Downtown Revitalization Town Hall
City Hall, Ponca City
May 29, 2025

On a warm evening in May, over 100 community members gathered at City Hall for a Downtown Revitalization Town Hall, hosted by Mayor Kelsey Wagner and Commissioner Rob Bodick. The goal was to develop an action plan focused on two of Main Street's four pillars: Design and Economic Vitality. The intent was to improve both the appearance and functionality of downtown by engaging community members, business owners, investors, and city officials.

Why Downtown Revitalization Matters:

- A thriving downtown reflects the heart and health of a community.
- Downtowns offer unique, vibrant experiences unlike malls or suburbs.
- Visual appeal and walkability impact tourism and local pride.
- Statistics:
- People form an impression of a city within 7 seconds—often based on downtown.
- A filled downtown building creates 5 new jobs and $140K in annual economic activity.
- Occupied buildings raise nearby property values by 5–15%.
- Visually improved downtowns can increase tourism by 30%.

What's Been Invested So Far:

- Over $2M in downtown infrastructure in the past five years.
- Projects include fire suppression grants, sidewalks, decorative streetlights, signal poles, sound systems, and facade improvements.
- Main Street receives $35K–$40K annually in city funding.
- Downtown revitalization has strong city and citizen support.

Investor Presentations:

Speakers included owners of buildings downtown who have made substantial investments:

1. Sam Lionelli (Combat Syndicate) – Renovated a multi-use building with gym space upstairs. Emphasized collaboration with the city and the ease of the fire suppression grant process.
2. Belen & Tomias (TriVest Investments) – Converted the Old Pabst Brewery Building into apartments. Faced high costs and learning curve, but praised the support and grant opportunities.

3. Richard Winterrowd (Eastin Building) – Purchased a large, neglected office building. Shared insight on doing phased renovations and building a tenant base through strategic upgrades.
4. Luke Garrison (204 East Grand) – Beginning renovation of a building with no stair access to the second level. Shared challenges of costs and finding viable ROI in historic buildings.

Main Street Program Overview (Maci Graves):

- Active since 1987.
- Focus on business retention/recruitment and placemaking.
- Recorded over $1.78M in private reinvestment in 2024 alone.
- 20 buildings renovated, 14 new/expanded businesses.
- High community engagement via surveys (89% visit downtown monthly).
- Offers facade grants and coordination with Oklahoma Main Street resources.

Chamber of Commerce (Shelley Arrott):

- Business resilience is built through relationships, engagement, and visibility.
- Networking, advocacy, education, and marketing all contribute to strong businesses.
- Visibility equals viability—owners must show up and support each other.

City Planning & Development (Chris Henderson):

- The city focuses on infrastructure (sidewalks, lighting, signage).
- Fire suppression systems are required for upstairs occupancy due to safety laws.
- The city enforces code compliance for life safety, but rarely enters vacant buildings unless conditions demand it.
- Plans to revise zoning codes are underway, and community input is welcome.

Ponca City Development Authority (Lori Henderson):

- PCDA focuses on business retention and job creation.
- Has recently expanded into housing and retail development.
- Offers small business support and property marketing.
- Highlighted events like Ladies Night and Draggin' Grand that significantly boost foot traffic.

Breakout Sessions: Key Takeaways

- Strengths: Historic charm, improved infrastructure, passionate owners, strong support systems.
- Weaknesses: Cost of renovation, absentee landlords/out-out-state building owners, vacant/boarded-up buildings, lack of upper-story access.
- Challenges: Insurance costs, structural degradation, limited ROI, slow project timelines.

Potential Ideas/Solutions:

- Group purchasing for brick waterproofing.
- Enforce minimal upkeep for vacant buildings (windows, signage, appearance).
- Explore tax reallocation for small grants or incentives.
- Define and regulate reasonable vacancy time limits (many suggested 12 months).
- Encourage accountability through partnerships before regulation.

Conclusion:

The session emphasized collaboration, practical solutions, and realistic expectations. Everyone agreed on one thing: dilapidation, vacancy and apathy—not each other—are the real enemies. Continued investment, creativity, and shared responsibility are key to making Ponca City's downtown vibrant and sustainable.