
CREATING A HEALTHY, DYNAMIC LITTLE ROCK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Community Dialogues with Central Arkansas Leaders

INTRODUCTION

The *New York Times* recently featured an article comparing the developmental histories of Birmingham and Nashville. The two cities were the same size in the late 1970s, but since then, Nashville has doubled in size, while Birmingham has lost population. The comparison illustrates the idea that small cities are dividing into HAVES and HAVE-NOTS. The fundamentals that typically allow a city to become a HAVE are in place here in Little Rock, but some of them are in jeopardy. We need to take quick action to preserve the city's potential.

The Central Arkansas Library System hosted a series of meetings on the future of Little Rock with community leaders from businesses, nonprofits, community planning, major city-based institutions, and media organizations. These leaders pooled their collective experience to produce six crucial priorities that they believe will most benefit the city and its residents.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SIX CRUCIAL PRIORITIES FOR THE CITY OF LITTLE ROCK

1. *WE MUST PROMOTE THE UNDERSTANDING THAT A STRONG LITTLE ROCK IS ESSENTIAL TO A STRONG ARKANSAS.* We need to inform residents and leaders statewide about the potential consequences of not supporting a healthy and vital Little Rock, which, by population density, is the only urban area in the state. Similarly, Little Rock's economic health will be greatly affected by the strength, sustainability, and research status of UA Little Rock. Central Arkansas leaders must leverage their collective influence to inform state government about the potential risks of not supporting Little Rock's research university.
2. *DIVERSE COMMUNITY INTERESTS MUST UNITE TO PROMOTE GOOD NEWS ABOUT LITTLE ROCK.* The community must push back against inaccurate perceptions outside the city.
3. *THE CITY SHOULD DEVELOP A "DESTINATION" CORRIDOR FROM UA LITTLE ROCK TO UAMS TO DOWNTOWN.* This recreational, dining, and living destination will assist with central urban revitalization and attract more residents.
4. *WE NEED TO CHANGE THE CULTURAL ATTITUDE FROM A ZERO-SUM MENTALITY TO AN ATTITUDE OF HEALTHY TEAMWORK INVOLVING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, THE INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNITY, THE GRASSROOTS, AND THE WEALTH COMMUNITY.* A zero-sum mentality that one neighborhood, community, or region's gain is another's loss has been holding back progress at the city, regional, and state levels.
5. *CITY LEADERSHIP NEEDS TO BUILD TRUST WITH RESIDENTS* that promises about funding and development will be fulfilled, and management must also address bureaucratic delays that are stalling development efforts.
6. *WE MUST FOSTER A CLIMATE THAT IS OPEN TO YOUNG TALENT AND YOUNG LEADERSHIP IF WE ARE TO RETAIN AND ATTRACT THE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WHO WILL DRIVE THE ECONOMY OF THE FUTURE.*

SIX CRUCIAL PRIORITIES: BACKGROUND AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

1. *A STRONG LITTLE ROCK IS CRUCIAL FOR A STRONG ARKANSAS, AND A STRONG UA LITTLE ROCK IS CRUCIAL FOR A STRONG, ECONOMICALLY HEALTHY LITTLE ROCK.*

- Community leaders, city government, and Central Arkansas legislators must work together to raise awareness in state government about the potential consequences of a decline in UA Little Rock.
- Many small cities around the United States understand that the chief barrier to their economic progress is the lack of a research university. We have one, but many Arkansans don't understand why it would be disastrous to lose the university's research status. We must unify to get out the message and rally support for our research university.
- The chief barrier to growth at UA Little Rock lies in state government. By unifying regionally (e.g. encouraging meetings of the Central AR legislative delegation), we can leverage our combined influence. We need to start informing people statewide about the potential consequences of not supporting a healthy and vital Little Rock, which, by population density, is the only urban area in the state.

2. *UNITING TO PROMOTE GOOD NEWS ABOUT LITTLE ROCK*

- There is a lot of negativity in the press that doesn't reflect the actual daily experience of life in Little Rock, especially the crime coverage.
- Bedroom communities have a perception of Little Rock that is way out of proportion relative to crime and safety.
- We need to speak out forcefully and frequently about Central Arkansas's positive trends, such as the increasing number of young professionals 18-30 years old in Little Rock (see document available from Metroplan). We need to showcase the LR lifestyle and all its advantages, including the cultural life, food and brewery culture, and music/nightlife. We also need to spread the word about all the positive outcomes from our major institutions.

3. *DEVELOPING THE CENTRAL CITY AND THE UALR/UAMS/DOWNTOWN CORRIDOR*

- Developing a corridor from UA Little Rock to UAMS to Downtown as a recreational, dining, and living destination will assist with central urban revitalization and attract more residents
- Rapid Transit should be developed to serve the big "L shape" from UALR to UAMS to Downtown/the Clinton School.
- Using promotional events such as a progressive bus dinner that offers one \$20 armband and stops at different restaurants throughout that corridor for different courses of a meal would display our very nice bus system as well as the attractions of the neighborhoods.
- UA Little Rock absolutely must develop pedestrian access with sidewalks and potentially underpasses to allow to students to walk to the retail areas around the university. Some progress has been made in revitalizing that retail area, but more public-private partnerships are needed both for roads and sidewalks and for retail development, restaurants, and housing, including affordable housing. Appropriate street lighting on a pedestrian scale is also crucial.
- The current sales tax of 1.5% is lower than every other surrounding metro area at 2%. That must change, and awareness must be raised that the city must have adequate funding if we are to meet our infrastructure and development needs.
- UA Little Rock and the University District Partnership know that there has to be a balance between resident priorities and university priorities. The university is an advocate for affordable housing, and we need to consult with neighborhood associations. But we also need to ramp it up, because 1 or 2 a year is not enough.

- Large sections of the university district and downtown have been designated as Opportunity Zones. This is an opportunity to leverage public-private partnerships.
- “University District” signage is also a pressing need (part of neighborhood branding for the whole city to increase the awareness of each neighborhood’s unique offerings).
- Current demographic trends in our metro area show us that when young professionals move here now, they tend to move to Benton and Maumelle. They become part of the “doughnut” of preferred suburban areas that leaves unoccupied residential areas in the middle of the city. We need to encourage the residential areas of the central city.
- We need to make sure that people have a reason to stop here in the city or travel here as a destination, so they have a chance to see the appeal of the city lifestyle.

4. *DEVELOPMENT AND UNITY: OVERCOMING THE ZERO-SUM GAME IN FAVOR OF TEAMWORK*

- Different groups in city leadership are fragmented, and different factions tend to be very critical of one another and even adversarial at times. Successful cities have unified leaderships. We need to get together for teamwork involving the business community, the institutional community, the grassroots, and the wealth community.
- Every great city has great neighborhoods, and all of them benefit from any good energy in the city. It’s not a zero-sum game. Little Rock is starting to show that potential to develop branded, distinctive neighborhoods. The East Side development has grown so quickly that it shows how fast this process can move under the right conditions.
- We need to raise awareness in the neighborhoods that we all benefit from thinking as a united group. It might be productive to have a town hall where we put the issue of cooperation vs. competition on the table and talk about working together as neighborhoods. We can’t have neighborhood interest groups fighting.
- A zero-sum mentality that one neighborhood, community, or region’s gain is another’s loss has been holding back progress both at the city, regional, and state level. We need to place a priority on changing mindsets to help people understand that the infighting and cutthroat internal competition has hurt the state, and we can only prosper in the future with teamwork. The only way to stave off the effects of the continuing decline of population in vast numbers of rural counties in Arkansas is to have at least three thriving populous areas (NWA, Little Rock, and Jonesboro). The ability to learn to cooperate in healthy ways for the benefit of the whole is central to the survival and prosperity of both central Arkansas and the state of Arkansas in a new economy.

5. *BUILDING TRUST AND FIXING BUREAUCRATIC DELAYS THAT ARE CHOKING DEVELOPMENT*

- Waiting on city permits takes so long that people working on projects just give up.
- The city also can take months to approve small steps in building projects.
- Some operational departments of the city seem to lack a sense of urgency in achieving satisfactory results for residents. Perhaps they need to be made aware that they are hampering the city’s growth by making solutions to routine problems so difficult and lengthy.
- The city needs to build trust by fulfilling promises. The LR Tech Park was supposed to be a research center with wet labs and dry labs. The plan was for the Tech Park to connect Children’s, UAMS, and UALR in research. None of that has happened.
- The residents were also told that a sales tax would be used to hire more police and add infrastructure. The city not always been accountable for delivering what was promised. Little Rock voters won’t approve a higher sales tax unless they have confidence that the city’s leadership will deliver the promised benefits of the tax hike.

- One problem is that sales tax receipt estimates were based on pie-in-the-sky growth estimates that never materialized.
- There's an issue of trust with the city of LR because people convene at discussion panels and propose projects, but then the proposed project never appears, e.g. the Promise Neighborhood. There's an excellent University District Partnership at UALR, but it's hard to make progress without resources.

6. *FOSTERING A CLIMATE THAT IS OPEN TO YOUNG TALENT AND YOUNG LEADERSHIP, BOTH HOMEGROWN AND FROM OUTSIDE*

- We need to provide more leadership opportunity for younger people, who often are more optimistic about change and progress and therefore more likely to drive it.
- There has to be opportunity for young talent here in Central Arkansas if we are to retain the most promising young professionals.
- Economic opportunity and community support must be extended to all age groups, and not locked in one generation.

To contact members of the community group or for more information, please email Nate Coulter, Executive Director, Central Arkansas Library System at ncoulter@cals.org.