

# CDI 2021 ADVANCED YEAR REPORT

WELCOME TO  
**MONTICELLO**



## WHAT IS THE CDI ADVANCED YEAR?

The Community Development Institute Central (CDI), established in 1987 at the University of Central Arkansas, trains community and economic development professionals in Arkansas and the Mid-South. The complete CDI experience is a three-year training program with one week of training per year. Participants are exposed to a comprehensive, applied approach to the field of community and economic development. CDI is coordinated by Director Shelby Fiegel, Assistant Director Dylan Edgell, Project Coordinator Emily Cooper Yates, and Graduate Assistant Greta Hacker.

The CDI Advanced Year is an optional fourth year of training for CDI graduates. The Advanced Year was created to provide a unique opportunity for CDI graduates to apply their knowledge and skills in real-life situations and to kick start a community and economic development process in one community in Arkansas. During the week of CDI, the Advanced Year participants conduct research on the selected community, visit the community for a driving tour, facilitate focus groups, conduct interviews with citizens and community leaders, and host a public presentation on their findings where they identify general strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and priorities for the community moving forward.

Monticello, Arkansas was selected as the CDI 2021 Advanced Year community.

To learn more about CDI, visit [uca.edu/cdi](http://uca.edu/cdi).

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Monticello is a wonderful community in southeast Arkansas with great assets including its historic downtown square, a respected four-year institution, and a strong sense of community. Participating in the CDI Advanced Year 2021 process shows that leaders in Monticello are looking toward the future and are open to new ideas and opportunities for their community.

Our goal with this report is to share the challenges and opportunities the CDI Advanced Year class identified as well as to provide some recommendations to help imagine the future of Monticello based on our assessment and feedback from community leaders and citizens. The challenges and opportunities identified by community leaders and citizens in Monticello are shared by many other communities in Arkansas.

The CDI 2021 Advanced Year team took a holistic approach in assessing Monticello from an outsider's perspective. Before coming to Monticello, the Advanced Year team was asked to research Monticello online. After discussing this research, the Advanced Year team participated in a driving tour of Monticello. The team then met with community leaders, conducted focus groups with citizens, and implemented an online survey to collect feedback from the community to inform their recommendations. At the end of the week, the team presented their findings to the community during a public presentation, and pulled their insights and future recommendations together in this report.

This is not a comprehensive analysis of Monticello, but it takes a fresh look at the community from several outsiders with community and economic development experience and expertise. These individuals work every day in different aspects of community and economic development and came to Monticello from communities in Arkansas and Mississippi to provide their unique perspectives.

There is a lot to be proud of in Monticello. The recommendations found in this report will build on the great work that the community has already done. We hope this report will serve as a catalyst for future growth and development in Monticello!

## KEY PARTNERS

UCA CCED, the CDI Advanced Year class, and Monticello leadership would like to thank Simmons Bank for sponsoring the 2021 CDI Advanced Year in Monticello.



### **Simmons Bank**

A special thanks to these additional key partners who made this initiative possible:

- UCA Center for Community and Economic Development
- City of Monticello
- University of Arkansas at Monticello
- Monticello Economic Development Commission
- Lorie Robertson of Chaffee Crossing (CDI Advanced Year Class Director)
- Dana Poindexter of the City of Bryant (CDI Advanced Year Class Director)
- CDI 2021 Advanced Year Team
- Entergy Arkansas
- Community leaders and citizens of Monticello



## CDI 2021 ADVANCED YEAR AND ASSIGNMENTS

The CDI 2021 Advanced Year consisted of seven individuals working in a variety of professional roles from communities in Arkansas and Mississippi. The class was led by Lorie Robertson of Chaffee Crossing and Dana Poindexter of the City of Bryant.

Members of the 2021 Advanced Year Team include:



**Don Clark**  
City of Siloam  
Springs



**Tonya Fletcher**  
Paris Chamber of  
Commerce



**Lasha Marshall**  
Bank OZK



**Julie Murray**  
Van Buren Chamber  
of Commerce



**Joy Saucier**  
Mississippi Power



**Truett Smith**  
City of Bryant



**Alicia Wilmoth**  
City of Cabot



**Lorie Robertson**  
Chaffee Crossing



**Dana Poindexter**  
City of Bryant

During the research phase of the CDI 2021 Advanced Year, the class explored the following roles: a prospective college student, a family with young children, a retiree, a tourist, a small business owner, an industrial prospect, and a citizen of Monticello.

## ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

CDI Advanced Year Participants conducted an “online tour” where participants assessed Monticello’s online presence through the lens of different personas. These personas include: a family with young children, tourist, small business owner, citizen of Monticello, prospective college student, retiree, and industrial prospect.

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis was completed for city and community websites, social media pages, Arkansas Site Select, online real estate databases, and travel websites based on these personas. Below are the strengths and weaknesses found from the online assessment of each persona:

### **Prospective College Student**

Strengths:

- UAM has the only forestry program in the state
- UAM offers fantastic opportunities for music students
- UAM has a number of technical and professional certifications
- Unique mascot (Go Boll Weevils!)

Weaknesses:

- Few rental options found off-campus
- No mention of community recreation opportunities on UAM’s website
- Little information on social groups and places for students to plug-in to the community

### **Family with Young Children**

Strengths:

- Several Pre-K options
- Shorter commutes than in larger metropolitan areas

Weaknesses:

- Middle School, Intermediate School, and High School rated “average” according to GreatSchools
- Elementary School rated “below average” according to GreatSchools
- Public safety rated a “D” from Crime Grade (third-party website; the Monticello Police Department is updating its information stream to correct these statistics)
- Lack of job opportunities in industrial and service industries
- Limited options for shopping
- After-school programs could not be found online

### **Retiree**

Strengths:

- Drew Memorial Hospital
- Monticello Senior Center
- Assisted living options

Weaknesses:

- Attraction and retention of healthcare specialists
- Not much senior-friendly outdoor recreation
- Smaller single-family housing

## **Tourist**

### Strengths:

- Quality of life with great parks
- Rich culture and history highlighted by local museums
- Hunting and fishing options nearby
- Country club and golf course
- Good, established local restaurants

### Weaknesses:

- City websites were not up to date with community events and resources
- Lodging options rated mid-to-low online
- The Allen House Tours look fun but it seems to be available only in October
- Historical Museum lacked information on hours of operation and events
- Several options for restaurants but not very many are reviewed online
- Limited shopping options
- Found no information online about downtown Monticello

## **Small Business Owner**

### Strengths:

- City has a population of 8,500 and a daytime population of 17,800
- Currently 38 restaurants and 6 hotels in Monticello
- Dial Diner Food Delivery
- Monticello AR Talk of the Town Facebook page offers positive reviews of the city
- ExpoloreMonticello.com was a great resource for quality of life

### Weaknesses:

- No commercial listings on nationally known commercial sites including: Loopnet, Crexi, and Commerce Exchange
- No retail or commercial buildings listed on the MEDC site; only industrial sites listed
- Chamber of Commerce had a static landing page and no online presence

## **Industrial Prospect**

### Strengths:

- Properties listed and community profile available on Arkansas Site Selection website
- Arkansas Midland Railroad
- University of Arkansas at Monticello
- Drew County Memorial Hospital
- Municipal Airport with commercial, freight, and charter capabilities
- Selected twice by Arkansas Business as a City of Distinction for its Quality of Life
- Monticello Economic Development Commission website

### Weaknesses:

- Google ranking and SEO optimization for economic development website and Chamber website
- Chamber website is one page and needs to be regularly updated including a listing of industries/ members, calendar of events, member news, and job postings
- Outdated social media posts
- Economic development contact for the City was difficult to find and not readily available online
- Need more housing options and more diverse housing options

## Citizen of Monticello

### Strengths:

- 4-year university
- Technical certifications offered at university
- Family friendly community
- Adequate healthcare options

### Weaknesses:

- City website needs to be updated
- Difficult to find utility information
- Could not find adequate information on housing
- No information on new developments or construction projects



## COMMUNITY FEEDBACK AND TRENDS

CDI Advanced Year conducted focus groups, interviews, and an online survey with Monticello citizens to collect feedback and identify key trends in the community. The feedback included the following bright spots, challenges, and opportunities in each of these community and economic development sectors.

### Bright Spots

- Variety of educational resources
- Hunting and fishing opportunities nearby
- Positive perception of local schools
- Plenty of childcare options and afterschool programs
- Arkansas Small Business Technology Development Center office at UAM
- Diversity of businesses and industries
- Hospital expansion
- Sports complex
- Received TAP and RTP funding for trails
- Youth sports and Miracle League
- Strong performing arts association in Southeast Arkansas Concert Association
- Monticello is a retail hub
- Market in the Park program
- UAM visual arts programs
- World renowned jazz band
- Beautiful downtown with limited vacancies
- Community has a rich history
- Use and availability of parks
- Community leaders and local business leaders are eager to be involved

### Opportunities

- Address infrastructure issues including: sidewalks, streets, utilities, and housing
- Create, retain, and recruit a skilled workforce in Monticello
- Increase engagement between the Chamber of Commerce and local business community
- Cultivate mutually beneficial partnerships among the Chamber, the City, the A&P Commission, and the Monticello Economic Development Commission
- Begin campaign to extend sales tax
- Develop a branding and marketing strategy to tell Monticello's story

### Challenges

- Lack of zoning and development codes
- Need for enhanced pedestrian infrastructure including sidewalks, crosswalks, and ADA compliance
- Connections between key community leaders
- Need to be further developed
- Lack of shared vision
- Workforce needs
- Awareness and trust to utilize local services
- Pedestrian friendly improvements
- No large event venue(s) outside of UAM
- Need to tell Monticello's story (branding and marketing needed)
- Business curb appeal
- Wayfinding signage
- Population is stagnant or declining
- Completing Lake Monticello improvements and communicating with public
- Unreliable broadband
- Limited healthy restaurant and grocery food choices
- Support and engagement throughout the community

## 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, healthcare, 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 and the CDI Advanced Year team took notes about why each amenity in Monticello was given a particular rating.

Below are the notes from the CDI 2021 Advanced Year driving tour in Monticello:

### Physical Infrastructure

- Nice gateways into Monticello!
- Lack of complete streets (walking, biking, and driving), sidewalk improvements, and general pedestrian connectivity
- Great streetscapes in certain areas of downtown; continue building on this
- City was clean from litter
- HWY 278 corridor needs improvement
- Curb cuts needed in commercial areas downtown  
Good transportation infrastructure including access to highways, rail lines, and an airport
- Charming downtown
- Overall an attractive city

### Economic Development Infrastructure

- Impressive industrial potential
- Arkansas Midland Railroad access is great for economic development
- Intermodal growth potential
- Active industrial park and diverse existing industry
- Boat manufacturing cluster
- Many signs of new capital investments
- Minimal signage for the downtown businesses
- Workforce Training Center and workforce training schools are great
- University of Monticello (UAM)

- Monticello is an ACT Work Ready community
- Healthy local banking community

### Social Infrastructure

- Impressive public library
- Parks and outdoor recreation has a lot of potential
- Market in the Park is great
- Robust church and faith-based community
- Healthcare facilities provide adequate care for area between Drew Memorial Hospital, general practitioners, and local specialists
- Existing greenspaces in the downtown area were nice
- Opportunities for murals and public art on buildings, benches, and public spaces in the downtown area
- Good mix of housing options and neighborhoods
- Monticello school system was impressive; educational options from Pre-K to post-grad
- Great historical assets (museum/courthouse/downtown)

## KEEP ON GROWING TODAY

Based on these observations and the findings of this report, there are several short term steps Monticello can pursue to raise quality of life and expand future economic growth. In this section titled “Keep on Growing Today,” the CDI Advanced Year class identified short term steps that can be completed within a year.

1. Start regular inter-organizational meetings with local leaders including the MEDC, the Mayor’s office, the A&P Chair, the Planning Commission, the Chamber, and other community leaders to foster collaboration and communication.
2. Elevate the Chamber of Commerce to serve as a hub and connector for organizations, activities, and businesses in Monticello.
3. Intentionally engage the business community with regular communication and opportunities to be more involved in community and economic development.
4. Regularly communicate the status of improvements on Lake Monticello with the broader community.
5. Plan a ribbon cutting event for the reopening of Lake Monticello.
6. Assess social media presence and create a social media strategy for the City and MEDC pages.
7. Revitalize Explore Monticello website and regularly maintain website with updated links, events, and community meetings.



## KEEP ON GROWING TOMORROW

The CDI Advanced Year team also identified several longer term action items that would take more than one year to accomplish but are a part of a long-term vision to raise quality of life and expand future economic growth in this section titled “Keep on Growing Tomorrow.”

1. Utilize existing talent within your community to accomplish community and economic development goals. Intentionally include community leaders and business owners and provide them a seat at the table.
2. Create zoning ordinances to assist with improvements in Monticello’s housing and public infrastructure needs and to protect existing housing and infrastructure.

Tell Monticello’s story by developing a brand and marketing strategy to share the city’s great assets. Suggestions to consider include:

- Focus on your main industries and economic development drivers
  - Focus on business retention
  - Miracle Ball Field sporting complex
  - Hunting and fishing options in the area
  - The University of Arkansas at Monticello and UAM Jazz Band
  - Update city websites regularly and elevate visibility of the Chamber
  - Maintain a regular social media presence
3. Develop programming to provide support for local entrepreneurs.
  4. Utilize Main Street Arkansas resources to continue investing in downtown.
  5. Seek signage grants to improve wayfinding around the city and consider developing a wayfinding signage system.
  6. Seek grants to improve facades downtown.
  7. Work with downtown retailers to improve merchandising, window displays, curb appeal, and signage to encourage foot traffic and sales.
  8. Invest in public art around the city including murals and sculptures.
  9. Develop the Drew County Museum into a regional tourist asset by improving online communications and increased public program offerings.
  10. Develop a skilled trade career path from UAM to existing industry in Monticello.
  11. Continue to capitalize on sports tourism and serve as a regional sports hub.
  12. Consider holding on to the Armory Building and developing this asset into a community center or community space to serve the citizens of Monticello.

## LOOKING FORWARD

A special thanks to the following individuals for their leadership, cooperation, and hospitality in welcoming the CDI Advanced Year team to Monticello:

- Mayor Paige Chase, City of Monticello
- Nita McDaniel, Monticello Economic Development Commission
- Chancellor Peggy Doss, University of Arkansas at Monticello
- Dan Boice, University of Arkansas at Monticello
- Jeff Weaver, University of Arkansas at Monticello
- Judge Robert Akin, Drew County

We appreciate the community leaders in Monticello who came out and participated in the focus groups and public presentations. Your participation, positive attitude, and commitment are crucial to the community development process moving forward.

Monticello is a special place with unique assets, opportunities, and a strong sense of community. Monticello has a great foundation on which to build the future. The citizens of Monticello are the most knowledgeable about your community, and they are in the driver's seat moving forward. We hope this report offers some useful observations, recommendations, and quick wins that will be helpful during the journey making Monticello a great place to live, work, and play.



