



A mural in downtown Beebe celebrates the city's history. An assessment of the city's strengths and opportunities, conducted in August by the UCA Community Development Institute's Advanced Year students, will help Beebe plan for its future.

First Impressions Tour gets to know Arkansas town from a unique perspective

By Shelby Fiegel

The University of Central Arkansas Community Development Institute (CDI), a three-year community and economic development training program with one week of training per year, is held the first week of August by the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Like many other large events across the state, due to rising COVID-19 cases, the CCED staff decided to cancel CDI 2020 for the Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 classes. Fortunately, the CDI 2020 Advanced Year class, an optional, additional year of training for a small group of CDI graduates, was able to move forward.

During the week of August 3-6, nine CDI graduates and community and economic development experts from Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma traveled to Beebe to conduct a high-level assessment of the community based on online research, a driving tour, interviews with community leaders, on-the-street interviews and a virtual focus group with citizens. Through their work, they shared a community presentation streamed via Facebook Live on the city's Facebook page that outlined strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, "Badger Bites" (short-term goals) and "Vanguard Vision" (long-term goals).

While the CDI Advanced Year is a unique experience for both CDI participants and the Arkansas community they are working with, other communities

across the state can easily replicate the Advanced Year process to assess their own community.

The class completes what the CCED staff call a "First Impressions Tour" (FIT) of the community. The FIT entails the following:

Online research

The community's online presence is assessed through the lens of different personas, such as a single, young professional looking to move to the community, or a family with children looking to relocate. Other personas could include a retiree, current citizen, tourist, small business owner and industrial prospect. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is completed for city and community websites, social media pages, Arkansas Site Select, online real estate databases and travel websites based on the personas.

Driving tour

The driving tour assessment focuses on the community's physical infrastructure (highways, roads, sidewalks, public utilities, signage and beautification efforts), social infrastructure (schools, health care, arts and cultural amenities, parks/recreational amenities and housing) and economic development infrastructure (small businesses, large employers, site and commercial building availability and downtown development). These

amenities in the community are rated as very good, average, needs improvement or not available. During the driving tour, notes should be taken about why each amenity was given a particular rating.

Interviews and focus groups with leaders and citizens

Interviews and focus groups with community leaders and citizens are a very important part of the FIT process. If possible, these conversations should include representatives from local government, economic development, health care, education and workforce, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and the business community.

These representatives are divided into groups to have open conversations centered on seven key topics:

1. Education and workforce,
2. Health and wellness,
3. Recreation and things to do,
4. Downtown development,
5. Business and industry,
6. Arts and culture, and
7. Physical environment (built environment, natural environment, infrastructure, utilities, etc.).

Participants in the interviews and/or focus groups are asked what is working well, what are the greatest challenges/opportunities and what should be prioritized moving forward for each topic area.

Based on the information gathered, a summary of findings is shared with the community and “next steps” (short- or long-term goals) are identified for the community to consider moving forward. The First Impressions Tour can be led by leaders within a community, but CCED staff recommends that a community interested in completing a FIT reach out to community and economic developers or leaders from a different community to assist with the assessment.

The CCED staff will continue to follow up with Beebe and a printed report of the CDI 2020 Advanced Year’s findings will be shared with city leaders.

If you are interested in developing a First Impressions Tour of your community, please email me at sfiegel@uca.edu or call 501-450-5269. If you are interested in learning more about the Community Development Institute, visit www.uca.edu/cdi. CDI 2021 will be held August 2-6, 2021.



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