

From left, Mulberry Mayor Gary Baxter, Assistant to the Mayor Monica Freeland, and the author discuss future development efforts for the city's downtown under their 19 by 19 Plan.



PHOTO BY SHELBY FIEGEL.

Mulberry a community planning success story

By Josh Markham

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.” This quote from the book of Proverbs sums up Mulberry Mayor Gary Baxter’s belief in the importance of community planning. Baxter has leveraged his unique background to achieve great success for the city. He combines the attention to detail and meticulous pragmatism of 27 years in military service with a genuine interest in building community that comes from 22 years as an ordained minister.

Since taking office in Mulberry in January 2011, Baxter has successfully implemented numerous projects. While Mulberry is a small city of around 1,600 people, in the past five years, the city has completed development efforts ranging from park renovations, street improvements, new construction of a senior center, and the attraction of several new businesses.

Baxter will attest that having a clear, action-oriented vision for Mulberry has been critical to the city’s success.

“We needed to be ready for the future. It is the leader’s responsibility to communicate to others the direction of the community,” Baxter said.

This responsibility led Baxter to develop his 19 by 19 Plan for Mulberry. This visioning document is a clear,

project-focused plan for the next four years of his term in office. The 19 goals focus largely on continued infrastructure improvements and economic development, but arriving at a short list to focus on was difficult. Over 100 items for future development were initially considered. Baxter noted that “our staff weighed the most important, immediate needs of the community” and then tried to trim the list down based upon what development needed to logically take place first.

His initial approach to communicating this plan was as straightforward as the plan itself.

“I just went door-to-door and talked to people,” Baxter said.

While this initial approach was no easy task, the effort to honestly communicate the leadership’s plan for the community underlies two focus areas that Baxter feels are integral to implementing the plan: building trust and building relationships.

While many community plans often end up on a bookshelf, for Baxter, the 19 by 19 Plan is much more than a bookend. His plan guides weekly staff meetings and helps his staff to stay on track. Additionally, due to the concise nature of the plan, it is easy for the mayor to share with people. This ease of use is a plus for all

involved, but the streamlined nature of the plan was intentional for other reasons.

“Even with 19 specific focus areas, each area has ripple effects that have a larger impact on the community” Baxter said.

As such, the 19 by 19 Plan has a comprehensive approach to community and economic development by focusing on core development issues. For example, by focusing on affordable new housing, the plan aims to attract new residents, which will positively impact local businesses.

Ultimately, Mayor Baxter hopes this planning effort will lead to a strong, self-sustaining community. Economic success aside, Baxter noted that he has already seen a large increase in community pride due to the city’s conscious development efforts. This 19 by 19 Plan is designed to continue that growth. Baxter noted that “businesses need to see that the community is being taken care of. Quality of life factors such as parks and sidewalks are important to people and to the economy.”

As a result, his 19 by 19 Plan is designed to pay dividends to both residents and businesses.



Josh Markham is Assistant Director, Center for Community and Economic Development, University of Central Arkansas.

Sample priorities from Mulberry’s 19 by 19 Plan

- Expansion of farmers market
- Upgrades to city park
- \$300,000 library expansion
- Downtown renewal
- Repair and overlay city streets
- Repair sidewalks and construct new sidewalks between high school and elementary school
- Attract business to 100-acre site in industrial park
- Sewer upgrades
- Water treatment plant expansion

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