

Wichita's Old Town

- Streets – ADA/Bike
- Streets - funding
- Streets - maintenance

Background

“Wichita’s Old Town is home to a collection of large brick structures, built primarily between 1870 and 1930, located adjacent to downtown. The area is approximately 25 acres, shaped roughly like a square and made up of long skinny blocks, bounded by arterials on three sides and rail on the fourth. Originally, buildings were used for the storage and transfer of goods from wholesalers to retailers.”¹

In 2004, the original 4-block area of Old Town received National Register of Historic Places designation. Old Town is still a limited industrial area with many commercial and entertainment uses (bars and restaurants) developed on the first floor with housing above.

Redevelopment History

“In 1991, Wichita adopted the Old Town Overlay District that allows for residential uses within the underlying Limited Industrial zoning. It also established design criteria that allow modern high-density, mixed-use development within the

¹ Barrett, Evan, Anna Lackender, Sushil Nepal, and Kyle Smith. Dubuque Warehouse District Recommendations for Revitalization. Rep. Dubuque: City of Dubuque Department of Economic Development, 2007. Print.

historic character of Old Town.

That same year, routine tests found groundwater contamination in a six-square-mile area that included Old Town. Rather than seek assistance through the federal Superfund program, Wichita took financial responsibility for the cleanup by creating an environmental Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district.

After the cleanup, several new restaurants and businesses opened in Old Town. A separate TIF district for Old Town improvements was created, and the city and Sedgwick County contributed \$4 million to start street improvements, pedestrian-level lighting, sidewalks, parking facilities, and rehabilitation of the building that would house the new farmer's market.

Improvements included brick paving to preserve the historic character of the neighborhood and a parking district to promote shared parking. The city also eliminated curbs, provided wide sidewalks, and preserved the boardwalks to ensure that citizens using bicycles, wheelchairs, and strollers could easily move around Old Town. Two large public plazas were designed to host specialty events, festivals, and concerts and to serve as informal gathering places to relax and play.”²

“Property owners paid for 50% of the streetscape

² "Old Town Wichita — Wichita, Kansas." *Great Places in America: Neighborhoods*. American Planning Association. Web. 24 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.planning.org/greatplaces/neighborhoods/2008/oldtownwichita.htm>>.

improvements. However, because the City of Wichita owned so much land, in total they paid for approximately 70% of the streetscape improvements.”³

Parking

The first master plan created in 1983, identified parking within Old Town as a significant redevelopment barrier. Wichita created a zoning overlay, establishing separate off street parking requirements for the Old Town district and adopting the shared parking concept, where each business owner pays parking fees based upon the already established parking requirements for their specific use. All parking lots and ramps are owned and controlled by the City of Wichita. To date, collected parking fees have covered about half the cost of the initial parking facilities construction.

Historic Brick Streets

The overlay-zoning district that changed parking regulations in Old Town also identified brick streets as a character-defining feature of the district. Prior to the creation of said overlay district, Wichita city ordinances, zoning codes, and/or regulations did not call out brick streets as a character defining feature, nor did they require historic brick streets be retained.

To merit brick preservation, the City of Wichita’s Historic Preservation Office has ranked and prioritized all thoroughfares with historic street materials. The City has also

³ Barrett, Evan, Anna Lackender, Sushil Nepal, and Kyle Smith. Dubuque Warehouse District Recommendations for Revitalization. Rep. Dubuque: City of Dubuque Department of Economic Development, 2007. Print.

instituted a policy that requires bricks (or historic street materials) be replaced in utility cuts on historic streets however there is not a mandated existing patch replacement program.

Currently, Wichita does not have a specific brick maintenance budget. If brick streets are reconstructed, in certain locations there are partial assessments relayed to owners.

Brick streets that are not retained are subject to Wichita’s salvage policy, which requires historic pavers be removed, cleaned, and stockpiled for future reuse. Public works staff on light duty hand clean and palletize pavers. The City then reuses salvaged pavers for other restoration projects in City limits.

Loading Docks

Similar to the Warehouse District, Old Town businesses typically use loading docks for either delivery or outdoor seating.

Wichita’s Design Guidelines for Existing Properties states “Features such as loading docks and metal canopies, which relate to the commercial history of the district merit preservation as well.” However, the City will allow modification if it follows the Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Kathy Morgan, Sr. Planner for Wichita’s Historic Preservation Office recommends “if modification is necessary to make loading docks ADA accessible, mandate all accessibility ramps be placed on one side of dock throughout the district, (e.g. all loading docks will be accessible from the north or west ends of

dock) and set guidelines, so there is conformity in the district.

Explanation of TIF

“Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds specific public improvements by allocating future increases in property tax revenue from a specific parcel or collection of parcels that directly benefit from the improvements. The mechanism was originally conceived as a way to improve areas with excessive vacancies, deteriorating infrastructure, declining tax base, and other indicators of blight.”⁴ In 2004, the City of Minneapolis invested about \$80 of TIF funds to redevelop the riverfront district.

Lessons for Minneapolis’ Warehouse District

- Parking in the Warehouse District and near the Twins Stadium can be a challenge. Wichita’s creative solution to parking helped “remove a common urban redevelopment barrier, a lack of public parking.” Minneapolis should look to implement similar new and innovative ideas.
- Wichita created an overlay district that addressed and/or solved many problems unique to the Old Town district. Minneapolis should assess Warehouse District needs; if an overlay district could alleviate some design and/or preservation dilemmas, than one should possibly be considered.

⁴ Barrett, Evan, Anna Lackender, Sushil Nepal, and Kyle Smith. Dubuque Warehouse District Recommendations for Revitalization. Rep. Dubuque: City of Dubuque Department of Economic Development, 2007. Print.

- “The City of Wichita made multiple streetscape investments in Old Town funded to induce area redevelopment. These public improvement projects demonstrated Wichita’s commitment to Old Town and encouraged private developers to invest their own capital.”⁵ The City of Minneapolis “should work with property owners and developers to determine appropriate timelines for streetscape improvements.”⁶ The City may want to consider creating a TIF district in the Warehouse District, to improve streets and streetscapes.



Wichita's Old Town district at dusk (Source: Keith Wondra via Flickr).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.