



# Let there be Light!

*The City of Muskogee has revived  
its pioneering past  
to light its downtown's future*

Working from designs by Sparks Reed Architecture and Interiors, general contractor Warfeather LLC has built a series of lighted steel towers and soaring arched signs to welcome visitors to Muskogee's Katy and Depot Districts.

"This is something that's going to make you remember going downtown," said Sparks Reed architect John Alig. "It shows that the city cares, that they're not giving up on downtown."

The \$750,000 Muskogee Gateways project, paid for with a grant from the City of Muskogee Foundation, is designed to strengthen this community's once vibrant downtown. The project involved construction of a two-story, street-spanning welcoming sign, another 97-foot-long marquee mounted on a highway bridge, and four independent pillars, all boasting programmable LED lighting systems.

Analysts expect these landmarks to help attract more retail business downtown, home to an estimated 7,000 daytime workers. The lights also should spur increased consumer traffic for evening business and heighten tourism appeal for the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame, Three Rivers Museum, Muskogee Civic Center, and other area attractions.

City officials illuminated the last gateway tower Jan. 12.

"This is sending a signal to downtown merchants and the city as a whole that this is the heart of the community," said city economic consultant Ron Drake.

"The city can't purchase buildings and renovate them to bring in restaurants," said Drake, the owner of Ron Drake Consulting of Siloam Springs, Ark. "What we can do is promote more beautification ideas that will possibly entice developers to do those things. These arches, these gateways, are beautiful, and the public knows it."

These steel web structures emulate one of Oklahoma's early statehood marvels: the historic three-story "Welcome to Muskogee" sign that greeted newcomers from 1910-15 to what was then eastern Oklahoma's largest commercial area. That downtown sign visibly demonstrated Muskogee's ambition, for it used more than 1,400 Tungsten electric lights



Photographs by Sparks Reed cofounder Gary Sparks

to daily dazzle its KATY Railroad depot visitors at a time when such displays were quite rare.

"It's one of the things that people really identify with in the city," said Warfeather owner Adam Oglesbee, who was raised in the Muskogee area. "I grew up seeing images of this on T-shirts and postcards."

Today's gateways grew from an inspiration by Sparks Reed. That Tulsa firm was hired in 2013 by the Action In Muskogee (AIM) revitalization initiative to help Muskogee streamline its downtown development strategy. In their year-long study of the commercial area, architects David Reed and Alig learned about the city's original sign, which in its time was considered the largest such marquee in the southwest U.S. The duo decided to incorporate similar landmarks into Sparks Reed's visionary proposal, to the delight of AIM, the Muskogee City Council, and the foundation.

"Everyone latched onto these towers," Reed said with a smile. "They were something everyone agreed to make happen, and it did."

The towers gave symbolic importance to the downtown project, said Dr. Bob Blackburn, executive director of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

"Every community needs touchstones of shared memory," said Blackburn. "These lights, reflecting a time when Muskogee was the Queen City of the Southwest, create a strong link between the past, the present, and the future, while creating a vivid new identity for first-time visitors."

D.J. Thompson, president of the Greater Muskogee Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, expects the gateways to improve Muskogee's quality of life while aiding its economic development.

"We felt like we needed something visual that people could see, a positive thing changing visually on a continuous basis," said Thompson. "If your city begins to look nicer, then it begins to feel better to you, and then it begins to feel better to people that are visiting. The long-term effect that those pillars

and that archway will have on the quality of life in Muskogee is significant."

Advantage TerraFab led the Muskogee area manufacturers that worked on the structures, which echo the historic sign down to its pillar-topping spheres.

"Each one of them was all hand-welded here in Muskogee, then transported locally," said Oglesbee, whose firm is based in Coweta. "Everything was fabricated within 30 miles of Muskogee."

Construction came with a few challenges, from hanging the Katy District sign on a state highway bridge to securing power grid connections and accommodating holiday shopping needs. But Muskogee civil engineer Prag Mahajan said work progressed without any major hitches.

"It was a fun project to work on," added Alig.

Just building the gateways boosted downtown traffic over the last several months as tourists and shoppers started posting social media selfies among the signs.

"There was a steady stream of people out there," said Oglesbee. "We had more traffic on Columbus Avenue during the days we took to install these things than I have ever seen there in my lifetime."

The Muskogee Gateways marked just one recent improvement to the downtown area. The Muskogee Little Theatre, Nanna's Broadway Bakery, Bros Haberdashery, and American Pie Wood-fired Pizza and Spirits opened their doors there over the last year, while Pinon Creek Trading Co., Hoopes Hardware, and Club Lunch moved or renovated their downtown stores. Erly Rush Coffeehouse is pursuing a facade update, and Muskogee Brewing Co. is renovating a former fire station to provide its future home.

"It's going to take some time before the total fruits of these efforts are shown, but every day there are things happening downtown," Drake said of the Muskogee Gateways. "This is kind of an exclamation mark, a cry out to the community that it's time to bring your downtown back."