



The White's Foodliner storefront in St. John offers seasonal items to its customers.

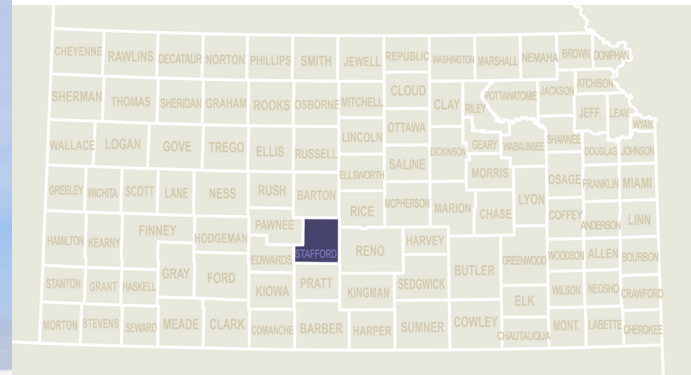
Background

St. John, Kansas is located in Stafford County in the south-central region of the state. The City was founded in 1875 when, as legend has it, a church elder declared the City was blessed and would never be hit by a tornado. To this day, no tornado has come through the city of St. John, although there have been a few close calls.

St. John is located at the southern tip of the Wetlands and Wildlife National Scenic Byway because of its proximity to the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area. These wetlands provide important habitat for migratory birds along the Central Flyway.



This sign welcomes visitors as they arrive in St. John.



About the Community

CITY POPULATION*	1,410
COUNTY POPULATION*†	4,437
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME*	\$50,060
MEDIAN AGE*	41 years
CHILDREN LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL**†	19.7%
FAMILIES LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL**†	9.1%
LOW INCOME & LOW ACCESS TO GROCERY STORE**†	9.6%
PEOPLE WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE**†	30.5%
CHILDREN WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE**†	8.0%

*ACS 2013-2017, **Kansas Health Matters, †County Level Data

The Issue

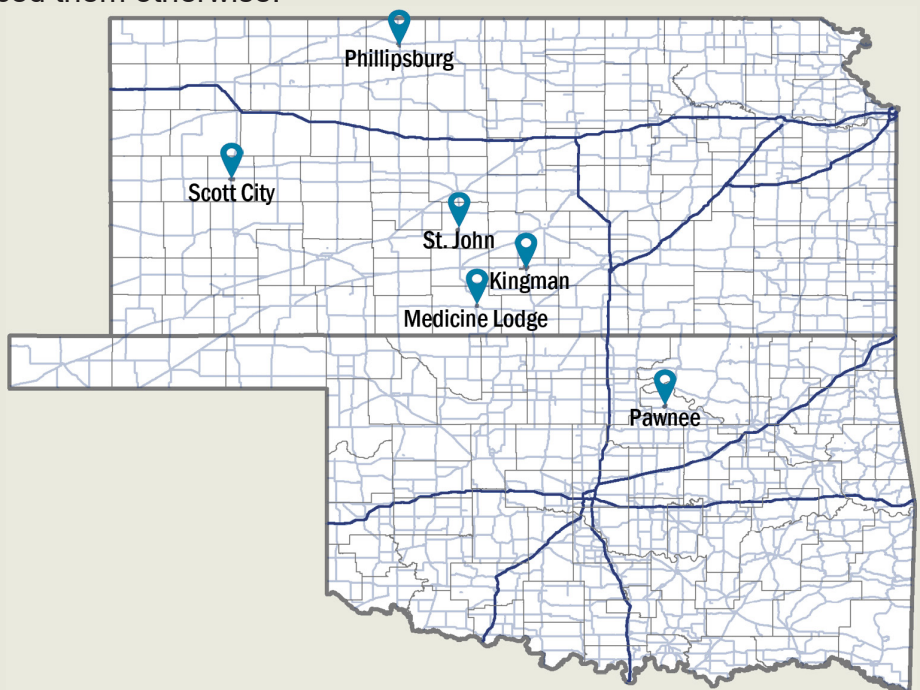
In 2016, the Dillon's Food Store located on the city square of St. John, Kansas, closed its doors. This forced St. John residents to travel to other cities like Great Bend or Pratt (both 26 miles away) or even to Hutchinson (55 miles away) for their groceries.

The city of St. John quickly stepped into action. The mayor appointed a Grocery Store Task Force which included six community members representing the local school district and local businesses. Carolyn Dunn and Ashlee Bevan, Executive Director and Program Director, respectively, of Stafford County Economic Development, worked closely with the Grocery Store Task Force in thinking through options and taking steps towards a new grocery store. Dunn and Bevan were instrumental in grant writing and fundraising for the new grocery store.

At stake was more than a grocery store. For Dunn, the loss of the Dillon's Food Store was a "symptom of a bigger economic problem" for the area, and was a wake-up call for the community. "People intuitively know the importance of a grocery store," says Dunn. This helped unite the community around the common goal of bringing a grocery store back to St. John.

White's Foodliner: A Locally-Owned Regional Grocery Chain

Today, there are six White's Foodliner stores spanning Kansas and Oklahoma. The first White's Foodliner was opened in 1953 in Coldwater, Kansas by Joe and Frances White. Today, White's Foodliner stores are owned and operated by the second and third generation of the Whites, Pat and Jordan White. The Whites refer to themselves as, "students of the business" and are "constantly learning, adapting, and expanding their knowledge of the grocery industry" says Jordan White. The Whites' decades of experience and commitment to the grocery business were attractive to the city of St. John as they searched for a grocery store operator. The Whites were not initially interested in operating the St. John store, but the City demonstrated their commitment to opening and sustaining a grocery store in St. John and convinced them otherwise.



Top Left: The St. John White's Foodliner storefront (photo from store's social media).

Bottom Left: The ribbon cutting at the Grand Opening of White's Foodliner in St. John, Kansas in October 2018 (Photo Credit: Dick Smith, 2018).

Right: The locations of the six White's Foodliner stores operating in Kansas and Oklahoma.

The Process

TIMELINE

February 2016

Dillon's Food Store located on the St. John City Square closes.

May 2016

The St. John Grocery Store Task Force consisting of six community members is established.

September 2016

Grocery store market feasibility study is conducted.

March 2017

Stafford County Economic Development purchases land adjacent to Route 281 for new grocery store.

April 2017

Fuel feasibility study is conducted.

Summer 2017

White's Foodliner and Stafford County Drug both sign letters of intent to operate in the new grocery store.

July 2017

City of St. John signs development agreement in support of a new grocery store.

January 2018

Original building on grocery store site is demolished in preparation of new construction.

April 2018

Construction of grocery store begins.

September 2018

Hiring and store stocking begins.

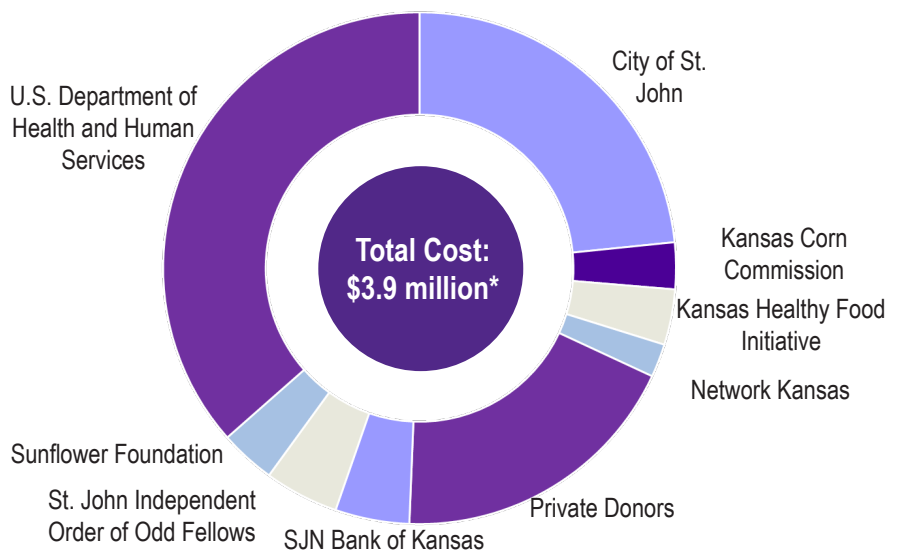
October 2018

Grand Opening of White's Foodliner in St. John, Kansas.

Stafford County Economic Development (SCED) commissioned a market feasibility study to determine the existing grocery market for the St. John area. The study encouraged the Grocery Store Task Force to consider a new location instead of renovating the old store. The study revealed that a new location would provide better opportunity for economic sustainability.

Once the location was established, financing mechanisms were considered. SCED applied for grant funding through federal programs. The City approved and enacted innovative financing mechanisms including a 1% sales tax, a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District, and the use of Industrial Revenue Bonds. The addition of gas pumps to the store initiated conversations with the Kansas Corn Commission who contributed funds for installation of ethanol gas pumps.

The Grocery Store Task Force interviewed grocery operators interested in operating another store, include the Whites of White's Foodliner. The Whites joined the project and provided input on the store design and layout which included a co-located pharmacy and gas station. For St. John, the ability to construct a new grocery store relied on piecing together many funding sources to cover the multi-million dollar project cost.



Additional Loan Funding

- USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program
- SJN Bank

Additional Municipal Financing

- Tax Increment Financing Revenue
- Industrial Revenue Bonds

*Total Cost Includes grants, donations, loans and financing over time.

Lessons Learned

✓ Know the Numbers

Bringing a grocery store back to your community can be emotional, but St. John learned the importance of having numbers that substantiated the need for a grocery store. Dunn felt that the initial market feasibility study was critical to the success of the project. It not only showed that a grocery store could be viable in St. John, it suggested siting the store along the highway and also laid the groundwork for adding gas pumps to the store.

“If I had to do it all over again I’d go to the marketing company, day one, to get a market feasibility study.” - Carolyn Dunn

Seek Strategic External Partners ✓

The financing for the new grocery store was complicated. It involved technical documentation for a newly established TIF District and development agreements with the City and other potential partners. Stafford County Economic Development hired a lawyer to assist in drafting technical documentation and to provide expertise in implementing these financing mechanisms.

✓ Be Persistent

Being successful in opening a new grocery store requires persistence. The City and Stafford County Economic Development were able to fit many puzzle pieces of financing, fundraising, store siting, and operator recruitment together for this unique project to come to fruition.

“It was the right time, right situation and right town”

- Jordan White

Project Successes

The story of White’s Foodliner in St. John shows the importance of knowing the numbers, seeking strategic external partners, and being persistent. The new St. John grocery store fills many needs in the community. It provides healthy food options, pharmacy and gas services and functions as a gathering place for the community.

KHFI Impact




A full-service grocery serving **2,500 individuals** within a 10-mile radius.



White’s Foodliner projected to create **30 jobs** in St. John.



Stafford County Drug, located in the grocery store, provides better access to **healthcare** for the community.

 329 N US Highway 281
St. John, Kansas 67576

 "White's Foodliner-St John KS"