

Column: Downtown Hutchinson offers hope for revitalization



RIC ANDERSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Jennifer Randall, a Hutchinson artist, poses beside one of her paintings in the family's loft at Avenue B and South Main Street. Randall and husband, Danny Brizendine, moved to Hutchinson from California in 2005 and have become leaders in the community's downtown revitalization efforts.

TOPEKA'S DOWNTOWN VISION

In late February, a group coordinated by Heartland Visioning began accepting community input on a downtown Topeka revitalization plan.

The planning process evolved from a concept to reduce Kansas Avenue from four lanes to three or two between 4th and 10th streets. Proponents say the reconfiguration would provide room for green space, wider sidewalks, areas for outdoor dining and other features that would make downtown more attractive to pedestrians — including those who will be

Heart of south-central Kansas community coming back to life after years in decline

BY [RIC ANDERSON](#)

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HUTCHINSON — The poor little old lady was barely breathing, and for some reason the doctor thought the cure was a choke hold.

That's how some people saw Hutchinson's plan to narrow South Main Street from four lanes to three in the mid-1990s. Critics of the project believed it could snuff out what little life remained downtown at the time by bottling up traffic, eliminating parking space and giving people even more reason to go to the Hutchinson Mall instead of Main.

Lloyd Armstrong heard all about how the plan was a bad idea.

But now, he can look down on the three-lane stretch of South Main from his stylish loft apartment and see proof that the skeptics were wrong. Downstairs on a recent afternoon, people were drinking coffee at a sidewalk cafe. Across the street, patio tables were being wiped down in preparation for the dinner rush at the Anchor Inn Mexican restaurant.

Down the block, shoppers looked over the produce in front of a newly renovated grocery store, a few doors down from a high-end kitchen supply store in another restored building.

There's a heartbeat again in downtown Hutchinson, and Armstrong said the street project was a key to getting it started.

"It's really proved beneficial," he said. "It made our sidewalks three feet wider on both sides, which gave

visiting the Statehouse once it has undergone its \$300 million makeover. The increase in foot traffic would give businesses an incentive to move to the area, proponents believe. But not everyone is sold. Concerns have been raised about how the street could be narrowed without eating up parking spaces and hampering traffic flow. Supporters say the overall amount of parking wouldn't be reduced and that the benefits of narrowing the street are worth the slowdown of traffic.

In March, the plan's proponents requested funding from the city of Topeka for preliminary designs on downtown improvements. The group is expected to make a formal request later this month for \$150,000 in city funds. Meanwhile, proponents also have collected more than \$100,000 in private funding that will go toward the designs, and is continuing to pursue donations.

Today, a committee of civic, government and business leaders has begun work to formulate the plan, which at this point might better be described as a loose collection of ideas. The committee and Heartland Visioning representatives is continuing to present the concept to community groups and gather ideas about how to go about generating growth downtown.

About 11 years ago, the city hired a full-time administrator, Jim Seitnater, to coordinate downtown redevelopment efforts.

Among Seitnater's duties is to help property owners obtain state and local tax incentives for historical or urban renovation. He also serves as the point man in a public-private partnership to improve downtown.

"You need that person who is the go-to guy, the champion, the 'everything I eat and breathe is downtown' person," Deardoff said. "I'm glad we funded that position."

City officials and downtown business operators say that if any of the parts hadn't fallen into place — the public funding, the hiring of Seitnater, the incentives, the private partners and so on — the development occurring today wouldn't be happening.

But Cody Heitschmidt, a Hutchinson Internet entrepreneur, said it also took an infusion of new

us a lot of possibilities to take business outside. And traffic hasn't been a problem at all."

You may have guessed where this story is headed. It's related to the proposal to spark revitalization in downtown Topeka by reducing a stretch of Kansas Avenue from four lanes to three or two.

Don't worry, the point isn't to suggest Topeka should shrink its main downtown street just because Hutch did it.

But it is to encourage anyone who thinks downtowns are a lost cause to reconsider.

City commitment

It's taken 14 years and millions of dollars to produce progress in downtown Hutch, and it still might not have happened if not for a ridiculously unlikely stroke of luck.

More on that later, but the thread throughout the project has been a commitment by the city to keep downtown from blowing away with the constant prairie wind.

"It's your front door. It's your heart," city manager John Deardoff said. "In order to be a healthy community, you have to have a healthy core."

With a mix of funding from the city and the Kansas Department of Transportation, the city anchored the revitalization project with the \$3.7 million Avenue A Park a half-block north of Armstrong's loft. Next, starting in 2000, came \$3.5 million in street and sidewalk improvements.

blood to move the project forward.

"We'd been planning for years, and we were still planning," Heitschmidt said. "But in the last five years, it's gone from zero to 60 here, and I give a lot of the credit for that to Jennifer Randall and Danny Brizendine."

The Californians

Randall and Brizendine are that stroke of luck mentioned earlier.

The couple moved to Hutchinson from Bakersfield, Calif., in 2005 after coming to Hutch on a lark. They had exactly one tie to the community — they'd bought a stove long-distance from a Hutchinson resident.

By conservative Midwestern standards, Randall and Brizendine aren't the typical civic leaders. They're as California as hemp skirts.

Take the thing they have for animals. One room of their loft at Avenue B and South Main houses stray cats they're committed to keeping out of the animal shelter. Legend has it that after a steer escaped from a sale barn and wandered downtown, Danny paid a guy twice the animal's market value to put it out to pasture instead of taking it back.

Danny has a pet pigeon that sits on his shoulder sometimes. He'll tell you how he scooped up the bird after it smashed into a glass door at an office supply store, then brought it home and, in his words, "Super Glued its head back together."

The bird has had no trouble living with the cats and a couple of dogs in the loft, Danny says. That's because "there's a lot of love in this house," which in turn has created harmony.

Jennifer is an artist. Teaches yoga, too.

She and Danny were doing well in California, where he was a homebuilder. He made a mint at it, homes selling so fast he could barely keep up with the demand.

But the sprawl was eating at them, Jennifer said. They hated to see all that land being gobbled up.

So when they saw the Avenue B building, originally a dance hall, they decided to make it their home. Well, not just like that, but close. Before long, they'd purchased the building and started turning the top floor into their residence and the bottom floor into commercial space.

The couple speak philosophically about the move, echoing Deardoff's sentiments about the importance of a healthy core and touting the environmental benefits of using existing resources instead of building new homes.

"Jennifer is trying to save the world," Danny said.

In addition to the investment they made at the corner, Jennifer also started a popular attraction known as Third Thursdays. The event, held on the third Thursday of every month, features art displays and live music at sites up and down Main Street.

It's designed to get people downtown on a regular basis and drive commerce to businesses, and it's drawing hundreds of people every month.

Heitschmidt said the couple's community activism and creativity spread, which helped overcome skepticism about revitalization efforts and produced the spark that moved downtown forward.

"The city deserves a lot of the credit, but it took that private group of people who were willing to buck that 'This is how we've always done it' mentality," he said. "Jennifer and Danny had that California mindset of, 'We really don't care how you've always done it, we're going to do it the way we want.' "

On the rebound

Deardoff, the city manager, says downtown was "nearly dead" not long ago, and he's right.

I grew up in Hutch, where you could buy most of what you needed or wanted downtown when I was a kid. But then came a mall and big box stores and chain restaurants in a wheat field near the east edge of town, and downtown cleared out so fast it was like a Farm Belt version of the fall of Saigon.

It seemed like every time I came back home from college in the mid-'80s, there would be another empty storefront.

At one point, the city staged a contest to name a new festival aimed at bringing people downtown and sparking interest in reviving it. A friend of mine suggested calling it the "You Could Shoot A Cannon Down The Middle Of Our Fest And Not Hit Anyone Fest."

Topekans know the drill. It was similar to what happened in the capital city after White Lakes Mall and then West Ridge Mall opened.

But downtown Hutch appears to be on the rebound, and not just in the area near Avenue A Park.

It would be possible for a visitor to eat at a new Italian restaurant and bar in the 200 block of North Main, take in a concert at the renovated Fox Theater just off of Main on East 1st Street, then stop off for a drink at a tony bar that recently moved into a renovated theater building in the 100 block of North Main.

Not that downtown has returned to its pre-mall strength. The nine-story Wiley Building — the district's signature structure — remains vacant, for example. And Heitschmidt recently abandoned an effort to resurrect a concert hall because of disappointing turnout for shows he staged there.

But there's been enough progress that the city justifiably feels it can show off a little.

"When we have a business prospect in town, we go downtown," Deardoff said. "We really sell downtown now as opposed to what we did five years ago."

Two cities

Again, the point here isn't to say that what worked for Hutchinson will necessarily work for Topeka.

The downtowns are entirely different, each having its own strengths and weaknesses.

Hutchinson, for example, didn't lose as much retail business downtown as Topeka has, and arguably didn't have as far to bounce back. And unlike Topeka, Hutch's downtown growth has been helped by struggles at the mall, which in recent years has had difficulty attracting and maintaining tenants.

But when Hutchinson launched its project, it also didn't have an attraction on the scale of the Statehouse or assets like corporate offices and an existing base of loft residences, like Topeka has.

Plenty of people think downtown revitalization in Topeka is a waste of money and effort, and only

time will tell whether they're right.

But the situation in Hutch would suggest that if there are enough people who take the opposite view — and if things fall into place — a downtown can once again be an asset.

Ric Anderson, who'll go ahead and clean out his notebook by noting that what makes Armstrong's loft all the cooler is that it's located in a building that once housed a brothel, can be reached at (785) 295-1282 or ric.anderson@cjonline.com.

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