

## Renaissance of the Downtown Square McKinney, Texas

### Golden Age of McKinney's Downtown Square (1850's – 1950's)

Founded in 1848, McKinney, Texas is located about 30 miles north of Dallas and is the county seat of Collin County. McKinney's downtown square is one of the symbols that people throughout North Texas recognize as being uniquely McKinney. The original town site was based on a grid plan with a downtown square (anchored by a county courthouse) near the City's center. The downtown square (approximately 2.5 acres) was the sole public space in the original town plan. The commercial core is housed on long and narrow lots facing the downtown square. For over 100 years, the downtown square was the focal point for business, government, special events and community celebrations.

### Decline of the Downtown Square (1950's – 1990's)

Eventually, as new highways bypassed downtown and commercial centers moved to the highways, the once vibrant downtown square fell into decline. In the 1970's, a new county courthouse was constructed several blocks away, and the "old" courthouse closed its doors on the square, only opening on special occasions such as Halloween and Christmas.

During the 1980's, most of the historic buildings around the square were underutilized or boarded up. Due to low rents, small "mom & pop" shops did appear, but most did not survive very long. The square was typically empty after all businesses closed at 5:00 pm. Slowly, in the 1990's, some shops around the square became more stable, but rents were still low and nightlife was still non-existent.

### Rehabilitation of the "Old" Courthouse (1999 – 2006)

Between 1999 and 2009, while McKinney was coping with rapid growth (population grew from 50,000 to 121,000), the City also embarked upon the first of two major capital initiatives to revitalize the historic downtown and resurrect the square as a lively, bustling, and relevant public space.

Between 1999 and 2004, the City (in partnership with the County and State Historic Preservation Office) conducted three different studies to specifically explore the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the "old" vacant courthouse. In 2004, after significant stakeholder input, consensus was reached on a plan to fully convert the courthouse into a performing arts center. Primarily funded by the McKinney Community Development Corporation, construction on the \$9.5 million project was completed in 2006 and included rehabilitation of the courtroom into a 427-seat theater. Other rooms were rehabilitated into conference rooms, office space, a catering kitchen, rehearsal rooms, gallery space, and badly needed public restrooms. The McKinney Performance Arts Center at the Historic Collin County Courthouse now serves as a truly unique and professional multi-purpose venue in which the community's cultural, artistic, and educational opportunities are nurtured.

### Town Center Study Initiative (2006 – 2011)

The Town Center Study Initiative is a sector plan of the oldest part of McKinney, called for during the City's 2004 Comprehensive Plan. The Town Center is comprised of the historic core of the City and includes some of the oldest neighborhoods in McKinney. However, the challenge facing the Town Center has been learning how to create a renewed emphasis on the authentic form and character of the area while still encouraging reinvestment for the future.

As a proactive step towards this end, the City of McKinney launched Phase 1 of the Town Center Study Initiative in 2006. Phase 1 consisted of a series of multi-day public design workshops. These charrette-style workshops engaged community stakeholders (over 300 residents, property owners, and business owners) and generated critical ideas about how the Town Center should look, feel, and function over the long-term. This innovative approach resulted in a community-based vision and master plan that was unanimously adopted by the city.

### Redesign/Reconstruction of the Downtown Square (2007 – 2008)

Around the same time of the Town Center Study Initiative, the City was also making final preparations to reconstruct the public infrastructure in the downtown square exactly as it was (in terms of travel lanes,

intersection geometry, sidewalk widths, parking configurations, etc). Funding for the downtown square infrastructure project had previously been authorized in the 2002 and 2006 bond elections, and the community was eager for the reconstruction project to be implemented.

However, a few days before the downtown square infrastructure project was scheduled to begin construction, the McKinney City Council made the brave decision to delay the project for a year so it could be redesigned to integrate many of the preferred concepts that had emerged during the first public design workshop of the Town Center Study Initiative. A clear public consensus emerged from that workshop, with stakeholders overwhelmingly voicing their preference for more urban design concepts in the downtown square (such as making it more pedestrian-friendly; reducing the number of travel lanes, widening the sidewalks; encouraging a variety of uses such as restaurants with outdoor café-type seating; increasing parking; and increasing landscaping). With construction imminent, coordination of various design elements was a challenging task and required careful consideration of tradeoffs. Stakeholder input continued through the phases of final design and construction. During construction, the City and its contractor exercised extreme care and creativity to minimize disruptions to existing businesses on the square.

Completed in 2008 at a cost of \$2.6 million, the redesigned downtown square infrastructure project included the following key elements:

- Reduction of the number of lanes traveling around the downtown square from 3 to 2,
- Reconfiguration of intersections to decrease pedestrian crossing distances and improve pedestrian safety,
- More efficient layout of on-street parking (increased the number of public parking spaces on the square from 70 to 92 spaces),
- Substantial widening of the sidewalks (doubled the width on three sides and tripled the width on the fourth side of the square),
- A unified streetscape to provide much-needed shade and greatly enhance downtown's sense of place, including landscaping (trees and planters), irrigation, and other sidewalk furnishings such as lighting, seating and waste receptacles, and
- Upgrade of utility and drainage infrastructure.

#### Wayfinding System (2005 – 2008)

To complement these capital initiatives, the City also implemented a wayfinding system of custom-designed signs to direct both pedestrians and drivers to (and within) the downtown area. The wayfinding system features several vehicular directional signs, parking lot directional signs, parking lot destination signs, and a kiosk. The City funded the \$300,000 project mostly through General Fund revenue, with additional funding by a Preserve America grant.

#### Positive Impacts

These capital initiatives have been the primary catalysts for the renaissance seen in downtown McKinney today and have re-established the square as the primary public gathering place for citizens and visitors alike. In addition to helping to weather the current economic recession, these initiatives have collectively increased:

- activity after 5:00 pm (new restaurants with sidewalk cafes),
- sales per square foot,
- lease rates per square foot,
- demand for downtown housing,
- sense of community pride,
- sense of security with a more active street life and improved lighting,
- attendance at community festivals/events,
- private investment in the downtown area (a new 4-story boutique hotel; more historic façade improvements; more expansions of downtown businesses; conversion of the historic Flour Mill into loft residential), and
- momentum for more public infrastructure projects expanding outward from the square (voters approved 2010 Bond package with \$12 million for downtown area capital improvements).