



# Kick Start Alma

By Shelby Fiegel

Each year during the first week of August, a group of community and economic development professionals from across the mid-south band together at the University of Central Arkansas’s Community Development Institute (CDI) to work one-on-one with an Arkansas community. The group, deemed the CDI Advanced Year, conducts a high-level assessment of the selected community aimed at supporting community and economic development growth.

This year, through a competitive process known as the Community Development Kick Start program, the city of Alma was chosen as the Arkansas community the CDI Advanced Year works with. Alma was selected for Community Development Kick Start because the city leadership and citizens are primed and prepared for positive change and the city has great assets. The excellent school system, Alma Aquatic Center and Water Park, community center, downtown area, parks system, and street and infrastructure improvements show that the community is taking steps toward a bright future.

With the support of the CDI staff and the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Breakthrough Solutions program, the Advanced Year conducted a driving tour, local interviews, did online research, and data mining to generate a final report for the community. In the report, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within Alma were shared, but most importantly potential

breakthroughs were identified that the community can implement immediately to grow its social capital and economy. The breakthroughs include:

**Community identity and brand**—Develop a powerful community identity and brand that describes Alma’s desired future, differentiates Alma from other communities, and attracts people (families, visitors, and businesses) to the community. Create an action plan to deliver on the brand promise.

**Enhanced online presence**—Enhance Alma’s online presence across all Alma related websites with a common look and brand that is mobile-friendly, and create a community app.

**Quality of life and place**—Create a clean, attractive community with walkability and trail systems that connect the entire community, a vibrant downtown, and entrances to the city that are attractive to residents and visitors.



Popeye Park in downtown Alma celebrates the city’s claim to fame as the “Spinach Capital of the World.”

**Support employers and identify new job opportunities**—Support Alma’s employers with a business retention and expansion program, create robust education and workforce development, and develop an entrepreneurship support system.

**Bring wireless Internet to public areas in the community**—Wireless Internet, or Wi-Fi, can help to attract people of all ages who seek to be online while enjoying Alma’s amenities. Consider offering free Wi-Fi in the Alma city core and at other city-owned amenities (community center, Aquatic Park, etc.).

**Long-term sustainability through new funding and finance**—Successful communities create ways for their citizens and outsiders to financially support community and economic development in their communities. Because people only support those things they believe in, this requires community involvement to create financing mechanisms that are good for the community over the long term.

“I look at Kick Start Alma as an opportunity to educate the citizens of Alma about the potential there is for our city,” Mayor Keith Greene said. “We have a tremendous number of assets that can be drawn together.

The participation of our citizens in this process is what has been most exciting so far. We are ready to step up and be the center of activity in the River Valley!”

Following the CDI Advanced Year’s work, the University of Central Arkansas and University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Breakthrough Solutions program will work with Alma for an additional nine months. The community will meet monthly to identify key issues and opportunities, culminating in the unveiling of a five-year strategic action plan in May 2018.

The Community Development Kick Start program is offered free of charge to one community each year, and represents a unique partnership between two institutions of higher education. For more information on the CDI Advanced Year program, visit [uca.edu/cdi/advanced-year](http://uca.edu/cdi/advanced-year). To follow Kick Start Alma’s progress visit [www.facebook.com/kickstartalma](http://www.facebook.com/kickstartalma).



*Shelby Fiegel is Assistant Director, Center for Community and Economic Development, University of Central Arkansas.*

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