



The Kickstart Heber Springs Steering Committee is building on the economic development momentum in their city.

Community-based planning supports local economic growth

By Joshua Markham, PCED

Heber Springs is a small city with many natural assets at its disposal. Julie Murray, Heber Springs’ Chamber of Commerce executive director, sees the economic potential of Heber Springs, but seeing potential is one thing. Capitalizing upon community assets requires initiative ...and a plan.

Murray took the first steps toward moving Heber Springs forward when the city was selected through a competitive process to be an Advanced Year Community for the University of Central Arkansas’s Community Development Institute in 2015. Over the course of one week, Heber Springs received a thorough community assessment from professional community and economic developers participating in CDI’s Advanced Year program. The assessment report provided a framework for potential growth areas in Heber Springs, but much more work was yet to be done. A yearlong community based planning effort would be needed, and thus Kickstart Heber Springs was created.

Strategic Planning for communities can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and are often completed with the help of paid consultants from outside the community. Murray and Mayor Jimmy Clark wanted to

take a different approach for Heber Springs. With the help of Dr. Mark Peterson of University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service and UCA’s Center for Community and Economic Development, Heber Springs began a community based planning effort that emphasized inclusive community involvement, short-term wins, and long-term planning. As a result, this planning effort has involved a diverse mix of community volunteers in development efforts that combine planning with doing.

Through guided community forums, key growth areas for Heber Springs were identified. Issues such as workforce development, economic development and attraction, tourism, and community branding were divided among working committees who were tasked with developing short and long-term goals for each area. Each committee has worked to identify key stakeholders whose participation is needed; as a result, the planning effort has sustained consistent community involvement from volunteers. Murray believes that “volunteerism is part of the Heber Springs DNA. Our residents love their town and are very passionate about its success. So, as a Chamber, all we did was provide the opportunity for our community to get involved.”

Central to the community-based planning effort's success has been an emphasis on action. While each committee has an eye toward long-term goals, a focus on short-term wins has led to some immediate and highly visible success stories for Heber Springs. The city recently received a \$135,000 grant for sidewalk improvements and a \$35,000 grant for trail extensions from the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department. Additionally, the local Chamber of Commerce will be moving to a much larger and more visible building in downtown Heber Springs through a generous property donation by First Security Bank.

"This building will be a great asset for our community," Murray said. "This new building will provide us the opportunity to create a true welcome center for visitors and new residents. It will also provide a "headquarters" for all the Kick-Start Heber Springs committees as well as a much better equipped resource for our members."

With such strong examples of success, Heber Springs' community-based planning effort has a great deal of momentum to maintain. With the final planning document to be completed by May 2016, Murray is prepared to continue working with the community to implement the goals set out in the plan. According to Murray, Kickstart Heber Springs volunteers will not slow down their efforts. Murray said the volunteers "will continue to meet on a regular basis and the Chamber is completely committed to making sure each committee has what it needs to achieve its goals. We will also be planning a party to celebrate our success and the final draft of our plan."



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