

3 Situational Assessment

Priority Issues

- Take advantage of the 10,000 people working at the Wal-Mart General Office and Sam's Office
- Lack of night life and restaurants
- Limited retail
- Need for noticeable gateways
- Lack of pedestrian oriented design
- Lack of core theme to build upon
- Inconsistency of appearance
- Lack of consistent landscaping
- Lack of loft apartments and urban-type housing
- Lack of planned variety of businesses
- Appearance of overhead utilities
- Lack of identified main thoroughfare – transportation entry point
- Bottlenecks during the rush hours – especially A & Central
- SW A Street – the condition and use of the properties
- Need activity to bring people downtown on a continuous basis
- Culture – families, small town atmosphere that needs to be retained

The first task of the six committees was to conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis. This chapter discusses the results of the first two committee meetings. For the full results, see Appendix F.

Circulation and Linkages

Strengths

The strengths of the existing circulation patterns and linkages are good pedestrian orientation around the square and accessibility from other areas of the city. The buildings on the Square are built up to the sidewalk which enhance the pedestrian character. Several entries into downtown help reduce congestion. Also, the schools downtown are within walking distance of a large number of residential areas and walking to school is an option.

Weaknesses

Traffic, lack of pedestrian pathways, and lack of appropriate signage for entering downtown are the most identified weaknesses. The major thoroughfare through downtown, Central Avenue, is also a major east-west thoroughfare for the city with access to I-540. The rush hour presents some bottlenecks, especially at SW A Street and Central Avenue.

Outside of the square, there is a lack of adequate sidewalks. There is not a safe pedestrian path between the General Office and the square and no other mode of transportation available. The only way for those employees to go to the square would be to use their car. But, committee participants indicated that those working at the General Office are likely not willing to give up their parking spaces and will remain in the office over the lunch hour.

No signage or features are in place to let visitors know they have entered downtown. Directional signage to public facilities and parking is also deficient.

Opportunities

The employees at the General Office, Sam's Club and Bentonville Plaza present one of the biggest opportunities for circulation and linkages. There is a need to link this area to the rest of downtown. The two opportunities are with a transit system and pedestrian pathways. Transit may be accomplished with a trolley network, which is currently under review. Pedestrian pathways include both trails and wide sidewalks along the major thoroughfares.

A common signage theme could give greater impact to visitors entering downtown. The signage could be used not only to identify downtown, but to direct visitors to places within downtown, particularly parking.

Many businesses are either offices or stores that close at 5 p.m. Parking lots for those businesses are often empty in the evenings. Therefore, parking is available for after-hours activities. Also, the large parking areas for the three churches provide an opportunity for shared parking.

Threats

The perception of traffic and lack of parking could impede development activity and location of new businesses to downtown.

Image and Identity

Strengths

The redevelopment of the square has provided a central place for community gatherings. The fountain, the confederate soldier statue, the benches, and traditional street lights add to downtown's identity. The statue is a part of the heritage and culture and has been stated as being "a conversational piece". The square is the center for several community activities, such as the Farmer's Market, Pickin' on the Square, and the Art Walk.



Fountain and statue on Square

The Redbud trees and historic homes on Central Avenue impart history and nostalgia. Throughout the year, American flags are placed on the traditional style light posts. These features create an inviting path leading travelers to the Square.

Downtown is a destination. There are several amenities that bring people downtown, such as the Wal-Mart Museum, the new Compton Gardens, Dave Peel Park, churches, schools, the library, and county and city administration services.

Weaknesses

The current condition and land uses of south SW A Street were consistently mentioned as an image weakness. SW A Street is one of the major entrances into downtown, but property maintenance conditions and used car sales in the southern part of the corridor are unattractive. They do not present an image of an urban, pedestrian friendly business district.



Streetscape enhancements

Participants considered promotion activities to be weak. There is the absence of a logo, motto, and theme to provide for consistent promotion. Some have suggested delving more into radio and television advertising.

Opportunities

The many destination places allow for downtown Bentonville to be promoted through tourism. Also, several special events and activities already occur. Those could be expanded to be larger with additional promotion.

Participants also see an opportunity to expand further into arts and culture with the success of the Art Walk and the art and home design shops.

Scottsdale Center in Rogers is a dominant retail area in Northwest Arkansas. However, it does not have the quaint character and pedestrian friendliness of downtown Bentonville. This is an advantage to retailers and shoppers and can be promoted as such.

Threats

The participants continued to mention that the biggest threat to the identity and image of downtown is by not thinking long term, not clearly defining a vision and promoting that vision, and being hesitant to change.



Appearance of car lots.

Degeneration of surrounding residential areas, particularly as it pertains to property maintenance, also presents a threat to image. Efforts need to be taken to preserve older homes that offer moderate income housing. These same efforts are needed to help preserve the small town character and avoid the location of major redevelopment projects that are not consistent with the downtown character.

Economic Conditions

Strengths

One committee participant defined downtown as “the backyard of the largest company in the world.” The Wal-Mart General Office brings thousands of people downtown during the week. The Wal-Mart Visitors Center serves to bring people, (approximately 80,000 annually) especially tourists, downtown. Also, Wal-Mart Shareholder’s Week provides an economic surge in the spring.

Another economic strength is the presence of public services and facilities. The county and city administration offices, especially the courthouse and Bentonville being the county seat serve to anchor the downtown as a place to conduct business. Also, quasi-public businesses, such as Main Street Bentonville, the Chamber of Commerce and the Bentonville Advertising and Promotion Commission have all selected a downtown location.

There are also several personal services that are beneficial to the downtown economy, such as the bank, grocery store, and dry cleaners. They serve area residents as well as the thousands of employees working downtown.

Recent development activity has sparked an interest in development and location downtown. Two new brick two and three story buildings at SW A Street and SW 8th Street offer office, retail and residential space. The Bentonville Plaza, just south of the Wal-Mart General Office, is the city’s largest office building.

Weaknesses

Over and over again, committee participants mentioned the lack of after-hours and weekend businesses as a serious economic weakness. There are very few restaurants and shops open past five p.m. Also, the dry county status is perceived to be a deterrent to restaurants locating in Bentonville.

The mixture of businesses is considered to be unplanned. A strong niche market is not evident and the number of retail businesses is extremely low, with very little specialty shops. There is also a poor use of the first floors for office space, which can reduce the level of pedestrian activity.

Participants also identified the lack of incentives for businesses to located downtown and very little help for businesses that may be struggling or expanding.

Opportunities

To address the lack of incentives, the boundaries of the redevelopment district could be expanded and the Square Roots program could have stronger promotion. The redevelopment district expansion would allow for more commercial and residential developments to be exempt from impact fees.

The next biggest opportunity is to build upon the existing business mix and promote the tourism related industries. Promoting downtown success stories could help encourage more businesses to locate here.

Threats

Losing an anchor facility and competitors on the major arterials are the leading threats. Every now and then, Benton County discusses relocating the administrative offices. Losing such a strong anchor could present hurdles for downtown development, especially for the spin-off businesses, such as attorneys, that come from those services. Participants also see the strip malls along Walton Boulevard and Scottsdale Plaza as a threat to the retail business activity.



Wal-Mart Museum located downtown

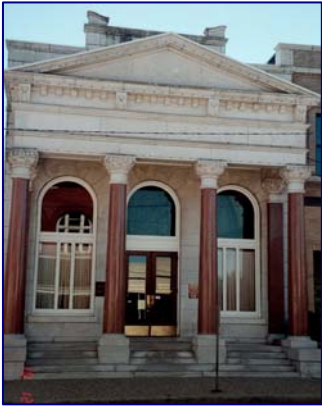


Bentonville's A & P Commission located downtown



Benton County Courthouse serves as a downtown anchor

Strengths:
Architectural features on Square



Weaknesses:
No curbs, and
overhead power lines



Architecture & Streetscape

Strengths

The square has the strongest streetscape features and the historic buildings provide the architectural character. The redevelopment of the square resulted in the installation of brick pavers for sidewalks, wall seats, a central focal point of the statue and fountain, and the use of the traditional style streetlights. The architecture downtown, especially around the square, has a historic character that is absent in the strip malls.

Weaknesses

The most significant weakness is the inconsistency of appearance, in regards to building design and placement, landscaping, and property maintenance. For example, along SW A Street, some buildings are located adjacent to the right-of-way while others have setbacks. The larger setbacks are adversary to pedestrian scale development. Also, because there are no design standards, anything goes. Creating a sense of place is a challenge without a coordinated design plan.

The visual appearance of the infrastructure, particularly the storm ditches and overhead power lines, does not benefit the streetscape along the major corridors of SW A Street and SW Main Street.

There is not a true central feature from which to build upon. For example, participants cited the Plaza in Kansas City being built around two features, architecture and fountains.

Pedestrian scale lighting is also inadequate to help promote a sense of safety and security during the evening hours.

Opportunities

Planning, regulations and financing could greatly enhance the streetscape. A common signage theme could enhance the streetscape. Adopted site design standards would help create more uniformity among new developments and compatibility with existing structures. Addressing such issues as height, structure placement and parking lot placement would assist in creating a more pedestrian friendly environment.

To encourage rehabilitation, historic preservation funds and Main Street Bentonville's façade renovation program should be further explored. Also, the city's recent award of Community Development Block Grant funds may offer funding for residential rehabilitation for home owners.

Threats

Discussion on threats to the architecture and streetscape revolved around height and renovations. First, buildings too tall could create a cavern effect, which is not highly desired. However, height is necessary in order to increase density. Participants feel it is important to determine appropriate heights.

Second, the cost of renovation can sometimes exceed costs for building new. If this is the case, we could see the removal of older buildings and construction of new. If there are no design standards, the new buildings may not be consistent or compatible with historical buildings or the desired character for downtown.



New City Technical Services Building



New Bentonville Public Library



Rehabilitation opportunity on Central Avenue.



Intersection of SW A Street and SW 8th Street. Background: New development with traditional style architecture. Foreground: Empty lot ripe for development.

Future Development

Strengths

The main financial incentive for development activities is those areas within the redevelopment district that are exempt from impact fees. When looking at commercial and multi-family development, this can result in a considerable reduction in associated development costs. This is not an option available elsewhere in the community.

The existing businesses and services also serve as an incentive for downtown development. There are existing public facilities and personal service businesses to meet the needs of employees and residents.

Recent public and private investment shows a commitment of the city and local developers to enhance and encourage future development. The City's new electric building, new Technical Services building, new Library and new fire station are all taking place right downtown. The Merchant District buildings around SW A Street and SW 8th Street are excellent examples of the type of development appropriate for an urban setting.

Weaknesses

There are two weaknesses that create a Catch 22. There are very few loft apartments and urban-style housing to increase the residential density. On the other hand, there is very limited urban-style night time activity to attract younger residents to live downtown. Essentially, the market is not quite what it needs to be to have the night time activity, but the night time activity and urban style housing are not available to encourage people to want to live downtown.

Opportunities

The opportunities for future development and redevelopment seem to abound. There is an existing business mix that can be built upon with complimentary businesses. An evening restaurant could open up the opportunity for more night-time activity. There is an opportunity for the Massey Building to be brought back to grander days when the library moves. The new library will serve as a community gathering place for arts and culture, such as film and book festivals.

There are other financial opportunities for future development. The City recently became an entitlement city for Community Development Block Grant Funds. The two target areas for funding are included in the downtown study area. These funds may be eligible for housing rehabilitation and public facilities that provide services to the people residing in these target areas. There are a number of Fortune 500 companies that have representation in Bentonville. These corporations may be a source of funding for special community development projects. Other considerations are special business districts, Tax Increment Financing Districts (TIFs), historic preservation monies, and creating a pool of funds for creating low-interest loans for commercial and residential rehabilitation.

Threats

New residential redevelopment could squeeze out affordable housing. Since downtown is the only concentrated area of affordable housing, it is critical that this housing stock be maintained at a moderately priced level.

Another concern is developers purchasing large amounts of land and developing the property in a manner that changes the small town character of downtown.

Infrastructure

Strengths

The most positive feature of the infrastructure is that it is in place. It does not require extension of services because the service already exists.

Weaknesses

On the other hand, the infrastructure is the oldest in the community and is in need of the most improvements and upgrades. Water and sewer lines were designed for a small community and may not meet the needs of new development projects. The storm water drainage is essentially ditches, which are sometimes ineffective and have a negative appearance, especially when not maintained.

The most discussed weakness from all committees was the appearance of the overhead utility lines. The poles line the major corridors and the cables cross the streets at several locations. They also present a problem for planting a variety of trees along the street, which limits streetscape design.

Opportunities

With the City's recent designation as an entitlement city for Community Development Block Grant Funds, some of the infrastructure needs can be financed through this funding program. Water and sewer lines will likely need to be increased in size to accommodate redevelopment activity, particularly if higher densities are encouraged.

Threats

The city and other utility providers are hesitant to offer under-grounding of utilities due to costs and maintenance issues. These issues could threaten the ability to improve the overall appearance of the streetscape.



Overhead utility lines



Small town in Kentucky where overhead utility lines have been placed underground