

# Old Shawnee Town

SHAWNEE, KANSAS

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## Strategic Plan 2004-2014

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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#### Introduction

Old Shawnee Town is an outdoor museum recreating a Kansas prairie town dating from the 1840s to the early 1920s. The site features seven original and twelve replica buildings, two gardens, and three structures providing support services for operation of the site. Each building is furnished with artifacts dating roughly from that period. Owned and operated by the City of Shawnee, Kansas, as a division of the Parks & Recreation Department, the Town is the cornerstone of Herman E. Laird Park, two blocks from the original Town Square and downtown Shawnee.

#### History

Old Shawnee Town was founded like most museums as a result of a grassroots effort by intensely dedicated individuals acting for the public good. In 1966, the impending demolition of the original Gum Springs Jail, then located at 58<sup>th</sup> and Nieman Road just north of the Shawnee Square, spurred the creation of the Shawnee Historical Society. A group of concerned citizens formed a committee to raise funds to save the jail and dismantle it. Bluejacket Park, a nearby five-acre neighborhood park, part of the Johnson County Parks & Recreation District, was identified as a suitable new location for reconstructing the jail as part of a complex of historic structures. The land was leased by Johnson County Parks District to the City of Shawnee with the understanding that the Shawnee Historical Society would administer the development of "Old Shawnee Town" on 2 ½ acres of the park site. The site was fenced and dedicated on July 13, 1966. In 1967, a General Store, an Undertaker and Cabinet Shop, and a Bank were built to replicate typical business structures of a prairie town. Other buildings were added and artifacts collected to furnish the buildings in Old Shawnee Town. The park was renamed Herman E. Laird Park in 1973 in honor of a former parks board commissioner.

As buildings were added to the grounds, the City of Shawnee assumed responsibility for all utility expenses and the insurance of collections housed in the buildings at Old Shawnee Town. In March, 1974, the City of Shawnee agreed to reimburse the Shawnee Historical Society for providing staffing of Old Shawnee Town in the capacity of receptionist and tour guide for the Summer season, May 15-September 15, at the federal minimum wage rate, not to exceed 40 hours per week. This support continued through the 1990s.

In April, 1993, the Johnson County Parks & Recreation District turned over the deed to Herman E. Laird Park to the City of Shawnee. In 1995, the Shawnee Historical Society hired the first full-time museum professional to manage the collections and daily operations of Old Shawnee Town. Shortly thereafter, negotiations began for a transition plan to shift the management of the site to city control. In November, 1996, the City of Shawnee entered into an agreement with the Shawnee Historical Society and agreed to take over the daily operation of the site. The City hired a Museum Director to manage the site in April, 1997. In an agreement signed September 23, 1998, the Shawnee Historical Society transferred ownership of all artifacts “as well as the buildings housing such materials” to the City of Shawnee.

Since 1998, the City of Shawnee has invested significant resources in stabilizing structures, documenting the museum collections, providing visitors to the museum complex with an orientation exhibit interpreting the City’s history, increasing professional staff from one to three full-time positions, and refurbishing the Town Hall for rental operations.

## **The Planning Process: Getting Started**

In 2002, the fifth year of operation under City management, City staff recognized the need to develop a plan to build on the assets established by the Shawnee Historical Society and the City, provide a vision for the future, and establish a clear plan of action to guide Old Shawnee Town in a new phase of development, growth and programming. The City and the Shawnee Historical Society together committed time, energy, and financial resources to develop a strategic plan. An independent consultant was contracted to lead and facilitate the strategic planning process.

A Strategic Planning Committee appointed by Mayor Jim Allen included representatives from the City Council, Shawnee Historical Society, the civic and business community, museum and City staff, and volunteers. In addition to the Strategic Planning Committee, specialists including three area historians, a museum program specialist, and a landscape architect were invited to an intensive, collaborative brainstorming session (charrette). Later, focus group sessions were held to gather input on the plan from educators in the community and past supporters and volunteers at Old Shawnee Town.

Members of the Strategic Planning Committee, its sub-committees, charrette participants, and focus group members met in late 2002 through 2003 and devoted over 500 hours to this project. The City appreciates their contribution of time and talent to this important endeavor.