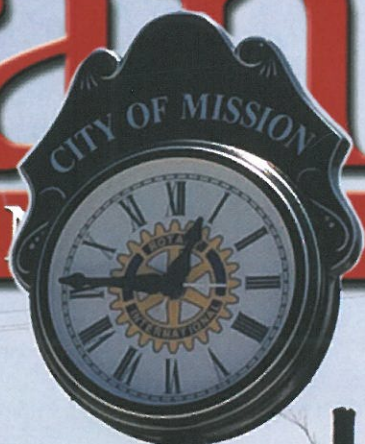


# Kansas

## GOVERNMENT JOURNAL

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Mission:Forward

Growing Public  
Servants

Demand Transfer  
Losses

ROTARY PLAZA





by Emily Randel



*Mission Mayor Steve Schowengerdt takes a swing at a prop barricade as part of festivities celebrating the end of construction on Johnson Drive. Photo by Travis Young Photography.*

**M**ission, Kansas (pop. 9,516), just 10 minutes from downtown Kansas City, Missouri, benefits from having maintained its small-town charm while offering great access to big city amenities. Johnson Drive, the corridor that runs through the heart of Mission, has the historic feel of main street so desirable to today's city planners. However, those visiting Mission over the last two years may best remember a downtown district scattered with orange cones. The pedestrian-oriented buildings and good connections to the surrounding residential neighborhoods were being overshadowed by cracked, uneven sidewalks, aging utilities, and a neglected streetscape. Bringing the area back up to its potential was a substantial effort involving the entire community.

In 2012, the Mission City Council approved a plan to renovate an eight block section of Johnson Drive. The project included stormwater upgrades, new sidewalks, streetlights, seat walls, landscape beds, trash and recycling receptacles, street signage, and three new pedestrian beacons to aid crossing at intersections. The \$10.8 million project cost included design, easement and right-of-way acquisition, construction and inspection with the following outside funding partners contributing over 50% of the total project costs:

- \$2.85 million from the Johnson County County Assistance Roads System (CARS) Program,
- \$2.8 million from a Federal Surface Transportation Program (STP) grant, and
- \$345,000 reimbursement from Johnson County Wastewater

The project scope was significant to start with, even more so considering that the underground work had to be completed before the road construction could begin. The utility companies - water, gas, wastewater, and telecommunications - started upgrades and

relocations in the summer of 2013. This kicked off frustrations for area business owners and visitors even before the City's portion of the project, expected to last eight months, could begin. Collaboration was critical, but not easy. Two large water main upgrades closed the street entirely, just as the holiday shopping season began. The local merchants had a mess, right at their front doors. Robert Hartman, whose family has owned Hartman Hardware on Johnson Drive for 38 years, said the challenges of that time were significant. "When they had the street completely closed, that was a real problem," says Hartman. "We didn't have the regular drive-by traffic, and it was a hassle to get anywhere. It's been better since they finished, but that was tough."

City leaders were determined to encourage shoppers to continue supporting local businesses during construction. During the summer months, the City hosted a weekly drawing where shoppers entered to win \$100 in "Mission Dollars" redeemable at any of the service or retail shops participating in the program. Each week, City staff, area business owners and City Councilmembers gathered at a different business to draw a winner. The contest brought people to the street to have fun, and with a relatively small financial contribution, provided an incentive for continued shopping in the district.

### Community Partners

Branding and marketing was a key component of the project's anticipated success. A local brand and communication design company, Springboard Creative owned by Kevin Fullerton, offered the City Council two years of pro bono assistance during and after the construction period. Thanks to the Springboard team's creative vision, the concept that emerged was "Mission:Forward" - a flexible, positive brand intended to serve the community long after the project was completed. Mission:Forward became Mission:Proud at the conclusion of the construction and continues to be modified depending on the need. Springboard Creative's professional



*Parking stalls are poured on Johnson Drive. Photo by Travis Young Photography.*



*The new streetscape includes enhanced landscaping, streetlights, seat walls and A.D.A. compliant sidewalks. Photo by Pond Photography.*

photographer captured images throughout construction and took portraits of many of the downtown business owners and their shops. The images were shared on social media and were compiled into a book commemorating the project. Springboard Creative still maintains a Mission:Forward Facebook page which highlights new businesses, building improvements and other stories of local interest. The campaign brought favorable attention to the project at a time when the local media seemed more interested in highlighting the negatives. Thanks to the personal commitment of Fullerton and his company, Mission has a successful brand that can help to tell the right story well into the future.

A long-time community partner also found a notable way to contribute to the project. The local Shawnee Mission Rotary Club donated a decorative clock for the project in memory of three prominent Rotarians. The clock, added at a corner in the heart of the district, denotes the new “Rotary Plaza” and is a constant reminder of the club’s outstanding community support. A dedication ceremony for the plaza, attended by the families of the three honorees, city officials and Rotarians, helped to establish an important gathering place along the newly renovated street.

### **Celebrating the End of Construction**

With only a few punch list items remaining, the street re-opened in November 2014 in a community celebration that honored everyone’s spirit and perseverance. Recognizing that a normal ribbon cutting ceremony wasn’t fitting, Mission’s twist was a “Barricade Breaking” event where Mission Mayor Steve Schowengerdt, the Mission City Council and area business owners broke through the construction barricades with sledgehammers. “Shop Mission Saturday” followed the next day with businesses featuring sales and specials, live music, receptions and other special events up and down the street. The Northeast Johnson County Chamber of Commerce joined in to host a “Member Hop” passport game that offered prizes for those who

visited the most Chamber members that day.

### **Continuing the Momentum**

After construction, Mayor Schowengerdt appointed a Downtown District Task Force to identify strategies that would capitalize on the momentum that had been building during the project. The Task Force included area business owners, property owner representatives, and residents. Over six months, they heard from neighboring downtown associations and a prominent area real estate developer, and held listening sessions with Downtown Mission business owners. Their recommendations were approved in a resolution by the Mission City Council in August 2015. Among the recommendations was the creation of a formal business association, establishing a Business Improvement District to secure a sustainable funding source for promoting the district, and an increased staff emphasis on facilitating the process of starting a business in Mission. The recommendations also included support for the work of an earlier task force that met to address concerns about parking availability.


June 2015 brought the launch of a farmers market in the heart of downtown. A first for Mission, the market was established in a grassy area fronting Johnson Drive that formerly housed buildings demolished to remove them from the floodplain. Although not officially deemed a City park, the location provides a highly visible space for public events such as the market. The Mission Farm and Flower Market was scheduled every Saturday from June to September, and has been a popular addition to the downtown. Over the course of its first season, the market has averaged 12 food vendors each week and featured local music acts and a “Community Tent” hosted by various non-profit organizations. Residents identified the market as a top priority in a community survey, and the City looks forward to building on its tremendous success.



## Business Growth and Positive Trends

The public investment in the corridor continues to pay dividends in terms of private investment. Historically, the area saw relatively frequent turnover. Since March 2014, businesses moving into the district or those coming soon have outpaced those moving out nearly 2:1. Four buildings have sold to new owners, and existing property owners are renovating their buildings as well. The owners of the district's historic theater initiated an extensive remodel, and in total, the area has seen nearly \$620,000 (estimated project valuation) in building permit activity since the project began. Clark Davis and his family, owners of *Mélange Dance + Events*, purchased and renovated their building, a former grocery store, in 2013, when the street construction was planned, but not underway. "The kind of investment that the City was committing to the project was the best indicator we had of where this area was heading," says Davis. "Mission has always had a great feel, and this improvement to the infrastructure made us confident that the next phase of success was coming. We wanted to be a part of that."

Signs are strong that the entire community has been energized by the Johnson Drive project. The attention the area received during the hardest days of construction helped to keep Mission top of mind throughout the greater Kansas City region. As Mayor Schowengerdt reflects on the past two years, he is encouraged by what he sees. "The construction period was hard on our businesses, there's no question about that," says Schowengerdt. "But the area looks great and we're seeing things improve with more people visiting with the farmers market and the building improvements that are going on. It's heading in the right direction." A renewed sense of pride for locals in Mission is aimed now at creating the next phase of success for the district. The community has never shied away from ambitious and challenging projects, and there's a distinct "buzz" in Mission these days. You get the feeling the best is yet to come.

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*Bob Bradwell, known as "The Jelly Man," helps a customer at the new Mission Farm and Flower Market. Photo by Springboard Creative.*



*Bob Hartman, owner of Hartman Hardware, on Johnson Drive since 1977. Photo by Travis Young Photography.*



*Tara, Clark, and Jaye Davis of Mélange Dance & Events. Photo by Travis Young Photography.*