

Historic Downtown Revitalization Emporia, Kansas

Emporia is located in the eastern portion of the state of Kansas between the cities of Topeka and Wichita, just over 100 miles from Kansas City. Emporia's population has decreased approximately seven percent, dropping from 26,760 in 2000 to an estimated 24,916 in 2016.

Having been historically an agricultural and manufacturing town, Emporia was hit hard in the 1980s as a result of declining agricultural prices and the subsequent relocation of factories and businesses elsewhere. As a result of this economic exodus, Emporia's downtown vacancy rate climbed to an estimated 30 to 40 percent. To address these challenges city and county stakeholders launched the Emporia Main Street program to revitalize the town's historic downtown. This initiative, launched in the 1990s, featured a number of catalyst mixed-use infill projects, such as Kellogg Plaza and Lofts and Grandpa Plaza and Lofts, completed in 2009 and 2012, respectively.

In 2008, the city created the Neighborhood Revitalization Plan and adopted a tax rebate program to encourage improvements to residential and commercial properties in distressed areas. The 2008 comprehensive plan also provided incentives for infill redevelopment in blighted areas, which included restoring and preserving the original façades of existing downtown buildings, improving pedestrian and bicycle connections throughout Emporia, creating a park for downtown and surrounding neighborhoods, and providing a wide range of housing options to residents. In 2011, Emporia established a downtown historic district that provides property owners access to historic tax credits to help with renovation costs (see Figures 5 & 6). These incentives, combined with the successes accomplished to date, have given the city the momentum and the means to continue with the rebirth of its historic downtown.



Kellogg Plaza & Lofts



Grandpa Plaza & Lofts



Historic Renovation before (left) and after (right). In this case, a business owner used historic tax credits and zero-interest revolving loans to finance a building renovation, converting an "eyesore" into a contributing part of the historic fabric while improving business and employee morale.



Left: A retail store before renovation; Right: After renovation. With the city's encouragement, local businesses are adopting design standards that help make the area appealing to shoppers.

References:

- EPA *How Small Towns and Cities Can Use Local Assets to Rebuild Their Economies: Lessons from Successful Places*. 21-24 (2015).
- Emporia Main Street, Inc. *Historic Downtown Emporia Kansas: Business Investment Guide*. (2012).