



CDI 2026

Advanced Year Report

Pea Ridge, AR

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 program (with an optional fourth year), 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 Tabatha Duvall, and Project Coordinator Tracie Spivey.

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 settings and to kick-start a community and economic development process in one community in Arkansas. During the week of CDI, the Advanced Year participants research the community, complete a driving tour, facilitate resident focus groups, interview community leaders, and host a public presentation on their findings where they identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and priorities for the community moving forward.

Pea Ridge, Arkansas was selected as the CDI 2026 Advanced Year community.

To learn more about CDI visit uca.edu/cdi.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pea Ridge, Arkansas sits in northeast Benton County in one of the fastest-growing regions in the country. Of the top 10 fastest-growing communities in Arkansas, seven are in Washington or Benton counties, and Pea Ridge tops the list with a 17% growth rate. The city counted 2,818 residents in 2000 and an estimated 9,140 in 2025, more than tripling in a single generation, with more growth still projected. It is home to Pea Ridge National Military Park, a school district that anchors both community life and local employment, and residents who consistently describe their town as friendly, family-oriented, and worth protecting as it experiences changes.

The central challenge facing Pea Ridge is the one that comes with that kind of growth: meeting the demands of today while planning decades in advance for the community of tomorrow. It is a difficult needle to thread, and the city's decision to host the CDI 2026 Advanced Year reflects proactive local leaders who are willing to engage outside perspectives.

Residents feel the tension that comes with growth. They chose managed growth as their top priority, and the most common word they used to describe Pea Ridge was "growing." They are proud of the momentum, the new investments, and the rising value of what they have built, but at the same time they worry about what that growth costs. The message was not to stop growing, but to grow with purpose.

Threading that needle means doing two things at once. In the near term, Pea Ridge is working to catch up with the demand growth has already created. The city is investing in line with these pressures, from streets and utilities to parks and sidewalks, and one of the clearest findings of the report is that much of that good work is simply not yet visible to the people it serves. Future priorities include creating a shared plan, protecting what residents value, and shaping the next decade of growth rather than reacting to it.

The CDI 2026 Advanced Year team took a holistic approach to assessing Pea Ridge from an outsider's perspective. Before arriving, the team researched the community online through a series of resident and visitor personas. During the week, the team completed a driving tour of the city, met with community leaders and city staff, examined demographic and economic data, facilitated focus groups with residents, and reviewed the results of a community survey completed by 385 residents. This report compiles that work and offers short- and long-term recommendations on how Pea Ridge can best capitalize on its momentum.

The CDI 2026 Advanced Year continues the work of the University of Central Arkansas's Community Development Pipeline program, which trains and supports community and economic development leaders across Arkansas, including several in Pea Ridge.

This is not a comprehensive analysis of Pea Ridge. It is a fresh look from a group of expert leaders who spent one week in concentrated observation and listening. There is a great deal to be proud of in Pea Ridge, and the recommendations that follow build on work the community has already begun.

KEY PARTNERS

The University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development would like to thank these key partners who made this initiative possible:

- City of Pea Ridge
- Pea Ridge School District
- Pea Ridge National Military Park
- Thrive
- University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Community, Professional, and Economic Development
- Arkansas Economic Development Commission
- University of Arkansas at Little Rock Arkansas Economic Development Institute
- Corey Parks, TSM Strategies
- Dylan Edgell
- CDI 2026 Advanced Year class
- Community leaders, business owners, and residents of Pea Ridge

The CDI 2026 Advanced Year in Pea Ridge was grant-funded by the Walton Family Foundation.



CDI 2026 ADVANCED YEAR CLASS

The CDI 2026 Advanced Year class consisted of 21 leaders working in a variety of community and economic development roles from communities in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. The class was led by Dana Poindexter of the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and Brittany Lutz of the Arkansas Economic Development Institute.



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COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

Pea Ridge counted 2,818 residents in 2000 and 6,633 at the 2020 Census. Esri estimates 9,140 residents in 2025 and projects 10,157 by 2030. Median household income is \$97,141 and median home value is \$323,533, which is 45.7% above the Arkansas median.

9,140

RESIDENTS, 2025 ESTIMATE

+38%

GROWTH SINCE THE 2020 CENSUS

\$97,141

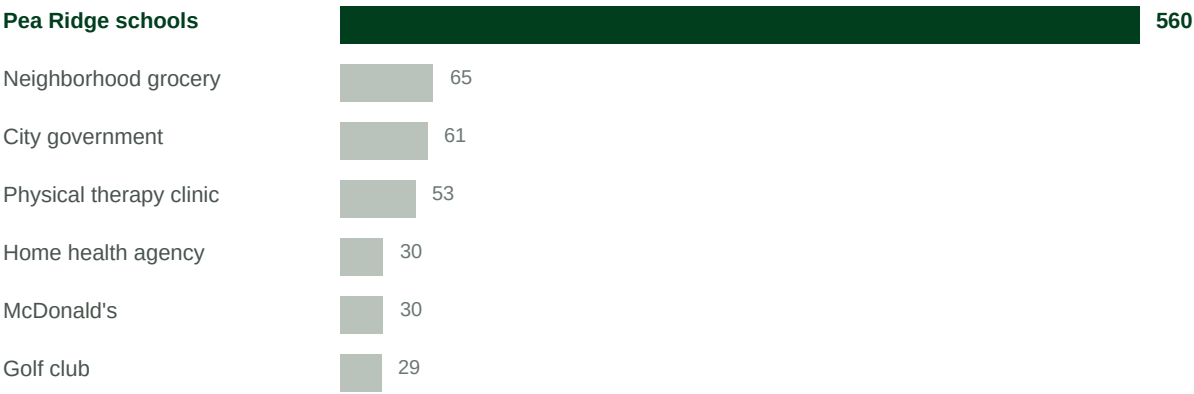
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

173

of the 3,384 employed residents of Pea Ridge hold a job in the city. Each weekday 3,211 residents commute out of the city for work and 868 commute in, a net outflow of 2,343 workers. The city holds 1,041 primary jobs, and its daytime population is 7,076.



The school system accounts for 560 of the city's 1,568 jobs



Pea Ridge households generate \$101.9 million in annual demand for retail goods and restaurant meals. The city has 25 retail establishments employing 185 people and 22 restaurants.

Sources: U.S. Census 2000-2020; Esri 2025 estimates and business data; U.S. Census OnTheMap (LEHD, 2023). Commuting and the 1,041 primary-job count are from OnTheMap; total employment (1,568 jobs across 158 businesses) and daytime population are from Esri business data. School and city figures aggregate multiple establishment records.

ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

CDI Advanced Year participants conducted an “online tour” where participants assessed Pea Ridge’s online presence through the lens of different personas. These personas include: a Pea Ridge resident, family with young children, retiree, tourist, small business owner, industrial prospect, single young professional, housing developer, college student, and high school student.

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 assessments of each persona:

Pea Ridge Resident

Strengths

- Small community with neighborly feel and affordable housing compared with neighboring communities
- Strong, transparent communication from the Mayor and City of Pea Ridge
- City council and planning department information readily available online and on Pea Ridge app
- Active resident presence on Facebook community groups

Weaknesses

- The City of Pea Ridge website ranks poorly in search results, appearing only several results down for a basic search
- Healthcare options not promoted online. Urgent care and primary care listed but no specialists
- No email contact information listed on the City of Pea Ridge site
- Local job listings skew almost entirely to entry-level despite highly educated population

Family with Young Children

Strengths

- Housing affordability comparable to surrounding Northwest Arkansas communities
- Low crime rate and strong public school rankings including a public Pre-K program
- Parks and recreation amenities visible online including splash pad, trails, and public library
- Public and private youth athletics are available starting at age three

Weaknesses

- Unable to find childcare providers online
- No playgrounds surfaced in online searches

ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Retiree

Strengths

- Beautiful, safe, small-town setting within driving distance of a larger metro
- Abundant volunteer opportunities through schools, churches, and the public library
- Local parks and splash pad appealing for visiting grandchildren
- More affordable than surrounding Northwest Arkansas communities

Weaknesses

- No 55+ or active-adult community visible online
- No hospital located in Pea Ridge; the closest hospital is roughly 20 minutes away
- Very car-dependent with no public transit and limited walkability
- No senior citizens center unlike neighboring Rogers or Bentonville

Industrial Prospect

Strengths

- Direct access to the Northwest Arkansas regional economy
- Rapid past and projected population growth
- Strong regional workforce through Northwest Arkansas regional economic development focus

Weaknesses

- Limited transportation infrastructure with no direct interstate access
- Little economic development content online; no available sites, infrastructure-ready sites, or local workforce resources
- Multiple utility providers may complicate coordinating utilities and service
- No Pea Ridge industrial sites listed on the Arkansas Site Selection Center



ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Tourist

Strengths

- Nationally significant Civil War history from Pea Ridge National Military Park anchors nearly every search for Pea Ridge
- Downtown Pea Ridge maintains a public website and Instagram presence
- Trip planning tools generated a coherent one-day itinerary for the area

Weaknesses

- Weak search engine optimization; the National Military Park outranks city amenities, restaurants, and events
- Events calendar shows mostly children's programming; very little food, music, or festival visibility
- “Explore Downtown Pea Ridge” site is difficult to navigate and links to very few websites
- Few appealing photos of things to do based on internet search

Small Business Owner

Strengths

- Highly accessible city leadership through the Mayor’s roundtables
- Transparent city resources including city council and planning meetings broadcast on Facebook
- Recent downtown Pea Ridge investment including a new downtown director
- Regional chamber membership tied to Rogers and Bentonville

Weaknesses

- City site ranks third in internet search behind the National Military Park
- Limited online guidance for starting or investing in a local business
- Project tracker does not retain completed projects to show momentum

Single, Young Professional

Strengths

- Close to Bentonville and larger Northwest Arkansas cities for amenities and jobs
- Locally available apartments that are reasonably affordable
- Outdoor recreation nearby including disc golf and hiking trails

Weaknesses

- Very limited apartment inventory; apartment searches surfaced one available unit in Pea Ridge
- Housing searches in Pea Ridge frequently redirected to Bentonville
- Very little nightlife or social scene for young adults

ONLINE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Housing Developer

Strengths

- Impact fees are notably lower than other Northwest Arkansas cities
- Planning and development website was intuitive and the Future Land Use Plan was easy to find
- GIS website was easy to navigate with water and sewer status visible
- Supportive local government

Weaknesses

- Multifamily housing is allowed in just two zoning categories; one of which uses the vague standard of 'context-appropriate' rather than specific criteria
- No advertised incentives for affordable housing development
- No publicly available market or occupancy studies
- Utility-capacity timelines including sewer upgrades were difficult to confirm online

College Student

Strengths

- Multiple high-quality internet providers available for students taking online classes
- Library and city park offer free wifi and public study space
- Accessibility information for the University of Arkansas, NorthWest Arkansas Community College (NWACC), John Brown University, and Northwest Technical Institute are easy to find online

Weaknesses

- No information on local college options through city channels
- No mention of John Brown University or regional trade school; focus on University of Arkansas and NWACC on city associated pages
- Transportation and para-transit options were difficult to locate and utilize online. The Ozark Regional Transit (ORT) does not serve Pea Ridge

High School Student

Strengths

- Signals of strong academics at Pea Ridge public school including high AP participation, college prep, and virtual options
- Active Facebook and TikTok communities with thousands of users
- Modern school website including pages for events and upcoming theater shows
- Strong emphasis on school athletic programs

Weaknesses

- Little to do in Pea Ridge outside of the National Military Park
- Opportunity for more student-led social media content on Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube

COMMUNITY SURVEY

385 residents answered the community survey and 117 left contact information to stay involved. Respondents skewed female, older, and inside the city limits, so the results describe the people who responded rather than the town as a whole.

385

SURVEY RESPONSES

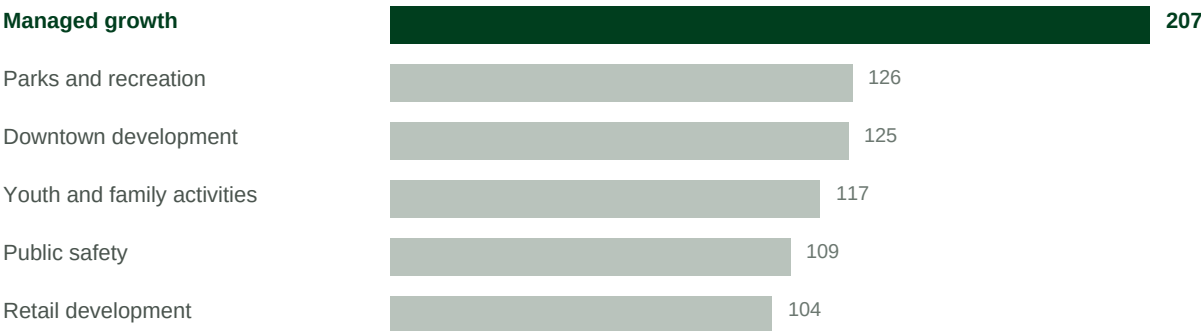
54%

CHOSE MANAGED GROWTH

117

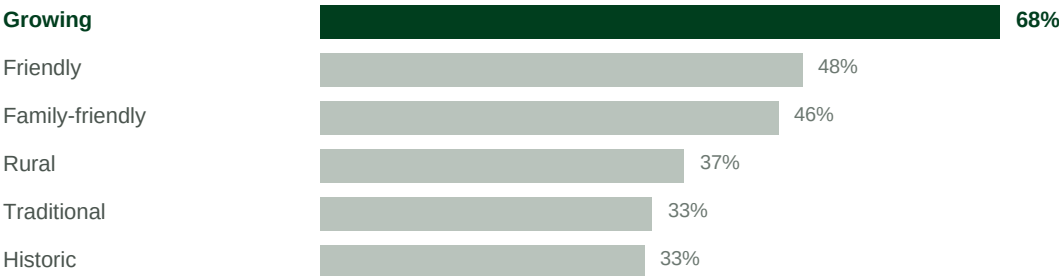
ASKED TO STAY INVOLVED

Topics selected as most important for the future



Respondents identified transportation and infrastructure as the highest priority in open-ended responses, with emphasis on roads, utilities, sidewalks, drainage, and traffic.

Top words residents used to describe Pea Ridge



Asked their favorite thing about Pea Ridge, respondents most often named small-town character, natural scenery, safety, quality of life, and convenient access to Northwest Arkansas. More than 65% agreed they feel like they belong in Pea Ridge, and nearly 66% agreed they are optimistic about its future.

Source: Pea Ridge Community Survey, 385 completed responses; four respondents skipped the residence question. Priority and personality questions allowed multiple selections, so percentages do not sum to 100. Results describe respondents, not a probability sample of all residents.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK AND TRENDS

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

Bright Spots

Belonging

- A friendly, affordable community with a strong small-town feel
- Welcoming neighbors and well-attended public events
- Churches and the Lions Club as community anchors
- Strong city and library events and programming
- Residents feel heard by City Council
- A welcome packet sent to new residents by the water department

Managed Growth and Strategic Planning

- Rapid growth bringing new revenue, rising property values, and new business
- An engaged city administration actively pursuing and planning for growth

Restaurant and Retail Development

- A new Tractor Supply, boutique, nail salons, and spa
- Food trucks, local pizza, Mexican restaurants, and the donut shop
- Ace Hardware and its auto-parts selection
- The Neighborhood Market and Walmart drone delivery
- Space available for new businesses and a city attracting new partners

Parks and Recreation

- Natural and recreational resources and interconnected neighborhoods
- The city park, splash pad, and new all-inclusive playground
- Neighborhood parks, exercise stations, and the reservation system
- The Garage teen recreation center and a strong youth sports base

Downtown Development

- Holiday carriage rides and seasonal programming
- The downtown farmers market and free downtown parking
- Holiday and vendor markets, historic shops, and a second-hand store
- New downtown sidewalks and good local customer service

Transportation and Infrastructure

- Recent state highway improvements
- Paved roads in good condition and recently redone gas lines
- Sidewalks now required in new development, with crosswalks and lighting
- City leadership working with the state on road funding
- Sewer capacity with room to grow

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK AND TRENDS

Challenges

Belonging

- A divide between longtime residents and newcomers
- Hostile unofficial social media pages
- Unresponsive homeowners associations
- Last-minute activity notifications and inconsistent communication
- Hard-to-find city information; the web page cuts off before the agenda
- An under-promoted city app and hard-to-locate volunteer opportunities

Managed Growth and Strategic Planning

- No clear growth plan or blueprint; strategy has lagged behind the growth
- Loss of farmland, green space, and small-town character
- Crowding, builder-quality concerns, and an unsustainable pace of approvals

Restaurant and Retail Development

- Only one grocery store
- Few sit-down or fast-casual restaurants and a lack of clothing stores
- Distance to shopping and online competition pressuring local business

Parks and Recreation

- Too few daycares
- Little to do in the evening
- No event or community center
- Inconsistent youth sports, aging park equipment, and a lack of shade
- Too few recreation sites and sports clubs; greenspace and funding concerns

Downtown Development

- Unclear downtown boundaries
- No "third spaces" to gather
- A lack of bike lanes
- Downtown vacancies, incomplete sidewalks, and limited parking

Transportation and Infrastructure

- Only four or five main roads out of town; Highways 72 and 94 congested
- Subdivisions that feel like "islands"
- Incomplete sidewalks, too few crosswalks, and unsafe routes to school
- E-bike safety for schoolchildren outpacing regulation
- Flooding from new development and weak stormwater management
- Unreliable internet

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK AND TRENDS

Opportunities

Belonging

- A welcoming committee with an updated welcome basket
- Age-specific events and a centralized community events page
- A public priority list of city projects with regular status updates
- Continued community feedback

Managed Growth and Strategic Planning

- Increase impact fees and direct more revenue to infrastructure
- Pursue mixed-use development and design standards for new construction
- Protect farmland and require greenspace in new development
- Extend utilities ahead of development rather than behind it
- Recruit and incentivize quality builders
- Publish a clear vision for the city
- Mayor's roundtables held outside working hours

Restaurant and Retail Development

- Recruit Aldi, Home Depot, and Slim Chickens
- Children's stores, sporting-goods retail, and an ice cream shop
- Fold the coming Walmart Supercenter into a citywide retail plan
- Local input on which businesses to prioritize in recruitment

Parks and Recreation

- A skating rink or hangout spot
- A community center for all age groups and a public swimming pool
- Pickleball courts, a skate park, and pocket parks in neighborhoods
- A greenway bike trail connecting to bike lanes and to Bentonville
- Adult and family programming, not youth-only
- Movement on the parks master plan

Downtown Development

- Downtown beautification, the most-supported idea from resident feedback
- A Main Street program, an active chamber of commerce, and a grant writer
- Make downtown "the window to your town"

Transportation and Infrastructure

- Stop lights or roundabouts, including near the Walmart Supercenter
- More crosswalk signaling, especially in school zones
- Wider roads with shoulders and more than one route onto main roads
- Sheltered bus stops for schoolchildren
- A school bike-and-bus program
- Regional transit for senior residents and others in need
- Better broadband and incentives to attract new providers

SHORT-TERM ACTION PRIORITIES

Based on these observations and the findings of this report, there are several short-term steps Pea Ridge can begin immediately and make real progress on within about two years. Each is an item the Advanced Year class identified.

Make the City's Work More Visible

Residents consistently said they want to know about city projects, decisions, and events, and the city is already producing much of that information without it reaching people. A clear first step is a communication and marketing plan that sorts what to share and sets a schedule for it:

- A short recap after each council meeting, such as a two-minute “Town Talk” video, so residents see what happened
- Updated website with information on parks, events, city council, and planning meetings
- A list of the pipeline of projects the city is preparing to roll out
- An updated city app with up-to-date information and consistent functionality
- Consistent communication that residents actively check including text, newsletters, and social media.
- A plain-language guide to who handles what at the city to accurately direct communication
- Actively identifying and sharing community comment opportunities residents might otherwise miss. For example, the state's upcoming Highway 72 review.

Keep Residents Engaged

Pea Ridge has an engaged base of residents willing to complete surveys and join focus groups. The city should capitalize on that momentum by continuously engaging them and the broader community:

- Close the loop with everyone who joined the survey and community dinner: a thank-you email, social post, and a follow-up when their ideas get acted on
- Moving the mayor's roundtable to evenings or weekends to allow for broader participation and formatting it as a walking tour rotating it through neighborhoods.
- Recruiting a community advisory board or engagement committee to provide a sounding board of residents and local professionals and maintaining resident relationships
- Treating communication as a shared city council responsibility so council members help carry information back to the people they represent.

Focus on Downtown Pea Ridge

The focus groups revealed confusion about downtown's boundaries and the new on-street parking, and noted school pick-up congestion. In the downtown director's first year, a few quick wins would help activate downtown:

- Deciding on-street parking layout and painting clear stripes
- Adding signage to indicate Downtown Pea Ridge
- Creating a publicly accessible downtown boundary map with help from high school students
- Beautification including storefront displays and public art
- Smaller events, pop-up shops, and other experiments to note what works and fold that into a longer-term downtown development strategy.

LONG-TERM ACTION PRIORITIES

The class also identified several long-term priorities that take more than two years but together form a vision for improving residents' quality of life and expanding growth. Most build directly on the short-term groundwork, and a few are lighter lifts the city can start early:

Plan for Upcoming Growth

Pea Ridge does not currently have a comprehensive plan and would benefit from a resident-informed one as it continues to grow. That plan could include:

- Prioritizing mixed-use development to provide additional housing options
- Protecting farmland and greenspace as the city expands
- Setting design standards so that new construction maintains a cohesive look and use over time
- Using the process to answer resident uncertainty about growth decisions

Build Belonging and Civic Capacity

The belonging conversations returned to a divide between longtime residents and newcomers, which the class framed as a long-term commitment rather than a single fix:

- Filter decisions and communications through both the newcomer and longtime-resident lenses
- Translate the website, app, and city communications into Spanish to improve accessibility
- Diversify the imagery the city uses so residents of color see themselves reflected
- Empower volunteers by facilitating opportunities and building credibility with them
- Delegate work that sits outside the city's direct control as the volunteer base and capacity build

Define the Downtown and Grow the Local Economy

Building on the short-term downtown work, the city can use what it learns from early events to shape a long-term downtown strategy:

- Define downtown's boundaries and improve facades and signage in the area
- Pursue the Main Street program as a support, funding, and collaboration path
- Consider a facade-grant program and stage vacant storefronts so downtown reads as active while revitalization is underway.

Connect the Community and Invest in Quality of Life Amenities

Completing the physical connections between neighborhoods and building out recreation residents keep naming would take years but change daily life. Priorities include:

- Connect sidewalks, add crosswalks, and connect subdivisions to one another
- Consider parks and recreation options for residents including a community center, a public pool, and pocket parks.
- Advance state and local infrastructure projects, state the timeline publicly so residents know the work is in the queue, and provide opportunities for public comment and involvement

LOOKING FORWARD

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

- *Mayor Nathan See*
- *City of Pea Ridge Staff and Leadership*
- *Pea Ridge School District*

We appreciate the community leaders and residents of Pea Ridge who participated in the focus groups and public presentations. Your participation, positive attitude, and commitment are crucial to the community development process moving forward.

Pea Ridge is a special place with unique assets, opportunities, and a strong sense of community. You have a great foundation on which to build the future of Pea Ridge for your children and grandchildren. The residents of Pea Ridge and Benton County 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 to you on your journey to continue making Pea Ridge a place to grow.





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