



INSIGHT

## Breathing New Life Into a Capital City with P3 Funding

In an increasingly competitive environment, city leaders are often pulled in multiple directions as they face conflicting priorities for traditional funding sources. Many have responded to such pressures with the public-private partnership (P3) funding model, learning that private investment can generate public enthusiasm and momentum for projects.

City leaders in Topeka, Kansas, used the P3 approach in 2015 to revitalize a downtown thoroughfare, Kansas Avenue. The comprehensive project included a traffic study, wider sidewalks and new pavement, curbs, gutters, benches, landscaping, water lines, street lighting and pocket parks. It was challenging to launch a project that had previously stalled for decades despite several grass roots attempts, yet perseverance led to the largest public-private partnership in the city's recent history.

### **Momentum starts with a strong vision**

Public-private funding typically involves a wider range of stakeholders, thus a wider range of opinions and increased project visibility. It is important to create multiple opportunities for city residents and business owners to support the projects through their actions, thoughts and financial support.



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Brian Armstrong, Bartlett & West

“With the downtown Topeka revitalization project, continual public and private collaboration helped the vision become more cohesive over time,” said Bartlett & West’s Brian Armstrong, PE. “Enthusiasm from key stakeholders lent momentum to public engagement and the project as a whole.”

## **Increase public funding**

The Topeka City Council approved a project budget of nearly \$5 million, funded by utility operating funds, general obligation bonds and a half-cent retailers’ sales tax. An additional \$800,000 from a previous budget increased the threshold even more. Transient guest tax, or “bed tax,” will help fund projects like Every Plaza, a 45,000-square-foot entertainment space opening in 2020 in the shadow of the Kansas Statehouse. Bartlett & West is overseeing landscape architecture around the plaza, which will feature a 50-foot performance stage, digital screen, programmable fountains, fireplaces and an ice rink during winter.

## **Inspire private funding**

In response to the public funding commitment, Downtown Topeka, Inc. partnered with city leaders to oversee the “Imagine Downtown” capital campaign, which increased funds by about another \$4 million.

Corporate sponsors were given the opportunity to help influence design concepts for pocket parks along Kansas Avenue, blending their corporate identity and Kansas state history. With Topeka’s heavy corporate presence, sponsors included Bartlett & West, Westar Energy, Fidelity State Bank & Trust Company, Mars Chocolate, Capitol Federal, Hill’s Pet Nutrition, Security Benefit and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway.

Moreover, local investors have found great opportunity along Kansas Avenue in recent years, opening new business like The Pennant barcade, Iron Rail brewery, Cyrus Hotel and Kansas

Avenue Lofts.

## **Find a muse**

With the Kansas Avenue revitalization, idea generation began with inter-city visits to towns like Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and Greenville, South Carolina. For many Topeka residents, that instilled a belief in the possibilities ahead for their city. Public meetings and committees began to take shape, with residents asking questions beyond just the design aesthetic. They decided the downtown area wasn't as functionally or structurally sound as they'd like and began to look more comprehensively at the bigger picture.

From concept to completion, the process lasted more than a decade, but industry and community responded positively to the result. The project earned numerous industry awards for Bartlett & West. More importantly, the downtown area saw better engagement than ever before, with record-high commercial real estate deals and significantly increased attendance at public events.