

# Connecting Campus to Downtown: A Partnership Between the University and the City of Maryville

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**W**ith an enrollment of more than 6,700 students, Northwest Missouri State University is a coeducational, primarily residential four-year university located in the city of Maryville, Missouri, which has a population of about 12,000 residents. Northwest was founded in 1905 as the Fifth District Normal School and today offers a broad range of undergraduate and graduate programs on its Maryville campus as well as at outreach centers in Kansas City and St. Joseph. The university was ranked as the top moderately selective regional university in Missouri on U.S. News and World Report's list of "2015 Best Colleges" and is one of only four Missouri four-year institutions to meet all measures of the state's performance-based funding initiative during its first three years. According to an economic impact study released in spring 2015, Northwest generated \$617.5 million in added regional income—the equivalent of creating 9,465 new jobs—during the previous fiscal year.

Northwest also boasts a 59% graduation rate, which is in the 89th percentile of its national peer group, and about 98% of Northwest Missouri State University Bachelor's Degree earners and 99% of Master's Degree earners secure employment or continue their education within six months of graduation. Not only has the Northwest campus been designated the Missouri Arboretum by the state legislature, it also offers a vibrant and diverse learning community.

## **Maryville Neighborhoods**

Until recent years, Northwest's collaboration with the city of Maryville on mutually beneficial projects was minimal, though the university played a key role in aesthetic upgrades to the city's historic downtown square about a decade ago. That project was part of the inspiration to enhance a six-block stretch of Fourth Street, a key corridor that connects the downtown square to the main campus entrance. Fourth Street serves as a dividing line between several Maryville neighborhoods. The neighborhoods are described as follows:

1. To the east: downtown Maryville, which serves as the local service and governmental center, where the focal point is the historic Nodaway County Courthouse. The area has a rejuvenated and growing retail base anchored by several strong, locally owned restaurants and banks, with several businesses having upstairs apartments, creating a slight mixed-use element within the downtown area.
2. To the west: Northwest Missouri State University campus, which serves as the educational, athletic, and cultural hub of the community.
3. To the south: established neighborhoods of single-family homes that include a few rental units.
4. To the north: the Campus Town District, which is predominately rental units targeting off-campus student housing. Many rentals are single-home structures converted for multiple occupancy, with a number of duplexes and apartment complexes sprinkled throughout.

On the north side of campus, aesthetics and property values are improving with the assistance of a Campus Town Redevelopment Incentive Program (CTRIP) by the city of Maryville, which encourages property owners to remove blighted structures and redevelop under-utilized properties. The President of Northwest, Dr. John Jasinski, said, “The CTRIP is a catalyst for continued growth and positive changes within our community and campus environment. Part of a more holistic plan, the CTRIP is allowing for economic investment, infrastructure and aesthetic upgrades, and an enhanced student pathway to both campus and downtown.”

### **Fourth Street Improvement**

The Fourth Street Improvement Project was born out of a vision developed by the University-City Collaborative (UCC), a small task-force of senior leaders from both the city and the university. The UCC originally had a formal role as an information-sharing group, and over the years they have transformed into an action-oriented organization. Strategic plans from both the city and the university have been used as guideposts for community development. The UCC had discussed the lack of ADA compliance along the Fourth Street corridor, in addition to the need for a more appealing environment to access downtown retail establishments. City leaders and senior university administration have acknowledged a critical need for developing and redesigning the corridor to comply with accessibility and safety issues for the public while improving the appearance and economic development opportunities for the downtown area.

The Maryville Comprehensive Plan and the Downtown Strategic Plan cited the need for the community to enhance the recruitment and retention of students, the economic vitality of downtown, and the overall quality of life. Maryville leaders also wanted to enhance their designation as a Tree City, USA, with connections to the Missouri Arboretum located on the university’s campus. Strategic planning for the university included a desire to strengthen the relationship and enhance their partnership with the city.

The Fourth Street Improvement Project—a \$2 million effort—was designed to functionally and aesthetically enhance the six-block corridor of Fourth Street from Maryville’s downtown area to the university campus. The corridor had suffered from years of decay and lack of investment, creating an area that was uninviting for students and community members alike. The goals of the project included increasing accessibility, enhancing safety, improving community pride, aesthetically connecting the university campus to downtown, revitalizing the downtown economy, and lever

aging outside funding for construction. The project strengthened the university's connection to the community, and just months after its completion it was already a source of community pride.

Early discussions of the project involved city and university leaders walking the corridor to study its condition and brainstorm possible improvements. City staff then began to build support for the concept with the city council, and attempted to locate funding for engineering and design work. In September 2012, the city of Maryville and Northwest Missouri State University announced their joint partnership to begin the engineering design for the development of the Fourth Street Improvement Project.

Construction work began during the summer of 2014, and by spring 2015 the Fourth Street corridor was transformed into an impressive compass point that welcomes visitors and signifies the synergy of the city and university. The corridor opened to traffic May 1, one day before the university's 2015 spring commencement ceremonies. "From a streetscape perspective, the project dramatically enhances the physical appearance and safety along the main gateway to the university," Maryville City Manager Greg McDanel said. "Through the beautification process, the project will celebrate the proud history between the community and Northwest while reflecting the design elements found throughout downtown Maryville."

### **Funding Challenges**

The major challenge of the project for the city was funding. While the project was reflected in long-term community plans, sufficient funding for engineering and design work did not exist until the partnership with Northwest was established. Immediately after the design phase was completed, there were no funds available for construction. Ultimately, a significant portion of outside grant funding was awarded. Other barriers included securing public buy-in of the project's vision. Numerous long-standing community members disagreed that spending funds on the corridor should be a priority. After construction began, many of the community members commented that they now understood the importance and symbolic nature of the project.

Northwest Missouri State University and the city of Maryville agreed to contribute half of the engineering design costs while searching for potential grants and other construction funding. The project received \$200,000 for pedestrian and landscaping improvements from the Transportation Enhancement Committee of the Missouri Department of Transportation. Nodaway County Economic Development (NCED) contributed another \$388,000 it had received from Neighborhood Assistance Program (NAP) tax credits through the Missouri Department of Economic Development. These contributions generated \$489,000 in funds to assist with the project construction. Further, Maryville's largest industrial employer, Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing Corp., purchased the remaining \$200,000 in tax credits to ensure project completion.

By the end of 2012, the city of Maryville and Northwest had selected SK Design Group, Inc. of Overland Park, Kansas, to complete preliminary design plans for improvements to the Fourth Street corridor. In May 2014, after a year of refining plans and securing needed funding, the Maryville City Council unanimously approved bids to begin construction on Phase I of the Fourth Street Improvement Project to functionally and aesthetically improve the Fourth Street corridor. The construction contract was awarded to Orr Wyatt Streetscapes of Raytown, Missouri.

## Redevelopment

Work began during summer 2014 and continued throughout the academic year as the city and construction crews sought upgrades that extended beyond the street's surface. A vacant residence along the corridor was demolished as part of the city's continued efforts to remove blighted structures; water lines were replaced, deteriorated curb and gutter sections were replaced, and a triangle intersection outside the campus entrance was reconfigured to a more traditional and safer design.

Other enhancements to the thoroughfare included decorative lighting, an eight-foot wide bicycle/pedestrian lane, with an ADA-compliant trail along the entire north side of the corridor and brick pillars that matched the downtown and university landscapes. Newly planted trees and shrubs along the corridor also served as an extension of the Missouri Arboretum. The crowning feature of the project was a gateway arch at the intersection of Fourth and Buchanan streets that features large medallions on each side. A medallion of the Northwest Missouri State University logo on one side of the arch welcomes traffic traveling west toward the campus, while a medallion of the city seal of Maryville tops the opposite side of the arch as people travel east toward the downtown area.

On June 15, 2015, an estimated 400 university and community members gathered under the gateway arch to formally celebrate the completion of the project. In addition to a ribbon-cutting ceremony and remarks by Dr. Jasinski and Mr. McDanel, the block-party-style event offered free food and other giveaways as well as a variety of children's activities which included face-painting, balloon animals, and inflatables.

Dr. Jasinski said, "The Maryville community has shown Northwest, our students, employees, and alumni tremendous support through the years. We are confident the Fourth Street corridor project along with other planned community improvements will couple nicely with our beautiful campus and help continue to contribute to our strategic enrollment and retention initiatives. Partnerships such as this have been part of our platform and will be important for years to come."

## Outcomes

Many outcomes were achieved through the improved Fourth Street corridor. The project has succeeded in enhancing safety, ADA compliance, beautification, and access to downtown retail for all university constituents—faculty, staff, current students, prospective students, visiting families, and alumni. For the city, this project has created a significant sense of renewed community pride. As a major gateway corridor, Fourth Street is now reflective of that pride to students and visitors entering the community on the way to campus. Many people have provided feedback on the project, saying it exceeded expectations and showed a true collaborative spirit between the university and city.

Functionally, the project created a pedestrian-bicycle connection from campus to downtown that is safe and well-lit. The project has served as a catalyst for redevelopment for residential and commercial properties along the corridor, and it is expected to improve the economic vitality of the downtown area. It illustrates pride in the community and the importance of safety and taking part in protecting its beautiful surroundings. The community has learned the city and university can partner on meaningful, large-scale efforts to revitalize and enhance their combined communities.

### **Next Steps**

Moving forward, the city will begin identifying funding for Phase II of the Fourth Street Improvement Project to enhance several additional blocks along the south side of Fourth Street and along other critical community gateways. Ideas have been set in motion to continue dreaming big. This project symbolizes the vitality and vibrancy of the partnership; city residents and university representatives understand this partnership will continue to enhance the community.

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### **Author**

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