



Restoring the landmark Hotel Pines in downtown Pine Bluff is one of the first priorities of Pine Bluff Rising, a nonprofit group aiming to combat blight in the city.

Group organizes to fight blight in Pine Bluff

By Shelby Fiegel

Arkansas may be known as The Natural State and filled to the brim with natural wonders, but many Arkansas cities and towns struggle with a not-so-pleasant issue that tends to put a stain on our otherwise beautiful communities: blight. Blight is an issue in even the most successful communities and can be a persistent problem. For most cities, blight ranks among the top community and economic development issues, and local leaders are at a loss on how to combat it.

One Arkansas city recognized blight as a top issue in its revitalization efforts. In Pine Bluff a group has organized called Pine Bluff Rising to address this issue,

among others. Pine Bluff Rising is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit established by citizens who are committed to instituting positive change. Community leaders Caleb McMahon, director of economic development at the Jefferson County Alliance; Tom Reilley, founder of Highland Pellets; William Carpenter, senior vice president of Energy Security Partners; and Dr. Ryan Watley, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff professor, assistant director of development for athletics, and CEO of Go Forward Pine Bluff, shared a vision for their community and banded together to kick start Pine Bluff Rising to raise money to achieve community goals and generate citizen buy-in.



The historic downtown area was hit hard by economic downturns in the 1980s and 1990s and by population decline. Downtown Pine Bluff now consists of dilapidated buildings and blight with approximately an occupancy rate of just 10-20 percent. Pine Bluff Rising has pinpointed this area as a focal point for their efforts.

McMahon explained that the group believes the heart of downtown is focused around the Hotel Pines, a Pine Bluff landmark that was an economic driver from 1903 until it was shut down in early 1970s, but is now an eye sore. Knowing that restoring the Hotel Pines to its former glory could be a shot in the arm for the community, specifically downtown, Pine Bluff Rising has recently purchased the building and is currently seeking information on remodeling it.

Watley said, “The best approach to combat blight within a community is to ensure the community’s code is enforced. When codes are not effectively controlling blight, an executable plan for repurposing property in correlation with sound economic develop offers a great opportunity to gather the necessary resources to bring that plan to fruition. Pine Bluff Rising envisions the Hotel Pines not only serving as a point of destination for tourists, but intertwining unique opportunities for workers with its dynamic hospitality services.”

Along with ensuring code is enforced, McMahon said that communities who want to combat blight must use a multi-faceted approach. In every community,

especially rural cities, needs are vast so leaders must be prepared to complete projects as opportunity arises. Also, cities must research and take advantage of state, federal, and private resources. Cities can utilize historic tax credits, work with groups such as Arkansas Capital, Department of Arkansas Heritage, and the Delta Regional Authority, and apply for grants. Cities can also utilize unique resources within the community. Find citizens and local groups who will take on projects. To combat community issues effectively, citizens play a vital role in accomplishing local goals.

“People are the greatest resource in Pine Bluff,” Carpenter said. “One of our goals at Pine Bluff Rising is to engage people in the process of community revitalization and empower them to realize positive change in their neighborhoods. When milestones are achieved, we also celebrate and share that success with the entire community.”

“Every person, family unit and business is part of the ecosystem of their community,” Reilly said. “Giving back implies that you have taken something and there is a zero sum game that needs balancing. Leadership exists in every one of us and examples of service by our youth to our business leaders are all critical elements to a healthy society. If you value your community and your fellow man then offering service is not a choice, it is an obligation.”

Finally, every community must gather around a plan and a shared vision to be successful. In Pine Bluff, the community has adopted the Go Forward Pine Bluff strategic plan, and though Pine Bluff Rising is not a direct affiliate of the plan, the group plans on following the vision that has been outlined in it.

To follow Pine Bluff Rising’s journey and for more information about the group, you can follow them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/PineBluffRising or on Twitter at @PineBluffRising.



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