

Best approach for addressing vacancies and unused space within Main Street districts

by

Raegan Linenberger

A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF REGIONAL AND COMMUNITY PLANNING

Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional and Community Planning
College of Architecture, Planning, and Design

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Huston Gibson

Copyright

© Raegan J. Linenberger 2023.

ABSTRACT

Main Streets are known to be a vital part of smaller towns as they provide opportunity for investment and social connections, while also contributing to the city's tax base and holding key parts of community identity. This makes it much more important to have Main Street districts that are functioning to their full potential which includes lowering vacancy numbers and finding ways to utilize unused space. This study employs a multiple case study approach to discover what has been done within other Main Street districts in Kansas to reduce the number of vacancies along their street front as well as utilize space that has been misspent. Information gathered from this case study investigation can then be applied to Main Street districts in need of guidance within these areas of Main Street development. The implication is that if Main Street districts are able and have the resources to resolve the issues of vacancies and underutilized spaces, then they will be less likely to fall into decline and will be able to provide more opportunity for economic and community development within their communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND.....	3
VIABILITY AND IMPORTANCE OF MAIN STREETS	3
REVITALIZATION OF MAIN STREETS	4
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MAIN STREETS.....	5
VACANCIES AND UNUSED SPACE ON MAIN STREETS.....	6
UTILIZATION OF UPPER STORY SPACES ON MAIN STREETS	7
SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE	8
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	9
RESEARCH QUESTION.....	9
APPROACH.....	9
STUDY AREA	10
DATA COLLECTION	11
DATA ANALYSIS.....	12
PROJECT OUTCOMES.....	13
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	14
KANSAS MAIN STREET PROGRAM	14
DODGE CITY MAIN STREET.....	20
EMPORIA MAIN STREET	23
HUTCHINSON MAIN STREET	27

GARDEN CITY MAIN STREET	30
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	34
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	36
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	37
LIMITATIONS.....	41
NEXT STEPS	42
SUMMARY	43
REFERENCES	44
Appendix A - Main Points of Background Research.....	47
Appendix B - Interviewees and Interview Questions	49
Appendix C - Interview Transcripts	54
Interview with Kayla Savage (11/10/22)	54
Interview with Scott Sewell (11/14/22)	60
Interview with Casey Woods (11/11/22)	65
Interview with Janet Burr (11/21/22).....	71
Interview with Coral Lopez (12/14/22)	79
Interview with Lacie Janzen (1/18/23).....	85
Interview with Bob North (1/25/23)	92

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: Map showing the location of the cities where the application Main Street district and case study Main Street districts are located.	11
Figure 4.1: Order of interview process.	14
Figure 4.2: Downtown Dodge City, Kansas (Boyer, 2020).....	20
Figure 4.3: Map showing the location of Dodge City KS’ Main Street district.	21
Figure 4.4: Map showing the location of Emporia KS’ Main Street district.....	24
Figure 4.5: Emporia Main Street (Linenberger, 2022)	24
Figure 4.6: Downtown Hutchinson, Kansas (Hutchinson, 2023).	28
Figure 4.7: Map showing the location of Hutchinson KS’ Main Street district.	28
Figure 4.8: Map showing the location of Garden City, KS’ Main Street district.	31
Figure 4.9: Main Street in Garden City, Kansas (Linenberger, 2021).....	31

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: Chart of mentioned resources and programs that shows which Main Street districts utilize or have utilized them to mitigate the issue of vacancies and unused space..... 35

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Many small-town Main Streets located in Kansas are known to be the heart of their communities as well as a prominent place to gather. Unfortunately, these districts also tend to have underutilized upper-story spaces as well as vacancies along the street front. This can cause decline in those Main Street districts which in turn negatively affects the community as a whole. Downtowns/Main Streets account for a considerable amount of a city's tax base, serve as a location for public investment, represent the culture of the local community, function as the community gathering place, and generally holds and projects the very identity of its community (Robertson, 1999, p. 270). This highlights the importance of the survival of these districts and all that they provide to smaller areas. It also indicates the importance of revitalization of Main Streets, especially when vacancies and unused space are a common occurrence.

There are different ideas about how to address and mitigate the issue of accumulation of vacancies and unused space within Main Street districts. For instance, renovating unused upper-story spaces into residential lofts or trendy office spaces. Other ideas are more technical and address the overall economic vitality of the district rather than target the specific issue of vacancies or underutilized space. For example, getting to know the market draw to better understand what goods and services would be successful, as well as working to foster merchant unity to avoid division within the Main Street business community (Kemp, 2000, p. 179). While some have presented ideas such as those previously stated, material on this topic has proven to be more difficult to find. Furthermore, since most ideas that have been written about address a broader scope of downtown revitalization, it is challenging to find those that more specifically cover upper story utilization and how to avoid or address the growth of vacant store fronts. Therefore, there is opportunity for more research and writing to be conducted in this area.

Through this study and its research, I intend to gather information on strategies for how to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. This is accomplished by looking at successful examples of Main Street districts, the strategies that they have used or currently use, and how those strategies have impacted the district as well as the community as a whole. Throughout this process I aim to also collect information regarding special resources and other helpful tools that prove to be useful within this specific revitalization process. With the information and data gathered I may then compile a list of best practice recommendations for my chosen application city. The overarching goal of this report is to answer the research question; What is the best approach to redeveloping or renovating vacant and underutilized spaces within Main Street districts? As well as answer the supporting question; How would redevelopment or renovation of unused spaces within the Main Street district in Garden City, KS create more economic opportunity and benefit the community as a whole?

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

VIABILITY AND IMPORTANCE OF MAIN STREETS

Common questions that are asked when discussing the topic of Main Street districts today include, Are Main Streets still viable in today's world? Or, will Main Streets survive or be taken over by big box stores and trendy mall developments? Both narratives studied in this section understand that there are concerns and issues that small-city Main Streets face, which in turn is why these questions are asked. Talen and Jeong focus more on the threat of chain stores and the overall decline in brick-and-mortar retailing which is discovered through studying and comparing the vitality of chain store blocks and Main Street/downtown blocks (Talen & Jeong, 2019, p. 215). Please see Appendix A in regard to additional source information. Whereas Robertson focuses more on the specific problems occurring on Main Streets which are brought to the surface by community members through survey collection. For example, vacant and underused space, attracting new development, preservation of older buildings, attracting community members at certain times of the week, etc. (Robertson, 1999, p. 274).

Despite the threatening challenges that Main Street districts may face, the narrators found that Main Streets and downtowns are still important city assets and through revitalization efforts, Main Streets can once again hold viability. The truth is that Main Streets still have a lot to offer within our communities, especially in smaller towns and cities. According to Robertson, downtowns/Main Streets account for a considerable amount of a city's tax base, serve as a location for public investment, represent the culture of the local community, function as the community gathering place, and generally holds and projects the very identity of its small city (Robertson, 1999, p. 270). Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. Opportunity for social connections, diversity, economic development, and street activity are some of the benefits

that Main Street districts can offer a community (Talen & Jeong, 2019, p. 216). A common solution focused on in both narratives is creating and maintaining a sense of place/placemaking. “Downtown’s greatest competitive asset is the ability to provide an alternative to the generic suburban environment, a distinctive and identifiable sense of place...” (Robertson, 1999, p. 282).

REVITALIZATION OF MAIN STREETS

Revitalization efforts have become more popular among Main Street districts in order to help them reclaim the same vitality they may have once had and avoid further decline. A common denominator in a large majority of narratives that discuss Main Street Revitalization is the Main Street program. As reported by Abernathy and Mitchell, “The Main Street Program is economic and community development in its best form. It is a place-based program where a community’s assets are analyzed and an economic development program built from those assets” (Abernathy & Mitchell, 2014, p. 1). The Main Street program’s approach is known as the roadmap to revitalization and is based on a four-point approach; Design, Economic Vitality, Promotion, and Organization (The Approach, 2022). Based on this four-point approach researchers have presented their own ideas of what needs to be done within Main Street Districts. Branco suggests accumulating community support as well as improving appearance and focusing on local niches as important steps in the revitalization process (Branco, 2006, p. 37-38). Whereas Abernathy and Mitchell have gone so far as to suggest transportation enhancements and streetscaping improvements, utilizing local programs such as façade renovation programs, and place-making as important components to revitalization (Abernathy & Mitchell, 2014, p. 2-4).

Another narrative, less blatantly focused on the four-point approach, focuses on a list of top ten initiatives that correlate with downtown success. Those initiatives are, 1) creating and maintaining private-public partnerships, 2) defining a clear vision, 3) having a market driven business plan, 4) honing in on unique niches, 5) attracting new businesses, 6) one-on-one

personalized business counseling, 7) determining focus groups, 8) providing housing options, 9) creating formal marketing campaigns, and 10) utilizing the same management techniques as the malls (Kemp, 2000, p. 158-161). This list of ten initiatives still fit within the elements of the four-point approach framework used today, which in turn means that researchers have come to find similar solutions and approaches when it comes to revitalization on Main Streets.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MAIN STREETS

Economic development is a key component of the Main Street revitalization process. Luckily, there are quite a few narrative and research pieces that cover this component of Main Street Revitalization. One narrative explains the effects of spillover investment on Main Streets. Through façade improvements, properties located downtown saw an increase in taxable value as well as many other economic benefits such as an increase in retail sales and rents, less vacancy, diverse quality of life factors, etc. (Gibson, Zurcher & Wisemiller, 2020, p.147). We can use this to examine how finding solutions to vacancies and utilizing upper story spaces on Main Street may create its own spillover effect with its own economic benefits. Another narrative covers the idea of taking on economic development from a different approach. Through case study research it was found that by creating a collective action framework that produces social capital and also aligns the goals of those involved in production of goods and services, a community will be able to better utilize important social and economic resources (Squazzoni, 2008, p. 510).

Other narratives simply provide information on best economic development methods. In Kemp's overview of local economic development, descriptions of economic development actions are shared such as attracting and retaining business, small business development, workforce development, public-private partnerships, etc. (Kemp, 200, p. 16-30). Rypkema provides a thorough economic development guide for Main Streets in his writing. The importance of appraising, development financing, doing a market analysis, evaluating the real

estate opportunities and more are explained (Rypkema, 1987). While these narratives share some similar but also very different ideas and solutions regarding economic development, they all seem to be effective and useful when it comes to improving downtowns/Main Street districts.

VACANCIES AND UNUSED SPACE ON MAIN STREETS

Vacancies and underutilized space along Main Streets can be a common occurrence in struggling Main Street districts. Some researchers have written about how detrimental vacancies can be as well as the best methods to avoid vacancy accumulation. Flory and Mullen write that there are several problems associated with empty buildings on Main Street; 1) the building owner would constantly be losing money, 2) in turn the district is missing out on potential sales and jobs, 3) the vacant buildings are likely to be unkept and project a shabby look, and 4) they suggest the district is failing or falling into decline (Flory & Mullen, 1986, p. 116). With a different more economic focused view of the issue, Rypkema explains why investments may not be taking place in downtown/Main Street. The main reason is said to be that the risk to the investor would not be equivalent to the expected return (Rypkema, 1987). These narratives although focused on different areas, suggest why vacancies occur and their effects.

Certain narratives have also shared how to overcome and prevent vacancies. For example, one narrative provides case studies of small towns in New Hampshire that were struggling with low occupancy rates and how reinvestment and renovations with help through local programs have helped bring their Main Street communities back to life and their percentage of unused/underutilized space down (Mowry, 2003). Other narratives share specific methods of revitalization efforts to tackle the issue of unused space on Main Streets. Kemp explains that leadership, consensus building, and persistence are key when wanting to keep retailers on Main Street (Kemp, 2000, p. 176). It is also said that it is important to know the market draw to better understand what goods and services would be successful, as well as working to foster merchant

unity to avoid a fragmented Main Street business community (Kemp, 2000, p. 179). According to Flory and Mullen, larger buildings are usually left vacant due to no one being able to fill them, so it is better to subdivide those larger spaces (Flory & Mullen, 1986, p. 117). Also, certain types of landlords can be a deterrent for small businesses as well as shabby buildings that have seen no improvement for many years, so it is important to sell to and attract landlords that will want to work with and better the community as well as to invest in needed renovations in order to attract tenants (Flory & Mullen, 1986, p. 117-118). While these narratives share different types of solutions that target the issue of vacancies, they are all valid and allow us to analyze from different viewpoints what exactly certain Main Street districts with vacancies and unused space need.

UTILIZATION OF UPPER STORY SPACES ON MAIN STREETS

As mentioned in the previous section, communities are coming to realize how much unused space their Main Streets have accumulated. This includes upper-level building space. Common ideas are to renovate the unused upper-story areas into residential lofts or trendy office spaces, however there are few writings of these projects that can be found. Some of the few narratives that are available share proof of these projects and the different benefits that they bring to their district. According to Turkel, creating more residential options along Main Street is a key component of revitalization because it brings constant life around the clock to the district and provides an in-house market for the businesses below (Turkel, 2004). Another narrator claims that adding housing to Main Street will help solve housing challenges within the community by persuading young professionals and baby boomers who are looking to live in a smaller space that is more central (Seitnater, 2014). While the benefits within them may differ, these narratives do show some of the advantages to adding second story housing units to Main Streets.

The narratives studied in this section also serve as case studies. While some present specific ways to go about implementing residential spaces on Main Streets, others serve rather as examples of what has been done. For example, Kansas Main Street provides information on the new SB 90 bill recently signed by the governor that significantly expands the project types allowed in Kansas Rural Housing Incentive Districts (Governor, 2022). Which will provide an opportunity for cities to take advantage of valuation increases on residential developments including upper-story housing options on Main Street/in downtown for much needed improvements (Governor, 2022). Meanwhile, Mannette focuses more on Hutchinson's downtown second story renovation project. One interviewee explains how in order for second story spaces to work, first floor units have to be vibrant and successful first; no one wants to live upstairs if there is nothing to do down below (Mannette, 2021). Therefore, while one narrative in this section focuses more on a specific element that could help move towards implementing residential space upstairs, Turkel, Seitnater, and Mannette focus on real world examples of residential spaces being renovated in upper-story spaces on Main Street and the benefits provided by those spaces. The information from all narratives, however, can help us to think more critically about how to best use underutilized upper-story spaces on Main Streets.

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

Much can be taken from these narratives in regard to Main Street revitalization, and more specifically how to overcome and prevent the issue of vacancies and underutilized space on Main Streets. The information shared through this review can be used to further investigate how to best undertake the task of filling vacancies and finding uses for upper story spaces in order to prevent district decline.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTION

The goal of this research is to discover best practices for avoiding vacancy accumulation and how to best utilize unused upper-story spaces on Main Streets. To help conduct my research I proposed the following questions which this report will aim to answer.

The primary research question:

- What is the best approach to redeveloping or renovating vacant and unused spaces within Main Street districts?

A secondary research question:

- How would redevelopment or renovation of unused spaces within the Main Street district in Garden City, KS create more economic opportunity and benefit the community as a whole?

APPROACH

In order to best answer the research questions stated in the above section, I needed to employ methods that would help effectively collect qualitative research and data. Therefore, I chose to utilize a multiple-case study approach to compare different Main Street districts in Kansas and their upper-story utilization in addition to their approach to avoid accumulation of vacant store fronts. Through my research, I investigated Main Street case studies that have been successful in accomplishing these goals in order to reveal their best practices. A Main Street district that has been deemed successful consists of a low number of vacancies, little to no unused space, including upper stories, and overall would be a vibrant and healthy district within the community. After discovering their best practices, I then was able to compile a list of recommendations based on what could be applied to the application city in this study. In addition

to case study research, semi-structured personal interviews were conducted in order to better understand what is going on through people's firsthand experiences within these districts and their perspectives on this topic. I believed these to be the best methods to pursue in order to collect useful qualitative data that helped identify best practices and effective processes for upper-story utilization and avoiding vacancies within Main Street districts in Kansas. This is because through case study investigation, I was able to better compare Main Streets within different communities to find what methods have worked within a real-world context. Through interviews data was gathered in a more structured environment with free communication which allowed interviewees behavior types (such as non-verbal and spatial behaviors) to be observed to help understand their answers and experiences more in depth. Whereas other methods would not allow such personal observations. It is also much more difficult to gather the information needed for this research without interviews as Main Street districts have limited written material that covers this specific topic.

STUDY AREA

For this report, four Main Street districts in Kansas were studied and analyzed: one application Main Street district and three case study Main Street districts. This allowed me to study communities that have fair access to the same number of resources and amount of assistance through programs such as the Kansas Main Street Program. The application Main Street district located in Garden City, KS was chosen due to its consistent struggle with vacancies and unused upper story space. The case study Main Street districts were chosen based on their success with low number of vacancies and upper story utilization as well as their overall vitality as a Main Street district. The chosen case study districts are located in the cities of Emporia, KS, Hutchinson, KS, and Dodge City, KS. Findings from these cities were then used to

formulate a best practice guide for the application Main Street district located in Garden City, KS. The map below displays where the four mentioned cities are located in Kansas.

Figure 3.1: Map showing the location of the cities where the application Main Street district and case study Main Street districts are located.



DATA COLLECTION

The key data collection technique for this study was personal interviews. The interview process will begin with interviewing directors/leaders of the Kansas Main Street program to collect a base level of information at the state level. This then led to interviews within the primary research sample, local Kansas Main Street districts. The three chosen districts as mentioned before are located in the cities of Emporia, Hutchinson, and Dodge with the application city being Garden City. The directors of the Main Street districts in those chosen cities within Kansas were interviewed for the majority of needed data. After interviews with Main Street district directors were conducted, interviews could also be held with additional

resource program directors that were mentioned/suggested in the previous interviews in order to gather supporting information. A more specific list of initial interviewees as well as lists of interview questions can be referenced in Appendix B. The intent was to choose participants based on their experience and involvement within their community's Main Street district or their knowledge and personal experience on this specific topic. Interviews were semi-structured with questions that are a mix of factual and subjective types as well as written as simple as possible to avoid any potential bias and to ensure authentic responses.

There was the possibility that one or more of the Main Street district leaders in my chosen cities or one of the leaders within related programs would not wish to participate in the interview process. If this would have occurred, my intent was to access public information that is available and ask for access to plans and documents that could have related to my research in order to replace the needed data provided through interviews. If this also was not an option due to districts' right to refuse access to such documents and plans, I would have considered looking at other cities in Kansas with successful Main Street districts to find a reasonable replacement for the city that did not wish to participate.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gathered through interviews and case study research was then analyzed in order to compare and compile a list of practices used within the three chosen Main Street districts in Kansas. Coding and inductive analysis is also used to help organize the gathered data in order to help recognize patterns and themes for further analysis. Notes collected through interviews were reviewed and information that is necessary and relevant to answering the previous research question and secondary questions are synthesized for each Main Street district case study.

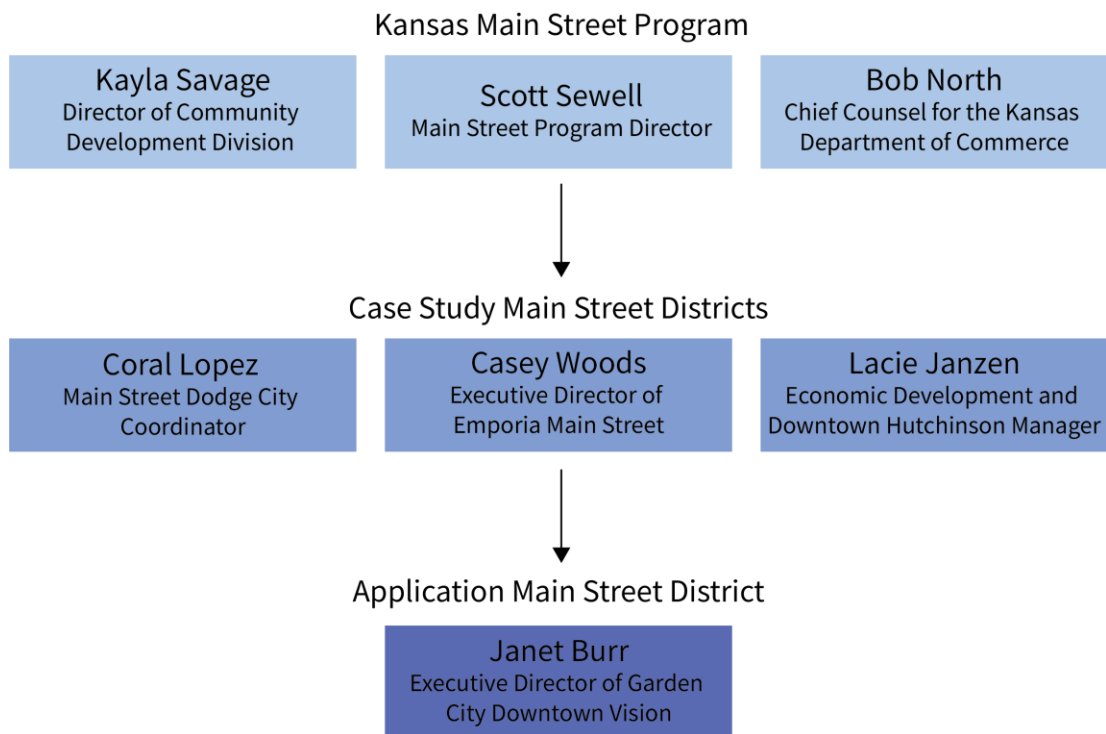
PROJECT OUTCOMES

Ultimately, the goal throughout this research process was to produce a guide of best practices used to avoid vacancy accumulation and utilizing unused spaces for the Main Street District in Garden City, KS and other Main Street districts that struggle with these same issues. With the discovery of these best practices through case study research and interviews, I was able to recommend viable solutions and strategies for the Main Street districts that still struggle with vacancies and unused, empty space to follow. While this study is primarily focused on Main Street districts in the state of Kansas it may be applied or related to districts located in other areas as well.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Included here is relevant information gathered through individual interviews with leaders of the Kansas Main Street Program as well as from the directors of the selected case study and application Main Street districts. This provides the reader with insight into what was discussed throughout the different interviews and how the information was used to create a best practice list regarding the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. Below, figure one displays a visual of how interviews were organized and the order they were analyzed.

Figure 4.1: Order of interview process.



KANSAS MAIN STREET PROGRAM

Three interviews were conducted at the Kansas Main Street program level. The first was with Kayla Savage, the Director of the Community Development Division, the second was with

Scott Sewell, the Main Street Program Director, and the third was with Bob North, Chief Counsel for the Kansas Department of Commerce. The goal of these interviews was to gather initial information on programs and resources available at the state level that help address the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Kansas Main Street districts.

In my interviews with both Kayla and Scott, we discussed what the Kansas Main Street Program has experienced in the past and what they offer in relation to vacancy and underutilized space. Vacancy and underutilized space within Main Street districts are common problems seen in Kansas as well as nationwide. The rate of vacancies within any Main Street district can fluctuate due to a variety of different things. We have seen how the typical marketplace has transformed over the past 40-50 years along with the push for big box stores, mall development, and online shopping which has ultimately led to a cycle of disinvestment in Main Street/downtown areas. If the district does not have effective tools in their toolbox, it can be difficult to address those vacancies as well as compete with bigger developments or adjust to those changes in the marketplace. This in turn can lead to chronic vacancies and other issues within the district.

When a community's Main Street becomes a designated Kansas Main Street in the program, they are given access to trainings and technical assistance related to the 4-point approach. This 4-point approach offers a helpful framework that can be utilized in any size Main Street community and grants them the opportunity to create incremental change and improvement within their district. It also helps Kansas Main Street districts build their capacity locally which would allow them to address vacancies and underutilized spaces more effectively. Knowing how to appropriately manage a Main Street's building inventory and the built environment as a whole is necessary for the successful growth of the district. By pairing the 4-

point approach with incentive tools, any improvement or development becomes so much more intentional and effective therefore improving the district in multiple areas. A variety of those different incentive tools and resources have been implemented or are still being developed at the state level to help mitigate or prevent vacancy challenges within Kansas Main Street districts.

The first resource that was briefly touched on was the Incentives Without Walls (IWW) program. This revolving loan program is available to existing Main Street communities and has been a popular resource for years. It was also shared that Kansas Main Street is a partner on a Historic Economic Asset Lifeline (HEAL) grant program. The HEAL grant program provides matching dollar funding assistance to help revitalize vacant and underutilized buildings in downtown areas. The aim of this program is to ensure that the owner has a plan in place for the usage and inhabitation by a business after the completion of the project. This grant program is fairly new to the Kansas Main Street program and is only in its second year of being administered to Kansas Main Street communities. It gives Kansas Main Street the opportunity to provide more state funding opportunities. This is something they have been trying to do more of considering federal programs often have a large number of requirements for their funds which in turn make them more difficult for Main Street communities to obtain.

Another resource that Kansas Main Street has offered the past couple of years that was well utilized is a workshop with Upstairs Downtown. At this workshop, technical assistance experts and professionals came together to discuss and share their knowledge on solutions for renovating upper story spaces within downtowns. The conversations included discussions of building code and other technical parts that people would need to be aware of during the renovation process. Scott Sewell shared the significance of this workshop by saying, “There's just so much space available on upper floors in downtowns and you combine that with the fact

that there's a housing issue statewide. Communities just don't have enough housing and even if downtown can play a small role in addressing that issue that's important. Typically, most communities regardless of the community size about 4% to 6% of the population would be willing to live in a downtown loft space for example. So, you know if you can help alleviate 4% to 6% of that issue in any size community that's better than nothing, and it helps address the housing issue and it helps the address the issue of vacant upper floor space in cool downtown buildings” (S. Sewell, personal communication, November 14th, 2022).

One last resource shared by both interviewees was one not offered through Kansas Main Street but is often sought out by downtown building owners. The Kansas Creative Arts and Industries Commission offers what is called the reimagined spaces grant. This grant is not only available for Main Street/downtown areas but for any buildings that have been disinvested or left vacant. These buildings are used for creative arts and cultural programming. It basically provides artists and organizations the opportunity to create pop-up art displays or performances. Kansas Main Street’s role was to assist in finding spaces that could be renovated for these activities. Then, once the temporary activities had finished the Main Street district is left with a white box building ready to be used for something else. By encouraging this resource in Main Street districts, underutilized spaces are reactivated which then creates interest in those spaces and brings in new people.

Moving into the policy side of things, a recent policy to help address vacancies and underutilized space was implemented by the Kansas Department of Commerce and is known as the Rural Housing Incentive District (RHID). In 2021 the Senate Bill 90 passed which would allow upper story redevelopment for residential units in downtown buildings. It is fundamentally a tax incentive for developers where the value of an upper story space is assessed before the

renovations, then at the end of the year that space is reevaluated for additional value and the developer of that space would receive the rebate on the value increase. Kayla shared that this really is a smart growth tool because it renovates vacant and underutilized spaces that have existing infrastructure in order to create a denser living opportunity for those who want that type of living. This would then potentially open up single family homes within communities that are experiencing low housing availability. Another potential policy that the Kansas Main Street Program and multiple Kansas Main Street districts have been trying to develop is one where buildings that are chronically vacant would be charged a higher property tax or some sort of fee. The goal is to encourage owners to either resell the vacant property or reinvest in and revitalize the property. Once either of those solutions is done, then the property tax would go back down, or the fee would no longer be charged. Ultimately, the challenge is figuring out how to put teeth into it that make it truly effective, which is where the Department of Revenue would have to come in.

The interviewees also shared their thoughts on what they believed was most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space. This included spending time focusing on assets, understanding why buildings are vacant or becoming vacant, working on challenging issue areas, being more proactive as a community, and understanding your market such as what it will and will not support in relation to vacancies and business makeup.

Bob North's interview was an additional interview that took place at the recommendation of Kayla Savage because of his knowledge and experience with Rural Housing Incentive Districts (RHID's). Bob shared that RHID has existed for over 20 years and is a tool that allows cities and counties assist with the costs of housing infrastructure such as electricity, water, roads, and more. It was not a popular resource until around 10-15 years ago when it was first used in

the Fort Riley, KS area as well as took off in other places due to the recent housing crisis. Currently, there are almost 30 local government units with over 80 established RHID's. In recent years, the legislature decided to amend the RHID act in order to permit upper story projects located in the central business districts of rural communities. RHID now can be used to pay for building renovations and some vertical construction costs associated with the project. Ultimately, the revised act provides an opportunity to turn dilapidated and unused buildings that are at least 25 years old and located on Main Street/in downtown into assets for the community. It is made economically feasible for the developer who invests their own money because the property tax increment will ensure a reimbursement. There is already a considerable amount of interest in the program in relation to upper story housing in Main Street/downtown areas. It was said that there are already at least six communities that are currently working on or have completed upper story projects in downtown buildings with the help of this act.

While RHID helps revitalize parts of Main Street districts/downtowns, it also helps meet a growing need for housing opportunities that many Kansas communities are experiencing. According to Bob, they are also looking at using RHID for infill housing in Main Street/downtown areas as a means to create more downtown housing opportunities while also utilizing unused, vacant space. The goal as of right now is to allow RHID to construct new housing projects on vacant lots located between existing buildings. While RHID is not the only solution when it comes to residential opportunities on Main Street, it is a strong tool that is making a substantial difference.

The next three sections of this chapter will cover the interviews held with the three case study Main Street districts. The goal of these conversations was to gather key information on

what successful Main Streets in Kansas are currently doing within their districts to address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space.

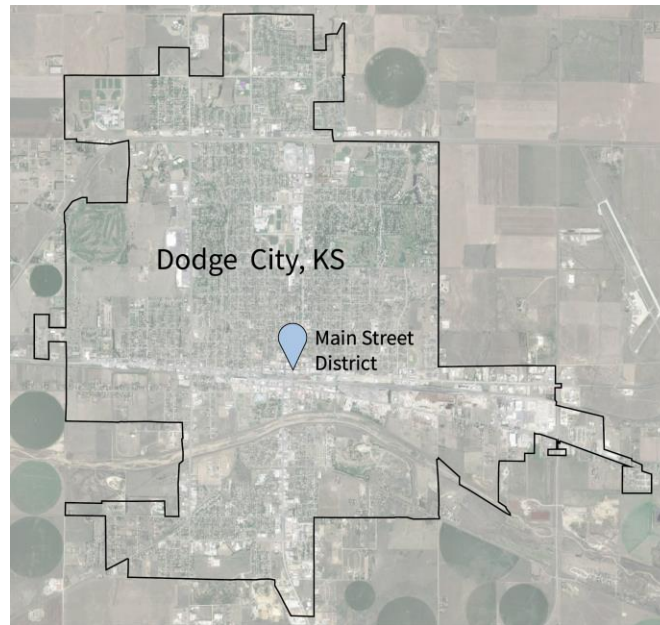
DODGE CITY MAIN STREET

For the interview at Main Street Dodge City, I talked with Coral Lopez, the Main Street Coordinator. We started by briefly discussing some of the history and the organizational makeup of Dodge City’s Main Street district. Below, an image of the district as well as a map showing where Dodge City’s Main Street district is located can be referenced. In 2010 Main Street Dodge City was established as a 501 c 6 nonprofit organization after worry developed over the future of their downtown and having to compete with new large-scale developments west of town. Main Street Dodge City is housed under economic development within the Dodge City/Ford County Development Corporation which requires a very strong public private partnership with the city, the county, and private businesses. This also allows Main Street Dodge City to take fees and other contributions from their members and put it all back into the organization as organizational funding to use for different initiatives related to the Kansas Main Street 4-point approach.

Figure 4.2: Downtown Dodge City, Kansas (Boyer, 2020).



Figure 4.3: Map showing the location of Dodge City KS' Main Street district.



The conversation then moved on to discuss the resources that Main Street Dodge City offers that may help address the issue of vacancies and underutilized space. When Main Street Dodge City was first established, the city realized that there were a lot of underutilized and neglected buildings located in the downtown area. The city decided to provide Main Street Dodge City with a \$50,000 allowance, which is funded by the tourism dollars that are received from the Why Not Dodge sales tax, for a building improvement type program. With this allowance a 2-part program was developed called the Downtown Revitalization Improvement Program, also known as DRIP. The first part of this program is a 1 to 1 match up to \$5,000 grant for the façade improvements of buildings within the district. This grant covers reroofing projects, replacing windows, installing an awning or signage, and other improvements needed on the outside of buildings. The second part of DRIP is a 0% interest loan that can be used to cover anything on the inside of buildings such as mechanical, electrical, structural, or flooring upgrades. This program has been helpful within downtown because a lot of buildings in the area

have been in a deplorable state which requires business owners and property owners to put more money into them. With the help of DRIP, needed improvements are easier to obtain.

Recently, within the past few years Main Street Dodge City has seen a growth in upper story development. They had an old event center located on an upper story that was converted into apartments. Before the project was even completed all units had already been signed for. The First National Bank building, which is a rather large building, is also experiencing upper story project development. A group of local developers and investors are wanting to renovate the first two floors as office spaces and then everything above that into higher scale downtown housing. Coral shared that they have seen a lot of interest from people wanting to live downtown because of the walkability, the quality of housing, and the close proximity to events. While Main Street Dodge City does not have a current program that specifically promotes upper story development or downtown housing, this shows how residential projects can be great ways to utilize unused space as well as get people into downtown or on Main Street. The biggest benefit that Main Street Dodge City has seen in result of these resources and projects is the continuous improvement to buildings.

When asked how the Main Street Dodge City organization learned of these different programs or initiatives, the response was that they have looked to other organizations and programs. You can learn from other Main Streets or organizations and what they have already done. In Coral Lopez's words, "There is no reason to reinvent the wheel, you can just make it more efficient" (C. Lopez, personal communication, December 14th, 2022). It was also asked what the interviewee thought was most important to focus on when addressing the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. Her response was to ensure that programs or resources are in place that can help property owners with building revitalization.

Without access to those types of assistance, buildings deteriorate or become neglected unless their owner has the time and the funds to do the renovations on their own. However, that is often difficult for small businesses.

One last point that was made during this interview was about property owners that leave their buildings intentionally vacant or utilize it for personal storage. This is common issue seen in many Main Street/downtown areas. It is believed that this challenge would require enforcement from the local municipality to address and prevent it. Ordinances rather than guidelines would need to be set in place due to the fact that ordinances have the authority to truly enforce the needed changes.

EMPORIA MAIN STREET

In this interview with Emporia Main Street I met with Casey Woods, the Executive Director. First, we talked about how and why the Emporia Main Street organization was established. In 1991 there was a downtown association of merchants that felt they were not getting the attention or assistance they needed. The area had a high vacancy rate and there was not much happening in relation to event planning, improvement, or development. This led the merchants that remained to look elsewhere for the support they needed. They had heard about the Kansas Main Street program as well as resources at the national level and decided that both were something they should pursue in order to help revitalize their downtown. Since then, the Emporia Main Street program has developed over 300 residential units in the downtown area and have had around 140 million dollars of reinvestment. Below or on the next page, a map showing the location of Emporia's Main Street district as well as a photo of the area are displayed.

Figure 4.4: Map showing the location of Emporia KS' Main Street district.

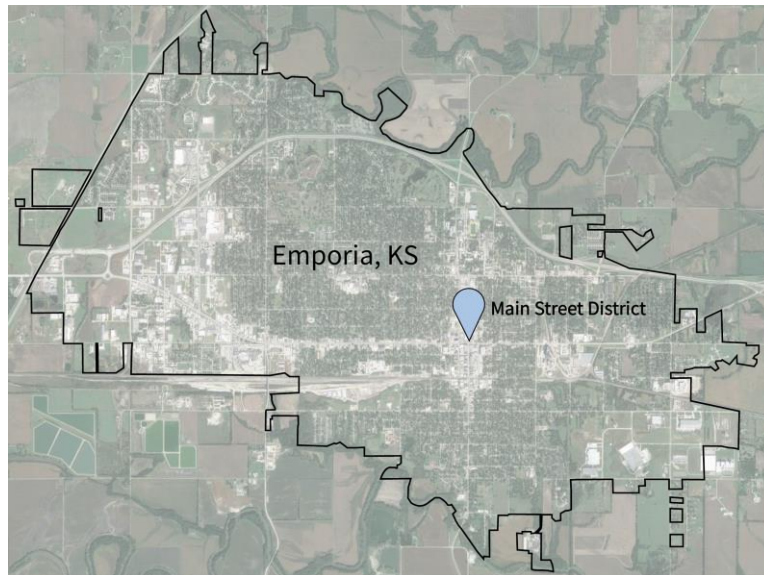


Figure 4.5: Emporia Main Street (Linenberger, 2022)



Next, we discussed the different resources offered by the Emporia Main Street organization that may help address and mitigate vacancies and underutilized space. In Emporia they have found that bringing more housing into the area has been an effective strategy. Casey shared that when people live on Main Street or in the downtown area, they are more likely to

spend 40% of their disposable income within that area. By living in a more walkable environment, people have less need to pay for gas or other transportation costs which leaves them with more disposable income to spend on Main Street. It was also pointed out that in rural communities, expanding outward can create liabilities for cities. The expansion of roads, sewer, water, etc. require upkeep and maintenance that a city may not be able to pay for later on. By increasing the city's density and utilizing downtown upper story space where there is existing infrastructure, it eliminates that liability that comes with outward expansion. RHID has been helpful in Emporia Main Street's upper story residential development and has been used to create 10 units that are now ready for move in.

A strategy that has specifically helped Emporia Main Street target vacancies is forming an investment group. The group is called TC2 (Town Country 2) and is made up of local architects, engineers, fundraisers, and accountants. They listed agents that all pooled their money and then held something similar to a shark tank for properties. People could give a pitch of their idea for the space and the investment group would decide whether they want to purchase and implement it or not. Within the past two years since TC2 was formed, they have taken on five projects either as a group or individuals from the group. This practice mainly focuses on preventing long-term vacancy within Emporia's Main Street district.

A few of Emporia's other resources also focus on business start up or development. The first is "Start Your Own Business Class" which is held every year in the fall in collaboration with the Small Business Development Center at Emporia State University. The goal of this class is to help people in the area who want to start their own business as well as expand or enhance their existing business. Another resource that is somewhat similar to the "Start Your Own Business Class" is Emporia Main Street's incubator space. This incubator space offers a singular tenant 6

months of free rent, then 6 months of reduced market rate rent, and then the final 6 months of closer to market rate rent which is when they should be looking for a more permanent space. It is a gradual process that prepares a business with the knowledge and security to be out on their own. The incubator space is also located next to the Emporia Main Street office which allows the organization to easily assist and support the new business when needed. One last resource that Emporia Main Street offers with a focus on business development is their fabrication lab. Having a fabrication lab on Main Street allows for individual business owners to create their own products and give themselves their own unique product mix. This in turn gives them a higher rate of survivability since the uniqueness draws people in and they no longer have to compete with those in the online shopping world. By having these three resources we have just covered, Emporia Main Street has its own start-up business inventory. Rather than relying on recruitment to fill a new vacancy they can look to those that have utilized the “Start Your Own Business Class” or the incubator space.

One last strategy that Emporia Main Street implemented was a chronically vacant property ordinance. In its first year it helped identify 41 properties that were sitting idle and vacant, not only in downtown but throughout Emporia. They were able to flip 39 of those properties to new ownership. Then in year two, one of the remaining owners of a chronically vacant property figured out there was no state procedure connected to the ordinance therefore the city could not force the properties to pay the fees. After that, the ordinance sort of died off. If there was a way to get state teeth behind chronically vacant building ordinances, vacancies within the state would decrease rapidly. Ultimately, this type of policy would require assistance from state legislature.

Emporia Main Street has experienced multiple benefits that these resources and strategies have brought to the district. With more people living in the downtown area, owners have extended business hours and extended days of operations. This has also resulted in more concentrated income within the district. Another benefit they have seen due to some of their projects or initiatives is an increase in the valuation of buildings located downtown which makes them a better investment for future investors. They have also been able to establish a sustainability within their business mix.

The conversation then moved on to discuss where Emporia Main Street learned of these strategies and practices. Casey shared that they attend trainings held by the state and national Main Street programs. Also, since Main Street is a national network, Emporia Main Street often talks to other Main Streets outside of their area about what they are doing. Emporia Main Street will look to communities that are similar in census profile and then do something that they call R&D, rip off and duplicate. If there is something working in a community elsewhere, they look at how it can be related to Emporia's Main Street and then convert it into something that they can try for themselves. Emporia Main Street also tries to be entrepreneurial whenever problems arise. They will identify assets and capitalize on what they have that may be unique to the area, but also figure out how to use it in a way that benefits downtown businesses. Casey also believes that community culture is vital when trying to lay a strong foundation for sustainability within a Main Street district.

HUTCHINSON MAIN STREET

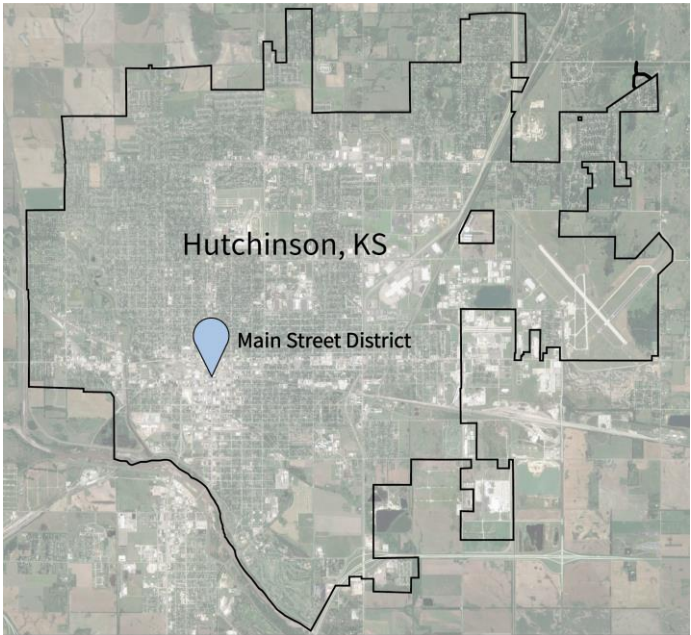
Downtown Hutchinson is housed under Hutchinson's Chamber of Commerce and was one of the first designated communities in the Kansas Main Street Program. For the interview with Downtown Hutchinson, I was able to meet with Lacie Janzen, the Economic Development and Downtown Manager. Towards the end of this interview Lacie also brought in the President

and CEO of Hutchinson’s Chamber of Commerce, Debra Teufel, to give her insights on what Hutchinson, KS has done to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within their downtown. Both of their responses will be discussed in this report. Below, a map showing the location of Hutchinson’s downtown area as well as a photo of the area can be referenced.

Figure 4.6: Downtown Hutchinson, Kansas (Hutchinson, 2023).



Figure 4.7: Map showing the location of Hutchinson KS’ Main Street district.



The conversation started with a review of the strategies and practices used within Downtown Hutchinson to address vacancies and underutilized space. One of the most helpful resources used is the Incentives Without Walls (IWW) loan fund they receive from the Kansas Main Street Program. Hutchinson, being one of the original designated Main Streets, was given a large amount of funds that the organization could then loan out to businesses interested in establishing themselves on Main Street. This loan was a three to one match, which means that the business owner would need to have three dollars in private funding to every one dollar of the loan money. It was also a revolving loan, thus as payments are made on current loans, the funds are replenished, and it can be loaned back out. Downtown Hutchinson was able to loan up to \$20,000 at 0% interest for 82 months. During Covid, Downtown Hutchinson was also able to use the IWW loan funds to offer several \$5,000 micro loans to businesses on Main Street. This micro loan was not restrictive, so people were able to use it to keep bills paid or use it towards other financial obstacles that occurred during the pandemic. Once businesses were back on their feet, they would pay back the loan. Overall, the micro loan initiative helped restore peace of mind through the uncertainty of that time.

In August of 2021, Upstairs Downtown held a workshop in Hutchinson, KS. They discussed code mitigation funds as well as best next steps for communities when it comes to upper story development. Understanding code can be difficult for business owners. Paying for all of the additional renovations required by code can also be expensive. This training workshop session allowed small business owners to learn more about the approach and process of upper story development. After the workshop, attendees were able to tour a handful of the existing loft spaces located in Hutchinson's downtown that had once been vacancies.

One last strategy that was brought up in conversation was partnering with local community foundations. Partnerships with Startup Hutch and the Community Foundation have been important in Downtown Hutchinson's success. Community Foundations are becoming drivers of development because they usually have wealth within them. Rather than just investing that money into the market and waiting on a return, they have realized that they can instead use those resources to partner with other community organizations to help facilitate projects and improvements. Some of the main benefits seen from these resources discussed by Downtown Hutchinson are a growth in their retail tax base, job creation, and really just getting people into the downtown area.

When asked what was believed to be the most important thing to focus on when addressing the threat of vacancies and underutilized space, Lacy shared that for her it was mindfulness of property owners. You may not agree with what they are doing with their building or the fact that they have left it vacant, but they are still the owner. There are numerous reasons as to why the owner could have chosen not to do anything yet. Alongside that, information sharing can be helpful in those situations. Spreading word about the different resources could catch the attention of some of those property owners and encourage them to take action. Debra believed that keeping a catalog of what properties you have, similar to a situation analysis of what is available, is another important practice to focus on. Then, you are better able to match those available or vacant buildings to business inquiries that come in.

GARDEN CITY MAIN STREET

The interview with Garden City's Main Street was structured slightly different since it is the application city for this research. The aim was to gather information on their struggles with vacancies as well as what practices and resources they may have already tried or have thought about utilizing. A map of the location of Garden City's Main Street district as well as an image

of Main Street can be seen below. I met with Janet Burr, the Executive Director at Downtown Vision in Garden City, KS because of her knowledge of the district and involvement within the district. Downtown Vision was established in 2004 as the corporate world started moving into Garden City, KS. A group of local Main Street businesses knew that they needed someone to champion the downtown area, and the city itself did not have the capacity to do that anymore. Once the Downtown Vision organization was created, they also decided to apply to be a part of the Kansas Main Street Program.

Figure 4.8: Map showing the location of Garden City, KS’ Main Street district.

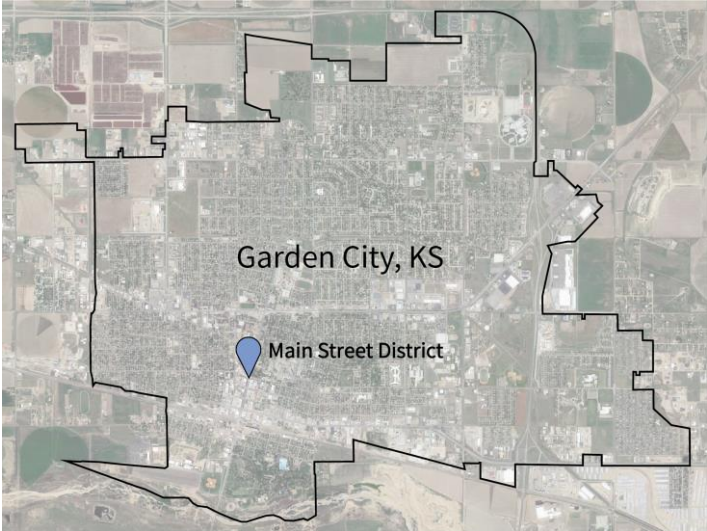


Figure 4.9: Main Street in Garden City, Kansas (Linenberger, 2021).



Garden City's Main Street has primarily struggled with vacancy in specific buildings. Some are too large for a small business just starting out and some cannot be touched due to historic preservation restrictions. For example, the Windsor Hotel is a historic landmark of Garden City, but it has continued to deteriorate under its historic preservation process as the owner does not have the funds to take on the restoration project. It has continued to sit vacant for years, even though they do run occasional tours. Another space that has proved to be troublesome is a large retail space that has been home to multiple smaller scale big box stores such as Stage and Gordmans. The building is much too big for small business but is not quite large enough to house the bigger box stores. There have been a few ideas about what to do with the building such as an event space. However, Downtown Vision does not have the funds or the approval for that type of project yet. Garden City's Main Street also has potential in their upper story spaces. As of right now there only a handful of residential loft spaces, but that could certainly be increased. According to Janet, a majority of building owners are hesitant to renovate for upper story housing due to the initial costs associated. She thinks that once owners see others success with upper story projects or once they learn more about current resources for these types of projects, the district may see a growth in their upper story development. Other vacancies within the district are a result of landlords either being unable or refusing to do something with their property.

Downtown vision has thought of some resources worth trying in Garden City's Main Street district. One that they are working on right now is learning how to better match new businesses with a space. Knowing who would best fit where would help with filling vacancies at a faster pace. Another strategy they have thought about is bringing more night life to the area. It is believed that with more nightlife in the area or even longer business hours, more property

owners would be willing to take the jump into upper story residential development. However, this has proved to be difficult since there are not any event spaces or entertainment type businesses on Main Street at the moment. This makes it challenging to keep people in the area past 8:00pm or 9:00pm. Janet also mentioned the possibility of implementing a business incubator for newly developing businesses. There is a lot of potential in the community, people just need the opportunity to feel like they have the ability to make it in a real storefront. One resource that has recently been implemented through Downtown Vision and their board is an IWW loan. You must be located within the downtown corridor to be eligible, and it is a 0% interest loan. This initiative was mainly focused on attracting new businesses to the area who could really use that assistance with their start-up. RHID was also briefly mentioned as a resource for upper story projects, however business owners are having a difficult time understanding the process as well as finding the initial funds needed to start. Downtown Vision has learned a lot from other Main Street districts in relation to program resources and viable solutions.

When asked what the most important thing to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space in Garden City's Main Street district, Janet had a few ideas. The first is spending time developing relationships with downtown landlords and realtors. She wants to take a more vested interest in that group of people just to share information on what possibilities there are for their building and to encourage progress. Another is just simply getting more people into the downtown area. It had come to her attention during an event they held last year that not many high school aged community members new about or had been to Main Street in Garden City, KS. This was both shocking and frightening but showed Downtown Vision that more needed to be done regarding promotion.

The conversation ended with a discussion of the importance of Main Street districts. It was shared that in a place like Main Street, you can truly get to know people and their business. People are nicer and actually greet you when you come into their store. Customers still want the personal touch/uniqueness in their products as well as those personal relationships. According to Janet, online platforms and corporate will never be able to replace Main Street or downtown.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Interviews were conducted at the state level as well as the city level that produced valuable information on processes and strategies that have helped mitigate the accumulation of vacancies and unused space. The figure shown on the following page compiles the data found through those interviews which includes the different strategies and practices utilized at the Kansas Main Street level and within the Dodge City, KS, Emporia, KS, and Hutchinson, KS Main Street districts.

Through this study there were many different practices shared such as IWW loans, RHID, residential projects, etc. It was also mentioned that additional help at the state level would provide additional help with this issue. The information gathered may help form both a recommendation list of current solutions for Main Street districts as well as a list of potential future solutions that could be implemented at the state level.

Table 4.1: Chart of mentioned resources and programs that shows which Main Street districts utilize or have utilized them to mitigate the issue of vacancies and unused space.

Resources/Programs Available	Main Street Dodge City	Emporia Main Street	Downtown Hutchinson
At the State Level			
The 4-Point Approach Framework	✓	✓	✓
Incentives Without Walls (IWW) Loan Program		✓	✓
Historic Economic Asset Lifeline (HEAL) Grant Program			
Upstairs Downtown Workshop			✓
Reimagined Spaces Grant (Through KCAIC)			
Rural Housing Incentive Districts (RHID)		✓	
At the City/Main Street District Level			
Downtown Revitalization Program (DRIP)	✓		
Residential Projects	✓	✓	✓
Forming Investment Groups		✓	
Start Your Own Business Class		✓	
An Incubator Space		✓	
Fabrication Lab for Business Owners		✓	
Chronically Vacant Property Ordinance		✓	
Partnering with Community Foundations			✓

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to determine what strategies and practices best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Kansas Main Street districts. Through interviews with Main Street directors, it was found that there are multiple strategies and practices at both the state and local levels that may help with this issue. Some help with façade improvements, building renovations and preventing building dilapidation. This can help attract new business owners as well as assist them with the improvements needed in a formerly neglected space. Others help with business start-up and creating an inventory of new businesses that have the potential to fill an empty space. Having connections with new local entrepreneurs can make the process of finding tenants to fill available spaces much easier. There are also trainings and workshops aligned with the Kansas Main Street Program's 4-point approach that are made to help Kansas Main Street districts address issues such as vacancies more effectively.

While most of these strategies or practices do help mitigate accumulation of vacancies, they do not directly solve the large challenge of vacancies and underutilized space in downtown areas by themselves. They may require other factors to be in place first such as funding, education or training, support of building owners, etc. and they may only address one or two vacancies at a time. Some of these strategies and practices also primarily focus on the appearance or condition of the building and not necessarily the emptiness. While this does prepare a vacant space for new tenants, other action may need to be taken to find those tenants. In other words, some of these strategies and practices would be best utilized in combination with another. For example, a Main Street district could use funds from a grant or loan program to update vacant spaces while also holding a class or training similar to "Start Your Own Business Class" in

Emporia. Then once the improvements to the properties are done, they would have an inventory of new businesses to potentially fill those renovated properties.

On the policy and legislative side of things, there is room for improvement. Information gathered from the interview process showed that multiple Main Street districts are interested in implementing an ordinance that would prohibit property owners from leaving their space chronically vacant or using it as storage. This has been attempted in Emporia, KS, at the city level, however, it was found that it would require state authority behind the ordinance in order for it to actually work. If an ordinance with state teeth behind it was created, it is believed that the number of vacancies within downtown areas in Kansas would significantly decrease. I personally believe that this is the next step that needs to be taken in attempt to solve the issue of vacancies and unused space in Main Street districts. An ordinance created at the state level is the only potential solution found in this study that would directly address the issue of vacancies and underutilized space as well as collectively help all Kansas Main Street communities with this issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there were multiple strategies and practices found to help with this issue, I cannot pinpoint any that completely solve the widespread issue of vacancies and underutilized space in downtown areas. This is because I believe it is not a “one size fits all” solution. What works in one community may not work in another. Therefore, while all of these resources have proved to be helpful, each Main Street district needs to find and utilize what works best for them in regard to addressing vacancies. The following recommendations are derived from the research above. At the city level, they aim to promote general actions that can be taken in any Main Street district when working towards mitigating vacancies and underutilized space. At the state level,

the recommendations made are based on gaps found between state and city levels as well as needs discussed in interviews with Main Street district directors/coordinators.

List of recommendations at the city/Main Street district level:

- Implement a Main Street program or office if your community does not have one.
Having a program or organization with a passionate director or leader to help support and lead the district is key when wanting to develop a strong Main Street. Without a program or director, it is much harder to address issues such as vacancies within a Main Street district since there is no one primarily focused and constantly working on those issues. A city office itself usually does not have the capacity to manage Main Street on its own, which is why it is crucial to have a separate office or organization.
- Understand your market on Main Street and what your community needs. It is important for Main Streets to know what their market will and will not support so that when a property becomes vacant, they are aware of what appropriate business types will be successful in that space. The more knowledge one has on their market and what their Main Street community is able to support, the better informed they are when making decisions on how to use space when it becomes available. Having this knowledge will also help prevent business failure and falling into a viscous cycle of properties becoming vacant every few years.
- Advocate for and assist with small business start-up. City offices as well as Main Street programs/districts can all advocate for small business start-up. However, there are some specific actions that can be taken to assist with the process. For example, implementing an incubator space on Main Street to help businesses

learn how to manage a brick-and-mortar store front. Or trainings for local entrepreneurs could be offered to teach the skills and knowledge needed when owning a business or storefront. By doing these things, a Main Street community will start to build a new business inventory that can be referenced when wanting to fill available space.

- Main Street districts should find and create local partnerships. Forming partnerships with community organizations can bring attention to the district and provide access to helpful resources. For example, Downtown Hutchinson has partnered with their local Community Foundation which has provided assistance with project and improvement funding. Partnerships can help drive different types of development within downtown which brings multiple benefits to the district.
- Look into and encourage housing opportunities on Main Street. Upper story residential developments have become popular within downtown areas and provide multiple benefits. When people live on Main Street, they are likely to spend more time and money within the district which allows businesses to extend their hours and can increase the amount of income concentrated in the area. Housing projects in downtown areas also provide the opportunity to help address the current statewide housing issue. So, while residential projects on Main Street provide benefits directly to its district, they may also help the city as a whole by offering new housing options in a time of need.
- Support the implementation of a state chronically vacant property ordinance. This type of ordinance would prevent property owners from leaving their space vacant for long periods of time or using it as personal storage. Those spaces can then be

inhabited by actual businesses which improves the appearance and vitality of the district. While there is talk about wanting an ordinance that enforces restrictions on vacancies, it has not been developed at the state level yet. It will require support from cities and local Main Streets programs/organizations as well as a partnership between the Kansas Main Street Program and the state legislature.

These city level recommendations may also be referenced as a best practice list for the application Main Street district in Garden City, KS. As Downtown Vision in Garden City begins to look for new ways to address vacancies and underutilized space, these strategies are a great place for them to start based on their needs and concerns.

Recommendations at the state level:

- Implement a chronically vacant property ordinance. This type of ordinance would benefit most if not all Main Street communities in Kansas. Property owners would no longer be allowed to leave their buildings vacant for years at a time nor use them as storage units. This ultimately would allow cities and their Main Street districts to gain more control over the issue of vacancies and underutilized space. Previously vacant properties can then be turned into new businesses that benefit the downtown community economically and socially. However, the creation of this type of ordinance would need to be taken on or led by the state since cities do not have the authority to enforce a fee or penalty. With the backing of state legislature, a chronically vacant property ordinance would have the teeth needed to truly make a difference.
- Provide guidance or training on new resources. A comment made during the interview process was that learning about new resources such as RHID and

understanding how to utilize them correctly can sometimes be difficult for communities or business owners that do not have prior knowledge or experience with that specific type of program. While the Kansas Main Street Program can hold trainings for its certified districts, it may be helpful if they were to provide some sort of assistance that can be available to all Main Street districts that want or need to utilize these newly developed resources.

LIMITATIONS

Initially, the goal of this research was to focus on identifying the best approach to redeveloping or renovating vacant and unused spaces within Main Street districts. This would be found through interviewing Kansas Main Street districts and learning what strategies and practices they utilize to address the issue of vacancies and underutilized space. While conducting interviews, I found that there were different strategies used throughout the three case study Main Street districts. While these strategies proved to be helpful in those specific districts when addressing vacancies, it also revealed that there is not a universal solution to this issue. A generalized list of recommendations could be formed based on the basic needs of a Main Street or downtown area when addressing the challenge of vacancies and underutilized space. However, for more specific solutions, a Main Street district will need to find what works best for them whether that is a Downtown Revitalization Program (DRIP) or a business incubator space and so on.

The research I collected was informative, but I could have been more exhaustive in my search which resulted in a methodological limitation. Interviews could have been extended and more secondary questions could have been asked in addition to the primary list. If this study was to be performed again, I would attempt to be more thorough in my interview questions. Choosing different case study Main Street districts could have also provided different solutions for

addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. Studying Main Streets with a large number of vacancies would have provided different results since they would have a different point of view on the issue. A mixture of large and small communities or doing separate studies for small and large communities would also produce different findings as they are typically organized and function differently. However, not every certified Main Street district in the state of Kansas could be interviewed for this study.

NEXT STEPS

While this study has helped uncover a significant amount of information relating to vacancy accumulation and unused space within Main Street districts, there are some next steps that may be taken. Sharing this information with Kansas Main Street communities would be a good place to start. Having the recommendation list would help Main Street communities be better informed of different practices that may help their district with this particular issue. They can then figure out what works best for their community and work towards establishing their own local programs and resources.

Giving legislators a slight push towards creating a chronically vacant property ordinance would be another step that could be taken. As mentioned, there is a strong desire for a state ordinance that would prevent property owners from leaving their spaces chronically vacant. Getting this information to legislators and state leaders would make them aware of the issue and the need for authoritative action. Giving legislators a slight push would be another step that could be taken.

One last step that could be taken in order to further this research would be to talk to other Main Street programs and districts that are located in different states. It was mentioned in a few interviews that district directors look at what other places are doing, even in different states. While this issue does not have a one size fits all solution, looking at what is occurring in other

states' Main Street programs and districts could bring about ideas that no one in Kansas has thought of or attempted yet.

SUMMARY

While this study had its own limitations, I was able to find a substantial amount of information on different ways to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. By learning of practices and programs that current Kansas Main Street districts utilize, a list of informative recommendations was created. This list can now be used by other Kansas Main Street districts as well as districts located in other states that struggle with chronic vacancies and unused space.

REFERENCES

- Branco, A. (2006). *Main street revitalization* (dissertation).
- Boyer, C. (2020). *Downtown Dodge City, Kansas* [Photograph]. Flatland.
<https://flatlandkc.org/news-issues/in-grip-of-pandemic-kansas-meatpacking-workers-say-were-right-next-to-each-other/>
- Business Incubator*. (2023). Emporia Main Street. Retrieved February 16, 2023, from
<https://emporiainstreet.com/programs/business/entrepreneur-incubator/>
- Burr, J. (2022, November 21). Personal communication [personal interview].
- Gibson, H., Zurcher, M., & Wisemiller, T. (2020). Beyond the façade: Layering downtown spillover investment. *Community Development*, 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2020.1837195>
- Governor Laura Kelly signs bipartisan legislation to aid Kansas's economic recovery*. Kansas Department of Commerce. (2021, April 15). Retrieved February 27, 2022, from
<https://www.kansascommerce.gov/2021/04/governor-laura-kelly-signs-bipartisan-legislation-to-aid-kansas-economic-recovery/>
- Hutchinson/Reno County Chamber of Commerce. (2023). *Shopping*. Hutch Chamber.
<https://www.hutchchamber.com/downtown/shop>
- Janzen, L. (2023, January 18). Personal communication [personal interview].
- Kemp, Roger L. (2000). *Main street renewal: A handbook for citizens and public officials*. McFarland.
- Lopez, C. (2022, December 14). Personal communication [personal interview].

- Linenberger, R. (2022). *Emporia Main Street* [Photograph].
- Linenberger, R. (2021). *Garden City, KS' Main Street* [Photograph].
- Mannette, A. (2021, Aug 18). How loft apartments could help Kansas towns revitalize their Main Streets. *TCA Regional News* <https://er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/how-loft-apartments-could-help-kansas-towns/docview/2562060150/se-2?accountid=11789>
- Mitchell, P., & Abernathy, C. (2014, November). Main street pursuits: how to make downtown the place to be. *Public Management*, 96(10), 11+.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A388663364/AONE?u=ksu&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=bc91d970>
- Mowry, M. J. (2003). Reclaiming MAIN STREET. *Business NH Magazine*, 20(3), 16.
- North, B. (2023, January 25). Personal communication [personal interview].
- Robertson, K. A. (1999). Can small-city downtowns remain viable? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 65(3), 270–283. <https://www.proquest.com>
- Rypkema, D. D. (1987). *Economic development on main street*. National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation.
- Savage, K. (2022, November 10). Personal communication [personal interview].
- Seitnater, J. (2014, Apr 30). Lofty plans for downtown Hutch evolve: Upper-floor space on Main, Wiley plan among revitalization endeavors. *The Hutchinson News* <https://er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lofty-plans-downtown-hutch-evolve/docview/1519852006/se-2?accountid=11789>

Sewell, S. (2022, November 14). Personal communication [personal interview].

Squazzoni, F. (2008). Local economic development initiatives from the bottom-up: The role of Community Development Corporations. *Community Development Journal*, 44(4), 500–514. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn009>

Start Your Own Business Class. (2023). Emporia Main Street. Retrieved February 16, 2023, from <https://emporiainmainstreet.com/programs/business/start-your-own-business/>

Talen, E., & Jeong, H. (2019). What is the value of ‘main street’? framing and testing the arguments. *Cities*, 92, 208–218. <https://www.proquest.com>

Texas Historical Commission. (1986). *The Texas Main Street Handbook: A Practical Guide to Small Town Revitalization*.

The approach. The Approach - Main Street America. (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2022, from <https://www.mainstreet.org/mainstreetamerica/theapproach>

Tux Turkel, S. W. (2004, Mar 14). DOWNTOWNS LOOK UP; Maine communities want to improve upper-story access because the space above storefronts - ideal for offices and apartments - often is underused.: [FINAL Edition]. *Portland Press Herald* <https://er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/downtowns-look-up-maine-communities-want-improve/docview/277239276/se-2?accountid=11789>

Upper Floor Housing Development. (n.d.) Upstairs Downtown. Retrieved February 14, 2023, from <https://www.upstairsdowntown.com/>

Woods, C. (2022, November 11). Personal communication [personal interview].

Appendix A - Main Points of Background Research

Table A.1: List of organized information on main points of background research.

Study Author (Date)	Area Investigated	Research Method	Issue/ Relationship	Findings
Alice Mannette (2021)	Primarily Hutchinson, KS; other small KS towns	Interview/Case Study	Utilization of upper story spaces	Upper story utilization can be a huge benefit to downtowns/Main Streets.
Anthony Branco (2006)	Borough of Hellertown; City of Bethlehem	Studying the Main Street ideology/Questionnaire/ Case Studies	Main Street Revitalization	The vision of the Main Street ideology has been successful.
Charles Abernathy & Patricia Mitchell (2014)	Main Streets in North Carolina	Case Studies	Downtown/Main Street Revitalization	Supporting Main Street development can build a community's downtown vitality & downtown revitalization is an incremental change leading to a community's future.
Donovan Rypkema (1987)	Economic development for Main Streets	Guiding framework	Econ. Development & Vacancies/revitalization	A complete guide to economic development within Main Street districts.
Emily Talen & Hyesun Jeong (2019)	Chicago, Illinois	Comparing Main Streets to chain store blocks	Importance/viability of Main Streets and downtowns	Blocks with Main Street qualities were stronger in terms of density, diversity, and stability associated with their surrounding block groups.
Flaminio Squazzoni (2008)	Oakland, California; Wiscasset, Maine	Studied two case studies	Economic development of Main Streets	A collective action framework that produces social capital and also aligns the goals of those involved in production of goods, ensures a community will be able to better utilize important social and economic resources.
Huston Gibson, Micky Zurcher & Tash Wisemiller (2020)	Helena, Montana; Kalispell, Montana; Anaconda, Montana	Case Studies, façade grant comparisons	Economic development of Main Streets	Downtown façade improvement grants to generate spillover effects on Main

				Street including various economic benefits.
Jim Seitnater (2014)	Hutchinson, KS	Interview/Case Study	Utilization of upper story spaces	Projects have proven to be successful in solving housing issues and strengthening the downtown economy.
Kansas Department of Commerce (2021)	Bill SB 90	Case study	Utilization of upper story spaces & Main Street revitalization	The Rural Housing Incentive District Act provides opportunity for cities to capture valuation increases on housing developments and upper-story housing downtown for needed improvements.
Kent A. Robertson (1999)	Auburn, New York; Bangor, Maine; Carson City, Nevada; Texarkana, Texas/Arkansas; Wausau, Wisconsin	Surveys	Importance/viability of Main Streets and downtowns	Yes, small city downtowns can remain viable with key policy implications.
Linda Flory & Kirstin A. Mullen (1986)	Texas Main Streets	Guiding framework/Case studies	Vacancies and revitalization	A framework for successful Main Street districts.
Main Street America (2022)	Revitalization approach for Main streets	Guiding framework/Case studies	Main Street Revitalization	4-point approach to Main Street Revitalization: proven to be successful.
Matthew J. Mowry (2003)	Jaffrey, NH; Dover, NH; Durham, NH	Case Studies	Vacancies and revitalization	Main Street programs are an important component to revitalization efforts (such as addressing vacancies).
Roger L. Kemp (2000)	Various locations in the United States	Case Studies/guiding framework	Downtown/Main Street Revitalization	Overall, a guide/framework for Main Street revitalization and development.
Tux Turkel (2004)	Gardiner, ME; Waterville, ME	Interview/Case Study	Utilization of upper story spaces	Developing upper floors is a key component to revitalization.

Appendix B - Interviewees and Interview Questions

Table B.1: List of initial interviewees.

Name	Position/Role in District or Program	District/Program
Casey Woods	Executive Director	Emporia Main Street
Coral Lopez	Main Street Coordinator	Dodge City Main Street
Lacie Janzen	Downtown Manager	Hutchinson Downtown
Liandro Rodriguez	Interim Executive Director	Garden City Downtown Vision
Kayla Savage	Community Development Division Director	Kansas Department of Commerce/Kansas Main Street Program
Scott Sewell	Main Street Program Director	Kansas Department of Commerce/Kansas Main Street Program

Interview Questions – Kansas Main Street and other possible resource programs

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we start, I wanted to ask whether it is okay if I record our conversation today? I will also write down short notes as we talk and will specify if I plan to take direct quotes. *

*The purpose of this interview is to find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. This information can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, let me know and we will skip over it. *

Name:

Name of program:

Date & Time:

- 1) How long have you worked in/with this particular program?
- 2) What is some brief history of this program?

- 3) Are vacancies and underutilized space (including upper stories) common issues within Main Street districts in Kansas?
- 4) What resources does this program provide to help mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?
- 5) Have many Main Street districts utilized these resources? If so, did they prove to be helpful?
- 6) What are some of the overall benefits that these resources have brought to Main Street districts?
- 7) Are there any new resources or ideas you have thought about implementing to help Main Streets with vacancies and underutilized space?
- 8) What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?
- 9) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about this program in relation to vacancies and underutilized space?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about this program in general?

*Thank you again for meeting with me today. As stated before, this information will be used to help find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. It can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. The interview recording taken today will be stored on my computer under a secure password to ensure only I and the PI will have access to it. *

Please feel free to reach out if you have any additional questions or concerns about this research or report. *

Interview Questions – Case Study Main Street Districts (Emporia, Hutchinson, Dodge City)

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we start, I wanted to ask whether it is okay if I record our conversation today? I will also write down short notes as we talk and will specify if I plan to take direct quotes. *

*The purpose of this interview is to find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. This information can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, let me know and we will skip over it. *

Name:

Location of district:

Date & Time:

- 1) How long have you worked in/with this particular Main Street district?
- 2) What is some brief history of this Main Street district?
- 3) Has the district struggled with vacancies and underutilized space (including upper stories) in the past? If so, for how long?
- 4) Have you utilized strategies and practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space that have proved to be helpful or successful within your Main Street district?
- 5) What have these helpful/successful strategies and practices done within this Main Street district?
- 6) How did you learn of these strategies and practices?
- 7) What do business owners and community members think of these strategies and practices and how they have affected the district?
- 8) What are the overall benefits that these strategies and practices have brought to the district?
- 9) What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your experience with vacancies and underutilized space within your Main Street district?
- 11) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your Main Street district in general?

*Thank you again for meeting with me today. As stated before, this information will be used to help find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. It can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. The interview recording taken today will be stored on my computer under a secure password to ensure only I and the PI will have access to it. *

Please feel free to reach out if you have any additional questions or concerns about this research or report. *

Interview Questions – Application City (Garden City)

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we start, I wanted to ask whether it is okay if I record our conversation today? I will also write down short notes as we talk and will specify if I plan to take direct quotes. *

*The purpose of this interview is to find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. This information can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering, let me know and we will skip over it. *

Name:

Location of district:

Date & Time:

- 1) How long have you worked in/with this particular Main Street district?
- 2) What is some brief history of this Main Street district?
- 3) How long has the district struggled with vacancies and underutilized space (including upper stories)?
- 4) Have you thought about utilizing any specific strategies and practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within your Main Street district?
- 5) What do you envision those strategies and practices doing within this Main Street district?
- 6) How did you learn of those strategies and practices?
- 7) Have you talked to business owners and community members about what they think could be done to help with vacancies and underutilized space within the district?
- 8) What benefits are you hoping these potential strategies and practices will bring to the district?
- 9) What do you believe is going to be the most important thing to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within this Main Street district?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your experience with vacancies and underutilized space within your Main Street district?
- 11) Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your Main Street district in general?

*Thank you again for meeting with me today. As stated before, this information will be used to help find what strategies have been used or what strategies are needed to best address the threat of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts. It can then be used to help other Main Street districts with these same development issues. The interview recording taken

today will be stored on my computer under a secure password to ensure only I and the PI will have access to it. *

Please feel free to reach out if you have any additional questions or concerns about this research or report. *

Appendix C - Interview Transcripts

Interview with Kayla Savage (11/10/22)

How long have you worked in/with this particular program?

Sure so as I like to tell people I drank the Main Street Kool-Aid a long time ago and I started as an intern with the Emporia Main Street program back in 2005 and so as a student I you know interned with the organization there and worked primarily on the fun stuff over the summer which was a lot of the promotion part if you will the you know the Main Street has the four point approach so worked on promotion but then also had a project of updating our building inventory and so that was a more uh you know some people might think of it being kind of dry but uh obviously downtown real estate is very important you know for a multitude of things you know from the from the fabric to the you know how many buildings are possible for renovation and you know what's the space like what's the square footage that sort of thing so that's another project that I worked on during that time then I continued to intern through the regular semesters and worked on a lot of events and promotions and things and then eventually served as interim executive director and then was hired as the executive director my last semester of college there when the previous director had left to actually go to the state Main Street organization back when it was it was still around so did that and worked with them until 2009 so really was there you know about four years and then moved on to other opportunities elsewhere outside of Emporia, went back to school got my masters in community development graduated in 17 and then the Kansas Department of Commerce was hiring the community development division director position in the spring of 2020 and I was interested and interested in you know returning to both Kansas Main Street but also helping to develop and direct programs that are focused on community development and so that's when I kind of returned to working directly with Main St. so Kansas Main Street is one of the programs in the division that I provide direction to and so I you know meet with the director of the Main Street organization also you know oftentimes have interactions with some of the organizations and just you know looking for ways that we can help you know support and enhance local programs and so yeah that's my experience with Main Street.

What is some brief history of the Kansas Main Street program?

So brief history and Scott could probably send you the written history on it you know it was around for 27 years before it was actually dismantled in 2012 and so it's always been with the Department of Commerce in some form or function and then um you know it was brought back in 2019 by the current administration and the administration that will continue for the next four years.

Are vacancies and underutilized space including upper stories common issues within Main St. districts in Kansas?

I would say yes in several of them there are some communities that are anomalies where maybe they don't have vacancies in their upper stories or their you know their first story which is great and fantastic and you know the goal is to continue that to have you know healthy makeup so I would say that the three communities that you've chosen they definitely have had vacancy in upper story and you know first story so it's you know fairly common the vacancy rate at any given time in any Main Street community is gonna flux somewhat which can be contributed by a number of factors whether it's the you know current economy or the local economy or let's say you know you don't have a robust transition planning effort locally or you know downtown building investment strategy if you don't have those kinds of tools in the toolbox that can be really challenging to address vacancies and then that's where the chronic vacancies become you know multiyear issues or can become multiyear issues.

What resources does the Kansas Main Street program provide to help mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

Incentive wise there's an existing program with existing Main Street communities called the incentives without walls program that's a revolving loan program Main Street is also a partner on a historic economic asset lifeline grant program called heal and that is a grant program that provides funding assistance, matching dollar funding assistance for buildings that are you know vacant or underutilized but they need some dollars to get them back up and running and really the end goal is they have to be able to demonstrate that the building is going to be utilized by a business and inhabited by business at the end of the project and those projects have to be in downtown Districts and this is just the second year that we have administered that program and so we're you know looking at ways that we can provide more state dollars, sometimes federal programs have a lot of requirements to them and so that's another opportunity or another way that we can provide some investment or opportunities the other thing that Main Street does and can do is provide resources to designated communities that they maybe otherwise wouldn't have sought out themselves so a great example is we have now offered a workshop called upstairs downtown two years in a row and that was all about convening technical assistance experts and professionals who have the information and the knowledge to share with these property owners and downtown directors of all of the solutions that exist for upper story, rehabbing upper story properties in downtown and that's everything from codes to existing building codes to you know here are some technical pieces you might want to be aware of this is what does need a sprinkler this is what doesn't need a sprinkler system so that was a wildly successful workshop the last couple of years that you know Main Street was the convener of that and provided a lot of resources during that event and it was very well utilized by the people you know who attended, so there's those kinds of things that we you know we invest in and then there's the policy side of things where we can work with you know our legislative director at commerce and our economic development partners and Main St. organizations and others in the legislature to develop policies that you know really help advance priorities for downtown districts but also things to help address vacancies and there's been two kind of monumental actually there's been more than two but the recent one that commerce is responsible for is the rural housing incentive district or

RHID and that's what I mentioned to you that Bob North is the expert on he's the godfather of it and that one in 2021 there was an effort to get the Senate bill 90 passed and it did pass to allow the upper story redevelopment for housing in downtown buildings and so essentially it's a tax incentive for developers and you take the value of the upper story space before the project takes place assess that assuming it's going to be a lot less than when the renovations are done and then they you know make all the investments to renovate the space for upper story housing and at the end of the year when property taxes are due you know and the property is then reevaluated for the additional value essentially that developer then gets the rebate on the increase from the original time it was evaluated to then after all of the you know changes or investments have been made and that's good for up to 25 years and it gives what it does is it gives a mechanism for local communities to be able to incentivize development for those upper stories for housing and the reason why it's focused on housing is not only because the vehicle was RHID but also because we've seen in a lot of communities where these underutilized spaces these vacant or underutilized spaces really are just a waste of real estate and the opportunity to create them turn them into a useful space is often you know that RHID can be a catalyst for that it can get that ball in motion it may not be the only thing that they're gonna look at you know depending on the size of the development there might be some other you know housing programs that the developer might need to look at you know with a different kind of IRB industrial revenue bonds and that's another program at large scale developments could take you know could take advantage of and balance that also with RHD historic tax credits that's another one and so there's a multitude of tools again as I mentioned earlier you know our role is sometimes to provide those tools or see where we can provide tools or potentially provide tools that assist local communities with those kinds of investments and it's not you know a one partner situation it's these programs are you know created to really leverage the local investment as well and so local banks are incredibly important to these developers to help them come up with that financial capital that they might need in addition to you know because obviously it's a rebate it's not like they're getting cash in hand it's a rebate of their property valuation for RHID.

One other thing that I would mention about the power of like RHID and upper story and enhancing upper story development is that it also helps it's really a smart growth tool and what I mean by that is it revitalizes existing space where there is existing infrastructure to create more of that higher density kind of living opportunity but also you know in the downtown district where there's essential services and goods for people who not just want to live downtown but that it makes sense for them to live downtown and then if you can open up those spaces as potential housing opportunities for current you know residents say they're you know empty nesters and they want lower maintenance kind of living don't need all the extra space that a single family home might have you know that could mean that their house that they previously lived in for the last 20 years or 30 years whatever it might open up then can be available to families who do need a single family home and so you create a net gain then especially in the building economy that we're in right now with supply chain challenges and inflation challenges then you're looking at more of a rehab and home maintenance issue when you know that housing types become available because there's been other you know apartment style or loft style housing that has been made available to those that are ready for that so it's you know it's creating those options you know for the people that live in your community but also for how your community is gonna grow.

Have many Main Street districts within Kansas utilized these resources and if so have they proven to be helpful in the majority of those Main Street districts?

Well I know that for years a lot of the Main Street communities have utilized that IWW program that I mentioned earlier we did have some Main Street communities that were recipients of the HEAL funds that I mentioned as well and then you know RHID is so new with the upper story development that the most recent and first to be expected to be first completed project is in Emporia and so it's great that you're talking to Casey he'll be able to tell you about that and I actually just got a text from him earlier today about that housing project being ready so they're one of the first but yes there's definitely been communities that have been taking advantage of that and I look forward to seeing a lot more projects resulting from that investment.

What are some of the overall benefits that these resources have brought to Main Street districts?

I mean beyond the Kansas Main Street program one of the four programs that our Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission makes investments in is really related to it's not just for downtown but there's a lot of downtown spaces or buildings that will apply for the funds but it's called the reimagined spaces grant and it's meant really for programming but also utilizing buildings that have been disinvested or abandoned or like for lack of a better word vacant and leveraging them for creative arts and cultural programming for the community and so that can look like everything from an art show to a oratory performance that you know is a one-time thing to an alley that is activated by public art that stays up for an extended period of time and so that really jives really well with Main Street in fact there was a collaborative effort between the Main Street organization and KCIC which is also in the community development division to work together on basically a main street version of that funding and then there were some there were some takers on it and it's been a good incentive to have as well.

It's through KCIC mainly but Scott could speak to it a little bit more I mean and it can go as far as you know like creative placemaking as well you know of course there's been a large investment in murals by KCIC and also the office of rural prosperity as well they have a tendency to focus on the smaller communities that may not have access to some of the Main Street resources but there's just a lot of that interest in public art and how you know creative placemaking can really reactivate is the word we always use activate or reactivate a space that traditionally maybe was used for something else and then when you reactivate it for a new use it creates some interest and then maybe even gets some people in the door that have never been in there before and then who knows maybe it results in you know somebody then purchasing the empty building or the empty space for you know their next business.

Are there any new resources or ideas you've thought about implementing to help Main Streets with vacancies and underutilized space?

We've collectively been approached by some organizations actually Emporia Main Street is one of them about how can the state which would be a Department of Revenue it's not just commerce it would have to be Department of Revenue that would accept like it's basically a backward

property tax incentive or disincentive or decentive if you will so basically charging more property tax for those buildings that are chronically vacant in order to encourage you know basically resale or reinvestment in those properties so that if they are no longer vacant then the tax actually becomes less or maybe it's or maybe it's a fee you know maybe it's a fee on top of which is probably more realistic that's not a bill or policy that commerce would be able to carry it would have to be something that you know the department of revenue but I am sure that when you talk to Casey he's gonna talk to you all about it because it's definitely something that they basically tried at the local level and it was wildly successful, when it came to actually getting people to pay that was the challenge but just the idea that there would be a fee they were able to get lots of buildings to change ownership and which then resulted in basically what they were trying to do which was to get the vacancies resolved so you know the first time it actually worked but now the challenge is how do you put teeth in it that makes it even more useful.

What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

I think the idea is to focus on, it's time well spent to focus on assets to address what the needs are and it's hard to determine one particular thing because vacancy is more than just an empty building there are systemic issues that result from a chronically vacant building it creates additional disinvestment or it can and so focusing on assets it would be pouring more investment into uh combating buildings from becoming vacant in the first place and understanding why those buildings are becoming vacant is it because there's no succession plan is it because property values are so low that somebody can buy an empty building cheaper to turn it into a storage unit than if they had to actually pay for a storage unit so I focus on the assets and how you use the carrots but then also continue to work on those challenging issue areas where you know what is it from a system standpoint that uh contributes to the chronic vacancy and combat those issues wherever possible so is it you know a robust succession plan is it making sure that people have access to capital so that they continue to make investments in their building and then they don't become you know this just pit of despair where there's no going back from you know a building being vacant you know social assets looking at you know making vacancy more than just oh that building's been empty for a while you know on an individual level or that's too bad but maybe being more proactive as a community which is where Main Street really comes in you know help their design committee their organization committee their business development people you know when those committees get involved and can get engaged with building owners or try to get engaged with building owners that can be a really powerful tool for a local Main Street community.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about this program in general that maybe we haven't talked about yet?

I mean I think the thing for me I mentioned at the beginning you know maybe bring it full circle is you know that I drank the Main Street Kool-Aid a long time ago and I think the reason why is because the approach is incremental and it is designed in such a way that it provides a framework that really any community any size community that wants to commit or make the commitment to

make their downtown you know thrive that they can leverage the four point approach and you know a lot of times their communities might be stronger in one area or another but it really does provide a very useful framework that gives the opportunity for incremental change and improvement when it's applied successfully and so there's the technical side of Main Street and then we've spent a lot of time talking today about the incentive tools that can then be leveraged and in you know pairing with the Main Street approach and that to me is the difference because that's where community development, community engagement you know business development, economic development, community pride there's kind of this inner section that happens with Main Street and you know I tell people my whole career has been community development and I didn't even know community development was a thing at that time and I think that it's because I value place I value community and I value you know local business growth that can also be paired with you know larger business growth and employment and workforce and Main Street is all part of that and it can be applied as broadly or as narrowly as a community wants so that's what I would add about main street.

Interview with Scott Sewell (11/14/22)

How long have you worked with Kansas Main Street?

Well, most recently I've been here just right about three years I started in late October of 2019 so it's just uh three years and a couple weeks actually but I was previously the assistant director of this program back in the mid-90s that was here for just about three years and then I became the director of the Nebraska program and then after I was in Nebraska I came back to Kansas and I did consulting all over the country with communities as small as 800 people to larger urban areas and areas like Milwaukee and Chicago Portland did that for about 15 years.

What is just some brief history of the Kansas Main Street program

Well the Kansas Main Street program originally started in 1985 with five communities and it grew to 25 communities by the time the program closed in 2012 by a previous administration and it was abruptly closed no notice given no advance warning it just came in one day and the staff was told that they were done and so that kind of left communities in kind of a bind and they tried some different things to bring back a state program or have another coordinating program type situation and that just didn't work and so governor Kelly made rural development and the Main Street program one of her priorities when she ran four years ago and so she brought the program back in late 2019 and I was hired and uh when we brought the program back we grandfathered in the 25 communities who were in the program in 2012 when it was closed so they automatically came back in regardless of their organizational situation or what they've been doing in their community and then we started working with those 25 communities to assess where they were at uh you know did they still have a program in place how was it functioning what was their you know success over the past seven years from 2012 to 2019 and then we started building a program to provide services to those communities and bring in new communities as well so we've brought in 10 communities in the last three years and we're now up to 35.

Are vacancies and underutilized space including upper stories common issues within Main St. districts in Kansas?

They are very common issues not just in Kansas but nationwide over the last 40, 50 years we've seen you know just a change in the way the typical marketplace works and how people invest and how companies invest and so you know there was back in the 70s a push for malls and then the big box development started happening with the Walmarts the Best Buys the Targets and so those have all had an impact on downtowns and frankly in a lot of situations kind of created a cycle of disinvestment in downtown and by that I mean you know people who once used to purchase buildings downtown to start a new business or for a business to come in or relocate there people started seeing those properties as inexpensive ways to just get their hands on a building and a lot of people use them for storage or they don't have specific plans for them and so you have vacant storefronts and vacant upper floors is a problem that I've never been in a community that hasn't faced those issues so.

Would you agree that like online platforms have also contributed to that?

Yeah that's played a part I think even the bigger issue is then not all you know businesses downtown are just sometimes not able to pivot as quickly as larger companies you know if you've got a mom and pop shop that's literally you know a couple or the husband or wife and they've only got two or three employees they may be doing well but they're not able to oftentimes pivot as quickly and adjust to changes in the marketplace and so I think the you know Internet shopping that's blown up over the last few years the issue that a lot of downtown businesses have is they just haven't been able to integrate their business model into that you know online shopping aspect of things and if you think about you know somebody who works an 8 to 5 job and if a business is open say 8 to 6 you know Monday through Friday and maybe 8 to 4 on Saturdays and closed on Sundays people are just so used to having access to buying whatever they want whenever they want it that the traditional store hours just don't often work anymore so you know and I've experienced this just this past weekend I went to a business, went out of my way to go to a business and found out that they were closed when their website said they should have been open and it's just too easy for me to go somewhere else and buy what I would have bought there so online shopping has impacted downtown but it's sort of a you know there's a lot of little fingers underneath that umbrella that play into that as well.

What resources does this program provide to help mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

Well I think just the general overview of what we do to help is we help local mainstream organizations build their capacity locally to be able to address vacancies and to be able to better understand what they can do with vacant buildings whether it's first floor or upper floor you know regardless of what type of vacancy it is and so we don't often have grant funds available for that we sometimes do and that helps but really what we do is help the local organization build their capacity to address those issues so we do that by providing training and technical assistance on issues like entrepreneurial development, upper floor housing development, uh understanding how to work in the built environment of downtown, working with historic buildings and so you know it's the kind of a cheesy analogy but you know it's we can just go to the grocery store and buy fish for people or we can give them a fishing pole and the bait and teach them how to fish so they can catch their own fish and not just have to get it from us all the time.

Have many Main Street districts utilized these resources and if so did they prove to be helpful?

Yeah that's what we always talk to communities about that whether they're in the program or thinking about being in the program is just if you are active and engaged with us you're gonna get the resources that can help you so as an example we had training in Dodge City in July that focused on tourism development and not every community has a major aspect of tourism that they can work on so it might help or it might not have been the most relevant topic to every community at that time but we're still giving people tips and techniques and resources to help understand how important tourism is to their community and their downtown how they can play a role in enhancing that so you know we try and mix the training and technical assistance up to

the point that there's something for everybody at some point throughout the course of a year of the training we provide.

What are some of the overall benefits that these resources have brought to Main Street districts in Kansas?

Well I think that the biggest benefit is that in the community the local organizations have a better understanding of how to manage their built environment and manage the building inventory that they have to work with and use that in a way that's most appropriate for their community at that time so um what that means is that if somebody you know if you've got a prime building on Main Street that's sat vacant for several years and somebody comes up and says hey I want to buy this building or I want to open a business or put it in this space that the local Main Street organization has developed their capacity locally to the point that they know if that's an insurance agent for example that might not be as appropriate as putting in a new restaurant or a clothing store and they know also that they can make those decisions because they better understand the market they're in and they've built that capacity locally so they can be confident in those kind of decisions, so what we frequently see in communities that don't really have a specific focus on their downtown is somebody says hey I wanna put a building or a business in this building or I wanna do this activity in this building and people just let it happen because they have a we'll take whatever you give us mentality and so this isn't a judgment on any type of business or activity but churches are a good example you know if you've got a building on Main Street that used to be a department store and maybe it's equivalent of two storefronts and it's got a lot of square footage maybe a church might not be the best use for that or you know that type of activity and when you fill that space just by taking whatever you can get then you're kind of closing the door at least temporarily on other opportunities that would be more appropriate. And one of the things that I encourage people to do is almost regardless of the community size but you know you're in Manhattan I assume yeah and so you know if you walk downtown on points avenue I think downtown is kind of a compact downtown but I'll use Mass in Lawrence as an example if you're walking down Mass street you can have a continuous row of buildings that have uh appropriate stores in them that people wanna shop or visit whether it's a restaurant or shoe store or clothing store and then if you come across a section of a block that has a big bank or a big insurance agency or a church for example in some communities it just disrupts the flow of pedestrian traffic and it affects how people feel about that downtown so if you're in a smaller downtown if you take Poyntz Ave. for example and if you know all of a sudden you had an insurance company that wanted to put a bunch of insurance offices down on Poyntz that would change how that downtown felt dramatically and it would take away opportunities for like a photo studio or a restaurant or a music store you know.

Are there any new resources or ideas you have thought about implementing to help Main Streets with vacancies and underutilized space?

That's a good question, one of the things that we did a year ago we hope to bring back soon if we can find the money to do it is we created a grant program that worked with the Kansas Creative Arts and Industries Commission kind of the arts program for the state, so they have a program

called reimagine spaces I think that's what it's called I need to not get them confused but basically their grant program allows artists and organizations to create like pop up art exhibits for example that aren't permanent so it could be a six month exhibit or it could be a specific arts program a dance program or some type of performance type program and so the program that we created was a grant program, let me back up a second the arts program funds can't be used for building rehabs or to improve the space they can only be used for the art event or activity itself and so our program was designed to help downtowns find space in a downtown building that could be renovated to put in those temporary art exhibits or art galleries or art performances so the idea is that you're using funds in a way that the arts people couldn't use their funds but it met the objective of getting art uh downtown and it also rehabbed the building that once that temporary use was done you've got kind of a white box building that could be used for something else.

I think Kayla mentioned a little bit about upstairs downtown...?

We did one in Hutchinson a year ago and then in August we had pretty much the same workshop and it was in Junction City so we've done that back-to-back which is a little bit unusual we typically don't do like the same type of workshop you know one year to the next but in this case the first one was so well received and there was enough different information in this one that we felt like it was important to bring it back again because there's just so much space available on upper floors in downtowns and you combine that with the fact that there's a housing issue statewide, communities just don't have enough housing and even if downtown can play a small role in addressing that issue that's important, typically most communities regardless of the community size about 4% to 6% of the population would be willing to live in a downtown loft space for example and so you know if you can help alleviate 4% to 6% of that issue in any size community that's better than nothing and it helps address the housing issue and it helps to address the issue of vacant upper floor space in cool downtown buildings.

What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

I think probably the most important piece of addressing that issue is understanding your market and what your market will and won't support and so for example if it's a first floor vacant space you know kind of what types of businesses are appropriate downtown and what your market will support and that helps you drive decisions that you would make about how you use that space and then with upper floor development you know like we talked about housing you know what the housing needs are in your community you know what people are willing to pay what they're willing to rent and that the more you know the better informed you are about making decisions about how you use that space.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about the Kansas Main Street program in relation to vacancies and underutilized space?

I know Kayla talked a little bit about the policy side of it such as like rural housing incentive districts...?

Yeah I mean that's a program that is designed to help incentivize people to make improvements and it's basically like a tax that current financing program so the incremental taxes that would be paid or what is the benefit that the property owner gets back from making those improvements so that's a specific uh type of incentive that can help but I think the biggest thing that we do with our program is just helping build that capacity locally and helping them understand that how they can figure out what they need to do in their community.

Do you have any links or access to any articles on the upstairs downtown program or anything like that?

I'll send you a link uh actually let me just drop it in the chat here if that works, this is a link to the website of the two guys that we brought in for this workshop oh so it's they've got some case studies and they've got some information about different things like they've got a video of governor Kelly on their front page so when she talked about the first workshop so and you can see under Quick Link uh workshops they have Hutchinson, Great Bend, Junction City, listed, Great Bend actually hired them separate from our organization to come in but yeah you can look at the those things you can see part of the presentations and the things they talked about and yeah if you look through that have any other questions don't hesitate to shoot me an e-mail or give me a call and I'd be glad to help answer questions about that information.

Interview with Casey Woods (11/11/22)

How long have you worked with this particular Main Street district?

It will be 14 years in March, and I was a volunteer for 10 years.

What is just a brief history of Emporia's Main Street?

So in 1991 the Emporia Main Street organization was formed and it was formed by a downtown association of merchants that didn't feel like they were being paid attention to resources weren't being allocated to them and at the time we had a 40% vacancy rate in the downtown area, wasn't a lot going on from an event standpoint or improvement standpoint or development standpoint and so the merchants that were remaining banded together and said if we don't do something there's not gonna be a downtown left to save, Kansas Main Street had formed 5 years prior to that and so at that point they'd heard about the process and the approach at national Main Street and decided that was a tool box that they could tap into to potentially grow the downtown area.

Has the district struggled with vacancies and underutilized space including upper stories in the past and if so for how long?

It has, Main Street approaches typically are low hanging fruit and then you build a taller ladder to get to the other fruit but it's one of those things that has gotten better over time and so we had not a lot of housing in downtown when we first started as a Main Street program over 30 years ago now we have over 300 housing units in the downtown area we've had about 140 million dollars of reinvestment since 1991 and from a vacancy standpoint we have filled a lot of buildings with entrepreneurial development and we have a start your own business class that's to help start or expand over a hundred businesses regionally, we have an incubator space, a fabrication lab that has helped businesses develop, I think probably our biggest problem that we haven't quite figured out is absentee land owners so we're still working on that, that's probably gonna take some state legislation because there's not a state structure to allow us to add fines to property taxes or to create a legal framework to find property owners and we have some property owners that are they don't even live in the state of Kansas so if you're east coast or west coast our building values are maybe less than they're used to so property taxes aren't a big thing for them and they'll just let a building continue to dilapidate.

Have you utilized strategies or practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space that proved to be helpful or successful within Emporia's Main Street district?

Yeah there's quite a few it's not a one size fits all but housing has been effective we've found that if people live in a downtown area they're likely to spend approximately 40% of their disposable income in that downtown area within this region we spend 36% more than the national average on fuel so if we have people in a walkable environment they naturally have

more disposable income which they also spend in that downtown area, that also encourages merchants to extend their hours so if we've got people living in the downtown area they're more likely to stay open late because they see the traffic patterns shift and they are more likely to put more emphasis on the weekends when they know people just have to come downstairs, we have a pedestrian traffic model now that is 285% higher than the national average and for neighborhood districts there's thousands of them throughout the United States but we rank within the 93rd percentile of those different districts because we focused on housing, start your own business class was an entrepreneurial development we found out very quickly that you can't rely on recruitment to fill your vacancies you've got to grow your own so finding ways to encourage entrepreneurial development through teaching start your own business classes we manage about 2.4 million dollars worth of loans we have a historic district that adds additional incentives we're part of network Kansas and manage their incentive portfolios we do a lot of individual consulting and then we'll have our incubator space which gives a singular tenant 6 months of free rent, 6 months of reduced market rate rent, and 6 months of closer to market rate time to find your permanent home rent and we're right next door to them so we assist them through their growing pains, the fabrication lab has allowed our individual businesses to create their own products which gives them a higher survivability rating because they're not competing with everybody online they've got a unique product mix that they can provide which pulls people in and we've done destination business training to try and increase the market rate area that people participate in and then we've built a variety of different large scale events through the end of September just this year we had over 225,000 visitors into our downtown but that's a conscious effort to find time periods where we maybe had less visitors so when school's out for example or when there are breaks we want to plan large scale events to pull people in to increase restaurant and retail traffic in order to sustain what we've got.

What have these helpful/successful strategies and practices done within Emporia's Main Street district?

Well its extended hours, it extended days of operations because of things like events at one time you would see businesses that had summer crews and school year crews and the summer crews were substantially less, now we have more standard employment models that are all year round which has improved service and just made the business mix a little healthier I think from a housing standpoint we've definitely seen the extended hours but we've also just seen more income that's concentrated within the area, our focus on historic preservation and appropriate infill has increased the valuation of buildings in the area which has made them a better investment for a tier of investor that knows that they need to have a constant sort of reinvestment in their buildings and then when people sell its an actual asset and that's been huge I think for us, it's a little easier for entrepreneurs to get a loan if your building's worth something rather than just being loaned on a business concept so our banks have been able to partner a lot better because of the strategies that we reference.

Well, when you can have 30% of your permit costs covered by the state tax credit and 20% by the federal so you can have half of your renovation paid for that's big.

How did you learn of these strategies and practices?

Well there's a combination 1.) Main Street is a national network so there are trainings and then they have their online network called the point um and so we'll talk within those groups there's some higher level Main Street programs that get together like we've worked with Wheeling, WV and Laramie, WY and a few other groups that are trying something that's more leading edge will do the same, so upper story RHID is something that rolled out this past year that we were able to influence that legislation and that's created 10 units that are about ready to open up like actually have moved in next week across the street so we have that, communities that ask us how does this work how do you use this within your finance stock so certain things are we spot problems and we're trying to be entrepreneurial so how can you identify assets how can you take advantage of them for the benefit of your district The Dirty Kanza Now Unbound that was a we have all these beautiful flint hills we're not taking advantage of them as an asset you know the only way you can either do that is you can either build houses out there which destroys the flint hills or you can find some sort of athletic activity and we knew some people that were doing biking and rolled into that you know disk golf we had a guy that was working basically out of a garage and we found financing for him to grow that sport and those events so finding assets and capitalizing on what you have that's unique to your area and figuring out how to convert that into something that benefits local businesses is fairly critical but those are all trial and error so you have the training and then finding things that other communities are doing outside of your area because if you're doing the same thing that all of your area communities are doing then it just becomes bland so we don't want to look inside Kansas, we work with the KU Policy Research institute to find similar communities based off of census profile and then we stalk them and then we have something that we call R&D rip off and duplicate or if there's something else working in another community how can we relate that to our community and then convert that into something that we can try here or test here, not everything works but we always start small and scale.

What have business owners and community members thought of these strategies and practices and how have they affected the district as a whole?

I call them independent business owners and the word independent comes first for a reason so I think overall the feedback's been positive you have a few people that my property taxes are going up that's because you bought the building for \$10,000 and now it's worth \$200,000 so yeah or you have people that bought a building and had a business within the area when we had a 40% vacancy rate and no visitors so they could park right in front of their store and it was fine and now they're like where are all these people coming from and so there is some of that but I think for the most part people really enjoyed the transformation it's not like we're done so there's always more work to do and it's always a work in progress but overall I think the results speak for themselves and people responded positively.

What are the overall big picture benefits that these strategies and practices have brought to the district?

Well so when we started some of our redevelopment that was part of a community initiative development plan and we've got that on our website and part of that planning document was put in place to improve the tax base uh improve the quality of buildings, improving quality and sustainability of the businesses, generate housing without taxing our infrastructure and that's one thing that especially in rural communities has been really big for us that I don't think people probably talk about enough, roads and water and sewer all those different things are liabilities for cities so if you extend those you've got something that you have to constantly have upkeep for and cities oftentimes have the money to build things but not maintain them so in rural Kansas especially or the rural Midwest if you've got a population that's staying the same or declining but you're building out you're going to collapse your tax base and so I think one of the major things we've heard from our city and county is the density here where we can add people and businesses and take advantage of all this space and increase the value of buildings is cash positive so they don't have to build a new water line it's already here they don't have to build new roads they're already here and that building that was worth uh \$10,000 that's now like a \$2.4 million structure, the tax revenue that comes off of that helps them in a variety of different ways the sales tax revenue that comes off of a district where you're getting hundreds of thousands of people that visit versus nobody visiting is substantially different so I think you know we've seen some positive metrics from basically a vacancy rating both on the first floor and the upper story the valuations of buildings over time and sustainability of our business mix we have businesses that have now been around for the entirety of the Main Street program and before that you have businesses that were open for two or three years and then they couldn't make it.

What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

So I think probably the biggest thing is culture within a community, most of your downtown districts are going to be entrepreneurial and if you have a community that's brand addicted that doesn't value entrepreneurship or small businesses then you're not going to fill spaces sustainably I think the culture also extends into leadership because I know we found when we started doing upper story loft development we had a certain generation that was in charge that still in some instances is in charge and they thought all housing should be a ranch style house on 4 acres and you know I would never live in a loft so nobody would ever live in a loft and we had to do a lot of education when it came to stratification and different housing types and needs, the fact that less people are owning more people are renting people like to travel which means they don't want a yard they have to take care of you know we have a lot of people that want to live in more of an urban environment in a rural community just looking at the past few years we have a lot of remote workers that love you know living in an apartment, a two-bedroom apartment even though they just use a single bedroom but the second one's their office or both use a co-working space and all of that was a cultural shift we're still not completely there but that's probably the most important thing to focus on when you're trying to lay a solid foundation for sustainability within a downtown district.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about your experience with vacancies and underutilized space within Emporia's Main Street district?

Well that it's multifaceted you have to have quality spaces you have to have some flexibility within your code departments so we have a code team that meets on site as people are choosing buildings before they sign a lease or will purchase a space to make sure that it's going to work for their type of business having an entity like Emporia Main Street that has experience so you know this is how you can partner with people in the same space this is how you right size the space for you these are the types of infrastructure that you need for your business type these are your incentives that you can eventually tap into all those different things that you can do to avoid mistakes as people are starting out and make them more survivable but there's also the adage that Main Street directors talk about leave things better than you found them so understanding that we're all links in the chain and or Main Streets sometimes get trouble, well that's better than it was and then they do something that will damage the Main Street long term and then somebody else inherits a problem and problems are usually expensive to fix so then you have dilapidation not only within that building but nobody wants to be next to the dilapidated building but nobody wants to be next to that so then you start seeing that cancerous creep within some of those different vacancy problems.

So we have that chronically vacant property ordinance here and in year one of the chronically vacant property ordinance we identified 41 properties not just downtown but throughout the city, many of them were residential and we flipped 39 of them to different ownership in year 1 then in year 2 one of the two remaining ones figured out that there was no state mechanism for us to exercise some of the different components and then it kind of died but if we had the state mechanism for that that's why I'm saying we could have a mass coercion, the RHID upper story, RHID I worked with the state on and that's been really big and I think there's some specific types of funding small project funding that we're working with the national Main Street on to a lot of businesses when they're looking to do housing on upper stories they may be a pet store owner and they know how to do everything for a pet store but they have no idea what to do with housing that's not in their wheelhouse and then someday an architect comes in and says well if you give us this \$20,000 check then we can design this for you but they still don't know what to do so we're working with the national Main Street on small project funds and small project grants to offset some of those initial expenses and then having a more robust property management company presence within the area and then forming investment groups so the project across the street that's doing 10 units in the upper story is a 2.9 million dollar project, there aren't a lot of people who can write a 2.9 million dollar check so we formed a group called TC2 this was a town company so Town Company 2 that was local architects and local engineers and local fundraisers and accountants and we listed agents that all pooled their dollars and then we have something that's like a shark tank for properties to decrease vacancies where I'm gonna pitch my concept for this and here's the Performa on what that development will look like do you wanna buy or not and since we formed TC2 2 years ago I think they've taken on either as a group or individuals within the group 5 projects in the downtown area so it's a prevention, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure so if you've got development groups and investment models in place where you can prevent the long term vacancy it's a lot easier than having something sit for 10 years and then trying to convince someone to come in and do something with the property.

One thing that you might add for future that we're seeing uh energy is gonna be huge so putting solar panels on the roofs things like that to mitigate some energy costs in the downtown areas

and making sure that their energy efficient buildings which most older buildings are, the other that is going to be much more difficult for the state is access to resources like water and for a lot of these buildings especially with upper stories they require sprinkler systems which are you need to have solid access to water and there are portions of our state that we think are gonna have pretty significant water issues in the next 20 years so there are a few things that we're a little worried about when we're looking at fulling utilizing buildings not only downtown but throughout communities but those will be two that we are focused on in the next few years.

We've got a lot more studies on our website and blogs if there's anything you need additional information on.

Interview with Janet Burr (11/21/22)

How long have you worked in/with Garden City's Main Street district?

Six months.

What is a brief history of Garden City's Main Street district?

Yeah I think it's 2004 Downtown Vision was started and when I talked to a couple of the individuals and one person rich harp is still serving on our board they just said that what happened was that it was about the time Home Depot went in and a lot of the businesses were kind of upset with the city Commission about you know probably giving some incentives or whatever and they wanted to kind of know who was going to champion downtown as the corporate world started coming to Garden City and I think a group of them, one of them is Reynaldo Masa I think he was on the City Commission they decided to get together with some businesses downtown and create Garden City Downtown Vision which would be a representative of downtown and then they also decided to apply with the state to become part of the Main Street program and that kind of allowed them to have some guidance on how to run downtown vision and what they could do how they could help downtown Main Street, so I think it started out of just wanting somebody to help you know keep Main Straight alive as the corporate world outside of town started to build up and it has been going on since then and I think what helps Downtown Vision right now is that the city is behind it that you know city leadership is behind understanding the value of having a downtown but they can't in their scope of work be the one to champion it so it's nice to put it on a group to kind of help champion and somebody that's kind of a liaison forum between the businesses and the city to kind of help keep it going.

How long has the district struggled with vacancies and underutilized space including upper stories?

Well I can think of a couple so like the Windsor and sometimes it isn't so much downtown struggles I would say like sometimes it is the person that owns the building so like Windsor our hands are tied on really what we can do to help them, it's owned by the Finney County Preservation Society and so sometimes maybe they might have some offers from some state funds to come in but at the end of the day you know that board chooses what happens to that building so that's the Windsor, the State Theater is owned by the city and so the city just recently announced that they're going to open up a request for proposals to possibly try to get something in that building and then like the Gordmans building is a tough little building because you know it's almost too big for small business but it's too small for the corporate world, but you know I have explored with that building about possibly being an event venue because we don't have any kind of meeting or event space downtown right now and so it could be able to fulfill that where the one side could be a dance, one side could just be strictly meetings and just have a catering kitchen so it wouldn't have to be completely catered out so I think some of those buildings we just have to kind of really like you know, real life that maybe it will never be a retail spot and

then you know we have a couple spaces that we've explored putting in a permanent vendor mart and so I think there are some options for buildings, a lot of it is just really working with the landlord who owns the building and sometimes it helps with like we're getting some new ones downtown that are visionaries that can see that maybe it's more than retail that you know even though we always want retail that's what brings people downtown but sometimes you have to look and see you know events also do too, so now the second story recently the state opened up that second story RHID and so I think as that starts to grow that will help some of our second story, we've had some meetings with people and several of them have plans drawn and now you know the big kicker for a lot of people is that initial investment they understand that they will get the money back over time but somebody still has to upfront the money and so I think just getting people to see that you know out here they don't have a problem with getting them rented or whether do Airbnb or whatever they do but it's just getting over the hump to make the investment and then they'll get that money back so I think we'll start to see a turn but I think with the state like an empty building it takes one person to kind of spearhead that so we have several people that are they call them in the queue, that you know they have the plans it's just like they have to make the step so I think when that happens then some of these other people are gonna be like oh my gosh that person is making that much money renting out their second space and mines just sitting on storage so I think it will help but sometimes I think in my mind one person has to do it someone has to be the one to start it and then kind of put like oh my gosh I rented out five one bedrooms I'm making this kind of rental income and I get my taxes back for 25 years you know so it's just getting that one person to take the step but I think we have two people right now sitting with plans.

Have you thought about utilizing any specific strategies or practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Garden City's Main Street district?

You know the biggest thing is just we have a lot of people contact us but it's trying to match up with the person but also just you know I am working with a couple of landlords that do own property in downtown to try to get them to you know, one has been really helpful like if it doesn't work for him he helps sell it to other people like maybe say like the Brown shoe fit like if he decides that building isn't for him maybe we have another one downtown that will fit his needs better or something, and it's not a fast process I think that's the hardest part of this job is that yeah you know we might work on some of this for a couple of years and yeah patience is the key cause it's nothing that's quick like I'll have an idea and then I have to go through all these steps you know and keeping that momentum all the way through because you'll be stalled out and then because we represent downtown but then we also have to work with neighborhood and development at the city and then we also work with economic development and I mean there's so many pieces to the puzzle and you have to let so many different people know about everything and then you know we might step out of the game plan which is fine but then you don't know but you start to follow up but you're in and out so it's crazy.

What do you envision those strategies and practices doing within Garden City's Main Street district? I guess what is your overall vision of like the end goal with those strategies?

So when people join Downtown Vision the number one thing they ask for is night life and so I'm really hoping that whatever the city decides to do with say like the state theater is part of our solution to nightlife because I think that's the missing piece to helping people believe that they could finish the second story, you know like some people they live down here then they can be able to shop down here eat down here and there's nightlife built in down here and so I think if the state theaters done to bring nightlife in that will help solve our second story build out and then you know I'm really not sure on the Windsor what will ever solve that but you know I also think an event venue for Gordmans is a selling point because then if people have meetings here then they're down here because when you break for a meeting you usually have an hour or an hour and a half for lunch so then you're eating down here you're shopping down here so I think a couple of those if they get done with that purpose that will help the overall landscape of Main Street and then I think you know we're exploring this as if we can do a permanent vendor market because I think we have to do something to find those business incubators those people that have side hustles or side businesses that we need to get them out of their house and down on Main Street but maybe not in their own store just so they can see yeah wow I can make it out of my house but whether they're not ready or whatever so I think we'll have to have some kind of business incubator pretty soon.

I just think right now when we have an empty building like when we had one when I first started we called 15 people to fill it and none of those people we called ended up filling it, but I was just like it would be nice to have a business incubator because then you know who you have and who would be ready to make the jump and then the selling jump is you're ready to move on you know you need something bigger but right now we're just randomly like I'll call up Blue Fox Boutique hey you ever wanna move downtown or call some of the boutiques in the little towns do you wanna move up and come to the garden, but I mean having a business incubator is gonna be crucial for downtown just because we need to be able to look somewhere for some businesses and they need to feel like they can make it in the brick and mortar.

How did you learn of these specific strategies and practices?

So I'd say like the incubator as a long time ago Garden City used to have when I was a kid a business called Bernie rose and it was kind of the vendor concept and there was a lot of little businesses and you would come in and shop but I've also seen it in Lenexa, Kansas City, Overland Park and I think you know Emporia Main Street even has a business incubator and some other Main Streets do have that program already and it works for them and they get to see them kind of graduate to their own space so I think sometimes I look to other main streets because we're kind of all in the same battle some of us have figured it out already and some you know haven't, in the end game we're all in the same battle because everybody has some kind of vacant building and so the people want the same thing just a different town but the nightlife is told to us on all those vision forms when people tell us either they want more retail or more nightlife so you know you have to look at how you can come up with that.

Does the brewery tend to stay open later on the weekends?

Sometimes you know I think they kind of usually stay open till 10 but if they have an event or something they'll stay open later to facilitate that or you know if they have people there but yeah I just think as a whole because you know you think of like Manhattan or Salina or those places that have those theaters downtown because you usually go early because you're gonna eat before you go because most of them don't serve food and then afterwards they usually get out early enough where you're not ready to quite go home yet so maybe you'll have a drink before you go home or something and so I think that I do agree that the entertainment the state theater could be the change because you know Flat Mountain will try, people will say you know you're not open late so then they stay open late but they don't see the business but I don't think one person can be I mean I don't think that Flat Mountain the restaurant can be enough to keep people to bring them down just for that but if you have you know hey there's a concert going on at the state theater or a play or something and then afterwards let's go down to whatever Casa Mariachi or Flat Mountain and have a drink before we go home you know because then when you leave Main Street you probably are gonna go home.

Even for downtown vision so we had an event come up where we're hosting an entrepreneurship challenge in March and they're like why don't you hold it downtown and that should be the easiest answer but we don't have a dedicated place to hold that so downtown now you can hold them at the city building to a point but they're still gonna be open, you could hold them at the Knights but then it's also a bar on the other side, you can hold them at the American Legion but there's no air conditioning, so you go through all the different places and we've got some kind of you know I can't hold it at flat mountain cause it's a bar and it's for high school kids you know so that's why I think it'd be so nice because it would even allow Downtown Vision to up its game on events because we're limited we can do all kinds of outdoor events but you know doing indoor events we're really limited, we've done some you know like if Beef Empire Days is going on down in Stevens Park they're open late for that crowd or if something's going on they're happy to stay open late but if there's not the traffic, it's not just I'm gonna stay open until midnight to be open till midnight.

Have you talked to business owners and community members about what they think could be done to help with vacancies and underutilized space within Garden City's Main Street district?

So, I would say you know the building the people that have businesses downtown a lot of them will tell me it's the landlords, like getting into some of the empty spaces I think the city is aware of it their hands are kind of tied on some you know like the Windsor hotel that's you know tied up with the preservation board so for them I think the only way they can make a change is if they declare the building that it has to be condemned so I think no one really wants to make that call on the Windsor and so they're kind of just waiting through it to see if something starts happening but I think that the city like our Downtown Vision board I think a lot of people know what the fight is, but I think the biggest eye opening for me in this position was that you know it is that we have the some of that sometimes some of those empty buildings that the reason we have them is the building owners you know we have a lot of building owners and you know they can wait until they find that perfect tenant and in the meantime we just have to work through that the building's empty you know so a lot of people then their perception is downtown vision isn't doing enough to help get rid of the empty buildings why aren't we filling them up why aren't we

filling them up but at the end of the day it has nothing to do with us or the city or anybody it comes down to that the building owner is fine with it being empty so it's a hard thing to watch because then you just have this empty building.

On the other side you're like that's not the case in a lot of them you know they bought it so they that should invest them in downtown but you know if they wait five years until they get the perfect tenant in their eyes they'll wait five years and in those five years nothing will go in it and I'm not sure of the solution on that.

What benefits are you hoping these potential strategies and practices will bring to the district?

Yeah you know in an ideal world everything's filled we have retail and what that means is that brings up the tax base and you know small business has a place in a community but honestly I think when I go to downtowns if the downtown is not healthy it's reflective on the town so like if downtown would ever switch and not have a lot more empty buildings yeah we might have a lot of you know corporate stuff on the outside but I think it speaks that there's some unhealthy stuff going on in Garden City because it's like where are your entrepreneurs because I think back like when we hit COVID you go to Kansas City and Wichita I know some of them are bouncing back but you would go through a lot of mini malls and they'd be empty or malls but like downtown we did not lose a single business during COVID and I wasn't even here it's nothing you know like it's just downtown didn't because they're resilient you know and they don't have somebody, they're a champion for themselves through that whole thing so I think there will always be downtown business, so I think you'll always have a downtown you always have to have a healthy downtown but like you know where will that be, what does that look like and how do you avoid having those empty buildings but I think the biggest thing is that visionary you just have to like be thinking all the time ahead of the game you know it's just you right now that permanent vendor market is trendy it's a trendy concept you know to try to solve the retail but even for my board it's a hard thing for them to encompass that we're going to rent a space for a couple \$100 a month on these businesses do they get you know is that an asset to them or risky adventure you know, to me it's like what we have to do or we're not gonna make it so I think even for them is just getting people to understand that they've gotta we can't be thinking about today we gotta be thinking about how are we gonna survive and for us here even though small business doesn't you know fit in Shulman Crossing but we also know like all the new development in town there's going to be a lot of mini malls and so they're gonna you know can we keep them down here are they going to get attracted to where growth is where will they keep but I know Alicia told me the other day in Roots she's like you know I think we have to be really visionary in downtown or we're not gonna make it and you know because they want people that are investing in downtown want visionaries they wanna know that when they're investing down here that it's gonna be here for a long time so yeah you're always trying to think ahead but it's then you have people like even on my own board that are on this board I mean not my board but DTV boards that are just always thinking you know the devil's advocate and all the risk.

And then too it's just unique like here we offer a lot of programs but you have to be in downtown so you know like a lot of them we voted on today were its an IWW loan and you have to be in the downtown corridor and its 0% interest so you know no one can offer that not even a bank or

your credit card right now and so we're able to offer those to businesses to get started, corporate's not gonna offer that to you a mini malls not gonna give you money to get started on a new business but that's something because we want those entrepreneurs to give it a go and so I think offering some of those things because we want to see you make it and then I think we do our training of some landlords that are more entrepreneur spirit and they're located here right downtown so like one of them Donnie Huber that owns scooters he's starting to invest some downtown and so you know they were born and raised here and they just want to see the success of downtown and so having some of those people come in that actually live here you know his office is in one of his buildings he bought so like I think that will help because those people are actually invested and I think when they start making some changes it's going to reflect on everybody else and they're going to be like I want to be part of that.

We had 60 volunteers for fall fest and what I did was if you had a group say like STUCO provided 10 volunteers for a minimum of two hours we gave them \$200 to their group and so uh I think we did that with how many groups so six different groups so we because it's so hard to get volunteers and so man when they're getting a donation to their group, all of them were here on time they stayed the whole time because you know I mean the people made it really clear but I would say 2/3 of them had never been downtown of the volunteers, like you would ask them have you ever been to fall fest, no, have you ever been downtown, no, that's so crazy to me and then the people that you could say I need you to go and set up by Stevens park, where's Stevens park but they knew almost everybody knew that had been downtown where the coffee shop they knew where Patrick Dugan's was so like if you were to say when you're done come down here to Patrick Dugan's they knew where Patrick Dugan's was you know some of them knew Root's but I was like it was crazy to me how many people had never been downtown, that was like I think really eye opening to me because I even told the board that you know so what we paid \$200 like the biggest benefit for downtown was getting those kids downtown because you know 20 of 60 kids had been downtown and it's like so those other forty and then once they got in there like you know I'd run into him at Stevens park they were hanging out going to food trucks I mean and they have money because they have parents money you know to just spend and some of it was like we got them down here they just had no idea what was even downtown.

These people aren't very much older than I mean than a lot of them that are in school you know, but I think for us it's just trying to also how to get to those kids because really those kids are also future business owners so that's why we're doing this youth entrepreneurship challenge with the high school and we're trying to get Holcomb to do it so they have to do like their own business plan and do a presentation and they present it and then after they do it they can do a trade show where they sell whatever their business is to the community so uh because I was like if we don't have a business incubator I mean these kids have to learn how to be an entrepreneur somewhere you know like Lexi said she learned because her dad owned that concrete business and so she said she saw him and then Mariah's grandpa and grandma have a construction business and that's what she learned from she said they worked hard but they played hard you know but you're like if you're a teacher I mean if you become a teacher you've seen teachers and work your whole life how do you see an entrepreneur really at work you know and a big part of it is taking risks.

What do you believe is going to be the most important thing to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within this Main Street district?

So next year I'm spending the year on relationships, this six months I've kind of just sat back and did a lot of events and that kind of stuff but next year is building relationships like with realtors with all the landlords downtown we've started doing that you know kind of like getting in with them and letting them know visions we have for their building and you know what would it take to make it happen and you know making it about them because I think for a long time we've kind of just been like oh he won't ever fill this building up that's how he is he's just gonna leave it open but you know we're taking a lot more vested interest in some of those people that have those like calling them visiting them once a month just saying hey you know have you thought about doing this I'd really like to see this building or you know and so a lot of focus on them to where you know I don't think it's pressure but I think it's just really letting them know like you know you can do this we really want to see something done and how can we help it get going and you know what would you like to see and so I think for us the big factor there's gonna be a relationships just really building those and really letting those people that were the bridge for them, not even just like downtown but relationships with the realtors in town relationships with the city just you know so it's gonna take all of us, I was like I gotta make sure and you don't want to lose more businesses so what is it going to take to keep the ones you have and then work with the people that have kind of held up the process for a while.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about the experience with vacancies and underutilized space within Garden City's Main Street district?

Well you know I don't want a lot of vacancies I don't think anybody does it puts a lot of pressure on the job you know and I have quite a few I mean I have more than I started with but I don't think it's good to be in a downtown with no vacancy though I think every downtown needs a couple because it really makes you kind of take a look at your downtown, what like the visionary we talked about and also finding out what you know what your downtown needs and wants are I mean like yeah perfect downtown is you don't want any vacancies but I think a couple don't let you get complacent I think if you if you were lucky enough to not have a single vacancy you would just get complacent and if you have a couple you always have to be on your game you know yeah thinking looking visiting and it also makes me not being here like it makes me have to be out there you know visiting with people trying to figure out how we can fill those spaces rather than otherwise I think you know you just would get complacent or just think everything's okay but when you have a vacancy you know you'll always have to be on your toes and it keeps you moving forward so even though I don't wanna lie I think it's good to have a few maybe not as many as we have but I think it's good to have a few just to keep you always moving forward and you know sometimes it is about like you know the hard part is you might be you know we've worked with people that are just adamant about being downtown and we do have some openings but right now we have not really small openings and so you know there is the downside is if you don't have some of the right openings then we turn people away.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about the Garden City Main Street district in general?

What I would add is that I really enjoy championing the small business, today I had a discussion about what if you weren't downtown and somebody said they're not downtown but they feel like nobody champions them and I said I really think Downtown Vision champions the small business but I also think we're the champion for all small business you know because somebody has to be kind of their cheerleader just so they keep going and also it's amazing the different kind of people like Jessica was in here today going over some ideas and she's in her fourth year in business with that sage house soaps and you know just going through her experiences, but you don't get that going into a TJ Maxx you don't get that experience you know you go buy some shoes but the person you might have saw yesterday you may never see again but it's like every time I go into Sage House it's Jessica you know and so you get to know her and her business and you're treated a lot better than you are at the corporate world or when I go into corner on main I grew up with the owners you know like I know their parents and so I think there will always be a place I don't think that you know contrary to what some people think I don't think online will ever take the place of Main Street I don't think corporate will ever because people still want that they want somebody to just still call them out you know greet them when they come in they still like the perks of you know someone helping them find a gift the free gift wrapping the personal touch you know helping them find what they need I just think that no matter what happens in the world or how strong the online industry gets I still think people want to be taken care of so I think they'll always stand the test of time.

Interview with Coral Lopez (12/14/22)

How long have you worked in or with this particular Main Street district?

So I started with Main Street Dodge City in 2019 I wanna say it was like June of 2019 and prior to that I had been with the City of Dodge City and I worked one year as a convention and visitors Bureau tourism coordinator.

What is a brief history of Dodge City's Main Street district?

Main Street Dodge City got established in 2010 as a 501-C6 nonprofit prior to Main Street Dodge City I believe there was like a downtown business owners association and they're the ones that would and continue to like do the final Fridays and stuff like that so I believe it was 2008 or 2009 when they were talking about with why not dodge sales tax funds creating and building an arena so there was multiple studies that were done to determine where the arena should be placed and the majority of those studies came back saying that it should be placed close to our downtown or historic district one of the proposed areas would have been where like the KOA currently sits which is behind Wright park so it's within walking distance to the museum and our downtown but some people in the community weren't too keen on having it in that area so they actually put it on a ballot to vote on it, after they put it on a ballot I don't know that it necessarily went anywhere but then it was right around that time that the state of Kansas was opening the casino and had decided for Dodge City to be the first state owned casino and when they picked their location to go West of town then it was a no brainer to have the arena go adjacent to that so the Dodge City Ford county Development Corporation the executive director which is Joanne Knight went to her board and they determined that they needed to have an organization that focused on economic development for our downtown as I'm sure with your research you've notice that the downtown in any community is like their heart their soul if you if you have a good strong vibrant downtown then that just kind of helps show and showcase your almost like a mirror image of your of the rest of your community and they knew that if they didn't have somebody focused in that area because the arena and the casino were going out West town they were afraid that it was going to become something where we ended up having a whole bunch of vacancies and people leaving the downtown to try to get closer to those other areas so that's one Main Street Dodge City got established and it got um funded primarily from the businesses that were part of the Development Corporation so the Development Corporation is also A501C6 nonprofit and our organization is mirrored off of that obviously just in the smaller scale and the why not dodge sales tax is that non sunset tax that we have that helps fund a lot of the tourism attractions that we have so (city has page on website).

Has the district ever struggled with vacancies and underutilized space including upper stories in the past and if so for how long?

Oh absolutely I think you have that in any downtown area um as far as how long I think it honestly just depends on exchange of properties, I think we have a lot of potential for upper story

even still just recently in the last two years we've had a lot of development when I start when we start walking downtown I'll point those out to you but on the corner of Gunsmoke and 2nd Ave. on the northwest corner there is West Coast Plaza they just renovated their entire upstairs it used to be an Event Center where they used to host weddings and special events kind of thing and they got rid of that part and converted their entire upstairs into apartments, before they even had their apartments completed they already had them rented out so they did one section and then they moved on and did the other section of their building, the First National Bank building has sat vacant for a long time that used to house Bank of America and when Bank of America in the last I want to say like 5-8 years pulled out their physical locations out of a lot of communities and went to more of a metro um location focus they left that building and at some point it used to house attorneys I think sometime in the 70s there was a dentist office in there so it was a really busy building and I think it's sat vacant for a long time just this year it actually got into the hands of some local developers and investors and they're looking at converting the first two floors into shared coworking space and then everything up above they're gonna convert it into higher scale downtown housing.

Do you see like a good amount of people wanting to live downtown?

Oh yeah for sure and they are higher rent places and units, I think from what I've heard from people that actually live downtown is they like the walkability they like that they have shops and they have like our brewery and our distilleries in our downtown and we have a mixture of salons and service type businesses but we also have shops and restaurants and bars that I feel like a lot of people like that, I think one downside to living in a downtown is proximity to your vehicle specifically so I think it's just a give and take.

Have you utilized any specific strategies or practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space that have proved to be helpful or successful within Dodge City's Main Street district?

So our organization is set up a little bit differently than what you see in other communities and I think as you start doing your interviews you will see that, you have some main streets that are set up as C3's some are C6's I think Salina actually has a CID which is a community Improvement District and you have some that are under their convention and visitors bureaus and others that are joint with their chambers so we're neither we are membership driven that's why we're C6 and not C3 we are stand alone we are overall under economic development because that's what main streets do a lot of people see main streets as the party planners and event planners and stuff but the only reason we're doing those events is to promote the areas so I like to think of ourselves as a miniature economic development that focuses in your downtown rather than focusing in your entire city community county so our salaries and this goes for the economic development organization we host I think it's five different organizations so it's Dodge City Ford county Development Corporation then there's CHAD which is the Community Housing association at Dodge City Main Street Dodge City REWA which is the rural education and workforce alliance um then we have Dodge City festivals we also host a satellite office for the small business development center as well as an office for the Kansas Department of Commerce so as far as the organizations that are under the umbrella of the development corporation the city of Dodge City

actually donates our salaries and our benefits so it is a very strong public private partnership our memberships and the fees that we receive from our memberships are all organizational funding so everything that our members contribute goes back to the organization whether it's the promotion it's design it's organization any of those like 4 point approach because we run off of that just like the state program does and the national organization yeah so when Main Street got started we knew that there was a lot of or the city identified that there was a lot of buildings that were underutilized needed fixing so we developed a program which is it has two parts it's the DRIP program which is the downtown revitalization improvement program and this has two pieces to it so it has a grant which is for the facades of the buildings and this covers uh we've covered roof um roofing like redoing the roof anything on the outside windows tuck pointing our facade improvement program also includes when somebody wants to apply or install an awning on their building as well as signage now we also have and that's a one to one match up to \$5000 grant that members of the organization are able to apply to the other part of it is the loan and that is a 0% interest loan and that goes to cover anything in the inside of the building mechanical structural electrical flooring kind of stuff um because we know that these buildings are in a lot of them are in a deplorable state that people business owners property owners are having to inject money back into it so it was a way of being able to help now the city set this up because the funding that we get for that we do receive about a \$50,000 allowance I guess you could say from the city that goes into that program and that comes from the tourism dollars that we receive from the why not dodge sales tax as well so they set that up so that even though we are city employees the organization is standalone from the city so development services planning and historical compliance can do the ordinances and can do the can do more of the hey you haven't done this and you need to take care of this um we get to be more of the nice guys that say hey we have these programs available that can help you to address what the city is trying to tell you to do as far as minimal maintenance for your buildings and our program started as a \$10,000 Max so somebody could have a \$20,000 project and they could get \$10,000 grant but we saw the money start dropping really quick So what they did we lowered that to a \$5000 Max, the applications are on the website so you can look at those on there if you have any questions once you start looking for that stuff you can let me know and I'd be more than glad to answer any questions but oh the word I was looking for earlier was enforcement so the city does the enforcement of this minimal maintenance stuff and we just get to be nice guys and not go in and yell at anybody and tell them hey your stuff looks kind of crappy but instead we have these programs available so Umm but yeah so we have that and then we're looking at with our streetscape project that we just did the groundbreaking for last week and I'm sure as you were coming into town you saw all the gates and fencing and stuff we're looking at enhancing that program because we know that as soon as these awnings these wooden awnings come down we're going to have a lot of people that are going to be applying for stuff because they've hidden things for so many years.

What have these helpful/successful strategies and practices done within this Main Street district? Like what results have you had?

We've had businesses that are able to fix their facades it brings more people into the area Dodge City is a minority majority community I believe we're close to 67% minority population and that's probably a little bit closer to 70-76% when you look at USD 443 and the level of enrollment that they have I think they report closer to like 80 plus percent minority in enrollment

so you see a clear representation of that in our downtown when you look at statistics majority of small businesses are open by minorities and locally small business are majority owned by a minority and you see a clear representation of that in our area so I think these programs have helped these people that some of them are tenants and when you're looking at a commercial lease sometimes the tenant's the one that has to do all those updates and fixes and they're not used to that they don't know that so this has helped with some of that and to help not have buildings that keep deteriorating.

You'll also see that our downtown specifically with the ones that you mentioned that you're interviewing and where you're from so you're from garden and you're interviewing hutch and then you're looking at interviewing Emporia as well when you look at their setup their setups are very similar all three of those communities have their they actually have a Main Street and their Main Street runs through their downtown yeah Dodge City doesn't have a Main Street we have a front street but it's just that three blocks spread that's in front of the parking lots over here but the actual addresses for all of those businesses Wyatt Earp which is just up from where those parking lots are at we have second avenue which you could also see our main strip but I think Wyatt Earp also serves as that now I can't remember when El Capitan was set because at some point 2nd Ave. used to run straight through which you would end up having that feeling of a main road and a Main St. but our downtown tends to be more square perimeter because we don't have that and it almost feels like it encompasses that that area a little bit better.

How did you learn of these different strategies and practices?

We were part of the Kansas Main Street program originally when it first was in place and then it got dismantled under governor Brownback and then it just got brought back in 2019 so we were just grandfathered in because we were one of the original communities when the program was dismantled Kansas Main Street had at the time the program called incentives without walls IWW and they had an allowance for communities that kind of did what we do with our drip program but at the time that we had joined there was no funds available so we don't actually have IWW funds where some of these other communities do I can't take credit for any of the programs that are set in place because those were started before I started so those were already set in place I will tell you one thing that and if you haven't heard it Main Streeters are going to tell you copy and you steal shamelessly and you take best practices from anybody out there, there is no reason to reinvent the wheel you can just make it more efficient so I believe anytime that we're looking at implementing right now that we're looking at doing our improving our trip program our facade improvement program to help with the streetscape project that we're doing right now it's stealing shamelessly from whoever has good practices and putting all of that together.

What do business owners and community members think of these strategies and practices and how have they affected the district?

Our program in comparison to how I was telling you how there's some that have CID's and they don't necessarily have a say so or don't have to contribute membership wise, ours is different where you have to be a member to be able to get some of the benefits that come with our

improvement programs I've increased our membership from when I started um I'm gonna say an average of like 8 to 10 members per year currently I'm focusing a little bit more on the promotion of the areas specifically because of the construction that is going on and not necessarily concentrating on those that are just members which I do tend to do because they are paying a fee but right now I know that having the construction going on is gonna hurt everybody down here that we're just hoping and encouraging everybody to shop it doesn't matter whether they're members or not members just like anything I think there's room for improvement to be able to have more participation I think what you see is that small business owners tend to focus on their business a lot so it's hard for them to see some of that bigger picture and concentrate in trying to participate and help and be involved in civic organizations like ours because they are the ones that are opening and closing their doors a lot of the time so it's hard for them to I mean I know they appreciate the help I know that when I come by and I'm asking for their support to help with an event or participate in an event or a giveaway I've never been told no but I think it's really hard for them to step away because of their weight they're either not open or they're having to pay somebody else to do the work that they would otherwise be doing themselves.

What are the overall benefits that you've seen through the strategies and practices that you guys have utilized?

I think it would be continuing to improve the state of the buildings um if you have an organization that's focused in this area then when there is a vacancy that is actively seeking tenants then you have organizations like ours that help promote that and they don't stay vacant very long now I think that's the key thing actively seeking tenants because you have a lot of property owners that are 100% okay with just sitting and not doing anything with their buildings and I think that's where you see the vacancies in downtowns, that because the downtown is not the hip and hop popping area that it once used to be property taxes tend to be lower and people tend to not do anything with their buildings and just use it as a tax write off.

We do have some property owners that choose to not do anything or say they're doing something with their building and we see no progress I think that all comes down to enforcement in your municipality and how much they're willing to enforce minimal maintenance put focus on the area and prevent and set ordinances or it can't be a guideline cause a guideline has no teeth it has to be an ordinance that actually has teeth in something to grab onto to actually enforce the changes.

What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

I think in order to address that you need to be able to have programs in place that can assist um property owners business owners uh as a whole I think for the most part some of these areas have gone unfocused for such a long time that that's what contributed to the buildings deteriorating their state because everybody we went from having that okay we have an entire area and an entire section that it's individual buildings where the shops are focused in to that urban um 50's 70s and 80s mall shopping and we all want to be in an enclosed area that houses everything and as those places started to get built your downtown tenants started to gravitate towards that because that's where the action was and then your vacancies in your downtown start to drop so as

communities started to grow you started seeing vacancies and that's not just Dodge City I think that's echoed throughout communities and it's funny because now we're going away from those enclosed mall spaces back to rows of outlets but we're going back to building new rather than utilizing what's existing and I don't know if that's because it's so much harder to try to improve infrastructure in something that's already aged yeah and then also having to adhere to guidelines, historic preservation is a double edged sword that we all want to preserve these buildings and we want to reutilize them but then sometimes your guidelines to refresh the facades and reuse the internal can cost you even more than it would cost you to build a Morton building and build to sue and I think it's an echoed issue in a lot of communities.

Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your experience with vacancies and underutilized space within Dodge City's Main Street District?

I think as our legislature and our state government put the focus back in with reestablishing the program establishing the office of rural prosperity and creating different programs that are set to help address the housing needs that a lot of our communities are seeing then they're starting to do things that could help property owners and business owners to renovate those underutilized spaces you're starting to see more people wanting to improve and purchase and move into those downtown areas I know that for us specifically this \$15 almost \$16 million project that we're doing with our streetscape is literally breathing new life into our area and it's seeking the attention of a lot of investors who want to go into the area now I also think that you're gonna have a lot of owners that are like well I wanna hang on to my property and see what's gonna happen kind of thing which is good and bad because you would wish that they would do something with their properties before but I don't know I guess it goes hand in hand if your municipality of your city you're counting are putting investment into the area then it should spark economic development in the area.

Interview with Lacie Janzen (1/18/23)

How long have you worked in this particular Main Street District?

I was hired at the chamber in January of 2020 and when I was hired, I was hired on to be the events and communications coordinator on the chamber side but then also the Downtown Hutch Coordinator so I've been here since yes January 2020.

What is a brief history of Hutchinson's Main Street District?

Like I said Hutchinson was one of the first or the first communities in the Kansas Main Street organization and we have maintained that since its inception up until 2019 it was housed within the city of Hutchinson and then we took that over underneath the chamber umbrella and we have since had that in our organization.

Has the district struggled with vacancy and underutilized space including upper story space in the past and if so for how long?

I would say right now we don't necessarily struggle with vacancies for retail locations we have been very very lucky in our Main Street and in our downtown that we don't have a lot of turnover of business in our downtown and once opened they stay open for a long amount of time during the pandemic we did have three businesses close and not reopen um but the pandemic or COVID was not the reason why those businesses did not reopen these were businesses like one of them for instance they had been wanting to sell for a while they just didn't have it succession plan that was strong or have you know anybody in a real interested position to take that business over yeah so once you know the shutdowns happened and COVID happened they just made the decision to just stay closed and so we also had another business very similar to that too so throughout those shutdowns and throughout those really tough times during the pandemic when I know small businesses really really struggled I would say as a community we really rallied behind ours and supported them the best way that we could and I while we all hated to lose those businesses within a very short amount of time someone had taken over those locations and were back open and operating again I would say where our main point of vacancies is the availability that we do have upper floor that are not being utilized.

Have you utilized strategies and practices to mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space that have proved to be helpful or successful within Hutchinson's Main Street?

So I would say in my opinion the number one thing that has been so helpful is an IWW loan fund and what that is, is a incentives without walls loan fund and this was also something that came with being one of the original Kansas Main Street organizations is that when this loan fund was established a community was given a pretty significant amount of money I don't have the exact number off the top of my head but it was probably close to \$300,000 that the community could

loan out to someone looking to establish on Main Street and the terms of loan was it was a 3 to one match so the business owner would have to have \$3 in private funding to \$1.00 of this but we could loan up to \$20,000 at 0% interest for 82 months and so and it's a revolving loan fund so as the payments are made it replenishes they were able to load it back out there really great thing about it is that it doesn't take the traditional like bank financing no credit checks or things like that but we have a strong loan committee that is established either you know at our financial institutions within the community business owners that reviews these applications and approves them and it's a very quick process in order to be able to get approved and so where that has been really really helpful is that it has been able to provide a lot of great gap financing for people looking to establish on Main Street and you know with those monies you could purchase inventory for your location you could you know make updates to the building as you need to there are some restrictions on what those funds can be used for but really it's just been a great opportunity to be able to help push that dream over the finish line and to be able to establish your brick and mortar location, and something unique that we were able to do through the pandemic is because we do you know we did have those loan funds available and we were able to do \$5000 micro loans to people on Main Street and so with that they were able and we you know to be honest with you we didn't put a whole ton of restrictions on those funds I know that people are able to pay their insurance payments they were able to you know really keep bills paid and give them some Peace of Mind through those shutdowns and through the uncertainty of small business and so we were able to do several of those \$5000 micro loans and a lot of the businesses once they're up and going again they just paid it back but I could tell you that it helped relieve a lot of the fears surrounding small business owners on Main Street during that time.

What have these helpful/successful strategies and practices done within Hutchinson's Main Street district?

So since 2017 I went back and did some research and some data on this since 2017 alone downtown hutch has seen over 60 new businesses on Main Street and so I would just say that you know the density of those districts and the vibrancy of a Main Street and just the heart of a downtown when people see things like that happening they want to be down in it and so I think that as people have established and as this work has gone on like it's just really um energized people to want to be on Main Street and so we have seen a huge growth through the help of you know like I said before we took it over with Jim Sitenater when he was running our downtown organization and then just continuing that on with business owners that really care about the Main Street too and want to have packed parking stalls on the weekend and things going on and we do a lot of different things too draw people into downtown hutch in terms of promotions and shopping opportunities and things to just really draw people in, this year in October we had or 2022 excuse me we had our very first shop n treat on Main Street and so it brought in almost 500 kids to trick or treat on Main Street and so that was the first year that we did it and we're gonna definitely do it again and also you know we have different shopping opportunities throughout the year that we do some marketing and some advertising for to draw people into come into hutch and shop and every December well excuse me November end of November beginning of December up until our third Thursday we do like a holiday window decorating contest where they decorate their windows and people in the community vote and so really just being very interactive with the community and showing them all the great things happening and then that

spreads because people are telling their friends to come shop in downtown and so really it's just an overall approach of how you know do we draw people in the best and really let them see what we have going on here.

How did you learn of these strategies and practices?

Just from historical data that was provided to us and through you know just reading old files and just really learning from the great work that has been done and just continuing that on and yeah just reading really and seeing the value because it's visible when you drive down main street for sure.

What do business owners and community members think of the strategies and practices that you have used and how have they overall affected the entire district?

So um with the Kansas Main Street and then you know on top of that like national Main Street there is the four point approach you know they really have the foundation laid for communities of what they should fall in line with what they should do so we have a very strong downtown coalition that meets monthly that talks about promotions that talks about what they're doing in their stores um we strategize next steps we talk you know economic development so I would say you know just the buy in from the business owners and the property owners in Main Street is huge too but then just again going with knowing how the approach is and knowing the expectations of what helps make a thriving downtown has been has been very very helpful because you know like with economic vitality with promotions with governance with design it helps because it really helps lay that groundwork and you know, you know the things that work and you know what you should do to help your community the best that you can.

What are the overall benefits that these strategies and practices have brought to downtown Hutchinson?

Well our retail tax base is growing yeah which is always great you wanna see those sales tax numbers trend upwards and ours is you know with the caveat of we know that inflation is happening right now we know that there are some things that help drive that but also just knowing that people are shopping here and people are interested and um coming here and having a day trip and seeing what the community has to offer I think is you can see it in our sales tax numbers but you can also see it too with just driving through Main Street and seeing the parking stalls full seeing people walking up and down main street I think that you can definitely it's a visible not only a monetary but also a visible that you can see.

What do you believe is most important to focus on when addressing the issue of vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts?

I think you have to be very mindful of the property owner I think that you can't you know we all have a vision of what we would want to see right and but I think that you also have to be mindful of the property owner and know that they still own that building right and you have to be respectful of albeit you may not agree with it with their vision for their building is and it's a big undertaking to look at a upper floor and say okay yes now I'm ready to do something like this and it could be that some people don't have the funding for it, it could be that some people don't have the drive or whatever that could be I still think that you have to be respectful of the property owner and their overall approach but I think also information sharing is so helpful also because like I've said you know some of the resources that are available now have never been available before and while people that work in this work every single day we know it's available and we know that things that are happening I think that you get in this cycle of you know but not everybody else knows so I think you know as a community and as an organization just information sharing the most that you can but also so we also have we have start up hutch which is here in our community and so they are they really deal heavily in our world of entrepreneurs and helping with business plans and helping with succession plans and some financing opportunities as well and so really partnering with community organizations to help spread the word as well and let them know that we're here to help in this capacity they're here to help in this capacity we work together and the more that we could talk to people about opportunities I just think the better off that we can be because and again not everybody has strong succession plans and so that's a tough conversation to have is when you can see that you know people are aging out or they're not they're not 100% ready to let it go but there's no what next and so I think that when you fall into that those are situations that nobody wants and sometimes you know even the property owner whoever that is doesn't want it either they just don't know what to do next yeah and so just helping them with resources available and talking them through what some next steps could be.

Is there anything else you would like to share/add about your experience with vacancies and underutilized space within Hutchinson's Main Street District?

I just think that we have a really great community you know community groups that come together and want to work together to help get us to the next level like I said embarking on this strategic plan process with the Olsson studio and community members and our city and I think that that will really help also because it's an outside agency that looks at the big picture of things right they don't have the blinders on they don't have the tie to this building or that build you know they come in with a really fresh approach and they look at the district as a whole and then they can help those next steps and say well you know what we heard is this and what we saw is this and so I really think that up until this point we have done such a great job getting to where we are right now and I think that you know it's just such a great thing to say okay what's next because as a community and again we're not unique you know you never want to go in and be reactive all the time like you want to be proactive and you want to be able to say okay well we've sat down and we've looked at it and next steps would be this and so I just really think that you know the more community relationships and the more partnerships that you can form to help have that end goal in mind is so helpful because this work is really hard work and it's not my community it's not this person's community like it's all of our community and so if we can come

together and say like this is really what we want to look at I think that is just what helps create a strong community.

Is there anything else you would like to share or add about Hutchinson's Main Street district in general?

I came from a really small town where like the heart was in downtown and so I just love to see our downtown and I think that we have some beautiful buildings I think that we have some amazing business owners we have some really great things happening and I just think it's been fun to be a part of just a little small piece of its success because again we have some business owners that really work hard every single day and are in the weeds doing what they can do, we also have some property owners that have come in if it's some buildings and turned them around and done some just really beautiful things and so I just think that to be even just a little part of this is really really fun yeah that you can see the lasting change and you can see with the great vibrancy happening.

Additional Interview Questions with Debra Teufel

There's a pretty good slide deck that we did for when we were first introducing like our community to some of the planners that we interviewed for the planning process and one of them kind of does a then and now on some of the things that have been redone and then we had a group of just kind of partner organizations that started working together that would kind of be going back to 2018 I guess 18, 19 and 20 with our Community Foundation our Main Street organization the city chamber, downtown, hutch rec, startup hutch and it was called the CPIN and so the CPIN group kind of put this list together of buildings that were low hanging fruit like of all of our wish list of things that need to happen next these are the buildings that we want something to happen with next and we put that list together in 18 and when we revisited it for the presentation for the planners we're like something's happening with almost every single one of them so yeah so sometimes it just works out that way but I think it's not like it wasn't intentional but it yeah it just you know sometimes there's just a life cycle of the way things happen.

So Upstairs Downtown they are nationally known for their work that they do Kansas Main Street had a training opportunity for the Main St. communities in August of 21 yeah August of 21 and they held that here in Hutchinson and so through some of that work they talked about you know just code mitigation funds because a lot of that in Main Street districts is something that a lot of small business owners or a lot of property owners they just can't afford and so you know they talked about best steps next steps for communities and you know the code mitigation fund was one of them I'm working with your city officials to help we know why code is there it is there for a reason but sometimes it's the interpretation of that code that is difficult and so you know so they talked through a lot of that so yeah we hosted them in August of 21 and then part of that we were able to walk through some loft spaces in downtown that had at one point been vacancies but turned into and so yeah and we had um gosh several other Kansas communities in attendance for that.

I mean the number one approach that we took was kind of one we keep a real estate database on our greater hutch website and that is simply fed by our local MLS and so it isn't really a vacancy analysis but it is kind of a litmus test about any given point about what is on the market officially now there's always those buildings that are never going to hit the market that are under marketed and so when especially when we just that's more of just primary research of talking to building owners and assessing those things that are just never gonna be officially listed but and then kind of identifying like I said what I call low hanging fruit those things that have high visibility and would have high impact if redeveloped and then matching those up to what we think are viable business opportunities that that could actually produce revenue for business but there are various reasons why buildings sit vacant and sometimes it's you know they're too far gone or they or would be so expensive to bring up to code but some have great potential then you can overcome those with the right resources if you have the right business opportunities so I think our approach has been a little bit proactive but in determining what are we focused on but maybe it's a little reactionary too of we all we as the chamber we often get those inquiries first of where people are looking and that's kind of our litmus test of where the markets going that's also where I talked about the IWW loan fund and how we've been able to help fill that gap we can't fund an entire project unfortunately although that would be but we can help bridge those gaps of \$20,000 or you know even less I also talked about through COVID on you know while you know we know somebody communities so many businesses were highly impacted we were really I would say lucky in the sense that we really only lost two businesses COVID wasn't the reason but with those IWW loan funds we were able to do some of those micro loans to help bear some of that burden off and you know take some of the weight off of people's shoulders of uncertainty yeah the other leveraging small tools that they have like that with other larger pools of money it was where partnering with startup hutch and the Community Foundation are so important and hopefully in your research you found that community foundations are starting to find their place as more of a driver of development because they're usually sitting on a lot of wealth and rather than just them investing it in the market and waiting for it to generate a return they realized they can put those resources to use to partner with other community organizations that's and that's how the CPIN initiative really came about was that an experiment that the Aspen institute wanted to do with four Kansas communities and Hutchinson was chosen Coffeyville, Topeka and Norton all very differently sized communities some of which are Main Street communities and some weren't but hopefully and maybe you'll have a question on this but how can community philanthropy help drive Main St. redevelopment would be another area for you to look at.

I mean number one thing is sales tax generation and job creation I mean those things that you can measure because sometimes you just get a general feel for it from the viewpoint of does it look more vibrant but to prove out how to actually measure it that economic vitality measurement of new job creation and sales tax and so for U.S. sales tax has grown year over year we also just had our state of the city address this morning at breakfast Lacie probably told and it's just really good to see our city coffers filling up if we you know we didn't experience a dip post COVID and I think a lot of that is because of that work to continue to redevelop real estate.

That cataloging what you have like doing a situation analysis of what is available so at any given time you do kind of either have a mental picture of but hopefully a list somewhere of the vacancies that so that you can't match those up to the inquiries that inevitably will come it's

natural for Main St. organizations to jump straight into promotion because four points approach you have a promotion committee for a reason and so getting foot traffic generated in your downtown is one thing but I think from a just from a development practice standpoint probably that cataloging what you have knowing who your resource partners are and then being able to be a matchmaker, and I also said too just the respect of the business or the property owner and knowing that maybe they don't know about those resources and maybe they're aging out they don't know what to do next and so just knowing that it's they're building and how can we best help them of next steps to help which is where you know the Community Foundation and start up hutch relationships really come into play too.

You know I think like one of the major buildings that we want to redevelop that's been a difficult one is that absentee owners sometimes hold all the cards whether it's in a downtown or on a highway corridor and so being able to get site control is another one of probably the most important thing for communities to have either a foundation partner some sort of financial partner that when a building that you would like to get control of presents itself for sale that you have the ability to buy it and then take your time on the redevelopment and development world we call that patient capital like having the wherewithal as a community to determine your own destiny rather than it being created for you by a building owner that's just not gonna play well with you so the landmark hotel building is that example of a really old property that has good bones that is also really visible and if it's not taken care of can be a blight on the whole rest of the district and so yeah that's that would be the number one thing is yeah do everything you can to gain site control so that you can create your own destiny or at least hold one of the cards and then and you know and then encouraging state and local folks to work together on programs that are meaningful like sometimes states will have like the RHID program in Kansas is one example of it's a newer tool to encourage rural housing but everyone still trying to figure it out and it's easy to just talk about these programs by name and think that they're going to do some good but yeah we actually need people creating the programs to understand that we also have you know ten other day jobs so make the programs as easy and flexible for communities to use them as we can from a state policymaker perspective.

Interview with Bob North (1/25/23)

So I'll tell you about our RHID at a high level and how we kind of tweaked it to make it fit downtowns in small communities and rural communities, so RHID has been around for over 20 years and it's a rural housing incentive district and it's a tool that lets cities and counties help pay for housing infrastructure you know sewer, water, electricity, roads, so it started out nobody really used it very much and then in junction city the fort Riley area with you know 15 years ago they expected a bunch of the big red 1 soldiers to once they cycled through the service they thought they would all need a place to live and they might want to stay in that area so that was the first project and then it didn't work out too well because the soldiers ended up going back all over the country but then I'd say 10ish years ago you know the housing situation in Kansas I mean every community needs housing at some level but rural communities needed even more so you know we'll be trying to bring a new business into a community and they haven't had a new house built in 60 or 70 years so young people and you think of healthcare workers teachers and kind of those kind of jobs in a small community you know they want a decent place to live and you know a 75 year old house that maybe has or hasn't been renovated just doesn't cut it and so the housing shortage is effecting economic development and impacts our ability, so it's a really acute need and what our RHID does is it's an incentive to defray the cost of what it costs to build new housing compared to you know what people can maybe afford to pay for that housing so rural areas the appraisal system is different because the 75 year old homes aren't valued as high and so if you want to build a new home you're not gonna be able to borrow as much at the bank etc. and so let's say you build a subdivision and the first row house incentive district project were all like that they were greenfield projects so somebody wanted to add 8 houses 10 houses so you create your district which would be the subdivision and then the county appraiser you know values that greenfield and it's probably classified as AG land and so the property tax is relatively nominal and then for a period for up to 25 years the city or the county can capture the incremental increase in property tax as the developer puts homes on it or apartments or whatever the project might be and then that 25 years of property tax increment that can either go towards reimbursing the developer who maybe had to put in a road or maybe a sidewalk or sewer line or whatever it is so most of the projects that we see are reimbursement of developers cost and also some bonds and use the property tax to pay that service on the bond, that's a rarity I think Doge City did that, so that was going along great we got a lot of interest we got probably 80 some districts established but it didn't work for downtowns really so a couple years ago legislature took our request to amend the RHID act to allow for the upper stories on buildings in a central business district that are at least 25 years old so now RHID can be used to actually pay for renovation and some of the vertical construction costs associated, a lot of times you'll see a building in a rural downtown and it's got some commercial on the first floor and so they second and third story you know you can make into lofts or apartments or condos or what have you and so the program was expanded specifically to try to help rural downtowns to try to track in people you know some people want to be in a little denser space they want to be where whatever action there is in that town so we've been doing these upper story rural housing incentive district projects the last couple years and there's some like Emporia's got some that are complete and they're just beautiful and then several other communities are working on them as well.

How long have you worked in or with this particular program?

I've been the Chief Council at the Department of Commerce since 2004 and I worked on all of the RHID projects that have come through here since then.

What is a brief history of RHID within Kansas?

So I think for RHID the act was um passed by the legislature in the mid to late 90's and the program was relatively dormant until roughly in 2007, 2008 when a community here in Kansas had a military base and planned on it, anticipated a large influx of soldiers that were finishing up their service time and the city anticipated a need for a lot of housing for those soldiers and their families as they exited the services so they built several hundred homes and had a multifamily project and used RHID for that purpose and then I'd say roughly 10 years ago or so that the housing need across the state became more acute and developers in cities and counties were looking for more tools and programs to help close the gap between the cost of building new housing and what folks in rural areas could afford to pay you know so taking into consideration kind of the appraisal gap that exists between metropolitan areas and rural areas and so we started to see a strong uptick in uh rural housing incentive districts and interest in those districts and so that uptick has accelerated significantly over the last 4 or 5 years and we've got close to 30 local units of government with over 80 RHID's established.

Have many Main Street districts utilized the resources that RHID provides or the benefits that it provides and if so have they proven to be helpful in Main Street districts?

Yeah so in the last couple of years the legislature amended the RHID act to allow for upper story projects in central business districts of rural communities we've seen a significant amount of interest in the program as it applies to downtown areas and upper story housing, we probably got I'd say at least a half dozen communities that are in the process of you know working on a project that's gonna be in the upper levels of a downtown building there's Emporia for example has completed a couple of upper story projects and converted that space into lofts and apartment and really beautiful housing projects and that's you know based on their ability to utilize the benefits under the act.

What are some of the overall benefits that RHIDs have brought to Main Street districts in Kansas?

It's an opportunity to take typically dilapidated and blighted unused buildings in downtowns and turn those into community assets and the property tax increment that provides the reimbursement to the developer makes it economically feasible for a developer to invest his or her own money in a downtown building and bring that building back to life and as you travel the state you know every small community's got a central business core and typically you can almost always see buildings there that are not utilized and have become rundown and not a good repair so this act

allows to bring new life and it also meets a need for housing that these communities have and keeps their downtown vital and feasible as well.

Are there any other resources or ideas that kind of relate to RHID or ideas that you've gotten from RHID's that you have thought about implementing to provide additional help to Main Streets with vacancies and underutilized space?

Yeah that's a great question, and yes we're always looking at ways to improve that program and so currently we're looking at the possibility of using RHID for infill housing, so lets say you've got two buildings in your downtown but you've got two vacant lots between them so we're exploring allowing RHID to construct not to renovate but construct new housing opportunities between those existing buildings, and that would be another tool that would help downtowns and Main Streets dramatically because a lot of Main Streets have those gaps right, so opportunities to create more housing downtown that uses that program.

Is there anything else you would like to add or share about RHID's in relation to vacancies and underutilized space within Main Street districts at all?

It's not the only solution to helping with housing opportunities you know on the Main Streets of rural communities but it is a strong tool that is making a difference and its getting capital invested into these downtowns and into Main Street and you know there are other programs that can also help these efforts, so you know we feel good about RHID and always trying to make it better so we can do more good things.

Do you know of any other resources or programs that are similar to RHID's that would help mitigate the issue of vacancies and underutilized space?

I mean there are some similar programs, there's the Neighborhood Revitalization Act but it also functions off of the increase in property tax it's just that the increase in property tax goes to the um individual that owns the property not necessarily to the project but the Kansas Housing Resource Corporation, hopefully Kayla mentioned them they've got some programs, there's the Moderate Income Housing Program which gives out cash awards to housing projects that are particularly geared at low to moderate income individuals and there's tax credits there's low income housing tax credit programs there are other housing related programs that could potentially help this, you know our RHID is not a silver bullet its part of the solution but not all of it and I know the legislature they passed some extra programs last year and put 20 million dollars into the MIH program so the policymakers they understand the widespread need for housing throughout the states and so they're taking action to help with this and we just have to keep doing more.