

# Washington, Missouri:

## *A City On The Move*



### About Washington

Washington, Missouri, located approximately 45 minutes west of St. Louis, has the benefit of being part of the St. Louis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), while still being able to provide its own residential and commercial opportunities with a unique sense of place. With a population of approximately 15,000, Washington is a historic community situated at the southernmost point of the Missouri River. Originally explored by Lewis and Clark and settled by German immigrants in 1839, today Washington boasts a strong manufacturing and commercial economy and a thriving downtown. Washington serves a trade area of approximately 60,000 people, and over the years has made a name for itself as the Heart of Wine Country with a strong tourism economy. With the City's expansive park system, the bustling downtown, and festivals and events put on throughout the year, there is never a shortage of things to do and see while in Washington.

### A Call To Action

While Washington has become an excellent place to take a weekend trip, it has always been home to a regional workforce. Since its incorporation, Washington has always been a strong manufacturing town. For more than 100 years, the commercial and residential growth would follow the new industry and, although commercial development moved out to the highway and new subdivisions followed suit, downtown remained the core of the community.

From 2000–2010, the City helped facilitate the development of a new industrial park with continued business expansion and job growth, even through the brunt of the recession. Retail development followed this trend through the same time period with the completion of a major shopping center and expansions to the highway system. The resiliency of the commercial and industrial economy in Washington remained apparent through the recession.

City staff realized, however, after reviewing the 2010 census data that residential growth did not mirror the commercial and industrial growth. Washington's population had increased by .08%. A workforce study was completed and showed that 79% of the City's workers lived outside the city limits solidifying Washington as a magnet for industry, but not as a destination for families.

Given the amenities downtown and throughout the City, it was logical to derive from the study that the potential for residential growth existed but the main deterrent was the cost of land in Washington. City planning staff along with the community and economic development department recognized the issue and proposed several policy updates to facilitate more affordable residential growth. A new comprehensive plan was written with hundreds of comments and input from the community. It was determined that a main goal was to diversify housing options in Washington and facilitate more opportunities for renters and first-time home buyers. This resulted in three major development code changes and an overhaul of the City's zoning code.

The first proposal was meant to tackle land cost. The cost per acre in Washington in some cases was twice as much as the cost in two neighboring communities. At the time, the City required all new subdivision lots created to be at least 10,000 square feet in size. The City created two new zoning districts to increase the housing density. One allowed lots sized down to 7,500 square feet. The other allowed 6,000-square-foot lots. Washington saw an increase in subdivision development almost immediately.

The second proposal included an attempt to lower development cost that in turn was passed on to the homebuyers. In one instance, this included allowing for narrowed street widths on certain streets that would not have through traffic on them. It also allowed for narrower streets and right of way when restricting parking to one side of the street.

The third development policy proposal included increasing the density allowance for multi-family development. It became clear that the outdated code from the early 80's discouraged developers from investing in multi-family development. The City increased the density maximum by 33% to help meet the goal set forth in the comprehensive plan. Within one month, the City received requests for 160 units over three sites.

Lastly, Washington made the decision to completely overhaul the zoning code. Major updates had not occurred since the 1980s and the City saw this as an opportunity to



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**A comprehensive plan, with hundreds of comments and input from the community, determined that a main goal was to diversify housing options in Washington, facilitating more opportunities for renters and first-time home buyers.**

modernize the code. The new code section updated zoning definitions and created policies for more modern uses, such as microbreweries and distilleries. The new code made it easier to develop mixed uses in the downtown district and created an opportunity for more planned developments.

### **Continued Revitalization Downtown**

Washington saw an opportunity to facilitate growth throughout the community and provide housing options with the code changes allowing for new development throughout the City. All the while, attention was never shifted away from downtown; the City recognized it as its best asset. Today, someone returning to visit downtown Washington for the first time since 2007 might find portions



of it unrecognizable. Over the past 12 years, Washington has focused on underutilized areas of the downtown with great success. The City utilized tax increment financing (TIF) districts to not only identify blighted and underutilized land downtown but to facilitate swift redevelopment. It began in 2007, with the Bank of Washington choosing to invest in downtown by rebuilding their \$7-million headquarters on Main Street. Their commitment to the district allowed the creation of a conservation district that covered most of downtown and gave the City a tool to invest in much-needed improvements. This allowed for the completion of large projects that cleaned up the district and encourage continued investment. These projects include burying all overhead utility lines, streetscape enhancements, public parking, and other aesthetic enhancing projects. As a result, over the past 12 years, downtown Washington received more than \$30 million of private investment in three active TIF districts that include 40 new residential units, new bars and restaurants, and 20,000 square feet of newly constructed retail space. All of this was constructed on underutilized or vacant lots downtown and has encouraged redevelopment of existing historic structures.

With the success of major redevelopment projects, the City and Downtown Washington, Inc. also realized an opportunity to assist property owners on smaller projects. The active TIF districts proved a success for downtown as a whole, but Washington wanted to expand that opportunity to property owners in the district that were not part of the major redevelopment. The City introduced The Small TIF Program. This program allowed owners of existing structures in a TIF district to recoup some of the property taxes captured from the increased development. If an owner of an existing structure agreed to add upstairs commercial or residential space, make façade improvements, or redevelop with environmentally friendly materials, they became eligible for a rebate of 80% of the increase in property taxes. The rebate is taken out of the sales tax generated TIF district fund and given back to participating property owners in the district. The City wanted to recognize the commitment and investment of existing downtown owners and the Small TIF Program proved a good way to do so.

Downtown Washington, Inc., also created a low-interest loan program for owners of existing buildings in the district. These funds were made available through a Neighborhood

**(Left) Part of the City's development code changes included increasing the density allowance for multi-family development. (Middle) The ability to offer large- and small-scale incentives for developers and property owners increased investment in the district. (Right) The progressive actions of the City and Downtown Washington, Inc., since 2007, are what drove the recent increase in investment and residential development.**

Assistance Program Grant from the Missouri Department of Economic Development and allows downtown property owners to apply for up to a \$100,000 loan offered at a 1% interest rate. As the loans are paid back, Downtown Inc. can loan the money out again to additional property owners in the area. Owners were able to participate in both programs. The ability to offer large- and small-scale incentives for developers and property owners, increased investment in the district and solidified downtown Washington as a destination. When marketing Washington as a place for young families to land, the downtown area became the City's most effective recruitment tool.

## Moving Forward

The progressive actions of the City and Downtown Washington, Inc., since 2007, are what drove the recent increase in investment and residential development. In true Washington fashion, a new group of young citizens have been encouraged by the development and taken on a call to action of their own heading in to the new decade. A group called the Washington Young Ambassadors has formed and aims at continuing the progress by attracting more like-minded young professionals and the employers for whom they work. The group actively organizes networking events, pub crawls and happy hours, and speaking events to engage the young professionals of Washington. In 2019, with the support of the local banks, they contracted with a video production company to create a video series on Washington. The six-part series will display Washington as a great place to live, work and play, and as a destination for young professionals to build a career and family life. A website, [www.washmoworks.com](http://www.washmoworks.com), has also been created to highlight job opportunities in the area. Now, anyone looking for a new job or graduating from school can visit the site and search by job description or major to find the right position for them in Washington. The group also works with regional high schools, community

colleges and universities on reaching out to alumni lists to highlight all the opportunities Washington has to offer. Adopting the slogan, “Washington, MO ... Plan on Staying,” the Washington Young Ambassadors are giving people all the tools they need to do just that — to plan on staying in Washington.

For more information on Washington, visit [www.WashMo.org](http://www.WashMo.org).

**Sal Maniaci** is a 2014 graduate from Missouri State University, where he received his bachelor’s degree in community and regional planning. He began his career as a county planner for Jefferson County, Missouri. In 2016, he was offered a position as city planner in Washington, the town he grew up in. Today, he is serving as community and economic development director for Washington, working to retain and attract new business as well as grow the community’s workforce.



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