





Codi Bates-Owner (with Simon) of Bon Bon!, The Burger Stand, and the Cider Gallery



Jennifer McKnight-owner of Arizona Trading Co.

# Destination Downtown

The economic, cultural and social benefits of the many events held in Downtown Lawrence can't be understated.

by Mike Anderson, photos by Jeff Burkhead, Steven Hertzog, Peaty Romero and Ann Dean

Andrew Holt-executive director-Downtown Lawrence, Inc



2024 Busker festival by Peaty Romano



2024 Kansas State Fiddling & Picking Championships by Jeff Burkhead

**From parades and concerts to jugglers and fiddlers, Downtown Lawrence has a wide array of events held throughout the year. These diverse events aim to bring people together, foster connections and create a sense of belonging. What groups like Main Street America and International Downtown Association (among countless municipalities) are trying to figure out is the impact these downtown events have on our community. What is the magic number of events to have? Is it better to have annual events or one-off events?**

One positive impact of downtown events is the increased foot traffic. Andrew Holt, executive director of Downtown Lawrence Inc. (DLI), understands the value of downtown businesses getting exposure from different downtown events. "People who come downtown for the events are saying to themselves, 'You know, I always wanted to go in there,' or 'Let's come back,'" Holt says. "Best practices say when you have a mass density of people downtown—walking, enjoying—it's a positive thing. It's a ripple effect."

Several downtown business owners echo this sentiment. Restaurant and business owner Codi Bates, of Bates Co. (The Burger Stand, Bon Bon! and Cider Gallery), says, "Events like Final Fridays, the Old-Fashioned Christmas Parade and Live on Mass not only boost foot traffic to our businesses but also create a ripple effect throughout the local economy. These events draw crowds who dine, shop and explore, providing essential support to downtown retailers and restaurants."

Jennifer McKnight, owner of Arizona Trading Co. and vice president of the DLI board, also cites the importance of the foot traffic these events bring to her business. "So many people come in, and they will just wander in my store. They are curious, and they are here."



2024 Busker festival by Peaty Romano



Richard Renner-executive director Busker Festival by Peaty Romano

## A Plan To Prosper

It's more than just the economic impact these events create. They also build a sense of community and promote the cultural identity of Lawrence. A meta-analysis from studies done at the University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin and Oregon State University (along with the Brookings Institute) have found seven benefits to downtown events in American cities: 1) Tourism: These events attract out-of-town guests; 2) Local spending: These events encourage locals to travel downtown and spend money; 3) Jobs: More events can create more successful business, which means more jobs created and more jobs retained; 4) Property Values: A stronger downtown helps raise the value of properties; 5) Community Identity: Downtown events help build a positive identity and also help develop a cultural significance for the area; 6) Social Cohesion: Downtown events bring people together and create a happier community; and 7) Attracts the Creative Class: Downtown events help attract a highly educated and creative workforce that might want to call Lawrence home.

Holt knows it isn't always about creating more events but strategically adding or advancing events, and getting creative with them. One of the goals of Holt's team at DLI is to get more entities involved in downtown events. For example, the Lawrence Sidewalk Sale has now grown and morphed into a bigger (and not as sweaty) event. Now called Midsummer Night on Mass, the evening event has grown to include restaurants and entertainment, with the goal of making it a community event. This year's event also included street entertainment, pop-up vendors and nonprofits. The Big Pig, Bourgeois Pig's annual block party, coincided with this event, as well. "It became much more of a community event than the sidewalk sale," Holt says. "Build that sense of community. What we hear is more."

A major role of DLI is to assist businesses in growing their events. It helps with marketing, getting the word out, marketing research, logistics for events and communication with DLI members, as well as being a liaison with the city. DLI is also looking to add its own events, including two more to its calendar (one in August and one in September). "We are going to strategically add or advance events. The more it incorporates the entire downtown the better. As we continue to build these events, we want to make sure that all parts of downtown are prospering," Holt explains.

Prosper is the key word in the equation. An often-touted advantage of downtown events is the economic benefit to the city and to downtown businesses. According to data collected by eXplore Lawrence, Downtown Lawrence in 2023 saw about 1 million visitors totaling around 6.5 million visits in 2023. This number represents a 3% growth over 2022.

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## Dancing in the Streets

One of the downtown events that has seen this growth firsthand is the Lawrence Busker Festival. Now in its 16th year, organizer and founder Richard Renner jokes the event has gained a level of maturity where it can go out on its own. Buskerfest, as it's known locally, is a circus in the streets. It's a festival that brings in buskers from all around the world to perform downtown. "This is a street performer festival, so you really have to have it on a street. The best street is downtown," Renner says. With help from DLI, he has grown the festival to include more cultural elements and visual artists. Recently, he's added more environmental acts, more vendors, more transgender and LGBTQ performers, and he's tried out different locations.

"I do my damndest to make it different every year," Renner explains. "It's a celebration. Lawrence identifies itself as being unique and different. These performers we brought in are also unique and different. It struck a chord."

Buskerfest works closely with DLI and eExplore Lawrence to feed into the unique culture of Lawrence and also bring in outside dollars. The event, itself, brings in \$250,000 to the city, he says. And it's becoming popular with people from outside of Lawrence, as well. Renner hears stories about whole families who schedule their reunions around Buskerfest. "People can afford Buskerfest. You just show up," he explains. And buskers from all over the world apply to perform. "I get people applying from South America, Italy, even Russia. It's tough to say no."

Renner is also looking to add another downtown event, possibly a comedy festival during the month of February. He wants to give people a good reason to laugh during the depths of winter. "I'm trying to hit that same nerve that Buskerfest hit," he says.

## Music to My Ears

The number of concert events downtown has grown in the last decade. And no one is more responsible for that growth than Mike Logan, a downtown venue owner and current board president of DLI. Logan noticed the festival and touring culture had changed here in the past 10 years, meaning less of a touring cycle for bands during the summer months. This created a backward amusement park feel, where the summer months were actually a slower time for his industry. His idea was to hold more concert events downtown during the slower time of the summer to bring in more people.

"Let's 'Field of Dreams' it here. If we build it, they will come," Logan explains. With this mentality, events such as Live on Mass were born. He and his team bring in outside dollars by marketing events up to a 120-mile radius.

Logan sees these concerts as a way to bring in a variety of individuals. "It's a vertical effect. It could be background mu-



The Heroic True Life Adventures of Alvin Brooks film screening and Q&A: Moderator Kaye McIntyre (left), Activist Alvin Brooks (center), Director Kevin Willmott (right) by Ann Dean



Alvin Brooks greeting guests and signing books by Ann Dean



Makaya McCraven trio at Liberty Hall: Marquis Hill - trumpet (left), Junius Paul - bass (center), Makaya McCraven - drums (right) by Ann Dean



Blood of a Poet film, dance and music experience at Lawrence Arts Center: Gwentessa Alfie (left), John Jasso (center), Tristian Griffin (right) by Ann Dean

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sic for some or others a chance to lose oneself, to dance all night. It's a great release," he explains. "We have so many stories of people driving or flying in for a show, and stories of people meeting a future spouse at a show. There's always a net benefit for these downtown events. Sometimes that net benefit won't be realized the day of the event, but DLI helped have a trail of communication to increase repeat business."

Besides Live on Mass, Logan is interested in smaller downtown concerts, as well—smaller places celebrating large. He particularly enjoys what the Sandbar is doing with its block party. "Sandbar holds 49 people and is hosting a block party that brings in 2,000 people. I love that energy. I'm trying to prime other businesses to think about this," he says.

Logan is also looking for other events that can be little balls of energy during the summer months. This is the fourth year of the Kaw River Roots Festival, which includes two indoor stages and one outdoor stage at Abe & Jake's Landing. There is also the Starlight Stage, a mobile stage that starts at The Granada parking lot and moves around town to places like Clinton Lake, local parks or for concerts at Lawrence Beer Co.

He is looking forward to the Rock Chalk Block Party on Sept. 27. With the University of Kansas football team not playing home games in Lawrence this fall, he knows he and his team are going to need to come up with events on game days to both bring people to Lawrence and keep people in Lawrence. In 2023, the highest spikes of visitors in Lawrence were on Saturday home games for the KU football team. According to eXplore Lawrence, the game on Saturday, Sept. 23, 2023, saw more than 54,000 visitors to Lawrence (this game coincided with KU Family Weekend). The interstate rivalry game with Kansas State University on Nov. 18, 2023, brought in more than 45,000 visitors.

The Free State Festival is another way to see live concerts downtown. 7,500 to 10,000 people have come to witness concerts by George Clinton and Public Enemy. Marlo Angell directs the festival, which is produced by the Lawrence Arts Center and includes films, concerts, comedy and art in various locations downtown. Angell explains, "Downtown events like Free State Festival give folks a reason to gather and connect over art experiences. Not only do our festival guests explore the planned activities we program, but they explore the town and make new connections."

Besides the economic impact of the festival, she touts the cultural and social impact of having this downtown event. "It's the cultural impact of the festival that tells the real story. It's having two of our festival volunteers (Sav and Riley Rodgers) coming back this year for a screening of their film 'Chasing Chasing Amy' that premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival. It's the commissioning of an original film-dance-music-art experience like 'Blood of a Poet' to push our local artists to try new things. It's screening a film about returning buffalo to the Blackfeet tribe and hearing the audience collectively gasp when they see the animals released to their native land. And it's being in the room when civil rights leader Alvin Brooks and Oscar winner Kevin Willmott receive a standing ovation. It's those special moments that have ripple effects. They inspire new stories, generate ideas and make positive change in our community."



Live on Mass 2023 – Billy Strings by Carter Gaskin



The Sand Bar Block Party by Peaty Romano



The Sand Bar Block Party by Peaty Romano

Art in The Park



Earth Day Parade



Old Fashion Day Parade and Budweiser Clydesdales in front of The Historic Eldridge Hotel



Old Fashion Day Parade

## A Community Vibe

When talking to business owners downtown, it is the cultural impact of the downtown events that are talked about the most. TK Peterson, of Merchants Pub & Plate, says, "Lawrence's downtown events have great variety and reach. Each one targets different interests and demographics, which is what keeps Lawrence inclusive and promotes culture."

Arizona Trading Co.'s McKnight sees these downtown events as a "continuation of 150-plus years of Downtown Lawrence being the center of its cultural identity. These events continue to be the legacy of our cultural identity." She believes these events are a wonderful opportunity for people not familiar with downtown or who don't go downtown to get that feeling of community. "People getting out and being together in a space is always going to promote a sense of community. We all have memories of downtown," McKnight explains.

Besides strengthening community bonds and cultural enrichment, Bates Co.'s Bates sees downtown events as enhancing the overall downtown experience. "As a business owner, I've seen firsthand how downtown events enhance the overall experience for visitors and residents alike. They add an exciting layer to our everyday offerings, making Downtown Lawrence a lively, dynamic place to be."

Whether you are looking for live music, shopping deals, culture or even a future spouse, event organizers in Lawrence all share the same message: Come on down. ▲



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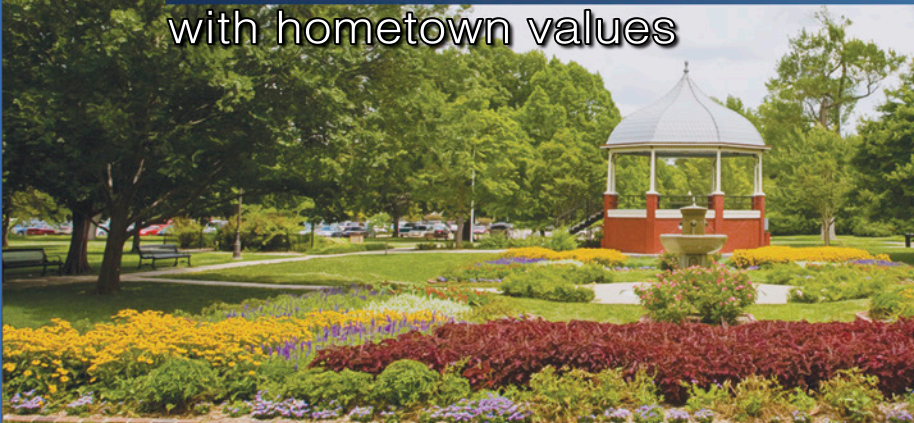
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