the neighboring businesses are interested in staying open on those nights.

Moderator: Do hear people say they'd go Downtown more if they were open later?

When there were businesses down there, they tried to stay open on Thursday nights. They've tried. Now, Christmastime, they try to stay open for about a week during the night, but that's about it.

Moderator: Is there enough parking?

Yeah.

(agreement.)

(unintelligible talking.)

Moderator: Do you hear visitors get confused?

Yeah.

A lot have to see what direction traffic flows before turning.

Within a block of the Square, there's another 500 parking spaces. There's lots of parking.

That's the least of our problems.

Moderator: What are the aesthetic issues about Downtown?

(unintelligible, mumbling.)

I think some of the buildings are starting to look run down. Upkeep.

Yeah. You don't have a unified design feel.

You go to some places, and it looks quaint, it looks appealing, and we probably could improve on the overall appeal. You go to some towns, and everything has a unified theme. We saw that through the Next Step 2030 process. There were a lot of façades that needed attention. The Downtown association has sponsored the planters on the Square, and they are attractive. We need to take that a step further. They do some nice landscaping on the inside of the Square, and we need some of that outside.

The City and the County cooperated on this a few years ago, and we all put lights up, and we buried all the electric lines, and the County's done a lot of landscaping work, too. Benches. We've got flower pots. On each corner, we try to put something. I think we've done a lot, but there's a lot more we could do.

One of the things 4-H does for holidays, they put out flags, and people comment about that all the time, how attractive and patriotic it looks. I think that's a plus. And the City maintains the light poles with the brackets. We do a lot of collaboration back and forth between the City and County.

Christmas lights. Upgrade the lighting, that's an ongoing thing.

Not to get off the Square, but we've kind of kept the old-time theme in the park, too.

Moderator: I hear a lot of positives. Is there anything else you think needs improvement?

I'd say the façades are probably the worst.

I think the sidewalks could use a little... (unintelligible)

Moderator: Is there good signage when visitors come to your community to get them to the Truman birthplace or Downtown?

There's a sign on the intersection to historic Downtown, and there's a signboard. The traveling public, hopefully, will get sidetracked.

I found confusion when I came here. There are several small signs, but they don't give you the address. The park isn't easy to find. The school, the library. When you're a stranger and you're coming in, you have trouble finding those small signs. The other thing that makes it difficult is coming off the highway and figuring out how to get to Lamar. It can be difficult and intimidating for visitors.

(unintelligible.)

A lot of that response, we get a lot of "we missed all the signs." We are mandated by certain things, and MODOT is one of them, and they have signage restrictions.

Has anybody been up to Nevada lately? Man, you can really see that signage. Out on the highway, all that. You can see it. It's not the small sign.

They've spent a lot of time and money picking out the color theme of the signs and throughout the city.

I was up there last week, and it was something else.

They've just picked that theme and they're going with it.

When you go to other places, you are looking for signs, but we're all just mandated by the State, which can be confusing.

(many people talking at once.)

We think the signs are adequate, but visitors all say it's hard to find their way around, but we have just upgraded the signs, which should help.

It would be nice to have the big, nice signs like Joplin has. You can't read a whole lot of little signs. I'd like to see something unified.

(agreement, unintelligible.)

I think you missed something. We're sitting right in the middle of a remarkable building. I don't think there's another town like us with an auditorium that will seat 800 people. What an establishment.

(agreement.)

Moderator: Where would you like to see your Downtown go in the future? If we were going to make a master plan—and just dream without worrying about money—what kinds of businesses would you like to see Downtown?

Restaurants.

I think something that would draw people from the birthplace to the Square would be an antique store.

And moving the historical society on to the Square.

The typical client that the birthplace gets would be an older patron.

We have a lot of senior citizen bus tours, and when they call to schedule, they want to see what's Downtown. Antique places, someplace to eat that's quaint and not McDonald's.

Restroom facilities that can handle a busload.

There are no antique stores currently. We have a flea market mall.

Moderator: Maybe a variety of dining?

Yeah.

Clothing.

We do cater to the youth, but there's not very much down there. There's only one store down there.

We have a very nice library.

I'd like to see a bookstore.

Our library is very nice. It's a block off the Square.

I'd like a place to buy souvenirs.

We sell some.

Office supplies.

Moderator: Anything else?

We used to have an office store, didn't we?

I've always thought a business incubator would be a really good thing to have on the Square. A space for little fledgling businesses to grow before they own their own space.

Moderator: Why did the furniture store close?

They retired, and the business was slow. The economy's gone down. Until we get some industry down here to support it, businesses will keep closing.

Stuff wouldn't work then, when O'Sullivan's was here. I wouldn't encourage anyone to open a business here right now.

I agree.

If we do get industry back in here, how are we going to keep them here? We're going to have to figure out a way to keep them here. Most of the people who worked at O'Sullivan were commuting. If we had a high level of skilled employment, they'd live here, but if we're looking at low incomes, they're going to live and go elsewhere.

(agreement.)

Moderator: Do you think that you'd be focusing on tourists or residents for the Downtown?

(noise, unintelligible.)

...Get them here for tourism, and...

I had a call from a gentleman from Carthage who wanted to come up. He was 90 years old, and the old Truman house, and he said, "I guarantee that if you get the Truman birthplace up to par, tourism's the way to go." He says a lot of people go to other towns.

Moderator: How do you promote the Truman birthplace?

Signage.

Brochures.

I think they're distributed out and about.

And the birthplace is part of the Southwest Missouri Tourism Alliance.

And we're also with the Department of Natural Resources, the state park. There's a website. And we work with the Truman Library and things like that.

We have about 50 to 60 bus tours with senior citizens, and quite a few school kids.

Do you see a down-trend in tourism?

I don't. I went on the Natural Park Service website, and ours has declined because there are fewer World War II vets, but we have foreign visitors that come. Overall, we're still up in the numbers. I noticed on the home in Independence, their overall numbers were broken down by category, and they added all them together, and their attendance was 52 to 60,000. We bring in a pretty decent number of people.

Would the new education center help?

I feel it would help. If we get it, we'd promote more programs and more use of it. When I have school kids, we have to stick them all in the birthplace, so we have to divide them up. Once we have this one building, we can alter the programming. We try to offer them a number of programs. We hope to increase that, not just for school kids, but for the public, too.

Moderator: How would you like to push tourism?

The guy I talked to, he said we have a lot down here, and it's all about getting it all tied in. Get a lot to offer. A lot of room for people to mill around, and they'll want to eat here and stay here. And a lot could be tied in with Branson and Precious Moments. Everybody's going to Branson. We take that at face value, but we could tie some of the local things together to draw them. We have a lot of senior citizens coming through to go to Carthage and Branson.

(agreement.)

It's easy access. The Truman Home here is easy access. In Independence, that home isn't as easy to get to. A lot of people comment about how easy it is to get to, despite the signage. They think our town is nice.

Moderator: Is there anything you'd change about the look and feel of Downtown?

We had this project in the 80's, and everybody came in and changed the look of the buildings, and now we need to go back to the old style. The old, original look.

There's some nice architectural details that aren't being utilized.

Sometimes I feel like I'm taking my life in my hands as a pedestrian on the Square. That would be one... also, the Courthouse is pretty, but if you're on one side or the other, it's just traffic and parking and traffic and parking.

I think part of the Next Step 2030 was to do away with some parking spaces, but that ruffled some feathers.

But if you're talking about aesthetics, it's so many cars.

They'd like to get away from cars and get a little more foot traffic. I think people would get used to it.

People who block off their Squares usually open it back out. In Neosho, the County's not in favor of it... Springfield is a little different, but it lasted only for 10 years in Springfield. They've got traffic back, and they've got business.

(many people talking at once.)

It's kind of rough to plant trees where you're going to have the fair, though. The fairgrounds.

Yeah.

Moderator: I just have one last question. Are there other Downtowns you've been to that you'd like to emulate?

I think we've got the second-largest Downtown in the state. Carthage has a beautiful Downtown. But Lamar's got a lot to work with.

Joplin has done a nice job on their main street on façades and lighting and wastebaskets, and everything looks thematic and charming. Not matching, but very nice.

Storefronts. We need to get some of the check-cashing places to turn into other things.

(unintelligible)...shops and...

Fort Scott.

It has more retail, antique shops, specialty stores. Couple of unique restaurants.

Moderator: Thank you very much.

SECTION III

DOWNTOWN BUSINESS OWNERS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: *Tell me a little about your community.*

Lamar is the biggest little town you'll find. We have all kinds of amenities, a beautiful park, the third largest Square in Missouri, there's lots of stores and lots of commerce going on, we have movie theaters, we have an outdoor theater, and we have a lot that large cities have without the extra problems.

My husband and I are transplants from Southwest Nebraska, so moving here was—we didn't know anything about Lamar, and the things that we learned, it was just one wow after another. The people are wonderful.

The hospital. Our school's relatively new, too.

(unintelligible)...largest free fair in the state of Missouri.

Moderator: *Would you say that Lamar is moving in the right or wrong direction?*

It depends on who you ask. Some people don't want it to grow.

Yeah. And we'd like to change that.

More in the past two or three years, it's been taking steps backwards, being on the Square and seeing the furniture store and GM close. My goal would be to see every building on and around the Square occupied.

The economy's just killing us, though. It's just the last 3 years when we've been losing everything.

Moderator: *Where do you do your everyday shopping?*

Wal-Mart.

(agreement.)

Or outside of town.

Moderator: *Do people come from elsewhere?*

Yeah, for Wal-Mart.

We're kind of a hub, too, for Liberal, Pittsburgh. Sheldon.

Every small town around. They come to Lamar instead of going to Springfield.

Moderator: What about dining or entertainment opportunities?

Theaters, restaurants, more than a handful of things to do... (unintelligible)

Plays, other events that are happening here all the time.

We have festivals on a regular basis. Truman Days, and the fair. It shuts down everything for about a week.

We've never been accused of having fine dining.

(laughter.)

We go to Joplin or Springfield for fine dining. Or Kansas City.

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

Pretty stagnant. We haven't changed.

What would you do to change it?

(many people talking at once, unintelligible.)

...we want entrepreneurs. The Square isn't going to be a big business place. They're all big box retailers. If you want to be successful, you can't go head-to-head with a big retail, so we have to develop niche markets. Not always easy, but it has to be done.

(agreement, unintelligible.)

...that's just one idea. There's a lot of people out there with ideas, but they don't have any experience getting the money. If there's a fund there that they know they can go to, they can talk to someone, that's a lot easier for them to talk to one of us and have help guiding them through and developing a business plan.

A few months ago, we had 600 people who worked within a 2-block area on the Square. That's the equivalent of a manufacturing company.

600?

Yeah, I think so.

The two-block radius of the Square.

Including the courthouse?

Yeah.

(many people talking at once.)

I think there's a lot of very small markets. There's room for a pawn shop, a quality pawn shop. Friendly. There are bad pawn shops, but we need a good one. Different people have different ideas and interests, and they can turn that into a business if they're passionate about it and they want to do it. Most of what we've had in my store, some of it I can't believe how well we're doing with it. (mechanical noise, feedback, unintelligible)...\$5000 a month in sales, in Lamar!... it keeps growing. There's niche markets out there, if you take your interests and you find it.

Another company was Solem's, they don't sell retail out of their store, and they have a high-end product that they sell, but nobody knows about it. They do loans out of their storefront. There's lots of little businesses.

(side conversations.)

Moderator: Before we talk about the future about Downtown, let's talk about the present. Why did you choose to locate your business Downtown?

For me, it's history. We've had the same location since 1945, and the family owns the building. It's a no-brainer for me. And the history's really important. I want to keep the tradition.

I'm on the Square because of proximity to the courthouse.

I think it was the center of commerce, and now it's moved away.

Moderator: Let's talk about how user-friendly Downtown is. How are business hours?

I hear a lot from the retail, it is not convenient as we would like it. They close at 5:30, 6:00. They've tried staying open later, and it doesn't really work, or on Saturdays. Once the banks close on the Square, it shuts down on Saturdays. We have a bandstand on our Square, and the Chamber is doing a night where an organization does a food and music fundraiser, and Java Mule has an open mic night. We have a lot of events that we really try to open those doors for later hours, but on a regular basis, 5:30, 6:00 is probably the latest.

We stay open until 9:00 on Fridays... every so often, somebody wanders through, and they think it's great we're there. But if I didn't have money coming in from elsewhere...

I think...(unintelligible)...they would blow in from the east and west, from 3 to 5 or so, and then everyone would leave, so you had heavy lunch crowd. But we've lost 1200 employees.

I call on about 20 clients every week, so I really try to keep... you understand that things are really going downhill when you hear the liquor stores and tobacco companies aren't doing well.

Moderator: Is there enough parking Downtown?

I think parking's great.

We have one of the easier squares to maneuver. If you go to Carthage, you're confused.

(agreement.)

I think our Square's unique. I had a guy here yesterday from St. Joe, and he said, "I want to catch the Square before I leave," and he thought it was unique. He thought it was awesome.

(many people talking at once, side conversations.)

Moderator: Do your customers have a hard time finding you?

Easy to find the Square because of the courthouse.

People forget there's retail on the Square. People come in saying, "I didn't know there was a jewelry store here."

(agreement.)

I think a lot of that is that nobody really thinks about retail when you come Downtown... (unintelligible)...things like that. A small restaurant would be great.

Moderator: What about the aesthetics of Downtown? Do you have any opinions about that?

I think the sidewalks are fine. I think the façades could use some work. Our building looks terrible.

What was it, in the early 80's, it was cool to cover up all that stuff. It's covers the eyes of our pretty buildings. They could be brought back.

The Square doesn't look all that great, but it's the best looking Square in Southwest Missouri. Try looking at some of these other towns, where there are a lot more empty buildings. Even Nevada's Square looks pretty bleak.

I think we have an opportunity because of our size. Nevada's just big enough that it was a mass exodus. I don't know if we need better signage on the highway or what we need to make them turn.

I think some of the things we've looked at is, the birthplace is just 4 blocks away from Downtown. We do have a historical society, and it's in the basement of the courthouse, but we'd like to get them eating lunch and shopping a little afterwards, or keep them at the hotel and go to Prairie State Park or something.

With signage on the highway?

I think it would help.

Let's look at Precious Moments. Their signage is everywhere. They want to make sure you know where you're at, because they're not on the beaten path.

Moderator: Do you feel that Downtown gets any of the Truman visitors shopping?

I get a lot of people who say the signage on the Square is terrible. They ask where stuff is all the time.

(agreement.)

A more pleasant customer experience, if they can figure out where they're going rather than stopping and asking. I think we capitalize on Wyatt Earp, too. Truman was only here for a little while, but they come in here for Wyatt Earp, too.

We had 3 or 4 Admirals from Lamar, too.

Yeah.

We have a huge, broad history. People always focus on Truman, but we forget about Wyatt Earp, the post-Civil-War border wars...

The courthouse was set on fire.

Yeah.

There's huge bits of history that we can latch on to. I don't think we should downplay Truman, but we should broaden the focus. At the economic summit we did, someone came from Kansas, and he asked, "Why didn't we see a sign about Wyatt Earp?" His family was here until the 70's.

Maybe the historical society should be bigger and better.

(agreement.)

Moved out of the dungeon and put up on a corner in a vacant building.

Great idea!

On the corner there...

(agreement.)

...and also, there's all that wonderful old machinery stuff, and that would bring people from all over the United States.

All of the old antique tractors.

Why are they not going to the supermarket?

The guy has turned it over to his son, and he spends most of his time in California. I think the place is falling in on itself. You turn the utilities off, and you're just asking for it to fall down.

(agreement, unintelligible.)

...the ice storm...

I know with the Truman Birthplace, they're trying to make it a national historic site, and there could be some funds there to do that. I know when I was on the Chamber, we were talking about the streetscape going from the Square to the birthplace. They could park on the Square and walk down that way.

Whatever happened to the tour bus deal? Getting on the route to Branson?

I think they were thinking that we needed more on the Square to hold them.

We do.

(agreement.)

I'd love to see the historical society out of the basement.

I think a lot of that is that it's free rent.

It's great that we have it now, but if we could get funding and make it self-sustained... we might have to charge a fee.

Shouldn't the Chamber be housed in that?

Maybe.

That's not the first time that's come up.

It just makes sense. A one-stop shop.

We have a rich history, and it's what I love about being here.

(side conversations.)

Several years ago, we were talking about doing like an Old West celebration, and have Wyatt Earp look-alikes, and have a fake burning of the courthouse. A show. Get people to come have a good time. At Silver Dollar City, every hour there's a shootout staged, and there's no historical accuracy, but people love it. They do Civil War Reenactments, and we never capitalize on those.

We've had several on the Square.

And they've been huge draws. They've been very successful. Now it's all run by volunteers, with little to no funding. Lamar's never asked for money from the government or the State. We raise our money.

Moderator: *No one's mentioned second-story residential space.*

We have one right now, and it's unoccupied. There was a business up there. But there's potential for at least 2 to 6 buildings.

We have great potential, especially on the west side of the Square, where Market Square is.

I don't really want anybody living above my store. The liability I'm worried about, because there's stairs. I don't want to be liable.

I think the reason people move to lofts is when there's a lot going on down there, a bar or restaurant down the street. The only reason they'd move here is because it's cheap.

If I didn't have children, I would.

I have a kid that I graduated high school with, and he's in Michigan, and he comes home at least once or twice a year, and he wants to know if we do anything with those loft apartments so he could have a nice place to stay.

There is one building up there that has, it probably was a boarding house, because it has a central meeting place, a small kitchen, and 7 to 10 rooms. Some of it's in bad shape, but it's there. We've considered making it a halfway house or something like that. It's just individual rooms.

Moderator: *The last phase of this is for us to dream a little. What would you like the Downtown to be like in the future? What kinds of businesses would flourish Downtown?*

Restaurants.

It'd be nice to have restaurants.

Casual dining.

People want fine dining, but I don't think there's enough people to support it.

The only thing is, it may not be what we want, but people may come here to go there.

See, if you could find somebody that had more money than brains...

(laughter.)

...to buy the old furniture store, buy the bar, knock a whole between, tear off the ugly façade...if we had proper marketing of ourselves...we don't market ourselves properly. We could get people to come.

From where?

All over. My dream is for people to come, spend their money, and then leave.

(laughter.)

There are those that don't want to grow. We wouldn't be growing, we'd just be getting their money. We don't need for them to live here, we just need their money.

(many people talking at once.)

...controlled growth. We need controlled growth.

There is a magic number that will support the things we want, and it's just a few thousand more than what we're at right now.

We lost a thousand workers, and that's a thousand fewer people who aren't spending.

Everyone's struggling because we're competing with each other. The Elks Club, the Country Club, all having Saturday night events, and there's not enough of us to go around.

My husband works out of town, and he does his business there. The biggest problem we have is O'Sullivan is gone, so it's hit us at home. He runs by something on the way home.

It's our major employer we've lost.

That's what's really hurt us. The DREAM initiative is great for Downtown, but I'd like to see us bring in more high-caliber jobs into Lamar. Engineering or something that pays a little more than living wage. Most factories don't. I'd like to see a few more white-collar opportunities. For educated people to make a decent living.

(side conversations.)

Maybe we might just see a couple of businesses...we'll take what we can get.

I'd take ten 100-employee companies over one 1000-employee one.

I think it makes sense not to put our eggs in one basket. We knew O'Sullivan was going to go, but we didn't get up and do anything about it. Now there's a whole mess with the building and all that... We need manual labor jobs, because there are people who are good at that, but offering that variety... if you want to support fine dining, we need people of a different social strata. Lawyers and retailers and professionals. We need a set of jobs where people can make 30, 40,000 dollars a year. I'd like to see people with more disposable income. I don't sell essentials. When times get really tight, you're going to choose a bar of soap over luxuries. You may lose rental income, you may lose business...

The problem we're having is that the vacancies are moving out of town rather than to another property. We have 8 out of 10 notices relocating this spring.

Another thing, Barton County is a huge farming community, and there's another group who's trying to look at Barton County as bringing income through this. Soybean area or a corn area. Pharmaceuticals have been looked at more than once because of the soybeans. This group is trying to market that, or a pellet that would be made out of the byproducts, and they want to market it to Kansas City Light and Power, and that would bring higher-paying jobs to Lamar.

So what we need is economic development.

I think it's vital.

It all goes hand-in-hand.

(agreement.)

We don't have a lot of time to spend on focus groups and all that, but the DREAM initiative is a long-term program...

Everything feeds off each other.

This is going to be a great program as we move forward. Maybe we could do solar power, generate enough electricity off the grid with solar panels. We have flat roofs, and it would extend the life of the roof, and it would generate another source of economic development for the whole community by meeting Lamar's power needs. It's an idea that's been tossed around. And it's a great selling point, and it could bring in more industry. If we are a green town, like (unintelligible)... they're rebuilding green, and they're constantly on the news... that's got to look good to big employers. We want to be on the side of green. Big companies are trying to go green.

Put windmills on that golf course. Those windmills run up and down the highway, and they stop to gas up in our town. These are huge. It would be an awesome opportunity. Back to your original question, though... I was in a wonderful town, Portsmouth, Maine, and I loved it. They had shoe shops, dress shops, bistros, little bars with live music on Friday nights, people playing their guitars, a bistro coffee shop, and everybody was outside walking around, shopping, having a great time, and it was very period-like, going back to what the Square used to look like 40 years ago. I wish I could've captured that. This is what Lamar needs to be.

There isn't alcohol served in restaurants in Lamar.

(laughter, agreement.)

Why can't we have a beer garden, my wife would ask, but you just can't—it won't be allowed. It's not going to happen.

I understand the liability issue, but I don't understand the logic of it.

It's not like it's never been tried anywhere.

It's not going to lead to selling crack on the street.

Moderator: What other kinds of businesses would target tourists?

What I think we need to do is have lots of little bitty shops where you don't have a lot of overhead. A lot of people go under because of overhead.

I know, certain months of the year...

This is still a unique time, though. It didn't used to be like that.

If you had a shop, though. Say you had 6 or 8 tiny shops in one building all selling something different, wouldn't you go there and mill around if you went to the birthplace and walked up a beautiful streetscape and you saw 7 or 8 shops. Those people on those tour buses have money.

(agreement, microphone noise.)

... people in Branson are happy to spend money. Here, they hang on to it, but in Branson, they come to have fun.

That goes back to what I said. I want them to come, spend their money, and leave. And we can be that, but we're going to have to work at it and figure out exactly what to do.

(agreement.)

We need to market ourselves properly.

...Website...

...I want to get on the highway and see signage.

We're talking about redoing our website so that Lamar comes up on search engines for Wyatt Earp and Truman. People know about Wyatt Earp, though. Truman did just one big thing, but Wyatt Earp has mystique about him. They make movies about it. If we could come up on the major search engines, we could bring in traffic. The other project we're working on is to get everybody's websites tied together, so we're all feeding each other back and forth, and we're getting traffic coming into Lamar. They don't even have to come, just send their credit card numbers to us. That's just one idea we're pursuing.

Moderator: What about the look and feel of Downtown?

I'd like to see... there's been a lot of metal façade stuff.

In the eighties.

(many people talking at once.)

There was a major community betterment in the 70's, but nothing's been done in 35 years.

We put up some awnings.

In the 50's and 60's.

No, it was later.

I think that was in the early 90's.

I would like to see us go back to a 50's look, because that's what the community wants, a nice community feel to come to the Square and hang out with each other. When I was growing up, the Christmas lighting was a big deal, and everyone was on the Square. Now, the lights come on and everybody scatters.

It's getting where there's less and less to offer.

Yeah.

(agreement.)

We had clothing stores, shoe stores...

Yeah.

I wish the shops there got more attention.

(many people talking at once.)

We need more to keep them down there.

I think a 50's look would help.

We have a new outpost in 50's style, and we've carried that theme to the park. At Christmas, we have the snowflakes. It's something we try to do to get people in.

(unintelligible noise.)

Moderator: Is there anything that the City could do for you?

Tax breaks. For property tax on the Square. They were giving cuts to people outside of Downtown.

The electric that's paid on the Square is higher than... than a regular residential...

But I thought property tax...

...commercial's at a higher rate...

(many people talking at once about tax rates.)

...you know, if we could get some kind of tax break, we could create new jobs. Some kind of a kickback for creating that job. Just a little bit of a tax break. I've got payroll every week, and payroll taxes at the end of the month are insane...

The City could do new Christmas lights.

And the courthouse...

(laughter.)

I like the old colored lights on the Courthouse.

Yeah.

Aren't they colored?

Yeah.

Moderator: *I have just one more question. There's been some buzz about special Downtown tax to beautify Downtown. Is that something that would work here in Lamar?*

You talking about a sales tax?

Moderator: *A special district tax.*

We're already one of the highest in the state.

I think it would be worthless and it would be harmful. I don't think there's enough retail going on for it to make a difference. I don't think it would work out very good.

(agreement.)

Moderator: *Thank you very much.*

SECTION IV

LONG TIME RESIDENTS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: Could you tell me a little about Lamar as a community?

Well, like I was saying earlier, Lamar's very welcoming, and in all of the little things I've been involved in, the community's a very giving community. If we can get the need across, the community's very receptive and very giving.

I agree.

What would you say?

I think there's some things for the community to offer to live here. It's very nice, and it's like a lot of communities. People are patriotic and comfortable, and that's natural. Of course, the way it plays out is that everybody's looking for a better mousetrap to bring traffic to their area. Everybody's got opinions, and people who are better versed in these studies have more factual information, but there's things that could do that. To make the Downtown thrive, for how many years have people tried to focus on revitalizing Downtown business? It's changing; it's not what it used to be, and what does that future hold?

You know, I've said for quite a long time that what we really need is, instead of... I mean, when Roberts department store went out...think about the overhead they had to pay. If you were to take a building like that, and put 5 or 6 little bitty shops, knick knacks and stuff like that, kind of a little mall like thing...none of us have a bunch of overhead. If we did co-op advertising, or something. My dream is that we can do something to get people to drive up and go on the Square, spend their money, and then get out of Dodge.

I don't know that that'll happen. I'm going to be opposite view there. I don't think that'll happen, because how many knick knacks are people going to buy?

But we have so many assets that people don't know about. We've got the Truman Birthplace, and people come and get in their cars and drive off, but they could come to the Square. Those people in those buses have money in their pocket.

I think that's a strong point to refocus on the Truman Birthplace, and that needs to be promoted and marketed.

And Wyatt Earp.

That has historical significance.

That kind of thing could be promoted. Then, I think the knick knock stores could follow that kind of thing. The Horton five and dime thing, that couldn't make it, so now he's gone to the more modern business thing of Internet. That's the market for that kind of stuff. The antique mall thing would be hard to make work.

But I'm talking about a vintage market square. _____ has jewelry that's handmade by...

But it's struggling.

But if we had a whole bunch of those, and we were marketing ourselves properly...

I think your key focus would follow a following of the Truman tourism. It's a key tourism attraction. And more of that type of thing would develop, but that would be the main focus. _____ was instrumental in redoing the theater, and that'll be a side attraction, but the key attraction would bring people here.

What is the word that we're looking for...?

(Someone else joins the conversation, introduces himself.)

We were just talking about the future. What do you think?

I was just thinking about what we need to be doing, and we've got a lot of empty buildings that need to get filled up, and we need to enhance the look of the Square again. We did that years ago, we spruced up the old fronts, and some of those are getting a little bit dated. Still looks pretty good. I was just up in Nevada, and their Square looks better than ours does, more full buildings. I think we need to fill up that Barrymore store... the furniture factory outlet, that's a big space.

What _____ and I were just talking about is, people, back in the early 1900's, everybody had their own little business. There are a lot of people who'd like to, but they can't afford it because of the overhead. But when Roberts closed, if you had that store or a Barrymore, and you had 5 or 6 little shops, knick knacks, jewelry, up-to-date clothes for the young girls, I think that would draw people to Lamar, as well as the Truman Birthplace. The Downtown Association has had dreams of doing 11th street with lampposts, sidewalks, benches...

I've heard that that was the plan. This corner building over here, where the computer guy is, I had the yarn shop, I had the nail people that did nails, I had... the craft shop. Over the last 6 or 7 years, I've had at least 4 or 5 of these small businesses.

But, the amount of rent that you have to have is more than a little bitty place. I'm talking about a tiny place, to where everybody helped paid the utilities, the rent...

Like a mini-mall.

But...

I mean, like a mini-mall inside a building.

I don't know what the answer is, but I'm thinking...

As far as development, we're our own worst enemy and our own competitor. Future development... if Lamar Heights were part of the City of Lamar, that corner would develop more rapidly. Interstate roads lead to community development. That, out on the highway, would be where the development was... but the tourist attraction would be Downtown.

Right now, and it's a bad situation, but the City is bullheaded... yeah...about letting those people hook on to the sewer, and trying to get Lamar Heights on board.

Moderator: *We're talking about the future of Downtown, but I'd like to hear about Downtown as it is right now. Why do people come Downtown?*

They come Downtown to go to the lawyer or the insurance agent, banks...

We've got four banks.

Yeah, and O'Sullivan properties is upstairs. We've got lots of space upstairs we can use, whether it be loft apartments or, I don't know. I could go on forever.

Down in Neosho, there's a gentleman there, and he's done a lot of refurbishing of Downtown buildings using the upper story for living quarters and the lower portion for offices, lawyers, real estate, and they're doing quite successful with their Downtown revitalization.

They're a DREAM community.

They even got all the city lights lowered because they were shining in their windows. It transitioned the use of Downtown. We should see what they've done.

Remember when we were trying to get the outlet malls? I went around and spoke to a lot of lawyers and so on, and... and this yahoo that we hired told us that \$14/sq. ft. was the going rate, and we got taken to the cleaners on that deal. But when I called a lot of these stores, they won't even talk to you if you're under 50,000 in population. But they don't understand the assets our community has.

Was it true that Walgreen's did look at this old church property?

Maybe.

I have faith that there's a basis to that rumor, but I can't verify it.

Moderator: *You mentioned the size of population. Do people come to Lamar to shop?*

This is a hub.

But they go to Joplin. But if I can't pick it up in Lamar... I have yet to go to the new Wal-Mart, though. If I'm fighting to save the Square, why should I shop at Wal-Mart?

It's a new Wal-Mart.

It was a smart move, on their part.

And the old building is now occupied by a company that had never been to Lamar.

But the old supermarket building is just falling in on itself. Especially if he doesn't have any utilities on.

He spends most of his time in California, and he left it to someone else to run it.

Somebody was talking about, the other day, that would be a good place for a Good Samaritan.

Moderator: A couple of general things. What do you do for dining and entertainment?

Go to McDonald's or Denny's.

The theater.

Recently, we have one of the few drive-in theaters in the area, and we're showing double features. But as far as dining, we've got two places on the Square that would be super, dynamite places... in fact, I would like to see somebody that had more money than brains to buy that corner building and tear that horrible brick off the front, and make the used furniture side into a nice covered dining area.

I guess somebody had that idea, um, I heard.

It takes so much money.

I know. I see where the donut shop is going to start serving lunch, which is interesting. Daylight Donuts. And the same people had a nice restaurant across the street, and it didn't make it...

It's really hard to make it in the restaurant business. You got to be able to sustain yourself for 5 years.

With our population base, I think considering other towns... Nevada is over twice our size, and they have worse restaurants than we do. They got a Ziggy's, but it's not that...

It's nothing to write home about.

It's a chain.

I'm talking about a nice, white tablecloth, flower in your... I have big dreams.

It would be difficult to administer, but if some way, we could... the Downtown, I mean... we could come up with a bucketful of money that we could say, "hey, we will pay your rent for 6 months," or whatever. When I was out looking for towns for, Butler just squeezed me to death, and same with Cassville... we aren't thinking in those terms as a City, but even as a Downtown group. Say, okay, we're going to collect some money and help people out. Help them get in business. That's going to be controversial. But, sometimes, you got to have a carrot to throw out there, and when you've got empty buildings and you want to get activity going to draw in people...

You've got to make it attractive. Make people want to be here.

(side conversations.)

Moderator: *As Downtown is right now, how user-friendly is it? Business hours, parking, navigation?*

I think it's... I think, they're, basically everything's open during the lunch hour. They close at 5, though. You can't do anything after 5 on the Square.

Saturday, you could shoot a cannon through the town, and you wouldn't hit anyone. And in the old days, that's when everything happened.

Parking isn't an issue.

We've got plenty of parking. The Moore pavilion, too. We are developing a farmer's market, and it will be underneath the pavilion, so hopefully that will bring people.

Some of the people didn't want to go there, so we saw them scattered out on 160.

We are very well organized this time. Those people, I threw up my hands. You've got this beautiful pavilion, but they told me they'd rather be in the Baptist Church parking lot, and I thought I don't care. This group is very well organized, though. They're going to do signage.

Moderator: *Is it easy for people to find their way Downtown?*

The Downtown Association has put a sign out, coming back from Wal-Mart from 71. As you're headed south, there's a sign that says, Welcome to Historic Downtown Lamar, 1 mile, with an arrow. It's great in the daytime, but at night you can't see it, so we have recently, that's going to be lit, and there's going to be a sign underneath it...it's advertising what's going on this weekend. Did you kids come from heading east?

Moderator: *We came westbound from 160.*

There's a sign there that points. I don't have any trouble finding it.

I noticed Nevada has a big new sign, with some punch-line about their city. It's something like "The Land of Opportunity." It's a good sized sign, and both ways on 71.

They always have their festivals, their Bushwhacker Days, and they capitalize on it.

Look at our historical society. We've got a great one, but it's in the basement of the courthouse.

Why aren't we talking about Wyatt Earp? That might create a tremendous amount of interest.

Colonels, Wyatt Earp, Truman... we need to exploit them. We need tourism. We need to work on our tourism. What is it we're trying to get for the City? Isn't that ridiculous? An economic development director. If we had someone, we need to get that accomplished.

I think there's funding. I put together a five-year plan, and my feeling is, if we're going to hire for the County a development director, we need to say, "This position is high level, it's funded for five years, and we expect results." They'd have to be well paid, well staffed, covered in travel and advertising...

(agreement.)

The City's got \$100,000 in their budget, but we can go to the banks and businesses and get involvement in this thing, not just because of the money...

Take ownership.

Yeah. Hopefully, they're going to feel like they've got ownership in this thing. And they will. It'll happen. We've always been able to do that in good times, bad times, whatever. That, obviously, once you start exposing the town, you get not only industry but things to support industry. Small business, small retail. We had _____ talk at ____ today. Did you know they were doing all that?

Yeah, it's...

_____ is a forward thinker.

They're doing Internet business, and their antique mall is a thing of the past.

Moderator: How do people find out about what's going on Downtown?

Well, we have a local Channel 3, which you can post notices on. We have a newspaper on Wednesday and Saturday. We also have an exchange newspaper which is published once a week. Flyers. I don't know. In all of my dealings, I had it in all of those things, but people had no idea. People don't pay any attention.

The Chamber puts out information in the paper and, to some degree, flyers. You know, I don't know that people are paying attention.

They stop paying attention. I know, with the theater, people say, "I didn't know you were playing that." Do you want me to call everybody up every day?

Moderator: Is there a Chamber website?

Yeah. The Chamber has a website. I think we need to get people educated and get people to care.

I don't know what the answer is to that... people never know that I'm there. People are focused, and they're going to pay attention to what they're focused to.

People do talk about the Blue Top restaurant on their way from Minnesota.

Yeah. It's known...

That's the halfway point south, and they stop there to eat.

The Mayo Clinic, someone was talking about a bus tour. Get on the agenda for an attraction. Combine with Silver Dollar City or something.

We talked about that when we had a tourism group, getting on bus tours. They bring the bus tour up to the Square, and there's nothing there. We've got to put something on the Square before we start doing that.

Between Dots and the free market, they could spend 30 minutes on the Square. We've got friends from Minnesota. They always want to go to Dots. They spend an hour looking, walking around, and it's a neat place.

If we had several. Now, Dots has three shops. You go in this door, and you can walk through 3 shops. And they have different things. That's what I'm talking about... you might not be aware of it, but at Market Square, they have Claudia's, and she has really nice jewelry, handmade by a local artist, and they just got in a shipment of cute clothes made by the Mennonites. If we could get several more shops like that...

(side conversation, everyone talking at once.)

...working to get stuff on the blogs on the Internet.

...a local artist is going to give lessons and have a gallery there.

The gal that I had in here for a while, she didn't need that much space, just a little spot.

That's what I'm talking about. We just need to figure out a way to get all of these women who are trying to do this stuff at home, give them their own little shop.

Moderator: What kinds of businesses do you think would be a good fit for Downtown Lamar?

Well, we right now are in a very severe economic situation, and I personally know this gentleman who makes wonderful candles. His wife works at the hospital, and they're raising their grandchildren. They had a shop on the Square, but it was too much overhead. But if you had a little bitty shop, with all kinds of different stuff, and you'll get more traffic. I'm sure there are people out there.

If I was 10 or 20 years younger, I would buy this Barrymore thing and turn it into something. Some people want to tear it down.

No!

There are things that you can do with, but as business moves on the highway, it's going to be tougher to bring people down here. The Dairy Queen guy, he's got 4 doors that are still empty.

My dream for that a long time ago is, I wanted to get the railroad to get a train from Kansas City through Lamar and on to Branson or wherever that line goes.

Moderator: *What about things like parks or green space? Is there a need for that Downtown?*

We have a wonderful Parks and Rec department. We have 2 parks, actually. And we've got space for green space around the Square. I mean, Straum's burned, and that could be beautiful. Nevada made green spaces. I think that would be very becoming.

Moderator: *What about the look and feel of Downtown? What specific things should be priorities for improving the look and feel?*

My thought is, all it takes is somebody with an eye for historic buildings and a few gallons of paint.

Well, look at the arts council building. Just painting that. And the awnings, and so on and so forth. That's not that expensive. _____ owns a building with striped awnings, and it's beautiful.

Just a few gallons of paint, and a consistent color scheme.

(agreement.)

The ugliest building on the Square is where Barton County Home Care... and I almost had him convinced to rip that off the front and totally redo that, on the west side of the Square. That's what it takes. Ripping the façades off.

Get rid of the aluminum sheeting.

Take those awnings off, and put canvas awnings on.

Moderator: *Thinking about other Downtowns, which of those places would you like Lamar to resemble?*

I don't know...

We lost our only car dealership recently, and that's created a big space there.

Moderator: *Thank you.*