

Secrets of successful communities

By Corey Parks

Prior to the 21st Century, economic development was believed to be one size fits all. After the turn of the century, experts in the field realized this was not the case. What works in one community may or may not work in another. Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow of the Urban Land Institute, considers the following to be the eight secrets of successful communities:

- Develop a shared vision for the future.
- Inventory local and regional assets.
- Build plans around the enhancement of assets.
- Use education, incentives, partnerships, and voluntary initiatives, not just regulation.
- Pick and choose among development proposals.
- Cooperate with neighbors for mutual benefit.
- Protect community character as well as ecology and economics.
- Have strong leaders and committed citizens.

While the implementation of these practices will vary in each community, everyone can benefit from utilizing them. An example of putting McMahon's secrets into action can be found in Morrilton, which is building its plan for the future around the enhancements of assets.

Local leadership and community members recognized that the growing downtown is an asset. According to McMahon, "If you don't have a healthy downtown then you don't have a healthy town." A nearly \$4 million bond issue has allowed the city to move forward with the purchase of a former downtown bank, enabling city hall to remain downtown. As a result, the current building will be renovated for future retail space. This property will likely become home to a mixed-use facility after renovation.

Morrilton has also worked to protect the city's character by improving its entrances. This simple but effective step can drastically improve the city's perception in the eyes of travelers and residents. Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best way to predict your future is to create it." Mayor Allen Lipsmeyer is a firm believer in this quote and is acting on it to improve Morrilton's future.

Rather than waiting for change to come, Morrilton has decided to create the change. McMahon says, "There are two kinds of change: planned and unplanned." Going forward, Morrilton plans to cooperate with neighbors for mutual benefit and inventory local and regional assets. The presence of colleges in Conway, Morrilton, and Russellville is an example of a regional asset and potential opportunity for cooperation. Lipsmeyer intends to



The Urban Land Institute's Ed McMahon shared his thoughts on successful communities during a recent presentation at the University of Central Arkansas's Community Development Institute in Conway.

continue developing relationships with surrounding area leadership to have a positive impact on the region.

According to Lipsmeyer, implementing these secrets in your community requires willpower and a positive attitude. "Without the will to grow and a positive attitude you won't be able to develop," Lipsmeyer said. "How will people view your town if you are constantly negative? I use every opportunity to share the positives about what is happening. There is hope in Morrilton because people believe in what we can accomplish."

The combination of hard work, resolve, and positivity has led to \$177,000,000 being invested in Morrilton. This growth exemplifies the change in economic development practices. A technique that works in a community does not automatically bring success in others.

Economic development is more dynamic than it ever has been, therefore we must have unique and creative strategies to be successful. Henry Ford said, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got." McMahon's secrets of successful communities provide a foundation of methods that can be tailored to fit each city's needs. Implementation will vary, but these eight secrets are applicable regardless of your geographic location or community makeup.



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