

Ward Morgan - CivicPlus

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

San Jose, California is located in the Silicon Valley, home to some of the nation's largest high tech companies. But the website for the city of San Jose is not designed by any of those. Instead, it was designed and is hosted by a company half a continent away in Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Ward Morgan is the CEO of CivicPlus, the software company which created this website. Ward has roots in rural Kansas. He comes from Oberlin and spent summers on his grandparent's farm near Atwood. He worked on a custom wheat harvesting crew and followed the harvest from Oklahoma to Canada. Then he worked in carpet cleaning and auto mechanics.

Ward went to K-State and got a degree in business. One day in Aggieville, he met Brenda. The two ultimately were married.

Ward served as a business consultant with a Salina accounting firm where he met Tony Gagnon. The two decided to go into business together. They created a dial-up Internet access business in Manhattan called Networks Plus which they sold in 2000.

They had also created some websites during this time so they decided to begin a website and software business. They named the new business CivicPlus.

CivicPlus set out to build websites for city and county governments. Ward eventually bought out Tony and continued to grow the business. He also co-owns a telecommunications company called The Phone Connection.

"Local governments hire us to build or redesign a website," Ward said. "Our team will consult with the community and then do the graphic design and train local employees on how to use it." CivicPlus created the software and hosts the sites.

"These websites are for communication, not for selling something," Ward said. The websites engage the public and inform citizens about services and civic leaders. "We design the site so users can move quickly to exactly where they want to be," Ward said.

The user-friendly websites became so popular that business grew across the nation. Today the company provides website solutions for 1,700 local governments coast to coast, plus in Canada and Australia. The company has won more than 250 website awards for its clients.

As business grew, Ward purchased and remodelled several older buildings in downtown Manhattan to house his employees.

"We were approached about moving to other states," Ward said. "Fortunately we were able to work with the city of Manhattan, Kansas Department of Commerce, and Manhattan Chamber to remain in the community." In order to bring its employees together under one roof, CivicPlus is building a new, five-story, 11 million dollar building in downtown Manhattan.

"We like the vibrancy of downtown," Ward said. He is encouraging new retail operations and is relocating restaurants into downtown Manhattan. These include Hibachi Hut and Della Voce. Plans call for a brew pub with a rooftop bar on one building and a speakeasy-themed restaurant in the basement of another.

"There's a downtown renaissance happening," Ward said.

One of his restaurant partners is his cousin Mark Edwards. Unbeknownst to them at the time, the decision to go into the restaurant business together may have been carrying on a family tradition. One day Mark was cleaning out his grandmother's house and found a license that had been issued by the Kansas Hotel Commission in 1928. The license was issued to Mark and Ward's great-grandmother Etta Bosler to operate Bosler's Café in the rural community of Ludell, Kansas, with a population of perhaps 25 people. Now, that's rural.

Perhaps Etta Bosler's great-grandsons picked up her interest in the food business. "We want restaurants and shops on the first floor of our buildings so there's more people downtown," Ward Morgan said. Such business benefits the quality of life of the community as well as CivicPlus employees who now number more than 185 people. Wow.

For more information, go to www.civicplus.com

It's time to leave San Jose, California, where a website from Kansas is serving this high-tech community. We commend Ward Morgan and all those involved with CivicPlus for making a difference with high-tech entrepreneurship and a commitment to revitalizing downtown – from Silicon Valley to the Kansas River valley.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.