

## 2009 Annual Awards Program

### Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

**Deadline for Nominations: March 13, 2009**

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

#### SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Blue Springs Downtown Master Plan

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: City of Blue Springs, Missouri

Jurisdiction population(s): 55,031

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2008, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: February Year: 2007

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Montréal, Québec, Canada, September 2009. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Eric Johson

Title: City Administrator Jurisdiction: Blue Springs, Missouri

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Jurisdiction: \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Merideth Parrish

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## **ICMA PROGRAM EXCELLENCE AWARD: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AWARD**

### **SUBMISSION:**

**BLUE SPRINGS DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN  
180 DEGREES DESIGN STUDIO AND  
THE CITY OF BLUE SPRINGS, MISSOURI**

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Downtown Blue Springs has seen a transformation from the centerpiece of a small, rural town, to its current condition as the declining heart of a large suburban community. As the City developed quickly in the 1970's and 80's, it did so along major highways and arterial roads, and the old downtown was largely bypassed. Since major through roads do not go through the heart of the downtown, significant commerce went elsewhere. Meanwhile, more fashionable neighborhoods grew up in other parts of the City.

However, the fact that Blue Springs does have an older downtown leaves it with a collection of handsome historic structures. The current condition of downtown is a mixture of quiet residential streets and too-quiet commercial streets. The infrastructure is largely in poor condition, and many buildings are in need of extensive upgrades.

Today, the Blue Springs community has a vision for a vibrant, mixed-use downtown that is the economic and social heart of the community. The concept has been achieved through years of intense community discussion, including the Downtown Task Force, citizens' visioning efforts titled, "Out of the Blue, Into the Future" and "Renew the Blue" and efforts of various community partners, including the Blue Springs Chamber of Commerce and the Blue Springs Economic Development Corporation.

Annual citizen surveys have repeatedly shown that downtown revitalization is one of the top two priorities in the community, and many in the community felt it was time to move ahead with concrete plans.

### **PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**

Arising out of continual citizen concerns for improvement/redevelopment in downtown, the City of Blue Springs contracted with a nationally respected urban design firm, 180° design studio for a service amount of \$125,000.00, to create a detailed master plan for downtown. The expectation, therefore, was that the community vision would become a reality through the design and implementation of a Downtown Master Plan.

The Downtown Master Plan documents current economic and market data, identifies market opportunities for additional retail, office, civic, and residential uses, and offers recommendations for short and long-term land use, transportation, and open space. Specifically, the City's Downtown Development Code, which supports walkable development and streamlines the development process for property owners, was a product of the Downtown Master Planning process. A substantial community involvement effort in August 2006 helped the plan become a reality. The plan is the

result of those citizen engagement initiatives, and aims to show how a series of future actions can create a vibrant, walkable downtown for Blue Springs.

The master plan was undertaken primarily during a design Charrette – an on-site design session where various scenarios were tested and drawn with the input of residents, property owners, city officials and others. The Charrette was attended by over 100 participants, and covered a full range of design, policy and management issues. The team addressed a comprehensive set of issues, including land use, transportation, streetscaping, architectural design, zoning, incentive policy, civic facilities and more. The openness of the process and interaction with the public generated extensive enthusiasm in the community, and the plan was very well received upon its final presentation.

After working through several options during the Charrette, a preferred option became apparent through all the public and private meetings. The plan resulted in a collection of visions for downtown Blue Springs for the next 2 decades. Several components of the plan, however, would result in implementation across both short and long-term initiatives. Key elements included:

- Focusing office and retail development in a more limited area for the forthcoming years, in order to create vitality and value
- Creating a new gateway to downtown, both short and long-term at Highway 7.
- Enhancing downtown’s desirability with a collection of new residential structures, especially creative multifamily and live/work buildings.
- Planning for a new civic heart for downtown, with a “double square” that a future City Hall could sit in the middle of.
- Enhancing the historic value of the block of Main Street between 11th & 12<sup>th</sup>
- Creating a new “transit village” to the west of the railroad tracks, and providing for future commuter rail options
- Preserving and improving the historic residential district west of 15th street.

Following the Charrette, the plan was comprehensively organized and presented to Planning Commission and City Council, where it was unanimously approved. Several elected and appointed officials agreed, the Downtown Master Plan was the most thorough planning effort the City had engaged upon to date.

## **MEASURABLE RESULTS: QUALITY & EFFECTIVENESS**

### **Downtown Development Code**

The Downtown Master Plan was organized into three core elements - design, policy and management recommendations. A key policy element was the introduction of a new form-based code for the downtown, to support the plan elements. The zoning includes a “form-based” ordinance, where primary emphasis is placed on building design issues, instead of “use-based” where primary emphasis is on building use. It sets up different rules for different sub-areas, depending on the character desired in the plan.

The code was created in the fall and winter of 2006-2007, and approved by the City Council in April 2007. Notably, the new Downtown Development Code (DDC) created a completely new zoning district, and rezoned hundreds of existing parcels from a variety of classifications into the new DDC. The DDC builds upon a key plan recommendation that expedites development proposals that support the master plan, often without a public hearing. More than 10 new homes have been constructed in the approved plan area according to the DDC guidelines.

### **Development Incentives**

Additional key implementation items have already begun as well, including the crafting of a new incentive policy, allocation of city dollars for infrastructure, and the allocation of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds applied to downtown. Despite a change in the political regime in 2007, support has remained very strong for downtown initiatives according to the master plan. Other private sector efforts are moving forward, including façade work for a number of historic structures, and site planning for several strategic parcels on Main Street.

### **Preserving Historic Integrity of Downtown Blue Springs**

Any good plan must recognize quality existing efforts that are taking place and reinforce them. The historic single family homes along 9th street in Blue Springs are such a case in point. Many are fine structures, and have been renovated with care. They stand un-protected because they are not part of the historic district, but have a character that should be retained for the coming few decades.

The Downtown Master Plan proposes to retain the character of these short blocks through proper zoning and design guidelines. They provide a unique niche within the larger downtown, and help to give it an appealing visual character.

The block between 11th & 12th street is the only truly intact block in downtown Blue Springs. While not all the buildings are historic structures, the citizen-driven Charrette processed revealed that several are, and are worthy of preservation. Some smaller structures may eventually redevelop into more substantial buildings, but for the short-term the emphasis should be on enhancing the existing character of this block. Primary among the strategies should be façade improvements. The immediate eyesore is the bank building on the corner, and the changes that have occurred over the years to its appearance. The plan suggests removing the alterations, and restoring the facades to their original character. Similar improvements can be made throughout the block, as well as streetscape improvements. An additional step is to clean up the alleys and parking lots to the rear of these properties, to make them more serviceable and usable.

### **Downtown Civic Center**

At the heart of the master plan is a new civic center for Blue Springs. Many citizens expressed a desire for a “town square” that could be the centerpiece for downtown, and a gathering place for special events. This particular arrangement came out of a desire to provide that space, and also provide visual interest from the intersection of 10th & Walnut. The square proposed is actually a “double square”, with a potential new City Hall building in the center. This arrangement provides a formal set of spaces, with the southern square being quieter in character and the northern square more active along Main Street. All sides would be surrounded by structures brought up close to the street, to

provide a sense of enclosure around the space. The new development would be a mixture of residential, office and retail uses, with primary retail being on corners and near Main Street.

### **Preserving a Community's Story**

A final and key recommendation of the Charrette process was to tell the story of Blue Springs and its history, as a method to encourage more visitors and appreciation for its past. Blue Springs is an older community that does have a story to tell, and it can tie in well to other regional history and heritage tourism efforts. Key elements of the preservation plan include:

- Promotion & Marketing
- Tie into Regional Heritage Tourism
- Improve Signage
- Outreach to historic property owners
- Complete Survey of historic buildings to
- determine eligibility for National Register &
- Historic Tax Credits
- Special Design Standards & Review for
- 1100 Block of Main Street

### **LESSONS LEARNED : PROGRAM ANALYSIS**

Blue Springs has a number of excellent special events that bring people into the downtown area, such as the annual Fall Fun Fest, the car shows, movie nights and more. While these events are hopeful signs, they must be organized in a fashion to benefit the businesses that are downtown now.

In many of the Charrette focus groups, business owners revealed that they shut down during the events because access to their stores is blocked off. Through the Downtown Master Planning process, Blue Springs believes it's possible to make these a win-win situation through some adjustments to how the events are laid out and organized. For example, the parade routing can be tweaked and booth layouts adjusted so that visitors can see booths & storefronts at the same time. And, over time, events can be moved to the new squares, so that more of the streets can remain open to traffic.

The ideas expressed in Downtown Master Plan will take many years to fully achieve. However, that doesn't mean that aspects cannot be, and have not been started immediately, to build upon the current momentum. Most importantly, the City has recognized through the planning and Charrette process that involvement and support must come from a variety of stakeholders of the community including citizens, elected officials, private sector businesses and non-profit organizations. The City has embraced the vision of a revitalized downtown, and through the Downtown Master Plan, has initiated the initial steps in seeing the vision through to fruition.