

# FOCUS GROUP SURVEY REPORT

## FINAL SURVEY FINDINGS AND RESULTS

CITY OF POPLAR BLUFF, MISSOURI

August 14, 2008



**D·R·E·A·M**  
I N I T I A T I V E



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION AND ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE FOR  
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## SECTION I FINAL REPORT

As part of the research for the DREAM Initiative, UNICOM-ARC conducted four focus groups in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. The purpose of these groups was to learn more about the priorities of the Poplar Bluff community in regard to the downtown area. The four groups included the following: 1) city staff and officials, 2) longtime residents, 3) business owners, and 4) newer residents.

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

### **A. QUESTIONS POSED TO THE BUSINESS GROUP:**

The following questions were posed to the business group:

#### **General Questions about Poplar Bluff**

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 or go 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 Poplar Bluff 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? Is there a need/demand for more housing downtown?
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?

## Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

08. As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Poplar Bluff. 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 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 posed to the general groups:

### **General Questions about Poplar Bluff**

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 or go 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 Poplar Bluff?

## Downtown Specific Questions

05. Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Poplar Bluff 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 Poplar Bluff? 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? Is there a need/demand for more housing downtown?
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 Poplar Bluff. 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 Poplar Bluff to resemble?

## C. THE POPLAR BLUFF 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?**

Participants in the focus groups described Poplar Bluff as a friendly small town with a good sense of community, strong religious roots, a good amount of retail chain shopping that draws nearby rural communities, many nearby outdoor recreation opportunities, and a good education system. All of these features, according to many participants, make Poplar Bluff a good place to raise a family. Housing is affordable, the cost of living is reasonable, and the community is small and tightly knit.

Poplar Bluff is a regional hub for surrounding rural towns, and people come in from surrounding towns much smaller than Poplar Bluff for employment, entertainment, and shopping. Since Poplar Bluff is within reach of larger communities with more shopping and entertainment such as Cape Girardeau, Jonesboro (Arkansas), and St. Louis, residents feel that they have access to the luxuries of bigger towns while still being able to live in a smaller environment.

Many participants felt that Poplar Bluff is moving slowly in the right direction, particularly in the last five years. A few downtown buildings have been renovated, and the citizens feel that the City government is progressive and is working toward change.

**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 areas in Poplar Bluff are the major chain stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, in strip malls by the highway. Downtown is not a main shopping area, but rather, a service area.

According to the groups, people come from about a large radius around Poplar Bluff, up to 75 miles, to do their shopping, mostly chain store shopping at places like Wal-Mart.

Many residents try to do their shopping in Poplar Bluff, but have trouble finding certain specialty or high-end items in town. For these, residents travel to Cape Girardeau or Jonesboro, Arkansas to go to malls. These items include a variety of men's, women's, and children's clothing, shoes, jewelry, sporting goods, 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 restaurants in Poplar Bluff, many of them large chains in strip centers by the highway, including Applebee's, Pasta House, and Ruby Tuesday's. Options in Poplar Bluff include casual dining, chain restaurants, Chinese restaurants, and diners. There are a few locally owned restaurants downtown that residents visit. The participants felt that there is a variety of dining options, but that a fine dining option in town, a wider variety of restaurants, longer business hours, and some outdoor seating would be welcome improvements.

For recreation and entertainment, Poplar Bluff has three museums, a movie theater, a bowling alley, a batting cage, an entertainment venue called the Coliseum, a stage theater company, and an eight-plex movie theater. The Coliseum has programs ranging from music to sports to comedians, and the local theater company puts on five to six plays a year.

#### **D. DOWNTOWN POPLAR BLUFF: DESCRIBING THE PRESENT**

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

Many participants felt that downtown Poplar Bluff has been moving in the right direction within the last five years, though slowly. They felt that the few renovations downtown have been positive, that downtown feels safer than it did a few years ago, and that special programs bring more people downtown than before. Many also felt, though, that there is a lot of unrealized potential that would make downtown Poplar Bluff move even further in the right direction—adding more businesses and retail, adding higher-end residential space, improving lighting and signage, and beautifying downtown.

**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 the low cost and large amount of available space as major reasons they located their businesses downtown. Participants indicated, in different points in the discussion, that new businesses might be attracted in the future if the City focuses on building repair and renovation, beautification efforts, improving user-friendliness, residential developments, and a higher number of shops in the area. Monetary incentives for building owners to renovate their buildings were also suggested for making the downtown more attractive to business owners.

**General Public: What are the major reasons you visit downtown? How often do you visit downtown Poplar Bluff? 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, accountants, and banks, a few restaurants and stores, bars, and special events. Services were the biggest reason people visit downtown.

**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 had a number of concerns about user-friendliness, including parking, one-way streets, safety, business hours, lighting, signage, streets, and sidewalks.

The parking situation, as some described it, is a “perceived problem”—people believe that parking downtown is a problem, but in fact there are ample parking spaces downtown. There is a parking garage at the edge of downtown that has enough capacity to serve anyone coming downtown. The participants brought up the issue that business owners, business employees, and

courthouse employees sometimes take up all the spots along the street. Some participants mentioned that some people want to park directly in front of the store rather than walking. They also felt that the parking garage feels unsafe, and therefore people are reluctant to park there. Finally, the participants felt that if the downtown were more populated with storefronts, people would not mind walking as much.

The one-way streets were also a major concern in user-friendliness. Currently, having the streets one-way is more of a problem than a benefit. The groups unanimously agreed that two-way streets would make navigation easier.

Safety, or the perception of safety, was an issue as well. Whether or not downtown is completely safe, there is a perception that it is unsafe. The bars downtown and the homeless population contribute to this. The groups suggested that a stronger police presence may help alleviate fears, as well as beautifying the downtown, bringing in more businesses, and improving lighting.

The business hours in downtown, according to some participants, are problematic, especially regarding evenings and weekends. Most of the shops are open only from 8:00 or 9:00 AM to 5:00 or 5:30 PM on weekdays, which makes it impossible 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, and the malls in Cape Girardeau, are open in the evenings and on weekends. The participants also felt that restaurant hours are inconvenient, since a few restaurants serve breakfast and lunch only.

Lighting and signage were concerns, since better lighting would help people feel safer downtown, improve navigation, and if the fixtures were historical-looking, improve aesthetics. Signage from all directions, in a historic style but still easily readable, would also help navigation.

Some in the groups brought up streets and sidewalks as user-friendliness issues as well. The groups were in agreement that streets and sidewalks needed to be improved, but were in disagreement about how. Some of the brick streets have been paved over, while others have not, but there is a debate about how to handle improving streets. Many people feel very strongly about stripping the paving and restoring the original brick streets, while others feel very strongly about paving over all of the streets. Most participants generally agreed that the aesthetics of bricks are nice, but many felt that brick streets are bumpy and hard to use. While most agreed that the streets must be improved, there was no consensus about how.

Considering housing, the groups felt that as downtown improves, there may be a demand for more housing. There are a few housing options under development currently, including housing for senior citizens. Some participants feel that loft-style housing might be attractive to young professionals and couples.

### **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 local cable channel, the Chamber of Commerce, the Internet, word-of-mouth, and the downtown marquee as the major ways they get information about downtown business and events. According to the participants, individual businesses in town have very informative websites.

## **E. DOWNTOWN POPLAR BLUFF: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

**As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Poplar Bluff. 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. For apparel, they suggested men's, women's, and children's clothing and a shoe store. For food, they suggested a coffee shop, an Internet café, and additional restaurants. In other types of businesses, they suggested candy stores, a nail salon, a beauty store, an antique store, a stationery store, a bookstore, a sporting goods store, a soda fountain, a drugstore, an ice cream shop, more professional offices, a skate park, and any other specialty store. They also suggested converting the Depot into usable retail or restaurant space.

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

Many felt that the downtown's purpose is not to compete with Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and the other large chains, nor is it to compete with the larger malls in Cape Girardeau; it is to offer a unique experience to customers. For this, the groups felt strongly that small business should be encouraged, and the City should find and offer incentives to potential 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?**

Participants identified a number of priorities for improving the aesthetics of downtown, all focusing on giving downtown a historic and cohesive look and feel. They suggested that building repair, streets and sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and green space, benches and trash cans, improving the parking garage, and improving the marquee should all be priorities

Building repair was the highest priority, since the participants felt that even if one or two buildings were renovated, if the others in between were still in disrepair, the downtown would not attract either businesses or customers. Group members felt that building owners should be given incentives to fix up their buildings and building codes should be more strictly enforced.

Streets and sidewalks were also a major user-friendliness issue. Many participants agreed that something should be done to improve the streets, but did not agree on whether those improvements would involve paving over the original bricks or exposing the original bricks. One group suggested that if the streets are paved, the original bricks should be removed and used for planters or other aesthetic features downtown. Sidewalks were also an important issue because the participants felt that downtown should be more pedestrian-friendly, particularly if senior citizens begin to move downtown.

Every focus group also discussed lighting. They felt that the streets should be well lit, and the lighting should fit the historical aesthetic the downtown is trying to create.

Green space was also a priority. Some suggested small areas of green space downtown, and others discussed a proposed riverwalk. Everyone was in agreement that more trees, planters, and other landscaping would make downtown look “cleaner” and more inviting.

Specific proposed improvements included adding heavy permanent trash cans downtown, adding heavy benches downtown, making the parking garage feel safer through lighting and a police presence, and improving the marquee by the Rogers Theater.

Generally, many groups focused on cleaning up the downtown and code enforcement as a priority.

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

The groups considered the following as the highest priorities: attracting retail and entertainment businesses, building repair and renovation, giving the downtown a cohesive and clean look and feel, and improving safety.

**General Public: What downtowns or areas of other communities would you most *like* Poplar Bluff to resemble?**

Members of the focus groups named the following small towns and larger cities as places they admire for various reasons: Paducah, Kentucky; Henderson, North Carolina; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Cape Girardeau, Missouri; Branson, Missouri; Liberty, Missouri; Hot Springs, Arkansas; Downtown St. Louis, Missouri; Springfield, Missouri; Columbia, Missouri, Washington, Missouri; Farmington, Missouri; and Jackson, Tennessee.

*In these cities, the participants admired the cohesive look and feel and the mix of businesses that draw people in. Groups paid particular attention to Paducah, Farmington, and Jackson as models.*

## F. KEY POINTS

Key points about the Poplar Bluff area:

- ◆ Poplar Bluff is a friendly small town with a good sense of community, strong religious roots, a good amount of retail chain shopping that draws nearby rural communities, many nearby outdoor recreation opportunities, and a good education system.
- ◆ Housing is affordable, the cost of living is reasonable, and the community is small and tightly knit.
- ◆ Poplar Bluff is a regional hub for surrounding rural towns, and people come in from surrounding towns much smaller than Poplar Bluff for employment, entertainment, and shopping.
- ◆ Residents feel that they have access to the luxuries of bigger towns within easy driving distance while still being able to live in a smaller environment.
- ◆ The participants felt that Poplar Bluff is moving slowly in the right direction, particularly in the last five years.

- ◆ The main shopping areas in Poplar Bluff are the major chain stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot, in strip malls by the highway.
- ◆ People come from about a large radius around Poplar Bluff, up to 75 miles, to do their shopping, mostly chain store shopping at places like Wal-Mart.
- ◆ Many residents try to do their shopping in Poplar Bluff, but have trouble finding certain specialty or high-end items in town, such as men's, women's, and children's clothing, shoes, jewelry, and sporting goods.
- ◆ There are a number of restaurants in Poplar Bluff, many of them large chains in strip centers by the highway, including Applebee's, Pasta House, and Ruby Tuesday's.
- ◆ In restaurant options, a fine dining option in town, a wider variety of restaurants, longer business hours, and some outdoor seating would be welcome improvements.
- ◆ For entertainment and recreation, Poplar Bluff has three museums, a movie theater, a bowling alley, a batting cage, an entertainment venue called the Coliseum, a stage theater company, and an eight-plex movie theater.

**Key points about downtown Poplar Bluff in the present:**

- ◆ Downtown Poplar Bluff has been moving slowly in the right direction within the last five years, particularly in renovations, special programs, and safety improvements.
- ◆ There is a lot of unrealized potential that would make downtown Poplar Bluff move even further in the right direction—adding more businesses and retail, adding higher-end residential space, improving lighting and signage, and beautifying downtown.
- ◆ Business owners cite the low cost and large amount of available space as major reasons they located their businesses downtown.
- ◆ New businesses might be attracted in the future if the City focuses on building repair and renovation, beautification efforts, improving user-friendliness, residential developments, a higher number of shops in the area, and financial incentives for building owners and businesses.
- ◆ People visit downtown for the courthouse, services such as attorneys, accountants, and banks, a few restaurants and stores, bars, and special events.
- ◆ There are a number of concerns about user-friendliness, including parking, one-way streets, safety, business hours, lighting, signage, streets, and sidewalks—these should be improved to make navigation easier and to increase safety.
- ◆ As downtown improves, there may be a demand for more housing.
- ◆ People get information about downtown through the newspaper, the local cable channel, the Chamber of Commerce, the Internet, word-of-mouth, and the downtown marquee.

### **Key points about the future of downtown Poplar Bluff:**

- ◆ Downtown Poplar Bluff 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.
- ◆ For apparel, men's, women's, and children's clothing and a shoe store would be welcome additions downtown.
- ◆ For food, a coffee shop, an Internet café, and additional restaurants would be welcome additions downtown.
- ◆ In other types of businesses, candy stores, a nail salon, a beauty store, an antique store, a stationery store, a bookstore, a sporting goods store, a soda fountain, a drugstore, an ice cream shop, more professional offices, a skate park, and any other specialty store would be welcome downtown.
- ◆ The Depot should be converted into usable retail or restaurant space.
- ◆ Small business should be encouraged, and the City should provide incentives and information to encourage small businesses to come downtown.
- ◆ Second-story lofts would help fill the buildings and keep a number of people downtown to patronize businesses.
- ◆ In aesthetics, the highest priorities are building repair, streets and sidewalks, lighting, landscaping and green space, benches and trash cans, improving the parking garage, and improving the marquee.
- ◆ Cleaning up the downtown and code enforcement are both priorities.
- ◆ The City should aim for a cohesive aesthetic, focusing on a historical look.
- ◆ The river should be incorporated more fully into downtown, and citizens like the idea of a riverwalk as part of downtown.
- ◆ Attracting retail and entertainment businesses, building repair and renovation, giving the downtown a cohesive and clean look and feel, and improving safety are the highest priorities.
- ◆ Poplar Bluff can learn from a number of cities, small and large, about ways to improve the downtown area; the participants focused on downtowns that have a thriving variety of businesses and a cohesive look and feel.

## SECTION II

### CITY STAFF AND ELECTED OFFICIALS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

**Moderator:** *Describe Poplar Bluff to me.*

I think there's a lot of things going on in town. A lot of times, people think we're small, and they don't think about the resources in this town, parks, library, museum, that most folks wouldn't think we'd have or they'd be quality. I think we've done a good job in those areas. Especially for children and senior citizens, the services available to them.

(agreement.)

I think we really do a great job in those areas.

I think it's not too big, not too small. It's just the right size. I've lived in Poplar Bluff my whole life, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

It's a unique community. I'm from St. Louis and moved here. In St. Louis, I couldn't imagine living anywhere but a big city, and I moved here, and it has the feel of a larger area. St. Louis, Cape Girardeau are close. And you have the library, the art museum, hunting, fishing, camping...you can do a lot of different things.

We're still an agricultural town, but we have a lot of industry for a town our size. The Mississippi goes East and South from here, but if you go North or West, the Ozarks, Clearwater Lake, Rockefeller, two nice golf courses in town...there's a lot of things that attract industry and retail. The County's population is 40,000, and our population has been the same since 1960, about 17,000, but we serve a tremendously large area as a retail center. And Memphis, St. Louis, Jeff City, Jonesboro, Little Rock...we're right smack in the middle.

We could almost do a brochure for day trips to Poplar Bluff.

When the 4-lane highway idea was brought up, I bet the farm that it would never pass...but there were more future-thinking people than I gave us credit for, and with completion of this, our future is bright.

**Moderator:** *Where do people go to do their everyday shopping?*

Wal-Mart (in unison)

Kroger

(many people talking about Wal-Mart)

**Moderator:** *What about dining or entertainment?*

Westwood.

(agreement)

If they come in May, Cinco de Mayo.

(laughter)

We're medium-scale with restaurants and stuff. (unintelligible) upscale restaurant.

Ruby Tuesday's and Applebee's.

Steak & Shake.

San Francisco Bread Company.

Buffalo Wild Wings.

Some specialty places. A Jazz Combo on weekends at one specialty place. Music's not bad sometimes, but really really small.

As far as that scale, entertainment. This and the Holiday Inn has most of the upscale stuff that people spend their money on.

Downtown, there's the Arts Center with a dinner theater and dance lesson.

We have a big golf tournament. Kids come in, and they want to play golf.

Movie theater. Hopefully a family entertainment center someday.

**Moderator: Let's talk about downtown. Would you say it's going in the right or wrong direction?**

I'd say it's on the right direction but it's at a hold. I don't see us going backwards, but I don't see us going forward very recently.

There's been some renovations. We're above the line...there wasn't anything below the line. There has been some developers downtown, and we're talking about some of the things we're looking at in housing.

What \_\_\_\_\_'s done with her building, and \_\_\_\_\_, and the post office is getting renovated now.

(agreement, unintelligible)

It's pretty much owned by different families, and in it's heyday, there was a soda fountain and a Woolworth's, it was a retail center, and that has changed. Those people have made a lot of money on those buildings and done little to maintain them, and consequently, they're falling down around them. We need some new money pumped in.

We had the banks downtown, the Credit Union and Commerce. US Bank is still there, but...

Southern Missouri's on the edge of our downtown, and US Bank is there, and the post office. It's gone from a retail center to a service center. The newspaper's down there... it's changed to a service thing.

(agreement.)

As far as retail, Dollar General and Hayes Furniture. At one time, there was several specialty things, jewelry stores and clothing.

***Moderator: Are there other reasons people come downtown?***

Courthouse, attorneys, title company.

Bars.

VFW.

A couple churches that are new downtown.

We still have City Hall and the jail.

I guess if you're going that far, I guess the library's considered downtown. It's under major renovation and expansion.

City Hall, Sheriff's Department, library...

Lawyers.

Gas Company. Are there any restaurants?

Myrtle's, Eatery, Jim & Jerry's.

Two of those aren't open in the evenings, though.

You've got a photography studio, chiropractor...

(many people talking at once.)

Architect.

Shoe store.

Hayes Music. Now they've done a big job on renovation.

(side conversations.)

Does Roger's Theater count as downtown?

I think it would.

They have a stage company with quarterly or monthly live theater.

They're doing stuff more often now.

It's above the line.

There's been some renovation, but there are a number of businesses that have gone out and buildings that have been torn down or burned down in the last few years, and there's not much new buildings or new investment.

(unintelligible...many people talking at once.)

Talking about the guidelines set up...

There's a preservation district that specifically addresses how things can be renovated.

***Moderator: How user-friendly is downtown? Is it easy to find your way around?***

No.

I don't think it's easy to find downtown.

It's these one-way streets.

It's because of the one-way street.

If you just come in, it's hard to find stuff, but once you live here, it's very easy.

The library sits on a one-way street going the wrong way.

One of the...when the library's up and running, we have over 10,000 people every month, and the biggest issue we have is parking. Once you get all the staff and employees parking downtown, there's not a lot left. We need to create more parking. It's an issue for the public to get around downtown, especially on court days. So many services, so many things happening downtown...once you get all those folks in here, it's difficult for others to find parking. And if people can't come up to the front door, if they have to walk a half a block, that's a mentality...

Wal-Mart, I guarantee you, I have to walk a lot more than if I park in the parking garage and walk to the library.

We have a parking garage that no one uses.

It doesn't get used by employees because it's two blocks from where they work.

I can't see my car from my desk.

(laughter, agreement.)

You know, at the same time, when downtown was filled with more hotspots...

(many people talking at once.)

Downtown was vibrant, there was people walking the streets all over the place, and they were doing it in the same atmosphere.

There was a lot more going on.

And we weren't collecting sales tax on most of it.

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

Again, a lot of businesses close up in the early afternoon or 5:00.

Maybe 6:00.

The Dollar General...but that pretty much serves as the walking traffic around the neighborhood. No one drives to Dollar General to shop.

On Saturday and Sunday, though, a lot of cars parked specifically for Dollar General.

Parking wouldn't be the issue if there was more stuff for them to do.

(participants asking the moderator questions about other cities.)

***Moderator: How do people in Poplar Bluff get information about what's going on downtown?***

Newspaper.

Newspaper.

Local cable channel. We advertise a lot of that stuff...

Chamber.

Marquee across the street.

Several organizations have websites that promote events.

Just about every kind of media you can think of.

Rarely do we use TV, though. I'm talking about Channel 12. Our cable has a thing we could run, though.

When you try to get local things on 12...they always arrive, but it's sometimes difficult to get some of the Cape or Jonesboro channels to cover stuff. But I'm amazed at how many things actually are on Channel 12.

It's not about downtown, though.

(many people talking at once.)

**Moderator: Do you think there's a need or demand for housing downtown?**

I think the town needs more affordable housing, apartments, and the downtown would be a good place to renovate second-story lofts for singles and couples.

The library issues over a hundred new library cards every month. We have a very transient population. I think that's also the experience in schools. From our perspective, especially the lower end, they're very transient, they're very mobile...that's a very large number. I was told, however, part of it was because we give picture cards, and they want that identification. We do issue a lot of library cards.

The housing that we have, the federal housing, is...it's like walking into a brand new facility. It's way above average. The housing that we have that isn't managed is below average. But the affordable managed housing, there's a real need for that... and I think it fits in well, to some degree, with almost all service or retail.

From our point of view, if you utilize downtown for apartments, someone needs to do a lot of renovations. There's old buildings that no one's ever done anything with them. If there was a fire, we'd lose a block. If you put apartments in there, it's not a good situation.

You'd love to have an apartment building taken down and built up to standards?

Yeah.

(agreement.)

You got to put the resources into it.

**Moderator: Rentals or condos? What kind of housing?**

Condos.

I think we're ready for condos.

There's only 2 in town...

(agreement.)

And again, the transients if they're looking for an apartment, they're not investment. It's a young, middle group that's looking for housing to settle down. There's a niche for that that isn't filled. Our apartment complexes are all on the outskirts right now.

**Moderator:** *Let's look to the future. Let me start by asking you what kinds of businesses you'd like to see downtown.*

I think you're not going to get us like Wal-Mart. It's going to have to be specialty shops and those kinds of things, for tourism attractions... a lot of people come through here.

Coffee shops or Internet cafes. Retail stores. People beg for retail, nail shops, beauty shops.

I don't want to misquote this, but we miss out on 70,000 people, getting them to the downtown area and away from Kroger and Wal-Mart, having them visit downtown.

This is a big city for a lot of people, and they come here to eat and shop.

If you were just going up and down Westwood, you would never know that there was a downtown. There's nothing there that says "historic district." When you get down here, there's a beautiful sign. But on Westwood, there's nothing there that says "we have a downtown."

They'll go for one thing downtown, but only if they can go to other things. They're not going to park for one thing.

We have a river that runs right through our city. That's why we're so interested in a riverwalk.

We're not different than other people. We're going to go to where the entertainment's at. So if you've got something downtown that's entertaining, specialty shops and theater...those people are really going to spend money.

And when the Theater lets out, there needs to be a place for them to get a cup of coffee and dinner. If you had something to keep them here a little longer...

But who's going to be first? Who's going to step in as that first business, renovating that first building...

If we could get the riverwalk, that'll draw people to town. Once that starts, there'll be a restaurant and a gift shop and whatever.

(noise, unintelligible.)

When the Coliseum lets out, if you have somewhere for people to go to for a few minutes, you'd have the place jam packed every time.

We've been on the Chamber's downtown revitalization committee, and we've been concerned with safety issues in order to draw people to downtown.

Those problems are related. When the buildings go down, the undesirables come in. When the property value comes up, and more people invest, those undesirables go out.

They originally wanted an archway over Main Street, and that was a neat idea. I was in a downtown recently, and they had that on the entrance and exit. As opposed to the green sign. This was in the plan the way it was originally designed... but you could do streelights or banners to change the visual, so you know you're in a different section of town.

We could light up behind the City Hall building.

(many people talking at once.)

Most downtowns do something decorative or something like that. We need to talk about what makes sense for us. If we do a bunch of stuff that doesn't draw retail or services downtown... there needs to be an impact from what we do.

***Moderator: That fits into my next question. What are the big priorities in terms of improving the look and feel of downtown?***

Safety. You've got to be safe before they come.

Signs.

I think it's the lighting.

It looks bad, when you go downtown. You can pick out a few buildings where they've done a really good job. But I think the overall façade of the downtown area needs to be improved. And I think one element brings another one on, and if you do that, it helps make it more attractive.

The apartment building... that guy's trying to renovate the apartments and bring the standards up.

That was unmanaged. The guy was in Sikeston, and he didn't have any idea...

The safety issue. The whole area's got to be uplifted, and then the undesirable element will leave. They don't like to be in well-lit areas.

One of the visual, architectural things in the city is the renovation of the theater. I know they're working on it, but every time I drive by that old, rusted sign, I think, "Is this what downtown is about?" If that sign was restored to its old grandeur...it's very prominent.

Maybe if they tied a banner to it.

Do we move it back?

Does moving the sidewalk help that?

Yeah.

The trucks clip it all the time.

(agreement, unintelligible.)

Smaller vehicles back then. Trucking has increased.

That could be a help, the "Welcome to downtown sign," and if they lit up Roger's Theater.

And if they could change the marquee, make it digital. They could talk about the theater, the library, the art museum.

Historically, would it be an issue if they kept that façade, but brought it in a little?

That was not an option.

The Historical Commission does a really good job, but they... one of the reasons it makes very little sense...

(laughter, side conversations.)

...it doesn't make sense to put a large investment on that marquee until we're sure it's safe.

And the County owns it.

That building is really beautiful, it's a nice old... it just needs somebody to spend a little money inside, and then that marquee is gorgeous.

The Roger's group appears to have some momentum going in these past two years.

(agreement.)

...what they were doing to refurbish was to invite restaurants in to serve appetizers and drinks. So you pull them in by having food in association with entertainment.

One of the things you can't do there is show a movie.

(many people talking at once.)

**Moderator: What about parks and recreation downtown? Is there a place for that?**

(laughter.)

A skate park would be good, at this facility right next door, and that may pan out. But the riverwalk, I see it different...if we ever did find a way to do that, I see it more of a park area than a retail...we've got a railroad track that isn't going to disappear, and it makes it difficult to make the river work as a retail area. I see it more of a park area that we can make look nice and possibly see some retail there. Initially, I think it'd be tough to attract much retail because of the location. An industrial park on one side and a railroad track on there other.

The fact that we have an Amtrak station here, for this size of community... (unintelligible)...the library probably once a month has commuters who want to use the library parking lot to leave their vehicles, because they don't want to leave it at the station.

We do have an Amtrak stop here.

We're having National Train Day on Friday.

I don't know if Amtrak is an asset or a liability.

There's no place downtown where they get on and off that train. Poplar Bluff looks scary from the Amtrak station.

(agreement.)

Well, it gets back to being well lit. It's not well lit.

(side conversations, unintelligible.)

Somebody's there at train time, though. You're not standing there by yourself.

As far as green spaces, there's a little space by the Clinton apartments, a little triangle...that would be an opportunity for downtown.

***Moderator: My last question is to consider other downtowns. What do you admire about any other downtowns?***

Branson.

Liberty, Missouri's Square.

Ice cream shops...

(many people talking at once.)

The Cape downtown.

Yeah, Cape's downtown is really nice.

Coffee shops. I think coffee shops downtown are great.

The riverwalk.

(unintelligible, many people talking.)

...parking...

...it looks nice...

I think something like Springfield...if you had something, whether it be a recreation facility... Their downtown was every bit as nice as ours when I went to school there.

They've come a long way.

They used to have a mall out in the county somewhere, and I didn't even know downtown was there, but you go down there now, and it's great.

Yeah, it's great.

Springfield is putting in a new library, I think.

I think we need a ballpark location right off downtown.

We've got tournaments all over the Mississippi, and if we could pull in tournaments for baseball or softball here... my boy does traveling wrestling, and we go to Southwest Missouri, St. Louis, but nothing here. People will stay in hotels and eat in restaurants.

And now we have the facility to do that.

(many people agreeing.)

I think the one thing that all the downtowns we've mentioned have in common is a lot of trees, plantings, aesthetic lights...the streetscape is a comfortable place to be.

It's inviting.

Hot Springs, and downtown St. Louis that they're working on...

Somebody's got to be willing to spend some money. Somewhere I went, their tree planters were all made of brick, and all the bricks came from the original streets.

Ooh, that's a touchy subject.

Some places pave their streets with asphalt, and all the sidewalks are brick, and the streetlights look like gas lamps. It looks beautiful.

***Moderator: So, brick streets are a touchy subject?***

Yeah.

We can't do anything to the brick streets except fix...we can't do concrete, we can't do asphalt, we can't even patch...

People either love them or hate them.

They're all covered up downtown, though, or removed.

They're covered because they became almost impossible to use.

They're 100 years old now.

If you start talking about brick streets, you're going to need a lot more time.

People like the aesthetics of the brick streets.

***Moderator: People like the aesthetics, but they don't like driving over it or the upkeep?***

Yeah.

A well-maintained streetscape is a major nightmare with the brick streets. The infrastructure of the streets...

I like the idea of recycling them and using them in other aesthetic places.

It can look really neat.

We should work on that plan.

Take it to a vote.

***Moderator: Thank you very much.***

## SECTION III

### LONGTIME RESIDENTS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

*Moderator: Describe Poplar Bluff to me.*

The location...we're 2 and half hours from St. Louis and from Memphis, so we have the best of both worlds. Two different cultures entirely.

And it's a small town, not a suburb of a city.

And we have a lot of scenic beauty around here...scenic riverways, rolling hills.

Swamps.

(laughter.)

Hunting, fishing, lakes.

It usually has a pretty balanced economy. We have agriculture, factories, guarantee check people...there's always, it's not a booming economy, but it's a pretty stable one.

Small town with access to two major cities, so you can enjoy the benefits of a small town environment but be in a metropolitan area in a couple hours.

The people are probably one of the strongest strengths. They're dedicated, consistent, high work ethic.

I like the climate. It's hot in the summer, but it's...

Four seasons.

We have a river that runs through our city that I think is a blessing. Not every city has a river, one that you can enjoy.

We have adequate medical facilities here...a VA hospital.

People don't think of Poplar Bluff as a shopping center, but we draw a lot of the smaller communities around us. They do a lot of shopping here.

I think the education system is a plus for us.

The draw in the community is over 40,000 people.

We have a community college, so people can stay at home here and continue their education for two years, and we have 4-year schools nearby.

We have a very good public library.

Parks.

***Moderator: Do people stay in town to do all their shopping?***

Speaking for myself, I stay and I leave. I do what I can here, but if I can't, I have to go someplace else. There are a lot of people who do a lot of shopping here in Poplar Bluff.

We're the gateway to the Ozarks.

The clothing industry's probably not very strong.

The Amtrak train service is here.

***Moderator: Does anyone else leave town to shop?***

I do. I try to shop here, but it's limited. I go to Memphis, St. Louis, or Cape sometimes. And there are some arts things here, which is good, but you go to those three cities for some of the arts too.

***Moderator: Is there a specific area that people have to leave town for?***

A department store, like Macy's.

***Moderator: Does anybody do all their shopping here?***

I do, but I'm not a shopper.

With the improvement of 60 east and 67 north, we're going to be more of a crossroads.

***Moderator: What else other than women's clothing are you light on?***

The men's clothing is pretty limited. It depends on your taste. If you want more expensive stuff, it's limited.

Some of us lived in a city, and you get used to a lot more choice. You don't have to leave...

We've got some electronics, but some of us leave for Circuit City and Best Buy.

There is an electronic thing that I tried to buy here, but I couldn't, so I went to Cape.

I go to Cape for electronics.

I can think of something else for my home that I tried a few places here, and I had to go to Cape to get it. Gas logs. You can get them here, but what I wanted was not that unusual...and you couldn't see 'em here. You had to look at pictures.

I'd also like to comment on the restaurants. At least in the four years I've been back home, I've seen improvement in the restaurants, but there's way too much fast food. I understand that it drives our society, but it's not always the best, and it's not always attractive.

I agree with that, but when I decided to leave a city and move back here...there were 3 things I saw as a negative. One was shopping. The other was restaurants. I knew that was going to be...and I find that frustrating. I don't want to go out all the time, but I'm so tired of the 3 or 4 places here that aren't fast food.

**Moderator: Does everybody else agree?**

Yes.

Absolutely.

I think over the long haul, there's been tremendous improvement. It's all relative in that respect.

**Moderator: Do you have any good stand-alone restaurants?**

There are several that are locally owned.

We've closed as many as we've opened. I don't know what that means, whether people aren't supporting them or we aren't getting the right kinds of restaurants...

**Moderator: Do people leave town to go to eat?**

A lot of people leave town.

I eat and shop. I make a trip of it. It's not specifically to eat. People here are just not accustomed to...they don't want more culture or more choice...(unintelligible)

**Moderator: What about entertainment options?**

We have 3 museums, which is unusual for a community of this size. History, art, and railroad.

**Moderator: Do they bring visitors?**

I'm not sure I can answer that.

It's probably just cultural things...

We've got some things at the Coliseum that are pretty good, too. But most of the things here I can't categorize.

Just the entertainment activities.

You know, a tractor pull might appeal to somebody that...

Wrestling.

They put on several things here, bands and comedians and wrestling...there's just different things at the Coliseum.

And there's local music that people like.

We have a stage company, local drama productions. They're renovating an old theater here in town.

We have a lot of musicians who are probably more bluegrass and country...we have a lot of them here.

**Moderator: What are other entertainment options?**

Movie theater, bowling alley.

Parks. Batting cage.

We have an 8-plex theater which shows notoriously bad movies.

We do have a good park department, with youth programs...sports...

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

I'm not sure it's moving at all.

(agreement.)

It's stagnant.

I think there are pockets of places that you can find, like the Hayes building, which is a real example of some of the architecture still remaining. There's a restaurant called the Eatery in an old bank building. So you can find pockets of things being done, but my wish is that the DREAM initiative would help bring some of those things together rather than just a new roof here and a little thing there...

One of the more important things that's been done is the Downtown Historic Preservation, which was expanded just recently. That has definitely been a major thing. Downtown has many features of a historic nature that we can capitalize on, and now that the preservation covers most of downtown, it'll impact the buildings...they can't go in and put up a metal building. They have to make it fit in to the way the city should look downtown. That's a real good jumping place to get into doing something downtown.

About 10 years ago, we were named one of Missouri's 8 national Main Street cities, and you can see several things that were done because of that, and then it became derailed, and I think the city lost interest and did not continue their funding. There was a change in leadership. And I thought there would be never be another opportunity, and I think the DREAM initiative is truly a gift, and I hope we don't pass that up.

I think our biggest asset downtown is the river, and they're planning on putting in a riverwalk...we've got two really good parks along the river, and they're being utilized very well, but there's got to be more than just that. It's used maybe 3 times a year, but it should be utilized every weekend. It's on the river, near the river...bringing people into town on Friday and Saturday nights. I think it was tried once, and it didn't work, but that's where the action needs to be. And something needs to be done about the buildings, to bring people to the downtown area.

I agree. I think that broadening the historic district has really been a positive, and is the start to trying to revitalize downtown, but the more I've thought of it, I think that the average taxpayer or citizen needs to know more about what has happened in towns like Washington, Missouri, when they have developed the downtown and what it's done for their town. If the newspaper would run articles on some of these towns that have done that...some of the property owners see this as just a headache, and I think we need to educate people about the value of having a really nice downtown, that it would help them by drawing more retail and whatever. I hope that we can reach out to people so they can understand that if you have a vital downtown, it only is a positive for everybody.

I would have to agree. I think that with some of these property owners, they do see it as a business venture. They don't see it the way residents see it. The residents...the town's going to have to promote this thing. The majority of people that own those buildings are not from Poplar Bluff. Even if they are, they no longer have the appreciation.

***Moderator: What reasons do you go downtown?***

Pay taxes.

Not many.

Post office and courthouse.

I go to the Eatery.

I drive down a lot just to look at it, but I wish that it were better.

Sometimes I drive down and remember what it was like in the 50's, how wonderful it was.

***Moderator: What did you used to do downtown?***

Everything.

That's where all the retail was, before Wal-Mart.

We had 3 theaters downtown.

Banks were all down there.

You went there everyday.

Clothing places.

There were jewelers, gift shops.

Department stores.

Grocery stores.

Gas stations on the corner.

You could eat downtown. There were several places with good food.

People lived downtown, above all of the businesses.

That's probably in the planning stages to be put back.

***Moderator: Does anyone live downtown?***

The only living we allow downtown is in caretaker mode, where they have to own the property. Downtown living is not allowed. But that's being changed, because we're looking at an elderly living facility downtown. That'll improve downtown a lot... I've listened to other citizens, and many of the ideas are much the same. That is part of the new comprehensive plan.

We do have some people living down there, some apartments at Main and Broadway.

Yes.

I think there's some people on some other buildings on Broadway.

They're given permits to live there.

(side conversations.)

...there is an apartment complex...

...we're trying to work on improving...

Residents could draw a grocery store, a drugstore, places for people to shop.

***Moderator: Is there interest in people living downtown?***

We've been approached numerous times for that, yes.

Without traffic downtown, it's going to be hard to build downtown. There needs to be people living down there. There has to be a connection between the park and the Coliseum. We have to have things to bring in money.

To go back to Wal-Mart, the supercenter out there was number 5. It was the 5<sup>th</sup>. This is really a Wal-Mart town, and when they built this, they stopped building them that large. It's really very large. The parking lot out there is frequently filled with cars. It's a destination place where people come to shop. They're in town, but how do you keep them here?

***Moderator: How user-friendly is downtown. How is signage and navigation?***

There's a sign on 53 south indicating historic downtown, and there might be another one, but I don't think it would be too difficult to find.

It's on a main highway, so it's not hard to find.

But there's not good signage on 60 or 67 on the bypasses.

It directs everybody to Westwood, not to downtown.

***Moderator: What about business hours? Are they convenient?***

There aren't that many businesses to use.

The dollar store is probably the busiest place downtown. It does fairly well.

***Moderator: Is there ample parking?***

We have a parking garage. I'm not sure how many that holds.

When we did the National Main Street, parking was a major issue always.

Parallel parking is not preferred. It would be better to have slant parking on one side only.

I don't find that there's a problem now because there's not much there, but when it was a viable downtown, it was hard to park. There was a problem with the people that worked in the retail places taking the prime places. If the downtown is revitalized, I think there will be a problem.

I've been in a lot of downtowns with revitalized areas, and parking is always an issue. You might need a cable car or trolley to get people around.

The parking garage could be cleaned up and made more attractive. That wouldn't take a lot of money.

***Moderator: What about the look of downtown?***

I was talking to someone earlier today, and I was saying my slogan would be "clean it up, green it up." It would make such a difference. There are a lot of empty lots that would be neat as little parks.

It looks clean to me, but the condition of some of the building...some of them are wonderful, like a bank over there, but some of the old buildings that were beautiful just look terrible now. That's part of the idea of the historic district, but that's very slow. When you have an old brick building that's covered with 1970's—I don't know what that stuff is—that's not going to come off for years. The look of it is one of the big problems in drawing people to want to have a business in some of those buildings.

Main Street looks fair, but Broadway is not good, not good at all. A lot of buildings need a facelift bad. Not a good situation.

Maybe the banks could offer low-interest remodeling loans with some kind of plan that's really attractive to property owners.

That senior place, they're supposed to maintain the historic front of that building, but they're getting millions in tax credits.

There is even tax credits in the historic preservation.

That's another thing that more people need to know about, but the articles about that proposal, it people read that...

If I own a building downtown and I'm going to renovate it, I would hope to have something that comes in and show me some income. Just renovating buildings isn't going to get people downtown. There has to be a draw other than a nice-looking empty building.

Which comes first? Fixing up the buildings or having businesses to bring people down there?

**Moderator:** *Since this is called the DREAM project, lets talk about the future of your downtown. What type of businesses would you like to see downtown?*

Specialty shops. They can be any type, and it doesn't have to be anything particular. It could be a skateboard shop or a hat shop or the best fishing lure maker in the county customizing lures...it has to be something...there's no way that Wal-Mart's going to be put out of business by somebody competing. It has to be something that people won't get at Wal-Mart. Clothing, antiques. Something in specialties, coffee shops, chocolate places.

Stationery.

The field is wide open.

There again, a restaurant would be wonderful there, but everybody wants to park real close.

A comic book store opened up down there about a year ago, and it's still in business. That's the kind of store that's not going to be impacted by Wal-Mart if he can get the clientele in there.

Those are the kinds of things that would work. They don't require that large expensive parking lot, because people would come...a bicycle shop, or a boarding shop. Kids, young adults, adults...

You just need, to start with, enough places that would cause people to walk more than a block. Now there's no foot traffic. There's nothing there. If you go to the Eatery...one time I walked to the Dollar Store.

We have this empty parking lot here. If you had a transit system of any kind...horse-drawn wagons or I don't know what. People could go park, and they could be dropped off any place that they want. It's not difficult if you're sitting here, and most of the time this parking is empty. Utilize what you have. Instead of building more parking, utilize what you have, but move people around.

Or you just need to have enough things...like in Paducah or Cape, you want to walk around. Downtown Poplar Bluff isn't big enough that...if you've been to Cape, it's great to just walk around, and there's all kinds of things to look at, stores and restaurants and the river. But here, it's not all that appealing. So I agree that there are easy ways to use the parking we have. I don't think the town is big enough for a big garage downtown, but I think that if there were more down there, people would walk around.

How far do people walk in the Wal-Mart parking lot?

They think nothing of walking out there.

That's a real good example, Eureka Springs. It's so crowded that you almost can't even walk, but I would defy you to find a day when that place isn't covered with people. They have little shops...handmade knives for hunters, or special summer and winter clothing, or an art gallery, or a restaurant with sandwiches and coffee. And they have a trolley system, but people are walking everywhere.

Some people may have a perception of not being safe in our downtown. Is that a fair statement?

I've never heard that.

I've heard people say it, but I don't believe it. I think it's the same as anyplace else.

They've definitely never walked downtown in Chicago or St. Louis at night.

***Moderator: Is there much going on downtown at night?***

It's desolate. Who wants to go to a deserted, dark place. If you get in trouble, who's going to help you.

It's very quiet at night.

I don't think there are as many taverns as they used to be.

(many people agreeing.)

They built the Coliseum...but it's very quiet at night, once everybody goes home. Except the big events at the Coliseum, prom, 4<sup>th</sup> of July...

***Moderator: What type of restaurants would you like downtown?***

Family, upscale, outdoor...

The problem is when there has been a fairly decent sit-down restaurant, it's put out of business by the buffet bar.

(laughter.)

Even when a good restaurant comes in, you have to put a buffet. We are the kind of people here that like buffet bars. If we ever got different clientele, it would be better to have any kind of eating. In Cape, we look for a nice steakhouse. It's not uncommon for us to spend 30 bucks on dinner. I'm just saying, once in a while, people don't mind paying 30 dollars for a meal to get that kind of service. We drive over to the Landing at Van Buren to get real nice atmosphere.

It's 45 miles, but we go there to eat.

They treat you well, you look at the river as you eat, the furniture is rustic...they have all kinds of seafood. One of the biggest things we don't have in this town is really good seafood, fresh lobsters and seafood...

Since we're a buffet kind of community...for instance, the place down there that does okay is just sandwiches, it's just lunch. At least there's that, and it's good. Even if there was a coffee shop, sandwiches, start small...it would be hard to have a really nice...I don't know if there are enough people that would go down there. But if you want to have people living down there, you've got to have some place to get something to eat. Nobody's going to want to live downtown if they can't get something to eat, a drugstore, something. They don't want to have to drive to Wal-Mart to get toothpaste.

I think the services need to come first, because why would people live there otherwise?

***Moderator: Any other businesses downtown?***

A little bookstore would be wonderful.

I think some kind of hobby business would be...a hobby shop or something.

I think what we're saying is, if there were something to draw people back there.

Something major to get those little spinoffs.

Casino.

(laughter.)

Put that on the river.

That would do it.

I am not advocating that, but that would do it.

We need to utilize that river. We have a perfect setting, and we do not utilize what we have here that's natural.

We need to clean it up and make it attractive.

That kind of thing would draw people. We really have to look...if we could just pretend that downtown was a person, what you want that person to be? You'd want that person to be a people person. You don't care how smart he is or all his technical jargon. You want this person to speak to people, to meet their needs, to look them square in the eye. It needs to be people-friendly.

We haven't talked about this, but I'd love to see the brick streets restored. I know it's controversial.

The bricks are a real positive draw, but what has to be done, but bricks cannot be the main thoroughfare for traffic. That's where they get the most complaints. If the arterial streets could be eliminated, getting people away from having to drive everyday on brick streets...brick streets are a draw, but they won't hold up to truck traffic.

It would not be expensive to take the asphalt off downtown, they did that in Sikeston, but it really incites a heated conversation.

That could happen if you had something for people to go down to. You'd have to have a reason to go there.

You have to take this building by building and look at what's good and what you need to change. The courthouse and the fire station and the bank are good. And look at what needs to be renovated, and how we go about doing it. My wife owns a building down there, and it's the downtown development corporation...they've done a wonderful thing with the parks...that's paid off for the whole community. I think there are some places downtown that are really nice and we need to look at the rest of them and see what you can't move... the parking garage is there. Where do you go with the rest of the buildings?

The historic people presented to us, and we heard a 2-hour presentation, and it's directed at one building at a time. They really have done a very thorough job. And the City Council just got to see a piece of that. But they didn't get to go through the whole deal, but planning and zoning wanted to hear it, and it's very comprehensive.

And if the public saw more of that, they'd gain more of an appreciation of what is down there that's good. You get so used to it being dead and you can't get over some of the stuff they've done, you get fixated, but if you go after something like that presentation, you can appreciate some of the things that're left. I don't think anybody looks at that anymore, though. I think we need to reeducate people.

An Italian restaurant that's affordable for families... Italian food is not expensive to make, and someone could put a really nice—not elegant, but family-oriented—Italian restaurant here.

I'd like to go back, too, to taking a look at the downtown in terms of planter boxes and trees, greening it up. If I wanted to put a business in, I'd want it to be aesthetically appealing.

Someone mentioned mini-parks, and that's right on target. That's exactly what has to be done.

You have a little planter in that old Piggly-Wiggly parking lot, and it looks gorgeous. We need to repeat that over and over. There'd be very little risk involved.

The more grass, trees, and shrubbery you have, it seems like it's safer.

I know it requires maintenance, but I think that would go such a long way.

A wonderful place for a pocket park is at the corner of Main and where that station is...

6<sup>th</sup>?

5<sup>th</sup>?

Absolutely. That could be such a sweet park.

(agreement.)

A number of us have talked about that. That was a beautiful home, and then it became a filling station, and now it's nothing...it's for sale. It's just concrete and asphalt, and it's just broken down. I don't think it's really marketable. You reclaim something like that...it's in a residential neighborhood, and there's some nice things around it.

The Methodist Church up there has a wonderful looking parking lot.

One thing our minister said was, "We owe it to the community to do something more than just put down some asphalt," and that was even controversial in our church. It is reclaiming something.

It's beautiful, really.

And it's right in the middle of Main Street.

It's not downtown, but it affects downtown.

I would do anything it takes to make Main Street look better.

***Moderator: Is there anything else in your dream downtown?***

I'd add lighting. Make it really nice. To have a unified, attractive streetlight system downtown.

Which I think we used to have. We used to have all the concrete—they all matched.

I worked for the City Utility as a lineman, and my job was to get rid of those. They're gone.

How about an outdoor theater by the river?

There you go!

That sounds good.

You also talked about a restaurant on the river.

Unless it floods...

We need a walkover bridge to connect Clinton park to the Coliseum. It would connect parking and everything. We have a walkover bridge across the river, but we have no way to get across the railroad tracks. We need a walkover to connect those two.

My son thought a microbrewery would be ideal.

That would draw people.

A wine-tasting.

The basement of the Community Development building would be perfect.

Little Rock did that. They really reclaimed their downtown.

We were just about ready to begin construction on that depot that will help revitalize downtown. We're going to turn it into an inter-modal depot, to organize all the buses, and make a beautiful parking lot, and we have 2 of Amtrak's finest trains through Poplar Bluff, south to San Antonio and Los Angeles, and north to St. Louis, Chicago, Washington DC. Last year, we boarded 3,245 people northbound and southbound. We unloaded 4,128. In here, in the early morning hours...now people say that's way too early, get it changed, and that would be fine, but this train comes through Missouri then into Arkansas, and the Arkansas governor is conscious of when that train goes through, and the Texas governor has his people in Austin watching that train. Now last month, the Amtrak president made a 30-minute change northbound in Austin. The governor found out, and that train was changed back in 2 days. The governor didn't like it. St. Louis up here built a 9 million dollar depot for everybody. Amtrak gets in at 8:30 in the morning, going to Chicago, and I understand that some state legislator wants that train to connect with the St. Louis to Kansas City train at 7:30. We in Poplar Bluff have complained to Amtrak president, and if the governor's on your side, you can do something. And the building, people have suggested that we turn the upstairs into a motel. And we plan on having a sit-down restaurant in the front of that building, like it used to be. We've got the parking space, the rooms, the facilities, and we could make that into a nice sit-down restaurant that wouldn't cost you an arm and a leg. We need that type of restaurant.

What's your time table?

We've tried to get the architects to give us one, but with the structural damage, they are afraid to make a guess. The railroad company let it go down so bad that we do anticipate some structural damage, but we're hoping to start on it and give downtown a real boost, and this riverwalk, it has showed up in various places, and I think the downtown's going to have to get with UP a little bit and get on their good side, work it out.

*Moderator: Thank you very much.*

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## SECTION IV

### BUSINESS OWNERS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

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

It's a small community, about 20,000, but a good community to have a family in. It's kind of unique in that it's a small town, but it serves a greater rural area, so it's kind of a trade center, so there are some benefits there. We have a good city government in place, works well with the other entities, we have Three Rivers Community College, a good school system, a lot of industrial development, retail is picking up even though it's been a weak spot here... we have various education and recreation opportunities.

Lot of good hunting, fishing, boating, canoeing, rafting, all kinds of outdoor activities real close to town.

One of the better utility companies I've ever had. Poplar Bluff works with you. When electric's down, we're on the phone, and they respond.

Lot of different churches in town. You can come to this town and find the church you're looking for. That's what's important to me. There's an overall presence in the town that it's okay to be a Christian, it's okay to pray...the football team and the schools and the City encourage it. It's very family-friendly.

Good police force.

Yup. Good sheriff's department.

Cost of living. You can buy property pretty reasonable here, and afford to have a house.

**Moderator:** *What's an average home price?*

80 to 120, probably. You can get up to a million and a half.

We bought exactly what we had in California, and we paid 450 thousand for what we paid for 100 here.

The cost of living here is so low compared to large areas.

**Moderator:** *Do you stay in town to do all your shopping? I'm seeing heads shaking...*

Probably not. If you can't buy it at Wal-Mart or Home Depot, it's not...there's no dress shops anymore, not like there used to be, not to where there's any selection. There's no small men's stores, dress shops, jewelry stores...there's one or two, but not commensurate with...

Cape gets a lot of retail.

Jonesboro gets the rest.

We have a large shopping district, but we don't have the ' to bring them.

Jonesboro and Cape are about an hour and a half away.

Some people go to Value City in Farmington.

There's a men's shop in Sikeston.

I've seen it decline, and it's starting to come back. We had some deserted shopping centers, and they are starting to fill up now. I can imagine what it looked like to out of town people.

And nothing downtown.

Yeah.

Even in the mid-seventies, there was a drugstore and a dress shop, and a men's store...they had a jewelry store and another one.

Gift chest was down here and...

And they're all gone, and we'd like to bring them back. That's why we're pushing this DREAM initiative...we want people when they think of Poplar Bluff they think of a charming place to go with entertainment, places to eat besides the chain places, more nice eateries...and we're working towards that. It used to be that Myrtle's was the only place you could eat downtown, but now we've got the Eatery, Jim and Jerry's, Windy City Hot Dogs, an Asian takeout place...you can get things today that you couldn't get five years ago.

All over. We used to not have any restaurants other than fast food, and now we've got Pasta House, Ruby Tuesday's, Applebees.

The pancake place, Perkins.

To me, that's a sign that there's some prosperity, because these places wouldn't come if not.

(agreement.)

I'm an attorney, and I had an office at Wal-Mart for 15 years, and when I looked at the statistics, it was incredible how many people actually trade in the Poplar Bluff area.

(many people talking at once.)

***Moderator: Do people stay in town to dine?***

You can go to Cape every weekend and run into people you know from home.

(many people agreeing at once.)

And there's not any entertainment. There's no reason to come to Poplar Bluff on Friday night.

For the surrounding rural area, people come here to go to a movie.

So we got one movie theater.

That's more than they got.

And the restaurants here. For a 75 mile radius, this is the largest city.

If you want to go to Olive Garden or Red Lobster, you've got to go out of town. But the restaurants here are good.

***Moderator: Are there things to do in town?***

The movie theater.

We do have a stage company that does 4 or 5 plays a year.

And they're good.

And we have musical events at the Rogers Theater.

One the weekend, in the surrounding community, there's usually something going on. Maybe a bluegrass festival or something... it's not that far.

And this is a pretty sports-minded community, and they support high school sports and the TRCC sports. Baseball, softball, soccer, volleyball, basketball, swimming.

(agreement.)

There's two pools now.

(many people talking at once.)

They got that wave thing...

We have one racquetball court.

***Moderator: Where do you take visitors?***

St. Louis.

(laughter.)

Hayden's.

For us, if it's winter, your options are limited. In the summertime, we've got the rivers, innertubing or canoeing or something like that. Fishing, boating.

As far as shopping, it's pretty limited.

**Moderator:** *Let's talk a little about downtown. Do you think it's going in the right or wrong direction?*

Positive direction.

I think we hit bottom several years ago, and now we're moving up.

I think the only way we can go is up.

(microphone interference.)

...when I was a kid, downtown was the Mecca. There's still a lot downtown, and I've seen it decline when I came back after college...there were two major fires that pretty much destroyed what was left downtown, and those businesses did not come back. They went out on the highway. There's just been very little down here. And when Roth's went out of business...

There's just not a lot of draw.

There was still small businesses around, but they suffered. But we did have the government offices down here, and they all left, they all went out on the highway. The people they serve were in close proximity to downtown. So there was really nothing down here, so that was one of the arguments for putting the Coliseum down here, to revitalize downtown.

Don't you think Cape Girardeau went through this too?

Yeah, absolutely.

(agreement.)

I think we're starting to come around a little bit. People are making some investment downtown. \_\_\_\_\_'s an example, and \_\_\_\_\_. There are people from California who bought this building, and they're offering art classes, dance classes, cultural opportunities, things like that. We've gotten involved in the dance classes, and they have something every other Friday night. It's people like that who bring fresh ideas and initiative and drive. And the Rogers, they're trying to raise money to restore the Rogers Theater.

**Moderator:** *Why did you choose to put your business downtown?*

I was looking for space, and I got a lot of space when I bought the building I bought. I came for proximity to the courthouse. Being a lawyer, that was important to me. When I graduated from law school in the 70's, I came down here, and there was a bunch of banks, a lot of offices. There was probably 15 lawyers downtown. And when I came back, it was still a pretty vital downtown. Then I went out to Wal-Mart in the 90s, and when I came back in 05, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ were downtown. There were no firms left. Just four people.

**Moderator:** *Let's talk about the user-friendliness of downtown. Is it easy to find your way around?*

Too many one-way streets.

Horrible parking.

You can never find any parking. And if you park in the parking garage, you worry that someone's going to break into your car.

It puzzles me that parking is a problem, because we don't have nearly the amount of business downtown that would make it a problem.

The businesses are all clustered together. I could park in front of 303 all day long.

(agreement.)

In the last 3 years, it's gotten much better as far as derelicts and drunks walking around. The police are doing a much better job keeping things in order.

I think some of it, too, is I have a different philosophy of homeless than my predecessor. I don't let them just hang out. If you're not trying to improve yourself, I kick them out. We try to move them on. I don't want this to be a hangout spot. I saw that in Sacramento and LA. We work with the police department, and if some guy is derelict, we move him along.

I think you've helped clean up the town a lot. I really do. You came to town a year before I bought my building, and I heard a lot more complaints a few years ago than now.

I'm a business, but I'm also nonprofit, so our clients are downtown. That's why we're downtown. I do not understand why all the social services moved, because most of their clients don't have any transportation, and there's no bus service in town. I'm used to a transit service that's actually a transit service. Here, you've got no way to get anybody anywhere. We burn up gas and staff time to take them to where they need to go. They're all downtown. I'm sorry that they're sleeping on your shops, but this is where they're going to be unless there's someone rooting them on. We don't want to be the downtown problem; we want to be the downtown answer to the problem that already exists. People say, "Your derelicts drink and urinate..."

You're probably getting blamed for the other major problem in town that you've got nothing to do with.

You've got several bars that are uncontrollable. They're not going to move anywhere.

**Moderator:** *Is there a feeling of being unsafe?*

I don't have a valid basis not to like the parking garage. It just looks creepy to me.

They keep knocking the lights out.

I feel creeped out, and I'm a man.

Ain't no women going to park in the parking garage.

I wouldn't use the garage in the daytime, much less at night. I feel safe downtown during the daytime, but I wouldn't walk the sidewalks at night.

It's not just Poplar Bluff's downtown, though. When we were kids, you went to each individual store to buy things. But my kids don't want to shop downtown. They want to go to a mall and buy everything in one place. I don't think it's a Poplar Bluff problem. I don't think people want to be downtown anymore.

As far as safety goes, I think it's better. There was a carnival going on a couple weeks ago, and we were commenting on people walking around and how it's gotten better. They felt safe. I'm not saying the feeling is entirely gone, but it's better.

**Moderator: Do you think it's properly lit?**

To me, it doesn't look like I want to come down here. Like that Hunan place, I wouldn't eat there, because it doesn't look inviting to me. I personally would not eat there, and other people feel the same way. If you're asking about downtown, that's what I feel like. Now, Windy City, I eat there a lot because it's inviting, it's clean...they're friendly. I'm sure Hunan, I'm sure they're nice, but I just wouldn't eat there.

Their place is very 3<sup>rd</sup> world, and I have some problems with it, but that's the way she is.

But if you're going to draw people in...

If a lot of that stuff was cleaned up some, we get people calling all the time looking for retail space, and if they could get a place that was nice and clean, they'd come down here.

What Hayes did, that's beautiful, but the building next door isn't.

(many people agreeing.)

Several years ago, \_\_\_\_\_ bought that corner on Broadway and Vine and fixed it up, was going to rent it out, and the apartments just got trashed. There was vandalism. He just gave up. I think the situation is much better now, but he's not going to do it again.

And that building's sitting empty.

Yeah. And it was fixed up.

(side conversations.)

**Moderator: Do you think there'd be any interest in downtown living, loft living?**

I don't think there would be a demand for it.

There wouldn't right now, but if the whole tenor of the town was, you could live upstairs and have your business downstairs...if it was cleaned up....there are apartments down there, and \_\_\_\_\_ just bought a whole block, and they're going to put 42 senior housing units down there. They're going to need dress shops and drugstores and amenities downtown that they can walk to.

All the railroad guys were down there, and when they were, downtown felt safer. I'm not afraid now to park anywhere near the Coliseum.

(many people talking at once, side conversations.)

We're no different from... in 79, my hometown, Blytheville, Arkansas, did the same thing. The downtown never took off. There's other towns trying downtown revitalization. Has anyone been successful?

In Springfield, their downtown looked worse a couple years ago than before the revitalization.

(many people talking at once.)

Paducah. They've come a long way, and they have art studios and artists...

They have a federal program. I went to Paducah twice, to see if we could do something along the same lines, and that's a one-shot deal.

We saw several towns in Arkansas. We talk about putting benches and sidewalks out, and instead of paying 500 dollars for these cheap benches, you had these heavy benches that families had donated in memory of people. They had flower parts and water outlets and electrical outlets. Henderson, North Carolina has loft apartments that run for a million and a half. It draws artists and writers, novelists, into these areas. There's a lot of towns that have really come back that I've seen. I've seen it not work, too. I've been places that they've tried and it's failed. I think it's all back to how it's done. We need to look at successful communities with a comparable population.

The couple buildings that have been renovated downtown...if you're going to go downtown, there should be a code of some sort.

They have that.

An old building downtown revitalized is the most beautiful...

(agreement. Many people talking at once.)

...There is money out there...

...there are codes and standards...

I think with the trash cans and benches and flower pots and baskets, if you get families involved... there has to be personal involvement. The citizens have to take ownership.

For the first time in my married life...we always used to go to Cape, but now with gas prices, we spend our weekends here. Now, I think hopefully people will stay here. It's going to be closer and closer.

That's one thing about the population. A lot of businesses look at Poplar Bluff's city limits. They don't look at the surrounding county as a whole. They don't see that.

(agreement.)

I dealt with a St. Louis developer, but we could not get the places to come here because of our population, and I would supply the traffic count and the shopping district, and people would then drive down here, drive downtown, and go away. They'd almost be ready to sign, but then they'd see our town.

I propose that we conduct our own census. I don't think our population has not changed since 1960.

Well, part of it is the township line.

But from that time, all the property that's been annexed into the city...and granted, the population downtown is not what it was, but people still live within city limits. We've gained a lot of residential property.

We've annexed these different areas, but the repair and state of our infrastructure has declined—the curbs, the sidewalks, the lighting, the streets...as a city, we've got to start taking care of our infrastructure. That will attract...but also, if you look at the highway, we've got a huge area of land that you could put a very attractive shopping area, but yet we started with a strip mall. I was very disappointed when I saw that strip mall built.

That's another thing you see in small towns, the sprawl. It's much easier to go to the edge of town. That sprawl...

But focusing back to downtown, I think that we should make a pretty infrastructure, visually pretty when they drive down the streets, and the buildings will follow. If we just get the streetscape, the signage...

Rip the blacktops off the bricks.

Pave them all.

No!

(many people arguing about brick streets. Side conversations.)

If we're going to go with that historic theme, the brick streets should be part of that. And we've got a mechanism in place to fix the sidewalks. There's an ordinance that the property owners are responsible for fixing their sidewalks... there was a councilman that started renovating the sidewalks years ago, and they did some of them, and then the money went somewhere else. I agree that some of the sidewalks are in bad shape.

And if we have senior citizens moving down here...

**Moderator:** *Let's continue to focus on the future of downtown. What kinds of businesses would you like to see downtown?*

A sporting goods store.

A chocolate shop.

I'm planning on putting in a real antiques store.

A peanut shop. Remember those? And chocolate candies and...

We could even boil some peanuts.

(side conversations.)

Mobile, Alabama...

A coffee shop.

A drugstore.

I don't think we're going to get the big retail stores downtown. To attract people, it's going to have to be specialty shops. Bookstores, boutiques, soda fountains. They've been talking about a riverwalk, and if they could capitalize on that and on the train history as kind of a theme, and the lumbering industry... those kind of specialty shops...and then, there's still room for professional offices, law and insurance and accountants. That's what I see.

Yeah.

I was in Henderson, North Carolina, and there was people everywhere. Ice cream shops and soda fountains with tables on the sidewalks. We don't have room for that here, but... it was just a hustle and bustle. They had nice restaurants.

Columbia, Missouri has a nice downtown. They're right by the University, but they don't have the big stores downtown. They have mom and pop stores and little coffee shops and vintage record stores...every time I've been there, there's always people, day or night.

Get rid of the one-way streets, light it, make it pretty.

Get rid of the bricks.

You'll never get rid of the bricks.

I would support paving the brick street down Main, too.

Exactly.

I think we need to repair it, not pave it.

Ask the guys who work on it.

Here we got these guys learning to do what we used to do in the 1800's. Seriously. Get rid of the stinking bricks. Pave the stupid roads. I live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

***Moderator: What about restaurants downtown?***

An Italian restaurant. Zia's is looking for smaller markets. I'm talking to them about bringing something downtown.

They're working on the Depot.

With the Rogers on one end and the Depot on the other, we should be able to do something in the middle.

There's another group fixing up the steps by the Depot.

The Library's going through renovation, and we built the foot garden...

We did the Poplars on the Bluff project...

And they're blooming.

Starbucks.

(laughter, side conversations.)

***Moderator: What about entertainment?***

That would be cool.

It would be nice.

(many people talking at once.)

They did have police walking the beat down here...

We've got a few more restaurants than we had, but if we could get even just a nice bar or some entertainment...

We hate that word, but it does help.

We could even have an entertainment area, maybe that building down on Broadway.

A blues bar would be nice.

A bluegrass bar.

(many people talking at once.)

Where you could sit outside and hear the music. I want to sit outside and have a drink and listen to music. We need...there is no small, nice restaurants. Really, once you're past Applebee's or Tuesday's, I'm looking for a good steak...

(many people still talking at once.)

We just need a decent restaurant. A nice small restaurant.

**Moderator: What about changing the aesthetics of downtown?**

Yes. We could even paint the bricks. Just make it cheerier.

Have you been to that new old-looking development in Branson?

The riverwalk?

The Branson Landing.

That's beautiful.

Yeah.

And a trolley.

(many people agreeing at once.)

We have so many existing buildings, but the feel of it, it's turn-of-the-century.

You could have a trolley like Eureka Springs.

You've seen these old postcards of downtown, with the big stoplights and the Coke billboard...it would be neat to turn it back into that era.

The thing I can't get past is, if we build a beautiful, historical, modern building, but right next to me is going to be the VFW and the American Legion Hall and the Tattoo place... these buildings look shoddy. How do you move them out or try to fix them up?

You buy the building.

What if I don't want to sell my building?

How do you move people out?

You buy the building.

The guy that has 303 is never moving.

It's historic. It's an institution.

But that denigrates what you're trying to do downtown.

But you don't kill the project because of one or two buildings.

If we could make it look good and get business down there, maybe some of those would change.

And if we could get grants or tax breaks to encourage people to do things...

That's the problem...it's all the buildings in between that don't give a rip or don't have the money to fix them up, and they're going to look run-down forever.

(many people talking at once. Side conversations on same topic.)

...Every building's for sale, for a price...

...I wish we could take those old postcards and make them look like that...

...US Bank would not spend the money to fix the clock...

***Moderator: What are the top priorities?***

Cleanup.

Clean it up, change the one-way streets, and put flowers and benches and trash cans downtown.

And pave the brick streets.

No!

(many people talking at once.)

...You've got to unify downtown....

...flower beds...

...when they tear down the post office downtown...

...there's a whole bunch of downtown streetlights buried under the post office, and there's another pile of them in Southeast Arkansas. Those streetlights we used to have with the glass globes.

(many people talking at once.)

***Moderator: Thank you very much.***

## SECTION V

### NEWER RESIDENTS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

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

I'd say Poplar Bluff...one of the reasons I moved back was because of the size. It's just perfect. It's got all the general amenities, but it has a lot of downsides. It mostly has to do with infrastructure, housing, layout of the town as far as businesses go. We've got the mother of all strip malls, and you can't tell if you're here or the middle of Kansas, and our downtown is basically a train wreck. There's potential for fixing that downtown...Westwood is very commercial, but it's kind of nondescript. We have an opportunity to make something special. There's nothing special that would bring someone here, nothing particularly compelling.

I would say a couple of positives...it's affordable, and family atmosphere, and the community. The people are outstanding. We have our issues like any other place, but it's a good place to raise a family, and it offers everything you need other than a large shopping mall and airport.

I would describe Poplar Bluff as a small community, rural environment, friendly people...the town has great potential, it's expanded greatly...in the 10 years I've been here, it's amazing how Poplar Bluff has changed. I look forward to the next 10 years with the expansion of the highways...that's going to help open doors for Poplar Bluff. The biggest detriment is shopping. In my business, we talk to people from out of town and try to get them to move here, and the first thing they do is visit, and then they don't want to talk to us anymore, because there's no place to shop, and they don't feel like they have enough shopping and entertainment. This is a community that's a lot more focused on outdoors opportunities with our lakes and rivers. Those are some real assets, and it's just going to take time to address the shopping issue, which will be driven by demographics, but people don't make much money here, but we're growing. We continue to have opportunity. We're a city that's emerging towards its potential.

It's one of those towns that when you bring people in, they don't want to move here, but once you move here, you don't want to leave. There's a lot of pride here. I love it here, and it's because of the people here... people that grew up in Poplar Bluff think it's got the best of everything. It's one of those towns that once people move here, they stay. I've moved twice, and now I'm not going anywhere.

I brought my wife here kicking and screaming. We've been here 10 years now.

My daughter felt the same way. I came back because of family...(unintelligible)...there's so much potential, not only the DREAM initiative, but the comprehensive plan, the pride, the happiness, the lakes and rivers... in the last 6 months, I've realized how lucky I am to be here.

One of the drawbacks, and part of it is the isolation of the area, but some of the infrastructure but also communication...if you think about cellphone service and different things, if you get 5 miles outside of town, there's nothing. I had better cellphone reception in Alaska. If you go to the cellphone maps, there's always a spot where it's roaming around here. It makes it hard for people who are traveling a lot. You're pretty much cut off.

(agreement.)

I'm sure a lot of it's due to the national forest and no cell towers...it makes it hard where you start talking business and technology.

***Moderator: What are the main shopping areas for residents?***

Wal-Mart.

People go to Wal-Mart for everyday goods and everything else.

I've never seen anything like our Wal-Mart in my entire life. It's unbelievable. I think Kroger and the other grocery stores are good too, but the Wal-Mart here is...

If you look at our map, Poplar Bluff is a big pull for small towns all around. People will drive from Ripley County or somewhere else 50 miles to go to Wal-Mart. If you think about the people that live in town, we think about going to Cape and St. Louis to shop, and there's a lot of rural people who come here to shop.

That's the problem with getting a big box store...they look at Poplar Bluff, and they don't look at the surrounding counties, where there's nowhere to go. I don't know that they do take that into account.

One of the big problems, though, is if you look at the median household income, it's lower than the state average.

It's well below the target numbers that retailers look at. Our numbers are improving significantly.

If you look at sales tax, they've been doing well.

Our family shops at Wal-Mart, but if you want to go clothing shopping, you go to Cape or St. Louis. Out west, the big box stores, you're got people spending 300, 400 dollars at a time. The money that's generated there is unreal. I know that wouldn't happen around here.

Our industries here are low-paid. We need to attract employment, for the economy of the town.

***Moderator: What are popular choices for dining and entertainment?***

When people visit, I cook myself. That being said, our restaurants, we have had a vast expansion. When I first came to town, there was only one or two kinds of places to eat.

This is the Mexicanest, craziest town I've ever seen. The Mexican food is people's top choice. There's not a great steakhouse. There's not a variety. I go to Cape quite a bit, and there's so much more selection there. We've had a lot of restaurants that have opened up and shut down.

My perspective is from a dining experience, I think the places we have in town are reasonable, and we have all the staples. For us, it goes back more to shopping.

There's a little place downtown, right next to...the Eatery. I've taken visitors from out of town in there. It's a little homestyle cooking place. And we go to Mexican places. There's plenty of places for visitors, but for residents, there's not a lot of variety.

I think some of it goes back to our income. A lot of people don't have a lot of discretionary income to go out and eat. If you look at the average couple, they're not going to be able to spend \$100 for a meal. A lot of us can, but the average couple...we're not the best representative sample for the community.

There's people that come in here to eat at Applebee's...there's a draw from the population that live out in rural areas, much like the way we go to Cape.

I really like barbecue, and I go to Dexter Barbecue, and the name of the town is Dexter...it's associated with the town. They've got a restaurant in Cape, too. I don't think of restaurants that are unique to Poplar Bluff.

I could go to Dexter and eat ribs, and I can go to Mike and Zac's barbecue, and it's really good. I think Hyde's is a really good secret, and...but there's not really a place when people come to town that's unique.

(agreement.)

Hayden's Barbecue, maybe, which is an established place.

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

In general, the right direction in spite of itself.

It's moving kind of slowly.

The City is always in the state of conflict with other entities, and there's too much controversy between the different entities.

Cape was really thriving years ago, and we're a little slow on it. We're heading in the right direction, but I can't see us growing at a rapid rate.

(noise, unintelligible.)

I've only been here a couple years, and it seems a little stagnant, but how I gauge it, if you look back at the record books, our population is about the same as 50 years ago. From the city's perspective, not a lot of growth. But from a newer standpoint, it seems to be doing okay, but it's not thriving. It goes back to location. Poplar Bluff is really a nice town, but it is isolated. When you look at airports and transportation, this is a town that would be like a Jackson, but here you're 3 hours from St. Louis, 3 from Memphis, 2 from Springfield. People really like that, but if someone needs to travel, they're not going to move here.

A lot of the changes remind me of Jackson when I was growing up. We could never get a bond issue passed, and one day we got one passed. The older guard...then we started putting money in, and we got nice schools, and people started moving there. There's no reason that their school district should be that big, but it is, and it thrives.

There's been several bond issues that have failed on trying to get new schools, and for me, it's not a tax issue. I'd pay twice as much as what they're asking. But it seems to me a typical expansion to the outskirts to build these schools way on the other side of the bypass, and that just forces all this busing and traveling and moving the population outside of the town. People that live out in the county, it's an advantage, but it's killing the town. I thought that the school district should've come up with some alternatives that brought the schools into the town.

***Moderator: Is downtown moving in the right or wrong direction?***

The cobblestones drive me crazy.

I think it's one of the best things in town.

If you look at Laclede's Landing in St. Louis...

But if you have to drive everyday...

(many people having side conversations, arguing about the brick streets.)

To me, I think there's more a subset of people who are really interested in seeing downtown improve, but I don't think there's an overall feeling like that. So some of the projects like the Library, the Poplars on the Bluff, the Rogers Theater, they're good, but there's nothing driving people downtown.

***Moderator: What does bring people downtown?***

When I think of towns I've grown up in, Columbia and Cape, the towns that have a neat downtown, they have things for old people to do and things for young people to do. They have a young bar scene for people from 21 to 40, and they have antique shops for older people, or they have something that brings people there. Cape has the Mississippi River. I wonder if we can ever get that. We don't have a 4-year school.

I think a lot of people are misguided. They feel they can make downtown the way they remember it in their youth, and it's never going to be that way again. It was retail oriented, and it was oriented towards everyday shopping. Our everyday shopping is on the major thoroughfare of town on the outside. To make downtown successful, they have to have a specialty niche to create a desire for people to come there.

I'd like to see them put a skate park downtown, and we're going to have senior citizen housing, so you've got two extreme age groups there. And specialty shops for the middle aged.

It's got to be more entertaining. A lot of people come down for the post office. I think the Coliseum is a big draw with all the events. I think from an entertainment standpoint, it's generally the Coliseum, but people don't venture out like they would if there was restaurants or bars.

People come down for a single reason, and they don't stay, because they perceive the downtown as unsafe and ugly. There's some great things downtown, the Coliseum, the railroad museum, several businesses. For people to go down there for a good reason, they see bad things like bars, the homeless shelter, the drug treatment center...those are things that make them not want to walk down the street.

If you think about all of the public assistance programs, they're all in a 2-block radius from here.

The City and the County both don't have a clue as far as a plan for downtown. The County enabled one of the nicest building downtown, they enabled the transfer of that building for the drug rehab program. That could've been a premier business, and now it's a downer. The City is also enabling a lot of that, and they don't have a plan for the type of businesses that go on, the way a lot of businesses keep their buildings...

(agreement.)

They're tenants, not owners.

The buildings are falling down around them.

When a lot of people left, they saw it as a way to turn their building around to a good cause.

It's almost difficult to describe how to get to our downtown. It's easy for us, but it's hard to tell people how to get downtown. Our downtown is in a really unique place.

I think it's in a good spot, though, being on that Business 60. You've got Westwood and Pine Street, and the main drag's through the old part of town. But the signing, there's no signing. There's no "here's downtown." You have no idea you're even there if you're in it.

If someone's going to try to do something, you have to concentrate on the main 3 assets, the Coliseum, the river, and the park. Those are the three main assets for downtown, and anything you can do to make that a draw...little things like having ball fields. Things to get people to come down here. We don't have any of those events downtown.

(agreement.)

...you go to the Coliseum or Rogers Theater once a month. You have to have regular events. I don't know how downtown businesses survive.

Most of them don't.

I have this perception that the town generally is not proactive at just basic things like waste management. There's nasty dumpsters all around downtown, the sidewalks are all broken up...every retaining wall in town is falling over. The City doesn't make people pick up their trash...the City is just kind of out to lunch, as far as I'm concerned.

The salvage yard's right in the middle of town.

(many people agreeing at once.)

I think this is important, because it establishes a perception. Right now, the only decent entrance into town is 67 north, clean, nice businesses, well lit...but if you come from another direction, it looks like a junkyard.

Enforcement is a problem here.

(agreement.)

Well, think about what makes revitalization of cities great, you think about housing and condos, but right now, there's places you don't want to live. They're all dives. There's no nice neighborhood right by downtown.

This new housing project will be interesting. They're spending 8 million dollars. It'll make that block a lot nicer.

That'll be kind of a lynchpin. Once it's complete, if it encourages other people to build and clean up, it'll be great, but if it stays a dump, it'll be a bad investment.

If you think back 40 years ago to where some of the nice neighborhoods are, that's where the businesses followed. They follow where residents are.

I live in the central part of town, and all the business owners used to live there.

I think you've got to find something that appeals to some demographic, whether it's antique shopping or fun for younger people...something that Poplar Bluff can offer downtown that will bring people there.

You have to make it a destination.

I think the riverwalk is a good idea...that could help.

If there's nice places for families to move, you attract businesses. Think about what they're doing in St. Louis to get people to move back, or San Diego. People left downtown, and they're going back.

**Moderator: What kind of housing is there a need for?**

Apartments. I've got students driving 50 to 100 miles round trip to go to class. I can't believe how many students I have like that.

That's probably true. Good quality rental apartments would be a plus. Even in downtown Cape, there's people that want to live downtown, and there's a loft condo development but they couldn't sell any of them.

Above a lot of buildings, there are loft apartments, and they're rented out, but that's because there's so many young professionals there. I don't think you could do that here in Poplar Bluff.

It could be less expensive, affordable lofts.

It's tough. I mean, it's just tough financially to justify it...the people that have the financial capacity need to see return.

(many people talking at once.)

Do the banks work with people like that to make those projects viable?

(many people talking at once.)

It's subsidized with tax credits?

Yeah. The tax credits essentially own the apartments.

The bigger banks will buy tax credits and sell them.

To go back, by just revitalizing the Theater and the Library and the Coliseum, it's going to take a lot more than that.

What's the draw? What's the identity? What's the compelling reason to go and stay downtown?

You need walking trails, the river. You have the river downtown. Right now, it's disgusting. It's not clean, there's trash all over, and it feels unsafe.

The other major eyesore is the train Depot, where Amtrak stops.

That's on the verge of being fixed.

If you look at some of the places, it just looks abandoned.

There's no public restroom downtown.

You've only got one parking garage...

One town I lived in had a similar parking garage, and nobody would park in it. There were drunks that slept in it. And the city went in and put in lights and painted it white, and now it's so popular that they're trying to put parking meters in.

(many people talking at once.)

***Moderator: Is parking an issue?***

No.

It used to be.

We've got hundreds of parking places downtown.

There's no businesses that you need to park in the parking garage for.

I'm 30, and the only time I go downtown is go to Jim and Jerry's or Myrtle's.

And the county offices.

Yeah.

Those are the only 2 reasons I go. I'm 30 and single, and you could probably pencil me in for the 20 to 35 year olds...

I'm 40, and I go for the same 2 reasons.

I try to avoid the post office because it's a madhouse...maybe I should come downtown more. You've got US Bank, Dollar General, a shoe store, a music store, a couple pool halls, a pet store.

The shoe store is great, but it's cash and check only.

Pretty much, I live in the county...it is not convenient for me to go to a store downtown when I can go to Wal-Mart.

Do any of us live in town?

I do.

Me too.

I would love to see it thrive like Columbia or St. Louis or Cape, but find something that will make me come there.

If we could thrive like Farmington, with that great community center.

A community center would be a plus. We really don't have one.

There are a lot of hidden things around town that aren't well advertised, like the skating rink...

We have a skating rink?

Yeah.

I had no idea!

To me, I think it's got to be a multifaceted approach. You have to have people involved. There's a lot of small and big needs that need to happen.

But before any of this happens, the City needs to get serious at paying attention to the little things, putting police down there, getting drunks off the street, moving the dumpsters, making people maintain their storefronts...there are ordinances that require that, but the city does not enforce those ordinances. Just clean the place up and pay attention to it. It would go a long way to change people's perceptions.

***Moderator: What else would you change about the look and feel of downtown?***

Everything.

I love Poplar Bluff. But a place like Jackson is so clean, when you drive through it. People do it themselves, they keep it clean, they have events every year...it is hard when you've got a drug treatment center and some dirty bars... I wouldn't go in them. That's where you got to start. The businesses that are there...that's going to take a lot of work.

(unintelligible.)

If you really think about it, even for those of you who don't live in city limits, it doesn't take a long time to get down here. It took me 5 minutes to get here for this meeting. With the size of the community, people can come and go. When you go to a larger city like St. Louis, you get down there, and you're kind of stuck there.

I agree. I tell almost everybody that I can get anywhere in town in 10 minutes.

I live 4 miles from here, and I can be here in 6 minutes.

I think the ease of access is not a deterrent, but it's not a destination because you can come and go easily. There's pluses and minuses. It's easy to get to.

You have to clean it up. It's just dirty.

It's an eyesore.

***Moderator: What kind of businesses would you like to see downtown?***

Something different than what's out on Westwood. Unique shops.

A bookstore.

When you're in a mall, competition is a good thing. If there's a retail area downtown that's different, that's going to be good for both Westwood and Downtown.

You need unique, niche products.

When you think of niche shoppers, it's not everyday. Restaurants and entertainment will drive people downtown. You'll go to eat, for an event... if we have niche shops, we can intertwine them, but some nice restaurants and bars, more entertainment.

I go to Cape to shop at a downtown women's clothing store.

I don't know what it takes to support a niche shop like that.

A couple niche stores with a nice little destination restaurant, maybe where you can sit outside on the water, eat a little dinner, some nice green space.

Have you ever been to Shreveport? There's a riverwalk right on that river, and it's a shopping...

It's a mini-San Antonio.

They have a little trolley and shopping and eating... I went to a game there, and we went downtown, and it was a neat experience. You could eat overlooking the water, and walk around to stores and stuff. That's what a downtown should be. Once you get there, you want to do something to keep people there for a few hours. That gets them to put money back in. But just to run down, come to an event, and go back, that's not helping.

I always thought having a riverwalk was dependent on having a viable downtown, not the other way. I think if the downtown were a draw, then the riverwalk could be developed.

It would attract boutiques and specialty shops and restaurants, though.

(agreement.)

I think the only thing that would attract someone downtown now is the possibility of cheap rent. If you put a riverwalk in, though, and I don't know if it's the answer...but there's just not anything that would make businesses want to come downtown.

If someone comes to me and asks for money to start a restaurant downtown, they're not getting it.

But this one building right across from the parking garage, that building was purchased for less than \$40,000. It's a huge building. And they were bragging about restoring it, and they put in \$80,000... people have this perception that that's a lot of money to restore a building, and it takes a lot of money, and people need to realize it.

Those guys still have nothing after \$80,000 in it.

That's not helpful for downtown.

Us in the room are not the majority of consumers in the area. We see a lot, particularly in the hospital sector, a lot of uninsured, Medicaid...people with no means. I think that would play a factor on what downtown is. Do you want it as a thriving business attractive place? I think until economics improve, we're not going to have the ability to support businesses.

I always thought it would be really great to have a store like Dennis Outdoors, great fishing and gun sections, camping gear, hunting clothing... it could be like a micro Bass Pro shop.

A microbrewery...

Some little thing that would appeal to people that would bring them downtown. It could almost be...what I hear you guys saying, you almost have to be independently wealthy, buy one of these buildings. Have a half million to fix it up.

You have to have grant money. People try to come in, and they're undercapitalized. Just because you put it downtown doesn't mean people are going to come downtown. It's going to be tough for people to get financing.

And where are you going to put it? Next to the crappy bars or the drug treatment center? Where would you go?

Right now, you couldn't do it.

The best piece of property downtown is on the corner over there... for a business, as far as traffic, is a tire repair place now.

I think it'd be the perfect place for City Hall. It's right on the bluff.

I think, too, and this is a lot like a lot of downtowns, wayfinding is difficult. I've noticed a lot of our street signs are the concrete posts on the corners.

The whole way our town is structured for transportation is the most screwed up thing ever.

(agreement.)

A lot of times, you get by the police department, and you get lost, and you can't get over to Main Street because it curves, and there's a lot of one-ways.

It took me a long time.

When you're trying to direct someone to the library...

We're not on a North-South-East-West grid!

***Moderator: My last question is, what other downtowns do you admire?***

Farmington. It's close, it's clean, it's easy to see the pride of ownership. I was talking with the Farmington postmaster, and the postmaster had lost one of his clerks, and one of those jobs was to keep police up by the post office and to clean everything up over there. The guy said that trash was accumulating, and people came in and demanded that it was going to be cleaned up.

(laughter.)

Could you imagine in Cape or Farmington if you started stacking up junky old cars. Could you imagine the outrage?

(many people talking at once, agreeing that the appearance needs to be cleaned up.)

To me, it's not so much that it's clean. I lived in New Orleans for a while. I want to go downtown for entertainment, to eat, to go to a bar, to watch a game. Maybe the kids want to go dancing. Clean is important, but I think going down to have a good time is the most important. A show or dinner or a night out on the town.

Look at how good the Rogers Theater Rockabilly show is doing. I'd go downtown for a blues band or something.

It was so much fun there.

I think about going downtown at night. Safety is important. That's what I would want downtown to be.

Overall, the experience that our downtown has is no different than towns all across the country. Everybody wants to revitalize, and a lot fail.

This is the last hope. If this doesn't work, we're looking at redevelopment.

Demolition.

If this doesn't work...

I think we need to try to make this work.

I think there's people that want to make stuff work.

(agreement.)

This is a very tough issue to come up with something, because people want to know what we're going to do.

Just like the Depot downtown. They've scratched and clawed and got the money to keep it from falling down, but there's still no compelling use for that building. Why would we want to put a million dollars into that building without a use.

Have you ever seen the Kirkwood Depot? It's beautiful. It's restored. And they've got these boutiques and specialty shops. They have created a walkway.

(agreement.)

Another one that comes to mind is Washington, Missouri. They've done great things.

Yeah!

The shops and restaurants and the Depot.

***Moderator: Thank you very much.***