

# Kick Start Alma

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# ACTION PLAN



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# Executive Summary

This document, the Kickstart Alma Action Plan, is a strategic blueprint for the growth and development of Alma, Arkansas over the next five years. The action plan was created as a result of public forums and action teams working together over the past nine months to identify a vision and goals for the community, as well as promising long-term strategic opportunities.

Many people and organizations worked together on this effort, including representatives from the City of Alma, Alma Area Chamber of Commerce, Alma School District, Western Arkansas Planning and Development District, the Crawford County Cooperative Extension Service, churches and non-profits, business owners, local banks, and many other community leaders and citizens.

To craft this document, the community worked with the University of Central Arkansas Community Development Institute and the Breakthrough Solutions program at the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

The interaction between the universities and the community began in August 2017, when a group of community and economic development professionals visited Alma to assess the community's current situation and help identify breakthroughs to move the community forward. As a result of that session, and monthly meetings since that time, priority areas and several breakthroughs have been identified as part of this process.

A summary of these key breakthroughs are identified in the next section. The priority areas identified were:

- Culture, Recreation, and Beautification
- Branding and Marketing
- Downtown Revitalization
- Job Creation

Many projects are already underway, and many others are planned and outlined in this document.

Community and economic development is a long-term effort that can take many years to bear fruit. The Alma Action Plan lays the groundwork for those efforts and helps focus the enthusiasm and passion that the Alma citizens have exhibited throughout the planning process.

# Community Breakthroughs

In times of rapid change, successful communities create breakthroughs to move forward toward their desired future. Congratulations to the community leaders and citizens of Alma who have developed these breakthroughs and breakthrough solutions:

## **Breakthroughs - Culture, Recreation, and Beautification**

Enhance the attractiveness of our community by:

- Showing the world that Alma is loved by its residents through consistent beautification efforts throughout the city,
- Creating public festivals and events, including a homecoming weekend and celebration of the 150th anniversary of Alma, and
- Working with the Crawford County Library System to establish a new library in downtown, possibly to include an historic museum.

## **Breakthroughs - Branding and Marketing**

Communicate to the world who we are by:

- Developing a community brand that is unique and compelling,
- Creating a robust online presence to market Alma to the world, and
- Implementing the River Valley wayfinding plan that tells visitors where key assets are in the community.

## **Breakthroughs - Downtown Revitalization**

Revitalize our downtown by:

- Connecting the downtown area to I-40 and I-49 to entice tourists to visit the downtown area,
- Revamping building codes and ordinances to enhance property values, public safety, and downtown development, and
- Building a plaza for hosting activities and events that will draw artists, musicians, food trucks and citizens to the downtown area.

## **Breakthroughs - Job Creation**

Strengthen the capacity for economic development in Alma by:

- Establishing the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce director position as a full-time position,
- Creating a business retention and expansion program modeled after the Northwest Arkansas Council's program,
- Developing and implementing a long-term infrastructure, land use and utility master plan that will guide future growth and development, and
- Creating a small business incubator and maker space, in conjunction with other entrepreneurship programming.

# Core Values

During the first public Kick Start Alma meeting in September, the public voted on the core values that they believe should guide Kick Start Alma. The top three core values as selected by Alma citizens are:

- **Being proactive, with a can-do attitude**
- **Creativity, seeking breakthroughs that move us forward**
- **Serving as a catalyst that brings people together to make things happen**

These core values are a guide for the Kick Start Alma process. As our community continues to come together and work to make our city a better place, these values will inform all of our decisions because they are the most important to our citizens.

# Vision

## *Alma – Naturally Home*

In the year 2023, Alma is a friendly small town known for its:

- **Rich history and traditions,**
- **Vibrant downtown and businesses,**
- **Close proximity to Ft. Smith, Northwest Arkansas, and Little Rock,**
- **Location at the crossroads of two interstates,**
- **High quality of life and school system,**
- **Beautiful natural environment with many recreational opportunities, and**
- **Caring, involved citizens who work together to build a prosperous, sustainable future for our children and grandchildren.**



# Executive Committee

Thank you to our Kick Start Alma Executive Committee and Kick Start Alma Action Team co-chairs for their hard work and dedication! These individuals are dedicated to creating a bright future for Alma:

- Brenda Belcher - Bank of the Ozarks
- ML Brown. Pastor - Zion Baptist Church
- Terry Carson - Van Buren Chamber of Commerce
- Debbie Fort - Alma Health Care and Rehabilitation
- Ashley Garris - Western Arkansas Planning and Development District
- Buddy Gray - Alma City Planner
- Keith Greene - Mayor of Alma
- Dave Hughes - Arkansas Democrat Gazette
- Brian Huff - Alma Chamber of Commerce
- John Lovett - Southwest Times Record
- Brooklyne Lunsford - City of Alma
- Lyndsee Lyons - Western Arkansas Planning and Development District
- Tommy McClain - Crawford County
- James McGee - Alma City Council Member, Farm Bureau Insurance
- Tracie McKenna - Western Arkansas Planning and Development District
- Becky Newton - Arvest Bank
- Emily Rucker - Rucker Fine Holmes
- Sherry Siler - Alma School District
- Marilyn Sneed - Alma Chamber of Commerce
- Wayne Steward - BancorpSouth
- Destiny Sowell - City of Alma
- Ed Thickston - Alma Dry Cleaners
- Taniah Tudor - Press Argus Courier
- Jim Warnock - Alma Parks Advisory Chairman, Alma School District
- Maria Washburn - Citizens Bank
- Jim White - Alma Planning Commission Chairman
- Dennis Williamson - Western Arkansas Planning and Development District
- Toni Wilson - Stepping Stone School
- David Woolly - Alma School District
- Mark Yardly - Public Works Director



# Culture, Recreation, and Beautification

## Goal #1: Promote the rich history of Alma by preserving the historic locations, artifacts, and stories unique to the area, and sharing those assets with the community and region.

### Short-term strategies:

- Collect old photos of Alma and display them with historic information plaque for each photo. A mobile installation should be considered, bringing in key community partners to assist with development of the display.
- Create a historical timeline of Alma that can be installed as a mobile or permanent installation. Historical events, sites, and people to be considered include the Bonnie and Clyde and the Barrows gang shootout, Commercial Bank Building, and Marshal Henry Humphrey, to name a few.
- Create an online platform for sharing the history of the area. Converting existing historical records and artifacts to a digital format will generate tourism and a sense of shared history within Crawford County. This online platform can also be used to promote historic trails, such as the Butterfield Trail, Trail of Tears, and Civil War routes.
- Identify and register locations and buildings that are on, or need to be added to, the National Register of Historic Places.

### Long-term strategies:

- Develop local tours, such as a Halloween tour or cemetery reenactment similar to “Tales of the Crypt” or a tour of historic markers or locations significant to Alma’s history. Consider tying walking tours to the Little Frog Bayou Trail.
- Identify a new or existing space to house and display historical photos and artifacts. Ideally, this would be located in downtown Alma.
- Begin an Alma time capsule that can be organized in conjunction with the 150th Anniversary Festival or the creation of a new plaza in downtown.

## Goal #2: Create public festivals and events that draw residents and tourists to the community.

### Short-term strategies:

- Expand the Farmers’ Market Holiday Market that builds on previously held chili cook-off, live music, and Weenie Dog Dash.
- Create an annual Christmas parade.
- Create an app or website that can be shared on all Alma-promoting platforms to drive tourism.
- Capitalize on the already established Bargains Galore on 64.
- In partnership with Branding and Marketing Action Team, begin planning of the 150th anniversary of Alma.

### **Long-term strategies:**

- Establish a robust set of activities for homecoming weekend, that includes a parade, class reunion party, and other related events.
- Evaluate and identify potential festival ideas that support the goals of the other Kick Start action teams. Potential festival or event themes include: art and music festival, antique or junk fest, monthly food truck event, Veterans Day or Memorial Day events/monuments, drone competitions, Senior Olympics, spring festival, fall festival, chili cook-off, and motorized or non-motorized bike rides.

## **Goal #3: Support and create public spaces and programs that support arts, culture, and community gathering.**

### **Short-term strategies:**

- Host Farmers' Market special promotion weekends, and extend use of the Farmers' Market shed for off-season events, such as movies and Christmas holiday activities.
- Promote and develop public art, such as: murals, sidewalk art, projection art, and painted storm drains and trash cans.
- Identify land and resources in downtown for a plaza, with first consideration given to a site near the Farmers' Market shed. This would allow overflow space for festivals, music, entertainment, and art.
- Identify and recruit civic or nonprofit groups in the city that support public arts and community-based initiatives.
- Identify other opportunities and potential for development that coordinate with other Kick Start Action Teams.

Suggestions that were submitted include:

- Pavilion or plaza area for art/music festival,
- Drone course for drone festival competition,
- Booth spaces for antique or junk fest,
- Track and field area or large safe space for Alma Olympics for Seniors,
- Mountain bike trail and commercial spots for mountain bike festival,
- Motorcycle parking,
- Commercial food spots, and
- Musicians.

### **Long-term strategies:**

- Better utilize and coordinate existing community calendars to create a master shared calendar for all community activities, working with key organizations such as the city, chamber of commerce, school district, and other partners.
- Work with the Crawford County Library System to establish a new library in downtown, and explore options to add in a historic museum component to the new building.

**Goal #4: Create a culture of health within the community by supporting regional recreational activities and facilities.**

- Create a Paws Playground through fundraisers and support for a “Friends of the Park” nonprofit.
- Support creation of Christello Park, Ozark Off Road cycling trails, and Little Frog Bayou Trail.

**Goal #5: Show the world that Alma is loved by its residents through consistent beautification efforts throughout the city.**

- Establish a Keep Alma Beautiful clean up day to be held at the same time each year.
- Promote volunteerism by sharing success stories through various media formats.
- Establish an online volunteer tracking system on the city’s website, and encourage Alma civic organizations to track their volunteer hours through the website.



# Branding and Marketing

## **Goal #1: Develop a community brand that is unique and compelling and market Alma to the world.**

- Develop a unique brand for Alma with a brand promise that builds on our unique assets and personality, including our geographic location at the crossroads of two interstates, great school, multiple natural resources, and friendly small town close to Ft. Smith, Northwest Arkansas, and Little Rock. Consider “Alma - Naturally Home, Centrally Located” or “Alma – Naturally Home.”
- Identify and market key community assets, which include: Lake Ft. Smith, White Rock Mountain, Frog Bayou Wildlife Management Area, Eagle Crest, RV parks, Lake Alma Hiking Trail, future mountain bike trails, and other assets that would appeal to key target audiences. These target audiences include: young workers, families, educators, tourists, and motorcyclists.
- Develop community marketing materials and distribute them to target audiences.
- Increase Alma’s marketing and public relations efforts by encouraging high school students to participate in class projects and internships for the purpose of creating audio and video materials, internet content, and building and maintaining social media services for the city and chamber of commerce.
- Work closely with regional organizations, such as: Western Arkansas Planning and Development District, Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization, Fort Smith Area Chamber of Commerce, and Western Arkansas’ Mountain Frontier to market Alma.
- Work with Arkansas Economic Development Commission and Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism to ensure that Alma is well-represented on state marketing sites and initiatives.
- Market regional industrial sites through the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce.
- Work with local businesses to put “Proudly Made in Alma” on their packaging.
- Form a coalition of nonprofits and market their services to the public.
- Work with local manufacturers to open a retail store outlet in downtown Alma.
- Seek certification as a bike friendly community from the League of American Bicyclists and participate in other bicycle programs.
- Build a strong relationship with the Alma Advertising & Promotion Commission to help provide financial assistance for marketing Alma.

## **Goal #2: Conduct an online audit of Alma websites and take action to ensure that local sites are up to date, attractive, and linked to one another, and that Alma is well represented on travel websites such as TripAdvisor.**

- Create a robust web presence, linking websites and coordinating key messages with the city, chamber, and other organizations.
- Work with the Arkansas Small Business Technology and Development Center and/or UAFS students to offer workshops on enhancing the online presence of local businesses.
- Review Alma’s presence on travel websites and add Alma businesses and assets to those websites.
- Identify additional resources to enhance Alma’s online presence, such as using ArcGIS story maps.

**Goal #3: Implement the River Valley wayfinding plan developed by the Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization that tells visitors where key assets are in the community.**

- City officials will review the signage plan and meet with Arkansas Department of Transportation on location of signage. Action will be taken as funding is available.
- Update “services” signage on interstate.
- Encourage the Advertising & Promotion Commission to fund billboards on I-40 to promote awareness of available options for gas, food and lodging.



# Downtown Revitalization

## **Goal #1: Connect the downtown area to I-40 and I-49 travelers to entice tourists and residents to recognize and visit the downtown area.**

- Consider rebranding the downtown area\* with a new name to designate, reference, and identity its boundaries. Such examples include Town Center, Old Towne, South Towne, Village District, Arts and Cultural District, Plaza Center, etc.
- Encourage activities that connect the desire to be in the downtown area with other business in City of Alma.
- Build the bicycle repair station to connect the downtown area to the newly formed bicycle and trail system.
- Build and promote the new trail system that connects downtown to other parts of the community.
- Promote the Alma Performing Arts Center events to encourage downtown foot traffic and to highlight new investment and improvements.
- Encourage affiliation with the Main Street Arkansas Program.

*\*Hall Street on the East to Locke Street on the West and from East and West Main Street on the South to Highway 64 on the North, which also includes the entire length of Fayetteville Avenue.*

## **Goal #2: Review, rewrite, and enforce building codes and ordinances for the downtown area, keeping in mind zoning to enhance property values, public safety, and further the goals for the downtown area.**

- Clarify and adopt enhanced building ordinances for new and remodeled buildings, to provide continuity for the downtown area.
- Create an “overlay zoning district” for the downtown area to improve the aesthetics and attractiveness of the property.
- The City of Alma should develop a plan to purchase existing buildings, or assist in demolition of unsalvageable buildings, with the purpose of incentivizing private investment.

## **Goal #3: Encourage Fayetteville Avenue building and land owners to take pride in the area and maintain, upgrade, and improve their building assets and property.**

- Work to involve the support of existing business property owners to entice them to make improvements to their existing privately owned buildings.
- Assist and enable existing business owners with information to obtain grant funds, if available, to promote remodel and renovation projects of existing buildings.
- Seek public support for architectural review committee guidelines and incentives.
- Build a new, or completely renovate, Alma Public Library and include meeting space availability in the new facility.
- Explore possibilities of moving the Alma Public Library to a new location downtown.



**Goal #4: Seek grants, private investments, and limited city funds to build a plaza for hosting activities and events that will draw artists, musicians, food trucks, and citizens to the downtown area.**

- Obtain grants and citizen support to utilize existing city property to build a plaza for events, such as musical entertainment or arts and crafts fairs, that will draw tourists and area residents to the plaza for community events.
- Engage the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce and the Advertising and Promotion Commission in sponsoring events in the downtown area. Utilize a community calendar for such events and actively pursue additional events.
- Encourage an art museum to be built in the downtown area.
- Encourage the City of Alma to participate in the new Arts Trail Program, currently being developed from Bentonville to El Dorado, AR.
- Invest in public restrooms, electric hook-ups, and parking to accommodate an increase in public events and festivals.
- Identify a location to display projection mapping art, which would change seasonally to encourage tourist visitation and interest.
- Provide a Wi-Fi hotspot to encourage visitation at the plaza and the downtown area.

# Job Creation

## Goal #1: Strengthen the capacity for economic development in Alma.

- Strengthen the Alma Area Chamber of Commerce by:
  - Establishing the chamber director position as a full-time position with a clearly defined role and scope of responsibility. Secure contracts with the city for community and economic development and with the Advertising and Promotion Commission for tourism,
  - Identifying affordable and professional office space that can be utilized by the chamber director, and
  - Raising awareness and funds for the chamber's mission through relationship building and programming.
- Improve visibility of information that is critical to economic development by listing available buildings and property on the Arkansas Site Selection Center website, and updating and improving demographic and economic information on the city's website.
- Ensure that elected officials and planning commissioners receive appropriate training related to community and economic development so that they effectively execute the duties of their office.
- Be an active participant in Fort Smith Regional Alliance.
- Explore economic development funding alternatives and funding streams for the community, which may include establishment of a chamber foundation, business licenses, revenue bonds, and incentives packages for economic development recruiting.

## Goal #2: Support existing businesses to strengthen and grow.

- Create a business retention and expansion program modeled after the Northwest Arkansas Council's program.
- Focus on workforce development in the region to meet the needs of current and future industry by:
  - Increasing awareness of workforce training programs in the area, and
  - Building relationships with workforce development officials from Arkansas Tech University, Arkansas Tech University - Ozark, University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, and Crawford County Adult Education.
- Tap outside resources such as University of Arkansas at Fort Smith and the Arkansas Small Business Technology and Development Center to offer workshops that support the business community, such as how to conduct business online.
- Support existing business needs through partnerships with the Arkansas Procurement Assistance Center and the Arkansas Economic Development Commission's Arkansas Manufacturing Solutions.
- Convene local employers with representatives from Alma High School, Western Arkansas Planning and Development District, and area colleges to review and strengthen workforce development issues such as retaining college graduates, employee benefits, and training needs.
- Produce positive video testimonials from existing business owners to tout Alma's positive business environment.
- Create a shop local campaign to prevent dollars from leaking out of the community, and to attract regional customers.

### **Goal #3: Take a fresh look at economic development infrastructure capacity and opportunities in Alma.**

- Develop and implement a long-term infrastructure, land use, and utility master plan that will guide future growth and development
- Build a frontage road north of I-40 between exit 13 and Eagle Crest Road for retail development.
- Build an exit off I-40 at Eagle Crest Road.
- Advocate for an I-49 exit (Collum Lane) in Alma.
- Involve students in mapping infrastructure.
- Continue with wastewater inflow and infiltration abatement.
- Address floodplain and drainage issues.
- Encourage residential housing development by identifying available land, planning for utilities, and working with developers.

### **Goal #4: Support the creation of new businesses in Alma.**

- Create a small business incubator and maker space, in conjunction with other entrepreneurship programming.
- Conduct an economic analysis to identify target industries for the area.
- Educate the community and local business leaders about the retail gaps and opportunities identified in the Retail Strategies analysis in order to spur additional investment in shopping and restaurants.
- Recruit businesses related to outdoor recreation and technology.
- Attract businesses that complement the industry clusters in Fort Smith and Van Buren.



# Kick Start Alma Facilitators

The Community Development Institute Central (CDI), established in 1987 at the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) 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 relevant for both new and seasoned professionals because it focuses on best practices and current trends. CDI is coordinated by the Center for Community and Economic Development team at UCA, as follows: Director Amy Whitehead, Assistant Director Shelby Fiegel and Project Coordinator Moriah Bruner. Special thanks to Corey Parks with the Conway Area Chamber for his project assistance.

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.

Communities in Arkansas were invited to apply for this unique opportunity, and Alma was selected. Once Alma was selected as the Kick Start community, leaders began collaborating with CDI and U of A Cooperative Extension Service in July of 2017.

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



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