

DOWNTOWN
REVITALIZATION &
ECONOMIC
ASSISTANCE FOR
MISSOURI

MARCH 25, 2008

FOCUS GROUP SURVEY REPORT

FINAL SURVEY
FINDINGS & RESULTS

Aurora, Missouri



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



CITY OF AURORA

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



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SECTION I FINAL REPORT

As part of the research for the DREAM Initiative, UNICOM-ARC conducted four focus groups in Aurora, Missouri. The purpose of these groups was to learn more about the priorities of the Aurora community in regard to the downtown area. The four groups included the following: 1) downtown business owners, 2) chamber members and director, 3) long-time residents, high school students, and downtown residents, and 4) city staff, council, and media.

Participants of all four groups are from a variety of backgrounds, and all have a strong interest in downtown development.

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. In all cases, names and other identifying remarks have been omitted.

A. QUESTIONS POSED TO THE BUSINESS GROUP:

The following questions were posed to the business group:

General Questions about Aurora

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

Downtown Specific Questions

04. Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Aurora is headed in the right direction or wrong direction? Why?
05. Why did you choose to locate your business or make an investment in property downtown (or not in downtown, for other business owners)?
06. From what you hear from your customers, how “user-friendly” is downtown? Are business hours and locations convenient? Is there enough parking and is it convenient? Is it easy for people to find what they’re looking for?
07. How do you communicate to your customers about information about what’s going on downtown (about shopping, special events, other entertainment and recreation) or with your own business? How would you like to be communicated with regarding what is going on downtown from the City of Aurora?

Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

B. QUESTIONS POSED TO THE GENERAL GROUPS:

The following questions were posed to the general groups:

General Questions about Aurora

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

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

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

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

Downtown Specific Questions

05. Generally speaking, would you say that downtown Aurora 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 Aurora? Is there anything that you used to do downtown but now do elsewhere or vice versa? Why?

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

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

Questions Regarding the Future of Downtown

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

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

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

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

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

12. What downtowns or areas of other communities would you most *like* Aurora to resemble?

C. THE AURORA AREA

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

The groups described Aurora as a “family-friendly” town, with a strong sense of community, a strong work ethic, and a focus on supporting their children in high school sports. The town is near a number of lakes, and has an abundance of parks. Aurora is within easy driving distance, about 30 minutes, of larger towns such as Springfield, Joplin, and Branson. Historically, Aurora was a mining town, and its downtown thrived.

The participants felt that in many ways Aurora is moving the right direction, but that there are still improvements to be made. Most participants felt that the improvement they have seen in Aurora has happened within the last 5-7 years. They discussed the expansion of Wal-Mart into a Supercenter, which is bringing shoppers into Aurora from neighboring towns. They also cited a three-phase downtown development plan, which is in progress and currently beginning phase two; they see this plan as a major improvement to downtown Aurora. Further, they mentioned individual instances of people rehabilitating old buildings and expanding their businesses.

In discussing ways that Aurora’s development is less positive, the participants suggested that there is still a lack of communication and cooperation between the city government, the business owners, the property owners, and the Chamber of Commerce. They felt that if these groups came together and worked together more productively, Aurora would move even further in the right direction.

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 Aurora are the Wal-Mart and Price Cutter, as well as other stores in the strip malls on the outskirts of town. Many people, however, do much of their shopping in Springfield, particularly clothing shopping, gift items, and specialty hardware items for their houses. Some people shop for certain items downtown, as the downtown area has a pharmacy, a formalwear store, and specialty gift shops. However, the majority of the residents do most of their shopping at Wal-Mart and in Springfield.

According to the groups, people come from neighboring towns such as Monett, Nixon, Pierce City, and Republic to shop at the Wal-Mart Supercenter. People from neighboring towns do not come in to shop downtown, but they do come to eat downtown at Hog Wild restaurant, a famous regional barbecue restaurant.

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 Aurora, a few of the most frequented ones downtown. Options in downtown Aurora include Hog Wild Barbecue, Bootleggers Restaurant, and Café Metropolitan. Aurora also has Chinese, Mexican, and fast food options. The participants felt

that the dining options are of high quality, but that a wider variety of restaurants downtown, longer business hours, and some outdoor seating would be welcome improvements. For entertainment, Aurora has high school sports, a major activity for Aurora residents. The town also has a drive-in movie theater, a walk-in movie theater, a skate park, and an abundance of parks.

When out-of-town relatives visit, according to the participants, residents take them to the downtown restaurants, Hog Wild and Bootleggers. Beyond that, residents take visitors to Springfield, Branson, and the lakes for shopping and entertainment.

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

Typical outdoor recreation for residents includes hunting, fishing, camping, and boating. Aurora has a number of parks, and because the lakes are so accessible, water activities are popular with residents.

D. DOWNTOWN AURORA: DESCRIBING THE PRESENT

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

Participants generally felt that downtown Aurora is moving slowly in the right direction. They agreed that the three-phase downtown plan is a step in the right direction. In phase one, streetlights and updated sidewalks have been added to a part of downtown. Phase two is currently beginning, and with that further improvements will be made. The participants approve of the expansion done by Bootleggers restaurant and the renovations happening in the downtown area.

However, the groups felt that progress is slow in the development of downtown Aurora because of a lack of businesses and incentives for businesses to come in, an unwillingness on the part of existing building owners to renovate their facilities, a lack of incentives for people to buy and rehabilitate old buildings, and a “mismatched” and “dull” look and feel of the downtown area. They suggested that one factor that has stalled progress in the past has been different groups’ unwillingness to collaborate, but that this atmosphere is slowly changing, and different entities are now more willing to work together.

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

The business owners focus group cited the following reasons for locating their businesses downtown: availability, tradition, and affordability. Some businesses have been downtown for a long time and continue on as a tradition, while other businesses opened downtown because the space was abundant and inexpensive.

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

The groups mentioned a number of reasons that they visit downtown, but the most prevalent reason was to eat. The restaurants were the number one reason the participants visited downtown. Other reason included churches, the pharmacy, the post office, the movie theater, the formalwear store, and specialty gift shops. It was noted that one can plan and execute an entire wedding in Aurora, mostly from downtown businesses, including catering, hair and nails, formalwear, the church, and the reception hall. In addition, the car show held in downtown Aurora is a reason to come downtown. Still, the participants felt that there are not many reasons beyond food and the occasional specialty shopping to visit downtown.

When asked why they visited downtown in the past, the participants unanimously cited past festivals, specifically Houn Dawg Days, which was a carnival-type festival that coincided with the car show. Many felt that the loss of the Houn Dawg Days festival was a major blow to downtown Aurora, since it was a way to draw so many downtown who would not otherwise go. The groups also mentioned that downtown used to have options for children such as game rooms, shopping options such as clothing stores, shoe stores, and affordable gifts, and events such as band concerts on the Square. They felt that with these options gone, there are fewer reasons for residents and visitors to come 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?

The participants’ major concerns about user-friendliness were business hours and signage. Parking and street lighting were more minor concerns, but still arose.

Signage is a major concern, according to the groups. While there are two small signs pointing to City Hall, there is no signage marking the boundaries of downtown Aurora. There is a billboard on Interstate 44, but there is no signage on highways 39 or 60 to direct passersby to downtown Aurora. Within downtown, the groups were concerned about clean and aesthetically pleasing signage on individual buildings. They felt that more signs on the highways, signs telling people when they have reached downtown Aurora, and signage within downtown would all make downtown Aurora more user-friendly.

The business hours in downtown Aurora, according to the 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 PM on weekdays, which makes it impossible for people who have jobs with a regular weekday schedule to shop in these businesses. Sundays are another problem, since the community often has free time to shop on Sundays and many shops are closed. Furthermore, since so many churches are located downtown, people feel it would be ideal to walk around and possibly shop downtown on Sundays. The problem is compounded by the fact that large stores such as Wal-Mart, as well as malls in Springfield, are open in the evenings and on weekends.

The participants also felt that restaurant hours could be more convenient. Some restaurants close fairly early, around 9:00 PM. Some participants mentioned that the coffee shops downtown often open only at 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning, making it difficult for people who work to stop in for a

cup of coffee in the morning. They suggested that options for early-morning coffee and breakfast and options for a later-night entertainment and dining would be welcome, and would make downtown much more user-friendly.

The participants had minor concerns about parking in downtown Aurora. The parking situation, as some described it, is a “perceived problem”—while a person may not have to park more than a block away to visit a business, the walk seems longer because the person does not pass many thriving businesses while walking. The groups felt that there is ample parking now, if people are willing to walk, but if downtown were renovated to reach its potential, there would not be enough parking available to support that expansion. They suggested opening old parking lots or creating public parking lots as potential solutions.

The participants also felt that street lighting was a problem in parts of downtown, but indicated that the current three-phase plan for downtown is addressing the issue of street lighting.

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

The groups stated that word of mouth is way most people get information about downtown. The local radio station, the newspaper, and the schools are other media through which people get information. The city also has a website with information for visitors.

E. DOWNTOWN AURORA: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As you know, the city is in the process of developing a master plan for downtown Aurora. 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 felt that getting new business downtown was of the utmost importance to make downtown Aurora thrive. They suggested a variety of new businesses downtown, focusing on creating a mix of shopping, dining, and entertainment options for all ages. For apparel, they suggested clothing and shoes. In other types of businesses, they suggested art galleries, a bookstore, a jewelry store, and other specialty-type stores. In dining, many wanted to see a larger variety of restaurants, including an Italian restaurant and a diner that is open in the early morning, a bakery, a coffee shop, fine dining options, and sidewalk cafés. For entertainment, especially for children, the groups suggested a game room, a soda fountain shop, and a candy shop, particularly to appeal to junior high school students and teenagers.

Some participants felt that the downtown’s purpose is not to compete with Wal-Mart and the other large chains, but to offer a unique experience to customers. While they felt that options downtown should be affordable for residents, they acknowledged that rather than competing with Wal-Mart, the downtown area should work to become a destination with unique shopping, crafts, and arts.

Another major focus in the discussions was the possibility of bringing back the Houn Dawg Days festival and perhaps other festivals such as Ye Olde Mining Days. There are plans for a Winterfest this year in Aurora, and the groups all felt that festivals and events are the best ways to attract both residents and businesses to see the improvements in downtown Aurora.

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 felt that there is a long way to go in beautifying downtown Aurora, even though some improvements have been made in the last few years. These improvements, including street lighting and sidewalks, they saw as a step in the right direction. However, some participants felt that the downtown looked “dull” and “uninteresting.” Others felt that mismatched buildings made the downtown feel uninviting. Still others suggested that the number of vacant buildings and buildings in disrepair make people feel a little unsafe, particularly at night.

Building and façade repair and renovations were the highest priority for the participants in improving the look and feel of downtown. They felt that the buildings covered in metal detract from the aesthetics of the downtown area, and the buildings in disrepair should either be renovated, if they are salvageable, or demolished, if they are beyond repair. The groups acknowledged that this is difficult for individual building owners, but if incentives and help were available from grants, from banks, or from the community, it would become easier.

Landscaping was also a priority in the beautification of downtown Aurora. The groups suggested flower pots, gardens, and other greenery to make downtown less “dull” and more colorful. This, they felt, is a complement to the building repair that needs to be done. While they expressed that landscaping is of less overall importance than building repair, it is still important.

Many of the groups expressed that a cohesive, unified aesthetic was important in downtown revitalization. While the buildings should not all look the same, they should have the same historic “feel.” Participants felt that a cohesive “modern village” aesthetic, with a historic look but modernized businesses, would draw the most people of all ages downtown.

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 attracting businesses, improving aesthetics, improving user-friendliness, and reinstating festivals to be the four most important priorities. In aesthetics, the priorities were façade repair for the unrepaired buildings, renovating dilapidated buildings, and adding landscaping. In attracting business, retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment were all priorities. In improving user-friendliness, signage and business hours were the two major issues. Finally, reinstating festivals, some participants felt, would be an important step in bringing more people downtown.

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

The groups named the following small towns in Missouri as towns they admire for various reasons: Carthage, Pierce City, Monett, Branson, Mt. Vernon, Ozark, Charleston, and Clarksville. They named the following towns in other states as admirable, as well: June, Oregon; Sanford, Florida; Golden, Colorado; and Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

In all these cities, participants admired one of two things: the cohesive look and feel or the thriving festivals that bring people in. In many of these cities, they admired the cohesive theme, since some towns revolve around art and artists. In some cities, they admired the cohesive look, the “modern village” look. And they discussed big festivals that other cities have, which keep their downtown areas thriving.

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

The business owners felt that all downtown improvements would help their businesses, especially attracting other businesses to the downtown area and offering incentives to building owners to renovate buildings. Both of these things would help attract customers.

F. KEY POINTS

Key points about the Aurora area:

- ◆ Aurora is a family-oriented small town with easy access to bigger towns nearby.
- ◆ Aurora is a hub for many smaller surrounding towns for shopping, particularly the Wal-Mart Supercenter.
- ◆ Aurora, according to community members, is moving in the right direction, particularly in regard to the three-phase plan for downtown improvements.
- ◆ The main shopping areas in Aurora are the Wal-Mart and strip centers on the outskirts of town, but many residents travel to Springfield to do much of their shopping.
- ◆ Dining options in Aurora include casual dining, Mexican restaurants, Chinese restaurants, and a café; two restaurants, Bootleggers and Hog Wild, are visited by people in neighboring towns, as they are well-renowned.
- ◆ The community feels that there is a variety of dining options, but that a wider variety of restaurants downtown, longer business hours, and some outdoor seating would be welcome improvements.
- ◆ Recreation and entertainment options in Aurora include high school sports events, a drive-in movie theater, and a walk-in movie theater, many parks, and a skate park. Other nearby options include the lakes, camping, fishing, and traveling to Branson.

Key points about downtown Aurora in the present:

- ◆ The community agrees that downtown Aurora is moving slowly in the right direction—the three-phase plan for downtown improvement is already under way, and streetlights and sidewalks have been replaced.

- ◆ The community is concerned that downtown Aurora is moving *slowly* in the right direction because of a lack of communication between involved entities, a lack of incentives for building owners to renovate their buildings, and the scarcity of businesses downtown.
- ◆ Business owners located their businesses downtown because of the low cost and the availability of the space, unless they had been located there for a long time, in which case tradition keeps them there.
- ◆ The community, according to the participants, visits downtown primarily for the restaurants and churches, but also for specialty shopping, the post office, and the annual car show.
- ◆ More people would visit downtown more often, according to the groups, if business hours were more convenient, the downtown was more aesthetically pleasing, and the signage were clearer.
- ◆ Parking is only a minor issue in the present, but with expansion and development, the participants fear that the parking situation will get worse.
- ◆ Improved signage would help with navigation and advertising.
- ◆ Downtown business hours are inconvenient for people whose jobs have regular weekday hours—expanded hours during the evenings and on Sundays would be a welcome change.
- ◆ Expanded restaurant hours, particularly coffee in the morning and fine- or casual-dining restaurants at night, would be a welcome improvement.
- ◆ Local residents get information about downtown mostly by word-of-mouth, but also from the radio, the newspaper, and the schools.

Key points about the future of downtown Aurora:

- ◆ Downtown Aurora should focus on attracting affordable specialty shops, restaurants, and entertainment options; the participants felt that downtown's purpose should be to offer a unique experience to customers.
- ◆ For apparel, a clothing store and shoe store would be welcome additions downtown.
- ◆ For food, a bakery, a morning coffee shop or diner, sidewalk cafés, and a variety of additional restaurants would be welcome additions downtown.
- ◆ In other types of businesses, art galleries, art stores, a bookstore, a jewelry store, and any other specialty stores would be welcome downtown.
- ◆ New businesses should be encouraged to come in, and old businesses encouraged to renovate their buildings, through incentives to renovate.

- ◆ Building renovation and façade repair are priorities for the beautification of downtown; improved landscaping is also an important goal.
- ◆ Downtown Aurora should aim for a cohesive aesthetic that will attract both young and old patrons, both residents and visitors.
- ◆ Signage and business hours are priorities in improving user-friendliness downtown.
- ◆ In additions to downtown, retail businesses and restaurants should be priorities.
- ◆ Reinstating old festivals and creating new festivals are a priority, and will attract residents downtown, as well as out-of-town businesses.
- ◆ Aurora 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 cohesive look and feel and downtowns that serve as a “destination.”
- ◆ Business owners felt that all downtown improvements would help their businesses, but attracting new business and incentives for building repair would be the most helpful improvements.

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SESSION II

DOWNTOWN BUSINESS OWNERS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: I'd like to ask you a little about the area in general. Tell me a little about Aurora. If you were talking to someone thinking about moving here, what would you tell them?

I'd like to start with something positive. I think our school district is making some positive strides. We're not perfect, but we're making strides to that. That's one positive. One negative is this town smells of byproducts.

I will second that. The first time I smelled it, I thought I walked out my back door and I thought there's got to be a dozen cats that just pooped everywhere. It's repugnant. It's horrible.

But, on the positive side, that's a lot of money coming in.

(Many people talking at once.)

I wish we had more jobs available to people in Aurora. We seem to have the number one place of employment as social security disability.

(Many people agreeing.)

On a positive note, we have several good eating places in the downtown area. Bootleggers, we're eating Hog Wild tonight, we've got Café Metropolitan and some suites that are available to rent. To me, that's kind of a positive, that they've decided to locate in downtown Aurora, which I think brings people down that otherwise wouldn't...

(Many people talking at once.)

And when she says good, she means very good. People from Springfield will drive 30, 40 minutes to eat here. On a Saturday night, the local people, you know that you're going to be waiting in line or you go at four o'clock. We have a new Wal-Mart Supercenter that's created some revenue for us.

We have the biggest car dealerships in the area.

We do, yeah.

Aurora's going to be a car town. We have May's and Jimmy Mitchell's...

Speaking from someone who did come from St. Louis, I think the biggest... when I explain to someone about my town, I tell them that it's so quaint. It's comfortable. Within 2 years I knew most of the people here. It's very welcoming. There's the benefit to being in a small town is that you know where your kids are and you, you know, it takes a village to raise your children, especially if they're in sports...and you can leave one at the ball field and take the other one to the soccer field and know that your neighbor's going to watch him for you and don't worry about

them walking from my business downtown to the library downtown, which is 2 or 3 blocks away. Maybe I should worry, but I don't. They go down by the café on the square. I know most towns don't feel as comfortable doing that anymore.

Something I hear from the people that come in looking for property is how pretty our towns are because we forget, we see it everyday, and we don't see the wide streets, a lot of trees, a lot of my customers in real estate have remarked over and over how pretty Aurora is compared to some other towns they've looked at...

And not every house is a cookie-cutter house. You've got the variety of Victorian homes, there's a huge variety...you've got the Holly Hills Strip here, very well maintained homes. People, that's one of the places where I take my family and friends when they come to town...

We have several churches.

Banks...

And a lot of the churches have things going annually, the big Catholic pork chop dinner, Methodist pancake dinners...

Community supports...

I know we just got off of playing up at MSU. The girls basketball, and the girls were playing for the final four, I guess, is that...? Anyway, the support that came out for the girls was phenomenal. They could get behind the kids...

And within 30 to 40 minutes, we have all kinds of things available to us. From Branson, to Joplin, to Springfield, baseball, shopping, music, entertainment... I mean, there's just nothing that we're really lacking.

The only thing that I would say that is a shortcoming would be the airport, as far as a major fly-in, because some of the companies I work with, when I was working industrial real estate, that was their complaint, that they had to land in Springfield and drive down 35, 40 minutes. That was probably one of the biggest things...

To attract industry...

The lack of a large airport, like the Jack Henry.

(Side conversations.)

That's part of one of the biggest things, that and the lack of sometimes the support systems that companies have to have, like they compare us to Springfield, if they locate in Springfield, then they have all the support of the tool companies...all these little things that they go to. When you get into a smaller community, you don't necessarily have the little support companies, that if they would locate here, that provides the opportunity for those kind of little companies to start up and makes everything grow. It's all connected.

One thing we have that's unique, we still have a drive-in theater. People drive down... (Many people talking at once.)

We need an overpass.

Yes, and we've had meetings about that.

Trains would be a disadvantage.

Disadvantage, but it could be an advantage if there was some type of commuter rail... (Many people talking at once.)

But then, I don't think the town would stay small.

With success like that comes the growth.

Moderator: Would you say Aurora is moving in the right direction, wrong direction, or both?

Some both.

Yeah.

Sometimes it seems kind of stagnant. I've had my business for 8 years, and it hasn't really changed. No extra jobs in town. A lot of people live here, but they drive elsewhere to work.

My first thought was stagnant.

(agreement.)

On a positive note, we have a great Chamber. We do the business fair, which is a success, where people can come in and see what's available in the community. And of course the car show is a big thing, too...

And we're working on Benton Town. I think that will help.

Moderator: What are the main shopping areas for people who live here?

Wal-Mart

(agreement)

Aurora had an excellent downtown in its day, up to 80's, I worked in a clothing store...several downtown businesses. And you hate to blame Wal-Mart. When they do come into town, they tend to trickle out some of the small business... So there's only like 2 or 3 retail stores. The gift store, Horton's clothing store... the flower shop.

But Elliott street is outstanding. Our drag, so to speak. It really looks good.

Things have moved out. The strip becomes your shopping area, the Wal-Mart is the big...anchor, right on the corner of the highway where it comes in. But, you all are too young to remember. I remember when I was in high school here, and how the downtown thrived so much that you couldn't find a parking place on Friday night or Saturday night because everyone was downtown, and sitting on the hoods of their car and hollering at everybody. But there wasn't a Wal-Mart...

I think another thing is people are more mobile. It's nothing to drive to Springfield for what you need.

(Many people agreeing.)

So we have to change with the time we're in.

Since I've been here, on a positive, when we first came here, we were in the next town over, and all we heard was the hub was the negativeness around the city council and the city, you know, community, and that is completely changed. We're no longer the talk of gossip...

(Many people talking at once.)

That's been a huge plus, because at first, people would say "why are you moving over there?" Because their city management system was in an uproar. And then it has since died down, and it seems like they're working together, so it seems like the perfect time, because you couldn't move forward with that, and now it seems like there is some motivation to move forward with other things. A lot of it's the funds aren't available. Obviously, coming from a larger community, I never heard of kids sharing schoolbooks. It's no big deal, it's just a little different. You know, lots of things were unusual. Things I've never heard of. The kids didn't all ride the same school buses. Kindergarteners weren't on the same buses as high-schoolers. The funding...in a perfect world, it would be great to see, since we have unique restaurants, to have unique shops downtown such as the gift shop. We've got a Horton's which is a clothing store, but I feel it leans toward older, more mature, and the teenagers don't want to shop there.

It changed with time.

If we had more retail downtown that was appealing to younger people, you know, maybe they wouldn't be so excited to go to Springfield. Maybe they wouldn't mind shopping...

Moderator: I'd like to ask you a little about downtown as it is now. Do you feel the downtown is moving in the right or wrong direction?

I applaud _____ for putting her business in Aurora. She could've gone to Wal-Mart or Elliott Street. I think it's a real asset to attract people down there... I have the vision of having more unique restaurants, you know, put there. I'd love to see...I've always had this vision of somehow letting us block that end and having an outdoor restaurant, Italian restaurant. (unintelligible.)

Scott's park would be perfect.

(agreement.)

Just more unique things.

They have put up the lights, the benches, the flower planters and things like that, but, you put the flowers out, and there's one lady that waters them, because the business owners weren't watering them.

(agreement.)

So it has to fall back on pride.

(Many people talking at once.)

I cannot wait for to come down there, because we don't even handicapped parking. And I have tons of patients in wheelchairs. I think we're moving in the right direction downtown, but it's just not coming fast enough.

On another negative note, my husband's business has been broken into 8, 10 times in the last year and a half, just constant window breakage and it hasn't happened, knock on wood, in the last 2 months, but it has really been a problem...

Are they actually going inside the store?

They have, and then mostly vandalism. Breaking out those huge windows and doors, so... and it's not just his store, it's been all over town, so...

If the downtown was more busy, maybe?

It happens in the wee hours, and they don't have enough police to patrol...

I have been able to take advantage of a building downtown. I bought 6000 square feet and turned it into office.

It looks nice.

We're getting ready to redo it. It is a probation and parole office, and we all know that's not going to go away, and they're going to take all the buildings. The whole thing.

(Many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Why did you all choose to locate your businesses downtown?

Ours has been there 100 years.

Cheap.

Availability. There's not a lot available on the strips.

In my situation, I'm just passionate about the downtown, because I grew up coming to Aurora and shopping, and what have you, and my first couple jobs were in downtown, and I like old buildings, and I just, you know... I could've gone on the strip, but that wasn't even an option for me. I just wanted to try to come downtown. Hopefully I make it. I've been there 2 and a half years, and it takes a while to ever see the light at the end of the tunnel, so we'll see what happens.

One of the things that people tell me about downtown that I never thought of is they can avoid a lot of the stoplight. The older people like not to worry about the stoplights. That really scares them.

(agreement.)

For us, one of the reasons we go downtown is the city cleans the streets when it snows. We don't have to get out and clean the parking lot. We just have to do sidewalks.

(Many people talking at once.)

We're supposed to have a Pizza Inn coming in, and he wanted to locate in the downtown because of centrality, you know, deliver in a 5-mile radius. So, thank goodness he chose...

Did he buy the building?

He bought it.

Well, and in all reality, to be able to walk, you know, I can walk from the funeral home, get lunch... (laughter)...in the spring and summer, I can get out, I can walk, and for an older person, you know, if they want to grab lunch with their girlfriends after their eye doctor appointment...

And what I think happens, people get used to going away from the downtown... I've heard people saying, "Well, I don't go downtown for anything. There's nothing down there." Eating places, pharmacy, Horton's...

You know, they used to stay open later. On a negative point of that, though, for thinking, what can the city do, well, the city could say, "If you've got a building that's really looking rough, you need to keep it nice, even if it's vacant." Or, the city needs to manage it. That Radio Shack is falling apart, and that's what I pass when I walk, and it just upsets me. That needs to be covered up, and you know, yeah...managed. It should be somebody's responsibility. There needs to be some chain of...

It's sad, because it is a historical building. It's sad that the owner's letting it go, deteriorate, but anybody can't take it and maintain it.

It's a big eyesore.

You have to get people used to come back down into an area. I spend a ton on advertising, trying to let people know I'm there. So, another business owner maybe said one time, "Well, does some of that fall back on your city or chamber to help promote the downtown?" You know.

But, you know, people get used to going somewhere else. They have to hear word of mouth... so promotion and creatures of habit and, you know, trying to get back in...

I had an idea, and I don't know if I dreamed this or saw it... but you know, I had a dream that an auctioneer company bought the store on the Square and was going to hold auctions every Saturday.

It's going to be a restaurant.

There's been auctions.

(Many people talking at once about the specifics of the auctions and the potential Italian restaurant.)

...It's just neat to look at how it was, as a historical community. It was a thriving town at one time, and someone said to me, "it stayed open later, and when it started closing earlier, you couldn't go out to eat in the evening, so you went somewhere else." The shops closed at 6 or whatever. If something's not open... I'm going to be very blunt... _____'s sitting on a goldmine, and he's pissing it away. We have a coffee shop, sweets, they're awesome, they're phenomenal... he's letting the building fall apart. It's great food...

He closes at 5!

(Vehement agreement.)

Why aren't you open on Saturday morning, when I want to take my kids to breakfast!? I don't know if you could even do this, but if it was like a mall, where the mall says you're open from here to here.

He used to be open in the evenings, too, but not anymore.

Right, so, you know, and I don't know an answer for this, and...

And all these little shops that are there, we need incentives for people to come in with antique shops and a little tea room, and if that's the route that we're going to go, we need to have a vision and push that, because if we, because I don't know what else is going to work.... You know, if you've got, you know, we've got a historical downtown, and I don't know that it's going to be like Springfield. You're not going to have bars and all that stuff, so roll with what might work, and what brings people here is food. People like to eat and they like to do antiques. They like to come through on their motorcycles. Maybe the city needs to find out, take that information that they're getting, either here, and then, then we push to just draw them here, have those carrots.

Something out there as a carrot, and if people are on the net looking for places to visit or plan their vacation route, got to have something that's either historical or so unique that they'll put Aurora on their route, so you've got to come up with some kind of identifying, or something, or if you can be year-round type thing, old historic...it's too bad we're not on Route 66...

It's too bad that they tore down the old depot, at the end of the McClure's... that would've been pretty cool.

(Agreement.)

Is it possible when we do a downtown renovation, that each business owner gets X amount of grant dollars or money or whatever to fix up their building with a designated awning or something? But I mean, that's kind of what vision that I have, that you can kind of clean up some of the buildings.

There is money available.

But it's not free money.

(Many people talking at once. Side conversations about loans.)

It would be nice to kind of have a general scheme of what you're going for...I don't know.

Moderator: How user-friendly is downtown Aurora? Is it easy for people to find their way here and find their way around?

Yes.

Very.

Moderator: Parking?

(Many people talking at once.)

It was so good until you said parking.

We give directions all the time, and people will be going around and around the Square... I don't know that it's really user-friendly as far as...

...The Square...

We need some sort of signs or designation or something...

Maybe this would come with this revival. You've got the new streetlights...maybe even the buildings that were empty would have a nice awning. And people might say, "I might put my business there..."

Just general things...the streets by the library is bad...

The sidewalks!

The sidewalks are bad, but not just *the* downtown, but a block away, the sidewalks are real bad, and that goes to the property owner, doesn't it?

And again, going back to the city enforcing ordinances that say, well, because, you know, because what person, what old, well let's just take _____ who tackled First Christian Church's stairs...she's not going to walk down to the library because the sidewalks are like this. You cannot, I mean, I've fallen flat on my face in front of the corner of Pleasant and Jefferson. There is several places on the sidewalks are not set up for someone who can walk, even someone my age, you know, I'm 39.... (Laughter.) 40... That really is a deterrent. If the city's moving in that direction, the city should enforce, you maintain your property.

And trash. Pick up your trash.

Yeah.

(Discussion on where the downtown boundaries are.)

Another thing we touched on, someone said parking, which is kind of a big deal now... there's no city public parking lots, because like at lunchtime, I've had maybe somebody walk in my store and there are like "where are all the people?" There's no parking spots out front. And Thursday, Friday, Saturday, they park all the way...

(People agreeing at once.)

The problem is, me as a store owner, I don't really have another choice other than park right in front of my business, which is really not a good thing.

Why don't you park and walk from the library?

(Many people talking at once.)

As we get the new Pizza Inn next to us, are they going to have one or two vehicles... so there you go. I know people may not think parking is a problem, but it really is.

(Many people agreeing, side conversations.)

Jayco pulled out...

And their cars were all on main street.

What could we have done to keep that business here?

They sold out.

(Many people talking at once, side conversations.)

But looking at it, though, they did bring money into the community by spending money.

Did anybody work at getting those business people, employees or management, active in the Chamber or the community?

I think they were all coming from out of town.

(Many people talking at once, side conversations.)

When that was the bank downtown, that was the main bank in Aurora, so people using that bank... and, you know, it would be nice if another bank came back down in that area.

Yeah, it worked great.... (Many people talking at once.)

Then you've got the parking issue all over again.

That's true.

But they've got a parking lot.

Moderator: Can you talk about advertising and being able to reach out to customers?

I spent \$7000 advertising my small business, and that's a lot of money.

Moderator: How do you all communicate with your clients, customers, potential customers?

(Laughter. Lots of noise.)

When the bank wants an appraiser or rental company, they come to me.

It's small town word of mouth.

I've been here 8 years...

...I've done the radio and the paper...

But you can tell there's more people coming and going...

It takes word of mouth... But you can advertise in the paper and all that stuff.

And I will say, hands down, that if you were to go to my business or wherever, and you go to the soccer field or something, and you try to raise money or support from the business, you'll get it. You're going to get that support from a business to support schools, the churches...

...The amount of people that come in for fundraisers, and want something, is unbelievable. You have no idea... you know...

(Many people talking at once.)

And you have to pick and choose, and you, what we have done is we've decided we have certain goals, and our kids are in school, and school functions are important, because that school supports, and school and activities for kids, I mean, you know, if any of your kids or grandkids came to us and said, "I'm going to be in a barrel racing competition," we're there. We sponsored this boy bullriding. We don't know anything about bullriding. He was local, and he was, you know, so...

(Many people talking at once.)

But advertising outside of this town, you know, we have... we do not do big corporations...we keep it here. Period. We turn people down. We do not advertise, big time.

You have a billboard, don't you?

Yeah, but...

(Laughter and talking at once.)

Advertising is important, but we've got to communicate that downtown is good. I tell people I'm going to go to the gift shop, and they're like, "That's expensive." There's got to be something that we can allow people to understand what's available. If you don't go, you don't know.

I have to agree that the best advertisement is customer satisfaction about what we do. We do advertise quite a bit, also, from the newspaper, you know, other things. One of our big things is trying to promote other stuff, through the schools or whatever, different charity things to get your word out there, spend your money in the community instead of other places, and we have the last three years, I guess, we've done surveys at the business fair on what phone books people use, because whenever the phone book people come, they have all these graphics about who uses this book... so we have paid 3 high-schoolers to go around and do this survey, and we've turned that to the chamber office the last 3 years.

You know, I think right here where we're sitting, it's a big asset to know you can come in here to the old Depot or the museum. I think it's awesome that we have it, and it looks good driving by...

Moderator: Let me ask you specifically about—and I know we've already brought some of these issues up—but what types of businesses would you like to see in downtown Aurora?

Restaurants, unique restaurants, like an Applebee's or something... I'd love to see the antique store... a clothing boutique, maybe?

Children's clothes.

If you want kids' shoes, you've got to go to Wal-Mart.

I know when the flea market moved away from me next door, we saw a significant decrease in the amount of people coming through that area, and now it's a pawn shop... a flea market, antique shop, clothing...

You know, Charla's or Suzanne's or something, it's down in the old Wheeler store, they have children's clothes, kind of secondhand. I mean, they're really nice. They have really nice stuff that's really inexpensive, but when you look at the outside of the building, it looks like a dump. There's a lot to curb appeal. If they could just tweak the outside...

For what it's worth, the building I moved out of was an old shoe store, the business went down, they closed it up... to portray to someone, "yeah, come in, put a shoe store, we need one, put a boutique, we need one..." Yeah, I'd love to see that too, but everything that goes along with it... you've got to have people supporting it... so there again, you know, you have to have a support, the push, and they're not going to come in and make a living out of it... on a negative note, maybe...

They're going to have to have working capital for a couple years, minimum... and so many people in today's world can't afford that, so you get back into the chain stuff.

And you get back into traffic, where they're used to going... and word of mouth is good, if you can get them to come back down.

I think we're facing the problem of the time that we're in right now, with the economy the way it is, and people being stretched for money, then how does the community work with that...how do we work with that to draw people in to even put in shops and stuff and support those shops? How can you work with the present situation?

I think food.

(Agreement.)

I think a lot of people work out of town, and if they know they can have their choice...

A nice bakery.

A lot of people drive in to have lunch.

A lot of my friends are into that thing where you go to Springfield and prepare your own meals... why couldn't we do something like that downtown?

(Agreement.)

You know what we're talking about? Meals-and-time or Why Cook?...you can actually go in and buy prepared food, or you can do a cooking class and prepare meals up for a week or two weeks or whatever you want to do...

(more explanation of cooking classes.)

That does cater to a more elderly population.

I know a lot of working parents do that too. They make dinner for the whole week.

And there's a group of seniors... my mom and dad eat out every meal.

Oh my god!

It's real surprising... and there's more out there.

(Agreement.)

And we do have some good restaurants downtown, but we have pizza, Chinese, Mexican...we've got a lot.

We might want to market ourselves to market ourselves to seniors, to that section.

Smaller meals, that's what they want.

(Agreement.)

Another thing that I thought about doing, not that it would've been a big moneymaker, and someone beat me to the punch... a donut shop. I think we need, not that you're going to make any big money, but even a drive-through, a sit-down...you've got that group of people that like to sit down.

The Coffee Clutch.

We've got some Casey's donuts, but as far as a donut shop... You'd almost have to put it in with a lunch place to try to get more revenue...

A place to eat breakfast.

(Many people talking at once, agreeing.)

We had a little Daylite Donut out on the strip for a while, but my thought on it was, if it would've been in a, I don't know, it was drive-up and it was a little different location...I think it could've.

I think we just need a bakery.

Wedding cakes and pastries...

(Many people talking at once, agreeing on the need for a bakery.)

That would be great, if you could get your bakery.

Like that little brown bag...

(side conversation.)

If you buy an old building and don't have your fire wall, you're going to have to spend money...

It's a lot of money. Everything's 24 feet. By the time you put a firewall in, you really limit your space inside, because they're using like 2 feet.

_____ 's got great buildings and a great product. If the city would say, "You know what? If you could guarantee you'll stay here 2 years, we'll put new awnings up." Her awnings need done so bad, and if they'd do a 50-50 with her or there was an incentive for it.

She's got an awesome selection of dresses.

She also had an opportunity, one of the makers was looking at relocating their headquarters from Houston, and she was enticing them to purchase a building, and they were looking at that... as far as I know, they haven't moved yet.

Your antique flea market type things really bring the tourists in.

But they need to be open longer. I can see people waiting in line at Bootleggers, having a store by there, they could give a little buzzer thing and go shopping.

Have you ever been to Wall drug store in Wyoming or whatever? They bought the whole block, and you could just keep walking from one to another, and they just, everything is there, available, from food to antiques to gifts to specialties like a humidor...just everything. And it appeals to the tourists. And that town is always thriving because that's a destination on your route out west, is to go to Wall drug store. They could do that by Bootlegger's.

_____, what would you like? Would you like a game room with pool tables? Something that would appeal to kids?

(Laughter.)

I wonder if there could be a community rec center, with handball courts in the bottom, or an aerobics place, you know, utilize the building. That would attract people.

If you could just grab the exercise place and get it located downtown... and the dance studios and you know...

Dance studios would be awesome.

You know, you have to think of it from a marketing standpoint. If you want to do something, you have to start a campaign, but you have to campaign the right thing. This is not a college student town. It's a community for families and older people, okay, so start a campaign and get the city, and advertise, push that, make it a deal, make it that everybody's talking about Aurora as a hometown community, Aurora that you could have the city life but live in the country because you're a half hour from anything. Start that campaign and push it and get it out there and have it on the radio. "Do you want to work in Springfield but live in a nice community?" You don't have traffic. You know... In St. Louis, I drove an hour and a half to and from work everyday. If I was in Springfield or Joplin, I'd be here in 35 minutes, nothing. That's nothing for someone who lives in St. Louis. I love St. Louis. You couldn't pay me enough to go back. I lived there 30 years, and nobody in my family has left, and when they come here, they say, "What do you like?" I say "I never have traffic." Even if have to go to Springfield or Joplin, no traffic. There is no traffic.

I think it's a domino effect. The ultimate thing is that we want, I think, some type of economic development, and we're looking at probably a small scale. We'd love to have the big stuff come in, but if you have the small one, what is going to secure a small business to come in? I would imagine that they're going to look at the schools, make sure their child's education, and recreation... I know a lot of small business owners, they work themselves to death, but there's pleasure you have to have. We greatly need to improve our park system.

Let's talk about hospital. What happened to our new hospital we were supposed to get?

We're getting it in 2010.

(Many people talking at once.)

You know, a new hospital might bring doctors in...

(Many people agreeing.)

When they came to that meeting in 99 or 2000, it was supposed to be a 5-year thing... It could still be delayed. But I think your idea is right. Looking at attracting smaller thing brings you more security, because stability I should say, because any kind of thing that employs 10 people vs. the 1000 people, because you know a 1000 people company leaves...when your 10 closes up, it's not as much of an impact.

And 1000 English-speaking people.

Yes.

(Laughter. Side conversation about why people should speak English.)

You know, we've been lucky to have a hospital and a nursing home... We definitely need small companies, but that's hard to grab.

But there's so much more stability.

But that's the committee we need to have, trying to entice. Where do you go? Who do you contact to get relocation to this area?

Eagle transport, that guy's running out of his house...there's a cute little house next door to it. Cute house. And I think he should move his business out of his home. And I would look at that house for myself, but I say no way, because I wouldn't want all that traffic there. So why is he staying there? What could entice them to have an office downtown?

Well, you'd need to get him a parking lot, because I don't want them next to me.

(Laughter, agreement.)

There's no ordinances established to keep your property clean, you know...?

Is there not?

Is it enforced?

(Many people talking at once.)

...because it has grown to 10 vehicles outside...

I'd say that maybe if a neighbor has complained...

(More discussion on this business, many people talking at once.)

Going back to the city, what can the city do? Well, the city could establish guidelines and enforce guidelines and make them user-friendly.

They have 'em. They just aren't enforced.

Yeah.

All you got to do is look at the code book.

(Many people talking at once.)

It's a matter of manpower too, probably. How, do we have enough people?

Complaint-based. Maybe it should stay that way. If nobody complains, they've got other things to do. That's what it boils down to?

Isn't that a planning and zoning thing? Can't you ask them to enforce...?

If it's already on the books.

Well, they're on the books, it's just a matter of finding them and pointing them out.

Then maybe the city does, they are tearing down, and this doesn't include downtown, but they are tearing down some of the eyesore homes that are the homes that are, "See, aren't you lucky, you could live there."

(Laughter, many people talking at once.)

If they are that bad, just like that Radio Shack building, if they're that bad, we need to tear down. That could be a good parking lot, you know.

(Agreement.)

Maybe pave behind him, so that all those people utilize a parking lot there, because it's just that it's not very nice, so if the money would be there through the initiative or something to...

There is a lot there... that would be a great parking lot.

Perfect.

(Many people agreeing.)

Is it a matter of convenience? We talk about our businesses and why we have to park in front of our businesses because we don't want to walk, yet we force our customers walk. Are people going to park and walk? No. Business owners don't park and walk.

I may get myself in trouble, but I've never really liked the auto body place at the corner of the Square. I think it's an eyesore.

I think if it looked better, you probably wouldn't...

It just looks like a bunch of vacant, beat-up old vehicles.

It's filling the space. It's been there for years.

Then it could be so cute with a little paint, a little fix-em-up stuff.

You've got to have the incentive to get him to do it. It all comes down to if there's some kind of incentives from the programs that the state offers to entice those owners to improve the buildings.

Another building (name unintelligible), there's a lot of square footage there.

It would be perfect to put a restaurant in, because there's a side slide door by the photography stuff...

I think he still owns that.

You could slide your door right into that gorgeous park. I could see all those little tables...it would be a perfect restaurant.

He lost that first of the month.

A shame.

Maybe that's something the city needs. A park downtown.

Wouldn't it be great if the city bought that?

It's already set up for a park downtown.

What about converting that to a community center... because, you know, the community center, I think they stay pretty busy, so that would be a great spot to expand for bigger banquets and weddings and such.

Well, I'm really hung up on that little park area and not letting it go to seed. I would imagine that building, I know, so many of the buildings downtown... you don't want to put too much money into them until you resolve a lot of the problems. There's water problems.

That's a gorgeous apartment...

That's a smart building for somebody to buy.

(Agreement.)

Moderator: The last thing I want to ask you is about other places you've been. Are there aspects of other downtowns that you'd like to see in Aurora?

Downtown Carthage is attractive.

The attractiveness of it...if it's, you know, we don't have, because it is a downtown, it's pretty um, there's not a walkway... it's concrete and then your building. There's not a tree or a little path of greenery...so the idea, when they did put the planters...so, pulling some warmth into it...

Some green.

Now I don't want this taken the wrong way, but Pierce City has just turned out real neat. It was wiped out by a tornado, but it has come back up. They've kept the old there, but it's sharp.

You sometimes wonder if maybe some space between buildings would be good...

Put a little tree in, put a little park on the corner.

In Monett, the little parking lot has some trees.

You know what would be neat there? Fred's.

They don't usually come into downtowns.

Well, maybe a Walgreens. People could shop there.

Most of these big places have certain parameters. Our town always is under the bar.

(Agreement.)

What's the population of Republic?

They're considered part of Springfield now. They're getting big.

(Side conversations about outdated maps.)

You mentioned Walgreens, but then you throw in your competition for your downtown pharmacies...

I do remember 20 years ago, when they put the pear trees downtown... do we have special lighting?

Yeah.

They have those new metal ones.

They don't match.

Do they go down Madison?

No.

Are they going to keep going?

That's part of the Main Street program.

The sidewalk's going to stop at the alley.

It should go down to Washington Street.

Wasn't that the original plan, to go all the way to Washington?

A dance studio would be nice there, or a gymnastics place.

They used to have a dance studio 30 years ago. (Side conversation.)

I think you were looking for special lighting, maybe other towns have different things like special lighting or neat benches. In different mountain areas, carved animals...

Moderator: Any downtowns you really like?

Golden, Colorado has wood carvings, with big slats of wood you can sit on.

When we advertise Aurora, we use the city hall buildings, but nothing's done to it to make it more unique.

If there's a glorified fountain, maybe...

When we first moved to town, they had bluegrass bands playing every summer. Live entertainment.

Yeah.

They have a gazebo down there. Maybe they could use that.

When they have the car show, when we get so busy like that, when I walk outside I can hear the music, I remember that, and I'll send the kids down or we'll run over there and grab lunch. And we'll see people from all over. It would be really neat if Bootlegger's and Café and Pizza Inn and Hog Wild—what would it take for you to all chip in and get a 1-man band to come in every Friday in June or something.

That is a neat idea, to have a band playing.

Yeah, or maybe at this dead end by the chamber.

I know coordinating these things...I'm a summer person, and I've been asked to help with a Winterfest. But in the summer, I would love to have something to do here.

That kind of make sense, where the old depot was, a bandstand.

Or maybe each restaurants gets one Friday of the month or something. It's a campaign to draw. If you're driving through, and you see this town's got the...

Isn't that what happened at Norma's?

Yeah.

It was fantastic.

And Brothers.

When we came here, we were told we're in the Bible Belt, but there's nothing wrong with good music and entertainment.

I think of the landing at Branson with the light show and water show, they've done something to bring people there.

A glorified fountain would be good.

If you could do some kind of advertising to pull in a small percentage of those millions going to Branson. Nothing's slowed down there.

(Agreement.)

The nationwide economy doesn't seem to be stopping people going down there. People are coming here from out of state for Branson.

35 minutes is nothing.

How do you tap into all of those people that that's their destination.

I'd like to summarize what I got from this meeting. I feel you can captivate people driving through. If you're driving through and you see a band playing, and they stop, and there's cute restaurants and gift shops and antique stores, and a cool fountain by city hall.

You've all been to Maggie May's...

I haven't.

Oh, we have to take you.

In Miller?

Yeah. 740 people in that town, but on a Saturday, there's cars from Arkansas, Oklahoma... that's a draw. And all those little ladies come, and they have their tea.

It's a metal building.

It started as a florist, then a tea place.

And no parking.

(Laughter.)

But it doesn't stop people from going there.

People appreciate light, good food.

It all goes back to the food. People's biggest complaint is no place to sit and eat in other towns.

Mt. Vernon.

Monett.

That would be a way to make Aurora unique. Sit-down places with good food.

Music and food.

Okay, we solved that problem!

(Laughter.)

Moderator: Thanks again.

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SECTION III

CHAMBER MEMBERS AND DIRECTOR DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Focus Group: *Moderator: If you were describing Aurora to someone who was thinking of moving here, how would you describe it?*

I've lived here from birth... and I've always said, "This is my Mayberry." It's a lot of hometown folks who care about each other and are willing to work together, especially when we have ice storms and tornadoes.

I'm the opposite of a lifer. I just moved here 3 years ago. _____ mentioned the word hometown, and that's very much what my wife and I here...the close feeling the community presents, and people wave to you, and you know them... that's what makes the town appealing.

I'm kind of in between. I've lived here about 10 years now, and one of the things that brought us, in addition to a business we were purchasing, was the town was...my wife is from Kansas City, and I grew up on a farm, and this is about a good compromise for us. It was big enough to suit her and small enough that I could still live in it and be comfortable...I had no interest in living in Kansas City or St. Louis, so this was a nice compromise for us. This location I think is great. It's close enough to a lot of communities and a lot of things that we can do in this part of the state that are within easy driving distance, and good access... I think we've got some great access to some of the major highway. I think that's a real advantage for us as a community.

We've been here for 10 years, and we literally drew a circle on a map, and said "here's Joplin, here's Springfield..." (unintelligible)

Moderator: Would you say the area's moving in the right direction or wrong direction?

I think in general, right direction. In general, I think the communities are growing, maybe not really fast, but I think at a reasonably steady rate. The communities that are the size of Aurora or equivalent, are growing at a rate that they're not in danger of dying. Some of the smaller communities...I see some that have been pretty static for a while and I don't necessarily see that here. I think there's some areas within the community that are a little static, and hopefully that's something that can be addressed, but I think the community as a whole is in growth mode.

The school system here is excellent. I've only been here for 12 years, and I've seen so much in the way of expanding their potential because they use their assets, and because they use their assets... it's a great way to promote the community. It's just a good school system.

And we have a new police department, a brand new high school.

Overall, the town is extremely progressive. You don't see this type of growth unless you've got potential.

Moderator: What are the main shopping areas in town?

Wal-Mart

(many people agreeing)

And we have some downtown businesses. Horton's has been here a long time. And we have True Value, we've got hardware stores...we're pretty self-sufficient, as far as most things, if you're looking for something, you can find it in Aurora. It's not a lot that people feel like you need to go to Springfield for, so...

We have some good restaurants. Bootleggers is really good.

I mean, for a community this size, I think we've got an amazing array of choices beyond fast food.

(laughter)

We have a good choice of that too, really, but we do have some restaurants like Bootleggers, like Blackbird Grill, that are different enough that it gives us some variety, and I think it draws a lot of people from the surrounding area... I have a lot of clients that live in Mt. Vernon and places like that that they come to Aurora to eat because of those restaurants that are here that they can't find anywhere else. Hog Wild...

Even from Monett, and they're a lot larger from we are...

They don't have near the variety that we have.

We're very fortunate.

Moderator: From how far away does Aurora draw for shopping, restaurants, and other things?

They come even from Springfield.

Yeah.

They come from Joplin.

We get people from Miller, we even get people from Cassville.

Cassville and Miller areas.

(many people talking at once.)

The skate center gets people from Diamond, Cassville...we ask these kids, "where are you from?" and there's a lot from Crane and Billings...

Galena.

I have clients from Miller, Galena, Republic, clients from Pierce City that drive through Monett to come to us.

(side conversations)

We draw a lot from the south, Galena, Crane, Shelmont—a lot of those people trade in Aurora.

Now that we have the Supercenter, they don't have an excuse to go any other place. We were losing some people, but...

Moderator: Is it relatively new?

Opened in Sept. of last year.

Finally.

Moderator: What about recreation opportunities in the area?

I think our lakes...a lot of people go to the lakes on the weekend. As far as entertainment in Aurora, we don't have a lot.

The drive-in in the summertime brings people in from Springfield and surrounding areas.

It actually brings people from Oklahoma and Kansas.

(many people talking.)

And there's a nice golf course.

The bowling alley does well too.

We also have the Princess Theater...it's not state of the art, but it's very nostalgic, so a lot of people like to come. The skating rink, I know, that gets utilized very well, especially now since it's been updated. We have our swimming pool. It's utilized in the summer, mainly residents.

We did used to have a really good, active theater company, the Aurora Community Theater, but... how long has it been since they folded? 10 years?

Yeah.

That used to bring in a lot of people.

Well, within driving distance, there's a tremendous amount of recreation—the lakes and rivers, and Branson, and Springfield obviously, but... we just got back from fishing on the Gulf of Mexico, and I couldn't get the guide once he found out where we lived to stop talking about Table Rock for long enough to catch a fish for me. Those are really plusses, I think, for the area.

We live close to Branson, you know...40 minutes?

Yeah.

30 minutes from Springfield, and 30 minutes from Joplin. Right in the center of the triangle.

Moderator: If you had friends visiting, where would you take them?

Branson, the lakes, Springfield...it depends on their interests. We have such a diverse...you can go to Springfield and go to the theater, and you can go to Branson and shop in the outlet malls, or go to some of the country music performances, or go and rent a houseboat on the lake or a cabin. You can drive to Arkansas and shop there too.

Shopping.

Shopping.

There's hiking trails, there's river rafting, there's so many things to be able to offer.

There's tons of canoeing in this area.

Yeah.

And sailing.

Yeah.

45 minutes to Stockton...

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

It's moving in the right direction, but there's still lots of work to be done. A lot of our old buildings are still really rough-looking, and that's not helping any of the stores.

I think we've seen businesses go in and try, but unless it doesn't get fixed... I mean, look at (mumbling, unintelligible).

...(building name unintelligible) They've purchased another building along with that one, and they're looking at putting another antique store in. It was another partner problem. I think it would've gone over well. But even the one that's sitting across the street from Bootleggers, at least they've got to block the windows so you're not looking at this empty, falling down building.

The community's been active in wanting to help downtown, whatever the group's called...there's been a fair amount of money and effort going in to creating sidewalks and things that's made it look a lot nicer. The part that's lacking is the private investment in specific buildings. So I think the community's behind it if you can just get some outside people to look at some of these buildings...

I agree. I think the community's behind it and in support of it. I think the vacancies that exist downtown kind of lend itself to that deserted feeling almost...

And our downtown's kind of unique to some communities. Some communities, you kind of have to look for the downtown. We have... especially in warmer weather, we get a lot of traffic through downtown.

And we've had an eyesore for years that is finally on the verge of being fixed, and that is we've needed desperately to have an overpass over the railroad, so traffic flows freely, and there's some really big steps have been taken recently to see that that's going to get done, and that will help a lot, instead of having to go around the downtown area, it'll bring them a little bit closer.

Moderator: Let's talk about how people use downtown Aurora. What are the main reasons people come downtown?

To eat.

(agreement.)

We have a great pharmacy that does a real good job.

Florist, insurance.

Business stuff.

(many people talking at once.)

We have two really nice gift shops, and I know Isla Bohm's really does advertise a lot.

And Norma's draws a lot all over the state, actually...her prom gowns. In fact, she told me, she's not getting any business hardly from Aurora. It's mainly from Crane and Monett.

She gets them from Lebanon and Ozark...

The Aurora girls go to Lebanon.

(side conversations.)

We do have a grocery store down there that does a pretty good job. A lot of people shop there.

A lot of seniors.

And the music store's pretty busy.

Yeah, they bring people from a long way away.

They do a lot of TV advertising.

They sell real expensive guitars and equipment.

I think one thing that would really help downtown is if we had business services that people are kind of required to drive to, like doctor's office or dentist's office. If those are kind of staples that have a lot of foot traffic...

Attorney's offices, those sorts of things.

Moderator: That's the sort of thing I'd like to hear more about in later questions. Are there businesses or activities that people used to do downtown but no longer do?

(many people talking at once, many conversations.)

The school is more involved in the community, as far as activities, and I remember being in 3rd, 4th grade, but I don't know what it was, but each grade did something to help, some kind of fundraising event. I remember making tissue flowers.

I painted the windows downtown.

So that's the one thing that I feel is lacking, is school involvement in the community.

We used to have a festival called Houn Dawg Days, which primarily revolved around our town square. And homecoming, and there was a very large band festival, Aurora was very well known for their band back in the 70s and the 80s...and that has, due to the lack of community involvement... I feel like when the school kind of stepped aside, the community stepped aside, because they weren't getting the proper information as to when things were going on. The only thing that is really left from the big festival is the Chamber's car show, which this'll be the 24th year that they've done the car show, and we are trying to bring some of that back. This was the first year in 10 years that we had a carnival, and there was a lot of positive...at first there wasn't, but overall there was a lot of positive feedback with the fact that, "oh look, Houn Dawg Days might be coming back..." Something that we can call our own.

How long has it been since Houn Dawg Days was with homecoming?

I've been here 7 years, and the very first Chamber board meeting I went to, they voted to completely dissolve all that.

I've been 15 years, and I know the first couple years I was here, it was exciting, Houn Dawg Days, but then we were like, "This is your big festival?" It was tiny.

Part of that was because the people who pay for those booths don't want to pay for them for a small group of people when the very next week is going to be the huge one in Mt. Vernon, the thousands and thousands of people...

We've got some competition on festivals. Marionville's got a great one, Mt. Vernon.

(Many people agreeing.)

You can't really compete with the Broiler festival, or with Mt. Vernon.

Used to have a band carnival, the Halloween band carnival—that was a big, big deal. Years ago, we used to have band concerts on the Square, right down here, every Saturday night during the summer...or Friday. I can't remember. But that brought a lot of folks to town, or down to the downtown area.

And they used to dismiss school for the homecoming parade. The schools made floats, and they don't do that anymore.

It's not required for the MAP test.

(laughter)

When I compare the way things are now to 25, 30 years ago...we were involved in all of these little activities, basketball, and all these AAU basketball, I mean they are so busy, they don't have time for this other stuff.

(agreement.)

And I think that's what's happened with the car show and the parade. The school can't be involved with the parade, because all the mighty mights are going to Cassville to play ball, and if we could just coordinate to get them to play in Aurora the same weekend as the car show, that would help.

We have an excellent school system, but there's a sense of community that's been lost. When we were kids, there was a unified community. Everybody coming out to support the bands, and there was just a lot of things that the town supported the kids in, and I still think we do, especially with our sports. We're big football town, but somewhere the sense of community's kind of been lost, and I'm not sure where that lies, either with the school or with parents in general that are too busy, but there's something that's not there anymore.

I'm not sure that's unique to Aurora.

(agreement.)

I think it's a sign of the times.

We did talk about having some of that come back, the Norman Rockwell...having a Winterfest and getting away from the fall stuff, because people want to do family things, and they don't care as much about what the weather's like when it's Christmas. They'll go to Silver Dollar City when it's cold out to see the lights, and they'll freeze. We're talking about doing something like that here. We're talking to churches to get parades more organized. We still have a pretty good Christmas parade, but it's not as big as it was. Churches don't participate as much. So we're talking about trying to bring things down here that will bring families in the wintertime.

Moderator: Anything else that used to be downtown in the past?

We used to have a shoe store down here, a jeweler.

We had a big furniture store and several clothing stores.

Radio Shack.

One time, there was 5 hardware stores.

And an appliance store.

Bank.

That's true. We don't have a bank downtown anymore.

Moderator: How user-friendly is downtown? Business hours and locations—are those convenient?

I don't think so.

(agreement.)

But it's pretty easy to get around for the most part.

In order to get to a particular place, though, just to visit one business—I used to go down all the time just to walk around the Square...(noise, unintelligible)...but you have about 4 parking spots per storefront, 5, 6, whatever, and you do have the access to this building. Unfortunately, I just don't see a lot of opportunity as far as getting a large amount of people here to participate in a lot of stuff unless you find a way to find some more traffic...

As far as the business hours, unless you're a restaurant, the hours just are not very good for working people.

Right.

They're just general store hours. 5:00, 5:30.

They've got 9 to 5 and the shops are closed. Except at Christmastime. Horton's stays open... and we coordinate that Christmas open house where they're open on Sundays, and this year they had quite a few businesses that actually did that downtown.

I can remember, they used to have a huge sidewalk sale, and every store had something...

I can remember going at 9:00...

(side conversations.)

Moderator: Would people say that downtown Aurora is convenient to use, as far as parking and navigation?

Yeah. Except maybe at lunchtime. If you're going to the Café, that kind of fills up.

It's really not bad to get around, when you compare it to Springfield or something. It's pretty easy to pull up to Bootleggers or Hog Wild.

You may have to walk a block, at the most.

People don't mind walking a little.

It depends on how cold it is.

(laughter.)

Moderator: And in terms of being able to find places? Is there room for improvement?

Yeah, there's room for improvement.

If you were a tourist... for us locals, we know where we're going.

There's not a sign on 39 pointing to downtown.

For our clients, all the girls, for confidentiality reasons...we're the only crisis pregnancy center in four counties, and giving them direction into downtown if they've never been...if there were a sign that said "historical downtown" that gave them a direction...

There is a sign out here on Church that says downtown...

It says "city hall."

Yeah, but there's nothing this way, and I have checked into what those signs...they run like \$1800 a year from the highway, but we're talking about highway 60. Those big blue signs.

(many people talking at once about the cost of signs.)

That is something we do—we have the billboard on 44 that does get a few people out. We're a shortcut to the lakes. We do have people come through, and because of our restaurants, we've built a name for ourselves...because of Hog Wild's...and I get calls at the Chamber asking about Hog Wild and Bootleggers. So, just by word of mouth, people know, but to get them to turn off from 39 to come up...most people will stop and ask, "where do I pay my sewer bill?" "at City Hall." "Well, where's that?" "On our Square." "You have a Square?"

Some of the road crossing are blocked by the trains, because the guys are going to Hog Wild's to eat.

If you like barbecue, you better go try it.

It actually won one of the top—that's been a big deal. One of the top in 417 magazine.

Are we sending out any brochures for the shortcut to the lake?

Ozark scenic byways?

Yeah.

The Crane end of it down there is completed, and _____ was wondering how this part was coming, because when I came in, they were doing a little stuff with _____, and everything just—I wasn't involved in it.

At one time, we had brochures at every tourist area, and it directed people right through Aurora.

And I think the expressway, extension...

Yeah. (agreement.)

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

Word of mouth, and radio, and newspaper.

We have a really good AM radio, and a lot of residents listen to it.

And area residents.

And if you can get on that between 6 and 9 am, people talk about it. A lot is word of mouth. We have our paper twice a week, and a Wednesday shopper, but in my 2 plus years, I've found that not everybody reads the newspaper, and not everybody listens to the radio. The best way to get to people is through the schools. And we are not able to do that.

Our hands are tied.

Even if you don't have a child in school, you may have a grandchild, or your neighbor... the school would be the best way to get the word out. You can do flyers and posters, but a lot of companies because of their branding...like banks...won't allow you to pass stuff out. So you do the best you can.

Moderator: What's the radio station?

KSWM AM 940.

They 3 other stations that they are a part of, and anything you advertise here goes there too.

Moderator: And the newspaper?

The Aurora Advertiser.

Oh, another thing that draws people to Aurora is the car dealerships.

(Agreement.)

We have two major car dealerships.

(many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Is there information available about downtown online?

Through the Chamber's website, yes.

Not sure if the city's website has anything, though.

Moderator: Let's talk about downtown as you'd like to see it. What sorts of businesses do you think would help revitalize downtown Aurora?

More clothing stores.

Yeah.

Niche retail, whether it's clothing or...

You see some towns with JC Penney, and other things. Besides Wal-Mart, you're pretty limited for clothing.

Curio shops with candles, and soaps...specialty shops. That's the kind of atmosphere people will plan on walking all afternoon. Like downtown Branson.

Yeah. I'm really impressed with downtown Branson. It's really neat...these little shops attract people by the droves, and they've got a neat wine place and all these specialty shops... (unintelligible noise)...an art gallery. Bring the artist in to show the art, maybe for a week, but you'd be surprised at the amount of people who'd visit. Once they realized the artist was there, they usually had a champagne deal, and then...this town was tiny, and the place was small, but it was packed with people. Boom! You have no idea!

We're getting an art gallery, in the fall is when they're hoping to open it. Gallery 307. They're wanting to do art walks and acoustic music. We go to the art walks in Springfield, and it'll be really good to have something like that in Aurora. One thing I wish Aurora had so I didn't have to drive to Springfield is a pool supply store.

(laughter.)

Because we have to go to Springfield for all of those chemicals and everything. They have some at Wal-Mart, but not enough.

I think a tea shop.

Yeah!

I, probably 2 or 3 times a month, I go to Miller to eat at Maggie May's. There's people that won't go to places that serve liquor, because of religion reasons...

Moderator: Any other kinds of businesses?

A nice bookstore, a Barnes & Noble type thing...

Yeah, we need a bookstore. Unless it's muscles or bow hunting, you can't buy a book in this town.

Even people who want to buy the Wall Street Journal, we don't have that here.

And also a sports bar. Bootleggers has a small one, but...

Don't you think of it as more of a game room?

Yeah.

Some place with pool tables and pinball...even my husband has talked about doing something for everyone, kids and adults.

In downtown Aurora, there used to be three pool halls, when I grew up. We'd sneak in...it was quite the deal back in those days...

I'd like to see somebody do something with the old hotel. It's just beautiful! Those that have put the money and redone buildings, they're beautiful!

(Many people agreeing.)

Is there no way to get historical loans?

Yes, there is a way.

Office supplies is something else.

When we were young, there was an office store.

Maybe like a Kinko's or a UPS store...

I'd like to see one of these old buildings as a satellite campus for MSU or MNSU in Joplin.

We could really be a good feeder college.

OTC.

That would be a good one, too.

Can you imagine having students down here? A bookstore, coffee shops, a clothing store...get these young people in.

They'll buy all kinds of stuff.

And we could have a work force to attract industry.

Then, we'd see growth like we wouldn't believe.

Moderator: What are the big employers in this area?

The school, Wal-Mart, the hospital.

A turkey operation.

MWM, Dexter.

(other people piping in, unintelligible.)

Luggage work, service vending...

Moderator: Coming back to what you'd like to see downtown, what about parks and recreation?

Aurora has more parks per capita than any other place in Missouri.

We have a lot of stuff, but it's spread out. It's not close to downtown.

It would be nice to have an after-school program downtown, so we didn't have so many kids wandering through. There's starting to be a lot of graffiti.

There is a group working on a YMCA.

Yeah.

(side conversation.)

I think probably just the services and programs for that are lacking. We have a lot of green space, but people go to Monett or Republic to take dance or Tae Kwon Do, because there's not a lot of that offered here.

There's not a community building that's capable.

The parks department was just awarded a grant last year, and we have a large park, 42 acres, and there was some soil issues, and the grant is helping with a cleanup and turning part of that into walking tracks and all kinds of things. That's a 3-5 year process.

And that's way outside downtown.

(side conversation.)

Moderator: What about the look and feel of downtown? What kind of improvements are needed?

Buildings.

I think buildings and storefronts are first and foremost. There are a lot of buildings that have not been kept up.

They've started falling down.

Some of the buildings are in dire need of attention.

And some of the stop signs are leaning or faded...

The city should be doing that.

Moderator: Are there out of town owners of buildings?

Nah... I think they're local.

(general agreement.)

I will say that downtown Main Street group has done a lot of work. The pole lights are pretty, and the flowers, and the benches...

They're doing phase 2, which will take care of streets, sidewalks, and light poles up to the corner.

When phase 1 started for the sidewalks, that's what sparked business owners downtown to...well, you know, I don't want my building to look like trash. When the sidewalks came in, they tried to make their buildings look better. They're really trying to remodel it, when the sidewalk's already torn up.

The problem is, some of the owners are quite old, and they're not motivated.

I think one real positive is several of those old buildings have for sale signs up. And they never had before.

Some of the facades, in my opinion, were done in haste and don't fit in. Metal fronts and things like that, not very attractive.

And I think that if we had something to offer them, more than the revolving loan program, some other tax credits or grants, that would help people fix up their buildings. I think 6 or 7 years ago, a group was trying to get downtown classified as historic... the information wasn't put out very clearly, and the building owners took away "well if we do this, then I'm going to have to fix my building down to the last doorknob." I think more information, get people to understand that it doesn't have to be done a certain way—yes, there will be criteria, but it's not as strict as you think. That would help with some of the facades and fixing buildings. The way money is for a lot of people, they just don't have it to be able to sink that money to the front of their building.

...I know there's been issues with the city inspector, and I think that creates reluctance to do expansions or renovations, because they get wound up in this web they can't get out of, and even an architect that, you know, he get engineers on it, and it can't get past the city inspector, and I'm not questioning him, but his qualifications sometimes come into question.

He's kind of got a bad image with the contractors, with the land owners and business owners.

When they can submit a plan in Green County and bring that same plan here, and it doesn't pass here but it does there, something's wrong.

But I know Bootleggers had a horrible time.

Yeah. Sure did. They're not the only ones.

I think that may be better. The city council has addressed that in their last two meetings.

Moderator: Any other issues with the look and feel of downtown?

I think it's a lot better than it was, but it's still got a ways to go.

And I think that the next phases of the Main Street project with the streetscape, that helps a lot, and even for businesses that haven't had streetscape yet, there were some out there planting flowers or cleaning their planters...

I know that there is an individual who plants those flowers downtown, but to get the merchants to water them is another story.

(laughter.)

Looks to me like the city government, you know, we've got a beautiful city hall, and the grounds after all of our storms and everything, we could update...do better...(unintelligible)...it's not bad, but there's always room for improvement.

(agreement.)

Moderator: The last question I wanted to ask you is, if you were looking at other downtowns, what aspects of those downtowns would you like to see in Aurora?

We just came back from Florida, and there was one small town, and all of the stores downtown had the same look. They were not any big metal buildings on one side—all similar, all very well kept, outdoor restaurants. Sanford, Florida.

I love Sanford.

There wasn't a lot of vacant buildings.

I do like the idea of an outside café thing, and there needs to be more eye candy there, you know...

(laughter.)

That's not what I meant.

(laughter.)

There's nothing to look at when you're walking.

No window shopping.

Well, there's no windows! They've got them boarded up. When we were little, the storefronts were pretty. There were things to look at.

Most of the communities that have rebuilt their downtowns, they're clean and neat and busy. Most of them have something that draws people, a YMCA or a Civic Center, that brings a lot of people down there.

Ozark has just undergone some revitalization, and the buildings have the same feel. They're not the same color, they're not cookie-cutter, but they have the same style. They're similar. Their courthouse is on the Square, with a gazebo. The city tries to incorporate the square into events, the Christmas parade and the fall festival. Ozark is one that's a little closer. It just looks nice.

And Eureka Springs and Springfield's square are unique. There is a nightlife there, with people eating outside. When we went on a trip to Eureka Springs, there were people playing music outside, and it was welcoming. If you walk out of Bootleggers, there's cars right here, but up the street it's dead. There's nothing there. So you know there's nothing left in Aurora after you've eaten.

When you were downtown, as a business, did it bother you that the festivals were down there? Did you lose business?

Yeah, but you just have to take things in stride, and the more people you can get down there, in the long run, it's the best way to get people to town and promote your business. It was kind of a hassle, but...

Right now, Main Street does the car show. The businesses gripe, but maybe there's a way to get the businesses to get a little business...

(many people talking at once. Side conversations.)

Moderator: Any other downtowns as examples?

I think we need to decide on what kind of feel we want Aurora to have, and then that's the plan. You've got some storefronts that have metal, and you've got pretty stucco, but you have to decide what kind of feel you want.

You have the big white façade here...

Which will be Rocco's Pizza.

You have this beautiful marble front...that adds distinction. You've got metal on both sides. It looks new for a while, but it tears you away from the beauty of the square. (Town name unintelligible), where I'm from, we used to have our little festival, and the downtown pretty much died. I loved the fact that you could go bowling, grocery store, all in walking distance.

There's one thing we haven't talked about yet, and that's our churches downtown. I go to the Presbyterian church here, and there's the new Church on the Rock here, and the Baptist Church is downtown, and the Christian Church, too. And they're all suffering because they have something to do with the downtown area. All three beautiful buildings. But we're struggling, there's no doubt about that.

I think all three of them are suffering. One good thing as far as having a historic building, the Catholic Church over here has been purchased by an individual who's going to restore it and make it her home. She's moving here from Las Vegas.

Moderator: Is there anything else you feel is important that we should discuss?

Some of the problems that I see with this downtown is the fact that you have to have a major incentive to attract business here. When I take a look outside, I don't see a lot of incentive, although there are so many possibilities here. Why someone doesn't take one building and turn it into something special. There's just one or two places, Bootleggers, but if someone...you've got a cold façade on some of these buildings, and if we could warm it up one building at a time...

We have four or five community not-for-profits in this area. We did the inside of our spaces, but those places do look trashy. There's not any money for them to fix them up. They all look like a welfare agency. There's not money for a not-for-profit to do anything, and we look like a welfare office.

I didn't want to say it, but it seems like our town is getting welfare people all the time.

It's true.

It seems like we are headed in the wrong direction that way.

But we don't have manufacturing plants and things to create jobs. I know with in our program, we're working on job skills, but it's hard when you don't have a place to send them.

Lawrence County has one of the lowest unemployment levels in the state. Anyone that's not working probably doesn't want to work, but we're operating at full employment. I realize sometimes it's an uphill battle to get retail, but we need a decent adult clothing store...there's several little things like that that could make Aurora more self-sufficient and keep dollars at home. We've got our healthcare, you can certainly buy an automobile, home improvement...but with basic professionals, business owners—there's not a lot of places for them to shop for personal stuff.

If we're going to make it work, we're going to have to work together and get the property owners to work together, to give them an incentive to do something... that's been one of our major setbacks.

And if we went to the community...when we did our beautification, we had people who came in from Springfield. We have people who can do that here, a community day, you know, people could come out and work... I would really like to see that Radio Shack building down, though. Flattened.

It's sad, though, because it's hard for me to see an old building like that go down, but I know it's gotten to the point where it's actually dangerous.

That's where our building code guy should do his work.

My parents are from Brooksford, Florida, and they still have their cobblestone streets. People in that town banded together and brought it back. It can be done! I know it can be done! Hopefully we can get the right incentives in, and the information to attract business owners and developers...

Moderator: Thank you.

SECTION IV

LONGTIME RESIDENTS, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, AND DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: This is the first time I've ever been to Aurora. If I were looking to move to this area, what would you tell me about Aurora.

I'd say family-oriented. Living here most of my life, most of the people in town are involved with family and a lot of sports.

Of course the school system.

Graded with distinction this year. Three out of five years. I'd say Aurora has kind of a work ethic. We have generational farm families, we have people who moved here, we have a great location, we're between two major metropolitan, almost equal distance, close to Branson, close to Stockton Lake...Table Rock...it's a great location, and a good place to raise kids.

I think people are proud to be from Aurora, proud of their town, people who live here.

Half the town turns out at the Friday night football games. Doesn't matter if you have a kid playing or not, everybody's there, so it's kind of a social event, too, in addition to just rooting the kids on.

And he mentioned agriculture, and it is real important, and mostly it's cattle and hay, not row crops, but the school district includes a lot of rural areas.

I think Aurora's the central hub, though. I mean, it's always been all the surrounding areas, Marionville, Verona, I mean, Marionville it would be just as easy to go to republic, but people come here for supplies, you know. Monett... Aurora's just a central hub for this area.

And it's flat ground. It's a railroad town, not on a major river, but it is on a US highway.

It's not far from the interstate.

We have a lot of new buildings here, and I think in eight years, I've seen a lot of really positive things happen in Aurora. A new police station. Much, much improvement over the old station. New elementary school and a new high school, and that is a major investment for a community without a lot of commercial wealth.

Moderator: How many elementary schools do you have?

Three. Two at one campus. But for a school district that doesn't have a lot of commercial properties, and Aurora doesn't have a General Motors plant... to fund that kind of thing shows real commitment to the kids and community. If you drive downtown on a summer night, you'll

see so many grandparents watching their kids play sports, play ball down on the ball fields there. It really says a lot about the community, the focus on kids... and we're the only school in the state that has a Houn Dawg as the mascot. We're not bulldogs.

(side conversation about the hound dog.)

I moved here 13 years ago from Texas. I didn't move here because I liked Aurora—I liked the buildings and I liked the historic home that we bought. And I'm going to give you the other side of the coin. I found it very hard to fit in here, because you're not born here, you're not raised here, and you didn't graduate from high school here. I tried to help establish the historical district, and everything you do gets shot down, pretty much. So I'm looking forward to this.

You're right. I mean, being from here my whole life, I know that it's hard to come in and join this group, and I've lived in all fifty states, and I know that I can go there and fit in anywhere, but come back home, they still know me, I still have that camaraderie with people that I grew up with.

See, we don't have that. And they don't let you in very easy at first, but now I'm finding that there is more people moving here from out of town, and more business, and it is opening up a little more. I call it clique-y here in Missouri. My parents are from Monett, and it's clique-y over there. But I find here, lately, it is opening up, and I think it's a good thing.

I think that has a lot to do with the churches. They've all started working together.

I think there's a real need for all of the different groups to work together. The City, the schools, the Chamber, everything to band together to push some things forward, because it doesn't have to fall on one group's shoulders, and the bigger the group you have, the more diversity and the more ideas.

I like to see the downtown develop for another reason, because Aurora is too sports-minded to me. It needs more fine arts, music, art. I mean, I don't find—I fought at school. My two older kids went to a college preparatory school in Texas, and the fine arts and sports and music and everything was combined, and it was great. I'm hoping we can give the kids more perspective that it's just not all about sports, and I love sports, but I think music and the arts are important and need to be developed.

(Agreement.)

The new police station—the old police station was a double-wide mobile home that was leased for \$6500 a year. That's what our police ran out of.

It looked like it had been here forever.

And before that was a little white building.

The fire department jail cell.

We've got a really nice city hall building, and a square, and an intact historic downtown with a lot of potential but several vacant buildings that need some work.

I was going to touch again, she said Aurora is too sports-minded, and I agree that we do like sports, but I was going to say that we have a lot of programs and clubs in school that do well, like our FBLA does good, everybody tries to do the best they can, and band, and drama. So, I'm sure, like she says, everybody likes sports, but I think that other groups and clubs, in high school especially, do really well, and people notice that.

Yeah, I've seen that around here lately. My daughter actually went to high school here, and she was in drama, speech, and debate, and theater.

Our debate time was really good a few years ago. I remember the debate tournaments a few years ago.

They're getting really good this year.

FFA has 7 or 8 year string of being state champions.

And that's future farmers of America.

And our band won among 30-some schools in Missouri state.

And I went to SMS for my degree, and I think that Aurora was known then for the band...

Yeah, and the reason I came, moved my family here, is Aurora is a nice size school district. You can offer things you'd see in bigger schools, but you still know each other. And student behavior—

When we moved in 28 years ago, my family moved here from Ohio, that was a big thing. We still, it took a long time for us to get that close-knit with anybody, but once we finally started building that rapport with people, it really worked out fine, but the schools—it's still small enough that if you get in trouble, your teacher knows your parents.

Everybody's helpful.

So it's still that way.

I agree with it being hard to fit in, because even when you're trying to give your time to make something better, and I don't want to generalize, but I've been looked at with an eye like, oh what does she want? There's got to be some ulterior motive...

Change?

(laughter.)

And I also hear the flipside, if you're not rocking the boat, you're not doing your job. But I think probably, the people I'm most close-knit with aren't the people who have lived here forever, but the people who are 10 years or so...

There's almost a tipping point in rural communities. There's always population folks that do not want to see change, do not want to pay taxes, "the roads we had 20 years ago are fine with me, the schools are fine with me..." And then you have people that move in that have seen good infrastructure and schools, and sometimes it takes that to tip a community towards progress, and I really see a change about 5 years ago from what was there before...

Moderator: Where do people shop in this area?

I work for a company out of Florida, and I market for Price Cutter and Wal-Mart, and Wal-Mart runs about \$150,000-\$175,000 a week. Price Cutter does about \$150,000 a week. That's a massive amount. I go to cities all over Missouri and Arkansas, and this does a lot of volume. But the crime rate here, people have moved away because of it.

He mentioned Price Cutter, which used to be the only supermarket, but for clothes and shoes, people drive to Springfield.

Monett.

There's some good stores on the Square, but there are a little prices.

I lived in Texas, and it was nothing to drive 30 minutes. Springfield's near. And Monett.

Some people think Wal-Mart's too far to drive!

Back to people not wanting change, and a lot of these farmers don't want to change. They won't even change their houses.

And there's a large segment that includes the long-term farmers that won't part with a dime if they don't have to.

That's just southwest Missouri.

But they won't spend a dime on clothing, but they'll save everything they have to save their cow at the vet.

I want to mention that this used to be a mining town, and there's a lot of mine shafts underground, and there's a lot of small miners' houses and substandard houses in town.

There's nothing for kids here. Unless you're in school, there's activities and sports, but my kids are more intellectual and artistic, and there's no games, no movies, batting cages, nothing here for kids.

And there's a skate park.

I didn't even know it was here for years, because it's in an odd place. Across the tracks.

And it's never advertised. So, the things that are great that are not promoted, they might as well not be great.

The skating rink's been resold so many times. When it was owned by _____, they had it for the whole time I was growing up. That was the thing. You'd go to the movie on Friday and skate on Saturday, and everybody was there. You'd spend all day skating. It's kind of run down there. We took our church group there a couple months ago...

We used to love to go skating, but in Texas, there was so many things there for kids, that you know, we just found out that there's nothing here, and I think that's a big thing that people need to bring something here for kids. I know they've tried to open arcades and things, and it's gotten out of hand because of the "hoodlums," but... if they're going to do something like that, it's got to be monitored, and I think kids will follow the rules. I heard bad rep about that from people on the city council and different ones...that "doesn't work here. It's modern, and it doesn't work here." I think something needs to be done to bring in batting cages or something, you know.

People take their kids up to Springfield to that one coach...he coaches the kids that are really good at baseball so they're ready for the season.

We do have an outdoor drive-in theater, and we also have a historic movie theater downtown.

It never upgraded the seats.

(laughter. Agreement.)

They are working on fixing that up.

But it is a neat place, and they're good to do fundraisers for the different clubs, where they'll lower the price and you sell as many tickets as they have seats, and the club gets the entire profit, and they just live off the concessions.

Also, we have a nice old Armory building.

Yeah.

I think that's great, what the school does working with the city. We had our church league basketball down there.

The city basketball league for kids is down there.

Moderator: Young people, where do you shop?

I usually go to Springfield.

I do some shopping in town, but for clothes I go to Springfield.

There's a sporting goods store in town, not downtown...

Moderator: Let's turn toward dining and entertainment. Where do you go?

There's several restaurants here.

We're strong in that area. People come in from all over.

I've got clients that'll fly in from Florida and places, just to go to Hog Wild.

Where do they stay, though?

They don't stay here...they'll stay for the day, and drive back to Arkansas.

Some of the late night, you can't get in to some of them because they're packed, but some don't stay open late enough for people. There's just a few that do. And that's a big thing. I would think, and what I think would be good downtown, one thing that I've always found that's ambiance, is the sidewalk cafes, that would be so nice for tourists and people stopping by, you want to sit outside with the ambiance and the old buildings and the restaurants and the eateries. Downtown shopping. That's what I do when I go on vacation. I look for that. I think it's really neat.

Moderator: Where do you take friends and relatives who visit?

Hog Wild.

Yeah

Bootleggers.

Monett.

Springfield.

Branson.

Yeah, Branson.

The lake.

Or a fish fry. Most family, they fish a lot, so I know they got three fishing gentleman's clubs here in town, so they get together and have fish fries.

We have a drive-in movie theater, and we'll go there most of the summer. A lot of kids do.

When the movies come out, it's usually packed.

It's so packed. That's kind of ruined the ambiance of the drive-in, too.

(agreement.)

He's trying to fix that. He's trying to buy the lot next to him.

That would sure help out.

He's trying to buy that lot, but somebody won't zone it so he can put in...because the mines run underneath it. They're worried about parking cars on it.

Moderator: Let's change focus a little bit. Tell me about your downtown. Do you feel it's heading in a positive or negative direction?

We have places to eat downtown, but I do wish we had some shopping. We do have a pharmacy downtown that's very nice. Another restaurant downtown would be nice, antique stores.

Tea rooms.

More loft apartments and people living downtown.

That's going to bring people in, if we can get... and when they do things on the Square, Houn Dawg Days...in the past, they made more money in that week than they would in a whole month. They left the Square.

And now it doesn't exist at all.

But now we're bringing a Winterfest. This is the first year for it, but we're hoping it will be annual.

We walk over to the car show, where Houn Dawg Days used to be, and people will stop in from out of town and ask "where's the fair, where's the carnival?" It should be brought back. It brought people downtown.

And if you look into Mt. Vernon, they make more from their festival than they make in a month.

And Aurora used to have the tri-county fair, and it was just packed, the FFA, the quilts, the farmers, it was the hugest thing around here and it dispersed, and it turned into Houn Dawg days, which doesn't exist anymore.

One other thing I wanted to say about downtown is, in three phases, they're replacing sidewalks and curbs and putting in new streetlights. The first phase is done, and the second one's going to be done soon, and that's a huge improvement.

Moderator: What are reasons that you go downtown currently?

To eat. That's about it.

(agreement.)

I go downtown for church.

There's a nice gift shop downtown.

Yeah, there's two new gift shops downtown.

And the movie theater, and a hardware store.

Aurora music.

Post office is downtown.

The pharmacy.

(many people talking at once.)

For a town this size, there's an amazing bridal shop or dress shop, and they have beauty pageants there and stuff.

You can do an entire wedding in downtown Aurora. Everything you need for a wedding, from photography to nails to hair to church to community center, the clothes, the cake, you've got everything in the downtown area.

Who would think that...when she put that in there, I thought she was crazy.

From what I've seen, in different towns, some of the higher-end things have gone in, and people do support it. As long as you've got a good business plan and you're a good business person...

One thing that's missing is banks. We used to have banks, but... I'm trying to think, is there an ATM downtown?

No! There's not!

That's something that would really help downtown.

Because you've got the cable company, used to have Radio Shack and that was a beautiful building, but then you had Boatmen's right there on the corner...

I'd be curious to find out how many people actually come downtown to pay their sewer bill to save that stamp, but a lot of them do.

Something else that downtown has is good parking. This town has wide streets.

Moderator: Is there anything that you used to come downtown to do in the past?

There was a grocery store that moved off. That got used a lot...when I was 16, I worked there.

One dollar store did a lot of business too.

There used to be a pet store, even downtown.

And we mentioned clothes and shoes. That's what I hear a lot of.

(many people agreeing.)

There used to be a trophy shop.

It's still there.

(side conversation about trophy shop.)

You can't even tell that that's there. It's another word of mouth thing.

I thought he'd gone out of business.

Moderator: How do people know about what goes on downtown?

Word of mouth.

Newspaper, radio.

A lot of word of mouth.

And sometimes word of mouth isn't accurate.

There was a meeting recently about relocating 39 through Aurora, and the downtown merchants wanted 39 to continue going through downtown.

But they want to do it, because the stop sign drives people crazy.

And those offsite turn lanes.

This used to be a shoe factory, and there's a big empty building downtown.

A lot of people come to me wanting to set up small businesses but not wanting to buy the building, but if a developer sectioned off a building so you could have little kiosks or something, and that would be great for people who can't afford the capital...

(side conversation about old shoe factory.)

You know, a mini mall would be fantastic. I've seen them in old warehouses and stuff like that.

That'd be catty-corner to the police station...

That brought a lot of people. Before the shoes, they made jeans, and that moved to Republic. My mom worked there for 19 years, and then she went to Delta, which left. That brought a lot of people.

(side conversation about participant's mother.)

There was a lot of things that used to happen here. Businesses come in, and then they leave. There's nothing for them. There's not a lot of economic here, and that's what... pulled Delta Dental out, and pulled some other places out...

There's not a lot of tax credits and things to bring in new business.

That's one of the things we're working on, the application for the Advanced Enterprise, and we had that before, but they've got a new one through the state that you have to requalify and reapply, and that whole process will take about six months, and I hope by the end of the year, that will be in place, and that'll help businesses that want to locate here or expand here if they're currently here.

Moderator: Do you think downtown is user-friendly? When people come, can they find their way around?

No.

There's one little sign, little green sign, and that's all I've ever noticed.

It says "city hall."

The one little green sign.

There's some signs on church, but that's it. One here and one there.

There's one that says "city hall," and there's one by the lumber place there that says "city hall."

What I've found is useful is when we're taking a trip or going somewhere, when you have a marker out on the highway, or a sign that says "historical downtown district." That makes you know where it's at, that you're going in the right direction...they have those on every entryway, coming into the city. That would be nice, so you know where the downtown is.

If you're coming from Monett to Aurora, there's nothing on 60 that says Bootlegger's, Hog Wild... if you're on 60, there's nothing. We've got enough gas stations to advertise on a big blue sign to pull off the interstate.

People use highway 60 quite a bit. People come out of Oklahoma, and instead of 44 and pay the toll roads, they'll get on and come through Neosho. That's the way I travel everyday, is to get down there.

There is the designation on 39 called Ozark (unintelligible), and people coming from Kansas City heading to the lake are supposed to take this scenic route.

Moderator: What about business hours? Are they convenient?

No.

(agreement.)

Everything closes early.

They stop serving at Bootleggers at 9:00.

And even Café Metropolitan closes at 5.

And it doesn't open until 8.

Yeah, I found that really hard moving here. Here, you're limited. 5, 6, everything's gone.

Forget going out on a Sunday, too.

Everything's shut down.

When Wal-Mart did their car count before building here, there are more cars that travel at that intersection than travel in front of Republic or Monett. During the summer months, they come through for the lake.

(side conversation.)

So do you think people would go late in the evening?

There wouldn't be enough customers to stay open, with the current mix of businesses down there. There's just not enough.

(agreement.)

Things like that is what I'm talking about, your small little places.

(agreement.)

Moderator: What about parking?

Parking's not a problem now. I think it could be, if it did get revitalized.

That'd be a good problem to have.

It's not a far walk from the Square to anywhere, and it's a nice enough walk. For Houn Dawg days, people would walk. I think that if it's something they want to go to, they're willing to walk.

Moderator: Let's switch focus to the future of downtown. If you could dream, what kind of businesses would you like to see downtown.

The old B&B building, there's a place called Going Bonkers—it's a kid's playroom. Get something in there, like that.

Like that corner building where the dollar shop is now.

I'd like to see a bakery.

Loft apartments.

Moderator: Does anyone live downtown?

There's one or two who live above their shops.

Moderator: Is there anyone other than business owners that live down there?

No.

Well, there's one. _____ just bought a 3-bedroom apartment. That's available to rent. And _____ just bought that magic shop building, and he's going to live above that. And you've got the two above Bootleggers.

Just recently, the photography had a mural painted on their wall, and it would be nice to have more murals, sculptures, flower boxes.

I think the greenhouse would be glad to come in and fill...

We talked to _____ about getting a garden area in downtown. Make it pretty.

You mentioned having live music in warm weather. That would be nice.

That would be great for the band program, too. I know they're schedule's tight, though.

I think a Winterfest's a great idea. Some of our churches are really neat. They just frame the downtown area.

They had an incredible Halloween crowd. All the kids.

We always do it on Halloween.

It's so successful.

I'd like to see the buildings, and even if the inside wasn't done, I'd like to see the outside of them fixed. Don't change it, but just fix it. That adds to this community.

Get the tin off the buildings downtown. I know they did that to help preserve the buildings, but they need to take the tin off. Those were the prettiest buildings in Aurora, and then they covered them. They're beautiful buildings.

And the building codes don't say otherwise.

There are no building design standards. That's a big problem.

Downtown used to be beautiful and thriving, and we could go back to it. People don't want to invest in something if it looks it's going to be crime-filled. In Springfield, they made it look the way it was supposed to look, and crime decreased. A thief doesn't want to steal from a place that looks good.

I'd like to see sidewalk cafes, a community theater, antique shops, tea rooms. There are so many things that would make people want to come to our city.

Moderator: Kids, what about you? What would get you downtown?

Something like Incredible Pizza. Something to do other than just playing ball.

An arcade or something. A pool hall. A soda bar.

That's more geared toward us.

Something else we haven't mentioned is a YMCA or rec center.

Didn't have an area out at Baldwin park? What happened to that?

Some is going to have to link with other organizations, but it's the ultimate goal.

Wasn't there a swimming thing?

They'd talked about a water park, but it was too costly.

Moderator: Anything else, before I move on?

I can't picture people shopping locally, even though we used to.

Do you think the locals would support this vision? Will it be for townspeople or tourists?

I think both. We need both. When businesses leave, others close. When people have jobs, people work, money's there...we can handle so much of it, but...

One of the comments that was made earlier is it needs to be cheaper than going to Wal-Mart.

(laughter.)

Clarksville, Missouri, up by St. Louis, is a little town on the Mississippi, and it is 5 or 600 people, and a lot of artisans and furniture-makers have moved in, and it's a destination.

There's another place like that.

Eureka Springs has that.

Truthfully, if you're on the Ozark Parkway, it would be a nice little stopping point to grab a bite, a stop through a place. Don't just drive by here, stop in to shop a little.

Moderator: What would you want downtown to look like?

I think it's kind of dull. It's all brown and kind of gray.

More colors. The orange lighting, it seems darker. I like it, but there's not enough colors to accent.

And when I poll most of the neighbors, they'd like to see it turned into a historic district. And that would be bright colors. It is dull. The pharmacy is cute, and Bootleggers has redone... it's going to be expensive, but if they can keep the ambiance there, they're cute.

A brighter light. How many of you ladies will walk at night yourself.

Oh, no.

And you might trip on a crack in the sidewalk, the parts that haven't been redone.

It used to be you could walk anywhere in town and be safe. A kid got beat walking home from church.

A lot of gardening would brighten up the downtown.

Saturday Club used to plant flowers down there.

You asked about appearance, but I want to say something else. I talked to some people that come from far away, and the first thing people said is the smell. There's one factory that really put out an awful smell.

Kind of like dog food, or beans.

Sometimes it smells like bread, sometimes like beans, sometimes like fire. But there's one disgusting smell in the summer time.

I think that's MFA. That's the MFA part.

I was smelling that before they ever open MFA back up.

(side conversations about other cities that smell bad.)

I think it's better than it was.

When people come in, they're not used to it. They really notice it.

My mom will come from Miller, and be like "what is that smell?"

Moderator: Anything else about the look and feel of downtown?

You've got your buildings right around the Square, with the exception of 1 or 2, I think the design standards need to be in place. It'll be difficult to get some business owners on board, but... a lot of buildings are on sale since the announcement of the DREAM project.

(Side conversation.)

One building, the brick has been torn out.

Isn't that the one with the windows broken out?

That's the southwest corner of the Square.

And it used to be really pretty.

We need a museum. In an old house that is restored, or something like that. Something to bring people in.

(Side conversation.)

Well, the boundary area is Church to Olive, and Elliott to Washington. That is the area that's being targeted, and it will be studied. That total package is about \$250,000 worth of services. With all of that, we'll be able to create a downtown strategic plan, and eventually they'll be able to match Aurora with developers who are interested.

Moderator: What should be the top priorities for downtown?

Business.

Yeah.

Bringing in new business.

And fill some of those vacant buildings.

Because that'll get things cleaned up, and that'll get the ball rolling, and people will come in and shop, and the crime will decrease, and people will start coming back.

I think most of that is vandalism here and there. There isn't steady crime, is there?

45 windows out of Modern Variety. They've taken out a window every 2 or 3 weeks. And the Christian Service center, and our church.

(many people agreeing.)

There's been lots of break-ins in houses and cars, there's houses with meth use right up here. There's massive amounts of this. And it's not that the police aren't doing their job—the crime rate has decreased in the last 9 years.

I think to revitalize downtown, there's going to have to be boundaries for the businesses. When we tried to establish the historical district, the people who owned buildings did not want to comply with the rules. They didn't want to fix things. Aurora's not up to national electrical codes. I think to revitalize downtown, there's going to have to be rules.

It's going to be expensive for people to do stuff that's up to code. Bootleggers spent thousands trying to get their building figured out.

But that's going to last. When I go in there, I think they've done a remarkable job.

I think all of the businesses, _____ has done a lot with her building. A lot of those people do a little here and there.

People will volunteer, though. People volunteered for the historical district project. People look like they're afraid to ask for help. People will volunteer their time. I brought that up to the city council, and I don't understand why people in this area are afraid to ask or are too proud. You could accomplish a lot just by volunteering to help each other.

We have helped each other, the high school, the police station. This town never passes a new tax, and we got the police station and the high school passed. We worked our tails off, on all of those projects. I'd see people in Wal-Mart and have to educate them on the need. We've made a lot of huge leaps.

Moderator: Are there other downtowns you've seen that you admire?

You mentioned Eureka Springs. Aurora has the ambiance to be like that.

And there's a little town in Western Missouri like that.

Eureka Springs has lost a lot of their tourism because they can't afford to support it.

I think if you've got Eureka Springs' look, or a more craft-based look like June, Oregon, but also regular community events. A 10K run, a Saturday market. If you mix in more things for people to do and have the shopping to fill in...

I think the event thing is what I look forward to, festivals. Something that's big to bring them in. You know, Aurora used to hold band concerts and festivals, and people ask, "why don't they do that anymore?" And the parades. Carthage does a huge one, and people come from all over the state.

Our band competition... (noise, unintelligible) We had a field marching competition.

They still march in our fall parade.

When I first moved here, there was band after band after band. Now you hardly see any.

You have to look at Verona, though. They're not doing much anymore because they don't have as much of a band. The ethnic groups don't get into the bands and sports as much.

What I find fascinating is Carthage, they do Art in the Park every summer. People drive by and stop there. They don't let it go to the point that it's not fine art anymore, it's fun. When we go through New Mexico, you see the balloon races. Something to attract people at certain times of year.

That's why we chose an event in December this year, because it gets away from the jam-packed fall.

Will there still be a parade in the fall?

Yup.

A lot of towns and cities have a theme as far as trees or flowers. Cape Girardeau has roses, DC has cherry blossoms... we might think about doing something like that.

How about the dogwood?

Charleston, Missouri has azaleas.

Each DREAM city, there's two MAC grants every year. We could try to do dogwood.

We need to play up our dog, too. It was the biggest thing, and now it's kind of fizzled out. There's nothing on the square with the hound dogs.

We need a public sculpture of the dog.

(side conversation about the hound dog.)

One thing we're going to do at Winterfest is a contest for students to design an ornament, so maybe incorporating the Houn Dawg into the design would be good. And I really like the dogwood idea.

Moderator: Thank you.

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SECTION V

CITY STAFF, COUNCIL, AND MEDIA DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

Moderator: I have some really simple questions for you, to facilitate discussion. I'm from St. Louis. Describe this area to me.

A sense of community, a sense of family. Because it's a small town, you know what everyone's doing, but that's because they care about you.

I think it's a good place to raise kids. I feel kids are safer here than Portland, Oregon, where we're from.

I also think it's one of those places that people like because we're close to major cities, but we're far enough out that we're rural.

It's good, centrally located. A half-day's drive to any activity you want to do.

I'd like to expand on what _____ said. I think we're unique that we're far enough from Springfield that we're never going to be considered a bedroom community, so we can retain our autonomy and a sense of small town, and I don't think that's going to go away. You know, we're not going to get swallowed up by Springfield, like Republic and Nixon and Ozark and all those places.

I think that's an interesting point, because I've heard on both sides—I've heard people say we'll only be a bedroom community, and I've heard people say we need to be stand-alone community where there are enough decent-paying jobs for people to make a community in this town. There probably are some industries that pay pretty well, they don't ever expand, so those jobs are locked in for a long time.

The town is (unintelligible)... coming out of the stage a time when its identity was pretty self-centered, and I think it's recognized that it has to expand its view of itself and the town, and look for something bigger and broader, or it's going to wind up being a bedroom community, or it's going to wind up being some type of commercial... it's looking for that, it's causing some growing pains right now.

Moderator: What are the major industries here?

Some of the ones that we talked about the other day are MWM printing, a large printing company, but you don't think too much about their labor force. You've got the turkey farm, the school district, Wal-Mart supercenter just expanded, and I don't know... (electronic recording noise).

City staff are 55, 60 people working for the city? Is that about right?

Yeah.

The hospital.

Yeah.

And there's been some talk for quite a long time for them building a new hospital south of town.

Car dealerships.

Construction.

(background noise.)

....construction is big. I think they all live in this area.

Something we talked about earlier was, even though we have industries here, people go away from their jobs and they shop away from here.

Our city runs on sales tax, so it's important that our residents shop here, and that's been a real big problem, because we have a couple years of very lean tax revenue.

I think Aurora as like a small town, I think climate-wise we get to experience all 4 seasons, and I'm a big outdoors person, and we're close to outdoor stuff to do.

We've got a drive-in movie theater and a walk-in movie theater, we have a historic Square, historic buildings.

Moderator: Tell me a little about how far people commute to work.

Monett.

Cassville, Springfield.

Monett's got Jack Henry, so people go there. They go to Effco, Miracle.

Tyson's.

A lot of industry in Monett... it's 10, 12 miles away. I've heard a lot of people say they'd much rather live in Aurora than Monett.

Moderator: Why is that?

I can't put my finger on it.

Housing price is lower here.

Yeah, but if you go through Monett and you go through Aurora, you get a different feel. It's just different.

You're right. You either have to go through highway 60 in Monett, or through their little Main Street area, but it's so congested, and there really is very little there that I would actually stop for... I have heard people say Monett doesn't have a place to get a good steak, but we have Bootleggers and Blackbird Grill.

Monett's more culturally diverse, too, than Aurora.

Very much so.

People comment about the smell.

It smells like beans.

I got so used to it.

It's a lot better than 10 years ago.

(agreement.)

AFB...how many do they employ?

MFA? 20.

No, AFB.

20, 30.

The dog food flavoring place.

Moderator: Let me ask you about shopping. Where do people shop?

They shop at Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart and Raimi's.

We do have people come from Monett to shop at Wal-Mart. It's cleaner, aisles are wider.

Price Cutter. It was formerly Raimi's.

Moderator: So do most people stay in Aurora?

A lot of people go to Springfield for clothes and shoes.

Groceries here, but everything else they go to Springfield. There's such a lack of anything other than Wal-Mart quality.

We do have some clothing downtown, but it doesn't suit everyone.

You could spend all of your dollars in Aurora and get about everything you need, though. You can get your appliances, stuff to remodel your house.

There's Sears for appliances.

We have a formalwear store downtown with inventory that meets or exceeds any in Springfield.

You could plan and implement an entire wedding in Aurora, except for the rings. You've got tuxedos, formalwear, cakes, the community center, Hog Wild or Bootleggers for catering, you can get hair and nails...

We have a little bit of everything, but it's the lack of choices of different locations of the same kind of thing.

Another thing, the younger generation has to go to Springfield to go on a date. We pretty much stayed in town. Even though we have a theater and drive-in, but the kids go to Springfield.

For things to do.

That's probably with every city and every kid. When I was growing up in Republic, we went to Springfield. You want to go out, you want freedom away from your family and everything.

I wasn't that way, but there might be some people.

(laughter. Many people talking at once.)

Moderator: Where do you all go for dining and entertainment?

For entertainment, the bowling alley.

Springfield.

If you're drinking, everybody goes out of town. They don't want anyone to see them drink.

We have 30 churches in Aurora. 30!

Me and my family, we'll eat in town sometime, but there's not a lot to choose from. You've got the restaurants, but it's either fast food or elegant dining. There's not that variety there. We've gone to Springfield and even Monett just to eat. Just to get that difference.

Moderator: Elegant choices?

Bootleggers. It's not real swanky, but...

That's kind of a stretch.

It's one of the finer restaurants.

If it weren't for Bootleggers and Hog Wild, no one would come downtown. Hog Wild and Bootleggers are known all over Springfield.

(agreement.)

And the fact that they're right there at the crossroads, you have to stop and slow down.

We've got a skating rink.

We have more park space per capita than any other city in Southwest Missouri.

And the drive-in movie theater.

And it's always packed.

You have to go before 5 and get in line for the 9:00 movie.

(agreement.)

When Spiderman came out, we couldn't get in.

And all seasons of year, there are all sorts of sporting activities.

Two age groups this year.

I thought last year was the first year.

I think so.

(side conversations.)

In the summertime, we've got the swimming pool. Nobody's mentioned that.

Skate park.

Moderator: If you had relatives in, where would you take them?

Pizza Hut.

(laughter.)

They've got the buffet.

We go to Hog Wild.

We do Hog Wild or Blackbird. It's affordable, it's good food, good service, and live music. Before Norma's bought the Legacy Building, we had really great bands there. If that had come after the DREAM initiative, it could've survived.

Moderator: And where do you go for entertainment?

Springfield.

Moderator: And the kids don't stay here?

No, they go to Springfield.

Moderator: Let's narrow down to downtown. Why do people come to downtown Aurora?

Bootleggers and Hog Wild.

Maybe a movie.

To get your mail.

(many people talking at once.)

The pharmacy.

When I was growing up, there was always teenagers downtown, and that's because we had a game room. When we lost that, the kids shy away from that area. We've had a couple game rooms downtown a few years ago, but you start to see the kids come back, and the bad kids come in and run off the good kids, and the owners allow that rather than standing up.

Moderator: Is crime a problem here? Is it very low-crime?

(laughter.)

Crime in Aurora is low, even compared to other towns our size. The frequency is low, the intensity is low, and there's not a lot of heinous crime.

The main issues are vandalism, breaking windows, breaking into cars, these type of things. To compare us to Springfield or any kind of metropolitan area, I would not categorize this as having a high crime rate or drug problem.

It's just the bullies running off the other kids.

The technology we got these days, we've got Playstation, Xbox, you could set them up with those types of games in the game room.

The building next to Bootleggers had pool tables, that sort of thing. But what age group will you bring in? You'd serve alcohol, and then...

It'll get them down there.

Our friends in Springfield have a teenage boy, 14 or 15, and they go down to the 21st century version of a game room, and it was packed. They had contests, and it was Halo, and all these games. It was packed. Kids were just overflowing.

I looked into a building for a video game store.

Joplin mall has an arcade.

When I think of years past, I remember when the bank was downtown, and while people were doing business at the bank, you'd go into the stores. When the bank left, you'd see a big decline.

Aurora has a lot to offer, but none of them are name brand. The restaurants, there's not a Applebee's or Taco Bell, it's all independent. I think that's why a lot of the younger generation goes to Springfield and Joplin and Branson, and that name recognition is something we lack. But I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. We have some very unique restaurants to offer.

The prices are different here. You can get a steak for \$10 at Cheddar's, but here you're paying \$17 for a steak at Bootleggers...There's no orthodontist in Springfield, so I'm up there all the time.

Another reason to go downtown, we have one home decoration, jewelry, gift shop... it just came 2, 3 years ago

(unintelligible noise)

...the five and dime store.

It's really the only place teenage kids can go for candy.

If you ask the kids...I have taken an informal poll of junior high kids, and they would like to see a mini mall or something that's got a variety of things to purchase. Even if you had a building with little kiosks in there, so nobody's spending a lot of money on big storefronts. They'd like a club hangout, with games and pool and a TV. They'd like a soda fountain, where you can get affordable drinks. There's nowhere for them to just go get a Coke. They go to A&P, so you never know what you're going to find in there, but they get those squeeze-pop things for a nickel. Somewhere they can get something to drink, something to eat, something to do, somewhere to browse...

There used to be Toys in the Attic in Aurora, a game store.

It was out on the south end of town.

It was kind of out of sight out of mind. It was one of those places where unless you knew it was there...but they used to have Yugio tournaments, and it was packed. He also branched out into RC cars and airplanes, and he just tried to do too much in one location. He had a decent business there for a while, but I think it was just the nature of the car games, as car games come and go, you buy so much stock of one, and it's worthless the next day.

Our area, though, we have a lot of hunters and outdoorsy people, and we have no...we used to have a Bob's Boat and Tackle, where you could buy fishing supplies and stuff, and we don't have that anymore.

(many people talking at once.)

...fly fishing stand at Branson. They ought to expand.

You know, the downtown is within walking distance from the junior high school, so they often walk home through the Square.

Moderator: Is there anything else that used to thrive downtown?

You used to have Western Auto.

True Value.

Radio Shack.

There was a liquor store and a pool hall, and three bars. We didn't have trouble with them, but the older crowd...

There used to be a game room.

When the bank was Aurora Bank, everybody banked there. You'd go down on a Saturday, and it would be packed.

Merchants would keep their stores open on Friday nights, and people would bring their families...when I was a kid, you'd go down Main Street and look at storefronts, that was a big deal back then.

He's got a point in the fact that everything closes at 5. The typical person works until 5. They moan about us going to Wal-Mart, but if you work until 5, what's left?

Years ago, the Sears was on Main street.

But downtown, there's also a parking problem.

There used to be an appliance store.

I remember as a kid, Saturday morning, going downtown and it was just a hustle and bustle of activity.

I remember that, too. I'd go with dad to the bank. You'd have to wait in line, cars all over downtown.

And a lot of stuff downtown, there's nothing on Saturday.

You go around the Square...

Thing is, banks are closed on Saturdays nowadays. Just the drive-thrus are open.

(many people talking at once.)

Moderator: How user-friendly is your downtown? Signage and navigation?

There's no signage that leads anyone to downtown. If you come in on highway 60, and you don't know that Bootleggers or Hog Wild or the Princess theater is in downtown Aurora, there's nothing that directs you.

And if you are driving down there on the weekend, you look up, you see that it's dead, and there's nothing that entices you to turn up that street other than Bootleggers or Hog Wild.

The traffic coming through Mt. Vernon can see it.

And they see the signs there, but not on 60.

There's a billboard from Springfield as you're coming into town. Who is that put up that billboard? It's new...

Bootleggers has one there between Billings... it's right there.

Coming from the other way, I don't think there is one. I saw a new billboard recently, and I can't remember what it was.

Moderator: Let's talk about parking a little bit. That's a problem? In what respect?

Bootleggers takes up all of the parking spots on Olive Street on Friday and Saturday nights...

So if anyone wants to watch a movie at the theater, it's catch as catch can...

Being that no one wants to walk further than the curb to the door...

(laughter, agreement)

I live nearby, so it's easy for us to just walk...

It's not as if there isn't land available for parking downtown...

Years ago, the pharmacy and stuff had that big parking lot, then there was one on the other side, and everybody used to park and just walk down there. Then business slowed down...

They didn't take care of it anymore.

I don't see why that can't come back.

And who owns that lot next to the barbershop?

The church owns that. From Jefferson back to—

Yeah.

And there's always the old Radio Shack building.

Yeah, and that's—

That's available to turn into parking.

We do have this little bitty barber shop, 2 chairs, it's really cute. They do the flat-top military haircuts, just two guys that work there, just little bitty.

(many people talking at once. Side conversation about barbershop guys.)

Used to be that Moore's clothing was there. They had a variety of clothes for all ages, and that was a real booming business. I don't know why...

Yeah, I remember that.

I really think if someone were to buy some of the buildings that had space where you could have two or three different shops in them, so that it's not a huge financial burden for any one business owner. Some of that might take off. Cause I heard a couple people talking about having their own little business, but they don't want to invest in the building...

And some of the other issues with the downtown is, you have 2 or 3 nice looking buildings, and then you have crap. I'm sorry, but you do.

(agreement.)

And the street lighting. If you're going to stay open later, there's the lighting issue.

Moderator: So, lighting issues?

Streetlights.

The part that's already renovated, you've got streetlights. They're adding more streetlights down there.

When we finish phase 2, we're going to have a well-lighted street.

So, you know, there will probably be some areas, you know.

Your alleys, where people are parking—

That's an issue.

Well, then you've got buildings that have significant historical significance, but they've been vacant and non-maintained for so long, that it's really questionable as to whether or not you could even redevelop them.

What would be their historical significance, other than how old they are?

That's probably it, just that and what it was used for...

The style of building.

The architecture.

Like the hotel...that's one in particular. There's not been a structural—

The hotel does have a history.

(laughter.)

Do we want to know all of the history?

(laughter. Many people talking at once.)

But there is...it's kind of ugly down there. You look down Main Street, it's kind of ugly. You've got buildings encapsulated in metal, to some in concrete, looks like Fort Knox or something...and then, everything in between, and it's just whatever, it's just a hodgepodge of stuff that people have used to patch their buildings up or put awnings on, or this or that, and there's no aesthetic value to our downtown whatsoever.

No plan, no theme.

(agreement.)

Moderator: Are there codes that businesses have to follow to look the same?

No.

We don't have building design standards.

And try as they might in past years, some people have tried to bring a historical district in, and it failed.

Because they thought they were going to be forced into complying with some historical renovations, which would be cost-prohibitive, but I think we've overcome that to an extent.

I heard there's talk of putting in a new historical society.

You still have that thought that there's...(many people talking at once, side conversations.)

The city doesn't own any of the buildings in the downtown, so we don't have any control over actually putting something in ourselves, except the community center.

Except if the city did, when they renovated a few years back, did keep the flavor of the building and didn't do as much as they could.

Moderator: I saw a community center. Is that well used?

Yeah.

But it's not downtown.

It is in the boundary area, but it's the very edge.

It's on the south.

It's well used.

Yeah.

But we have a vendor agreement with a nonprofit group that actually runs the scheduling of it...It was a building that was vacant, and a few years ago, we had the opportunity to sell it or keep it.

We decided to keep it.

It's used for wedding receptions, political rallies, circus, girl scout meeting...

(side conversation about recent circus.)

Since all the publicity about the DREAM initiative, a number of buildings have come up for sale... but what we're also finding is some of these buildings are going up for sale, but there's exorbitant price tags!

They're testing the water, is what their doing. There's no methodology at all.

Isn't there an Italian restaurant coming down there?

Yeah. It's not official yet, but yeah.

That's something that we miss, is we don't have Italian, and we don't have a fish place, a catfish house or anything. Everything else is pretty representative. You've got Hispanic and pizza and Chinese, but no Italian.

(many people agreeing, side conversations.)

Moderator: Are there any other things I need to know about downtown?

Well, they had a very active Main Street group, and there were festival, a merchant association, there were sidewalk sales, people stayed open later...I don't know why it all went away, but lack of funding for a director may have been it. A lot of what's been done over the last several years has been by volunteers.

I think part of what happened is nobody wanted to work together. One year, one group was in charge of the fall festival, and you had food vendors who wanted to come in, but they would refuse them to set up their booths because they wanted to be in control.

We have the same thing at Baldwin park with the fireworks festival. Some guy wanted to sell ice cream, and they didn't let him do it.

The groups just didn't want to work together...

Back when they had that Main Street group, it was some of the older people that had business established for a long time, they didn't want no new ideas or new people down there. You'd never see no Chamber members down there...(unintelligible.) When they quit having the band festival, all those kids that would come up on the Square with their families...the car show used to be up there, but it moved over to the park.

(many people talking at once.)

They didn't want to work together.

(many people agreeing.)

Moderator: Are there any festivals downtown currently?

We're starting one this winter. This will be city run. We've got an opportunity to apply for a grant to bring arts activities in the downtown, so the first Saturday of December will be a winter fest, and we're going to collaborate with the school and the main street and the Chamber. And we're going to have carolers and a Christmas tree, I've got churches involved, and craft booth, food booths... the Chamber's going to move their parade to that day. If it goes off well, it'll be an annual event...

We are getting new Christmas decoration.

(laughter, many people making fun of old Christmas decorations at once. Unintelligible.)

...I got some feedback about that the other day from a member of the historical society. This particular person would've liked to have seen some authentic reenactments of something that actually tied to the history of Aurora, more than what it's really turning into is...

Just another craft show.

A craft show, but mostly nonprofit groups trying to raise money.

There is nothing there that would exemplify the title, "Ye Olde Mining..."

Yeah, and that's the point this person made to me.

It's like that Renaissance Festival. A theme, something.

Exactly.

One of the things that might hurt fall, I mean, we lost the band and car festival, but the fact that Marionville has their event the last weekend in September, Mt. Vernon has theirs the 2nd weekend in October, we always tried to sandwich ours in the middle, and theirs have become so well-developed that, you know, it was competition.

And that's been the grumbling, is that none of the crafters can make any money in an Aurora festival, so they don't participate, so that is going to be a challenge this year.

And Republic has Pumpkin Days...

And Ozark has theirs...they used to have it earlier in the year, and now they try to miss everyone else and it's always cold.

I'd like to say that people having a difference of opinion back then, all of those types are out of business now, and I think it'll work now. All of these people want to get together.

I think over the last six years that I've been here, there has been a lot of energy that I can see maybe in the last year that that energy is really waning some. There was a pretty strong group that worked hard for the police and fire facility and the new high school, but then you have to let go of that button and push another button. You can't do them all at once, but we can try to focus on the community side while we're developing our vision. I do know that people do want something in the community to do. They really do. People will drive down to Branson for their Christmas Olde-Tyme...what do they call it...and they'll spend \$200 or \$300. They'll go if it's freezing cold. You're driving an hour, and you're spending all day, and you're spending your money, but it's to have that family atmosphere and family event. We're hoping on a smaller scale to do something like that here.

Moderator: The last piece of this, as we discuss the DREAM initiative, is to dream a little about where your downtown should go in the future. What are some businesses that you would like to see downtown or would thrive downtown?

Have you ever been to Eureka Springs?

Moderator: I have not.

My dream, my goal...I'd love to see some businesses down there, an eclectic combination of niche-type gift shops, you know, like a hot sauce shop or an arts store, and you go from one to another, and you never know...you're walking down the street, and you're seeing something different. It's not all flea market, it's not all...I think people want variety. (sounds of agreement from others.) That's what I'd like to see from downtown.

A bakery.

A candy shop.

A pottery shop.

Yeah!

Jewelry store.

One thing I'd like to see is something that draws the kids back in there, and the reason why is because if you don't draw the younger generation downtown, then it's not going to go anymore. You're going to be in the same situation when the older generation dies off, the younger generation is still going to be going away.

(agreement.)

If we draw them downtown, then when they grow up, they'll bring their kids downtown, which becomes a circle where they continually draw, so you've got to draw the younger generation downtown.

Talking about Eureka Springs, I remember my kid was excited about a t-shirt shop with all kinds of logos.

T-shirts, bumper stickers...

I would hate to see us turn downtown into a boardwalk, a Coney Island. It has to be devoted to being a destination location that brings respect and money to downtown, that'll bring somebody back every month or month and a half, that they will come back again. That you're not relying on novelty. Something substantial, substantial entertainment, substantial restaurants, viable places... this town, you've got to see it, be a part of it, stay with it. Not something that you can run to the mall and see the same thing. It has to be different.

You're saying the same thing I'm saying.

It's got to be different.

It has to have a certain amount of class to what we're putting down there. Buildings have to be modernized in an old-fashioned way, to represent that class this town is and can be. Downtown needs to be the start of that, and that attitude and atmosphere can permeate the whole town, and we'll see the neighborhoods cleaned up.

They also got to sell things that are important.

That's right.

(many people agreeing.)

I don't think it's so much for that, because these kids are driving up to, I mean, have you been to American Eagle? 40 dollars a shirt!

But for someone my age, my wife's age... it's got to be affordable, or I'm going to Wal-Mart.

The average salary for this town...

That's what it's got to be.

It's got to be current trends, and the current trends, some of that stuff isn't necessarily affordable.

(many people talking at once.)

I think we're mixing too many things together here. To me, we're talking about creating stores that will be attractive for people outside the area to make Aurora a destination. They want to go to Aurora because of cool art galleries, cool things that you can...and bring the money in from outside. Or are we appealing to residents in Aurora?

I was talking about, right now we're talking about a small portion of Aurora, and creating an environment that brings in things like you're talking about, and then the subsistence type operation... (unintelligible) and the Wal-Mart, they won't have anything that...

(many people talking at once.)

The first year that Ye Olde Mining Days came in was really the best, because it brought in some people who were trying it out to make money. You had the woodcutter and the potter, the true handmade crafts...if you had something like that where perhaps somebody bought the building and sold things on consignment... maybe locally made or regionally made gift items, but yet if you have one person footing the bill, they're not going to survive. The local people might just shop there at Christmas, but if other people would come in and shop, maybe you've got something there. One of the other things I've always thought of is, when everyone's buying cars at the dealership, why isn't there some type of packet or booklet that says "Come downtown. Get 10% off your meal. We've got these shops..." While their car's being detailed, they can just come on downtown, get something to eat, see what we're about.

Something else, I mean, you don't want to harm current businesses, but you're going to have to put a recognizable name brand down there to draw people down there.

Like a Chico's?

A Play-and-Trade or an Applebee's or something of that caliber, that people recognize. If we had an Applebee's downtown, how busy would it be?

How about Hooters?

(laughter.)

But, you know, like the bakery, the chocolate shop, the soda fountain. Things to fill in while you're shopping. There isn't anyone I know that doesn't wish there was some place to get coffee that opened before 8:00 in the morning. Unless you go out Starbucks... if you're downtown and you can get a cup for a dollar at a diner, there's a lot of people who would eat breakfast before work. Something like that would appeal to some of the local people, and they would do a lot of business, and they would stay.

We went to Six Flags last year, me and my family, and we stayed in Pacific, and we just happened to go to their downtown area. Hardly any buildings, but they did have a place like Café Metropolitan, and I kid you not, stuff was half the price, and it was just as good, and it was cheap.

He's got his buildings up for sale, too. The coffee shop, and next door he built four really nice suites upstairs.

I think his business is good for the downtown area.

(many people agreeing.)

...nice atmosphere...

...the prices are night and day...

(many people talking)

What you have down there's got to be affordable, or people will go somewhere else. I don't feel like we have enough tourists coming through to keep a woodcarver's shop open. Now, once you've got established...

If that's all it was, but if it was just one portion of other things...

You're only going to draw 2 crowds with that. I keep going back to the teenagers from 16-20, you know, they want something that's going to entice them. I mean, my kids, when they were younger, they loved going to those things. Craft shows. They'd love standing there and watching them. Now we go to those, and it's like, "why are we watching this?" They don't have that interest in that type of thing. So there's got to be enough there that we draw the younger crowd, the older crowd, kind of get everybody meshed together.

A bookstore... (agreement.) Just like the ones up there in Springfield, where they've got a little coffee shop in it, and a nice, new, modern-style bookstore. It would do...and again, I mentioned to a couple... something that Aurora is lacking, unless you want to go to the Aurora diner, there's no place to get a breakfast or go and get an affordable lunch, unless, again, we need a family restaurant where people want to go. I hate to say that bad about the current restaurant, but the Aurora Diner is a tired building, it's a worn asset... so something in a new location with a good menu, but again, I hate, getting back to it, it's got to almost be a name brand. It's going to have to be something that people are going to trust in.

Or it's gotta be cheap.

It has to be cheap. I go to Nixon to get my parts. When I can get something from Nixon and save \$30 on it, it's worth the travel. I travel other places to shop.

(many people talking at once, side conversations.)

A lot of the discussion is what should be there. Which target population should we target? If we want to set up the downtown to serve the existing population, you go one direction. If we want to draw from other areas, you have to do something different, and put stuff for the existing population in other portion of the city. You can't have it both ways.

I think if you had a few filler things, that the locals would support. I think that anything to do with food the locals will support. Look at our restaurants.

The point is, you have to decide which target population are you after. What are their needs, what do they want, what is their price range? You'll have overlap. In Eureka Springs, there's not a whole lot of locals...they target that place like that, and they advertise it like that...

(Agreement.)

...and that's what this DREAM project is going to do for us, it's going to help us target a population.

(side discussion about the specifics of the DREAM initiative.)

One reason that a lot of people don't put their business downtown is the building is so old. What if it collapses on my merchandise?

Yeah.

(many people agreeing at once.)

Even aesthetics, though, as you're approaching the city, no matter what direction you go toward the downtown area, your first impression is a vacant building in need of repair. There's nothing aesthetically appealing there. There needs to be something visually pleasing as well as financially pleasing.

Lack of pride in ownership downtown. They don't care about what the property looks like. They'd rather let the building sit vacant and kind of fall down.

Moderator: What do you want the downtown to look like, regardless of the target population? What are some improvements you want made?

I'd like to see historical type... and consistent. Not just back and forth, but a good historical old but nice—

We have a lot of history in this town. With the mining, it used to be a flourishing community. It really looked neat.

What I'm looking at is Springfield, you've got the mall. The really updated stores. I'm kind of pushing towards a modern feel.

And not to take away from the history of the city...what are you hoping to portray? If you want a bedroom community, you just have historical stuff downtown, you're not going to draw the younger generation. They're not going to be interested until they reach a certain age....

(Laughter.)

I'm talking about the outer appearance. If you're driving along and you see a nice building, but you don't see what's on the inside... if there's something outside to draw the young ones inside...

That's true, but I think the people with the money ain't going to be the kids. If you're driving through town...

Yeah, but most of these kids are getting their money from their parents, and they're driving all the way to Springfield and spending money.

But then again, which audience do we want?

I think if we convert our downtown...

If it's flashy, it might as well be a mall. You've got to have something outside that identifies what's inside—the outside can be brick.

It's kind of like some of the new development in Springfield and Republic is sort of a modern village look. It's the old and the new... like the Aurora Pharmacy, for example... and I happen to love that color, but it's that sort of look. If everything was a unified theme, the biggest problem I see is right around the Square. You've got some very old businesses that have done absolutely nothing with their fronts, and they're going to fight us tooth and nail...

That building is very pleasing, because it kind of intermingles that modern look with that old look.

(many people agreeing.)

That way, you entice both groups of people.

And really, it's not just the style of (name unintelligible) façade, but it's clean. You look at their house, and it's well kept, but you walk through the doors and you've got the hardwood floors and it's very tastefully done, but not really really expensive.

And Café Met, he's let some of his façade deteriorate, but the rest of his building, it entices both generations.

Yeah.

If someone were to come in and buy those businesses, they could put some complementary things in under the suites and could really do well, bring the prices more in line, do a bakery.

Whatever direction it goes, I think we have to have consistency. We need to take advantage of the history of the town in some fashion, because it is too expensive to level everything and come back with a whole new look, and you have to remember that downtown is off the beaten path, and if you're going to bring outsiders in, you're going to have to have something to bring them.

If you want to make downtown the place for all the locals to do their shopping, I don't think you can do it, but it will not provide the basic everyday things you can get at Wal-Mart. It has to be something special. And we need to consider a whole different atmosphere. You used the word mall. Why not make it a walking mall? Why not ban cars on Madison, find ways to park cars adjacent, and it's a walking mall?

(many people talking at once, general agreement.)

I think that on your historical buildings, you have a plaque with the history, so that as they're walking.

(many people talking at once.)

...same architectural design, so that it's still consistent. You can build new buildings with an old look.

One other thing I'll say is we have to be careful, but if you go up to the Palace and Spring Hill, that whole area is done in a unified theme. It's dead. Chesterfield village. But it's dead.

But there's other reasons for that.

There's other reasons! I wish it were here. That is a really cool theme. And I think it would modern and still be old, and combined...

They really do have a nice unified theme, and everything's a little different, but it all kind of gives you the same feeling of being... I don't know.

The one thing that kicks off that whole thought, where if you close down Madison, if you're really going to close it down, is a divider where you've got a section of grass with trees in it, where people, you know...

With some places to sit.

Exactly. People go out, have their coffee, go to a movie.

That's quite a concept, closing Madison Street. You'd get gripes out of the pharmacy, because they deliver all over town.

Well, the alleys behind it...

They may have to tear some buildings down to create some parking, do some things. But that's just an idea of what you could do to downtown to make it unique, and still provide things to draw people. I'm not saying you need to make a walking mall, but you can.

Well, downtown Vegas, they've got the color and the lights...

(Laughter. Side conversations.)

Moderator: Thank you very much for coming.