

CHAPTER 6 – DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

Stephenville’s history is evident in much of the Downtown area with the architecture, design and structure of old buildings, including the centerpiece of downtown, the Erath County Courthouse. Reminders of the past and present are visible. However, over the years, downtown has lost the atmosphere that it once had: a unique gathering place for both the community and tourists. Today downtown is characterized by a business vacancy rate of nearly 50%, poor maintenance of existing businesses, lack of land use variety, and has no recognized corridors leading to downtown.

Downtown Stephenville has many historic buildings and structures. While many of the buildings have a good blend of old and new architecture, many of these are not well maintained and are in need of restoration. A good example of recent restoration in downtown Stephenville is the Erath County Courthouse. The restoration of the courthouse can serve as a catalyst for the restoration of other buildings in downtown.

Within the past year, downtown Stephenville has seen an increase in the number of retail businesses. Overall, over 23 businesses are minority or woman owned and over 50 businesses are owned locally. Because of Stephenville’s rich heritage and history, many of the buildings have historical markers and are recognized by the State of Texas Historical Commission. Parking is plentiful around the courthouse and near the Plaza.

One of the highlights of the Plaza in downtown Stephenville is the “Cowboy Capital Walk of Fame”. Similar to the *Hollywood Walk of Fame*, stars displaying names of famous “cowboys” are embedded in the sidewalk. Other interesting facts about the City’s history are also noted in the area. Street furniture, decorative paving, and information signs make this area attractive to both residents and tourists.

Defining Downtown

Downtown Stephenville is generally bounded by Green Street to the north, Long Street to the south, Barton Street to the west, and Floral Street

Chapter 6-Downtown Revitalization

to the east. However, it is important to note that downtown Stephenville should not be defined solely by artificial boundaries.

Downtown begins where guests perceive a “sense of arrival”. This “sense of arrival” begins at minor landmarks along the four major corridors entering downtown. Each corridor has its own character based upon its location and proximity to other features. One corridor on North Graham Street could be medical oriented in relationship to Harris Methodist Hospital Erath County and its associated medical offices. Another corridor on West Washington Street could be education oriented in relationship to Tarleton State University. A third corridor on South Graham Street could be recreation oriented leading to the City Park. The final corridor on East Washington Street could be culture/heritage oriented and head toward the museum, Bosque River and the potential location of a civic center. As downtowns have traditionally been the heart of the City, revitalization of downtown Stephenville would involve economic development and incentive strategies to encourage businesses to locate downtown, aesthetic and design changes that create a common theme through the downtown core, areas of attraction for residents as well as visitors, and development strategies and guidelines that are sensitive to the area’s history and architecture, and that create a cohesive downtown environment.

Key Features of a Successful Downtown District

- ◆ Pedestrian Friendly;
- ◆ Unique and enjoyable experience;
- ◆ Restaurants and similar establishments;
- ◆ Stores and Shops that are open after 6 p.m.;
- ◆ Entertaining; and,
- ◆ Multifunctional (serves community and tourists).

Goal, Objectives and Actions

The goal, objectives and actions outlined in this element of the Stephenville Comprehensive Plan Update are based on traditional urban planning principles as well as input from community residents and leaders during the planning process. These principles establish a framework for the development and redevelopment of downtown Stephenville and are

more likely to result in an economically vital and more viable downtown. The objectives appear in no particular priority order. Actions appear under the different discussion items.

Downtown Goal: Downtown as the activity center and focal point of the community of Stephenville.

Objective DR1: *Create an aesthetic and physically appealing character in Downtown that creates a unique destination for visitors.*

Action DR1.1: Determine a theme for Stephenville's Downtown.

Action DR1.2: Develop design standards and concepts that support Stephenville's downtown theme.

Action DR1.3: Incorporate downtown theme into street signs, business signs, banners, and lampposts to differentiate the downtown area from the rest of the City.

Action DR1.4: Continue to support Stephenville's Heritage Square Foundation in its efforts to revitalize the downtown area.

Objective DR2: *Encourage pedestrian circulation throughout Downtown.*

Action DR2.1: Coordinate pedestrian circulation with the "Downtown Traffic Access and Circulation" section of the Transportation element.

Action DR2.2: Incorporate street furniture (benches, planters), wide sidewalks, pedestrian scale lampposts, pavings at crosswalks to encourage pedestrian movement and promote safety.

Action DR2.3: Work with the Stephenville Chamber of Commerce and the Heritage Square Foundation to create destinations for pedestrians within downtown such as historic and cultural walks and trails.

Objective DR3: *Provide adequate parking to meet the current peak demand and future needs of Downtown.*

Action DR3.1: Develop and install directional signage to direct visitors to parking areas.

Action DR3.2: Initiate design of access, circulation and parking layout for public parking areas.

Action DR3.3: Create incentives for parking off the square.

Chapter 6-Downtown Revitalization

Action DR3.4: Investigate areas that can be used for City parking lots.

Objective DR4: *Attract more entertainment and restaurant uses to Downtown.*

Action DR4.1: Coordinate with Future Land Use Plan for location and impacts.

Action DR4.2: Coordinate with the Stephenville Economic Development Corporation (STEDCO) and the recommendations from the Economic Development element of the Plan for relocation incentives and programs.

Objective DR5: *Promote annual festivals and other community activities that focus attention on Downtown and reinforce its role as an activity center.*

Action DR5.1: Coordinate with Stephenville Chamber of Commerce to promote Downtown through a marketing plan and scheduled yearly events for residents and visitors to re-discover Stephenville's downtown (fun runs, outdoor concerts and theatrical performances, street fairs, art shows, community book sales/exchanges, parades, volunteers clean-up events).

Action DR5.2: Coordinate with the Heritage Square Foundation and other interest groups for creating downtown and historic tours.

Action DR5.3: Work with downtown business owners to promote street fairs, "sidewalk sales", monthly Downtown sales events.

Objective DR6: *Encourage residential uses Downtown.*

Action DR6.1: Review existing Zoning Map and Ordinance to ensure that residential uses are permitted Downtown.

Aesthetics

In order to provide and guide improvements to the appearance of Downtown, a set of development standards should be implemented. These standards are necessary to achieve the desired sense of identity for Downtown Stephenville, as well as to address some of the issues identified for the area such as creating a pedestrian-friendly environment, improving the aesthetics and general appearance of the area, creating

a common theme for the area, enticing desirable businesses to locate in Downtown, and providing the City with an attractive, enjoyable destination for both residents and tourists to the area. The following standards are recommended.

Screening/General Appearance

- ◆ All outdoor heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, and utility equipment, vehicle loading/unloading areas should be 100 percent screened from public view with a decorative wall, fence, or architectural element that is compatible with the building.
- ◆ Refuse containers should be screened 100 percent from public view, and when possible, located in a common area for combined use. All locations should be within an enclosure of a masonry wall or solid fence.
- ◆ No open storage or merchandise display beyond the building setback should be permitted.
- ◆ All electric, telephone and cable TV lines should be relocated to the back of buildings (replacement) or buried underground where feasible.
- ◆ New construction and building additions should be setback a distance that is equal to the average setback of all lots on the same side of the street and within the same block.
- ◆ The rear of buildings that are readily visible from public areas should be improved with finished appearances and maintained to the same standards as fronts of buildings.
- ◆ Decorative street lighting and street signs that are compatible with the newly refurbished Erath County Courthouse appearance should be installed.
- ◆ Location and directional signage should be placed at appropriate places in Downtown. Signs should indicate event locations, areas of historic significance, off-street parking, attractions and recreational areas.

Building/Architectural Standards

- ◆ Architectural design, materials and colors of existing and any redeveloped structures should be harmonious and compatible with their surroundings to preserve the overall appearance, history and culture of Downtown.
- ◆ Height, mass and exterior finish should be compatible with the character of the building.
- ◆ Original brick façades should ideally be restored. Brick façades may be painted to match original colors if exposed brick is in poor condition.
- ◆ Establish design guidelines to control architectural design.

Sign Standards

- ◆ No more than one business identification sign should be located on any premise, unless the business faces two streets, in which case one sign per street face would be permitted.
- ◆ All signs shall be projecting signs and should be placed on all premises, but should not project more than 30 inches nor have a vertical dimension that exceeds three feet.
- ◆ There should be no more than one projecting sign per establishment.
- ◆ Temporary signs should be prohibited.
- ◆ Roof signs should be prohibited.
- ◆ Premises with awnings may have painted or affixed signage no more than 9 inches in height.
- ◆ Signs having revolving, flashing, blinking or traveling lights should be prohibited.
- ◆ Interior illuminated signs should be prohibited.

Landscaping Standards

- ◆ Tree planters should be placed along sidewalks on Washington and Graham Streets.
- ◆ Keep bushes lining the Erath County Courthouse area low so that views are not obstructed.
- ◆ Preserve existing trees.
- ◆ New trees should be a minimum of 8 feet in height and 3 inches in caliper.
- ◆ Relocate some of the parking around the Earth County Courthouse to allow more tree plantings and green space.

Access and Parking Standards

- ◆ Install brick streets immediately around the Earth County Courthouse.
- ◆ Off-street parking areas should have a tree planting for every ten (10) spaces provided.
- ◆ Public sidewalks should be a minimum of eight (8) feet wide.
- ◆ Install crosswalk pavers at all street intersections on Washington, Graham, and at other significant pedestrian crossing locations.
- ◆ Employee parking should be encouraged in peripheral lots for buildings located on the square.
- ◆ Request sign identification for Downtown from TxDOT on U.S. 67, U.S. 281 and U.S. 377.

Land Use

The City of Stephenville's Zoning Ordinance has a designated zoning for the downtown area called the Central Business (B-3) District that is typical of many cities' downtown zoning districts in that it allows a full-mix and

variety of uses (residential and nonresidential) for a downtown business area and has more flexibility regarding setbacks, heights and bulk than most other traditional zoning districts. In addition to the Central Business (B-3) district that covers the majority of the study area, there are also portions of the study area that are zoned in other districts.

The current zoning allows activities that may achieve the stated goal as there is the flexibility to encourage a mix of uses in a pedestrian-oriented commercial setting with buildings close to the streets, clusters of storefronts for window-shopping and the potential for residential dwellings above commercial uses. The current zoning, however, also allows uses and activities that may discourage or be detrimental to achieving the goal and objectives. Prohibiting these types of uses is therefore recommended not only to encourage those uses that attract people and visitors to the downtown area, but to also to prohibit uses that are unsightly, those uses that discourage pedestrian traffic and those that might otherwise be detrimental to the overall goal.

Permitted Uses

The following types of uses are considered appropriate to foster and encourage the types of activities and atmosphere envisioned by the goal and objectives.

- ◆ Retail and specialty shops;
- ◆ Bakeries, ice cream shops, specialty food shops, and candy stores;
- ◆ Professional offices;
- ◆ Medical/dental clinics;
- ◆ Government offices and facilities;
- ◆ Banks and other financial institutions;
- ◆ Barber/beauty shops;
- ◆ Book and card/gift stores;
- ◆ Dry Cleaning services and tailors;
- ◆ Restaurants and cafes (no drive-through lanes)
- ◆ Florists;
- ◆ Pet Shops;
- ◆ Theaters;
- ◆ Museums and galleries;
- ◆ Studios (art, dance, photography);

Chapter 6-Downtown Revitalization

- ◆ Travel agencies; and
- ◆ Hotels, motels and bed and breakfasts.

Prohibited Uses

The following types of activities are considered detrimental to a pedestrian and customer-oriented atmosphere and are recommended to be excluded from the uses permitted in the B-3 District. It is noted that existing uses in these categories would become legal nonconforming uses under the terms of the Zoning Ordinance and would be allowed to continue operation. Other policies and programs could address incentives or assistance to encourage voluntary relocation.

- ◆ Auto Parking Lot or Building (Commercial);
- ◆ Gasoline Service Station and Car Care Center;
- ◆ Pawn Shop;
- ◆ Service Yards;
- ◆ Tool and Equipment Rental Shop;
- ◆ Plumbing Shop; and,
- ◆ Storage, Sale or Repair of Furniture and Appliances (inside building).

Other Zoning Considerations

- ◆ Enact special parking regulations. Parking requirements should encourage shared public/private parking arrangements in close proximity to downtown.
- ◆ Residential occupancy should be permitted by right in commercial buildings.
- ◆ Outdoor seating areas for restaurants should be encouraged (where possible).
- ◆ Encourage more restaurants and similar establishments to locate or relocate to the downtown area to offer a service that is not currently available in the immediate area.

Transportation

For Downtown Stephenville, Washington Street serves as an east-west thoroughfare and Graham Street serves as a north-south thoroughfare, both of which provide primary access to downtown from other areas of the City. In order to take advantage of these thoroughfares, enhancements should be made to illustrate its association with Downtown Stephenville.

- ◆ Install sidewalks on both sides of Washington and Graham Streets from the Bosque River and Tarleton State University on Washington

Street and from Harris Methodist Hospital Erath County and City Park on Graham Street.

- ◆ Performed thermoplastic rumble strips should be installed at the Bosque River Bridge on Washington Street and Graham Street to provide an audible signal to drivers entering the approach to downtown.
- ◆ Areas where shoulder pavement is currently provided beyond travel lanes should be re-designated or eliminated. Curbs should be brought out towards the travel lane where parking is not provided.

Implementation Responsibility

In order for downtown revitalization to be effective, implementation is vital to its future success. The City will play an important role in accomplishing certain actions and in assisting businesses and property owners with implementation. It is unrealistic to believe that the entire responsibility of downtown enhancements falls on the City. Only through partnering and coordinated efforts with concerned parties (The Heritage Square Foundation) and citizens will it be successfully accomplished and maintained.

Role of the City

The City has the ability to initiate several items identified. These actions include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Install decorative pedestrian level lighting, tree planters and landscaping, street overhangs and street furniture that reflect the desired image for Downtown Stephenville.
- ◆ Develop decorative street and location signs that reflect the theme of Downtown.
- ◆ Install decorative pavers in crosswalks at major intersections.
- ◆ Reduce the amount of parking around the Earth County Courthouse. Establish parking areas immediately outside the courthouse area to encourage pedestrian traffic inside the square.
- ◆ Add bicycle and pedestrian trails along Washington Street to connect to Tarleton State University to the west and the Bosque River and potential civic center to the east.
- ◆ Add bicycle and pedestrian trails along Graham Street to connect to Harris Methodist Hospital and Erath County to the north and City Park to the south.
- ◆ Improve and extend sidewalks and trails. Include trail markers.
- ◆ Consider freezing taxable property values for up to five years to encourage new businesses to locate, rehabilitate and expand in Downtown Stephenville. Encourage the Stephenville Independent

Chapter 6-Downtown Revitalization

School District and Erath County to also participate in the tax freeze.

- ◆ Coordinate related park improvement and facility opportunities to attract traffic to the area (amphitheater at City Park).

Role of The Heritage Square Foundation

The coordinated involvement of downtown property owners and tenants is vital for implementation of the Plan. Just as the City has the ability to initiate several action items identified as important, downtown property owners will need to commit resources as well. The Heritage Square Foundation, a public nonprofit foundation, was organized to improve the image, physical environment and economic stability of the downtown business district. The Heritage Square Foundation has identified a number of goals and directed efforts in a draft master plan. They will need to take the lead in the promotion of the whole downtown in order to present a unified voice to the City. These interests of the Foundation include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Improved parking from location, function and appearance perspectives.
- ◆ Identify the downtown area with brick crosswalks and treatments.
- ◆ Signalization that promotes pedestrian and traffic safety.
- ◆ Promotion of the activities and features of the City at an information kiosk.
- ◆ Enhance the appearance of buildings with murals.
- ◆ Build upon the success of the Cowboy Walk of Fame with a museum honoring the local and national cowboys.
- ◆ Support the building of a new library facility in the downtown or appropriate location.
- ◆ Support the development of a multi-purpose civic events building.

City and The Heritage Square Foundation Partnership

A “partnership” should be formed between the City and The Heritage Square Foundation and other property owners and tenants in order to have a consensus on large action items. As the previous action items need to be initiated by either the City or property owners, the following action items will need to be initiated by property owners and then presented to the City for review and approval:

- ◆ Develop entry markers along major corridors into Downtown.

- ◆ Install directional signage to parking areas. Adopt an architectural theme and architectural standards for Downtown.
- ◆ Install street furniture (seating and trash bins), pedestrian level lighting, and pedestrian-friendly signage.
- ◆ Pursue linkages to other areas of interest (City Park, Tarleton State University, Bosque River, etc.)

Development

- ◆ Create a Public Improvement District in which a small portion of the taxes paid are dedicated to improvements in the downtown area.
- ◆ Clearly indicate in the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance, which uses are acceptable and which uses are prohibited, such as automobile related uses. Encourage a mix of uses to promote living/working/playing environment that includes strict development standards that dictate architectural, landscaping, signage, access, and parking standards.
- ◆ Encourage restaurants and similar establishments to locate Downtown.
- ◆ Create a historic district for Downtown as a means to preserve structures and control architectural and/or façade treatments. Consider developing a program to eliminate and/or relocate uses that are considered detrimental, such as automobile related uses and/or outdoor sales lots.
- ◆ Establish a “people mover” (trolley) between Tarleton State University and Downtown.

Infrastructure

- ◆ Redesign square to include pathways, seating areas and landscaping.
- ◆ Work with property owners and electric utility companies to relocate the electric lines to the rear of the buildings (or to bury them if feasible).

Texas Main Street Program

The Texas Main Street program is part of the Texas Historical Commission's Community Heritage Development Division and helps Texas cities revitalize their historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts by utilizing preservation and economic development strategies. The program began in 1981 and is affiliated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Over 130 Texas cities have been assisted through the program. The program has resulted in the private reinvestment of more than \$860 million in Texas downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts, the creation of more than 18,200 jobs and the establishment of more than 4,600 new businesses.

Chapter 6-Downtown Revitalization

The Main Street program focuses on a four-point approach of organization, design, promotion and economic redevelopment targeted to the downtown area. The intent is to support and encourage historic preservation within the context of economic revitalization. Participation in the Main Street program requires the participating city to commit to and adopt the Main Street strategy consisting of ten criteria, which are briefly summarized as follows:

1. Broad-base public support for the commercial district revitalization process, with strong support from both public and private sectors.
2. Vision and mission statements relevant to community conditions and to the local Main Street's organizational stage.
3. Comprehensive Main Street work plan.
4. Historic preservation ethic.
5. Active board of directors and committees.
6. Adequate operating budget.
7. Paid professional manager.
8. Program of ongoing training for staff and volunteers.
9. Reporting of key statistics.
10. Current member of the National Main Street Network.

Should the City of Stephenville decide to participate in a Main Street program, it would be required to hire a full time Main Street manager for three years and provide funding for the local program.

Main Street Program for Stephenville

The Texas Main Street Program was evaluated with respect to its viability for application in the Stephenville Downtown area. Due to the specific requirements for staffing and fees for a city the size of Stephenville, the Texas Main Street Program does not appear to be necessary element for implementing the preceding recommended improvements in the downtown area. A new state program is in the works that may provide funding for non Main Street cities.