



With the help of the community, Wynne's historic downtown is on the rebound, and it has meant increased economic activity in the city.

# The road to downtown revitalization in Wynne

By Katie Weaver

**M**uch like a smile improves one's expression, revitalizing downtowns like the one in Wynne improves the face of northeast Arkansas.

Revitalization is important to cities and towns across the country. Restoring downtown communities can increase a municipality's economy and boost the sense of pride citizens have in their community. Most recently, Wynne has been bringing new life to its downtown and hosting events to draw attention to the area.

Wynne Downtown Revitalization Committee (WDRC) member Esther Witcher says this project is important because "it brings life back to a geographical area that is seen and traveled through by many daily."

Wynne has done an excellent job restoring the historic downtown area and giving it a fresh look and identity for citizens and visitors to enjoy. The city has held several recent events to showcase their hard work, including the Downtown Christmas hosted by the WDRC, the first Downtown Mardi Gras in March, and they installed a new splash park during the summer of 2018. The splash park was partially funded by

a grant provided by the Wynne Parks and Recreation Commission.

The Cross County Library is also expanding as part of the committee's efforts, Witcher says. "We foresee the expansion of our library to be able to offer services that are currently stifled by lack of space."

According to WDRC member Mary Anne Cruthirds, the committee hopes for all of the old buildings to be restored in the downtown area. To expand the library, the committee will use Wynne's Burnett Drug building.

Cody Slater, CEO of the Wynne Economic Development Corporation, notes that they are able to aid the WDRC by awarding grant funding and providing "statistical support and information for retail businesses interested in relocating or investing downtown." Additionally, "The Chamber holds our annual FarmFest festival in the downtown area which helps highlight the improvement being done each year," Slater says.

Wynne is working toward several goals in their downtown revitalization efforts. Although they have accomplished a lot already, the WDRC has no intention of slowing down. The WDRC hopes to award grants that will help improve the exterior of downtown buildings

in an effort to attract businesses to the area. They have already placed decorative lights and planted trees along downtown's streets.

The WDRC hopes to increase the number of businesses in downtown. Currently, the Merriman building and Downtown Charm are both places available for rent. The Bridge Church has taken up residence in the Merriman building and rents the building for Sunday morning services.

Wynne Mayor Jennifer Hobbs says she and the city have high hopes for a more vibrant downtown.

"There is one building under restoration for a restaurant, but I would love to see more restaurants or even a coffee shop open downtown," Hobbs says. "We need activities in Wynne that draw us together and give us all the feeling of community."

While the WDRC, Mayor Hobbs, and the Wynne Economic Development Corporation have played essential roles in restoring downtown, revival takes broad community involvement, with citizens and stakeholders participating in meetings, attending events, supporting fundraising efforts, and contributing their time.

"I feel [downtown revitalization] is extremely important for our future economic development," Hobbs says. "When you look to thriving communities, almost all, if not all, have a thriving downtown area. I am so proud Wynne is trying to preserve the Historical Downtown District of Wynne."

Investment in the city and job growth have gone hand in hand, Slater says.

"Over the last three years, the community has added 75 direct jobs to our economy and millions in investment," he says. "WEDC has also implemented a new grant program in Wynne to support exterior renovations to existing businesses and is in the early stages of creating a business incubator to assist with start-up ventures."

The city of Wynne has grown economically in recent years, and the revitalization of the downtown area, with the help of its citizens, can only push Wynne's development to new heights.

## HGTV stars coming to UCA for downtown revitalization event

The Center for Community and Economic Development at the University of Central Arkansas will host stars from HGTV's *Home Town* from 5:30–7 p.m. on Tuesday, July 30 in UCA's McCastlain Ballroom. Mallorie and Jim Rasberry and Josh Nowell will present "Downtown Comeback," a story of how Laurel, Miss., revitalized its downtown through preservation, promotion, and economic development efforts. Learn more at [www.uca.edu/go/downtowncomeback](http://www.uca.edu/go/downtowncomeback).



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Installed last year, the city's downtown splash pad gives children and families a place to hang out and chill out in the summer heat.