

Downtown Centralia
Hospitality/Revitalization Plan
Phase II 2004



MISSION STATEMENT

To restore and redevelop DOWNTOWN CENTRALIA into its traditional role as a regional destination center for hospitality, entertainment, the arts, business, professional and fraternal meetings and conventions — utilizing its historic buildings and its multi-cultural and multi-racial history as an economic stimulus to recreate a vibrant and unique urban center for residents and visitors.

CENTRALIA: THE HISTORIC “HUB CITY”

Our George Washington, the son of slaves and soon to become one of the city’s richest men, platted Centralia as “Centerville” in 1875. The city soon became the transportation center – “Hub” – for all of Southwest Washington, due to its location on the major north-south shipping route and the new east-west rail connections. The railroad connection to maritime shipping facilitated local coal mining, lumber and agriculture business trade in both national and international markets. The newly born “Hub City” developed the qualities and amenities of a much larger city. The largest railroad depot, other than Portland and Seattle, hosted 44 passenger trains daily. Fourteen hotels, five theaters, 12 banks, 24 taverns and downtown restaurants dotted Tower Avenue. Fraternal organizations flourished. The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, the Masons, and the Fraternal Order of the Eagles erected dramatic structures that mingled with commercial structures. Each year’s calendar was full of cultural, recreational and community events. The demands of a flourishing economy created the need to found Washington’s first community college – Centralia College. That was 1924!

Seventy-five years later, in January 1999, the Centralia City Council confronted declining commercial property tax revenues and rising costs of providing services to the businesses and residents in the downtown core. Vacant and deteriorating commercial properties in the City Center had created a negative impact on police and fire services. The Council explained the crisis and a possible solution to its local citizens and the business community in an “An Open Letter to the Citizens of Centralia”. The Council committed itself to the restoration of Downtown Centralia as the economic and cultural center of Centralia. The Council concluded that Centralia’s future was in its past: the restoration of its historic buildings into a hospitality center that would be the economic generator to revitalize the town.

HOSPITALITY CENTRALIA: THE VISION

Centralia's future lies in the re-creation of its vibrant past; a future in which Centralia is re-established as the "Hub City", a hub for recreation, commerce, transportation and culture in the region. Centralia will become a 24 hour city; alive with performing arts, entertainment, conventions and meetings, special events, heritage tourism, specialty retail and recreation. Centralia will continue to be a destination for antique shoppers, while the antique stores provide the ambiance of the City. The six blocks of downtown will be a hustling convention and meeting center. Historic buildings such as the Lewis and Clark Hotel, the Wilson Hotel, the Olympic Club and Oxford Hotel, the Dale Hotel, and other hotels will offer more than 200 elegant historic hotel rooms, bed and breakfasts, and meeting rooms. The "art deco" ***Fox Theatre***, operated by Opera Pacifica, will be home to classical theatre and musical theatre. In addition, the beautifully restored theatre will host teleconferences, special events, and meetings. Centralia will be a regional performing arts and cultural center. Various venues will be available, including ***The Aerie Ballroom*** (the restored Eagles Lodge), ***McMenamin's Olympic Club, Hotel and Theater*** (the restored Oxford Hotel), the ***Evergreen Playhouse***, Centralia College's ***Corbet Hall***, the ***Gibson House*** (the restored Proffitt building), ***Centralia Square*** (the restored Elks Lodge), the ***Lewis and Clark Hotel*** lobby and ballroom, ***Destiny Christian Center*** (the restored Liberty Theatre), the ***Ayala Brothers Furniture Store*** (the restored Union Loan and Trust building), and the ***Hub City Ballroom***. Unique dining experiences await locals and visitors in a variety of small and large, unique and traditional venues. The ***Lumber Mill*** will be a destination for specialty shopping, dining and entertainment. The restored ***Centralia Union Depot*** will be the transportation center of the area, a destination for Amtrak rail service and the home to businesses and meetings.

A REVITALIZED DOWNTOWN: THE GOAL

1. To redevelop downtown Centralia's historic infrastructure to its original and similar uses: hospitality, business conferences, entertainment, professional offices, residences, and commercial and retail businesses.
2. To restore Centralia as the cultural and arts center of Southwest Washington.
3. To stabilize and grow the property tax base by restoring every building to its historic elegance.
4. To enhance current businesses and attract new enterprises.
5. To capitalize on the City's geographic location between the metropolitan areas of Portland and Seattle.
6. To utilize the City's highly developed wastewater, water and utilities infrastructure to grow the local economy.
7. To utilize the City's labor pool, public education and Centralia College to attract business and industry to the City.
8. To establish an economic environment conducive to commercial diversity and prosperity, while protecting the environment and enhancing the quality of life for local residents.

HOSPITALITY CENTRALIA: THE PLAN – PHASE I

Centralia Union Depot Restoration - (COMPLETED)

This 3-phase project took eight years and cost more than \$4.4 million. It was completed in March of 2002. The restoration developed more than 4,000 square feet of premium commercial space. As the Interstate highway system has become more congested and the cost of owning and operating a private vehicle has risen, local and regional travel by rail has become an attractive alternative. Centralia's historic Union Depot has been restored as a major resource as the train schedule has increased. Travelers find their weekend excursions or business retreats begin the instant they board the train for Centralia. Early results indicate that this is a correct assessment. Centralia Depot's ridership is up more than 16% over last year, while most other stations on the West Coast line are down for the year.

Early 1900's Streetscape – (COMPLETED)

The \$2.85 million project replaced cracked sidewalks and pot-holed streets with stamped and dyed concrete, repaired brick, added new trees, and installed vintage benches and lighting matching the ambience of the 1920's. The trees have matured and flower baskets brighten the summer streets. Private investors have invested millions of dollars into their buildings and their businesses.

Façade Improvement Program – (COMPLETED AND CONTINUING)

Centralia's Downtown Historic District includes more than 100 buildings, of which 67 properties contribute to the historic context. Many buildings show the scars of misguided modernization or deferred maintenance. A few of the 30-odd non-contributing properties have been modified beyond recognition as historic, but are restorable. Centralia's Façade Improvement Program will continue to support restoration of modified structures and preservation of those that remain in their original state. To date, 14 properties have used this program to restore their facades.

Restoration of the Fox Theatre – (IN PROGRESS)

The City purchased the historic Fox Theatre to save it for restoration. A buyer has been found and *Opera Pacifica* is in the process of saving this beautiful lady. On September 11, 2004, *Opera Pacifica* presented the first live performance in over fifty years, to the thunderous applause and deep appreciation of the audience.

Restoration of the Wilson Hotel – (IN PROGRESS)

The City purchased the historic Wilson Hotel to save it for preservation. A buyer has been found and work will begin soon. The Lewis County Convention and Visitor Bureau currently occupies the lobby of this fabulous historic building.

HOSPITALITY CENTRALIA: PHASE II – TASKS

Phase II - Task #1: Commercial Infrastructure Development

Centralia endured a declining economic environment for five decades. Nonetheless, the City is rich with historic infrastructure and ripe for redevelopment, in many instances because the local economy did not provide the revenues necessary to remove or destroy the historic buildings. More than 80,000 square feet of upper floor space awaits development. Most of the hotel and entertainment space that accommodated Centralia's visitors is still available. A commercial infrastructure improvement program will seek to distribute matching fund grants to building and business owners with retrofits to make second and third floor space productive commercial space. These code-related improvements will make it economically feasible to return the upper floors of these buildings to their original elegance and commercial productivity.

Phase II - Task #2: Parking and Traffic

The success of Task # 1 will require the enhancement of parking availability, parking information and traffic flow. Visitors will require adequate signage from the freeway and to their downtown destinations. Programs are in progress to accomplish the following tasks:

1. Freeway Signage: A coordinated signage system will direct vehicular traffic from the freeway to the downtown core commercial area.
2. Historic Attractions: Historical markers will direct travelers through an historic loop along Mellen Street, through downtown and back out Main Street and Harrison Avenue, with directional signs to historical buildings and sites.
3. Pedestrian Signage: Kiosks will point to public parking, cultural attractions, entertainment venues, dining, shopping, meeting facilities and public restrooms.
4. Parking: Cooperative parking efforts will enlist local business in preserving on-street parking for customers. The Streetscape will be regularly cleaned and maintained.
5. Campus-City Ambiance: A pedestrian promenade will connect the Centralia College campus with downtown Centralia.

Phase II - Task #3: Product Development

The goal is to create a vibrant downtown business environment conducive to a diverse mix of commercial and residential uses. Activities are in place to encourage the following activities:

1. Evening Entertainment: The City will encourage retail that is open in the evenings, such as art galleries, pub theatres, theme restaurants, and bookstore/cafés, while working with current businesses to extend business hours into the evening.
2. Established Events & Attractions: Established events will be encouraged to focus on Historic Downtown Centralia.
3. Railroad Focus: The City will encourage the creation of a downtown “Railroad Focus” by moving the locomotive from Borst Park to the downtown area.
4. Hospitality: The City will develop and execute a long-term plan to create a centralized conference administration center.
5. Historic Ambiance: The Department of Community Development will facilitate the development and publication of a walking tour booklet describing and identifying historic buildings and photographs.
6. Public Events & Festivals: (Discussion Item) The City will encourage service clubs and non-profit organizations to produce special events throughout the year. Current activities include:
 - a. A nine-day Summerfest – two weekends/one week, including 4th of July activities, the Antique Fest, a Centralia College event, one of the Music in the Park concerts, and perhaps adding a special Farmer’s Market event and street vendors/carnival (summer)
 - b. ARTrails
 - c. Hub City Car Show
 - d. Railroad Days (spring)
 - e. Music in the Park series (summer)
 - f. Patriot Days – performance at the Fox Theatre by *Opera Pacific* and other patriotic events (winter)

Phase II - Task #4: Diversify Business Mix

The plan will focus on creating commercial venues, focusing on recruiting specific retail outlets to create businesses that are mutually compatible. The plan would be to encourage the following:

1. To expand the business mix to give local residents a reason to come to the Historic Downtown Centralia.
2. To expand and utilize the regional transportation facility at the Union Depot.
3. To convert old hotel space to bed & breakfast venues.
4. To enhance entertainment venues.
5. To develop food clusters such as bakeries, wine/cheese shops and specialty foods.
6. To create art studios and galleries.
7. To offer outdoor sports/recreation: cycling, canoe/kayaks, camping, and fishing shops.
8. To encourage craft and specialty stores.
9. To support development of a farmers market with a wide array of produce and products.
10. To develop second floor residential space.
11. To develop live-above work-below industries.

Phase II - Task #5: Create Financial Resources

1. Centralia City Light Rural Electric Fund.
2. Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation funds.
3. Lewis County Distressed Community funds.
4. Washington State Community, Trade and Economic Development Block Grants.
5. Washington State Community, Trade and Economic Development Building for the Arts funds.
6. United States Department of Agriculture Rural Economic Development funds.
7. Centralia Hotel/Motel fund.
8. Public Facilities District funds.
9. Business Improvement District.

Phase II – Task #6: 5 Year Plan Priorities

1. Create and implement a Downtown Elevator Utility and Local Improvement District.
2. Expand and fund the Façade Improvement Program.
3. Obtain and develop parking space adjacent to downtown.
4. Design and install downtown signage and kiosks.
5. Develop the Downtown Convention Center Administration facility.

CONCLUSION

Phase I has been an unqualified success. Phase II will take the City far into the Hospitality and Historic Preservation model. Phase III should be developed in five years to set the stage for the next level of development.