

LAWRENCE

BUSINESS

MAGAZINE

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OUR EVER EVOLVING
DOWNTOWN
WITH MASS STREET AT ITS HEART

Kristin Eldridge, with friends at Bon Bon!



Andrew Holt (DLI) with Reanna and Chad Slagl-owners of Jody's Market



An Expanding Landscape

Businesses in and around Downtown Lawrence have different views about what its boundaries are and should be, but they will continue contributing to its success long into the future.

by Tara Trenary, photos by Steven Hertzog

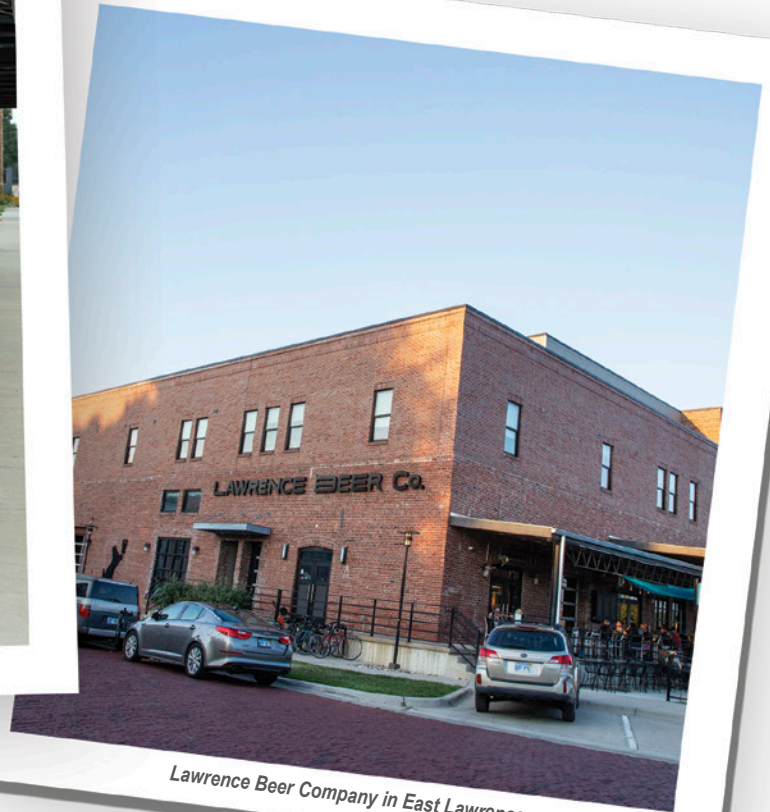
Where is one place in every city or town community members can go to eat, play, shop and just hang out? The place one might consider the social and economic fabric of a community, its heartbeat. In Lawrence, that would be downtown. From shopping to eating to getting coffee to hitting the clubs, community members here feel a sense of pride when spending time on Massachusetts Street.

The heart of Downtown Lawrence, Mass. Street (as locals call it) and the streets flanking it are home to more than 400 businesses—including shops, restaurants, cafes, bars, galleries, museums—many of them locally owned. The National Trust for Historic Preservation ranked Lawrence among its “Dozen Most Distinctive Destinations,” calling it one of the best-preserved and most unique communities in America, according to the Unmistakably Lawrence website. Parade magazine named it “the most popular tourist destination in Kansas.” Travel + Leisure included The Bourgeois Pig, 6 E. Ninth St., on its list of the “10 Greatest College Town Coffee Shops in America.” Four locally owned downtown restaurants were named in the Top 10 Restaurants in Kansas by culturetrip.com.

Since its founding in 1854, Downtown Lawrence has remained a flourishing, diverse, historic Midwest staple. Most thriving downtowns like this have several things in common: successful businesses, engaged citizens, cultural and community events, a vibrant nightlife, historical attractions. Having a designated downtown contributes to the quality of life of its community members by bringing in revenue and keeping it in town, supporting local families and businesses, and engaging in community projects. It offers the community a sense of place, of pride.



Kristin Spacek-Owen's Flowers



Lawrence Beer Company in East Lawrence

The Town Hub

"Your downtown is still the business center and gathering center for the community," explains Andrew Holt, executive director at Downtown Lawrence Inc. (DLI). "With its historical buildings, it is the link to the city's history and identity. Now more than ever, downtowns serve as the front porch for cities and communities."

The preservation of contiguous historic buildings with active storefronts is not common these days in downtowns, he continues. "We are so fortunate to have streets and streets of activity taking place in a historic environment that shows off our history and identity. And it is a healthy mix of retail, dining and entertainment, and growing residential: the magical combo."

Holt believes the presence of an established, thriving major university on downtown's doorstep, with students and families easily walking down into the core of downtown and all framed by beautiful parks and neighborhoods, is key. "In addition, there are so many vital businesses and groups that are consistently putting on fun events and promotions. In other downtowns, the downtown association is tasked with developing massive events to try to drive people downtown. Here, the organizations, businesses and others are already doing that."

With the national workforce leaning more toward being remote, he says people can now decide where they want to work based on where they want to live, not where companies are headquartered. "So they choose a place where they can find the best quality of life. Downtowns historically were the public meeting space, the town square, and downtowns still most effectively serve that purpose today."

Codi Bates, owner of Bon Bon!, 804 Pennsylvania St., Cider Gallery, 810 Pennsylvania St., and The Burger Stand at the Casbah, 803 Massachusetts St., agrees. "A downtown serves as the heart of a community, offering a central location where people gather, shop, dine and socialize," she explains. "It is often the cultural and economic hub that reflects the town's identity and history."

She says downtown areas bring people together and foster a sense of community and belonging, while also attracting tourism and investment, and driving local economic growth.

"Having a downtown in a community is important because it brings people and businesses together, especially with all of the events that happen downtown, such as farmers markets, concerts, etc.," says Kristin Spacek, owner of Owens Flower Shop, 846 Indiana St. "The majority of downtown is made up of locally owned businesses, too, which is amazing. A downtown provides an inclusive place for individuals and families to gather and grow."



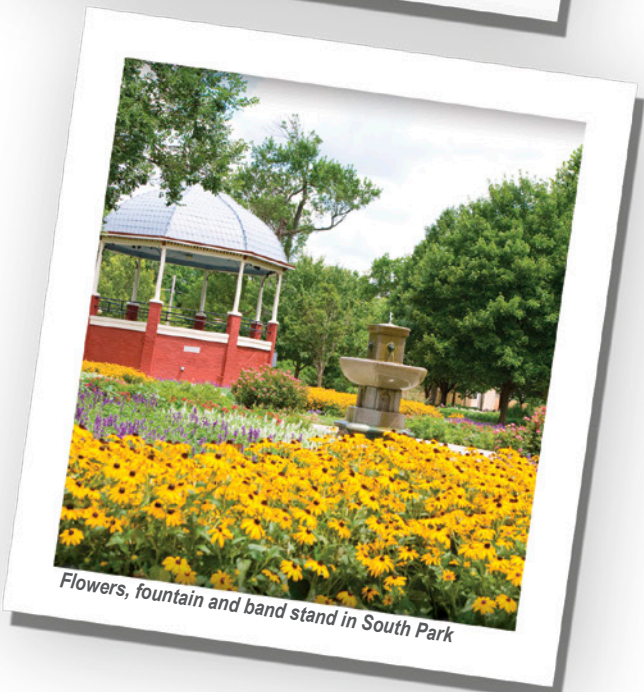
Maximo & Angela Cruz-Burrito King



Lawrence Public Library



Signage for North Lawrence



Flowers, fountain and band stand in South Park

Downtown Districts

There are several distinct areas in and around Downtown Lawrence, but which areas are actually considered a part of downtown may well depend on who you talk to.

Massachusetts Street, along with New Hampshire and Vermont streets bordering it on each side, are what most people recognize as the official streets of Downtown Lawrence. The 600 to 1200 blocks of Mass. Street are listed on the National Register of Historical Places under Lawrence's Historical District. Most of the buildings along the route were built between 1856 and 1953. The diversity of shopping, dining and entertainment in this area makes it a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. Unique shops, local boutiques, restaurants, live music venues, historic buildings and parks add to the charm of this section of downtown.

The Warehouse Arts District, east of Mass. Street, emerged from the revitalization of old industrial warehouses that were repurposed to house studios, galleries, restaurants, a brewery, small businesses and residential spaces, Bates explains. The transformation has preserved the historic character of the buildings while infusing them with new life and purpose. "Its proximity to Downtown Lawrence, with Ninth Street serving as a connecting point, makes it such a great bonus area for folks to explore while out and about downtown."

She says the district is a testament to Lawrence's commitment to supporting the arts and fostering a creative community. "Its blend of historic charm, artistic expression and modern living makes it a unique and cherished part of the city, drawing both locals and visitors to experience its vibrant atmosphere."

Ninth Street, a direct line from west to east landing directly in Downtown Lawrence, has local businesses scattered along its north and south sides, and butts right up to the University of Kansas (KU). Businesses like these—locally owned that prioritize community and cater to the eclectic vibe of Lawrence—are essential to a downtown setting, Spacek explains. "We've had success over the years by providing quality service and product with a positive customer-service approach. Our location is ideal because it adds to our friendly, local, small-business energy."

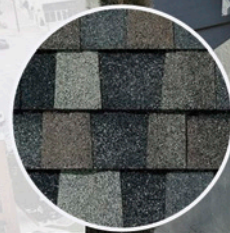
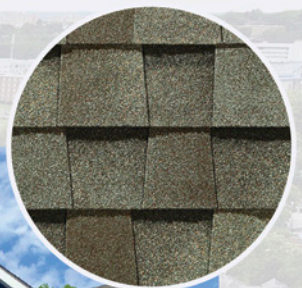
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Blurred Boundaries

The official borders of Downtown Lawrence, according to Downtown Lawrence Inc., are Kentucky Street on the west, the Kansas River on the north, Rhode Island Street on the east and South Park on the south. Also included are Ninth Street from Mississippi Street on the west and Delaware Street on the east; Seventh Street from Kentucky Street on the west and New Jersey Street on the east; Massachusetts Street including the bridge on the north to 19th Street on the south; and North Second Street from the bridge to Lyon Street on the north.

But not everyone sees downtown in this way.

“Some may view downtown as the core commercial area along Massachusetts Street, while others include the surrounding neighborhoods and cultural districts,” Bon Bon!’s Bates explains. “Officially, downtown may have specific boundaries defined by city planning, but the community’s view can be more expansive, encompassing areas that contribute to the downtown atmosphere.”

Holt says DLI likes to take a broader view of what it constitutes the boundaries of Downtown Lawrence are today. “Certainly Massachusetts, Vermont and New Hampshire, from 14th Street north to that beginning section of North Second is identified by everyone. But we also consider the Warehouse Arts District as part of downtown and also heading west on Ninth Street to Maine Street,” he explains. “There is some growth still needed in viewing the Warehouse District and the further reaches of Ninth Street, but both are heavily traveled by both groups via walking and car.”

However, some businesses in parts of those “unofficial” downtown areas don’t always feel included.

“The downtown boundaries should officially include Massachusetts Street and the surrounding areas within a comfortable walking distance,” Owens’ Spacek says. “Doing so would give surrounding businesses a better chance at being included in event advertising and general visibility, which would help the Lawrence economy.”

She says she personally considers Owens and businesses around her on Ninth Street a part of the downtown community because they are so close to the main section of downtown. “Since we are located in Old West Lawrence, it is within walking distance to downtown.”

And she believes downtown is larger than simply Mass. Street. “Massachusetts Street is definitely the hub of Lawrence downtown, and then everything within walking distance from Mass. is included.”

Bates believes the Warehouse Arts District is an essential part of downtown, because “together, our businesses enhance Downtown Lawrence’s appeal by offering diverse dining and cultural experiences, supporting local talent and fostering a sense of community.”

Angelina Cruz, owner of Burrito King, 900 Illinois St., and the upcoming Ninth Street Café, 602 W. Ninth St., says Ninth Street could play a big part in downtown if it were included in local events. “It’s growing. Little businesses are trying to pop up here. I’d like for that to be recognized.”

She believes people in Lawrence love mom ‘n’ pop shops like hers because they have the best food. “Burrito King is legendary. I love that there’s old-school and new-school coming into Ninth. There’s really good food here. There are a lot of self-owned businesses.”

What she doesn’t like is not being included when local events such as parades and street sales are held downtown. “Anything that goes on downtown, we don’t get notified. We are not asked to contribute. Ninth Street is a major portal to downtown, even more so than Sixth. But we don’t get recognized. It would be cool if we got our street lit up with lights.”

Cruz believes community members include Vermont and New Hampshire streets in downtown, but not Ninth Street. “When I tell people my location, I don’t say downtown, I say Ninth. If you say downtown, they’re going downtown.”

She also believes bringing the KU area, in which Burrito King is located, and downtown closer together could help bridge a gap between students and downtown businesses. “Burrito King has the advantage of being close to the students. They eat morning, noon and night, and then some,” she says.

Living the Dream

Coming from other communities, Holt says, and talking with his colleagues across the country, he cannot emphasize enough what a treasure the community has here in Lawrence. “Other downtowns, gutted by the urban sprawl and mall mania of the ’80s and ’90s, could only hope to dream of what we have in Lawrence.”

He points out that Lawrence is incredibly fortunate to not only have KU and Haskell, but to have KU right on the doorstep of downtown. “I have done this type of work in cities that do not have a four-year university. There is a marked difference.”

He also believes there’s tremendous potential for growth here. “Inherently, downtowns foster a sense of community, they enhance our connection with our fellow residents, they create a sense of who we are. Some downtowns have lost their sense of place and are struggling mightily to reclaim it or create anew. Lawrence happily does not have that problem. When you are in Downtown Lawrence, you get a definite sense of what Lawrence is all about and who we are as a community.” ▲

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