



ANNUAL

---

**STRONG  
TOWNS**

---

REPORT



2018

10 YEARS OF  
STRONG TOWNS



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT .....          | 4  |
| THE CHALLENGE OUR COMMUNITIES FACE ..... | 5  |
| THE STRONG TOWNS APPROACH .....          | 6  |
| STRATEGY .....                           | 7  |
| CONTENT .....                            | 9  |
| EVENTS .....                             | 11 |
| MEMBERSHIP .....                         | 13 |
| 2018 BUDGET AND SOURCES .....            | 14 |
| IMPACT .....                             | 15 |
| STAFF MEMBERS .....                      | 17 |
| STAY IN TOUCH .....                      | 18 |



# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

This past November was the ten-year anniversary of when I started writing the blog that would eventually grow into the Strong Towns movement. I started writing out of frustration with the status quo approach to growth and development, a dysfunctional system that, as a working urban planner and engineer, I was deeply involved in. I felt very alone.

A decade later, and the Strong Towns message has reached over 1.3 million people in just the past year. With a tiny staff and budget, we're outperforming long established media organizations with our reach and level of engagement. Our events are bigger and more enthusiastic than ever. And we're connecting people to each other, locally and nationally, so they can effectively advocate for a Strong Towns approach in their place.

At Strong Towns, we believe that nobody who wants to build a great place to live should feel alone in that desire. And we're proud to provide a space where change agents can gather around a common goal.

When I started writing, I never imagined how many people from all walks of life would connect to the Strong Towns message. Last year I was invited to speak in Old Goucher, a struggling inner-city neighborhood in Baltimore. I was blown away by the local council member, Leon Pinkett, who introduced me to a diverse audience with a powerful synopsis of why the Strong Towns approach was needed in his neighborhood.

Over the past year, we've had governors, members of Congress, and mayors of major cities and small towns alike sharing our work, citing Strong Towns, and contacting us for assistance. This is powerful. Yet it's the home-grown groups of average citizens working together in places like Indianapolis, Sioux Falls, and Shreveport that inspire me most. They are an ongoing testament to the substance of our movement.

In 2018 we began to see Strong Towns transition from a set of key ideas and insights about the struggles our communities face to an organization capable of creating revolutionary change in communities across the country. In 2019, we'll be launching some major initiatives to do just that. It's going to be an epic year for the Strong Towns movement.

Thank you to all our members and supports. Keep doing what you can to build a strong town,

Chuck Marohn



# THE CHALLENGE OUR COMMUNITIES FACE

North American communities have experienced decades of robust growth, but we're still not wealthy—in fact, our communities are worse off financially. How is it possible that our cities could be growing but sinking deeper than ever into debt? Why are our town leaders urging us to build more roads to spur our local economies, but when it comes time to repair all that aging asphalt, we don't have the money to do it?



The problem lies in what we build. Seven lane roads when a simple two way street would do. Auto-centric businesses with huge parking lots that generate little to no wealth for the community they're a part of. Our communities are investing everything they have into growth—and usually, borrowing money to invest even more—but they aren't paying attention to what it costs to maintain the things we build. Our pattern of development doesn't make any financial sense in the long term.

When we choose this pattern of development, it's not hard to predict the future: the more we build, the poorer we will become. And real people will pay the price.

**At Strong Towns, we like to say that American cities don't struggle from a lack of a cultural consensus. They struggle because of one.**

Too many American citizens and decision makers believe that our current culture of unproductive growth, rapid development and intensive, debt-driven public investment is acceptable—or worse, they believe there is no alternative. This consensus is based on a core, systematic misunderstanding of how communities create and destroy wealth.



We need to change the way North Americans think about how their communities build wealth. We need to change the conversation about what our places really needs to thrive.

# STRONG TOWNS APPROACH

The Strong Towns approach is a radically new way of thinking about the way we build our communities. We believe that in order to truly thrive, our cities and towns must:

- + Stop valuing efficiency and start valuing resilience
- + Stop betting our futures on huge, irreversible projects, and taking small, incremental steps and iterating based on what we learn
- + Stop fearing change and start embracing a process of continuous adaptation
- + Stop fearing change and start embracing a process of continuous adaptation
- + Stop building our world based on abstract theories, and start building it based on how our places actually work and what our neighbors actually need today
- + Stop obsessing about future growth and start obsessing about our current finances

**But most importantly, we believe that Strong Citizens from all walks of life can and must participate in a Strong Towns approach - from citizens to leaders, professionals to neighbors, and everyone in between.**

Over the past 10 years we have toured the continent exploring the challenges and opportunities our communities face. Our posture is one of urgency and hope. Urgency, because the fundamental insolvency of our communities is real, and continues to effect real people. And hope, because across the country, a growing movement of Strong Towns members are transforming their communities and building strong towns - one small, humble, step at a time.



# STRATEGY

---

North American cities have fallen into a cycle of endless, unproductive growth - and to break that cycle, we need to fundamentally change the way we build. And that starts with changing our culture at its roots.

The Strong Towns theory of change is simple but radical: more than anything else, we believe it is necessary to expose ordinary people at all levels of citizenry and leadership to a different way of thinking about the way our communities are built, and give them the insight, inspiration, relationships, and resources they need to apply that model to their unique community. And when we expose people to the Strong Towns message, something amazing happens: we see their community dialogue begin to transform, and we see those ordinary people along with their elected officials begin to take a different set of steps to repair the harm done to their communities.

## WE DO THIS IN 3 KEY WAYS:



**MEDIA**



**EVENTS**



**STRONG TOWNS  
NETWORK**

# STRATEGY (continued)

## MEDIA

Strong Towns' core focus is media. We produce high-quality content that asks hard questions about our current approach to growth, development, and governance, and shines a spotlight on a better way that we must take up tomorrow. We believe that in order to have a lasting impact on our culture, we must educate, excite, and inspire citizens of all backgrounds to get involved in the conversation about how we build our world, and advocate for a Strong Towns approach.

## EVENTS

Events are a crucial tool to spread the Strong Towns message and help communities see a path forward to apply our approach in their real places. By giving the community a common language to talk about the future of their place and inspiring incremental change at the neighborhood level, time and time again we see these events have a huge impact in the host community.

## THE STRONG TOWNS NETWORK

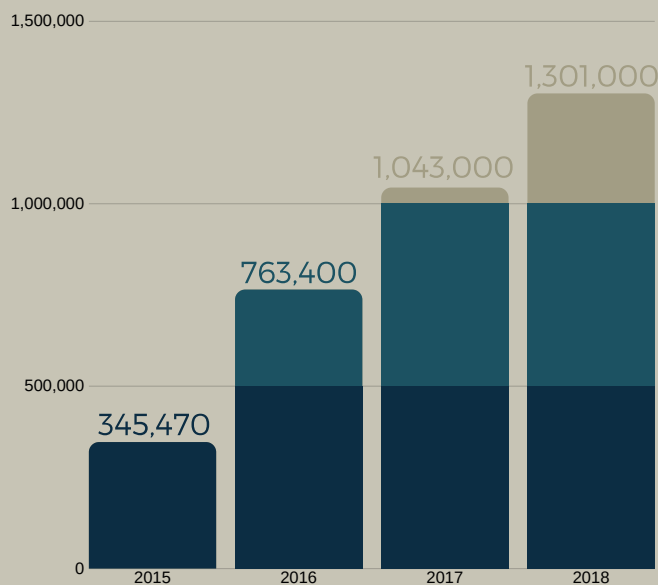
The Strong Towns network provides platforms for members of the Strong Towns movement to connect, self-organize, and share resources on how to make their places strong. From providing digital gathering places to encouraging local conversations in communities, we're dedicated to helping our readers move beyond reading our content and begin using our ideas to take action in their unique community context.

In 2018, we began working on a Strong Towns Knowledge Base designed to make our knowledge and insights actionable around a broad range of topics and issues. As the Knowledge Base evolves, we will be able to create a seamless back and forth between our content (communications-oriented) and the Knowledge Base (action-oriented), and thus nudge change in communities across the country.

# CONTENT

Everything about our strategy requires us to aggressively grow our audience. If we want to see the sort of broad, grassroots change our communities need to thrive, Strong Towns needs to reach more and more people every year.

Graph of growth of unique annual readers.



## TOP 5 ARTICLES OF 2018

**#1** THE MORE WE GROW, THE POORER WE BECOME  
by Charles Marohn

**#2** WHY ARE DEVELOPERS ONLY BUILDING LUXURY HOUSING?  
by Daniel Herriges

**#3** WHO CAN AFFORD TO INVEST IN A POOR NEIGHBORHOOD?  
by Kea Wilson

**#4** WHAT DOES INCREMENTALISM ACTUALLY MEAN?  
by Andrew Price

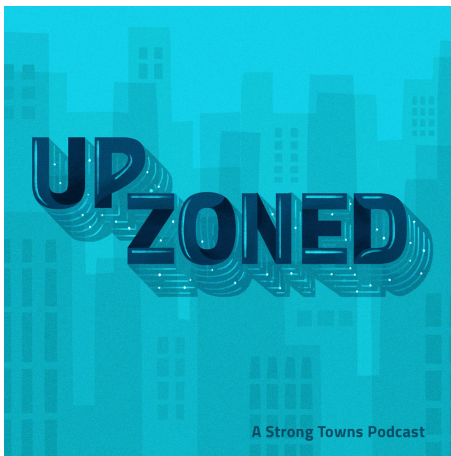
**#5** THE REAL REASON YOUR LOCAL MALL IS FAILING  
by Charles Marohn

# PODCASTS

In addition to the Strong Towns Podcast, in 2018 Strong Towns launched two new podcasts...

## UPZONED

Kea Wilson, Chuck Marohn, and occasional surprise guests offer an in-depth conversation about one big story from the current news cycle as it relates to the Strong Towns movement.

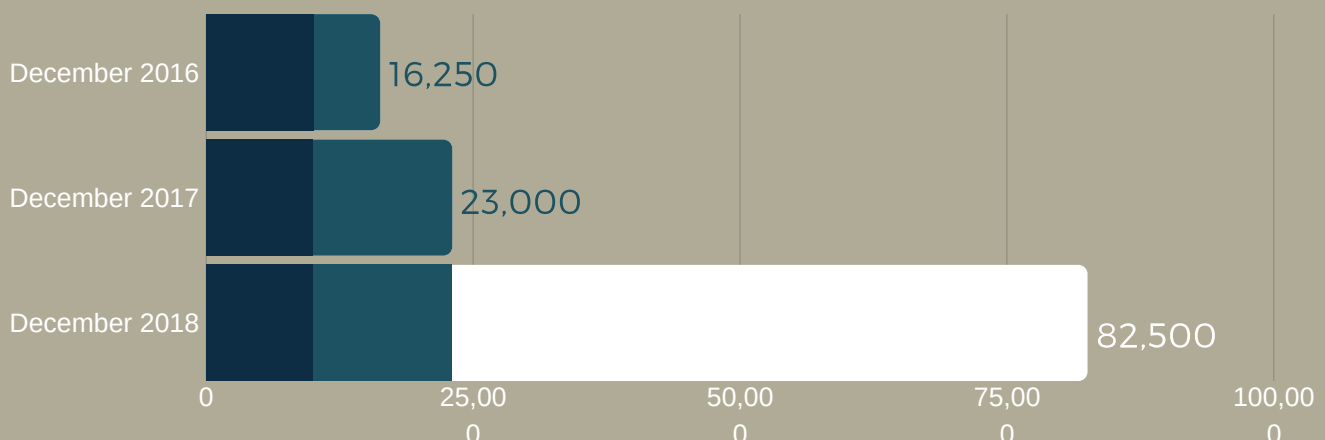


## IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

Strong Towns Community Builder, Jacob Moses, in conversation with Strong Towns members and allies from across the country who are doing the little things to better their community.



Graph of growth in downloads per month.



# EVENTS

The crowds at Strong Towns events have been record size and the enthusiasm has never been greater. We are working to find more speakers because we literally can't meet all the demand for people to share this message. Sample list of 2018 events:

**Indianapolis, IN** Strong Indy

**Kansas City, MO** Making a Great City hosted by the KC Public Library

**West Palm Beach, FL** City of West Palm Beach

**Thomasville, GA** City of Thomasville

**Bismark, ND** Main Street North Dakota

**Cambridge, MA** Harvard Law Forum

**Colorado Springs, CO** Downtown Partnership for Colorado Springs

**Kennett Square, PA** S.A.V.E. (Safety, Agriculture, Villages & Environment)

**Billings, MT** Big Sky Economic Development

**Chattanooga, TN** Chattanooga Design Studio

**Peoria, IL** Tri-County Regional Planning Commission

**Savannah, GA** CNU26

**Huntsville, AL** Downtown Huntsville, Inc.

**Anaheim, CA** The American Conservative

**Muskegon, MI** Strongest Town Winner

**Baltimore, MD** International City/County Management Association (ICMA)

**Old Goucher neighborhood, MD** Old Goucher Community Association

**Albemarle County, VA** Piedmont Environmental Council

**New Orleans, LA** City Building Exchange

**Harvard University** Harvard Planning Class

**Halifax, NS** Union of NS Municipalities

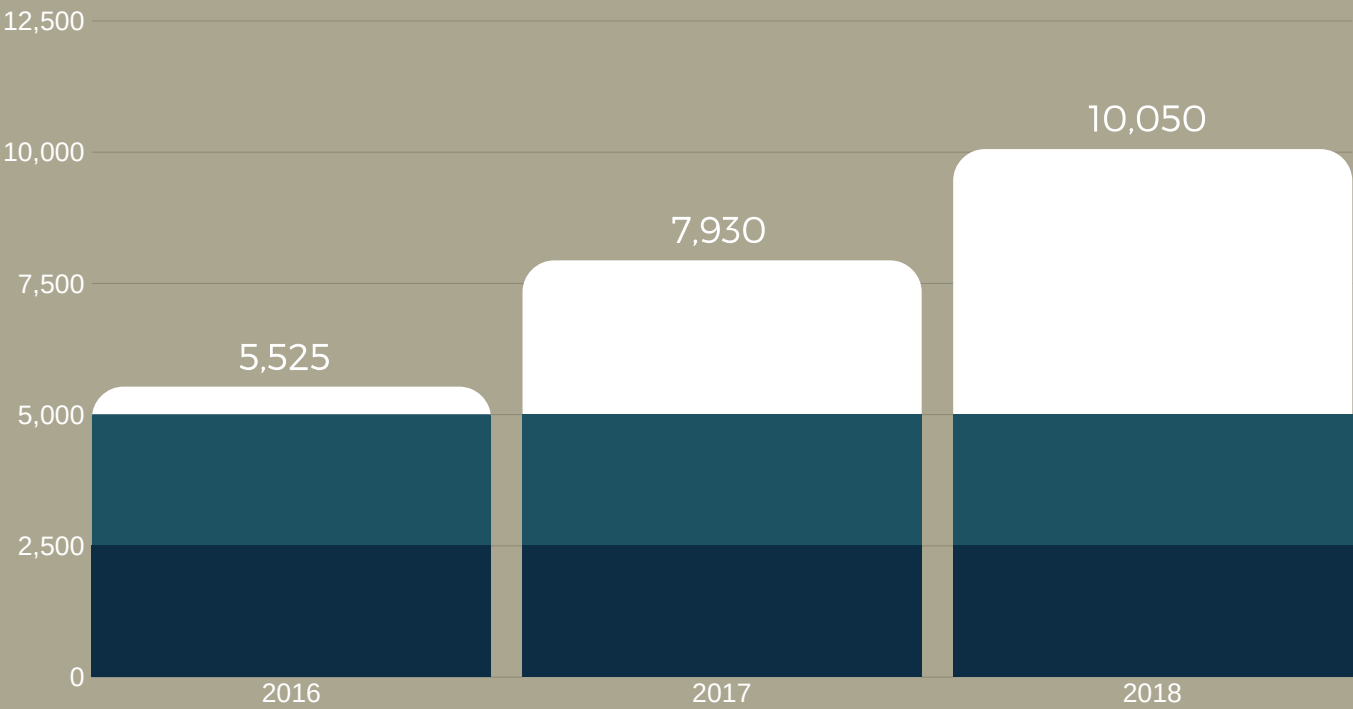
**Boerne, TX** Greater Boerne Chamber of Commerce

# EVENTS (continued)

In October we hosted the first Strong Towns regional gathering in Plano, TX aimed at inspiring and connecting strong citizens and community leaders from across North Texas.



Graph of growth at Strong Towns events over the past three years.



# MEMBERSHIP

At the close of 2018, we have 2,748 members who believe in our work and want to help us share the Strong Towns message with more people.

That's a 36.25% increase in members since January 1, 2018.

In 2018, we launched the Friends of Strong Towns club for members giving \$500+ to help us take the Strong Towns movement further.

## **BENFACTOR:**

**\$5000+**

Quint Studer  
Wick Allison  
Sinclair Black

## **SUPPORTER:**

**\$1000-\$4999**

John Marsh  
Varily Isaacs  
Steven Baker  
Haile McCollum  
Jonathan Holth  
Ian Rasmussen  
Andrew Burleson  
Spencer Gardner  
Kyle Winning  
John Beaston  
Beth Akeson

## **FRIEND:**

**\$500-\$999**

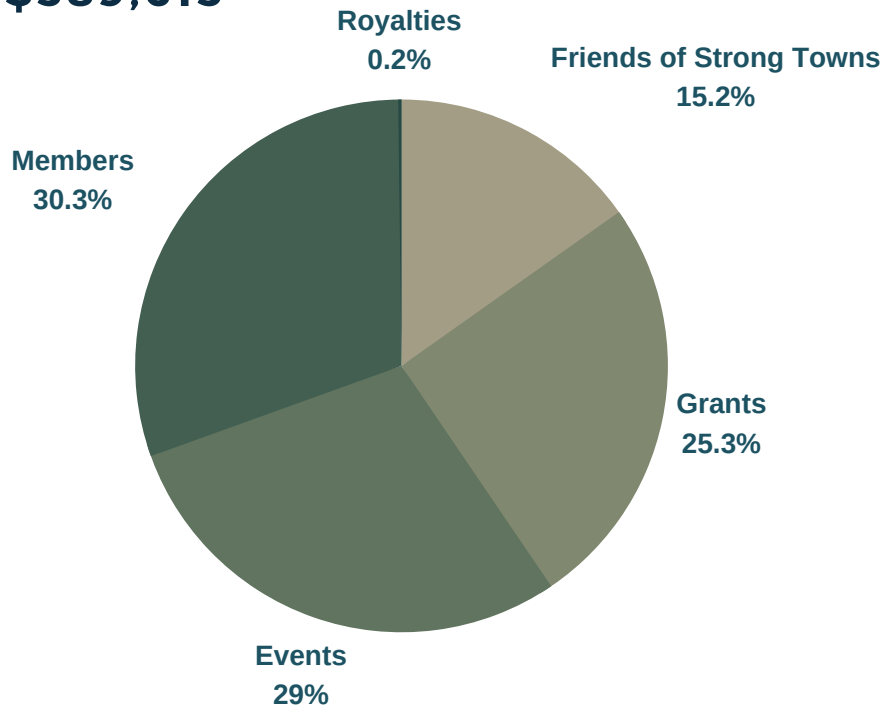
Beth and Brian McCarten  
Andrea Fettingner  
Rollie Cole  
Joel Dixon  
Andrew Frey  
Andrew Connor  
Ed Callahan  
Matthew Brady  
Pat Trahan  
Brian Silcott  
John Gear  
Malissa McCreedy  
Wilfred Bussing  
Alex Pline  
Anne Fairfax  
Ryan Short  
Jake and Molly Dulle  
Stephanie Byrd  
Andrew Herrig  
Roderick Rice  
Peter Christopher

## **ORGANIZATION SPONSORS:**

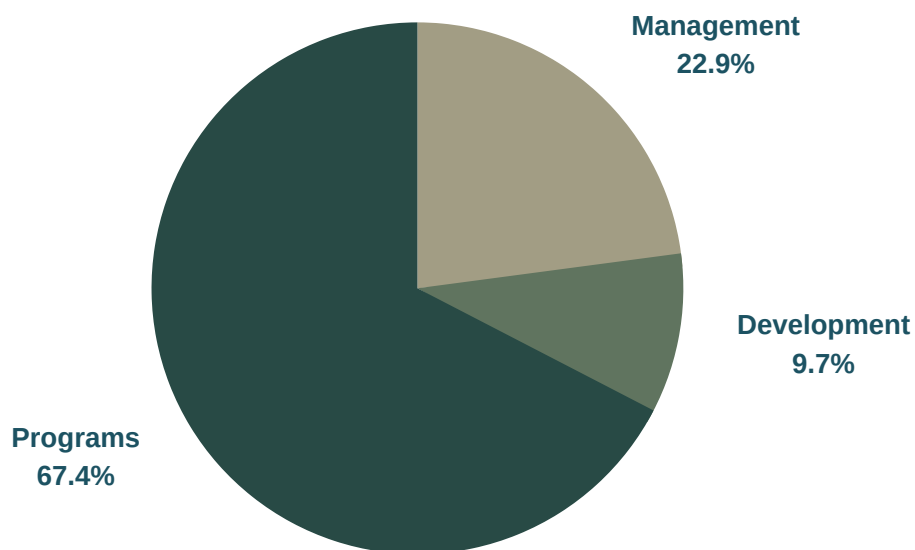
The Knight Foundation  
William B. Wiener Jr. Foundation  
R.C. Kemper, Jr. Charitable Trust  
Urban3  
Fieldstead & Company Inc.  
Cartegraph  
Evair GIS Consulting Inc.  
Verdunity  
CivicBrand  
Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.  
Redevelopment Resources  
Arete Scholars  
Clevelanders for Public Transit  
John Gear Law Offices

# 2018 BUDGET & SOURCES

## REVENUE: \$589,615



## EXPENSES: \$578,083



# IMPACT

As an organization whose strategy is to shift the culture and change the conversation in real communities, we don't always see the impact of our work immediately - though we're rigorous in measuring the indicators of success that we can track. But each year dozens of stories come to our attention that show we're having an impact, that we're having a profound influence on the way average citizens and local leaders talk about the way their places are built. Here are a handful of such stories.

---

## BISMARK, NORTH DAKOTA

In March, we stood with North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum to advocate for a focus on building strong local communities. Gov. Burgum is a long-time member of Strong Towns and he credits Strong Towns for helping to shape and design the North Dakota Main Street Initiative by helping him understand the need to invest in walkable places, to build upon traditional downtowns, and to create economic strength and resilience chiefly at the local level.

---

## KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

Kansas City Mayor David Alvey, like many local leaders across the country, believes the Strong Towns message is the playbook for his city going forward - so much so, that he used his State of the Government address to share the Strong Towns message with his community. Mayor Alvey urged residents and businesses to take small steps to improve their neighborhood and improve walkability, to recognize the assets in each neighborhood and do small things to improve the quality of life.

"Over time, it's the small things, one by one, bit by bit, that accumulate into great transformation," said Mayor Alvey.

The city is also rewriting some of its zoning ordinances to allow for small investors and developers to rebuild wealth within the city's traditional neighborhoods.



# IMPACT (continued)

---

## ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

In February, local media outlet KSDK ran an in-depth report on the city's many "stroads", a term Strong Towns coined several years ago to explain the deadly combination of a street - where people walk, shop and work - and a road - where cars travel quickly to their destination. The word "stroad" has permeated the planning profession to a remarkable degree, and this was just one example of the term beginning to change the broader public conversation about the design of our neighborhoods.

---

## GODDARD, KANSAS

The city manager of Goddard, Kansas was hiring a City Planner and made this one of the interview questions: "What do you know about Chuck Marohn and Strong Towns' work?"

---

## SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

The North American Association for Environmental Education's (naaee) annual conference featured Strong Towns content and ideas. We had nothing to do with this and only found out about it through a family member of our staff. We're seeing Strong Towns ideas and content pop up across the country and that means our message is seeping into the cultural conversation.

---

## WASHINGTON, D.C.

Over the past year, several members of Congress - from both sides of the aisle and representing diverse geographic constituents - have followed Strong Towns and expressed that Strong Towns ideas shape their work.

---

## SIOUX FALLS, SD

In March, we delivered our Neighborhoods First presentation to citizens, elected officials, and planners in Sioux Falls. Attendee and Sioux Falls resident Jordan Deffenbush embraced the message and, in June, created Strong Towns Sioux Falls: a group of Sioux Falls residents who meet weekly to discuss how our concepts can make Sioux Falls stronger. The group threw a community potluck to brainstorm city-boosting ideas, used the ideas to create 19 guiding principles to keep the group focused on its mission, and plans to present the principles to the mayor for city-wide adoption. Strong Towns Sioux Falls is one of dozens of similar groups in other cities across North America working to implement Strong Towns ideas in their place.

# STAFF MEMBERS



**CHUCK MAROHN**  
Founder & President



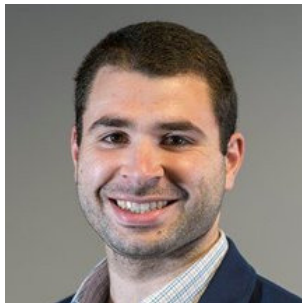
**MICHELLE ERFURT**  
Event Pathfinder



**KEA WILSON**  
Communications Manager



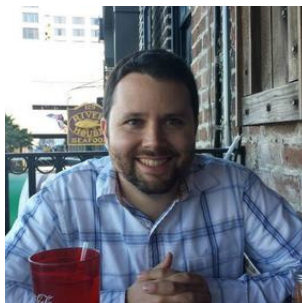
**JACOB MOSES**  
Community Builder



**BO WRIGHT**  
Development Director



**MISSY TREES**  
Membership Coordinator &  
Office Assistant



**DANIEL HERRIGES**  
Content Manager

## **BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Andrew Burleson  
Ian Rasmussen  
John T. Reuter

# STAY ENGAGED

Sign up at [strongtowns.org/email](http://strongtowns.org/email) to receive the latest news and ideas from the Strong Towns movement, as well as notifications when Strong Towns is in your community.

# STRONG TOWNS



[STRONGTOWNS.ORG](http://STRONGTOWNS.ORG)



[/STRONGTOWNS](https://www.facebook.com/STRONGTOWNS)



[@STRONGTOWNS](https://twitter.com/STRONGTOWNS)



[STRONG TOWNS](https://www.youtube.com/strongtowns)

