Phase 1: Immerse

Over the past few months, we've been thrilled to kick off the Downtown Wichita Action Plan (Action Plan), a participatory process to envision and shape the future of Wichita's urban core.

On March 4, 2025, more than 540 Wichitans gathered at WAVE for a lively kickoff event, sharing their ideas and aspirations for downtown's next chapter.

At the event, participants explored key topics including Living & Working Downtown, Urban Form, History & Culture, Landscape Systems and Getting Around.

Attendees contributed valuable insights on what makes downtown Wichita unique and what improvements are needed, such as enhancing walkability, increasing family-friendly spaces, expanding green areas and improving safety. Many praised downtown's affordability, arts and culture scene and dining options while identifying opportunities to make the area more vibrant and accessible.

Curious to learn more? Here's what you told us!

A highlight of the kickoff was a keynote presentation by Jeff Speck, renowned walkability expert and author of "Walkable City", who inspired the community with ideas on creating a more pedestrian-friendly and connected downtown. For those who missed it, a recording of Jeff Speck's talk is available here.

The input gathered at the kickoff is guiding the project team, led by global urban planning firm Sasaki and their partners, as they develop a series of "big ideas" that will shape downtown's growth and development over the next decade.

Stay tuned for more details and opportunities to get involved as we work together to create a vibrant, walkable, and welcoming urban core that reflects the spirit of Wichita.

Curious to learn more about our findings from Phase 1: Immerse? Learn more below and check out what we heard from you !

Living & Working

Highlights

- The Wichita Biomedical Campus℠ will diversify the economy and attract new talent, directly boosting demand for housing downtown.

- Projected growth includes 3,765 new housing units by 2030, with strong demand for rentals in the 80-120% AMI range and for-sale condos and townhomes.
- This growth opens opportunities for a variety of housing developments and attracts a broader range of developers.

Challenges

- Residents express a strong need for more amenities downtown, including grocery stores, shopping, dining, cultural venues, nightlife and wellness options.
- There is a low sense of community and belonging, with calls for more "community living room" spaces beyond food and drink venues.
- Downtown currently hosts few major employers, limiting the number of people who can live and work in the core.

Intervention Opportunities

- Develop diverse housing options that meet the needs of new residents and workers.
- Expand amenities and community spaces to foster social connection and improve quality of life.
- Attract more employers downtown to create a vibrant live-work environment.

Urban Form

Highlights

- Downtown features a rich collection of historic buildings offering unique identity and adaptive reuse potential.
- Central Business District zoning allows significantly more development capacity. Current buildings realize only 15% of the allowed gross floor area.
- Downtown's lack of minimum parking requirements gives developers more flexibility.

Challenges

- Almost half of downtown land is surface parking lots, which can make the area feel empty and disconnected.
- Investment is scattered, and some developers hesitate to take risks, leaving parcels underused.
- New construction has often used shapes and materials that don't complement grander architecture typical of urban environments.

Intervention Opportunities

- Focus investment along key streets to create connected, lively areas.

- Manage parking better to free up land for development.
- Coordinate major projects around a shared vision for downtown.

Getting Around

Highlights

- Many Wichitans are willing to walk over 10 minutes from their cars, showing demand for walkable environments.
- Existing road capacity offers opportunities to redesign streets for balanced mobility, including walking, biking, transit and driving.
- The city is proactively planning road diets and transit network improvements.

Challenges

- The transit center is moving away from downtown, reducing public transit access.
- Current street designs favor cars over pedestrians, and many sidewalks lack interesting shops or activities.
- The street layout can feel confusing, boring and disconnected.

Intervention Opportunities

- Create a clear street hierarchy supporting all types of travel.
- Design streets that are welcoming and engaging for people on foot.
- Align transit and street plans to work together smoothly.
- Improve connections between downtown's key places.

History & Culture

Highlights

- Wichita's rich history and culture are visible throughout downtown, supported by strong city arts leadership.
- A diverse group of cultural leaders is working to grow the city's creative scene.

Challenges

- Downtown lacks a visible, critical mass of creative activity despite anchor cultural institutions.

- Too much clutter from signs and street furniture can be confusing.
- District identities are unclear, causing confusion about downtown's boundaries and cultural districts.

Intervention Opportunities

- Connect cultural venues along key streets to create a "Cultural Corridor." Use creative lighting, signage and programming to highlight cultural assets.
- Improve wayfinding and sight lines to enhance navigation, safety and encourage visitors to linger.

Landscape Systems

Highlights

- The Arkansas River is a vital natural and cultural asset with popular bike and pedestrian trails and iconic art installations.
- Downtown is close to major cultural destinations like the Keeper of the Plains and Botanica gardens.
- Existing programs along the river support outdoor recreation and cultural engagement.

Challenges

- Connections between downtown and the riverfront are weak, limiting access and integration.
- Downtown lacks sufficient tree cover and shaded areas, reducing comfort for outdoor gatherings.
- Public spaces lack vibrant programming, limiting social interaction and community building.
- Wayfinding and storytelling in the public realm are insufficient, hindering visitor engagement.

Intervention Opportunities

- Create green corridors and parks linking downtown to the river.
- Prioritize programming in open spaces with activities like sports, river recreation and public terraces.
- Build "community living rooms" – welcoming outdoor spaces for people to meet and relax.