PARTNERSHIP PLAYS KEY ROLE IN ICT SUMMIT, "DOWNTOWN: A VISION FOR OUR CITY'S CORE"

By Emily Younger-Barnwell



Partnership and Downtown Wichita staff shared critical insights into the state and future of downtown during the Wichita Business Journal's 2023 ICT Summit titled, "Downtown: A Vision for Our City's Core."

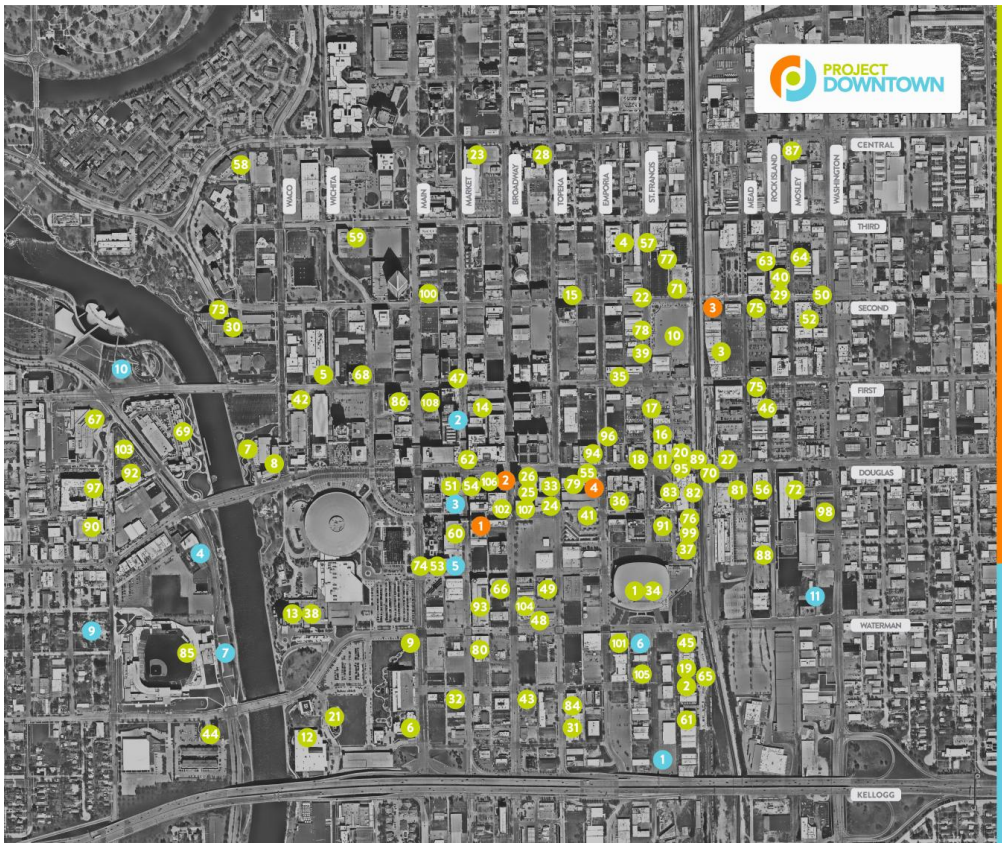
The event, which drew about 175 attendees, featured three distinct panels that detailed downtown's past, present and the challenge to ensure an aspirational future.



Partnership President Jeff Fluhr served as the event's keynote speaker. He opened the day-long event with a comprehensive presentation about the deliberate strategies to revitalize downtown and the importance urban design plays in defining Wichita as a distinctive riverfront city.

"Downtowns are where communities gather, celebrate and engage. Design – everything from architecture, walkability and connectivity of spaces and buildings – is critical to our core's continued economic success," emphasized Fluhr.





107 PROJECTS COMPLETED

5 PROJECTS UNDER CONSTRUCTION

11 PROJECTS IN PLANNING

Since 2010, more than $1.6 billion has been invested in downtown Wichita with 107 projects completed. An additional $700 million is in the pipeline. Fluhr pointed to the following transformative projects and the impact they will have on the city's quality of life and talent efforts:

- Wichita Biomedical Campus.
- Exploration Place's EP2 Initiative.
- Development around Riverfront Stadium and in the Delano District.
- Proposed convention center district and performing arts center.

"Investment in our downtown is an investment in our city's future. We are creating a competitive advantage in terms of talent retention and attraction as well as industry expansion and diversification," Fluhr explained. "We ALL build Wichita. We must continue to be bold and inspirational in everything we touch."

Fluhr's keynote led into the first panel: "Origin Story: The Making of Project Downtown," a discussion of the evolution of Project Downtown, a 15-year master plan for downtown Wichita that began in 2010. Panelists included:

- Suzie Ahlstrand, Community Volunteer

- Bob Layton, City Manager, City of Wichita
- Larry Weber, Vice President, Garvey Center
- Lavonta Williams, Former Vice Mayor, City of Wichita

Key takeaways:

- Project Downtown, a strategic, data-driven and workable plan, guided the public and private sector to invest boldly in the urban core.
- The creation of the Self Supported Municipal Improvement District (SSMID) was instrumental in bolstering visionary projects and infrastructure.
- City, county, community and business leaders demonstrated bold resolve in their decision-making, steadfastly working toward a brighter future for all.
- A significant opportunity existed to enhance community engagement regarding economic development projects.



The second panel: “Recent Era: The Current Landscape” detailed current downtown investment projects, opportunities and challenges. Panelists included:

- Troy Anderson, Assistant City Manager, City of Wichita
- Ricki Ellison, Director of Talent, Workforce Development and Community Engagement, Greater Wichita Partnership
- Jason Gregory, Executive Vice President, Downtown Wichita
- Cole Sneiders, CoC Planning Mgr., United Way of the Plains

Key takeaways:

- Downtown Wichita has experienced transformational progress since Project Downtown's 2010 inception, generating more than $1.6 billion of development in the core and an additional $700 million in the pipeline.
- Industries must navigate evolving workforce dynamics and compete for talent as individuals adjust their priorities.
- Strategic parking plans are currently in development with the aim of enhancing and preserving both existing and future infrastructure as well as advancing economic development.
- Community initiatives are in progress to provide support for the homeless population and address the complexities of mental health and substance abuse challenges.
- Solving the demand for affordable housing, economical childcare and efficient public transit is critical to the city's successful talent retention and attraction.



The third and final panel: "Expand: A Strategic Vision" focused on the future of downtown and the strategic steps needed to accomplish the bold vision of Project Downtown 2.0. Panelists included:

- Jeff Fluhr, President, Greater Wichita Partnership and Downtown Wichita
- Natalie Gosch, Organic Growth Leader, Cargill North American Protein
- Rick Muma, President, Wichita State University
- Luis Rodriguez, Partner, Method Productions

Key takeaways:

- Strategic collaboration among the public, private and education sectors is propelling downtown development and vision.

- Cargill's decision to remain in Wichita and increase its investment was an important psychological moment in our community. This decision served as a catalyst, inspiring other businesses to relocate and expand within the urban core
- The Wichita Biomedical Campus is poised to establish a healthcare corridor with the potential to not only transform and diversify Wichita's economy but also propel the community forward.
- It is important to continue to pursue development opportunities that reflect inspirational vision, exceed expectations and accelerate growth.
- It is imperative we persistently foster an inclusive community.

The event concluded with a sincere call to action: We must aggressively invest in and elevate our community. The bold and aspirational decisions made today will determine Wichita's visionary future.