

**Community Engagement and More:
Twelve Counties Served by the Eastern Arkansas Planning
and Development District (EAPDD)**

Submitted To

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Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this report is to present findings from qualitative research in twelve counties that make up the East Arkansas Planning and Development District (EAPDD): Clay, Craighead, Crittenden, Cross, Greene, Lawrence, Lee, Mississippi, Phillips, Poinsett, Randolph and St. Francis. Ciaramitaro and Associates, LLC conducted this research beginning in February 2014 through May 8, 2015. The methodology was limited to in-depth open-ended interviews, participant observation, and non-random reviews of newspapers, websites and Facebook sites and review of other sources of internal and external written communication. In addition, researchers conducted short informal interviews with groups and individuals while conducting research. And finally, researchers attended public meetings including, but not limited to, the Delta Bridget Project steering committee, reNEW East Arkansas strategic planning steering committees, cultural tourism committee, chambers of commerce, presentations by EAPDD staff and an EPA Smart Growth presentation. Nearly three hundred individuals were interviewed and many more were encountered as part of the participant observation experience.

Initially the methodology was developed to conduct research only in the towns where there was a reNEW East Arkansas Steering Committee. The interviews were to focus on community engagement and needs. This was expanded to include other communities in each county and other topics. This was important since cities and towns within counties are interdependent in many ways and often do not collaborate. Open school enrollment, commutes to other communities for work, and dependence on other towns and even states for shopping make it impossible to understand one community or one county without having insight into the whole. Respondents were interested in a wide range of topics about their community. This interest expanded the focus to include leadership, jobs, housing, community events, tourism, families, friendships, hardships and more. These inductive interviews made it possible to understand the community from an insider's perspective.

Selection of persons to interview began in the public domain – libraries, restaurants, stores, parks, senior centers, businesses, government offices and neighborhoods. The individuals and groups encountered were diverse in race, religion, age, gender, economic status,

length of residency, employment status, type of job, level of education and their formal and informal roles in the community. In order to maintain confidentiality, names were not associated with interviews. However, in several cases, there were individuals who were willing to share this information because they wanted to be more involved in planning and development activities in their community and even in the region.

The data reveal themes presented in this report. This research does not claim to reveal all there is to know about East Arkansas. These themes are important insights for anyone working to improve the Delta and are to be considered with other data collected by EAPDD. Ciaramitaro and Associates, LLC wants to make clear that the purpose of this report is not an indictment of the region. These findings are not meant to point fingers or demean anyone in any county. The information in this report was shared freely by those interviewed. It is clear that the citizens both long-term and new residents care about their community and this region.

Respondents were aware that they were being interviewed for the EAPDD. When anyone asked for something to be “off the record,” that thought or opinion was not written down or carried forward. Most everyone appeared eager to tell his or her story. In most cases, the researchers were invited to come back and learn more. Some eager leaders attempted to recruit the interviewers to be a part of their local projects.

Themes

1. Community engagement

Community leaders and reNEW East Arkansas local steering committee members are often frustrated with the challenge of community engagement. Many do not understand how to engage others. Some do not believe that civic engagement is important.

“Can’t we just put a note in the paper...if they don’t come can we just do it anyway... that [trying to engage others] could put a stop to our project.”

“They say they are going to do something and then they don’t follow through. It’s up to a few of us to do it all. I just don’t understand them.”

“Young people just aren’t engaged. I don’t know any young people who would want to get involved.”

“I guess people with kids just don’t think they have time. They all work and drive somewhere to work, by the time they get home they don’t have time or energy.”

“No one under fifty five cares.”

“Who participated in the cleanup? You are looking at us. It is the same people every time.”

“We put a notice up and in the paper but nobody came. Not surprised. That is the way it always is.”

And when younger adults or new comers do try to get involved, there is skepticism.

“Yeah she is running for office but she doesn’t have any experience, she needs to wait.”

“Yes, we have more people at the festival, but they don’t even pick up their own garbage...”

“What do they think they are going to do, takeover?”

“We started a different committee. We don’t want her on ours and no, I’m not going to tell you why.”

“I want to have more people involved, but we have to have the right people... Those people don’t really know how to participate.”

“I had them all at the first meeting. But when we met again [several months later] hardly anyone showed up.”

“Heck, they are members, they should know better, they should be here... we shouldn't have to hunt them down.”

“There is a certain kind of people we are looking for, you know, the kind that will spend money at shops in our restored downtown.”

“We are pretty much a white town. Not much has changed there.”

“I don't think they want us to succeed. We are trying to do better in the community and we can't get them to help.”

“If they want to know what is going on they can come here, to the Chamber and ask.”

“Ah, that fell apart. We are going to do our thing and they can do theirs. It's better that way.”

Some interviewees were eager to share how community engagement could be improved.

“People are engaged around their own reality, interests and needs. If a family is focused on keeping a school open, it may be difficult to get them involved in Tourism. Leaders have to know their communities, the needs and where to begin with community engagement.”

“Where children are -- parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, neighbors – people will come...”

“Something for kids, food and music attract people to events.”

“If you want someone to participate then invite them directly, personally ... I contacted each of you directly and here you are.”

“We invite them to come to a meeting and before the end of the meeting we have them on the board or volunteering here at the museum. I contact them directly. I don't leave it to chance.”

“If you don't give them something to do, you are going to lose them.”

“If you get him, the others will likely come.”

“I keep parents notified... what is going on at the school and with their children... I reach out to the businesses for help... to plan the parent appreciation banquet each year. Any parents who have volunteered even for an hour get certificates... Of course not all parents get involved... We have some who stay at the house.... Make appointments to see them and they say, 'Ok, I'll be there' but they don't show... but we don't give up ... It is hard work but the kids do better.”

“Hey, all they have to do is ask me. I'm ready to help. I don't think they want my help.”

“You have to get out and walk the streets and meet people. You have to reach out to them and let them know what you are up to. Everywhere I go, I introduce myself and tell about what we are trying to do. Some may think I am pushy since I have not lived here long but mostly everyone wants to know what is going on.”

“We always have refreshments and we can laugh. We know each other that well. No food. No fun. No come.”

“When someone comes in, we them put to work.”

“We get things done and we do for the community.”

Almost everyone who was asked by the interviewers if they would like to be more involved, answered “yes” or “I would like to know more about it, but sure.” This was particularly the pattern of newcomers. Many reported they had tried to get involved but were not able to find a way to do so. Most agreed that it was a challenge to even know what was going on in the community. But there were exceptions.

“The people in this town want to make it better. I am happy to be here. I was recruited right out of Memphis, but I like it here. We are planning to buy some land and build a house and continue to work in town. People get involved and we like that.”

“I got this part time job when I moved in. I wanted to be successful and help the community so I just started talking about making things better. I just started talking to people, suggesting things, volunteering to help. The mayor where I live asked me to head up improvements. Sure there were people who had lived here a long time who acted resentful. I did not let that stop me.”

2. Schools, Education and Literacy

Almost everyone we interviewed said that schools were an important issue in their town, county or the region as a whole. Most responses to questions around this were focused on schools, not necessarily education, literacy or other life long learning opportunities.

“Hughes is struggling right now. The enrollment is right at 354. If we fall below this number, the school will close. We already lost the football program because we didn’t have the money. This was a huge blow to the town. Some believe the town is not doing enough to save the school. I agree ... already some parents, even a member of city council, are sending their children to West Memphis schools... Not sure if the mayor and his wife [the school superintendent] want to save the school.”

“This is frustrating when right across the street is a city councilman who moved his children to West Memphis Schools... When parents send kids to West Memphis for school they have to provide transportation... Some parents bounce back and forth from West Memphis to Hughes and back. This does not help to keep our school open. This is real hard on the school district and hard on the kids.”

“Marianna schools are being taken over... under performance, I think.”

“We had good schools... great parent-teacher ratio, lots of community support. When the schools were closed, that was a huge blow.”

“Yes the state took over the Marianna schools. I guess they need some help with management over there. I really don’t know what goes on. Mostly kids go there who can’t go anywhere else.”

“Black Rock schools were recently closed due to under enrollment... We are making it okay ... Trying to decide what to do with the buildings.”

“People with money are willing to move or send their children to schools in other towns to get a better school situation... and I am struggling but I take my kids down the road ... I found out just in time and I applied for KIPP. They weren’t going to accept my son, so I enrolled by kids in the school in another town. I leave work everyday at three, pick up my kids and get them home. I’m usually back at work at five. Since I’m a waitress, it works out okay.”

“Things have changed in the last ten years. It was not like that when I went there ... No serious fights but they are not learning as much.”

“Blytheville is not like it was when I was growing up. My father was well respected in our neighborhood, in the black community and beyond. The schools were good. There was no violence. Sure people got into fights occasionally but no one ended up dead on Sunday.”

“They don’t have school choice any more in Blytheville. We see more and more families moving out here so that they can enroll their kids in our school. Newcomers find out about Blytheville schools and the no school choice decision and locate where they can come to this school even when it means they have to commute further to their jobs ... They do not want to live in Blytheville”

“We lost our schools. Now people who live here can send their kids to the Marion Schools so of course more people are moving out here. Now, we are just a bedroom community.”

“Marion schools are okay but things were not right in the junior high...my son is at St. Michael’s in West Memphis. Marion schools are not adapting well to the districts that have merged in the school system. They were not prepared for students like these.”

“My children grew up at the St. Michael’s school in West Memphis. But I help out so that my grandson can go to school in Memphis. He will be at Christian Brothers next year. I help out because my son has to go pick him up from school in Memphis every day.”

“People are moving here because of our schools. They see us as much better than the Blytheville schools. We use to get kids through school choice but since that has been blocked in Blytheville, people are just moving out or the new folks are coming here to start with.”

“We’re getting the management folks from Peco because our schools are so much better than up there and the housing is better ... and we have all the amenities.”

“Our schools are safe. We don’t have any problems like Memphis or West Memphis. We have the best schools.” This response two weeks before a newspaper article was released about a fight during school hours on campus.

“I sent my children to the Catholic school in West Memphis, all seven of them ... My son drives his son into Memphis every day to attend St. Louis School. He will start at CBHS in the fall. Things just aren’t the way they use to be.”

Issues in education such as curricula, quality of education, graduation, number of students accepted in college and amount of college scholarships awarded were typically not included as responses to school questions. The greatest concerns mentioned were keeping the schools open, maintaining order in the school and letting us know if a particular school was “good” or “bad.”

There are newcomers in Eastern Arkansas who are working to improve education in the region. Teach for America (TFA) is one example. In talking with residents in various communities we heard only a couple of isolated comments about this program. “Teachers come and go...This turnover is not good.” KIPP Schools are another example. No one mentioned anything positive or negative, KIPP was simply part of a list of options.

The College Initiative is another nonprofit working in Eastern Arkansas. Their mission is to help students take the steps needed in their junior and senior years to get into college. The founder is a Harvard graduate who came to the Delta with TFA. He noticed that many students who were academically in line for college did not follow through or they went to the local community college and did not pursue an academic career. Most of the guidance counselors did not encourage anyone to pursue college outside the schools in the region. He left TFA and founded the College Initiative.

The Founder’s ultimate goal is get the best students prepared, beginning in their junior year or before, to complete all that is necessary to get into Harvard and other top schools. As of April 2014, College

Initiative had worked with one hundred twenty students in the Delta to successfully make the transition into college. Several applied and were accepted to Ivy League Schools. The founder was frustrated that even when they were accepted, they often chose a local college or junior college.

According to the founder, many young people who come in the Delta to teach, work with him or come in some other capacity do not stay long. He said the Delta does not offer much support and it is difficult for these newcomers to “fit in.” For this reason, he lives in Memphis and commutes to several East Arkansas schools. When he was interviewed, he was hoping to get funding to work in Memphis Schools along with the Eastern Arkansas. In Arkansas, College Initiative is funded by the Walton Foundation and is staffed by teachers in AmeriCorps positions.

Jennifer Fox is another newcomer to the education scene in eastern Arkansas. She is the founding head of school for the Delta School in Wilson, Arkansas. Jennifer’s credentials and ideas about education are internationally recognized. The school will open in August 2015 with fifty students from around the region. The College Initiative and the Delta School have the potential of beginning conversations about education that would also include many talented educators already in place.

Day care/pre school programs are active in many if not most communities. More are needed according to respondents. Arkansas State University (ASU) pre school programs are in several communities. Some towns have Head Start and ASU programs. Private day care/pre schools are also in operation.”

At a private facility in West Memphis that is part of a church ministry, we learned that the director lives in Memphis and commutes to the job. Hot meals are prepared on sight every day. The director was very friendly and proudly led a tour of the facility. There were three classrooms with twenty children assigned to each. Several adults were engaging children in small group activities. The facility was bright and clean. The director said that children leave her program and go straight to Kindergarten. She and others in the facility were proud of student achievements and proud of this preschool/day care program. All the adults were African American as were most of the children.

Libraries are the only option to find books in most towns and they are under utilized for this purpose. The libraries will often order books

that are required reading in school since particularly when the school cannot afford the books for their library. The Blytheville Chamber offers the Dolly Parton Books from Birth program. Blytheville has a “famous” bookstore according to respondents. Many authors come there to talk about their books and sign them.

Illiteracy and programs to address it were mentioned only when the interviewer brought it up. Respondents had little knowledge of any formal literacy programs in their towns other than things like summer reading programs for children.

Most discussions about adults and education focused on the community colleges within the region. Frequently a respondent would say that the local community college was the place to go for GED education and to prepare for jobs. Education and learning are focused on formal schooling geared toward a job or career opportunity. Adult reading is not a topic discussed openly.

“I believe our literacy council is reorganizing.”

“I think that group was starting to get that literacy thing going.”

“Literacy Mid-South has books to give away? I just don’t have time to connect with them and no, I don’t know anything about Books from Birth.”

“I think the community college handles that.”

“Yeah, I think the school tries to help kids with reading but I don’t know of anything for adults.”

“I don’t know anything about that. I guess it’s a problem. I just think those people just don’t want to work.”

“My daughter did go to a summer reading program once.”

“We encourage reading here at the library and have some summer reading programs.”

“We don’t want kids at the library. We don’t let them use the computers for sure. What is our main focus? Leisure reading for adults, you know, like these paperbacks... No we don’t have any classes for adults and we don’t know what they use the computers for.”

“Sometimes it’s the children reading for the parents.”

3. Children, Teen and Youth

Most everyone interviewed said there was a need in their community for constructive activities for children, teens and youth after school, on weekends and in the summer.

“One of the most urgent needs around here is basic life skills, planning, budgeting, critical thinking... We’ve got to do something to get these young people going.”

“My dream is to open a Youth Center in Hughes. These kids need some place to come and hang out, be mentored, have something constructive to do...”

“Kids need recreation to keep them calm ...”

“Kids and teens don’t have a lot to do in the summer time in Marianna...just hang around.”

“We need more things for kids in Blytheville. We need to all advocate for kids...the only place for them to go is the mall and the outlet mall... Nobody seems to be moving on this. Hard to find resources for your kid especially if they have special needs, like ADHD.”

“We have to do something so these teen boys will focus on something more than girls and these girls will focus on something more than guys.”

“What we really need here, it’s our biggest need, we need a small park for the kids. They end up going out on the

highway to ride a bike or cross the highway to play. We all watch each other's kids and so far no one has been hurt, but if they had a park, right here in town, they could play and ride and we could watch them better. We told the mayor. We need a park. We have priced it. It should only cost about \$150,000."

"I moved back here to be with my father. Things have changed. I worry about my children and other children. There is nothing for them to do. When there is a one-time event like that carnival, kids get together and trouble starts... They need to do something for kids on a regular basis."

"Our most urgent need? A lot of young people come out of high school with good grades and say they are going to college. These young people need some guidance to get there."

"Some come in here [library] and they can only 'go through' books. Kids and young people need more help, especially in the summer and after school. Nothing to do"

"We lost our football program. That really messed it up for kids. No practice for the players and cheerleaders and nothing to do for the whole community on Friday nights."

"Drugs are a problem around here. If there is nothing for the teenagers to do, this is what they will do and vandalism and other things like that."

"Kids have to drive to another town to find something to do."

"Young people around here don't have anything constructive to do after school. They just walk the streets until their parents get home ... and that is late. Most of the parents work in Memphis or Jonesboro and do not get home until late. No real crime problems yet, just some pranks."

“The young people don’t know anything about leadership and they can’t stay around here. There are no jobs.”

“Kids in high school here were working at Sonic and then the Sonic closed...”

When African American seniors at a Senior Center in Osceola were asked what was their greatest need, they responded,

“We need something for these children and teens to do. There is just nothing. They need a community center and mentors.”

“We can’t just throw these kids away. We’ve got to raise them up. We have this center, they have nothing.”

4. Jobs and the Workforce

There is a trend in attitude toward teens and young adults that runs through all twelve counties and is a barrier to workforce development. Regardless of the racial makeup of a county or the economic structure, there is a belief that many young people (high school graduates) will never get jobs. Respondents report that a large number of these graduates are now on public assistance and are falling into poverty “because they don’t want to work.” Pointing to these “unemployed, lazy people” with no strategies on how to move this group forward adds to the fatalism that communities feel about their future. This attitude was expressed in every county regardless of racial demographics. Communities that are predominantly African American such as Hughes have this concern. Piggott and Corning expressed this problem and their communities are 97% Caucasian. One mother in an isolated community in Lawrence County was concerned about her daughter. “She can’t find a job around here for more than ten dollars an hour. She has looked in Jonesboro and most of those jobs were low wage. We cannot afford the gas for her to go back and forth to work. I am worried. Some of her friends have started receiving [public] assistance and I believe they will never go to work. I just don’t want my daughter to be like that.”

“All the young people in this town don’t want a job, they don’t care, they are use to getting handouts and drugs are a real problem.”

“No one has applied for those Peco jobs. No one wants them. They [Peco] are messing up our roads with all the dust and construction traffic. Go out there and see for yourself... Anyone working on building the place is from somewhere else and they are living over in Missouri.”

“Mexicans will have to take those jobs. No one around here will.”

“Many of these [young adults] can’t find jobs. Some could get jobs but they don’t want to. Sixty five percent want to work ... Others are just looking for a handout ... the young generation have killed our country... When he [stepson] gets out of jail, there is a transition program ... see if he turns his life around ... I’ve worked all my life until the doctor said I had to quit. I just don’t understand this young generation not wanting to work.”

“There are no jobs for kids coming out of high school in Blytheville. Kids know that. They can’t get a job. Then they believe they can’t get a job, and then they can’t ... My dad is a supervisor at the steel mill. He has worked there for twenty years. He did not graduate high school. My brothers work at the steel mills. That’s not happening for these kids today and they don’t all want that life ... My brother had a sports scholarship for college but he did not go because he could get fast legal money [at the mill].”

“We need jobs around here. We tried to get a Sonic and they said we did not have enough traffic by here.”

“All the jobs have gone away ... no one around here wants to work. If we get new jobs, they will move people in.”

“When the Peco plant comes, that will be jobs. We need jobs. But will our people work at those jobs?”

“People move a way from here if they are willing to work. They have to if they want a job. We don’t have any. Then those left behind don’t want to work so if we get new jobs, it won’t help them and we don’t get new businesses because no one wants to work.”

Overall, there is a belief that jobs are THE answer to the problems in Eastern Arkansas.

“Yeah, we have the community college, unemployed people, but no jobs.”

“We need job opportunities for different types of job skills... We need a lot of opportunity for jobs. We need support to start businesses. We need jobs where people can make a descent living. People are focused on surviving, hard to try to do better.”

“Young people want to go to the local community colleges and even work in other towns but there is no transportation to get there... ”

“All our jobs went away. We need jobs. That would change everything ... if we can get people to work.”

“Guess companies don’t want to come here. All the jobs have gone to China. We need jobs or we are going to die.”

5. Communication and Information

Finding out “what is going on” and “trying to get people to come” are two of the major issues with communication.

“I get my information from the *Evening Times*... That’s how I found out about the deadline here to get the food ... I

haven't seen anything in there about any development projects or what you're talking about."

"They have the information about Peco over at the library." Then at the library we were told, "no one has told us anything. All we have is an article that was in the paper. What did we do with that article?"

"There is no communication around here. I'm new to the area and I have to research everything I need to know. You would think they would want to tell us what is going on and make it easier to find local stuff – services even shopping."

"There's a good ole boy network ... takes the City Council and goes right over their heads. If you aren't in the know then you don't know."

"Since Mr. Lawrence came we know everything that is going on ... such a change. He has big plans for the town."

"We have good tourist attractions and events... we want more people to come and see... That Beatles thing is really unique ..." This town's website has a calendar but none of the attractions and events are listed."

"Planning and Development District - never heard of it ... and we have a plan? Never seen it."

"There may be folks trying to help, but we don't hear about it ... if it's important, they could put it around so people would see it ... at church and on bulletin boards."

"Walking across the bridge, I don't know anything about that. It's hard to get people from over there to drive over here and to do something, walk? I doubt it."

"People just seem to happen in here... We don't have good signs to direct people. There is something on the town website about us, I guess. That group from Ireland found us,

and a couple of other groups came through. I guess that music highway and river highway will attract more people here.”

The reNEW East Arkansas Strategic Plans were not in any library we visited. Staff did not know about the plans and had not been engaged or asked to be involved in the planning. The library staff was interested in gaining the information. Libraries have huge potential in being a part of an effective local communication system.

There is confusion as to what various government offices and other organizations are doing. This is not surprising. The researchers are confused too. At the community level, there are a number of organizations whose work overlaps, For example, Chambers of Commerce are concerned about tourism. In the same town there may be another independent committee concerned with tourism with different ideas as to how to move forward. This committee is linked with a regional group and sometimes there are two regional groups with tourism agendas that overlap. State economic development groups are confusing and then there is the Intermodal group.

“Word of mouth” is the most often utilized form of communication. In Eastern Arkansas this happens through formal and informal networks. We observed and participated in the process of people sharing information. For many people “word of mouth” includes texting and phone conversations as well as interacting face to face.

Some of these networks include, but are not limited to:

- A little restaurant on Main Street in Blytheville where there is a community table – Information is passed at this table through informal conversation. There are many other “meetings” taking place at other tables.
- Parents programs at the Library in Earle where adults come together to learn about the projects their children are working on
- The Museum in Osceola where volunteers come together from all over Mississippi County to spend time in the museum and serve on the board – Folks working downtown

stop in from time to time to chat and when there is a volunteer willing to take charge, there is a coffee shop and thrift store that attracts drop ins.

- The little diner at the turnoff to Black Rock where a group of 10-15 retired men come for coffee in the morning, put tables together to be in a group, and stay until 3:00 or until closing
- A restaurant in downtown Walnut Ridge where locals drop in for lunch and feel free to call out questions to the waitresses as they pursue conversations with other locals in the restaurant at their table and across the room
- A diner in Marianna that we were told was “the place to go” – We thought our respondent was saying the food was good. Instead, we found a place where “important people” came to have lunch.
- The little convenience store in Widener where there are tables and locals come to have a coke, fried fish or ice cream and share the stories of the day
- A “soul food” place in Forrest City we learned about from a respondent who showed us the way there –neighborhood folks having lunch and sharing the news of the day – the owner/cook/chef knew everyone and talked with folks as they ordered their food and even engaged us in conversation
- The combination library/mayor’s office/municipal building in Edmonson where any civil business is handled and questions are answered - Neighbors run into neighbors and catch up on the local news.
- The “original” St. Francis restaurant in Hughes – This place is very crowded in its new location in an old church fellowship hall. Most of the people have been coming there for a very long time. People come even though there is not

much elbowroom, the bathrooms are below par and the kitchen is almost in the lap of the diners.

- The women's club in Wilson that has been in existence since the 1800's and sponsors many of the local events
- Churches where folks talk with their friends and "even people they don't like"
- Senior centers where participants hear the local stories and pass the "important" ones on when they get back home
- Civic groups such as the VFW where meetings, cookouts and other events offer the opportunity for conversation and debate
- Community events such as Volunteer Fire Department fundraisers that bring a number of networks together to help with a cause
- A café in Wilson where people come from all over to have lunch and meet about issues of importance to them and the young chef comes out and talks with the customers and makes folks feel at home
- The County Fairs where adults and children go to celebrate local culture and have fun
- The many region wide meetings on topics such as tourism, transportation, parks and more
- At region wide events such as the EAPDD Summit

This list could be several pages long. These networks are stronger than local newspapers, T.V. or radio. Much of the information exchanged may be perception rather than fact. Getting the best information into these networks is the responsibility of leadership. "It takes more than printing a flyer."

6. Newcomers

All the newcomers we interviewed struggled with becoming assimilated into the community.

“Land is passed down through the family here in Horseshoe. Everyone knows everyone. If you don’t mesh in you have to go ... Lot’s of rumors about newcomers. Everyone around here knows what you ate for breakfast. Close knit community. If we don’t like you, you’ll be gone.”

Teach for America, College Initiative and other young professionals working in Eastern Arkansas report feeling isolated. Young professionals working at State and Federal parks are also often left out of the local community’s social structure.

Folks returning to the Delta who have roots there also find it difficult to work their way into the fabric of the community. These are often individuals who have work experience and have been involved in the communities they left. Most have time now to get engaged in local activities and they bring skills that would help.

“When my husband and I retired we decided to move back here and live in some land owned by the family. We wanted to give back to our roots... Yes, there has been some resentment, maybe jealousy. I find a lot of people are afraid of change, new ideas. Afraid to make things better.”

“It is difficult to assimilate even after so many years. They make everything complicated here even getting a drivers’ license...”

“There is a lack of welcoming, not open... not feeling more like home ... Sense of exclusivity in and across racial lines.”

7. Crime, Safety and Drug Abuse

Crime was mentioned by many as becoming a problem, but most people feel they can navigate in their own town without fear of harm.

“Yes, there is crime here, but I am not afraid to go into certain neighborhoods. I feel safe pretty much anywhere.”

“I am glad to be living in Osceola now... In Blytheville, there are gangs and not much control of kids.”

“You ask what we need most, it’s to clean up the neighborhood and stop this violence and everyone needs to get along and get together, stop this shooting. People could do a whole lot better instead of hurting themselves. We need a neighborhood association.”

Others feel that their communities are completely safe.

“There’s no crime around here. People watch out for each other’s kids. We have two parks, children play in the parks families come to the parks together. Everyone knows everyone.”

“Hughes is a good place to live. Don’t have to worry about getting knocked in the head standing on your porch.”
West Memphis and Blytheville are thought to have the more significant problems with crime.”

“West Memphis has a horrible crime problem. Gangs ... on the East and West Side... There was a huge drug bust a month ago... a guy running drugs, had lots of weapons.”

“I was glad to move away from Blytheville, things were getting rough there.”

8. Economic Development

- Landowners, Big Farmers and Corporate Agribusiness

Through out Lee, Crittenden and Mississippi Counties, we heard about “the landowners” or the “big farmers.”

“If you want to do something about the mosquitos, you have to get the farmers to want it. The farmers get what they want.”

“These big farmers don’t have jobs for people ... I don’t even know who they are anymore.”

“Around here there are no jobs... the work is controlled by a man at a computer. No need for workers.”

“The little industry we have left and farming is all computerized. Doesn’t make for jobs.”

“Big farmers control things, everything.”

“Most land around here is owned by big corporations. This rice we grow does not feed anyone in this state. This type of farming has changed everything.”

- Transportation

“Young people want to go to the local community colleges and even work in other towns but there is no transportation to get there.”

“We need employment for young people and to equip them to know how to have a job... When they want to go to get further training or education after high school, they don’t have transportation.”

“If we don’t get that highway improvement, people are going to get killed. It is already dangerous now. When Peco comes ... it just has to be fixed.”

“It’s a long way to Jonesboro where there are jobs. The young people around here say they can’t take a minimum wage job and pay for gas to drive there. My daughter has a degree but she hasn’t found a job. Don’t know what she is going to do. She can’t afford to move until she has a good job.”

- Small Business and Entrepreneurs

“I want to open a bakery/bookstore here in Marion. I’ve been searching for resources to help. I have done a lot of research myself. Could the thing you are working for help [EAPDD]? Aren’t there resources around here to help people start businesses?”

“I teach at the local school. My husband and I decided raising chickens for Peco would be a great business for us. We went to the bank and they were very helpful. They gave us a loan to buy a piece of property out of town. We will be ready to take on chickens when the time comes... This is a great opportunity for a young family like ours. We know of another family who is doing the same thing. I bet if everyone knew about the opportunity, we would have people coming here to start this business.”

“We can’t get people to shop local. We try. But most people drive all the way to Memphis, Southaven or Jonesboro.”

“I needed a particular type of screw the other day. I drove to Southaven to get it. I just didn’t think about checking in West Memphis to see if they had it. I don’t think anything about driving from Wilson to Memphis.”

“We don’t have anything around here, just Wal-Mart. I drive to Memphis to shop. No big deal. I was there this morning. It’s not far from Marianna. I go to the doctor there too.”

“We plan ahead and do the majority of shopping in Memphis and Southaven. There is nothing in Marion.”

“I have this little business here, but good thing I am not trying to make a living.”

The researchers encountered very little discussion about or support for self-employment, small businesses, entrepreneurship or internal business start-ups and job creation. Everyone looks to the outside for someone to bring jobs in. Yet many living wage jobs are small businesses that provide a product or service needed in the community. Other small businesses or self-employment add extra income to the household. The small business owners are proud of their communities and are often involved in some way in local activities.

- Cultural Tourism

There is at least some enthusiasm in most local communities about improving the economy through cultural tourism. We found most of the discussion to be low-key and not particularly well thought out.

There are many interesting cultural tourism opportunities in the five counties. These include but are not limited to: The Powhatan State Historic Park and World War II Museum in Laurence County, ASU’s Dyess Johnny Cash Home Place, the Crittenden County Museum in Earle, the Mississippi County Museum in Osceola, the St. Francis County Museum in Forrest City, and historical downtown districts in several towns. Historical markers identify various Civil War, music and other historical sights.

A number of barriers to the development of cultural tourism were identified in this research. It is difficult for visitors to find cultural amenities. Signage is poor. Even employees at businesses in the town aren’t able to give good directions to these sights. In some cases, the existence of the opportunity seems to be only for locals.

When visitors come to a particular area to “see the sights” they have difficulty finding clean restrooms, food, shopping opportunities

and lodging. If any of these amenities exist they may be closed even if their sign says, “open” or if the brochure or website states they are open.

Residents and businesses are not supporting the industry. It was not clear to the researchers if the region works together to promote tourism. Several different committees were named as being in charge.

- Technology

Eastern Arkansas is technologically challenged. Although large farm corporations use computer technology to run their entire business, the unemployed man who lives near by is without any access to the Internet. When he is searching for a job he has to go to the local library (if he knows to do so and there is a local library) and use their computer to search for jobs and fill out applications. Cell phone service is not consistent even for those who have unlimited plans for texting, phone calls, Internet service, etc.

“The library and McDonalds are the only source of Wi-Fi here.”

“Mostly kids come here for computers. There is no other source of computers or Wi-Fi for miles.”

“I don’t know where you could find Wi-Fi in this area.”

Record keeping is a problem for museums water departments, government offices and others who have little to no technology. Even if there are computers, they are not part of a system and the software and hardware become obsolete.

“We can’t keep these kids up to date with technology by what they see at school.”

“ASU helped us get some things preserved. We didn’t have any way to categorize or archive because we just don’t have the technology...”

“Nothing here is digitized, computerized or even on microfilm. We have all the original documents. They are getting frayed but we have to let people read them or why have them? The whole history of our town and county is right here. Somebody someday will have to do something”

“Nothing here [at the Water Department] is computerized. When someone walks in to pay their bill, I give them a receipt and mark it in the ledger [with a pencil].”

“We have to keep some things computerized. She has some records on her computer and I have some on mine. I guess they save what we send them and back it up.”

“Nothing around here is computerized. But I know where everything is.”

- The Need for Collaboration

Regional economic development requires collaboration among counties, towns, groups and individuals. Within towns there are groups working on the same issue but not working together. In some towns one or two individuals believe they are doing all the work and that collaboration is not possible. Isolation, factionalism and cultural history also separate people and towns.

In one county, there are three reNEW East Arkansas Strategic Planning Steering Committees. Development in each of the towns depends in large part on development across the county. Rarely are there projects that can be completed without support and coordination with the county and with other communities. Two of the towns are only separated by an Interstate. The third town is predominantly African American and is located several miles from the others. Implementing the strategic plans in each of these communities depends on the success or failure of implementation of the other plans and the cooperation of the county government. The success of each will affect the entire county. The three steering committees are not supporting one another or coordinating efforts according to interviews we conducted. No one reported this as being a problem.

In another county there are two towns in the same county that have a history of competition. According to respondents, this goes back to competition among the high schools in sports, the distance between the two towns and many other differences. An iconic example of this competition happens each year on the fourth of July. Each of the towns has a picnic and celebration that is promoted as though it were THE celebration inviting everyone to a homecoming event.

When one respondent working at the Johnny Cash Home in Dyess was asked if she encouraged visitors to go to other areas she responded yes. However, all of her referrals were west of Dyess. When she was asked about Wilson, she said, "I just never went over there. We didn't play them in sports. I don't know much about them."

9. Health

Unless there were direct questions about health respondents did not bring up the subject. When asked, there was not a sense of alarm or urgency about addressing this need and it was never mentioned as a major or priority need. At one meeting there was a discussion about demonstrating the need to improve health in order to receive funding for park improvements. The facilitator [from Little Rock] laughed and said, "that is NOT a problem. Everyone knows Arkansans have major health problems." The participants laughed with him and were satisfied when he said he would help them find the needed statistics.

The few folks who did discuss health promotion pointed to senior centers where there is almost always an exercise class. No one mentioned outdoor activities as a way to improve health. Even paths, bicycle lanes, and walking trails were not discussed as ways to improve health. The focus on these is almost always related to tourism.

- **Food**

One only has to drive through Eastern Arkansas to determine the area is a food desert. There are very few gardens or farms where food is raised to be consumed. Grocery stores are few and far between. Grocery stores with fresh produce and other healthy foods do not exist in many communities. Farmers Markets are infrequent and when there is one there are not many local people shopping there.

Obesity is a noticeable problem. Observing shopping cart contents in the larger stores such as Wal-Mart also speaks to the problem of nutrition rich food and food choices. Obesity is said to be a problem through out Eastern Arkansas. It was mentioned at a meeting in West Memphis that the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity has grant money. The director of the food pantry in Marianna spoke of problems with obesity. These were the only two respondents that discussed obesity.

On a visit to a library in Jonesboro the researchers noted that of the fifteen or so patrons and staff all but two were noticeably over weight. One of the over weight patrons took a break from the computer and went outside where she could enjoy a cigarette. She appeared short of breath as she sat down at the first bench. The researchers were not allowed to interview anyone that day because the PR staff member was not there. While waiting for this answer, we walked the entire library to assess what information was available for health promotion. We could not find any. There may have been a section for reading about health but it was not obvious. There were brochures about activities in the community, but none about health or health promotion.

“Yeah, we have a community garden down there somewhere. The mayor did that. Said he got a grant for \$50,000 to do it. I don’t know much about it ... don’t know how the food gets out and even if it has been planted ... I have a garden. Don’t eat nothing out of it. I like frozen vegetables better. I just give all the garden away.”

“This is definitely a food desert around here. They have a farmers market in West Memphis but I don’t know if anyone shops there. It is best to go to the Saturday Farmers Market in Memphis.”

“I just don’t get it. Why do all the farm to table farmers around here have to go to Memphis to sell their stuff? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Where do we shop for food? Around here, there are not many choices for fresh and good food... Wal-Mart is a dangerous place to shop lately. They have the second highest rate of theft. They have some management

problems. Kroger has one isle of whole foods. We do most of our grocery shopping in Memphis or Southaven.”

“I do most of grocery shopping in Southaven. It’s easy to get to and the prices are better... Around here I might get bread and milk.”

“We did get our Farmer’s Market going. People are shopping at the Market but not many with EBT cards... We have a food bank that helps those people. Unfortunately it is downtown and that is not the kind of people we need downtown.”

“Yes, we have a grocery store, but not many people shop there. We’d rather go into Jonesboro and shop.”

The researchers had a difficult time finding food pantries open. One in Marianna was open and the director agreed to be interviewed. A Caucasian family came to a food pantry for help. The father came in and talked with the African American director. He said he would volunteer to help her in any way he could but his family needed food again. She encouraged him to come back the next day and the food would be in and yes he could volunteer. His wife and young daughter were with him. We returned to this food pantry later in our research on a day when food was being distributed. In addition to all the usual packaged food, there was fresh farm produce including tomatoes. The director was not there and none of the volunteers could tell us who or what organization provided the produce.

Many children eat lunch and even breakfast provided at school. Boys Club/Girls Clubs provide after school “suppers” for kids in several communities and in some they provide three meals each day in the summer. In one small town these meals are distributed at the library. The woman who works at this library stays late for the school age children to eat and then she offers them some time in the library so that they are together, enjoying themselves and not getting into trouble.

“This is all they have to do around here after school. Some use the computers and I try to get all of them to do their homework. I love all these kids... I don’t know how their

parents get food... The meals for the kids include a sandwich and a fruit, sometimes chips...the kids eat the food..."

An older African American man was at a food site picking up a bag of groceries. He said he was born in the town but left for 50 years. He has been back for several years. He said,

"No, there are no gardens in my neighborhood...most in the neighborhood get their groceries from the Big Star, Save-a-Lot and Wal-Mart. People eat what they can get...if they don't have money or they don't have transportation ... they eat what they can get... I think there is a senior center somewhere...reopened... they can eat there if they go there... Utility bills are high... my utilities cut off for a month... My wife allows her son to call her from jail. It is eight or nine dollars a minute..."

"Sure, we have a grocery store here ... I don't shop there."

"If they don't have the money to drive to West Memphis, they just get what they can ... get milk and bread at the dollar store. We don't have a grocery store. It burned down. I go to Forrest City to get groceries ... or Memphis."

No one knew about any programs to teach children about food or where food comes from. None of the feeding programs, food pantries or senior centers had any classes about nutrition. There was concern on the part of the people who provided the food "to meet nutritional standards." This was stated to be a requirement of the funding source.

Most diners, café's and restaurants did not have the variety of food that would make healthy choices easy. There were two exceptions, The Wilson Café and the café in Earle. The Wilson Café chef has made a difference in the menu there offering fresh salads, grilled chicken, and food from scratch and seasonal vegetables grown in his garden. Starting this year the local community garden will provide the produce for the restaurant. In Earle, the pork chops and cabbage were steamed, as were the other vegetables. These two offer choices and it is still possible to make the wrong choices.

- Healthcare

An African American lady 61 years old with Lupus had just gotten out of the hospital. She talked about how she would not go to the West Memphis hospital and how she was in the shape she was in because of treatment she received there. A resident of Horseshoe told a story of how she almost died at the West Memphis Hospital and if it had not been for her friend who got her out and took her to the MED in Memphis, she would have died.

Others had more to say about local health care.

“I get my prescriptions at Wal-Mart. I don’t get a flu shot. I go to the West Memphis hospital ER if I get sick. There are not enough specialists. I make my appointments myself with my heart doctor in Memphis.”

“What we need here is better response time from ambulance and sheriff. Ambulance gets lost coming out here. Most people here have cell phones.”

“I go to Memphis. Will not go to Crittenden County Hospital. The standard of care is not what it should be. The MED Trauma Center is the best. Baptist Hospital in Forrest City is ok.”

“Most folks don’t like the West Memphis Hospital. The doctor lady in the clinic here is okay. Forrest City is preferred to the other hospitals. Ready Transportation will you get to dialysis.”

“I see a doctor in Marion but any specialists or need for a hospital, I go to Memphis.”

“We go to Memphis for our doctors. Osceola has doctors that are okay I am sure, but we go to Memphis.”

“We just don’t have good doctors here like we use to. The have all retired and moved away.”

- Environment

The researchers were surprised that not much was said about the environment and any effect it might have on health. The exceptions – were farm to table farmers, folks who had tried to have a small garden but nothing grew because of chemical over spray from large farms, staff of the State Parks, the mayor of Hughes in 2014 and a participant at a regional meeting in Jonesboro.

“We’ve got to do something about all those chemicals coming from the farming around here. We’ve got to build some kind of natural barrier that will filter some of that and keep it from making the people around here sick.”

“We haven’t applied for organic food production status. We would not meet the standards with soybean farmers all around us. We have built a natural barrier around our gardens and we do our best to keep out the chemicals.”

“When I first moved out there, I tried to have a garden. When they crop-dusted all the farms around there, everything I had just wilted. I gave up. You can’t argue with them.”

“Since I live in Memphis, I don’t know what goes on with my farm up there near Blytheville. I rent out the land to a group that grows cotton and soybeans. We’re careful here with our garden. We don’t use chemicals. I guess they do on the farm.”

“We have plenty of water here in Eastern Arkansas. No problem there. That should be a draw for agriculture business and other industries who need a lot of water.”

“This isn’t real corn, I sure wouldn’t eat it. You know how they say knee high by the forth of July? Well this is knee high in June. It is engineered. They have different kinds for different reasons... would hate to see some tourist try [to eat it].”

In the fall, we noticed that defoliates were utilized heavily and that when the ground was being turned, there was an unpleasant chemical odor. We were surprised that only a very few homes had developed a natural barrier between the house and the massive chemical dependent agriculture.

10. Organizational Capacity

For the purpose of this project, organizational capacity refers to the relevancy of the work [does it effectively meet a defined need], is it vision and mission focused, is there effective leadership in place, is there organizational transparency and is the operation of the organization such that it will be in place for as long as it is needed? Interviews and observations revealed that most if not all organizations in the twelve counties are on their own in terms of capacity building. They are fragile and yet expected to move mountains by the funders, voters, other supporters or recipients of services.

The organizations we observed and the interviews we conducted on this subject indicate that capacity building is needed around leadership development including how to engage the community, how to move past fatalism - “nothing is going to change” - how to utilize data in decision making and even how to conduct an effective, engaging meeting. Record keeping is a struggle and most organizations do not understand how to determine their financial position or take steps to improve it. Because most communities do not have a strong unified vision of where they want to be in years to come, it is difficult for the agencies, business and governments to have a vision. Developing a vision for the community would be a good capacity improvement.

“My vision? I just want to see those dilapidated houses torn down.”

“The vision I see is someone’s got to bring jobs in here.”

“I just want everything to stay as it is... I want the town to be like it was.”

“My vision is lots of industry and jobs ... “

There is very little accountability for nonprofits. Most local residents do not even know who manages the nonprofits in their town, where the money comes from or what the organization was established to do. Organizations are underfunded and do not have the skills to improve this status.

There is some misuse of funds and some donors are unable to determine if the money they provide really makes a difference. This has caused donors to become weary of investing in Eastern Arkansas. Some organizations with the least resources are actually meeting a need while others with more funding are providing services that are not cost effective. Organizations lack role models of how to operate effectively.

All of the training and professional opportunities we learned about were related to the profession of the individual not their role as a nonprofit manager, leader, staff person, volunteer or board member. There is an apparent lack of understanding as to what the role of board members should be.

11. Housing

School closings and school policy have a huge influence on many housing decisions made by current residents and others thinking about moving to East Arkansas. This affects all income levels and naturally has an impact on the local economy. Other factors that affect housing choice include perceptions of safety and the desire to live close to family. Availability of good housing is a problem that prevents purchases in some areas. Some good housing is in the midst of dilapidated and abandoned homes. The availability of good rental housing is another problem in many communities.

“When we came back we just moved in the trailer where his father had lived. We fixed it up and decided we like it. It is better than a lot of the housing in our community.”

“I came back and moved in with my sister. She is sick. Guess I will just stay there. Marion is a safe place and I like it well enough.”

“If I had to say what our town needs the most, its decent rental housing. The rules are strict [in public housing]. Hard to stay there. Not many rental choices”

“People lost their jobs, moved away and left their houses empty and now they are falling apart. No one comes back to fix them up or sell them.”

“That house was a rental. When it burned down, the owner just didn’t try to fix it.”

“Those burned out houses have been here for a long time. The owners won’t do anything about them. We can’t bring them down without EPA approval. There’s a long process... And we don’t have the money to bring them down anyway.”

“Fire is a problem, electrical fires. Fire burned down some rental housing. Left as is so I asked the owner... he said he could have bought commercial insurance but it would only pay 80%. Cheaper all the way around to just leave it as is.”

“Code enforcement is a problem... Not much of it. No one saying to owners that they have to clear or rebuild after a fire.”

“We don’t want any more federally subsidized housing. For a while it was easy to get and we have too much. It does nothing for us in the long run. Yes, housing is a priority but we need the regular kind not the kind we have.”

Location close to work is often not a factor in choosing a home.

“I live in Wilson and work in Osceola.”

“Before I retired I worked in Blytheville but I have always lived in Wilson.”

“I work in Jonesboro and he works in Memphis and yes we live in Marion.”

“We live and work in Crawfordsville and we drive our son to East Memphis to school.”

“I was working in Jonesboro and my daughter was at Williams Baptist College. We lived here in this town and drove to school and work.”

“I work in Memphis. My daughter goes to ASU and we live in Mississippi County.”

“They moved out of Blytheville so they could send their kids here to school. A long drive to work is not a problem.”

We did not have an opportunity to pursue this further but there were two incidents shared by respondents that may indicate a problem with how real estate firms are operating.

“Housing is insufficient... I called a real estate agent on the phone. Said he had property. When he saw me, he didn't have any property... Do you know what I am saying?”

“I just did not want to live in Blytheville any more. I was working here in Osceola and this house across from the park was for sale. I love living here. This town is much friendlier. In Blytheville, I could not even get anyone to show me a house. I don't think they even want to do business. I'm so glad because I like living here better.”

12. Seniors

Even though many communities and towns have an aging population this subject did not come up unless we asked a direct question about seniors. Reviewing interview notes and strategic plans reveals that the aging population is not a priority in Eastern Arkansas.

“We have senior housing out on Highway 79. Forrest City has outreach to seniors and they bring meals from there for seniors here.”

“One of our strategies in Crittenden County is to recruit retirees.”

“We make home visits to seniors who are frail and live alone or with another frail senior. I don’t know how these people make it”

“The lady on the corner is having problems. She has run out of her retirement money and has no family. I don’t know what is going to happen to her.”

“Grandparents are bringing up grandchildren... This is a growing issue... sometimes its their great grandchildren.”

“Most people left in this town are either old or very young. Not many in between. It’s the seniors who continue to keep up their yards and try to do right as long as they can.”

“There are at least three senior centers in Osceola... They have a quilt at the library in Osceola.”

“We have some senior housing... not enough. There are seniors living in houses that are falling down. And there are seniors who are raising grandchildren in those houses.”

“People are sending their kids out to the country to live with grandparents. These grandparents are providing for themselves and their grandchildren.”

“Our population is aging. We have a senior center and a real nice nursing home.”

13. reNEW East Arkansas Strategic Planning Committees

Interviewees have a laissez faire at best attitude toward the reNEW East Arkansas strategic planning process. First, only seven respondents knew anything about East Arkansas Planning and Development Corporation. None had seen anything in their local newspaper about the plans. Libraries and other public services did not have information about the process or outcomes.

Most steering committee meetings lack a sense of urgency in implementing the plans. If something was accomplished it was usually accomplished by one person (or least reported this way). Many times other committee members were surprised at the progress.

Committee members indicated that they had not met as often as they should. Many people involved originally had dropped out. There was an expectation that the only thing needed to get folks to these meetings or any meeting was to make a public announcement. It was the fault of the people if they did not attend. Sometimes one person was controlling the meeting by responding to any question asked and/or denying that their community had any problems. There was focus on the past and on the cause of current problems. The researchers noted a tone of fatalism. It was easier to talk about who and what caused the problems than to plan for solutions. There was an attitude of doing this because EAPDD had asked them to do it rather than because they believed the community could change for the better.

“I just can’t get any of them to get involved. I have even walked around their neighborhood and asked who is in charge.”

“I don’t think we can get any community engagement. They don’t care. They won’t come to the table. They are not going to make this town any better. I don’t know why we have to get them involved.”

“I know it has been a while since we met, but I don’t understand why no one is here.”

“I decided to quit coming. I just have too many other things to do that are more important.”

Recommendations

1. Lift up new regional leaders even if their local community does not acknowledge them - Build a cadre of leaders that support positive change, critical thinking and collaboration.
2. Model visioning and assist leaders in developing a united regional vision
3. Take a leadership role in leading cities, towns and communities to an understanding of trends, facts, the need for change, importance of community engagement and the consequences that will take place if real change does not occur
4. Offer training, coaching, workshops, webinars and conferences aimed at increasing organizational capacity - Help cities, towns, agencies and organizations understand the need for improved capacity.
5. Develop frequent and effective communication strategies to build awareness of the work of the EAPDD, to bring information that helps towns and communities see how they fit in the larger world and to disseminate information that may lead to the development of innovate local strategies
6. EAPDD executive staff must build strong relationships with the cadre of leaders regionally and the evolving leadership in the towns and counties.

7. Address the issue of the need for improved philanthropy and the sharing of resources by large landowners and industry - This will likely entail further regional and local research to identify potential untapped philanthropy sources and the building of relationships with corporate farms and absentee landowners.
8. When possible, reduce the burden of local “red tape” and other barriers to move the region forward - The land bank idea is a good example.
9. Celebrate successes and publish results any and everywhere – on the website, through social media, in newspapers, travel magazines, trade journals and when possible through academic venues
10. Lead in the creation of a collaborative economic development regional culture that is future focused with an appreciation for cultural history