



State Rep. Ken Bragg, center, joins his constituents at Hot Spring County Conversations, an initiative to assess regional community development opportunities.

# Build on community strengths for economic development

By Amy Whitehead

Conducting an assessment of your community is one of the first steps you need to take as you lay the groundwork for local economic development efforts. Perform a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and you will have a better understanding of what opportunities you can seize and challenges you can work to overcome.

During the assessment process, many community leaders and residents get stuck in a deficient mindset constantly focused on disadvantages their city faces. While it is important to mitigate any weaknesses and to be aware of your strategic position, effective leaders will mobilize assets for economic gain. An asset-based approach has the potential to launch your community into a positive, forward-focused discussion about the future.

Every community has assets that can serve as the foundation for community and economic development. Assets can be described as positive attributes of a community that you want to grow or leverage. The Community Capitals Framework, developed by Cornelia and Jan Flora, provides a useful overview of the various assets that can be found in a community:

- **Built assets:** buildings, infrastructure, schools, roads, water and sewer systems, main streets.

- **Financial assets:** money, charitable giving, grants, access to funding and wealth.
- **Political assets:** connections to people in power, access to resources, leverage, influence to achieve goals.
- **Social assets:** groups, organizations, networks, sense of belonging, bonds between citizens.
- **Human assets:** skills and abilities of people, leadership, knowledge, ability to access resources.
- **Cultural assets:** generations, stories and traditions, festivals, spirituality, heritage, historic preservation.
- **Natural assets:** the environment, natural beauty, lakes, rivers and streams, forests, wildlife, soil, local landscape.

An initial assessment might ask the following questions:

- In what area do we have an abundance of assets?
- In what area do we need to focus additional attention to shore up existing assets or develop new assets?
- Are there assets in our community that are underutilized?

Mapping out community assets is also an excellent way to engage citizens, businesses, and key stakeholders in a discussion about the community's future and where growth opportunities might exist. During this process, don't forget to communicate regularly with your regional planning and development district, relevant state agencies such as the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, congressional and legislative officials, and other elected officials and influencers that may want to join your efforts.

Recently, communities in Hot Spring County have started working together on a regional level to identify assets and opportunities for the county as a whole, as well as the individual cities and towns in the county. Known as Hot Spring County Conversations, communities and school districts are holding a series of town hall meetings and community surveys to gather input on local needs and opportunities. The tagline of the initiative is "a future-focused, positive community development initiative."

State Rep. Ken Bragg, who represents Hot Spring County, participated in one of the initial community forums for the initiative.

"I think the effort Hot Spring County is making through the County Conversations initiative is going to make a significant difference in the future growth and development of the county," Bragg said. "The process of bringing local communities together to work in unison encourages a wider input of ideas and encourages engagement from interests that might not otherwise be involved in shaping the future of economic development in the county."

In addition to bringing together all the cities in the county, the effort has also engaged electric provider Entergy Arkansas, College of the Ouachitas, Hot Spring County Economic Development, West Central Arkansas Planning and Development District, Malvern Chamber of Commerce, University of Central Arkansas, local school districts, and other key organizations.

To learn more about Hot Spring County Conversations, visit [facebook.com/HSCconversations](https://facebook.com/HSCconversations). For more information on conducting an asset-based assessment of your community, contact UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development at (501) 852-2930 or [amyw@uca.edu](mailto:amyw@uca.edu).

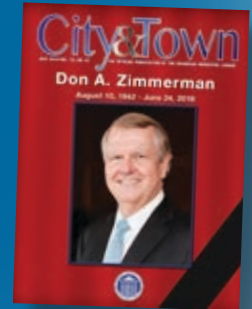


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