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From left, Whitney Horton, vice president of programs for the Arkansas Community Development Society, Bobby Lowe, outgoing chairman of Growing Corning Together, and Pam Lowe, managing editor of the *Clay County Courier*, at the 2019 Arkansas Community Development Society. Growing Corning Together received an Innovative Community Development Project/Program Award.

Growing Corning Together

By Shelby Fiegel

Over the past decade, the city of Corning has seen a steady decline in population, sales tax revenue and job opportunities. Walmart, the city’s largest employer, closed its Corning location in June 2018. Over 60 workers lost their jobs, and citizens were faced with an uncertain and uneasy future. This same story can be told of many of our small communities in Arkansas, but what makes Corning different is the reaction of its people.

Just one month after Walmart closed, a key group of dedicated leaders, in partnership with the Center for Community and Economic Development at the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (UAEX) and the Clay County Extension Service, created Growing Corning Together. The purpose of this broad-based community development organization is to work together in revitalizing the community and improving the quality of life now and for future generations.

Since its inception, Growing Corning Together has accomplished and supported community development in the following ways:

- Created a formalized organization under the name Growing Corning Together.
 - Created articles of incorporation and pursuing 501(c)(3) status with the IRS
 - Created a Growing Community Together Facebook page
 - Elected officers and met over 25 times, with a total of 500 people in attendance at meetings

- Conducted a community survey with 236 responses
- Gave presentations/met with five civic groups
- Identified four action teams: Things to Do, Business Retention, Downtown Revitalization and Infrastructure.
- Benchmarked the cities of Manila and Marked Tree to learn what they are doing well.
- Conducted a community wide cleanup with 100 volunteers, hot dog roast and music provided by local bands and volunteers.
- Hosted the “Hop Ally Rally” event with 250 people and 25 food booths/trucks in attendance.
- Painted windows in downtown as part of beautification efforts.
- Corning received a grant for a drainage project and a loan for a major sewer project.
- Held a golf tournament with 75 participants.
- Hosted a Pride Booster Club Banquet with 400 people in attendance.
- Created a community garden on a city owned lot.
- Hosted a Fourth of July Parade with nearly 500 people in attendance.
- Held community wide movie nights.
- Currently pursuing grant funds to develop an 18-hole disc golf course and a walking/biking trail to connect the city to the community center.
- Accepted the donation of a building on 2nd Street valued at \$20,000.

- Contributed funds to community organizations and school clubs to support development projects.
- Currently working with the Corning Beautification group to create murals in the downtown area.
- Developing a business retention and expansion program through UAEX and new workforce development programs through Corning High School.
- Six businesses are either remodeling or opening new storefronts.

This lengthy list of accomplishments equated to enormous impact in Corning. Over 1,200 people attended Growing Corning Together events, 1,000 volunteer hours have been recorded, \$5,000 has been raised through events and there is an estimated \$30,481 in total economic value gained through Growing Corning Together activities to date. Growing Corning Together also received the Innovative Community Development Project/Program Award from the Arkansas Community Development Society at their annual conference in October.

Stewart Runsick of the Clay County Extension Service shared, “It has been a pleasure working with the volunteers in Corning. They really have a passion for their community. Corning is a great place to live and is full of really good people who care about the future of their city. I am excited to experience all of the changes coming in future years.”

“Growing Corning Together is more than just an assembly of volunteers, it is a movement to make Corning better,” said Mayor Greg Ahrent. “I am amazed by their generosity and their compassion for others. Growing Corning Together truly makes Corning a better place to live. I wholeheartedly support their efforts and will contribute my time whenever possible.”

This work could not have been accomplished without the support of multiple partners: The Corning Chamber of Commerce, Corning Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Veterans of Foreign Wars, local businesses, Corning City Council, Mayor Ahrent, Quorum Court and the hard-working citizens of Corning. All of these groups worked in tandem to change the conversation in Corning from negative to positive.

Growing Corning Together spreads the message, “We have a promising future if we work together.” You can follow updates online by joining the Growing Corning Together Facebook group.



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