

TOWN SQUARE INITIATIVE

Mount Vernon,
TEXAS

Downtown Strategy Report

Final Draft: January 2016

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
real places telling real stories



Introduction

The Town Square Initiative is a program at the Texas Historical Commission (THC) that provides specialized project assistance for vacant and underutilized historic buildings. Operating in partnership with the Texas Main Street Program, a professional team with architecture, planning and economic development expertise provides services to spur preservation-based projects so that local, small-scale and high quality redevelopment becomes more achievable in Texas downtowns.

The Initiative team works at a high level of expertise with a small subset of communities within the THC network that have already demonstrated a substantial commitment to historic preservation-based revitalization. Mount Vernon has a strong historic preservation ethic and has participated or is currently participating in the Texas Main Street Program, the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Grant Program, the Texas Historic Highways Program and Bankhead Highway Heritage Tourism project. In addition, Franklin County is a Certified Local Government.

TSI services are intended to leverage that investment and spur additional preservation successes. This report is the result of a planning process that included:

- **Public engagement activities** to determine the desired vision for future downtown development;
- An **economic analysis** to study market research and retail trends as a way to identify building re-use strategies that are both financially sustainable and consistent with the vision; and,
- An **architectural and design analysis** of the key historic buildings and public spaces to determine project scope and feasibility.

Recommendations are summarized in the remainder of this report. Decreasing the number of vacancies in Mount Vernon will require a coordinated downtown strategy including changes to local policies and programming, the creation of new programs and incentives, and the use of additional historic preservation tools to stimulate private investment and local market conditions. Initiative staff are available to assist with implementation of the projects identified in the plan.



Figure 1. View of the north side of the courthouse square.

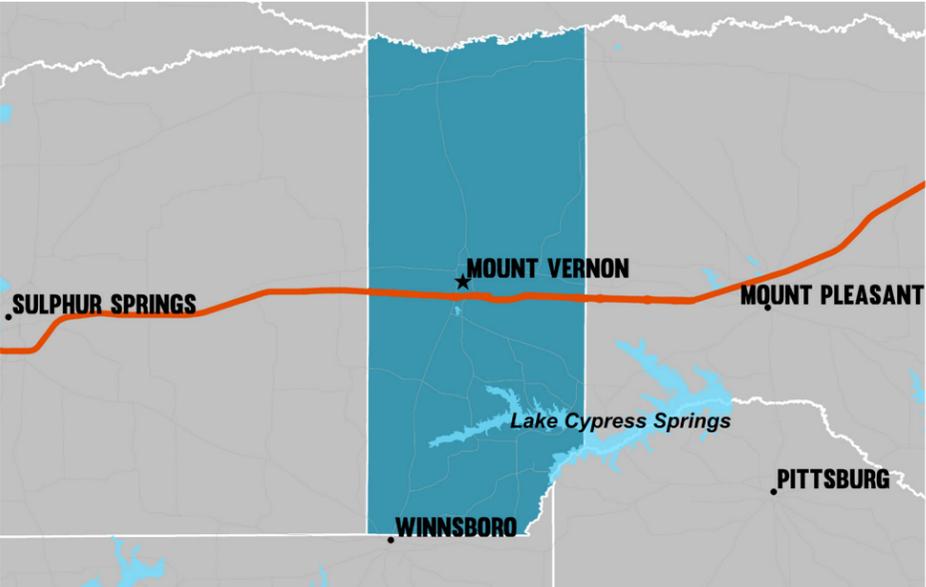


Figure 2. Mount Vernon is located in the central part of Franklin County.

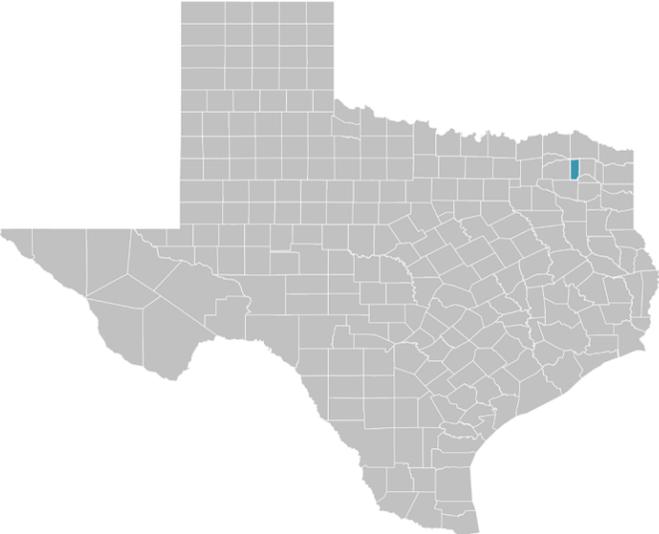


Figure 3. Franklin County is located in far Northeast Texas.

Process

The Town Square Team began working with Mount Vernon Main Street in late 2014. While the courthouse and square are the central concepts to the analysis and resulting recommendations, all of downtown Mount Vernon is included in the project area (See boundary in Figure 4).

- DECEMBER 2014:**
 - Site Visit #1**
 - Studied Assets
 - Public Open House “What Do You Want in Downtown?” (20 Attendees)

- JAN/FEB 2015:**
 - Research and Analysis**

- FEBRUARY 2015:**
 - Site Visit #2**
 - Stakeholder Meetings
 - Downtown Ideas Presentation #1 (40 Attendees)

- MARCH 2015:**
 - Site Visit #3**
 - Downtown Ideas Presentation #2 (100 Attendees)

- APRIL 2015:**
 - Site Visit #4**
 - Property Owner Meetings

- MAY 2015:**
 - Consumer Survey** (160+ Responses)

- JAN 2016:**
 - Site Visit #5**
 - Presentation of Recommendations to the Mount Vernon EDC.

- 2016+:**
 - Plan Adoption and Ongoing Technical Assistance** for Implementation



Figure 4. Project Area Map

Market and Demographics

Downtown Mount Vernon is no longer the heart of retail activity; however it retains its importance as a government, financial, and cultural center and has symbolic importance that affects residential and business location and investment decisions community-wide. The downtown lacks continuity among businesses and the critical mass of offerings necessary to act as a destination district. Therefore, the city should begin with the basics of offering retail and consumer services to accommodate its existing residents with an eye toward organically growing weekend visitors and tourists.

OPEN HOUSE COMMENTS

Downtown stakeholders understand that the market demand is not present in downtown currently, but there were many ideas shared at the first open house on what uses are needed to help create new demand in downtown.

- A major draw (music, wine, satellite office, sports complex...)
- Shop local program to foster local businesses
- More retail and more restaurants
- Expansion of events and programming
- Market to support Monday-Thursday businesses
- Activities to engage kids and young families
- More ways to socialize
- Increased foot traffic
- Bed and breakfast within walking distance
- Glove Factory with key tenant
- Enhancements to area around plaza and public restrooms

Mount Vernon Demographics	
City Population	2,668
Median Age	31.80
Educational Attainment - Percent high school graduate or higher	80.40%
Total Housing Units	1,113
Median Household Income	\$39,519
Individuals Below Poverty Line	29.70%

Source: 2013 American Community Survey

Mount Vernon Retail Trade Area, 2014	
City Population	2,678
Population Growth within 25 mile radius (2000-2014)	14.48%
Population 15 mile radius	27,743
Average household income 15 mile radius	\$62,772
Average age 15 mile radius	39.9
Workplace Population 15 mile radius	4,581
Average Sale Price - Lakefront Property on Lake Cypress Springs	\$484,000
Population 25 mile radius	93,305
Interstate 30 and Hwy 37 Intersection Traffic Count	26,000+ per day
No. of colleges within 60 mile radius	7

Source: Mount Vernon Economic Development Corporation

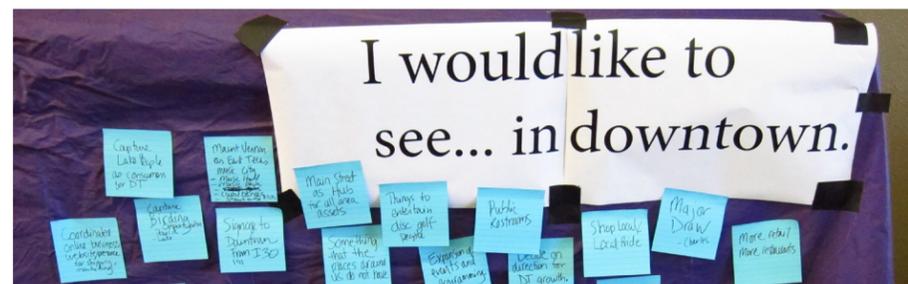


Figure 6. Comments captured at the open house in December 2014.



Figures 7 (above) and 8 (below). Downtown stakeholders brainstorming in December 2014 at the open house; attendees listen to the downtown ideas presented by the TSI team in March 2015.

Regional Assets

LOCATION

Mount Vernon is strategically located in rural northeast Texas. The county seat of Franklin County, the town is 100 miles from the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and 80 miles to Texarkana. Lake Cypress Springs, a popular recreational lake, is located approximately 12 miles south. The lake area has attracted many part-time residents from Dallas-Fort Worth seeking exceptional lakefront amenities within a reasonable driving distance.

Mount Vernon is at the northern point of the Piney Woods Wine Trail and is a short drive to many of the area's wineries. The region is also home to some of the highest quality disc golf courses in the world located just a few miles north of town at the Selah Ranch. Abundant wildlife and nature preserves also attract birders and outdoor enthusiasts in significant numbers. Finally, hunters and anglers are also drawn to the region by the ultra-private Hageman Reserve which offers its exclusive members world-class hunting, fishing and outdoor adventures.

OPEN HOUSE COMMENTS

Because of its strategic location, many regional opportunities were identified by citizens and stakeholders at the Downtown Open House in December including:

- Create something that the places around us do not have
- Make downtown a hub for all area assets
- Capture birders, hunters and disc golfers
- Capture "lake people" as downtown consumers
- Position Mount Vernon as a regional live music center
- Position Mount Vernon as a regional wine destination
- Direct people better from Interstate 30
- Better coordinate downtown partners to capture visitors and regional market



Figures 9-12. Regional Assets

Mount Vernon is strategically situated in northeast Texas and the area offers an abundance of outdoor attractions that appeal to birders, hunters, fishermen and those just looking for a relaxing weekend on the lake.

Historic Assets

Mount Vernon’s history is rich and has had many wonderful stewards over the years to tell its story. Active volunteers, local history publications and fantastic archives are evidence of the community’s pride.

The town was first settled in the 1840s and voted as the Franklin County seat in 1875. The railroad arrived in 1887 and the town served as the major supply and shipping center for the county’s farmers. Incorporated in 1910, its population remained steady around 1,200 until the dwindling farming industry incited efforts to bring industry to the town in the 1950s. The population at the 2010 census was 2,662.

A wide range of architectural periods and styles are represented in an exceptional collection of historic buildings for a town this size. The neo-classical **Franklin County Courthouse** was first dedicated in 1912, the third for the county. The courthouse is sited on the northern perimeter of the square leaving the plaza open in a more unusual pattern for courthouse squares in Texas. The **plaza** is also elevated, another exceptional characteristic for the charming town square. The buildings on the courthouse square retain their historical integrity with most dating from the early 1900s.

Smokey Row, a distinct commercial area just southeast of the square was lost largely to fire. The name derived from the amount of smoke and haze that would hang in the air due to its slightly lower elevation than the courthouse square. This physical area remains culturally significant although most structures no longer exist.

The **Bankhead Highway** brought the motoring public in the 1940s and some fantastic examples of roadside architecture remain including the **Gulf Standard Oil Gas Station** (1945) and the **Teague Chevrolet Dealership** (1940). Finally, the **Wells Lamont Glove Factory** (c. 1953) is a striking industrial building located on the northeast corner of the courthouse square. Currently vacant, it is a unique structure due to both its architectural character and its size and location adjacent to a town square.



Figure 13 and Figure 14. The varied historic buildings in downtown are pictured above, while the diagram to the right illustrates the historic building locations.

Project Goals

CHALLENGES

After the team's initial visit in December, the challenges to address through the Town Square Initiative became clear: **filling vacancies and creating a diverse, sustainable business mix.**

Approximately 19% of first floor building stock is vacant (calculation based on number of resources, not square footage) while approximately 80% of second floor space is vacant. Many of these vacancies are in Mount Vernon's key historic buildings.

In addition, there are not enough sales tax generating uses on the square which results in minimal foot traffic and very little activity after 5:00 PM. Typically, a vibrant downtown district contains at least 30-40% of the activity and sales tax generating uses like retail and restaurant. In Mount Vernon, that total is approximately 13%.

TSI PROJECT GOAL

The objective of the Town Square Initiative is to:

1. **Build off of existing assets to create a coordinated downtown revitalization strategy that has broad public support.**
2. **Focus on priority preservation-based projects to attract the right mix of uses to downtown and fill vacant spaces.**

This report provides recommendations for planning, design and economic development projects that if implemented sequentially, can help Mount Vernon attract the right mix of uses to create a sustainable business mix and occupy space in important historic structures.

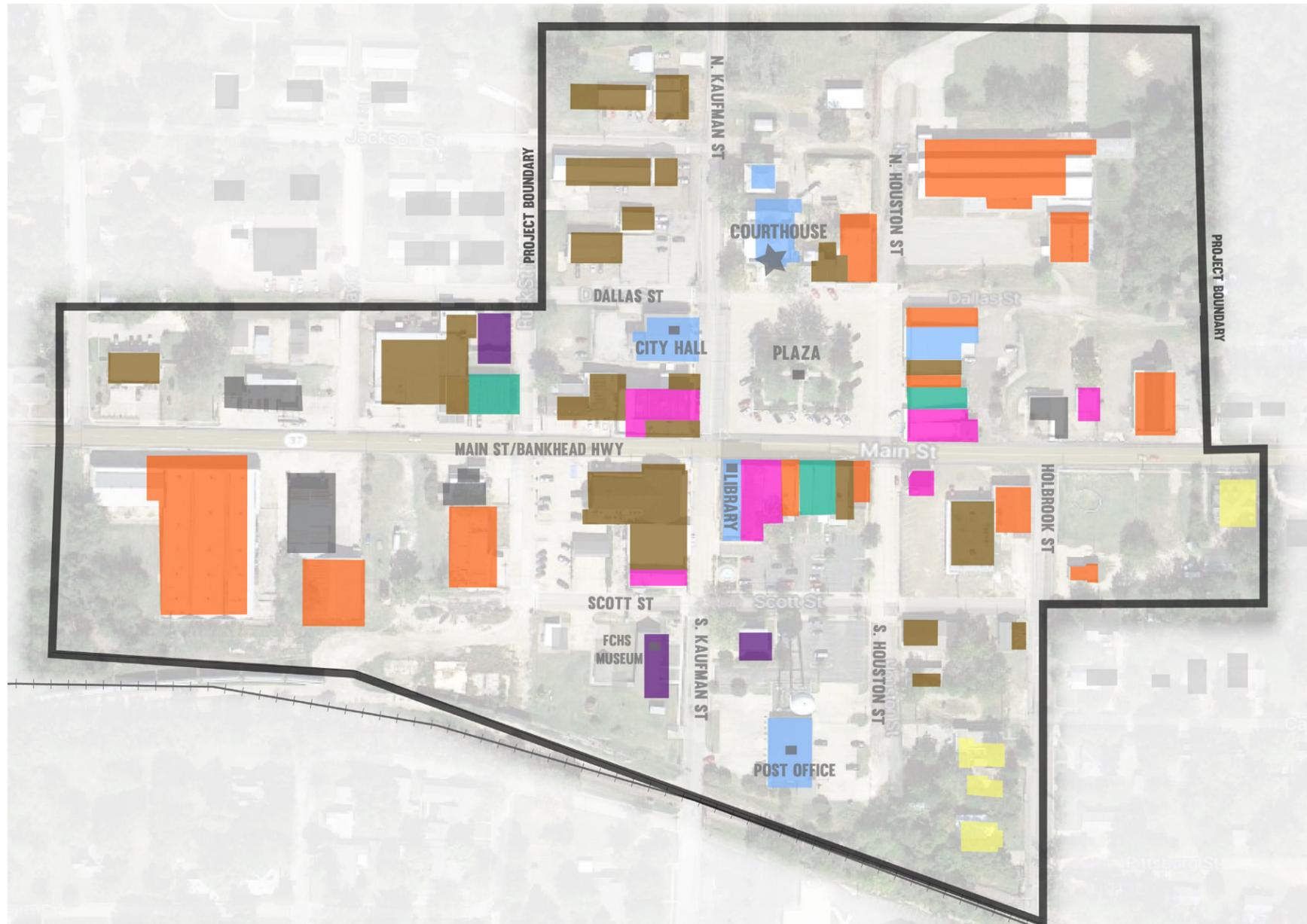


Figure 15. Building Use in Downtown Mount Vernon

A mix of uses is essential to the overall health and success of downtown. Typically activity-generating uses (retail, restaurant) should make up at least a third of downtown's business mix. Thriving downtowns reach percentages above 50%. The Delaware Regional Planning Commission completed a study in 2013 of 71 downtowns demonstrated an average retail percentage of 42.9% and restaurant percentage of 15.3%. <http://www.dvrpc.org/reports/13070.pdf>

Land uses documented in July 2015 were as follows:

Government = 11.4%		Non-Profit = 5.7%	
Office/Professional Services = 34.3%		Auto-Related = 7.1%	
Restaurant = 4.2%		Retail = 8.6%	
Residential = 5.7%		Vacant = 18.6%	
Cultural = 4.2%			

Public Feedback:

Downtown Idea Meetings

After listening to citizens and downtown stakeholders in December, the TSI team completed a thorough design study and market study of Mount Vernon. Combining this analysis with comments from the Open House, the team prepared three scenarios for financially viable revitalization strategies. Each scenario focused on the market potential of a different theme.

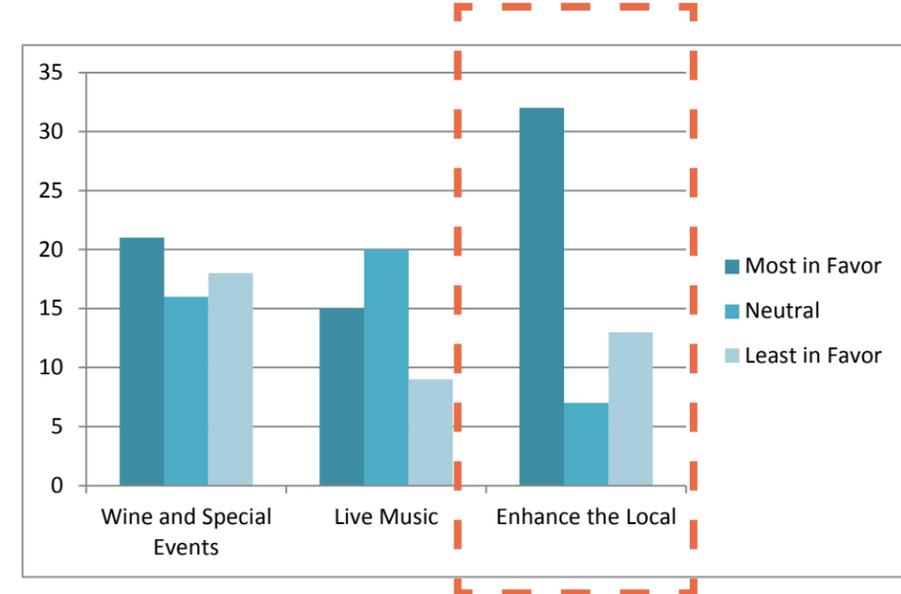
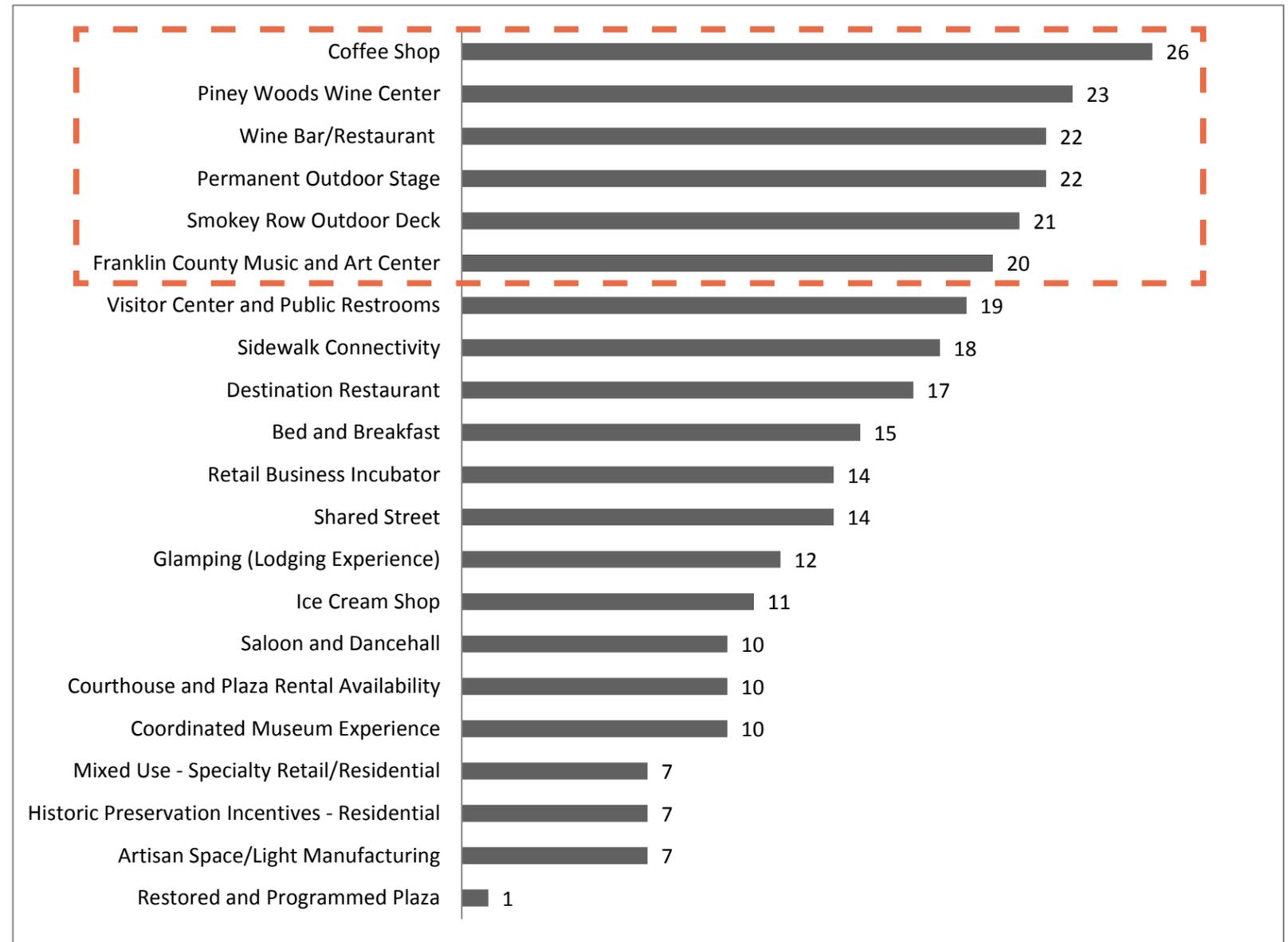
SCENARIOS

Wine and Special Events primarily capitalized on existing assets like the proximity of the Piney Woods Wine Trail, the Piney Woods Wine Festival, Wine in the Pines and the public's desire for entertainment and social gathering opportunities. A series of **ideas** accompanied this theme including: a wine center for classes, tours and retail sales; a wine bar; and enhanced public spaces around the square for special events.

Live Music focused on existing musical traditions and assets like Mount Vernon Music, Music Park and again the community's desire for more programming and social gathering opportunities. A series of **ideas** accompanied this theme including: a performing arts center; outdoor concert area, live music indoor venue and enhanced public spaces.

Enhancing the Local took on a different approach emphasizing public investment in amenities and infrastructure as a way to spur additional private investment. Ideas shared as part of this strategy included: significant urban design improvements to the plaza; sidewalk connectivity in downtown and from downtown to the neighborhoods; consistent programming of the plaza; development of a visitor center; and public restrooms. This would also include a focus on fostering local businesses.

Meeting attendees were asked to vote on each theme and then select their preferred projects. Results were tallied at two different meetings in February and March 2015.



Figures 16 and 17. Attendees to two large public open houses in February and March 2015 voted on preferred overall themes or scenarios to guide future revitalization efforts and preferred downtown projects.

The results indicated a preference for a future strategy to focus on investing in public infrastructure and new downtown amenities that will provide entertainment opportunities for all ages.

Public Feedback:

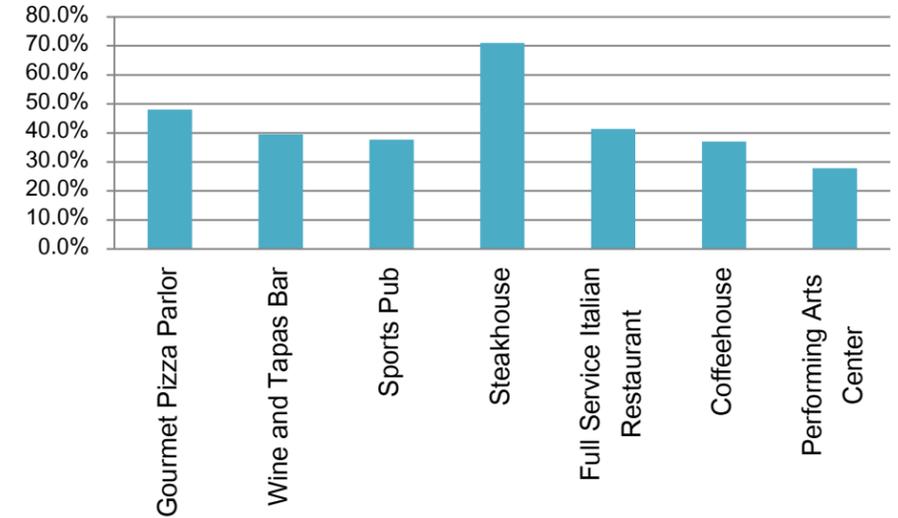
Consumer Survey

In addition to the public presentations and voting exercises, the Mount Vernon Main Street program and TSI team also conducted an online consumer survey trying to reach a larger audience in the region. A total of 163 individuals responded and indicated their preferences for new retail and entertainment options. They also provided information on what they were willing to spend and how far they were willing to travel for retail, dining and entertainment in the area.

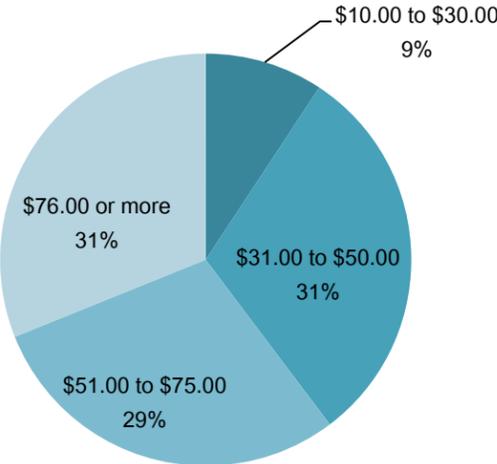
The largest number of survey responses came from the following zip codes:

- 75457 (Mount Vernon): 70%
- 75480 (Scroggins): 5%
- 75494 (Winnsboro): 5%
- 75487 (Talco): 4%
- 75455 (Mount Pleasant): 4%

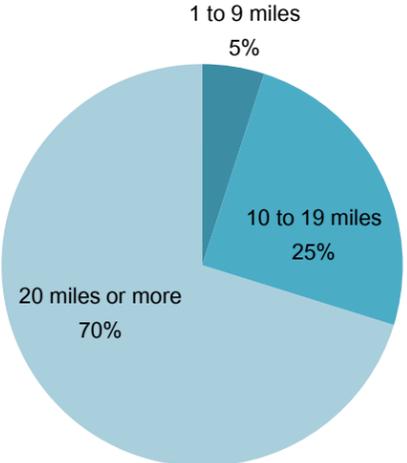
1. What new retail services and entertainment options are you most likely to support in downtown?



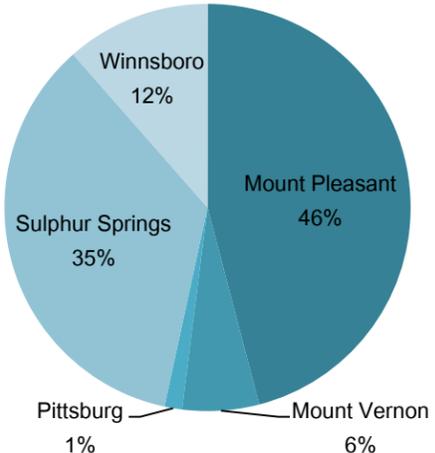
2. How much do you currently spend on weekends for such retail services and entertainment?



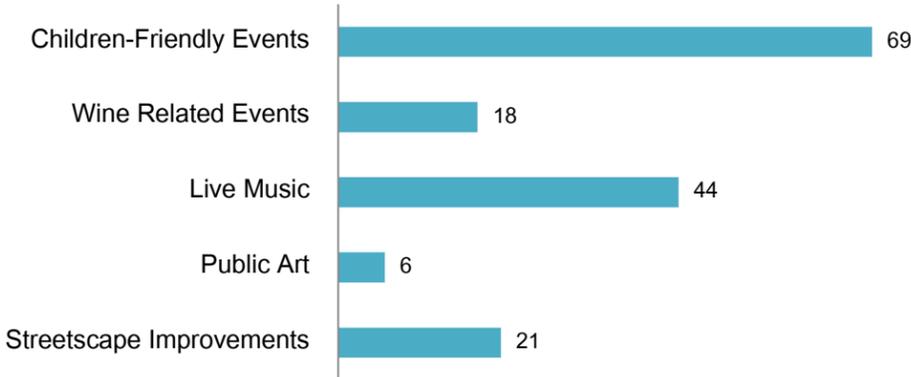
3. How far are you willing to travel to obtain such retail services and entertainment?



4. Where do you go most often for retail services and entertainment?



5. What public amenities and events would attract you to Downtown Mount Vernon more often?



Summary of Recommendations

After gathering public input, meeting with individual property owners, meeting with city and county officials and studying various market scenarios, the TSI team developed a series of recommendations for downtown Mount Vernon. The community indicated a preference for a future strategy that focuses on investing in public infrastructure and new downtown amenities that will provide entertainment opportunities for all ages. The recommendations are meant to be a coordinated strategy requiring a sustained commitment from both the public and private sector.

I. PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS

1. Smokey Row - Shared Street and new Outdoor Deck
2. Plaza Preservation and Urban Design Features
3. Sidewalk Connectivity

II. CATALYST REDEVELOPMENT

4. Adaptive Reuse of Wells Lamont Glove Factory

III. POLICY

5. Revise zoning ordinance to include residential and lodging uses
6. Pursue National Register District Nomination
7. Create a Tax Increment Finance District

IV. BUSINESS RECRUITMENT ASSISTANCE

8. Create a Lease Subsidy Program for Targeted Businesses
9. Strengthen Facade/ Building Improvement Grant Program
10. Create a Targeted Business Recruitment Strategy
11. Develop a Marketing Package for Key Buildings

V. IDENTITY AND PROMOTION

12. Promote the charm of the square for weddings and special events through courthouse and plaza rental policy
13. Capitalize on existing wine reputation by increasing presence on the Piney Woods Wine Trail.
14. Complete a Strategic Plan for the Arts to determine organizational capacity and future community needs.

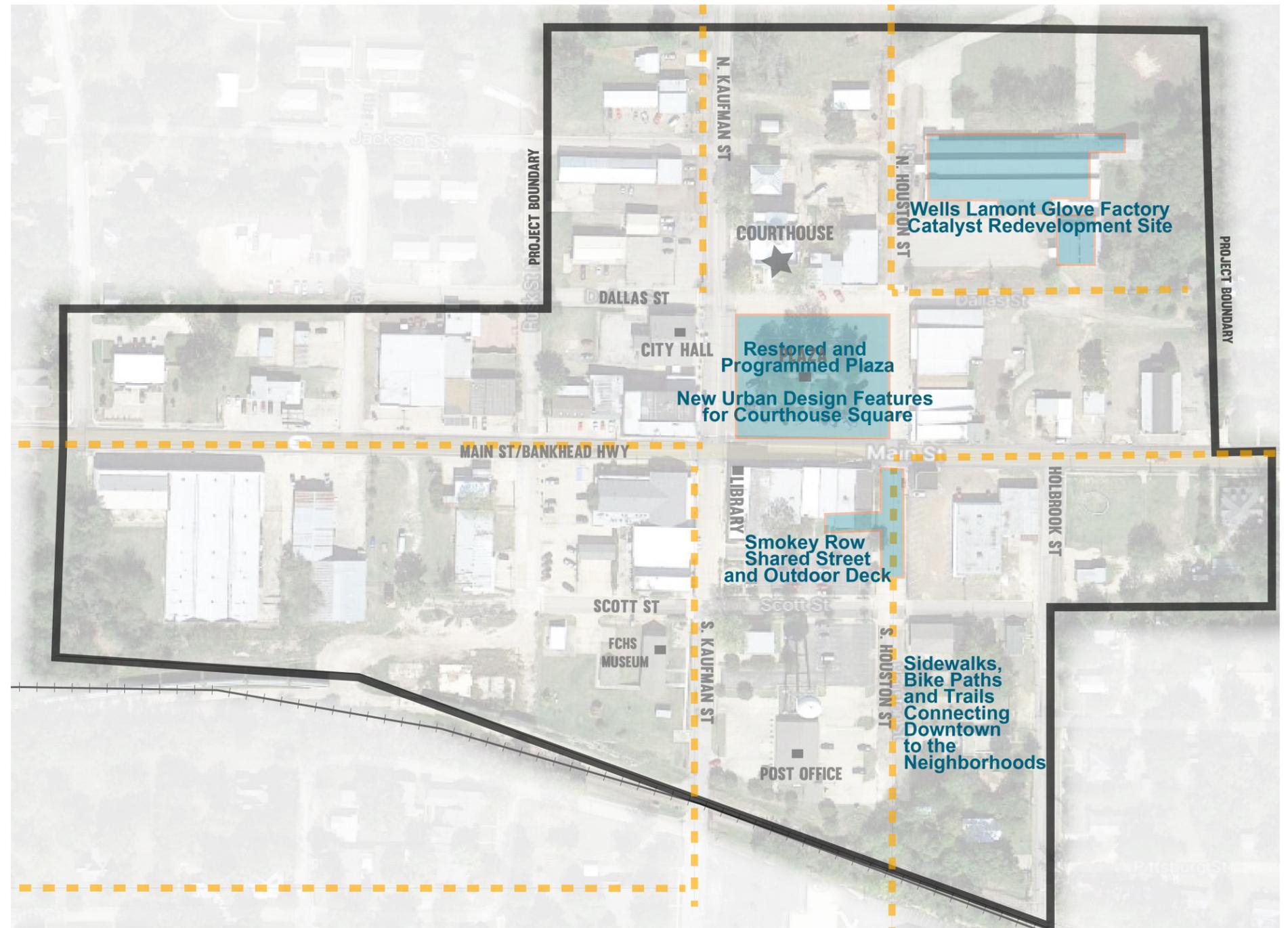


Figure 18. Map of proposed recommendations.

Public Improvements

Project 1. Smokey Row Shared Street



Figure 19. Smokey Row reimagined as a shared street.

DESCRIPTION

This historic area known as Smokey Row is proposed to be a shared street. New sidewalks, street paving and landscape treatments will enhance the pedestrian atmosphere. The sidewalks can be wired for easy power access for vendors and performance groups for special events. Non-permanent features can serve as a barricade when the area is to be closed for an event, but removed for normal daily traffic use and business access. Multiple sites can be appropriate for a temporary stage depending on the type of the event and number of people. The project will help activate the businesses on Main Street. A visitor center and public restrooms should also be considered in the Smokey Row district.

IMPLEMENTATION

The shared street project is largely infrastructure-based. The Better Block model allows communities to “test” a new infrastructure project by staging an event, temporarily altering traffic and parking, and allowing community members to experience and embrace the new design. This would be a great first step for the Smokey Row project. Once a staged design has public support, an engineering firm and landscape architect should be engaged for design and construction. Additional amenities like a sound system, street furniture or landscaping can be sponsored or the result of a Main Street fundraiser. The city should be the responsible entity for design/construction. The Main Street Program can host the Better Block event and coordinate fundraising for special amenities.



Figure 20. Smokey Row with streetscape improvements on event day



Figure 21. Existing street view of Smokey Row (above).

Public Improvements

Project 1: Smokey Row Outdoor Deck



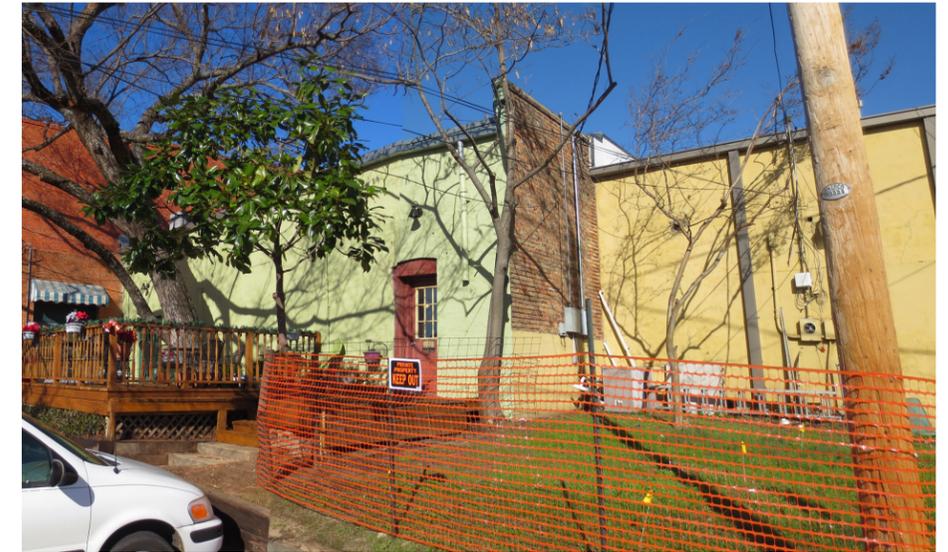
Figure 22. Smokey Row reimaged as a gathering place (this view is from the parking lot facing the rear of the buildings along East Main Street).

DESCRIPTION

The buildings lining Main Street on the south side of the square present an opportunity for an outdoor deck and entertaining space that would overlook the improved Smokey Row shared street and the parking lot. This provides additional space for programming special events especially live music and family-friendly activities. This project was voted a priority during the Downtown Idea Meetings.

IMPLEMENTATION

This project would largely be managed and funded by private property owners, which would require cooperation among all the property owners on the south side of the square. The private improvements should be coordinated with public improvements along Smokey Row to maximize investment. A schedule for programming Smokey Row should be developed by Main Street and adjoining property owners.



Figures 23 and 24. Existing view above (above) and detail of proposed improvements (below).

Public Improvements

Project 2: Plaza Restoration and Urban Design Elements



Figure 25. Existing view of Mount Vernon's impressive plaza.

DESCRIPTION

The plaza is the defining feature in downtown. Its raised design is especially unique making this particular courthouse square stand out among many distinguished courthouse squares throughout Texas. While it was clear from the public meetings that no changes were desired for the plaza, preservation and maintenance is needed, as are urban design elements to better connect the space between the plaza and surrounding commercial spaces. Combined with consistent programming to activate the area, the beautiful, historic amenity will draw people to downtown Mount Vernon.

IMPLEMENTATION

Preserving and maintaining the unique plaza should be a priority for the city. A preservation plan should be developed by working with a landscape architect and funding should be set aside for initial capital work and ongoing maintenance. The THC administers the Texas Preservation Trust Fund which provides matching grants for restoration, preservation, planning and heritage education activities leading to the preservation of historic properties. A proposal could potentially be submitted to this competitive matching grant program which would assist with funding the initial preservation plan.



Figure 26. Historic view of the plaza (top) and image of needed repairs (above).

Figure 27. New urban design elements on the plaza and square will help spur additional investment and help activate buildings facing the plaza (below).



Public Improvements

Project 3. Sidewalk Connectivity



Figure 28. The intersection of Holbrook and Main Streets reimaged.

DESCRIPTION

At the Downtown Idea meetings, the Enhance the Local theme was selected by the attendees as their preferred principle to focus future revitalization efforts upon. This concept was presented as a way of making a public investment into amenities that will increase the quality of life for residents and the local community first, but would then spur private reinvestment and attract new investors and developers to the area. Sidewalk connectivity is a critical part of this concept and not just within downtown. Sidewalks, bike paths and trails that connect downtown to the historic neighborhoods are equally important. Safe, comfortable, pleasant connections make people want to walk and bike, especially if there is new activity and life downtown. Additional urban design amenities like lighting, landscaping and public art should be considered part of this project as well.

IMPLEMENTATION

A sidewalk inventory should be completed in the downtown district and blocks should be prioritized based on condition, use and connectivity potential. The sidewalks in the worst condition which are used the most should be completed first. Standard design specifications should be established which may include urban design features like lighting and trash receptacles. The Texas Capital Fund Main Street Infrastructure grant may be able to provide a continued source for upgrades around the plaza, but a Capital Improvement Program or bond election may be a more systematic approach to completing all necessary public improvements, including the restoration of the plaza itself. Other grant programs like Rails to Trails may provide a source for bike paths and walking trails.



Figures 29, 30 and 31. Existing view above (above) and detail of proposed improvements (below). All photos and renderings by TMS staff.

Catalyst Redevelopment Site

Project 4. Wells Lamont Glove Factory



Figure 32. The Glove Factory reimagined.

DESCRIPTION

The Wells Lamont Glove Factory is located on the northeast corner of the square. When constructed in the early 1950s, the company was the largest single manufacturer of work gloves in the US. The impressive mid-century industrial structure is approximately 30,000 square feet and is in good condition. The size, proximity to the square and unusual architecture make this an important asset for downtown Mount Vernon. The space could be utilized in many interesting ways. Public responses indicated a desire for an arts venue and an outdoor concert area. While the Glove Factory could be especially appealing to “artisan” manufacturers, the space could also be reimagined as a larger mixed use project. There is a significant amount of vacant land surrounding this property which suggests the opportunity for infill development. New residential will help support downtown’s revitalization efforts and the types of units could appeal either to retirees, empty nesters or young couples and families looking to escape the big city life.

In the scenario illustrated in Figure 34, the Glove Factory serves as a community arts space that provides an attractive amenity within an overall site redevelopment plan incorporating single-family residential and a new active public space in the parking lot nearest the courthouse square.

IMPLEMENTATION

It is recommended that the city and EDC prioritize this site in long-term planning and actively recruit an investor/developer that can envision the property as an anchor for downtown. A public/private partnership could help construct needed pedestrian connections and an inviting public space. The city should work collaboratively with the current property owner to develop a tailored redevelopment plan for the site including: preferred uses, marketing materials and a potential incentive package.



Figure 33 and 34. The Glove Factory existing street view (top) and proposed redevelopment plan with infill residential (bottom).

Figure 35. The Glove Factory interior existing conditions.



Policy Changes

Project 5. Revise Zoning Ordinance to Allow a Mix of Uses

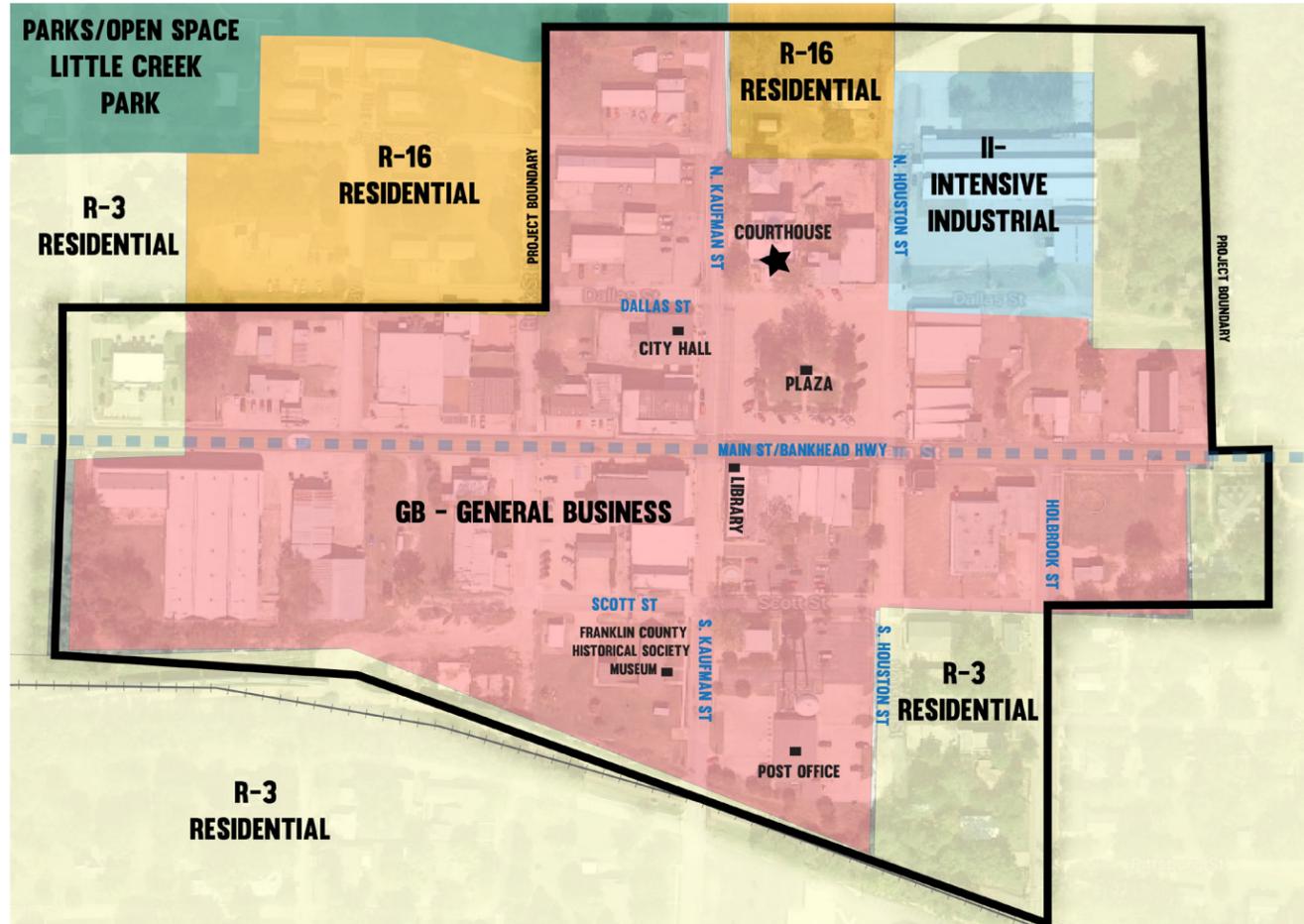


Figure 36. Current zoning in downtown Mount Vernon.

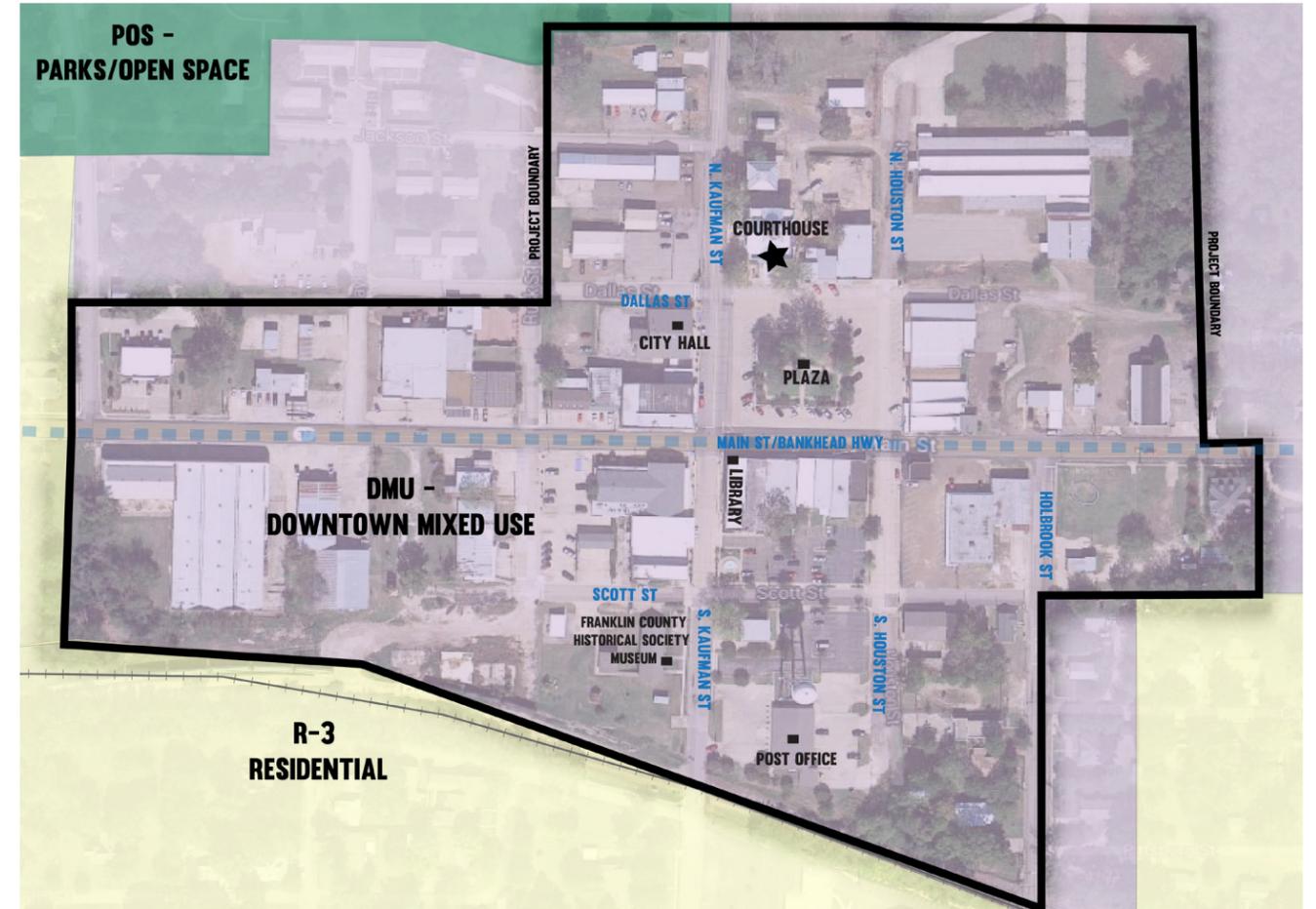


Figure 37. A mixed use zoning district should include the historic core and some of the surrounding neighborhoods. It could also potentially stretch south along Holbrook Street and north along Kaufman Street.

DESCRIPTION

Allowing a mix of uses in downtown is critical to a long-term, sustainable strategy for revitalization. In particular, residential and lodging bring consumers to the downtown area in the evenings and weekends. This helps support retail and restaurant businesses, as well as those providing services like salons, dry cleaning, etc. Mount Vernon’s zoning ordinance has been in place since the 1990s and the majority of downtown is zoned General Business, which does not allow residential or lodging. While a quick fix can be made to allow these through a special exception process, the city should consider adding a new Downtown Mixed Use zoning district.

IMPLEMENTATION

To implement a new mixed use zoning district for downtown, the city should study communities with similar ordinances in place. Main Street cities, Gainesville and Elgin, are good examples with which to start. While the process for developing the TSI plan for downtown does provide a good foundation for public support, a short public process would be necessary to share details with downtown stakeholders about the particular ordinance before adoption and implementation.

Policy Changes

Project 6. Pursue a National Register Historic District

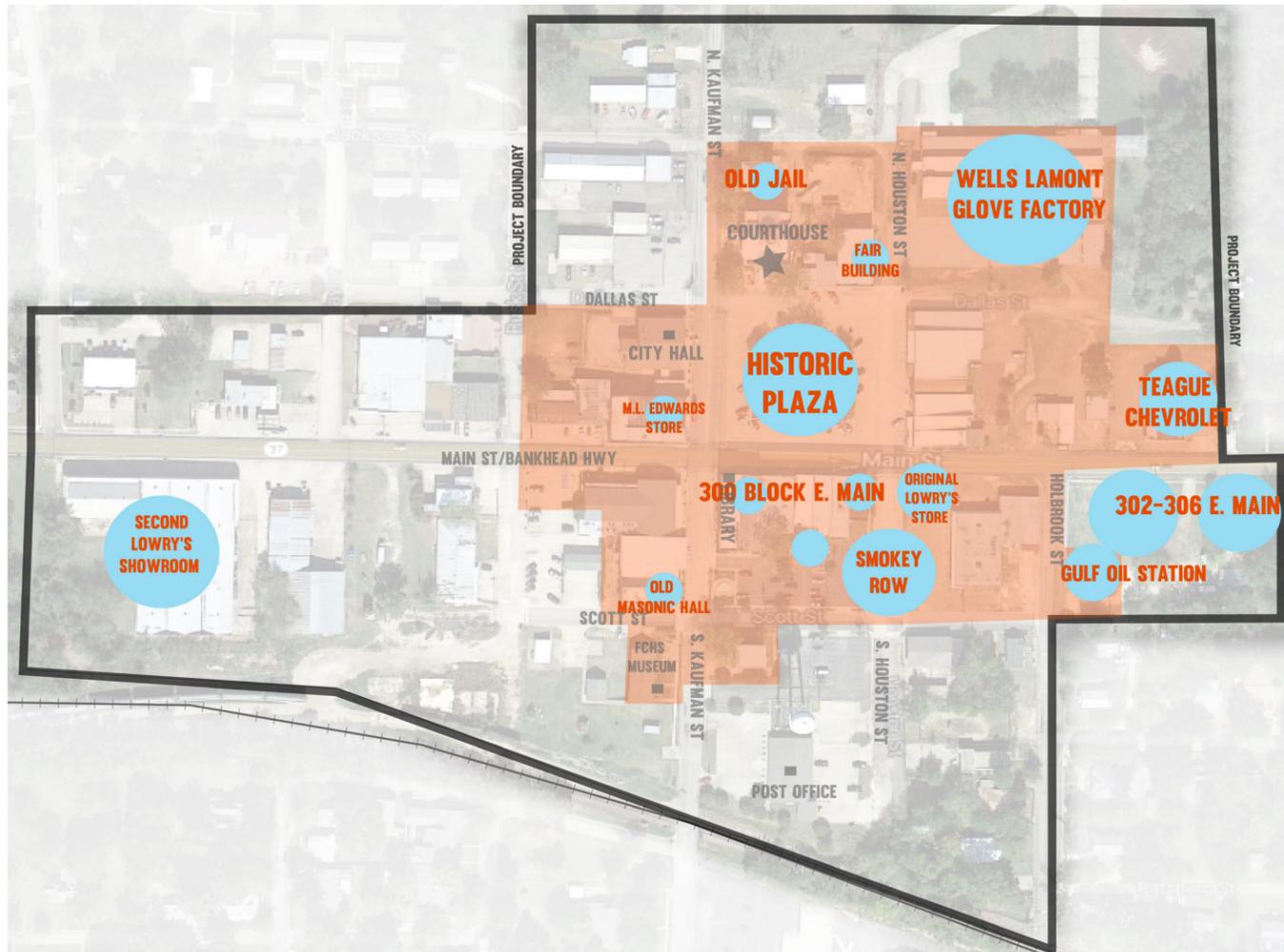


Figure 38. The map shows the concentration of historic assets. A potential National Register Historic District boundary is shown in orange. Boundary is shown for illustrative purposes only.

DESCRIPTION

The National Register of Historic Places is a federal program administered in our state by the THC in coordination with the National Park Service. Listing in the National Register provides national recognition of a property or district's historical or architectural significance and denotes that it is worthy of preservation. The designation imposes no restrictions and allows property owners access to the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program which offers a 20% income tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic, income-producing buildings. The new Texas Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program offers a 25% tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic buildings. Work must comply with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

IMPLEMENTATION

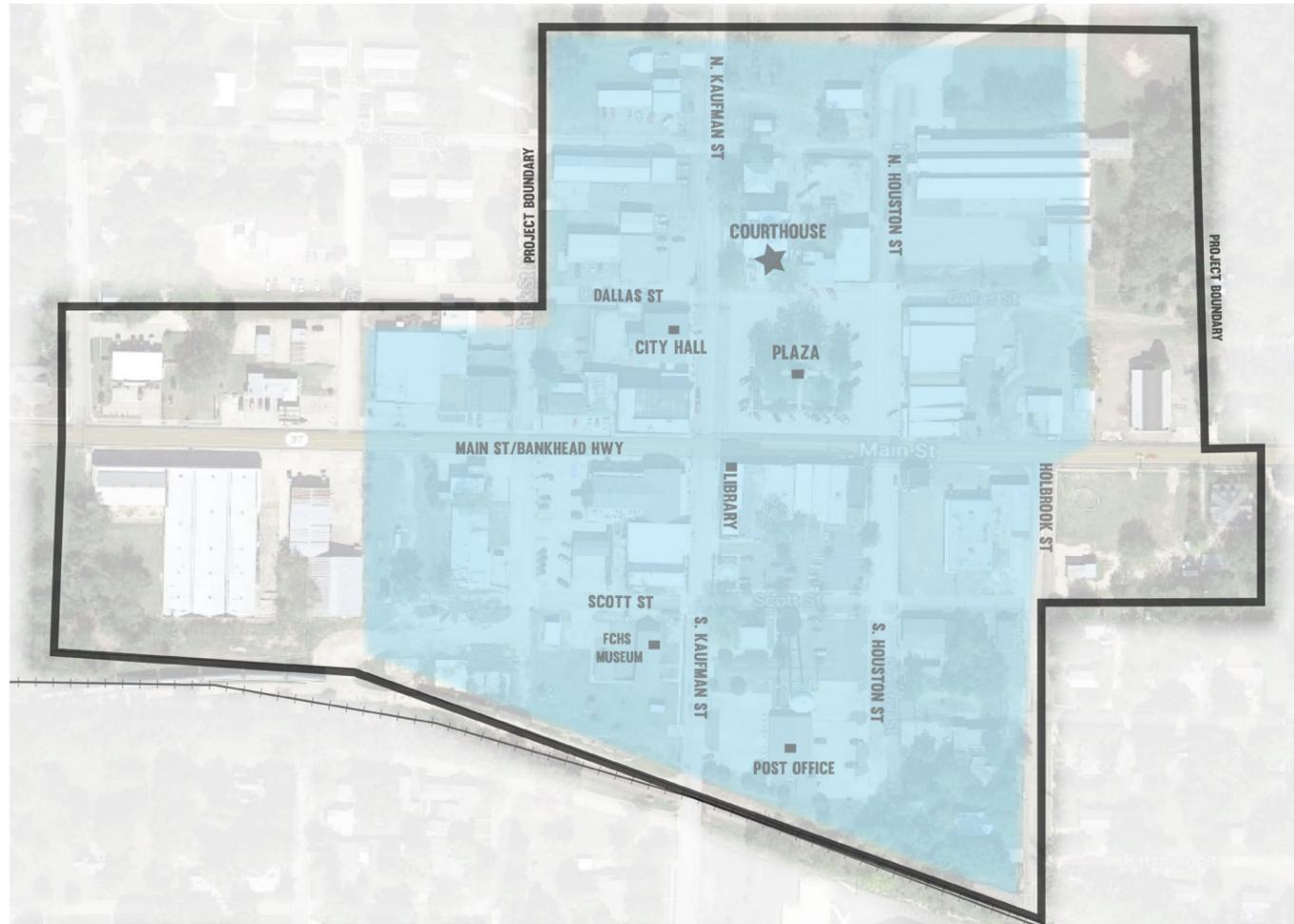
The city should consult with THC historians on district eligibility first. After a determination of eligibility has been made, a Request for Proposal should be prepared by a consultant to complete the National Register Nomination Form. Information and documentation required by the National Park Service is very specific, and the obligation for preparing a fully documented nomination rests with the applicant. Several other Main Street cities similar in size to Mount Vernon have recently completed nominations. Based on their experiences, the approximate cost is \$25,000 - \$30,000 and requires approximately six months to complete. The administrative review time by the THC and NPS can take an additional three to six months. Franklin County is also a Certified Local Government and is therefore eligible for the THC's Certified Local Government grant program. Priority funding is given to projects relating directly to the preparation of nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

Project Cost Comparison Using Historic Tax Credits			
Project Costs	Preservation Costs	Non-Preservation Cost	Difference
Soft Costs	\$78,000	\$65,000	\$13,000
Environmental Remediation	\$80,000	\$80,000	0
Historic Construction	\$1,058,000	\$899,300	\$158,700
Cost per sq. ft. (9,200 sq. ft.)	\$131	\$113	\$18
Total Development Costs	\$1,216,000	\$1,044,300	\$171,700
Project Credits	Incentives	No Incentives	
Fed Tax Credit (20%)	(\$243,200)	0	\$243,200
State Tax Credit (25%)	(\$304,000)	0	\$304,000
Net Dev. Costs	\$668,800	\$1,044,300	\$375,500

Figure 39. The table demonstrates how combining the federal and state historic tax credit programs can significantly reduce a project's net development costs.

Policy Changes

Project 7. Create a Tax Increment Finance Zone



Figures 40 and 41. A Tax Increment Finance Zone could be focused on the downtown core as shown in Figure 40. Area shaded in blue was used to calculate a potential increment of approximately \$95,000 based on an increase in value of 3%. Figure 41 demonstrates a potential boundary that would include more vacant parcels and the historic highway along Holbrook south of downtown.

DESCRIPTION

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) zones are created by city council to attract new investment to an area. TIFs help finance the cost of redevelopment and encourage development in an area that would otherwise not attract sufficient market development in a timely manner. Taxes attributable to new improvements (tax increments) are set-aside in a fund to finance public improvements within the boundaries of the zone. State law allows taxing units within the zone to negotiate on a case-by-case basis with the city the percentage (0 percent to 100 percent) of incremental tax revenue they will contribute to the fund.

IMPLEMENTATION

Mount Vernon should consider the creation of a TIF zone as part of long-term strategy to secure a funding source for downtown improvements. This type of economic tool does not place any additional tax burden on property owners in downtown and the revenue collected is reinvested in improvements that benefit all of downtown. It is most effective if there is substantial new development or reinvestment; therefore this strategy should be employed as part of a catalyst redevelopment project such as what is proposed at the Glove Factory in Project 4. Using a conservative 3% increase in value, estimates of the potential increment based on the current market value of the existing properties in the downtown core demonstrate a capture amount of about \$95,000 annually.

Mount Vernon could consider a smaller district that roughly follows the project boundary used in this plan. The city may also want to consider a larger district that stretches north on Kaufman Street/37 to include vacant land east of the park, as well as south along Holbrook/423 to include the historic high school just north of Majors.

Business Recruitment Assistance

Project 8. Create a Lease Subsidy Program



Figure 42. The south side of Mount Vernon's courthouse square.

DESCRIPTION

Downtown Mount Vernon is fortunate to have many property owners who have adopted a long-term investment outlook and are willing to sacrifice rents to establish a market place. These owners recognize the benefits in deferring short-term gains to fill gaps in the downtown's business mix. Without exception, every retailer prefers a nearby customer base (residential and/or workforce population) in sufficient numbers and with spending capacity. Unfortunately, the downtown is challenged in these areas, and may wish to provide business incentives to cultivate a downtown retail market. Benefits of the Lease Subsidy Program include: Reduced vacancy rates; increased quality and diversity of retail mix; increased employment; increased sales and property taxes; increased number of businesses; and weekend and evening hours of operation.

IMPLEMENTATION

The City of Mount Vernon should provide rental assistance for 12 months for targeted retailers that relocate downtown. Any business may apply, but retailers falling into the following categories may be given greater consideration:

- Restaurants, coffee shops, specialty food
- Entertainment
- Upscale apparel/accessories, footwear
- Electronics – computers, phones, digital equipment
- Specialty retail: toys, sporting goods, transportation
- Home furnishings and appliances
- Visual and performing arts

Applicants must provide an application, executed lease, business plan, budget, financials and marketing plan. Applicants may receive rental assistance up to 50% of the monthly lease for the first six months, not to exceed \$500 per month. For months seven through 12, rent payments will be reduced by 5%. Maximum rental assistance per business is \$5,000.

Lease Subsidy Program: Maximum Allowable Amount Example			
Month	Market Rent	Reimbursement	Percent
1	\$1,000	\$500	50%
2	\$1,000	\$500	50%
3	\$1,000	\$500	50%
4	\$1,000	\$500	50%
5	\$1,000	\$500	50%
6	\$1,000	\$500	50%
7	\$1,000	\$450	45%
8	\$1,000	\$400	40%
9	\$1,000	\$350	35%
10	\$1,000	\$300	30%
11	\$1,000	\$250	25%
12	\$1,000	\$200	20%
	12,000	\$4,950	41.25%

Business Recruitment Assistance

Project 9. Strengthen Facade and Building Improvement Grant Program



Figure 43. Rendering of recommended facade improvements at 112 N. Houston provided by the Texas Main Street Program.

DESCRIPTION

As a large portion of city revenues are derived from ad valorem taxes, it is incumbent upon the city to protect its investment. A starting place is to provide a level of financial incentive that leverages private investment, creates physical change, is visually apparent, instills investor confidence and motivates local businesses. A more robust facade improvement grant could be the right tool for downtown Mount Vernon. The Texas Main Street Program provides design assistance to property owners to assist them in developing a historically appropriate vision for their buildings. Many Main Street programs offer sizable grants to help make these visions a reality. The City of Georgetown, Texas, has a model facade improvement program for reference.

IMPLEMENTATION

A more concerted financial investment is needed to encourage property owners to rehabilitate their buildings. Mount Vernon should consider an equal match grant of \$2,500 per property that includes roof repair and replacement as an eligible expense, as this is a concern among property owners. The city might include the provision that no less than an additional 30% (\$750.00) be spent on facade enhancements. This approach balances the issue of functional obsolescence of some of the downtown building stock with the community's desire to preserve community aesthetics and property values.



Figure 44. A historic photo of the east side of the square along Houston Street, which was used by the Texas Main Street Program design staff to create recommendations for facade improvements to 112 N. Houston.



Figure 45. The existing conditions at 112 N. Houston. Photo by TMSP staff.

Business Recruitment Assistance

Project 10. Create a Targeted Recruitment Strategy

DESCRIPTION

Mount Vernon residents and visitors are well aware of the retail services they want and are willing to support. The city might consider hiring a retail recruitment professional to contact area merchants about starting a Mount Vernon location. The strategy for the city is to convince successful regional retailers and start-ups that downtown Mount Vernon provides an untapped and flourishing market segment. The city will have to be strategic, but flexible, in the types of retailers it hopes to recruit. The responses from the public meetings and the online business survey indicate a strong desire for the following retailers:

- Steakhouse
- Gourmet Pizza Parlor
- Coffeehouse
- Italian Restaurant
- Wine Center/ Wine Bar

IMPLEMENTATION

The city could retain a retail recruitment professional with intimate knowledge of the food and beverage industry. The recruitment professional will identify retailers that satisfy the city's criteria and match their existing operations to the building characteristics downtown. The recruitment professional will help craft the message of why targeted retailers will be successful in downtown Mount Vernon. As much of this work is relationship building, a professional with experience and industry contacts is preferable to ensure expediency and minimize cost.

Mount Vernon might offer financial incentives to relocate targeted retailers to downtown Mount Vernon. Relocation assistance up to \$2,000 could be reimbursed to retailers who sign a downtown lease of not less than 24-months. As a condition of its financial assistance, the city might require retailers to remain open weekends and evening hours.

The relocation of targeted retailers will help the city develop retail clusters that may make it a destination for residents, tourists and future office and manufacturing.

Project 11. Create Marketing Package for Key Buildings

DESCRIPTION

To market itself to prospective retailers, the city will need to develop a business recruitment brochure incorporating the downtown's image, demographic data, along with building characteristics. In addition to the information on the city website, Retail Coach data, and social media, the brochure should include the following:

1. Downtown (vision, goals, action plan).
2. Highlights of market research indicating the types of market potential, and competition.
3. Benefits of locating downtown for specific businesses.

IMPLEMENTATION

Town Square Initiative staff are available to collaborate with the City, Chamber of Commerce, and Main Street to develop a recruitment brochure featuring Mount Vernon and the available leasable building space. The brochure will assist the efforts of the city's retail recruitment professional.

Figure 46. A sample marketing piece for a mixed use redevelopment project. Mount Vernon's recruitment brochure should also include detailed information about downtown and the market. Brochure design by Cross Street Partners.

Identity and Promotion

Project 12. Promote the Charm of the Square and Plaza



Figure 47. The charming courthouse square and restored Franklin County Courthouse. Photo by TMS staff.

DESCRIPTION

Texas' many dramatic courthouses are desirable venues for weddings and special events. Mount Vernon's beautifully restored courthouse and charming plaza provide an ideal setting for destination weddings in East Texas and other parties and celebrations. It is not unusual for counties to draft rental policies and charge fees for using the spaces. Not only can it generate revenue, but events at the courthouse bring large numbers of people into downtown on evenings and weekends. The wedding industry supports many other small businesses, like caterers, bed and breakfasts, bakeries, event planners and more.

IMPLEMENTATION

Since the plaza is city property, the city and the county should work together to draft a more formal rental policy and agreement for the courthouse building and the grounds. Fees can be used to cover associated expenses like cleaning or security and any excess revenue can be utilized for maintenance or landscaping. There will need to be an administrative contact for the paperwork, which is typically an employee of the county. This is largely a marketing strategy that does not require significant funding upfront. Other Main Street cities with similar policies include San Marcos, Georgetown and Goliad. Texas Main Street Program staff can assist with providing sample policies and agreements from these other communities.



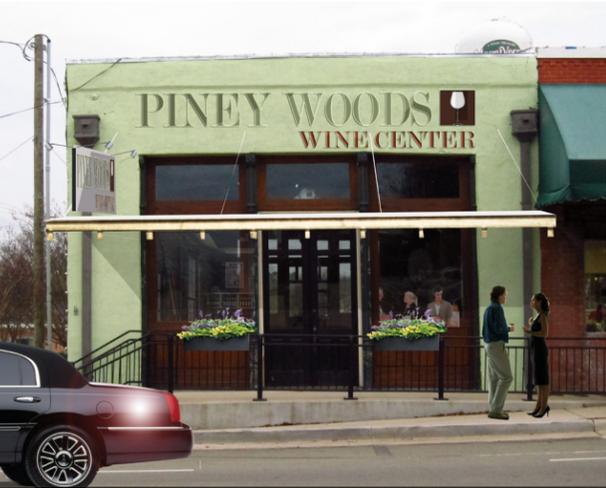
Figure 48 (Top left). A wedding party at the McClennan County Courthouse in Waco. Figure 49 (Bottom left) A wedding part at the Hays County Courthouse in San Marcos, photo by TMS staff. Figure 50 (right). A wedding at the Williamson County Courthouse in Georgetown.

Identity and Promotion

Project 13. Increase Presence on the Piney Woods Wine Trail



Figure 51. Mount Vernon is located at the northern tip of the Piney Woods Wine Trail. The shaded area illustrates a 60 mile radius from Mount Vernon, a distance that could be traveled comfortably in a day trip. There are 12 of the 20 wineries on the trail in this area.



Figures 52, 53 and 54. Photos from the existing successful wine events (top and middle). Rendering of a proposed Piney Woods Wine Center featuring retail sales, tastings and tours.

DESCRIPTION

The Piney Woods Wine Trail includes twenty wineries sprinkled in the Piney Woods from Crockett to Mount Vernon. There are eighteen trails promoted across the state attracting day trippers and those looking for longer get-aways. Wine is big business in Texas with wine consumers spending 10% more than the average Texas traveler. Also about 50% of wine consumers choose to stay two nights when visiting Texas wineries. Mount Vernon is perfectly positioned to capture more of this market since it hosts the two premier East Texas wine festivals. It also has been selected as the location for the regional office for the Piney Woods Wine Trail. This recommendation is intended to put Mount Vernon literally on the Piney Woods Wine Trail map. However, the opportunities are endless to position the town as a wine destination. It could become the starting point for visiting the northern wineries on the trail. This would require a coordinated marketing/promotional effort, along with recruitment of a wine retailer/wine bar to sell regional wines. To be successful, the city and EDC would also need to target the recruitment of businesses to support this type of traveler; for example, boutique lodging and a tour transportation business.

IMPLEMENTATION

The first steps would be promotional and would include ensuring Mount Vernon is part of the Piney Woods Wine Trail marketing materials. Pursuing the regional office location - even if it is a small shared space in the front of one of the downtown buildings - provides additional visibility for the city. Should wine become an economic development focus, then the related businesses would become the priority for the programs listed in the Business Recruitment Assistance section.

Identity and Promotion

Project 14. Develop a Strategic Plan for the Arts

DESCRIPTION

Mount Vernon has many strong arts and cultural institutions and an active arts community. Coordinating the many groups and formalizing the important role that art plays in the citizens of Mount Vernon can be achieved through an Arts Strategic Plan. This type of planning effort works to identify assets, organizational capacity and community needs. Recommendations can encompass all the arts - visual, performing, public - and create a coordinated plan for the future. The plan can assess the viability of new arts and cultural venues, the creation of an arts commission and policies to begin programs like public art in downtown.

Main Street towns like Clifton, home of the Bosque Art Center (BAC), have demonstrated the clear impact of cultural arts on downtown redevelopment and tourism. The BAC has been operating for more than 30 years and consolidates all facets of art under a single umbrella in rural Bosque County. Housed primarily in a former Lutheran College administration building, it gave a physical home to an area known as an artist's mecca. The Center houses the Tin Building Theater, the Arts Council, a citizen's Art Club, a photography guild, civic music association, artisan's guild, book club, pottery guild and more. The BAC completed a \$2 million renovation and expansion in 2006 and serves as an important regional economic driver.

Another Main Street, San Marcos, recently expanded their very successful Mural Arts Grant Program to apply to both private and public property. The downtown murals have created new gathering spaces like "Graffiti Alley" in downtown and attracted artists from across the world. San Angelo, Georgetown and Bastrop all provide strong case studies for the role of art in the economic well-being of downtown as well.



Figure 55. A Mount Vernon Music performance, one of the area's many impressive arts organizations.

IMPLEMENTATION

Should Mount Vernon choose to pursue art as a key redevelopment strategy, the city should work with the arts community, area residents and business leaders to develop an Strategic Plan for the Arts. The plan will determine the existing demand and supply for arts and culture in Franklin County. To start, the city might seek proposals from qualified consulting firms or individual consultants to prepare the plan. Under the direction of the city manager, the consulting firm would be expected to perform research, compile data, analysis and studies.

The plan should include the following elements:

- Identify new opportunities throughout the city for visual and performing arts, including live music in the city and county.

- Identify opportunities throughout the whole city for art in the public realm as a way to improve downtown and the region.
- Make recommendations for art policy and programs.
- Make recommendations for an organizational structure.
- Identify potential funding sources to support programs and venues.
- Develops action steps that are achievable within 3-5 years as well as long-term initiatives.

Conclusion

Next Steps and Ongoing Implementation



NEXT STEPS

This plan is intended to provide a vision for downtown Mount Vernon and a sequenced set of action steps. After adoption, the many stakeholders should devise an appropriate implementation strategy for the various projects including priority, timeline, funding source and responsible party. The THC's Town Square Initiative staff will remain readily available to provide technical assistance including design, planning and economic development consultations, sample documents and ordinances and renderings and design reports where appropriate. The foundation of the plan is the rehabilitation of historic properties and the many other programs available at the Texas Historical Commission can provide an array of additional opportunities for a community that has already proven a great partner in historic preservation and community heritage development.

SPECIAL THANKS

Mount Vernon has been extraordinarily hospitable and generous to the Town Square Initiative Team on their many visits. The team wishes to thank:
Mayor Margaret Sears
Mount Vernon City Council
Darrek Ferrell and Carolyn Teague with the City of Mount Vernon
Franklin County Historical Society
Mount Vernon Optic-Herald
Mount Vernon Economic Development Corporation
Mount Vernon Chamber of Commerce
And...the dedicated downtown business and property owners who graciously opened their doors, hosted events and toured us around.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following services and resources can be provided by TSI staff on an ongoing basis to the City of Mount Vernon and Mount Vernon Main Street.

- Vision and design plan for Smokey Row shared street and outdoor deck.
- Better Block project assistance for Smokey Row to test design scheme.
- THC guidance on Texas Preservation Trust Fund grant application for the courthouse plaza restoration project.
- Planning assistance for conducting a sidewalk/connectivity inventory and assessment.
- Redevelopment plan for the Glove Factory including renderings, floor plan, pro-forma and marketing package to attract a developer.
- Economic development assistance for creating a Tax Increment Finance Zone in the downtown area.
- Planning assistance for revising the zoning ordinance to allow a mix of uses in downtown.
- Economic development assistance to draft the desired incentive program for downtown - programs recommended include a lease subsidy, improved facade grant or business relocation assistance.
- Technical assistance to create a downtown recruitment brochure with detailed property availability information.
- Samples of other courthouse rental use agreements.