TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Full Project Description

Creation of a Downtown Online Inventory Tool for Community Development

The Challenge

In November 2014, Main Street surveyed the level of vacant downtown property among its then, 89 Main Street cities. A response rate of 86.5 percent (77 out of 89) showed that of 1,340 buildings, approximately 17 percent of first floor retail space is vacant. The number would likely more than double if it included the number of occupied but still underutilized buildings or upper floors in the survey. Nationwide retail vacancies have averaged around 9 percent over recent years, with figures in the 3-5% range for healthy markets. Nationwide office vacancies have averaged 12 percent. These comparisons show that historic downtowns in Texas are significantly lower than market averages. The Texas Historical Commission (THC) views this cycle of underutilization (vacancy, abandonment, demolition) as one of the greatest challenges to the preservation of historic downtown commercial buildings. Since January, the recently implemented state franchise tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic buildings is attracting new investment interest to Texas and the moment is ideal for supporting and encouraging this downtown investment potential.

The foundation of downtown revitalization work is survey and inventory, which among many important purposes, provides preservation professionals with the detailed information they need to both protect and promote historic assets. The THC regularly recommends completion of surveys and building inventories to its communities; however, we have yet to provide effective tools and project support to our participating communities to accomplish this – largely because the right tool does not exist.

While there are software tools to support historic resource survey work, there are currently no modern, effective, and accessible software tools focused on serving and supporting the needs of local downtown revitalization programs, planners, preservation professionals, property and business owners, and potential investors. Ultimately this impacts critical revitalization, promotion, and preservation efforts undertaken by the professional community. In particular are the efforts to rehabilitate vacant properties and maximize the potential of under-utilized buildings.

The Solution

The THC has envisioned the development of a digital inventory of downtown resources to be utilized by participating communities of various sizes across the state to strengthen local historic preservation efforts and facilitate downtown revitalization. The Downtown Online Inventory (DOI) will be a comprehensive, web-based mapping tool that will capture and store essential historical and

architectural building information along with current real estate and property data – simultaneously meeting the needs of historic preservation and downtown revitalization professionals. The centralized data will be displayed in an easy-to-use, highly visual, and broadly accessible online platform. The platform will also be capable of integrating additional layers of information over time such as data from intensive-level historic resource surveys. Its design will allow for accurate tracking by local programs and for the THC's tracking of revitalization trends at the local, regional and statewide levels. No currently available product has been identified to fulfill the goals and requirements of this proposal.

The DOI concept was created to do three important functions: first, to provide a web-based tool to our constituents to facilitate historic resource surveys that can be easily accessed and shared; second, to provide a needed tool for Main Street professionals, city planners, and preservation advocates to accomplish accurate and useful building inventories; and third, to offer a searchable web-based platform to the public in order to increase the visibility of vacant and under-utilized historic buildings.

Currently, vacant and not-actively-marketed commercial buildings in our communities have no exposure beyond the local area. However, if searchable through an online format, these buildings have the potential to attract investor attention from outside the local community. With the DOI, interested investors will now not only have exposure to buildings that are not actively marketed through the MLS system, but will also be able to see other public and private investment in the downtown area, get a sense of local commitment through available incentives and have accurate data at their fingertips for ownership, square footage, zoning etc. When combined with other technical assistance offered by THC staff, this provides a completely new approach to the difficult job of attracting investors and rehabilitating vacant and under-utilized commercial buildings.

The Downtown Online Inventory will:
- allow communities to maintain accurate property and business inventories in a web accessible format that can be analyzed and presented statewide
- store architectural historical research and documentation by property, including photographs and documents
- provide detailed property characteristics and real estate data to aid communities in their business recruitment and business retention efforts
- track the cumulative appraisal district data and reinvestment data to aid both local communities and the THC in producing meaningful reporting on public and private reinvestment.
- Prioritize and publicize building rehabilitation opportunities online to an audience of investors and developers
- connect local economic development programs and incentives by property, including TIF district boundaries, grants, zoning designations, tax credit eligibility and more
- promote downtown assets through a "community profile" page to external audiences, allowing users to gain a comprehensive understanding of the downtown market

- provide crucial reports, resources and materials quickly to all interested downtown audiences including marketing materials by property
- facilitate enhanced communication with property owners
- serve as a preservation foundation for communities, laying the groundwork for access to additional THC services including historic resource surveys, National Register District status, and historic tax credit eligibility
- allow the THC to track short- and long-term trends and measure outcomes within participating cities without paying for consulting services.

The Opportunity

The concept was developed by THC staff through a collaborative planning process over the course of the past year. A software planning workshop was held with CRE Planning and Development, LLC, the creators of an existing web-based historic resource survey tool RuskinArc in March 2015. The workshop provided an outline of potential features, phases, costs, timeline and a development approach for the inventory tool.

The DOI will be designed for the THC with the 73 Certified Local Government and 87 local Main Street programs as the initial target users. The initial five-month software development process will require working with a small subset of pilot communities and these communities will become the models for future implementation.

How does it fit within the context of the THC's broader goals?

Much of the THC's focus is to help communities better leverage economic development tools. The DOI provides the necessary foundation to effectively utilize existing development opportunities by creating a wealth of quantifiable and reliable reinvestment data to track downtown trends. It can be used by the THC to track changes in city and county use of incentives, changes in local policies and programs to encourage real estate investment and change over time in property values. Implementation of initiatives such as tax abatements, historic tax credits, low interest loans, grants and expedited permitting can also be tracked to determine program success. The inventory data itself can serve as the essential first step in the National Register process in order for local property owners to more easily access the state and federal tax credits.

At its core, the concept of this inventory tool is to build capacity at the local level. Any successful downtown revitalization effort should be based on a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of the district. The development of the data rich inventory lends itself to volunteer participation which helps create ownership. As a publicly accessible, easy to use website, it will make once obscure information available to all. Online access to historic photographs and documentation alone will make a difference in local preservation advocacy efforts. Of particular note is that this product will meet the rising expectations of sophisticated investors and developers, as well as new-comers to preservation, such as young tech-savvy entrepreneurs and business owners. It can communicate

historic preservation from a market-based perspective, helping to bridge a gap that continues to be a challenge for the field of historic preservation.

The Potential

The existing preservation ethic and organizational capacity provided by CLG and Main Street communities provides a natural fit to accomplish a wide-spread roll out of the DOI. As communities register for access, THC staff expects to first populate their databases with county appraisal district data which includes the basic building and real estate information. Once the accuracy is verified by staff, access will be open to the local contact. Additional data can be added at the community level by volunteers such as photos, architectural details, historic context, additional building amenities, etc. A minimum amount of data will be required for each property so that data entry and maintenance does not become overly cumbersome. A schedule for data maintenance will be established; for example, monthly for real estate updates, annually for building improvements.