THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF QUALITY URBAN DESIGN IN DOWNTOWN WICHITA

– Jason Gregory, Executive Vice President for Downtown Wichita

I can tell by the bustling restaurant patios and the stands full of fans at Riverfront Stadium that I am not the only one ready for social interaction.

A year of public safety-mandated distancing has made us thankful for gathering spaces that can safely bring communities, cities and regions together. The pandemic experience has helped make clear the connection of how quality urban design can establish and accelerate a vibrant downtown core. Downtown is everyone's neighborhood and our growth as a region is tied to the long-term strength of our urban center.

Urban design means something different to everyone; when I talk about urban design, I'm speaking from a design language that can be boiled down to four principles:

- Place—maximizing the character of our downtown and developing its unique sense of place
- Equity—making public spaces accessible and enjoyable to all
- Detail—considering architectural materials, scale and relationships with existing surroundings
- Comfort—ensuring people feel safe and comfortable

Our Old Town District is an incredible example of how these elements can work together successfully. It's an area that also proves urban design is a long game; the success there has required everyone involved working together over the course of the past 20 to 25 years.

Another example of effective urban design in downtown Wichita is the restoration of the historic Spaghetti Works warehouse and the newly constructed mixed-use building along Douglas Avenue. Both properties are located adjacent to the recently redesigned Naftzger Park and were completed in Spring 2020. Project Downtown: The Master Plan for Wichita (our community's vision for downtown development adopted in 2010) recognizes this location between INTRUST Bank Arena and Old Town as a catalyst site. And by "catalyst site," I am referring to strategic locations outlined in the master plan that upon redevelopment have the potential to spur continued growth. The public and private sectors work together to redevelop these sites and maximize the return on strategic public investment.

As a result of many stakeholders working toward a shared vision, we now have a beautiful, inviting area that connects INTRUST Bank Arena and Old Town and gives us open, programmable space in the middle of downtown, including the new iconic Evergy Pavilion. The renovated public park, the conversion of an empty historic building into residential units, and the in-fill development of a new mixed-use commercial building creates a signature gathering place and hub of activity for our community.

We were able to get just a small glimpse of what's possible at the park last year during a few public events before COVID-19 and smaller-scale activities during the pandemic. This area will be activated nearly 24/7 because of the thoughtful design and

the dedicated collaboration between all groups involved.

An opportunity emerging from the pandemic is businesses saw possibilities they'd never considered before. Working remotely, in many cases, has allowed people unprecedented freedom to choose where they want to live. That includes people looking to trade the congestion of a big city and a high cost of living for a place like Wichita.

But what will attract talent to our region versus another Midwest community with an affordable way of life? Research tells us that starts with a vibrant, active core that has the unique amenities they are looking for.

That's why we must continue to invest in our urban core and be aspirational in our planning and design. Our Old Town District led the way with its decades-long resurgence in downtown that continues to evolve and our community's newest outcome is Riverfront Stadium—designed with its main entry to encourage interaction with the river and a secondary entry leading directly into the very walkable, welcoming historic Delano District.

While we can celebrate our newest civic asset, I hope we'll also use it as momentum for future projects. Last year, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of Project Downtown and our progress since the plan's adoption. The numbers show this community plan to drive investment and development in the urban core is having a positive impact.

When I look at those metrics, I see confidence—from lenders, local government, the public and investors. Let's continue to work as a community to embed quality urban design into Wichita's core. We need to develop the Riverfront Legacy Master Plan with the goal of making the Arkansas River, which I consider our community's most important natural asset, accessible and enjoyable for everyone. From there, we will continue to work on the connectivity of our key civic assets, filling in the gaps with thoughtful urban development.

Jason Gregory, Executive Vice President for Downtown Wichita

Learn about a recent placemaking success in the core in a blog from Emily Brookover

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