CITY OF PONCA CITY, OKLAHOMA

Mayor's Task Force on

Downtown Revitalization

Final Report and Policy Recommendations

June 2026

Executive Summary

The Mayor's Task Force on Downtown Revitalization met three times between March and May 2026 to develop policy recommendations in five areas: building maintenance and vacancy standards, incentive programs for renovation, upper-story development, accountability for absentee owners, and zoning reform. The task force consisted of 11 voting members — downtown property owners, business operators, and commissioners — plus 5 ex-officio advisory members from city staff, the Ponca City Development Authority, and Ponca City Main Street.

The task force approved the following recommendations:

1. **Adopt a Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance** with a Building Grade Classification system (Grades A through D), a 6-month vacancy trigger for Grand Avenue storefronts and 12-month trigger for the broader downtown district, and escalating quarterly fees that double annually. Approved unanimously, Meeting 3.
2. **Adopt the CBD Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program** providing a 50% match up to $75,000 for building envelope and life safety improvements, with upper-story projects prioritized and eligibility open to any permitted use in the CBD. Funded at $300,000 annually. Approved, Meeting 3.
3. **Preclude passive storage and warehousing** as permitted uses in the central business district. Consensus, Meeting 1.
4. **Integrate design guidelines into the Unified Development Code** rather than establishing a formal historic overlay district. The 2019 design guidelines document will serve as the starting point. A new series of task force meetings beginning in July 2026 will develop specific guidelines for adoption. Consensus, Meeting 3.

Background

Origin: The May 2025 Town Hall

In May 2025, over 100 community members attended a Downtown Revitalization Town Hall at City Hall. Commissioner Rob Bodick and Mayor Kelsey Wagner heard from downtown investors, Main Street leaders, the Chamber of Commerce, city staff, and residents. The consistent message was that dilapidation, vacancy, and apathy — not each other — are the primary obstacles to a thriving downtown. The community demanded action. This task force was convened to translate that mandate into specific, actionable policy.

Task Force Structure

The task force consisted of 11 voting members and 5 ex-officio advisory members. Mayor Wagner chaired the meetings and voted only in the event of a tie. Decisions were made by consensus where possible; when consensus could not be reached, recommendations were approved by simple majority vote. Dissenting views were recorded.

The task force met on the following dates:

- **Meeting 1 — March 12, 2026:** Orientation, Goal 1 (Vacancy Accountability & Building Standards), Goal 2 (Renovation Incentives & Financing Tools).
- **Meeting 2 — April 9, 2026:** Goal 3 (Upper-Story Development), Goal 4 (Adaptive Reuse & Zoning). Votes on ordinance and administrative fees.
- **Meeting 3 — May 14, 2026:** Updated ordinance with Building Grade Classification system, grant program approval, design guidelines, UDC permitted uses, and final recommendations.

What Ponca City Has Already Invested

The task force's work builds on significant existing investment:

- Over **$2 million** in downtown infrastructure over the past five years, including fire suppression grants, sidewalk improvements, decorative streetlights, signal poles, sound systems, and facade programs.
- **$1.78 million** in private reinvestment recorded by Main Street in 2024 alone.
- **20 buildings** renovated and **14 new or expanded businesses** in the last five years.
- **$40,000** in annual city funding to the Main Street program.
- **89%** of surveyed residents visit downtown at least monthly.

Why Downtown Is Different: The Shared-Wall Reality

Downtown Ponca City is not a collection of freestanding buildings. It is a continuous row of structures that share walls, share rooflines, and share risk. When one building deteriorates, the consequences do not stop at the property line. Water infiltration through a neglected roof migrates through shared walls into adjacent buildings. Structural failure in one building compromises the integrity of the buildings on either side. A fire in a building filled with combustible materials threatens the entire block — not because of the space between buildings, but because there is no space between them.

This physical reality is what makes downtown vacancy and neglect a collective problem, not just an individual property rights issue. A building owner who invests in a new roof, upgrades their electrical system, and maintains their facade is directly affected when the building next door sits vacant with a deteriorating roof, no utilities, and no maintenance plan. Water from the neglected building damages the invested building. Property values suppressed by the vacant building reduce the return on the invested building. Fire risk created by the neglected building threatens the invested building.

The task force heard this repeatedly from its members — many of whom own buildings downtown and have experienced these consequences firsthand. Members described bricks falling from neighboring buildings onto their roofs. Members described water damage migrating from adjacent vacant buildings into their renovated spaces. Members described the frustration of investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into their properties while the building next door sits empty, deteriorating, and dragging down the value of everything around it.

This shared-wall reality is the foundational reason the task force concluded that downtown requires a different standard than the rest of the city. In a freestanding residential neighborhood, a neglected property is an eyesore. In a shared-wall commercial district, a neglected property is a threat to every building it touches. The recommendations in this report — accountability for vacancy, incentives for renovation, design standards for the district — all flow from this basic physical fact.

Downtown District Data

The state's Main Street tracking system (the BOOMS Tracker) counts 346 parcels in the central business district. However, parcels are not the same as buildings. That number includes railroad right-of-way strips, utility easements, city-owned alley parcels, school district lots, church properties, parking lots, and residential homes. It also treats a building with three separate storefronts as one parcel, and a single business spanning two parcels as two entries.

To get an accurate picture of downtown, the task force merged the BOOMS parcel data with Ponca City Main Street's building inventory, classified every property, and separated ground-floor status from upper-floor status. The result is a building-level baseline. Of the 346 parcels, **270 are leasable commercial properties**. The remaining 125 parcels (residential, civic, religious, infrastructure, parking, and vacant lots) are tracked separately.

This distinction matters. When the community discusses downtown vacancy, the denominator should be leasable commercial buildings, not parcels that include railroad tracks and utility easements.

Legal Framework

Ponca City is a charter city operating under Oklahoma Title 11. Oklahoma preempts municipal unoccupied property registration fees. The city's primary enforcement tool is §11-22-112.4, which authorizes municipalities to maintain a list of abandoned buildings and assess quarterly costs as a municipal lien collectible as a tax. In July 2023, the City Commission adopted an abandoned building ordinance under this statute, but many chronically unoccupied buildings do not meet the "abandoned" threshold. The Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance recommended in this report fills that gap.

Recommendation 1: Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance

RECOMMENDATION
Adopt a Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance for the downtown central business district with a Building Grade Classification system (Grades A through D), a 6-month vacancy trigger for Grand Avenue storefronts and 12-month trigger for the broader district, and escalating quarterly administrative fees that double annually.
Vote: Unanimous (Meeting 3)

Problem Statement

Many downtown buildings are chronically unoccupied — no tenants, no maintenance plan, and no visible effort to activate the space — but do not meet the statutory threshold for "abandoned" under the city's existing 2023 ordinance. There is no mechanism to distinguish between an owner actively planning renovations and one simply holding a deteriorating asset. Unoccupied buildings suppress nearby property values by 5–15%, create fire and safety hazards, and impose costs on neighboring owners and the city.

Building Grade Classification System

The cornerstone of the ordinance is a grading system that classifies every building in the CBD annually:

- **Grade A — Active:** Fully occupied on all floors, maintained, code compliant. No enforcement action.
- **Grade B — Stable:** Ground floor occupied, maintained, but upper floors unoccupied. No enforcement action. Owner receives notification and awareness of available grants.
- **Grade C — At-Risk:** Ground floor unoccupied but building maintained, or showing early signs of neglect. Vacancy timelines begin. Grant access serves as an on-ramp to compliance.
- **Grade D — Critical:** Wholly unoccupied, deteriorating, or owner has failed to engage. Full enforcement applies.

Every building owner receives an annual notice with their classification. There is no ambiguity. Owners can move between grades based on their actions and may petition for reclassification at any time.

Definition of "Unoccupied"

The task force approved the following definition across Meetings 1, 2, and 3:

"A condition whereby a building lacks the habitual and continuous presence of human beings who have a legal right to be on the premises and are regularly working or living there."

In determining whether a building is unoccupied, the city may consider the following factors. Two or more must be present:

- Utility services have been disconnected or show zero usage for a defined period
- No active business license or certificate of occupancy on file
- Visual indicators of neglect (boarded windows, debris, deteriorating signage, unsecured entry points)
- Owner has failed to respond to city inquiries about the building's status
- No evidence of regular occupancy or business activity observed over a monitoring period
- Building has been unoccupied continuously for 365 days or more (off Grand) or 180 days or more (Grand Avenue storefronts)

Vacancy Timelines

- **6 months** for storefronts on Grand Avenue.
- **12 months** for the broader downtown district.
- **Pause conditions:** Active building permit, signed lease, active commercial listing at market price, or approved renovation plan. Burden of proof is on the owner. The clock does not reset if a permit is pulled and no progress is made — it resumes where it left off.

Fines and Enforcement

Quarterly administrative fees that double each year. The escalating structure creates increasing financial pressure on non-compliant owners. The task force specifically rejected a flat annual fee, noting that a $1,000-per-year fine is insufficient to compel action from many property owners and that other states assess fines in the thousands of dollars annually.

Fees are collected as a municipal lien under §11-22-112.4 with the same priority as a tax. Liens attach to the property and do not reset upon sale. The ordinance includes notice, hearing, and appeal procedures with due process protections.

Additional Provisions

- **Dumpster fee waiver:** City-provided rolloff containers at no charge for the first 30 days of renovation.
- **Local contact requirement:** Owners of unoccupied commercial properties must designate a reachable contact.

How We Got Here

This recommendation evolved significantly across all three meetings. In Meeting 1, the task force spent approximately 90 minutes defining "unoccupied," debating vacancy timelines, and discussing how to distinguish between owners who are investing and those who are not. The group unanimously agreed an ordinance is needed and approved a working definition.

In Meeting 2, the task force voted to approve the ordinance with specific changes: removing "or a portion thereof" from the definition and keeping indicator #5 (regarding multi-story buildings with occupied ground floors). One member dissented on the inclusion of #5, concerned it could inadvertently penalize occupied buildings.

Between Meetings 2 and 3, the Building Grade Classification system was developed to address that concern. The grading system handles upper-story vacancy through Grades A and B without enforcement, making indicator #5 redundant. The member who had dissented in Meeting 2 supported the updated version, and the Meeting 3 vote was unanimous.

Recommendation 2: CBD Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program

RECOMMENDATION
Adopt the CBD Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program providing a 50% match up to $75,000 for building envelope and life safety improvements, with upper-story projects prioritized through the Building Grade Classification system. Eligible for any permitted use in the central business district. Funded at $300,000 annually, separate from the existing fire suppression grant.
Vote: Approved (Meeting 3)

Problem Statement

Accountability without incentives is a dead end. If the city imposes greater accountability through the Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance, it must also provide greater resources for owners willing to invest. The cost of renovating a historic downtown building is often prohibitive — fire suppression alone runs $50,000–$150,000, and total upper-story renovation costs were cited by task force members at $350,000 to over $1 million for some buildings.

The existing CBD Code Compliance Grant covers only fire suppression. While critical, the narrow scope limits its effectiveness. Many building owners cannot justify fire suppression investment when they also need a new roof, electrical upgrades, or window replacements.

Program Structure

- **50% match, up to $75,000** per project.
- **$300,000 annual funding pool**, separate from the existing fire suppression grant program.
- **Eligible uses:** Any permitted use in the central business district. The task force specifically expanded this from a limited "beneficial land use" list after extensive discussion about the need to activate all unoccupied spaces, not just those suited to a narrow set of uses.
- **Eligible costs:** Building envelope and life safety improvements, defined broadly: roofing, windows, doors, electrical, structural, ADA compliance, and general code compliance. The task force chose a generalized category rather than an itemized list to avoid inadvertently excluding needed improvements.
- **Funds disbursed upon certificate of occupancy.** The building must be fully code-compliant and the space must be leased or in active use before reimbursement. This prevents partial projects and ensures public funds result in activated buildings.

Priority Structure

When applications exceed available funds, the Development Services Director prioritizes awards in the following order:

5. Upper-story renovation projects in buildings classified Grade C (At-Risk) or Grade D (Critical).
6. Upper-story renovation projects in buildings classified Grade B (Stable).
7. Upper-story renovation projects in buildings classified Grade A (Active) that add new occupiable space.
8. Ground-floor projects in buildings classified Grade C (At-Risk) or Grade D (Critical).

Staff retains discretion on prioritization within these categories, with recommendations brought to the City Commission for approval, similar to the HIP 2.0 process.

Grade A Eligibility

Buildings classified as Grade A (Active) are eligible for this program solely for the purpose of upper-story renovation or expansion that adds new occupiable space, provided the ground floor remains actively occupied throughout the duration of the project. This ensures that the most well-maintained buildings can still access the grant to activate vacant upper stories.

How We Got Here

The grant program was first discussed in Meeting 1, where the task force strongly supported expanding the existing CBD Code Compliance Grant beyond fire suppression. In Meeting 2, the resolution was tabled because the eligibility language created conflicts — buildings with occupied ground floors but vacant upper stories could not qualify under the original "unoccupied building" framework.

The Building Grade Classification system, added between Meetings 2 and 3, resolved this problem. Grade A and B buildings became clearly eligible for upper-story work without being declared unoccupied. The beneficial land use list was expanded from a limited set to any permitted CBD use after members argued that restricting uses would exclude buildings that most need activation, particularly large multi-story buildings suited primarily for office space.

Recommendation 3: Preclude Storage in the CBD

RECOMMENDATION
Amend the zoning code to preclude passive storage, warehousing, and mini-storage as permitted uses in the central business district. Active inventory associated with a functioning commercial business is not affected.
Vote: Consensus (Meeting 1), confirmed in UDC draft (Meeting 3)

Problem Statement

Multiple downtown buildings are being used primarily for passive storage of accumulated materials with no active business purpose. These buildings present fire hazards (combustible materials, no HVAC, extreme temperature swings), attract pests, and do not represent the highest and best use of commercial property in the downtown district. Buildings used for passive storage share walls with active businesses, creating risk for the entire block.

Discussion

This was one of the strongest consensus items across all three meetings. The task force distinguished between active inventory for a functioning business (acceptable) and passive storage of accumulated items with no business purpose (not acceptable). City staff confirmed that the UDC draft already reflects this recommendation, with mini storage listed as not permitted in the downtown district.

Recommendation 4: Design Guidelines in the UDC

RECOMMENDATION
Integrate design guidelines for the downtown central business district into the Unified Development Code rather than establishing a formal historic overlay district. Use the 2019 design guidelines document as the starting point. A new series of task force meetings beginning in July 2026 will develop specific guidelines for adoption.
Vote: Consensus (Meeting 3)

Problem Statement

Downtown Ponca City's building stock includes significant historic architecture, much of which has been altered or covered over decades. Currently, the only enforceable design standards apply to new construction and demolition. All other exterior modifications — including covering historic facades, painting buildings inappropriate colors, or making alterations inconsistent with the district's character — are merely suggested. There is no mechanism to prevent a building owner from defacing a historic structure.

Why Not a Historic Overlay District?

The task force considered and rejected a formal historic overlay district for several reasons:

- A historic overlay adds another layer of regulation at a time when the task force is working to reduce barriers to investment.
- Review by a historic preservation advisory panel was seen as potentially slow and burdensome for routine projects.
- A previous attempt in 2019 to adopt comprehensive design guidelines failed due to insufficient support, in part because the proposal was perceived as too onerous.
- Several members expressed concern that overregulation would discourage the investment momentum the task force is trying to build.

What the Task Force Recommends Instead

Design guidelines integrated into the UDC and enforced by city staff rather than a separate advisory panel. This approach is more flexible, faster to administer, and less likely to discourage investment. The city invested $60,000 in 2019 developing a comprehensive design guidelines document with building-specific examples from downtown Ponca City. This document will serve as the starting point, with selective incorporation into the UDC rather than wholesale adoption.

The task force emphasized that the most critical protections are: preventing facades from being covered or defaced, preventing inappropriate new construction if a building is demolished, and

maintaining the overall historic character of the streetscape. The guidelines should be clear and predictable, with administrative approval for routine projects.

A new series of meetings beginning in July 2026 will bring task force members and city staff together to review the 2019 document in detail, determine which guidelines should be adopted, and develop specific language for inclusion in the UDC. This work is ongoing and the specific design guidelines are not finalized in this report.

Additional Items Discussed

The following topics were discussed across the three meetings but did not result in formal recommendations. They are included here for the record and for the commission's consideration.

Business Improvement District

The BID concept was introduced in Meeting 1 and discussed in subsequent meetings. Several members expressed interest in a per-storefront fee structure rather than square-footage-based assessment, with revenue split between Main Street programming and city grant funding. Concerns were raised about disproportionate burden on owners with multiple properties and the administrative costs. The task force agreed that a BID is a separate process requiring a 51% petition from property owners and is outside the scope of this report, but members expressed interest in exploring it further.

Upper-Story Development Barriers

The task force extensively discussed the practical barriers to upper-story activation. Total renovation costs for upper stories were consistently cited at $350,000 to over $1 million per building. Specific barriers include fire suppression costs ($50,000–$150,000), elevator upgrades ($300,000+), sewer line upgrades from 3-inch cast iron to 4-inch, new water taps and electric meters, egress requirements constrained by alley utilities, and tenant disruption during construction. The grant program and grading system address these barriers partially, but the task force acknowledged this is a long-term challenge that will require continued attention.

Parking and Alley Infrastructure

Members raised parking as a growing concern as upper-story residential development increases. Alley access is constrained by overhead electrical lines, limiting rear egress construction and parking options. Burying alley utilities was identified as transformative but expensive. Energy providers reportedly have plans to bury overhead lines on the north side of downtown, though the timeline is uncertain.

Condominium-Style Upper-Story Ownership

A member raised the possibility of selling individual upper-story residential units rather than only leasing them. This involves complex code and legal issues and was flagged for future consideration.

Proactive Fire Marshal Inspections

The task force discussed the need for proactive commercial property inspections. Many comparable cities conduct fire marshal inspections of all commercial properties every two years. Ponca City has not historically done this but has a new fire marshal who is beginning to increase proactive inspections downtown.

Building Appearance Standards

In Meeting 1, a commissioner proposed universal appearance standards for all downtown commercial buildings regardless of occupancy: clean windows intact, doors secure, no structural deterioration, no trash, signage in good condition, and landscaping maintained. The group supported this concept but did not formalize it as a standalone recommendation, expecting it to be addressed through the design guidelines integrated into the UDC.

Insurance Costs

Multiple members identified insurance as a significant and rising cost for downtown building owners. One member reported an $880 annual increase, with total premiums at $13,000 per year. The idea of a cooperative insurance arrangement for downtown building owners was briefly discussed but not developed into a recommendation.

UDC Permitted Use Table

The task force began reviewing the UDC permitted use table for the downtown district in Meeting 3 and flagged several items for the ongoing UDC public meeting process. These are not formal recommendations of this task force but are noted here for the commission's awareness. Items discussed included: outdoor entertainment (members supported changing to special use), technical schools (members supported changing to special use), medical clinics (questioned why not permitted), bed and breakfast and short-term rentals (different use categories needing clarification), fitness center limitations, and medical marijuana (strong consensus that no additional marijuana-related uses should be permitted in the CBD). Mini storage was confirmed as not permitted, consistent with this task force's Recommendation 3.

Implementation

The task force considered implementation requirements as part of its deliberations. The following notes are provided for staff and commission consideration.

Ordinance and Grant Program

Both the Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance and the CBD Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program were approved by the task force in their final form and are ready for staff review and legal formatting. City staff indicated these documents can proceed directly to the City Commission without Planning Commission review. Staff estimated that grant applications could be accepted after July 1, 2026.

Staffing

The Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance requires a dedicated administering officer to conduct inspections, maintain the building grade database, issue annual classifications, process notifications and appeals, and coordinate with the City Attorney on enforcement. In 2023, the city reorganized to create a dedicated abandoned building inspector. The task force discussed whether additional staffing would be needed and was told that the administrative fee revenue could help fund a new position if warranted.

Design Guidelines

Design guideline integration into the UDC will require additional meetings led by city staff, beginning July 2026. The 2019 design guidelines document provides the foundation. The task force recommends selective incorporation rather than wholesale adoption.

UDC Permitted Use Table

The full permitted use table review for the downtown district will continue through the UDC public meeting process. The UDC is expected to be adopted by the end of summer 2026.

Ongoing Monitoring

The task force recommends that the City Commission review the effectiveness of both the ordinance and the grant program after one year and make adjustments as needed, similar to the iterative approach taken with HIP 2.0.

Dissenting Views

Under the task force's ground rules, any voting member who disagreed with a recommendation that passed by majority vote could submit a written dissent for inclusion in this report.

In Meeting 2, Kevin Emmons voted against the Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance as presented, specifically regarding the inclusion of indicator #5 (multi-story buildings with occupied ground floors but vacant upper stories) and the potential for the ordinance to classify occupied buildings as unoccupied. Between Meetings 2 and 3, the Building Grade Classification system was developed to address these concerns. The updated ordinance passed unanimously in Meeting 3, resolving the dissent.

No other written dissents were submitted.

Task Force Members

Voting Members

- Richard Winterrowd
- Kevin Emmons
- Jodi Cline
- Brent Buller
- Luke Garrison
- Jill Rowe
- Sam Lionelli
- Mary Anne O'Neil
- Jeremy Sacket
- Benjamin Garrison
- Rob Bodick — City Commissioner

Ex-Officio Members (Non-Voting)

- Lori Henderson — Executive Director, Ponca City Development Authority
- Maci Graves — Executive Director, Ponca City Main Street
- Chris Henderson — Development Services Director, City of Ponca City
- Craig Stephenson — City Manager, City of Ponca City
- Don Bohon — Deputy City Manager, City of Ponca City
- Mayor Kelsey Wagner (voted only in the event of a tie)

Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-Meeting Research Brief

The full research brief distributed to task force members prior to Meeting 1 is attached as a companion document.

Appendix B: Central Business District Occupancy and Building Standards Ordinance (Final Approved Version)

The complete ordinance as approved by the task force, including the Building Grade Classification system, definitions, enforcement procedures, and administrative fee schedule.

Appendix C: CBD Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program (Final Approved Version)

The complete grant program resolution as approved by the task force, including eligibility criteria, priority structure, and permitted uses.

Appendix D: Meeting Summaries

Summaries of all three task force meetings are attached.

— End of Report —