

Economic development plans critical for success

By Amy Whitehead

Winston Churchill said, “He who fails to plan is planning to fail.” When it comes to developing our cities, there may be no truer statement.

Many local leaders understand that a plan for community and economic development is needed, but beginning the planning process can be overwhelming. However, with a thoughtful approach and attention to best practices, a successful community plan can be crafted.

Impact Independence County is an example of a planning process currently underway that takes a countywide approach to planning. Spearheaded by Crystal Johnson, president and CEO of the Batesville Area Chamber of Commerce, along with a steering committee, the planning process is scheduled to be complete in Spring 2016.

“We decided to take on strategic planning because our community is poised for new and exciting growth,” Johnson said. “We needed to establish a clear vision for our community and a plan to achieve our goals. This was a grassroots effort led by the citizens of Independence County. It was important for us to establish a county wide plan and incorporate and build on all assets, not just those within the city limits.”

Based on information gathered through a public outreach survey, the steering committee of Impact Independence County determined the top priorities of the community and then established committees to craft goals for each area. The committees are Economic Prosperity, Education Excellence, Healthy Living and Wellbeing, and Tourism.

The Impact Independence County initiative is well thought out, with the chamber benchmarking its process against other communities. Through this benchmarking, it is clear that a community-based plan is most successful when:

- The process is open and transparent—The community knows what is going on, the intentions of the process are clearly outlined, and the public is invited to participate. Having multiple ways to keep stakeholders updated is important. This can happen through local media outlets, a web page, social media, or one-on-one outreach.

- Short-term and long-term goals are established—It is important to have goals and plans that can immediately be implemented because quick wins build momentum and keep the public engaged. It says to the public “We can do this!” Long-term goals are also important because in order for the community to really think strategically it must be willing to stretch itself and look out over at least a five year horizon.
- The timeline for the planning process is clear and the public’s time is used judiciously—When engaging the public, make sure they understand their time commitment, and use each meeting to gather their input and move the process forward. A steering committee can set a timeline and make important decisions about the process so that public engagement is meaningful and doesn’t drag on with no end in sight.

Batesville Mayor Rick Elumbaugh believes an economically vibrant community plans for the future.

“If you want to be competitive in the local, state, or global economy you have to plan and implement new ideas and a new vision,” he said. “Batesville has done comprehensive land use and trails plans, which are important to quality of life and attracting the millennial generation. Quality of life cannot be discounted.”

The mayor believes Impact Independence County will help the area capitalize on its assets for long-term development. The University of Central Arkansas, through grant funding from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, was able to provide technical assistance and resources to support the Impact Independence County initiative. If your community is interested in kick-starting a development process, contact UCA’s Center for Community and Economic Development at cced@uca.edu or 501-852-2930.



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