

Balancing big dreams with hard work: Lessons from Greenbrier

By Greta Hacker

The city of Greenbrier in many ways exemplifies both the joys and troubles of small-town living in Arkansas. It has a top-rated school system and its citizens form a close-knit, family friendly community. However, like many rural communities, it has struggled over the years with its transportation infrastructure and a lack of a downtown area. These challenges have only become more apparent as Greenbrier's population has grown.

Over the last five years, Greenbrier has demonstrated that it is up to the task of capitalizing on its assets and areas for improvement. The city has made great strides in economic and community development, and recent wins have made big impacts. Its recent progress serves as a good example of how any city can take steps to improve the quality of life in their communities.

Greenbrier's recent community development efforts began when they implemented recommendations from a First Impressions Tour (FIT) conducted in 2017 in partnership with the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development. Through the FIT, Greenbrier leaders received a broad assessment of the city's strengths and weaknesses. Some of the suggestions for improvement that emerged from this report included the development of sidewalks, improving recreation facilities, increasing wayfinding signage and engaging in beautification efforts.

Greenbrier city officials went right to work on implementing these recommendations in the following years. Greenbrier Events Center Director Shellie O'Quinn noted that throughout the community development process, Greenbrier succeeded because they tempered idealism with realism. "One thing I love about our current leadership is that they seize opportunities when they arise," she said. "They dream big but back it up with realistic expectations. The amazing facilities that we enjoy in our community today are a direct result of hard work and dedication to those big dreams."

These big dreams include several large improvement projects, including 55-acre Matthews Park, a new fire



Greenbrier doesn't have a traditional city center, and Matthews Park, completed in 2020, helps make up for that by giving residents a place to gather.



Public input helped guide city leaders when choosing the park's amenities.

station, a new city building that houses Greenbrier's parks and recreation department and chamber of commerce, and a 4,000 square-foot events center. In 2018 residents passed a sales tax increase that funded the construction of the city park and fire station. The projects wrapped in 2020 and 2021, respectively.

The creation of Matthews Park addressed an important need in the community by functioning as a central gathering place, said Greenbrier Chamber of Commerce President Ashton Pruitt. "Greenbrier does not have a traditional downtown with a lively entertainment

district. Matthews Park allowed us to have a special central location for recreation, celebrations and events. It really brought the community together.”

The park has served as the location for several large community events, including an art festival and Glisten in Greenbrier, a month-long holiday celebration featuring a tree-lighting ceremony, skating rink and light display.

Gaining community buy-in was a key ingredient in Greenbrier’s success throughout the process of developing Matthews Park. “It was important to us to ask the people what they would want in a park,” said Greenbrier Mayor Sammy Joe Hartwick. “We visited groups including senior citizens and school groups to get their feedback, and we included Greenbrier citizens on our city park board.”

O’Quinn also emphasized the importance of partnerships in Greenbrier’s achievements. “The city of Greenbrier works very closely with the Greenbrier Chamber of Commerce and the Greenbrier School District,” she said. “Most of the progress in the community can be attributed to the collaboration between these amazing institutions. They share many resources that help ease the growing pains of our community.”

One of Greenbrier’s current projects includes improving its streets and sidewalks. Mayor Hartwick noted that the city was proud to partner with the Arkansas Department of Transportation in widening its intersections and installing turning lanes and turning arrows in high-traffic areas. Hartwick also highlighted a sidewalk project connecting Highway 65 to Greenbrier High School.

Finally, Greenbrier is taking steps to plan for future growth by conducting a community survey. City officials will eventually use this citizen input to guide the development of a citywide strategic plan.

“Our citizens have been given a great opportunity to share their dreams and participate in the process of creating a unified vision as well as working to make it come to fruition,” O’Quinn said. “Having the buy-in of our community will be essential to realizing the ultimate ‘big dream’ of shaping a future Greenbrier that is even bigger and better than any of us individually could ever imagine.” 🍷



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