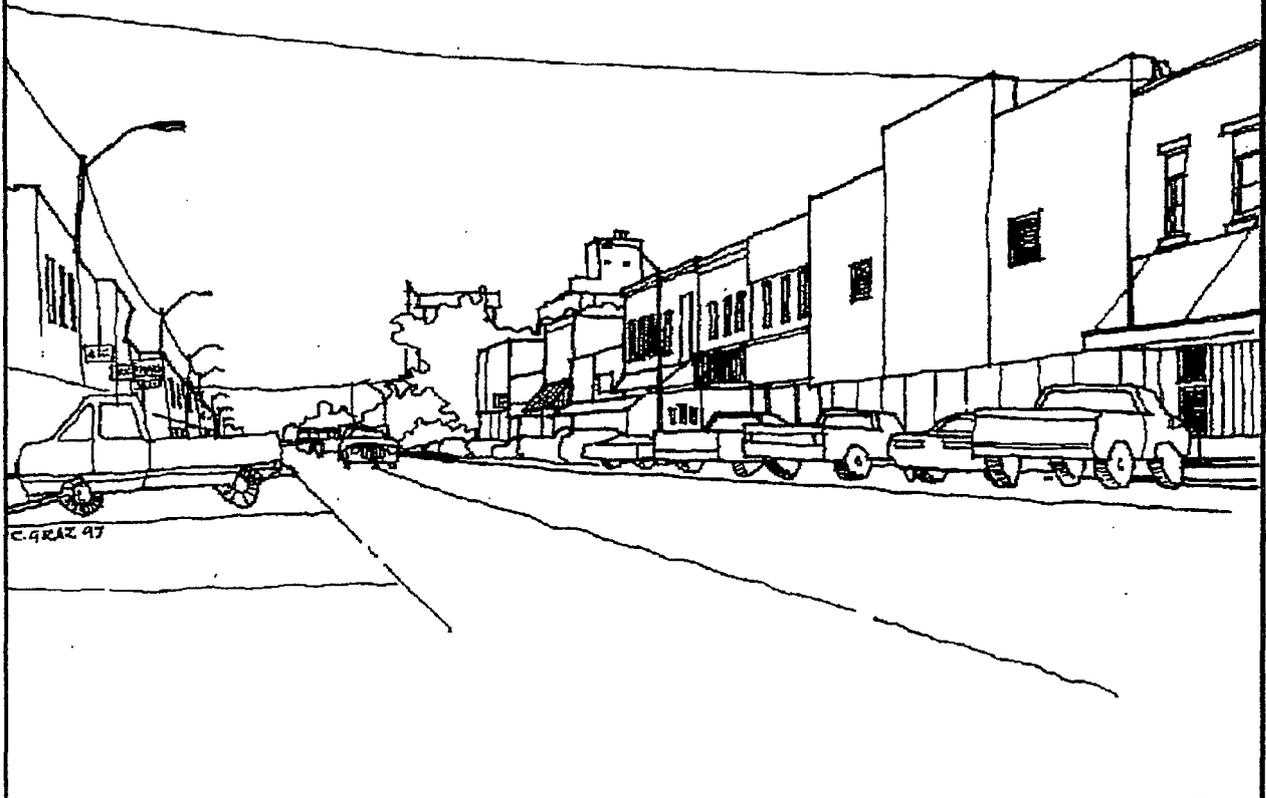
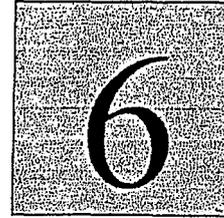


6



*Downtown Study*

# Downtown Business District



## INTRODUCTION

American downtowns are continuously struggling to maintain their vitality. The effects of age on the structures and competition from shopping areas on the outskirts of town pose real and serious challenges for downtown business owners. The central business district plays a critical role in the economy, serving as a central location for shopping and providing jobs for the local labor force. Special efforts to address current and future needs of the downtown will help ensure its future and a sustainable economic environment.

This special area serves the community by meeting a variety of needs. It is centrally located with a concentration of shopping and business activities. As an informal social center, people talk to friends and relatives, while others sit and watch people and passing cars. Festivals, special events and parades usually are held along the main street. Consequently, downtown is best defined as the heart of the rural community.

St. Marys has characteristics and issues similar to many other small towns in Kansas. Residents and business owners express a strong desire to maintain downtown vitality, but existing conditions create hardships. Outside competition from businesses in Topeka and Manhattan is a legitimate concern. Limited selection of goods and non-competitive prices prompt residents to shop in the larger cities. Efforts have been made to improve the appearance of downtown by planting trees, only to result in their removal due to maintenance difficulties. Also, parking is a major concern. Existing conditions and recommendations for improvement are identified on the following pages.

The study of downtown addresses two primary issues. First, the business environment is discussed, identifying the business mix, vacancy rates, and marketing and advertising strategies. Second, the physical conditions are presented, analyzing existing structures and quality of sidewalks. This chapter concludes with recommended actions and a brief discussion of financing opportunities. Transportation and parking conditions are studied in the succeeding chapter.

### Chapter Sections:

- *Introduction*
- *Business Mix*
- *Physical Conditions*
- *Conclusions*
- *Recommendations*
- *Financing Opportunities*

*The effects of age on the structures and competition from shopping areas on the outskirts of town pose real and serious challenges for downtown business owners.*

*Residents and business owners express a strong desire to maintain downtown vitality, but existing conditions create hardships:*

- *Outside competition*
- *Limited selection*
- *Non-competitive prices*
- *Appearance of downtown*

The city does not have a defined central business area. For purposes of this study, the St. Marys central business district is bounded by Palmer Street to the south, Mission Street to the north, Fourth Street to the east, and Eighth Street to the west.

**BUSINESS MIX**

Existing businesses help define character, as the mix of retail and commercial activity creates the incentive to shop and do business locally. Data for this analysis was obtained from the results of the Housing/Land Use Study conducted in February 1997.

*Business Mix and Compatibility*

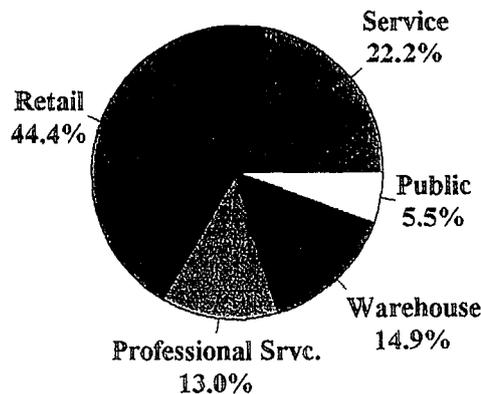
The central business district is alive and well, consisting of an appropriate mix of economic activities. Service, retail, and professional services best describe the type of businesses concentrated in the study area. Service businesses include auto repair, hair salons, appliance repair, and eating establishments. Retail industries are those that sell tangible goods to the public, such as grocery stores, florists, liquor stores, and variety stores. Professional services includes medical, real estate, accounting, and finance businesses.

Figure 6-1 shows the mix by business type. Approximately 44 percent of all structures in the study area are retail businesses. Service activities, including both general and professional services, comprise almost 35 percent of the downtown.

*The central business district is alive and well, consisting of an appropriate mix of economic activities.*

*Approximately 44 percent of all structures in the study area are retail businesses, and service activities comprise nearly 35 percent of the downtown area.*

**Downtown Business Mix**



Source: Housing/Land Use Survey, 1997, KSU

Figure 6-1. Downtown business mix in St. Marys.

## THE STUDIES

This well-rounded mix provides a variety of services and products. Information gathered at the focus group meetings supports the existence and appropriateness of this diversification. Many residents say they shop here anywhere from once a day to five or six times per week. The grocery store, variety store, bank, and restaurants seem to draw customers downtown.

Warehouses consume a significant portion of all buildings, approximately 14 percent. Because they consume spaces better suited for commercial activities, warehouses normally are not considered appropriate uses for small commercial centers. However, the existing warehouses do not seem to present a real problem for surrounding business activities or a threat to the district.

Successful downtowns have businesses that work well together. St. Marys has a mix that creates such an environment. As the map of the downtown business district indicates, most blocks consist of compatible stores and services. However, some businesses are in direct competition and, therefore, subject to a double-edged sword. For example, the block between Sixth and Seventh streets on the south side of Bertrand has a number of automobile oriented storefronts. Concentration of this type of service creates a specialty node, which provides a situation conducive to marketing and promotion. However, those individual shops compete for the same customers.

Anchor stores provide basic goods and services and help sustain downtown shopping activities. These are vital for the support of smaller businesses. The anchors in St. Marys are the grocery store, banks, and city hall. The presence and strength of these businesses suggests that the central business district can support a variety of business types.

Recent commercial activity on the east side of town presents a significant threat to centrally located businesses. Some have already relocated and others, such as St. Marys Bank, have similar intentions. The loss of primary anchors could devastate smaller businesses. The customer base diminishes and fewer purchases are made as people begin shopping on the east side of town. However, current vacancy rates suggest this is not a grave threat at this time.

### *Vacancies*

The number of vacancies, those buildings or lots currently lacking activity, help define downtown sustainability. A high number of vacancies suggests a decline of economic activity, as businesses are not making a profit at their present locations and may declare

*Warehouses consume approximately 14 percent of downtown business spaces.*

*Successful downtowns have businesses that work well together, and St. Marys has a mix that creates such an environment.*

*Anchor stores provide basic goods and services and help sustain downtown shopping activities.*

*Recent commercial activity on the east side of town presents a significant threat to centrally located businesses.*

bankruptcy or relocate to the edge of town. Conversely, low vacancy rates suggest an active business environment.

Residents state a concern about vacant buildings, but no vacancies were discovered at the time of the survey. This indicates a vital downtown with hope for the future. To prevent future vacancies, relocation outside the central business area should be discouraged and concepts for attracting appropriate businesses should be developed. Furthermore, future vacancies should be filled immediately.

### *Marketing and Promotion*

The effective promotion of local business can greatly enhance economy vitality. The Downtown Research and Development Center suggests six essential elements for successful promotion:

- (1) The appropriate merchandise
- (2) Strong organization with a common goal
- (3) Good communication among merchants
- (4) Good communication with news media
- (5) Good communication with local officials
- (6) Enthusiasm!

Applying these elements to St. Marys helps evaluate the potential for successful promotion. As discussed above, the business district appears to have the appropriate merchandise and a good mix of products and services. However, local merchants express concern with the organization and leadership of the Chamber of Commerce, so this may be an area for improvement. Many business owners and residents discuss the lack of communication between businesses, a factor that inhibits efforts to improve the quality of downtown promotion. Communication between local officials and the news media, however, seems favorable. Enthusiasm may be restrained by inadequate communication and cooperation, but could be enhanced through more effective leadership.

Cooperative marketing is not evident. A few years ago, local businesses coordinated a sidewalk sale as a promotion effort, but the lack of leadership, participation, and interest discouraged further cooperative efforts. The primary source of advertising is through local and regional newspapers, with few merchants utilizing radio or television for business promotion.

The concentration of businesses in one location is an ideal situation for marketing. Downtown has an opportunity to help all businesses by working together to promote shopping in St. Marys, and the Chamber of Commerce should provide the leadership for these efforts.

*Residents state a concern about vacant buildings, but no vacancies were discovered at the time of the survey.*

*Local merchants express concern with the organization and leadership of the Chamber of Commerce, so this may be an area for improvement.*

*The primary source of advertising is through local and regional newspapers, with few merchants utilizing radio or television for business promotion.*

*Downtown has an opportunity to help all businesses by working together to promote shopping in St. Marys, and the Chamber should provide the leadership for these efforts.*

Possible cooperative marketing efforts include newspaper advertising, weekend sales with special themes, and reviving the sidewalk sale.

## PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

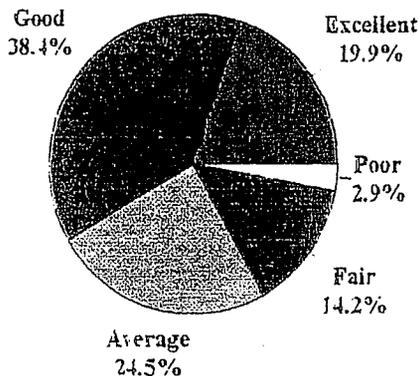
The condition of the physical structures in the commercial area is another vital element to a vibrant downtown. Structures, such as buildings and sidewalks, should at least be held to a minimum standard to ensure health and safety. An inventory of the existing conditions is presented and provides direction for appropriate improvement strategies. The physical-condition study identifies the quality of the buildings, the primary structural problems, and the sidewalk conditions.

### *Structural Conditions*

The structures in the central business district are typical for the Midwest. They are primarily brick, one- and two-story buildings, with storefronts on the lower levels, and either offices, residences, or storage facilities on the second levels. During the 1960s, metal facades were mounted over the original brick walls of many structures. This presents problems for surveyors in identifying primary structural problems, as the original facades are not visible and cannot be properly evaluated. Therefore, the structural conditions are based on what was clearly discernible at the time of the survey.

Figure 6-2 shows the condition of structures. The survey reveals that

### Structural Conditions



Source: Housing/Land Use Survey, 1997, X51

Figure 6-2 Structural conditions in the downtown business district.

*Structures, such as buildings and sidewalks, should at least be held to a minimum standard to ensure health and safety.*

*The survey reveals that more than 50 percent of the structures are in either excellent or good condition. Many of these are older buildings, and the evaluation of these conditions may be overestimated because the metal facades may be hiding serious deterioration.*

*Approximately 25 percent of the structures are average, 15 percent are fair, and just under 3 percent are poor.*

more than 50 percent of the structures are in either excellent or good condition. Many of these are older buildings, and the evaluation of these conditions may be overestimated because the metal facades may be hiding serious deterioration.

This graph shows a considerable number of structures as average or below average. Approximately 25 percent are average, 15 percent are fair, and just under three percent are poor. The average and fair structures should be monitored because they have the potential of deteriorating during the next 10 to 20 years. Routine maintenance and repair should help alleviate potential structural problems. Poor structures require immediate attention and repair if they are to remain safe for employees and customers.

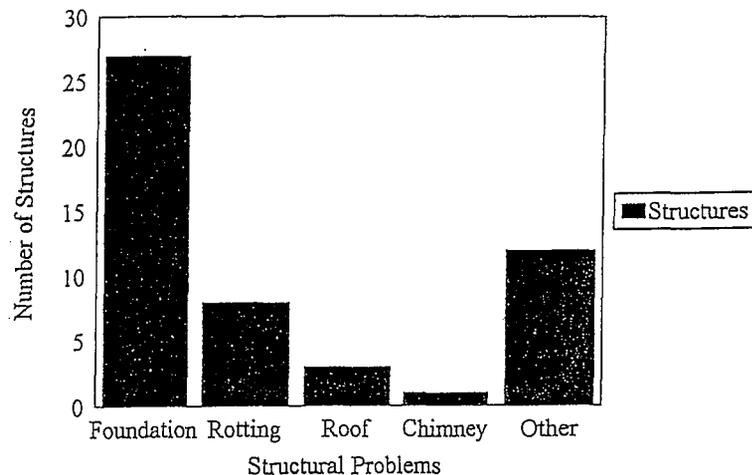
The structural condition ratings were based on the type of structural problems, as shown in Figure 6-3. Deteriorated building foundations are the primary culprits of below-average ratings. Of the foundations that could easily be surveyed, approximately 30 percent are seriously deteriorated, distinguished by major cracks and shifts. Other structural problems include severe rotting on eight structures, one chimney showing deterioration, three sagging roofs, and 11 structures with other contributing problems.

*Of the foundations that could easily be surveyed, approximately 30 percent are seriously deteriorated.*

### *Sidewalk Conditions*

The significant level of pedestrian traffic in a commercial area requires designated and safe walking areas. Figure 6-4 shows the

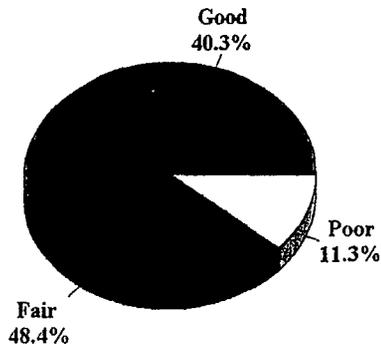
## Structural Problems



Source: Housing/Land Use Survey, 1997, KSU

*Figure 6-3. Structural problems in the downtown business district.*

## Sidewalk Conditions



Source: Housing/Land Use Survey, 1997, KSU

Figure 6-4. Sidewalk conditions in the downtown business district.

existing condition of sidewalks, which were rated on a scale of good, fair, and poor. Good sidewalks have no serious problems, while sidewalks rated as fair have some minor cracks and weeds protruding through the pavement. Poor sidewalks have cracks and chips large enough to trip a pedestrian.

The survey indicates that most sidewalks are inadequate. While approximately 40 percent are in good condition, more than 50 percent are either fair or poor. Poor conditions consume nearly 11 percent of all sidewalks, suggesting immediate action. These sidewalks present a real safety hazard for pedestrians and their repair should be made a top priority.

### CONCLUSIONS

Considering the challenges with which it is presented, the economic conditions of the commercial district are good for a town the size of St. Marys. The equal representation of retail and service industries suggests a good mix of businesses. However, residents and merchants feel a need to improve the communication among the various businesses.

The physical conditions do require attention, however. Some of the older buildings are deteriorated with foundation and rotting problems, and other problems may be concealed because of the metal facades that cover the exterior walls. Seriously cracked and chipped sidewalks threaten pedestrian safety.

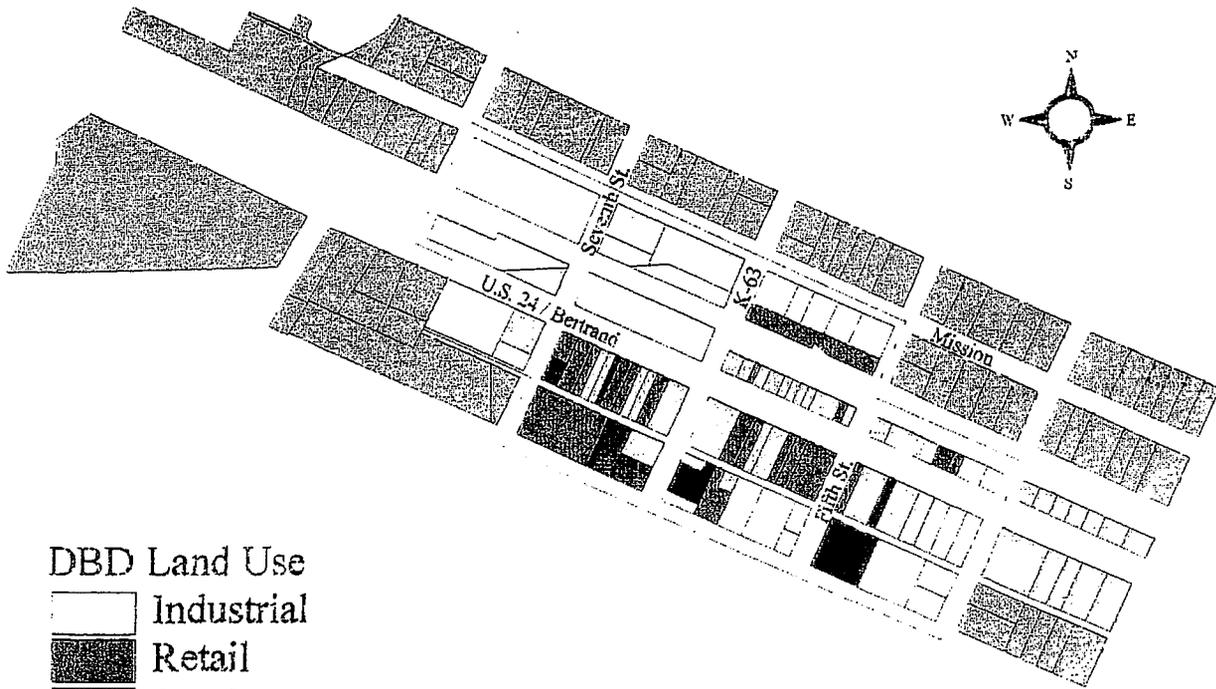
*Good sidewalks have no serious problems, while sidewalks rated as fair have some minor cracks and weeds protruding through the pavement. Poor sidewalks have cracks and chips large enough to trip a pedestrian.*

*While approximately 40 percent of the sidewalks are in good condition, more than 50 percent are either fair or poor. Poor conditions consume nearly 11 percent of all sidewalks, suggesting immediate action.*

*Considering the challenges with which it is presented, the economic conditions of the commercial district are good for a town the size of St. Marys.*

*Some of the older buildings are deteriorated with foundation and rotting problems. Additional problems may be concealed by metal facades.*

# Downtown Business District



- DBD Land Use
-  Industrial
  -  Retail
  -  Service
  -  Government
  -  Warehouse
  -  Other
  -  Proposed
  -  Excluded

The following map represents the defined Downtown Business District and its respective land uses.