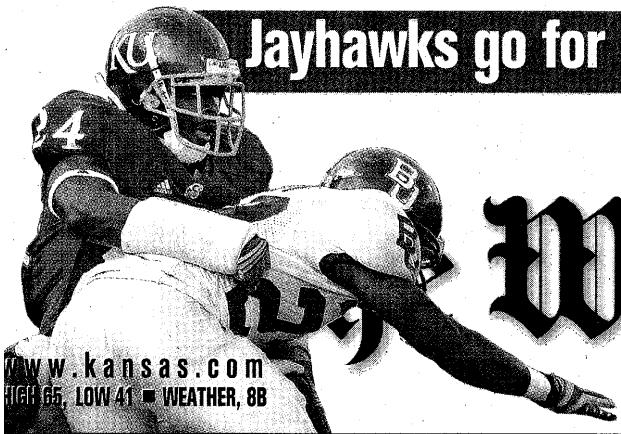


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## PERCEPTION SURVEY

# Residents' opinion of downtown improving

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK  
The Wichita Eagle

More Sedgwick County residents have a favorable attitude about downtown Wichita than they did two years ago, according to results of a survey released Friday.

The "Community Perception Survey About Downtown Wichita," prepared for the Wichita Downtown Development Corp., also showed that slightly fewer residents think downtown is "propped up" by city government.

However, most residents surveyed think that there needs to be more parking downtown and improvements to traffic flow.

The telephone survey was conducted last month by Griffin Media Research. Respondents were 300 adults 18 and older who live in the county — including 17 percent who also work downtown. It has a sampling error of plus or minus 5.5 percent.

It's the third survey done by the Wichita Downtown Development Corp. The first was done in



Wolverton

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# DOWNTOWN

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2004 followed by another in 2005, when its frequency was changed to every two years.

Ed Wolverton, president of the downtown group when the survey was conducted, said his organization started the survey to measure the attitudes residents have about downtown and to identify areas where the group needs to do a better job communicating what's actually happening in the city's core. He characterized the overall survey results as "extremely positive."

Wolverton's last day with the Downtown Development Corp. was Thursday. He begins a similar job in Greensboro, N.C., next month.

The survey covers a range of topics, from dining and attending entertainment events downtown to doing business there.

The results also showed that of the residents surveyed, adults under 35 had a better opinion of downtown than those who were older than 35.

According to the survey, 86 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that a healthy downtown is important for Wichita. That's up 10 percentage points from the 2005 survey.

Also higher was the number of residents agreeing that downtown Wichita is more vibrant. Thirty-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared to 30 percent two years ago.

"I think that people are realizing that it is your downtown that is defining you as a city," said City Council member Sharon Fearey, whose district includes part of downtown. She also sits on the development group's board of directors.

Thirty-nine percent strongly agreed or agreed that city government was investing too much money downtown. That was down from 46 percent in the last survey.

While the survey showed that attitudes have improved about the importance of a healthy downtown, perennial issues such as adequate parking and traffic have not changed much.

Seventy-two percent said it was somewhat important or very important that there was more parking for visitors.

With 23,000 parking spaces downtown, Wolverton and downtown real estate developers think there is adequate parking. But the survey results tell them that's not what most residents think.

"There's the actual supply of available parking and there's the perception of what's available,"

said Steve Martens, president of real estate firm Grubb & Ellis/Martens Commercial Group.

Wolverton thinks it's a matter of overcoming the perception by doing a better job of communicating to residents the availability of downtown parking.

Martens said it may come down to "creating additional, highly visible parking lots" downtown.

"As we all know . . . perception is reality," Martens said.

But fewer than half of respondents said they were somewhat or very supportive of spending more tax dollars for additional parking downtown.

Parking is one reason why Ron Holt thinks most respondents were less than enthusiastic in their answers to a statement about the new downtown arena.

Responding to the effect of a

downtown arena on the community, 42 percent said it was not at all good or not very good for the community. Thirty-four percent said it was somewhat or very good while 20 percent were neutral.

Holt, the assistant county manager overseeing the arena project, said concerns about parking tend to pull down opinions about publicly funded arenas.

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### HIGHLIGHTS FROM DOWNTOWN SURVEY

- 86 percent of residents think a healthy downtown is important to Wichita, up from 76 percent two years ago.
- Residents who thought downtown Wichita is vibrant climbed to 38 percent from 30 percent in the 2005 survey.
- Forty-two percent of residents go downtown more than 12 times a year, up from 35 percent.

Source: Griffin Media Research