



ACTION PLAN FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Prepared by



Introduction

Economic Development Is A Team Sport!

This report will present some aggressive but achievable **Action Steps** and **Tactics** for the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce and its community partners to pursue and implement. The successful implementation of this Action Plan will depend heavily upon the participation of the City of Van Buren, Crawford County, the Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, as well as involved citizens. The Van Buren Chamber of Commerce does not have the resources to complete these action items alone. The end result of implementation will be a better community for all and will require a team effort.

In order to design an **Action Plan** that can be immediately initiated and implemented, it requires the gathering of honest and frank feedback from those in leadership positions in the community. We want to be sure that these recommended **Tactics** are accepted and embraced by the those from the community who hold leadership positions in business, political office, or in community activities. We could not have gathered the information, opinions, and insight to the economy of Van Buren and Crawford County without the input from the area's leaders. We want to thank each of those who participated for their frank discussion and input into this report.

We also would be remiss if we did not thank **Chamber CEO Julie Murray** for her leadership and organizational skills in providing assistance to our team in setting appointments and directing us to the appropriate leadership of this great community. We also want to thank **Van Buren Mayor Joe Hurst** for his cooperation and input into this process. **County Judge Dennis Gilstrap** was also instrumental in assisting in this effort.

We conducted interviews with the following persons and their input was valuable and essential to the preparation of this document and its recommendations:

Hon. Gary Baxter, Mayor of the City of Mulberry
Kevin Bell, President, Jimmy Bell Real Estate

Ashley Garris, Assistant Executive Director, Western Arkansas Planning & Development District
Hon. Dennis Gilstrap, Crawford County Judge
Sasha Grist, PCED, Executive Director, Western Arkansas Planning & Development District
Hon. Raymond Harvey, Crawford County JP, Owner – Turf-Pro USA
Hon. Joe Hurst, Mayor of the City of Van Buren
Daniel Mann, President & CEO, Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority
Randy McClaren, Plant Manager, Bekaert Corporation
Chad McReynolds, General Manager – Cherokee Casino & Hotel
Rusty Myers, (Retired) WAPDD
Jason Myers, Myers-Beatty Engineering
Arkansas State Senator Matthew Pitsch, Arkansas District 8
John Pope, Executive Director, “Keep Van Buren Beautiful”
Maryl Purvis, Executive Director, Van Buren Advertising & Promotion Commission
Brittany Ransom, Van Buren Public Schools
Bruce Sikes, Chancellor – Arkansas Tech University, Ozark Campus
Marty Shell, Five Rivers Distribution
Mike Stephens, Vice President, Finance & Strategy - USA Trucking
Bentley Story, Arkansas Economic Development Commission
Jay White, Pepper Source

We also conducted a three (3) Focus Groups. The participants included:

Focus Group #1

Jason Myers, Myers-Beatty Engineering
Craig Beam, Owner - Progressive Business Solutions
Jared Clark, Store Manager, Walmart
Kenny Whitehead, Partner, Hubbs Whitehead CPAs
Mason Shirey, Broker- Jimmy Bell Real Estate
Steve Dufresne, Director, Van Buren Municipal Utilities

Focus Group#2

Dr. Debbie Faubus Kendrick, Director, Crawford County Adult Education Center
Ragon Clements, Ronald Ragon Realty, Inc.
Eddie Lee Herndon, OG&E
David Tyler, Ghan & Cooper Commercial Properties

Focus Group #3

Brandon Fisher, Arkansas Electric Cooperative

Ryan McClure, Arkansas Electric Cooperative

Holli Willis, CEO, Legacy Heights & Memory Lane.

The Van Buren Chamber of Commerce hosted a Public Forum for Economic Development at the King Opera House in downtown in September 2021 attended by 48 citizens.

This Action Plan for Economic Development could not have been pursued without the contributions from the Walmart Foundation, the Arvest Foundation, Arkansas Valley Electric Cooperative, the City of Van Buren, and the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce.



Demographics

Crawford County, AR

Comparisons

Indicators		Crawford County, AR	United States	Percent difference Crawford County, AR vs. United States
Demographics	Population Growth (% change, 2010*-2019*)	3.2%	6.8%	-52%
	Median Age (2019*)	38.6	38.1	13%
	Percent Population White Alone (2019*)	88.1%	72.5%	21%
	Percent Population Hispanic or Latino (2019*)	7.7%	18.0%	-57%
	Percent Population American Indian or Alaska Native (2019*)	2.3%	0.8%	188%
	Percent of Population 'Baby Boomers' (2019*)	25.0%	24.6%	1%
Income	Median Household Income (2019*)	\$46,828	\$62,843	-26%
	Per Capita Income (2019*)	\$24,547	\$34,103	-28%
	Percent Individuals Below Poverty (2019*)	17.2%	13.4%	28%
	Percent Families Below Poverty (2019*)	13.0%	9.5%	37%
	Percent of Households with Retirement and Social Security Income (2019*)	58.8%	51.1%	14%
	Percent of Households with Public Assistance Income (2019*)	19.5%	19.4%	0%
Structure	Percent Population 25 Years or Older without High School Degree (2019*)	15.0%	12.0%	25%
	Percent Population 25 Years or Older with Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2019*)	16.0%	32.1%	-50%
	Percent Population That Speak English Less Than 'Very Well' (2019*)	3.5%	8.4%	-58%
	Percent of Houses that are Seasonal Homes (2019*)	1.8%	4.0%	-55%
	Owner-Occupied Homes where > 30% of Household Income Spent on Mortgage (2019*)	21.4%	27.7%	-23%
	Renter-Occupied Homes where > 30% of Household Income Spent on Rent (2019*)	42.9%	46.0%	-7%

Source: Headwaters Economics

Van Buren's Action Plan for Economic Development

Business Attraction & Growth

Goal #1 – Prepare Van Buren and Crawford County to attract new businesses, new capital investment, and primary employers.

Tactic – Create a Not-For-Profit Van Buren Economic Development Partnership with a Board of Directors to provide oversight.

This Partnership should be developed with assistance from the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce. The “Partners” should be the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce, the City of Van Buren, and Crawford County – all making a contribution both financially and in-kind to the economic development effort.

This should be a public-private economic development organization that can engage in fundraising, both private and public, to provide the economic development services to the city and county.

The Partnership Board should have equal representation from the City of Van Buren, Crawford County, and the Van Buren Chamber.

The Chamber's contribution to the Partnership is as follows:

- Office/Headquarters location.
- The President & CEO of the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce also will serve in the same capacity in the Partnership. Compensation will be provided fully by the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce. The President & CEO will be responsible for the hiring, training, and supervision of any Partnership employees.
- The Partnership will have full use of the office, meeting rooms, office equipment, and some staffing (to-be-determined) for fulfilling

economic development actions. If/when the Partnership hires staff, the Van Buren Chamber will share payroll services and employee benefits which will be reimbursed by the Partnership.

(NOTE: The following actions and tactics in this document are intended to be overseen and/or completed by the Partnership!)

Tactic – The Economic Development Partnership should negotiate an Economic Development Agreement with the City of Van Buren.

As a partner, the City of Van Buren should negotiate an economic development agreement with the newly created Economic Development Partnership.

Tactic – For prospect hosting and working with consultants, AEDC Project Managers, and developers, designate an “Economic Development Point Person” to work with business prospects.

It is important that the community identify a “Point Person” who is recognized by site locations selection consultants, AEDC project managers, and real estate developers as the one and only “Point Person” for economic development. Many of those mentioned above have told me over the years that it is extremely frustrating to have to determine “who is in charge” and “who has the information” when working on a project. Many times, they use this excuse to eliminate a community from consideration on a project.

Our recommendation is that the Partnership President & CEO be designated as the community’s “Point of Contact” for economic development.

Tactic - Develop or subscribe to a simple database to survey local, primary employers and store pertinent employment and company information. \$

Design a survey form with adequate questions to learn employment numbers, where employees live (zip code addresses), challenges envisioned

by management, opportunities they could achieve with a little assistance, growth possibilities, etc.

There are several qualified vendors from whom you can subscribe to a BR&E database program.

Tactic - Host Fam Tours of Van Buren and Crawford County.

Invite Arkansas Economic Development Commission project managers and regional allies for an annual “Fam Tour.” Be sure to include economic development managers from local utility companies.

This should be a full day of touring development sites and hearing presentations from Van Buren officials regarding the advantages of locating and investing in Van Buren. Have Plant Manager or CEO of a local company offer testimony to the visitors about the great partnership with Van Buren.

This activity should also include hosting meetings and events for the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and the Arkansas Highway Commission. This type of interaction keeps Van Buren and Crawford County on their “radar screen!”

Tactic – Benchmark Successful Communities

Many new concepts and ideas can be gleaned from taking a group of leaders to another community to observe successful economic development tactics and projects. We are recommending that a “Benchmarking Visit” becomes an annual event.

Explore opportunities to partner with NW Arkansas and the River Valley. Consider formal partnership agreements with these groups.

Funding Economic Development

Goal #1 – Develop a permanent funding mechanism for economic development in Van Buren and Crawford County.

Tactic – Dedicate a portion of the existing City of Van Buren sales tax to fund economic development.

There is an existing sales tax of which economic development is a portion. This was approved by the voters and there are expectations of an investment in economic development.

We recommend that an annual amount be set, and a contract developed with the “Economic Development Partnership” to lead the economic development effort in Van Buren and Crawford County.

Tactic – The City of Van Buren should appoint a 3- or 5-member Economic Development Commission with the Mayor or a Council Member as one of the members to oversee the distribution of moneys from the economic development fund.

This Economic Development Commission will be responsible for overseeing the distribution of sales tax funds toward successful economic development. They will be responsible for reviewing and considering proposals from the City’s contractor for economic development, the Van Buren Economic Development Partnership, for proper expenditure of the funds to ensure a proper return on the investment made by the taxpayers of Van Buren.

Tactic – The Partnership should develop a plan to raise private dollars to be used exclusively for economic development. \$

Marketing The Community

Goal #1 – Create a long-term Marketing Plan that includes and involves all of the public entities in Van Buren. “Brand Van Buren!”

Tactic – Conduct a branding and communications audit to develop a common “look” for Van Buren. \$

This can be manifested in common branding for each entity to achieve a consistent message and identity.

It is important that the City of Van Buren, the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Van Buren, Van Buren Public Schools, and the Advertising & Promotion Commission be involved in this process and appear to be representing the same community. This enhances your image to outsiders and spreads your limited advertising dollars and limited resources to a larger market.



VAN BUREN
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Tactic – Create an Economic Development website.

Create a website, managed by the Partnership, designed by a professional economic development web designer to ensure that it contains the information needed by site location consultants and corporate real estate executives.

This site should be designed in a way to market not only industrial properties but also commercial and retail. This does not necessarily need to be a separate stand-alone site. It may be an addition to the Chamber website if it is easily visible from the home page.

Tactic – Review and update all relative websites. \$

Establish a procedure to regularly review all the community public websites to ensure that information is up-to-date and that all links are relevant.

Goal #2 – Make Van Buren and Crawford County the most attractive place in the region to locate a business!

Tactic - Rename the Industrial Park.

Using the term “industrial” dates your park and your economic development effort. One suggestion would be to rename it as the Van Buren Business Park.

Tactic – Get the Van Buren Business Park “Show Ready!” \$

The Business Park is Van Buren’s “Product” for primary jobs and new investment.

Be sure that the Business Park and any potential future land additions are annexed into the City of Van Buren to insure adequate utility access and lower insurance rates for tenants.

Investigate potential new ordinances that will ensure that the tenants maintain their facilities in a manner to retain an attractive business park. Be sure that existing ordinances are being enforced.

Tactic – Develop a strategy to engage the tenants and their employees in making the business park more attractive

This can come in the form of rewards programs, contests among tenants, etc. There is a need to create “pride of workplace” in the Business Park.

An attractive, well-designed Business Park will help in attracting a highly qualified, well-trained workforce who take pride in their work.



Tactic – Research and Update the Ordinances of the Business Park to ensure that current and future tenants are assisting in keeping the park up to standards.

There may be ordinances already in place, but not being enforced, that will encourage tenants to maintain their property and facilities to standards. If not, it may be prudent to modify ordinances to accomplish this effort.

Tactic – Organize a “Business Executives Roundtable” group that can meet occasionally to compare common issues, voice concerns, and keep the Partnership informed on challenges.

This could be a “meal” event, breakfast, lunch, or drinks after work. Banks and other Chamber members often like to “host” or “sponsor” these types of gatherings.

Bring the Mayor, County Judge, or other officials into these gatherings occasionally as a guest speaker, or to just listen.

Tactic - Get new signage up along Interstate 49 and on local streets directing traffic to the Business Park. Design attractive signage for the entrances of the Business Park. \$

Include a directory of tenants and possibly a site map. If a local utility(s) has infrastructure in the park, there may be an opportunity to ask them to sponsor signage. Turn the Industrial Park into a “place of pride” for tenants and workers.



Tactic – Through the Partnership’s BR&E program, be sure that the tenants in the Business Park are taking full advantage of the benefits of the Opportunity Zone.

There are many benefits to being located in one of Arkansas’ Opportunity Zones. Taking advantage of these benefits is sometimes complicated and fraught with bureaucratic hurdles. Interviewing and

surveying existing companies can ensure that they are taking maximum advantage of these benefits.

Van Buren's Opportunity Zone consists of 7,200 acres and encompasses the city's business park. The region is bordered by the Arkansas River, Interstates 40 and 540, and the future Instate 49.

Goal #3 – Promote Van Buren as a location for retail & business development.

Tactic – Regularly meet with Arkansas Economic Development Commission (AEDC) representatives.

The Partnership should regularly meet with AEDC representatives, specifically those who deal with business prospects interested in locating or expanding in Arkansas to assure that they are aware of what the Van Buren area has to offer in the way of sites and facilities, and to establish a well-connected and good working relationship between Van Buren, its point of contact and key players.

Tactic – Join the Innovating Commerce Serving Communities (ICSC). \$

The Partnership should become active in their local and regional ICSC events. Get to know the ICSC members in the region.

Tactic – Develop a strategy for supporting entrepreneurship.

Partner with the local Arkansas Small Business Technology Development Center at UAFS, the Small Business Association, and others to provide needed resources for entrepreneurs. This may be in the form of one-on-one meetings, training sessions, mentor programs etc.

Placemaking

Goal #1 – Develop policies, procedures, and projects to make Van Buren a “Great Place to Live and Work!”

Tactic – Review and update ordinances for mowing, weed control, and trash pickup.

Update these ordinances in Van Buren and in Crawford County. Encourage and ensure enforcement of these regulations.

Tactic – Support the Efforts of “Keep Van Buren Beautiful.”

Support the expansion of KVBB’s efforts to include an “Adopt A Street” program focused on primary corridor routes in Van Buren. The program could eventually be expanded out into the rural areas of Crawford County.

It is important that both potential new residents and potential new employers see an ongoing effort to beautify the area.

Continue supporting the efforts of Leadership Crawford County. This organization has proven vital in developing the talent pipeline for the county. Many LCC graduates have been the catalysts for the development the community has experienced over the last 10 years.

Tactic – Develop a strategy to improve cycling and walking paths in the community.

Cycling and walking paths are critical to quality of life in retaining and recruiting new residents to your community. Some suggestions include.

- Developing cycling, walking/running trails from Mike Meyer Riverfront Park through Lee Creek
- A Broadway/Midland bridge extension for cycling and pedestrian traffic to tie into the Fort Smith riverfront trails
- A trail extension on the levy system along Highway 59 South to and across Lock & Dam 13 bridge
- Continue to expand on the city’s sidewalk improvement plan.

Bicycles are rapidly becoming a favorite alternative mode of transportation for all ages.



Tactic - Provide free Wi-Fi.

Place some routers at prominent locations around Van Buren. Free Public wi-fi is available in most modern cities and shows visitors as well as site location consultants and corporate real estate executives that your community is on the leading edge in technology. Investigate the potential for including local Internet providers as “partners” in this effort. Demonstrate that Van Buren is staying ahead of the curve on technology.

Tactic – Continue the improvement and development of Downtown Van Buren.

Downtown Van Buren has beautiful historic buildings, a growing successful retail and restaurant sector, and the new Arts on Main facility. A few ways to build on this momentum are slowing the vehicle traffic, increasing the visibility of crosswalks, and adding streetscaping and greenspace. These elements will continue to build on the existing success of downtown and further enhance it as a historical and cultural attraction and quality-of-place amenity.

Tactic – Utilize the community’s new brand to improve the major city entry ways.

As visitors and residents enter the city from Hwy 59 north, Hwy 59 South, Hwy 64, I40, I540, the Midland Bridge, and the new I49, they should be greeted with visually appealing and consistent welcome signage and landscaping.

Tactic – Continue to support the projects and community improvement efforts put forth by Leadership Crawford County.

Facility and Staff Team

Goal #1 – Begin the search for “housing” the economic development Partnership and the Chamber.

Tactic – Assess the current and future needs of the Partnership’s and Chamber’s facility to accommodate all current and future activities.

Identify an existing or plan a new facility that can house adequate staff office space as well as space for entrepreneur training, meetings, and other activities necessary to conduct a successful economic development program.

The facility should also provide a “welcome” appearance for business prospects as well as the program’s constituents.

This facility should serve as the “epicenter” of economic development activity for the area.

Goal #2 – Ensure that the Partnership has adequate staffing to implement the steps in this Action Plan.

Tactic – Designate or hire a staff team member as the “Business Retention & Expansion” Vice President for the Partnership. \$

The BR&E Vice President’s primary role is to visit, meet, get to know, survey, and offer needed assistance to the area’s primary employers. While this effort is not full time, it should be the priority of the staff team member. This activity will encourage and influence growth with existing employers and will provide a vehicle for identifying a “crisis” before it becomes a “crisis.”

Include some limited Entrepreneurship responsibilities in the job description for this position.

Final Note

As you review this report, you will find a \$ next to several tactics. This is to identify some actions that are necessary to successfully implement this Action Plan that do not have any identified financial resources currently.

Economic Development is not an inexpensive endeavor and arranging adequate funding should be a priority!

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This report was prepared by Community Growth Strategies, LLC and is the property of the Van Buren Chamber of Commerce.

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Our Firm

Community Growth Strategies (CGS) is a dynamic economic development consulting firm, heavy in successful experience specializing in working with communities who have a desire to formulate an achievable strategy to accommodate and encourage economic growth. Leaders at CGS fully understand the need for an outside consultant even in those communities and organizations with limited resources, remote location, and other monumental challenges.

Our Consultant & Economic Development Leader

CGS brings the highly successful experience and skills of its founder, **Jim Fram**, a professional, 30+ year economic development/chamber executive who is a Certified Economic Developer (CEcD) as well as a Certified Chamber Executive (CCE) who has achieved success in job creation, new capital investment, increasing of public revenues, and product development to smaller communities such as Dewey, OK and Harrison, AR to medium size cities such as Hot Springs, AR, Bartlesville, OK, or Killeen/Fort Hood, TX to larger metro areas like Lincoln, NE or Tulsa, OK.



APPENDIX

Demographics material used in this report was prepared by ***Headwaters Economics***.

Some material used in the preparation of this report were from research on the websites and through personal interviews with the following:

Van Buren Chamber of Commerce

City of Van Buren

City of Mulberry

City of Alma

Crawford County

US Bureau of Labor Statistics

Arkansas Economic Development Commission

Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority

Oklahoma Department of Commerce

NWA Democrat-Gazette

Arkansas Dept of Transportation

Public Input

Community Analysis

During the Public Forum on Economic Development, the participants took part in an exercise to analyze the community based on their own personal opinions and views. The following is the results of that exercise:

Strengths

Historic District (Strong #1 indicators)
Train Station
Community Service/Volunteers
Proximity To Higher Ed
Great Leadership
Fire Rating
Community Safety
Positive Climate for Small Business
Available Land/Space for Development
Art Center
Logistic Location (Highway, Rail, Airport)
Education System
Water Supply
Natural Resources
Affordable (Cost of Living)
Best Adult Education
People Work Together

Challenges

Dry County (Received equal number of “for” and “against” indicators!)
Less Desirable Areas/Industrial Park
Infrastructure Expansion Funds
Lack of Conference/Community Center
Funding To Promote The Community
River Front
Student Leakage
Lack of Public Transportation
Travel/Commuting (Highway 59)
Workforce

Lack of Retail Selection
Image/Misperception
Image of Healthcare
Lack of Parks/Recreation

Opportunities

Riverfront Development
Tourism Opportunities
Gateway to the Boston Mountains
Family Entertainment
Incentive Funds for New Business
Improvements to Downtown
Beautification of Intersections and On/Off Ramps
River Port

Threats

Lack of Funding (High number of concerns)
Highway 64 Water/Sewer
Competition
Code Review
Quality Healthcare
Not Willing To Change
Lack of Consistent Image
Incentivized Business Growth in Neighboring Communities
Trails/Rec Facilities (High number of concerns)
Tell Our Story
Identify and Champion Van Buren

The participants in the Public Forum for Economic Development were asked to offer their #1 one idea for economic development if they were in charge, money was no object, and time was of no consequence. These were the anonymous responses:

- Riverfront Entertainment Development
- Open outdoor space similar to the riverfront in LR to bring events to the area – include a walking park trail around the whole space.
- Create a riverfront shopping center to attract local commerce as well as visitors.
- Build a multi-use community center – pool- exercise facility – meeting rooms & banquet facility.
- Improve Image!
- I would buy out all property surrounding the entrance to the City of Van Buren and build attractive welcoming structures with greenways.
- Water & Sewer improvements and expansion.
- Attract businesses by providing tax credits and incentives based on number of employees.
- Bring in a few corporate/chain retailers.
- Make Crawford County a wet county.
- Have all sidewalks repaired & more installed all over the community. Have foliage installed to give curb appeal. Have these regularly maintained to provide community enjoyment.
- Restore, facelift, and promote downtown.
- Every student can go to UAFS free!
- Provide scholarships for students to attend local higher education institutions & stay in Van Buren.
- Expand the train and have riverfront development with a riverboat to the Marshall's Museum.
- Beautify the Industrial Park with entrances. Beautify the entrances to the city and rundown neighborhoods.

- Renovate historical downtown empty buildings to draw unique shops, restaurants, and services to the area.
- Construct a mid-sized meeting space for business meetings & banquets.
- City-wide sidewalk improvements.
- City or investor build a building large enough for public groups.
- Arts and education increased and available for all.
- I would invest money into major roads, intersections, bridges, etc., for safer travel and the dispersing of traffic.
- Every person who is willing to work knows where and how to get the best training possible at little or no cost.
- Infrastructure in and around Van Buren.
- Recruit Doctors and Nurses. Medical professionals.
- Revolutionize our retail zones to invest in our local businesses.
- Educate local leaders that we have a --- in the county we need to make decision to put us in a better place with funding.
- (sales tax) funding to improve development codes, standards, and establish a fund to improve existing streets, drainage, water, sewer, etc.
- Generate business that competes/exceeds opportunities in NWA, Conway, or Tulsa. Provide hundreds of high paying jobs. More family, more homes, more schools, more spending – creates instant growth.
- Develop the riverfront to include family resources like Tulsa’s new park.
- Building a community center w/ classroom, fitness center, racquetball, etc.
- Conduct a process that involves a majority of the population to develop a consensus of “who Van Buren is”. Once developed, build accordingly.
- Roadblock northbound I-49.
- Public transportation.
- Promote trade schools and have business locations/buildings that graduates can be employed with...
- Buildout the riverfront – Riverwalk, marina, and retail.



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