

Kick Start Alma 2017

Community Development Kick Start Report



What is Community Development Kick Start?

The Community Development Institute Central (CDI), established in 1987 at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, trains community and economic development professionals in Arkansas and surrounding states. 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 Amy Whitehead, Assistant Director Shelby Fiegel, and Project Coordinator Corey Parks.

The Community Development Kick Start program was created to provide a unique opportunity for CDI graduates to apply their knowledge and skills to a real-life situation and to kick start a community and economic development process in one community. Community Development Kick Start uses the Breakthrough Solutions Model from the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, with Dr. Mark Peterson, professor of Community and Economic Development, serving as facilitator and partner for this initiative. The Breakthrough Solutions Program is a partnership initiative with the purpose of equipping communities and regions in Arkansas to be vibrant, sustainable, and resilient in this 21st century economy.

To learn more about CDI visit www.uca.edu/cdi. To learn more about Breakthrough Solutions, visit www.uaex.edu/business-communities/strategic-planning/breakthrough-solutions.aspx.

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Executive Summary

Community Development Kick Start is a collaborative initiative between the University of Central Arkansas' (UCA) Community Development Institute and the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension to provide a community the tools they need to develop a five year strategic action plan. The program begins with a five day, intensive workshop where a team of CDI graduates (also called the Kick Start team) focuses on one Arkansas community, and creates a research based report for that community. UCA and U of Arkansas Cooperative Extension faculty then work with the community for an additional nine months to create and launch the action plan.

Communities in Arkansas were invited to apply for this unique opportunity, and Alma was selected. Alma has great assets, and is doing many things very well. The excellent school system, aquatic center, community center, and street and infrastructure improvements are signs of visionary leadership in the community. It is also a mark of leadership to look to the future, engage your citizenry, and tap strategic resources that can help move your community forward.

The challenges and opportunities identified by community leaders in Alma are shared by many other communities in our state and nation, and Alma now has a unique opportunity to address these challenges and opportunities moving forward. Our goal is that this development process will equip the community of Alma to become a model for the nation as it identifies and implements breakthrough solutions to realize its full potential and desired future.

As in the real world, people check out communities online before visiting them, so the Kick Start team researched Alma online to gather insights about the community. When the team came together during the week of CDI, they went to Alma and interacted with citizens, took a guided tour, and met with community leaders. At the end of the week, the team presented their findings to the community, and finally pulled all of their insights and future recommendations together into this report.

This is not a comprehensive analysis of all economic sectors of Alma, but it does represent a fresh look at the community from several outsiders who brought community and economic development experience and expertise into this setting.

Breakthroughs are advances, innovations, or leaps forward that can transform a community and change the dynamics in a region by acting as catalysts to leverage other resources. Breakthrough solutions carry the breakthroughs into action. The Kick Start team found that the citizens, leaders, organizations, and businesses in Alma have much to be proud of, and are successful in many ways. So these potential breakthroughs really build on the good work that you are already doing.

Potential breakthroughs for Alma:

1) Community Identity and Brand - Develop a powerful community identity and brand that describes your desired future, differentiates Alma from other communities, and attracts people (families, visitors, and businesses) to the community, with an action plan to deliver on the brand promise.

2) Enhanced Online Presence - Enhance your online presence across the several Alma websites with a common look and brand that is mobile friendly, and create a community app.

3) 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.

4) Support Employers and Identify New Job Opportunities – Support your employers with a business retention and expansion program, create robust education and workforce development, and develop an entrepreneurship support system.

5) Bring Wi-Fi to Public Areas in the Community – Wi-Fi can help to attract people of all ages who seek to be online while enjoying Alma’s amenities.

6) 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.

The rest of this report provides a brief overview of the research conducted by the Kick Start team: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and quick wins that can be put into action immediately. **For a copy of the full report developed by the Kick Start team, please contact Amy Whitehead at amyw@uca.edu or Mark Peterson at mpeterson@uaex.edu**

Strengths

Driving Tour Strengths

- Excellent school system: good website, good academics, beautiful facilities, strong athletic programs, Performing Arts Center, school store, and tornado shelters at every school
- Access to I-40 and I-49
- Proximity to regional airport
- Public water and sewer; city has a larger capacity for water than currently utilized
- Homes are affordable
- New infrastructure improvements throughout the city (over \$30 million in current projects)
- New city park is being planned
- Aquatic center and park
- Community center
- Stepping Stone School and Boys and Girls Club
- Variety of shopping opportunities and restaurants in and around Alma; close proximity to Fort Smith and Fayetteville
- Farmer's market with great facility and location by the Chamber of Commerce
- Outdoor recreational opportunities: Lake Alma, Eagle Crest Golf Course, Frisbee golf course, tennis courts, well maintained city parks, and walking/hiking trail
- Senior center
- Spinach Festival (unique connection to Popeye)
- Diverse faith-based community

Online Strengths

- City has a website
- Chamber of Commerce is active and has an up-to-date website and Facebook page
- Several Facebook pages connected to the community
- Pictures of the area are beautiful
- City utilities and fines can be paid online
- Reservations to the Alma Aquatic Center can be made online

Weaknesses

Driving Tour Weaknesses

- Blighted areas; code enforcement needs strengthening in the business and residential areas
- Lack of coordination between city leaders, businesses, and nonprofits and there is no apparent connection with regional development organizations
- Part-time Chamber director
- Empty storefronts downtown
- Lack of quality residential rental properties
- No airport or train station
- No hospital
- No public transportation opportunities
- Flooding/drainage issues
- High taxes
- ISO rating of 4; six minute fire response time
- Commercial real estate prices are not in line with market demand
- Very few shopping and recreational activities for teens and families in Alma
- Limited walkability and biking opportunities throughout town
- Dry county
- Lack of land for industrial and residential development

Online Weaknesses

- City website needs: Comprehensive programs and schedules, more information about historical sites, high quality pictures/videos, and more clarification on “Gap Analysis” under “Economic Development;” do figures reflect lost retail dollars due to holes in the retail mix? A source of this information is also needed.
 - The website also needs to promote current projects, future projects and value of projects:
 - Link to Fort Smith Regional Alliance
 - Economic development contact information
 - Information about Stepping Stone School
 - Links to community websites (Boys and Girls Club, churches, etc.)
- Chamber website needs: Links to economic development information (incentives) and contacts, lists of commercial properties for sale, activities, restaurants, utility providers, high quality pictures/videos, and other residential information, and resources for startups and new businesses.
 - If the Chamber of Commerce is truly the “Alma Area Chamber of Commerce,” the site should include an area map and information about the service area, including the industrial park at Mulberry.
- School website needs more information such as: full list of activities, schedules, accomplishments, district rating
- City, Chamber and county websites need more cohesion and consistent messages; consider a common banner as Newport, AR does

Opportunities

Community Health and Well Being

- Encourage healthy food options on local restaurant menus and in schools
- Create a community farm-to-table dining event downtown near the farmers' market (similar to an event held in Russellville)
- Expand and partner with farmer's market to provide more community activities
- Consider an indoor pool and/or a portable dome over the existing pool
- Start a program for teenagers to do minor exterior lawn care/maintenance for homebound residents
- Explore options for urgent care facility and expanded weekend hours for walk-in clinics
- Create a senior center social media page

Economic Development and Job Creation

- Sponsor economic development training for planning commission and local officials
- Encourage light industry
- Develop economic development incentives program and consider corporate tax abatement to attract new businesses and industry
- Attract high-tech businesses
- Create/offer entrepreneurship programs (Harrison has an effective entrepreneurship short course)
- Encourage organic growth - support existing small business and entrepreneurship
- Strengthen the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce: New location, define roles for the Chamber director, contact person for economic development, Mayor, others, provide city funding, eliminate rent to free-up funding, and make the director full-time.

Education/Workforce

- Develop a reciprocal relationship with Stepping Stone School to make it widely known that educational opportunities for developmentally challenged children exist in Alma; help attract/recruit educators in the specialty field
- Consider using school pride as a launch pad for other community strengths - infrastructure, economic development, and location

Infrastructure

- Tap the sewer line in the Collum West area for new homes
- Continue with wastewater inflow and infiltration abatement
- Address flood plain and drainage issues
- Develop and implement a long-term infrastructure/utility plan
- Explore development opportunities at the intersection of Highway 70 and I-40
- Remain engaged in highway planning process (I-49, I-40, and state highways)
- Encourage residential development (identify land, plan for utilities, work with developers)
- Support housing development, which needs to be in place to attract new industry and provide options for people who relocate

Quality of Life and Place

- Strengthen and enforce housing codes to provide clean, affordable housing
- Create a strategic economic development brand and identity for the community, outside of I-49. Make it relevant to the Alma of today, what assets are there now and are being built on. Roger Brooks International is a tremendous authority and resource on branding communities. His videos have been invaluable to Arkansas communities and are available through the Crawford County Extension office.
- Crossroads of America – not visible from the community, may not be that meaningful to local people; search online to see how many other communities have the same tagline
- What if Alma became the fresh market Spinach Capitol of the World? If you google Popeye, you will find he is an internationally-known celebrity in several countries, with theatrical performances and festivals held in several countries.
- Consider raising spinach in the area for fresh market, as there is strong demand from local grocers
- History of Allen Canning/Spinach – create a Popeye Museum downtown (could start in the library)
- Develop a driving tour of Alma with assets identified on a city map
- Tell your STORY!
 - o Lake Alma Trail testimony: “Lovely little trail - lots of surprises! The little waterfall, old stone structures, and rustic bridges are all great. You also get some lovely views of the lake, of course, plus bluffs, boulders, pretty creeks, and an amazing view from the top of the dam... I was astonished by how much this short, easy trail offered.” Miranda Kohout www.alltrails.com
- Improve curb appeal on gateways and entry corridors to the community
- Complete downtown revitalization
- Have a “paint downtown” event/festival and learn from “Let’s Paint Stuttgart”
- Improve online and physical appearance and location of Alma Public Library in downtown
- Develop entertainment, nightlife activities
- Create a festival tied to the performing arts
- Revitalize the Spinach Festival, and include a Popeye look-alike contest, a food carving contest, and a theatrical production
- Create a historic tour with a Confederate general, Bonnie & Clyde reenactors, founding fathers, tie in with the historic cemetery, and host cemetery tours/walks at night
- Motorcycle tourism is a promising market segment
- Continue to enhance and expand parks and recreation
- Create an arch with a name for your water park/park/Frisbee golf course
- Expand Performing Arts Center opportunities for year-round community engagement
- Create a comprehensive calendar of events for the website(s), Facebook pages, and local media
- Use multiple venues to communicate to the community and the world about upcoming events and the list of community projects and investments, and keep it updated
- Embrace openness, collaboration, and citizen involvement from all levels of citizenry

Create a Funding and Finance Action Team. For example, Kick Start Heber Springs created a Funding and Finance Action Team with these purposes:

- Review all funding streams (taxes, etc.) coming into the community, to see if they are used for the most strategic purposes in the community, and if they can be enhanced or leveraged in some way
- Assist the other action teams with identifying possible funding sources and strategies
- Offer training on grantsmanship
- Connect people of means (such as wealthy individuals who have some connection to the community) with major projects that would be breakthroughs for the community

Quick Wins

Now you have all the basics of Alma in its current state, its strengths, weaknesses, and a list of opportunities. You may be asking yourself, “Where do we get started?” This is one of the toughest questions to answer in a community that is beginning a planning and revitalization process. To help kick start Alma’s efforts, the Kick Start team shared some key quick wins the community can get started on right now to initiate change and get more citizens involved and excited! The quick wins include:

Community Health and Well Being

- Expand Lake Alma fishing opportunities and access
- Educate the community on the benefits of exercise, encourage participation in outdoor activities

Economic Development and Job Creation

- Add Mulberry’s industrial park to the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce website
- Connect the city and chamber through links
- Make local employers aware that the Arkansas Procurement Assistance Center (part of the U of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service) can assist them sell their goods and services to the public sector
- Survey small businesses and work with Arkansas Small Business Technology and Development Center to offer small business workshops
- Meet with local employers to identify their needs and partnership opportunities (business retention and expansion)
- Invite the community to hear the Retail Strategies presentation and seek to recruit businesses to fill the retail gaps in the community
- Shopping - collaborate with Van Buren and Fort Smith

Education/Workforce

- Bring together representatives from area colleges, universities, and Western Arkansas Planning and Development District with local employers to identify their needs and partnership opportunities
- Update and improve demographic information on city website; broaden area for potential workforce to a regional viewpoint

Infrastructure

- Involve EAST Lab students in mapping infrastructure

Quality of Life and Place

- Create a presence on Western Arkansas Mountain Frontier
- Confirm you have an appropriate presence on the regional and state tourism websites
- Launch a city-wide beautification program, sponsoring clean-up events, and involving local nurseries
- Create a Lawn of the Month program
- Market your RV parks

- Partner with Keep Arkansas Beautiful Sept. 9 – October; 31, 2017 (free materials, planning guide, volunteer reward materials, etc.) www.KeepArkansasBeautiful.com; offer extra credit for student participation
- Market your golf course – it is on the Arkansas Trail!
- Remove the headless Popeye and lettering at Cherry St. and Fayetteville Ave., replace with message “Downtown Alma” (with arrow)
- Invite food trucks downtown
- Provide Wi-Fi access in public facilities/areas – downtown, in the community center, and aquatic park
- Conduct a civic pride campaign - meet with every civic, church, community, public, and private group to communicate the positives of the community and the future plan for growing and improving the quality of life for every Alma citizen; tell the story over and over again

Looking Forward

Thank you to the Community Development Kick Start team for dedicating a week of their time to creating this report for the city of Alma:

- Essie Mae Dale-Cableton, Mayor of Gould
- Ashley Garris, Economic Development Administrator at Western Arkansas Planning and Development District
- Lisa Johnson, President of the Bossier Chamber of Commerce
- Mike Kemp, Mayor of Shannon Hills
- Allen Lipsmyer, Mayor of Morrilton
- Lorie Robertson, Director of Marketing at Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority

A special thanks to the following individuals for their leadership, cooperation, and hospitality in welcoming the Community Development Kick Start team to Alma:

- Keith Greene, Mayor, City of Alma
- Jim White, Alma Planning Commission Chairman
- Destiny Brockett, Administrative Assistant to the Mayor
- Mark Yardley, Public Works Director
- Terry Carson, Alma Visionary Co- Chairman
- Ed Thickston, Alma Visionary Chairman
- Bryan Huff, Alma Area Chamber of Commerce

We appreciate the community leaders in Alma who came out and participated in the community meetings. Your active participation and commitment is invaluable to launching the Kick Start development process in your community. Alma is a special community with unique assets and opportunities. You all do many things very well, and have a great foundation on which to build the future you desire for your children and grandchildren. You who live in Alma are most knowledgeable about Alma, and are in the driver's seat moving forward. We hope this report offers some useful observations, recommendations, and quick wins that will be helpful to you on your journey.

Thanks to all who have been involved with this initiative so far - we look forward to seeing great things happening in Alma!

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