Drop-In Events Connect Community

By Emily Barnwell

The Partnership's strategic priority of quality of place is dedicated to revitalizing and enhancing the Wichita region through ongoing development, increased connectivity, amenities and more.

This effort is driven by the Talent Team and the Partnership's affiliation with Downtown Wichita, whose initiatives center on cleanliness and safety, development assistance, market research, creative marketing, and collaboration with city, county and community stakeholders.

In September and October, Downtown Wichita hosted a series of drop-in events to connect with downtown community members. These gatherings allowed property owners, business owners, employees and residents to share their visions for downtown and explore ways to get involved.

Heather Schroeder, the new executive director of Downtown Wichita, spoke with attendees one-on-one and in small groups, eager to hear thoughts from those who live and work in the area.

"Public engagement is essential to building a strong community," emphasized Schroeder. "The drop-in events encouraged those in downtown to connect, share ideas and help each other discover all that our vibrant core has to offer."

As the Partnership and Downtown Wichita look to the future, public input is more crucial than ever. Downtown Wichita is currently vetting national firms to engage for Project Downtown 2035: The Downtown Wichita Action Plan (Project Downtown 2035). This initiative will update the 2010 downtown master plan which generated more than $1.7 billion in investment and a project pipeline of more than $760 million. Public engagement for Project Downtown 2035 will begin in January.

"Wichitans have reimagined empty department stores as colleges, company headquarters and apartment homes. We've

turned warehouses into hotels and restaurants and shops. We've converted empty lots into parks and arenas. We've welcomed visitors to sporting events, concerts, plays and outdoor festivals. We have a lot to be proud of and, together, we can continue to create a distinctive downtown that people will enjoy for generations to come," Schroeder said.

During the drop-in events, participants were asked to fill in the blanks for a series of questions. Key themes that emerged include:

- **Downtown stakeholders would like Downtown Wichita's assistance with** activating the river, improving walkability and transportation connections to and within downtown; growing entertainment options in the district; addressing housing costs and housing availability; and improving access to basic amenity retail (e.g., groceries, household products).

- **Respondents wish that more people knew about** the diversity, uniqueness, and quantity of local businesses and organizations downtown, as well as arts and cultural experiences, events, and Wichita's great restaurants.

- **People love** the district's walkability; sense of community; unique offerings like the Farm and Art Market and specialty retail; activity; architecture and historic buildings; ease of access; cultural offerings; variety of people; and Flowers on Douglas.

- **Downtowners think it would be so cool if downtown Wichita** had more open spaces and river access; more food options (including "healthy" fast-casual and vegan options); entertainment options like dueling piano bars, gambling, rooftop bars, a movie theater and Elsewhere Fest; large photo opportunities (e.g. like Chicago's Cloud Gate reflective sculpture); and more positive marketing of what's here.

The teams eagerly anticipate greater community engagement as Project Downtown 2035 moves forward.

For more information regarding quality of place initiatives, contact Heather Schroeder at heather@downtownwichita.org.

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