

A DOWNTOWN STORY: WAYNESVILLE MAKES A COMEBACK

Waynesville sits in south central Missouri along I-44 and on Historic Route 66. The City was settled in 1833 on the banks of the Roubidoux Creek and was incorporated in 1843. Waynesville's history encompasses the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, World War II and the building of the "Mother Road" across America.

Waynesville is the county seat of Pulaski County and the county courthouse dominates the center of the square. The courthouse has brought several attorneys to downtown. It is also home to the U. S. Post Office, and several retail shops and restaurants. Route 66 runs through town, as does the Roubidoux Creek, home to a blue ribbon trout stream. The 1903 courthouse, one of two original Missouri courthouses that sit directly on Route 66, is open to tourists at specified times.

Waynesville has for years relied on the rise and fall of Fort Leonard Wood and its economy is dependent on military neighbors. Built in 1940-41, Fort Leonard Wood is the largest training post in the Midwest, and now houses the Engineer, Military Police and Chemical Corps Schools. It has seen bustling days, as well as days of military cuts. It was a thriving post in World War II, and endured talk of mothballing Fort Leonard Wood after the Korean War. The Vietnam War once again revived the post during the 1960s and 70s.

By the 1980s and 90s, as the Vietnam War ended and military drawdowns were taking place, downtown Waynesville was largely abandoned. The City also dealt with the loss of a bustling Fort Leonard Wood. In the 1990s, the City saw more economic decline when the downtown grocery

store closed with the opening of a new, modern supermarket in West Waynesville. With the burning of the Western Auto store, the death of downtown had become apparent. Things were bleak in downtown Waynesville.

As a retired high school teacher, I was well aware that the City's reputation was tied to the appearance of its downtown square. I was somewhat embarrassed at times with the reputation that Waynesville had with neighboring schools. An editorial in a Jefferson City newspaper in the 1980s described us this way: "On a good day Waynesville, Missouri, isn't very pleasant. You know you have hit the end of the road."

The downtown area was dark with very little street lighting. Sidewalks around the square were broken and falling apart and remnants of more than 20 sign poles jutted out of old buildings on the square. Moss grew on the facades of buildings; a tree grew through another building; and there were many empty storefronts.

In 2003, I ran for City Council in Waynesville. My main motivation was cleaning up the City and especially, the downtown area. With little experience in local government, except for 30 years of teaching Social Studies, I did know grants were available. After I was elected, former Mayor Cliff Hammock and I met. He was concerned about the same issues and agreed to support me in trying to obtain some grants. Together, we formed the Downtown Beautification Committee, aimed at improving the appearance of the historic downtown square and revitalizing the area. With 15 original citizen members, the Committee began a plan to revitalize downtown. The Roubidoux Historic Transportation

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Top: The downtown square in Waynesville needed repairs. Moss grew on the facades of buildings; a tree grew through another building; and there were many empty storefronts.
Photo by Alan Clark

Above. The City was able to purchase a town clock. In 2015, a vintage lighting project was completed as well. *Photo by Ed Conley.*

and Pedestrian Enhancement Program contained a wish list for downtown.

The Committee applied for a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for new sidewalks and vintage lighting for the square. This grant was dependent on matching investment and support from existing businesses.

With a newly hired grant writer, Layla Earl, and the volunteer help of local engineer, John Mackey, the Committee began the process of applying and planning for this grant. A survey for the grant revealed that more than 70 percent of the buildings on the square were abandoned or neglected.

The Committee found many absentee landowners and tried to make contact. One of the first victories was finding the owner of the old Vert Art building and obtaining permission to remove a blue, soiled mattress from the front window of the abandoned building. We also removed more than 20 rusted, ugly sign poles from the south side of the square.

In 2005, Waynesville was awarded CDBG monies in the amount of \$250,000 for downtown improvements. Using the matching capital investment by downtown businesses, the completed project totaled more than \$400,000 of improvements to existing businesses around the square. A new interest in downtown Waynesville began to grow. Developers and builders began to respond to the interest and support shown by the City and its citizens.

The City Council began to have new faces come on board. The next step in the plan was a zoning change from commercial to mixed zoning in the downtown area; this would allow apartments to be built, thereby, creating a demand for more businesses and services. This encouraged investment, as it allowed for rentals to help with capital. We also began a memorial bench program, and added new flower pots around the square. Working with financial institutions, we were able to purchase a town clock. In 2015, the vintage lighting project was completed and now the downtown area is well lit.

Partnering with the Pulaski County Tourism Bureau, a focus on Route 66 began in earnest. With visitors from all over the world, Waynesville is appearing in videos and print media as an interesting stop on Route 66. The recognition and certification of the Trail of Tears encampment in Laughlin Park, that borders the downtown area, was part of the effort. In 2007, the park was certified as a site on the National Historic Trail, and in 2015, park exhibits and signage were completed. Remembering the past was, and is, important to the City.

In 2009, the Waynesville Downtown Business Association formed. Waynesville was selected as a DREAM (Downtown Revitalization and Economic Assistance for Missouri) community for the state of Missouri. The designation began a strategic plan for the downtown and provided demographic and economic statistics for the City. In surveys for the DREAM program, our citizens were asked about the progress downtown and they responded with:

“Downtown is an event waiting to happen.”

“The Square is a diamond in the rough.”

“Downtown is a hidden jewel.”

Public opinion had turned in our favor. Since the CDBG award, an estimated \$4 million has been invested in downtown. Developers have become interested in a City that someone cares about. Many local businesses began to invest in their buildings and downtown has a different air about it. The City has fulfilled that “wish list,” plus much more.

The City is thankful to its concerned citizens, the City Councils, former and current mayor, city staff, businesses, and developers and builders for the turn-around in downtown Waynesville. A pride has emerged among local residents and former residents alike. An alumnus of Waynesville High School recently visited his hometown and I gave him a walk about the square. At the end of our tour, he smiled and said, "This isn't the Waynesville I remember." No, it is not! 🍃

Luge Hardman is the mayor of Waynesville, MO. Elected in 2012 and 2016, Hardman is a retired high school and college instructor. She has lived in Waynesville for more than 40 years.



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Top Left: The recognition and certification of the Trail of Tears encampment in Laughlin Park, that borders the downtown area, was part of the revitalization effort. In 2007, the park was certified as a site on the National Historic Trail.

Bottom Left: Partnering with the Pulaski County Tourism Bureau, a focus on Route 66 began in earnest. With visitors from all over the world, Waynesville is appearing in videos and print media as an interesting stop on Route 66.

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