



Community Leadership Visit

Asheville, North Carolina

August 5-7, 2004

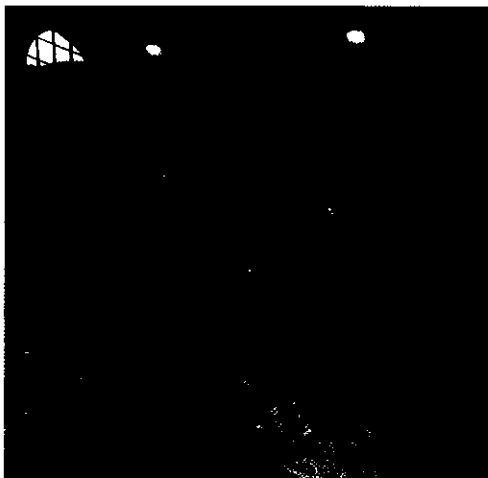
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Background

For 11 years now the Springfield Area Chamber Commerce has coordinated an annual community leadership visit to learn from the experiences of another community and bring home ideas that could benefit the Springfield region.

Each year, a delegation of business, education, civic and government officials travels to another city to study a particular aspect of community betterment or economic development. Previous intercity visits have served as catalysts for important local projects like the Ozarks Regional Economic Partnership, Jordan Valley Park, the expansion of Springfield-Branson Regional Airport, and the publication of a community report card.

In early August, a delegation of 40 Springfield area leaders embarked on the 2004 community leadership visit. The group traveled to North Carolina to study Asheville's success in developing its center city, improving public education, and creating a positive economic climate.



The annual community leadership visit provides participants with a balance of learning experiences and networking opportunities.

Springfield Area Delegation

- Jim Anderson**, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce
- Rob Baird**, Concrete Companies of Springfield
- Jim Baker**, Southwest Missouri State University
- Roseann Bentley**, Former Missouri Senator
- Brad Bodenhausen**, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce
- Mike Bridges**, Blackwell Sanders Peper Martin, LLP
- Greg Burris**, Southwest Missouri State University
- Annie Busch**, Springfield-Greene County Library District
- Kris Callen**, Springfield R-12 Board of Education
- Mayor Tom Carlson**, City of Springfield
- Mary Collette**, Springfield City Council
- Gary Deaver**, Springfield City Council
- Mark Dixon**, The African American Agenda Collaborative, Inc.
- Larry Ellison**, Kirkpatrick, Phillips & Miller, CPAs
- Tom Finnie**, City of Springfield
- Brian Fogle**, Great Southern Bank
- Jerry Harmison**, Springfield R-12 Board of Education
- Deirdre K. Hirner**, Drury University
- Mike Hoeman**, Springfield R-12 Board of Education
- Bob Horton**, Urban Neighborhoods Alliance
- Bob Jones**, Springfield City Council
- Allen Kunkel**, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce
- Kay Logsdon**, Springfield Regional Arts Council
- Ralph Manley**, Springfield City Council
- Ken McClure**, City Utilities of Springfield
- Cy Murray**, White River Valley Electric Cooperative
- Mary Norman**, Springfield R-12 Board of Education
- Todd Parnell**, The Signature Bank
- Jeff Reinold**, Greene County
- Charles Rodgers**, BKD, LLP
- Ralph Rognstad**, City of Springfield
- John Simmons**, Urban Districts Alliance
- Marc Thornsberry**, City of Springfield
- Chris Tuckness**, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce
- Randell Wallace**, Lathrop & Gage, LC
- Louise Whall**, City of Springfield
- Carol Williamson**, Vision 20/20
- Mike Williamson**, Empire Bank
- Shelia Wright**, Springfield City Council
- John Wylie**, Springfield City Council

Introduction

Asheville is a unique place. We heard that phrase many times during our short stay in Western North Carolina. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Asheville is unique in part because of the beautiful natural setting that surrounds it. Rivers, mountains, trees and trails provide striking vistas and bountiful recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

But beyond the geography of the area, it is the people that truly make Asheville unique. It is "at once the most conservative and the most liberal place," according to one of our speakers. Asheville is a culturally diverse city that takes great pride in its tolerance of others. A large but peaceful

Friday night gathering of bongo drummers and dancers at the Vance Memorial in

downtown Asheville demonstrated that point to our group.

"A mixture of character and characters is important," said Dr. Doug Orr, president of Warren Wilson College. They have a good measure of both in Asheville.

Jack Cecil of Biltmore Farms spoke of the diversity and dynamics that make Asheville special. Our culture, he said, includes the "blue suit crowd" as well as those with tattoos and pink hair. Rather than simply tolerating such diversity, Asheville celebrates it. Orr described tolerance as part of the "sense of place" that has emerged in Asheville and become an important piece of economic development in the community.

These unique people do unique things. We heard of the community's history of resilience from a staggering level of bonded indebtedness to a downtown renaissance. Asheville's economy has gone through a remarkable transformation. After losing a

foothold of nearly 4,000 manufacturing jobs in the textile, furniture and tobacco industries, Asheville is re-inventing itself with technology, biotechnology and movie production.

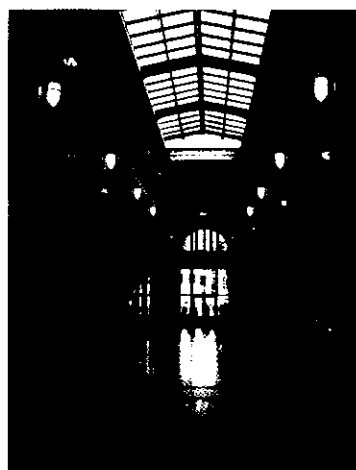
Not all is perfect in Asheville. They face some transportation challenges as citizens wait on a much-needed connector highway that will help ease the gridlock. Child abuse and smoking rates are above peer cities. And the price of housing is soaring, at nearly twice the average home price in Springfield. There are clearly issues of livability and growth that face the Asheville community. But they continue to address those issues with creativity and tenacity.

Asheville's Downtown Revival

Asheville had a dilapidated downtown a mere 25 years ago. Today it is vibrant and alive, recreated around the grand old buildings of the mid-1920s and a burgeoning arts community. Asheville has

become one of the nation's Top 10 art gallery destinations and the center city boasts more than 70 restaurants and a lively nightlife.

"A mixture of character and characters is important."



The Grove Arcade Public Market is one of more than 300 historic structures in downtown Asheville.

According to Asheville Mayor Charles Worley, an original "leap of faith" by risk-taking merchants sparked the momentum that has resulted in Asheville's downtown success. Now the downtown is almost 98 percent occupied, primarily with shops, restaurants and galleries that are independently owned and operated.

Kim MacQueen of the Asheville Downtown Association outlined her organization's efforts to create events that bring people downtown. As an example, the association sponsors the "Downtown After Five" concert series at Pack Square. The event, which is held monthly on Friday nights during the summer, draws people downtown and they stay to enjoy Asheville's nightlife.

Additionally, this year marked the 25th anniversary of Bele Chere, the Southeast's largest free outdoor festival. Bele Chere features arts and crafts, food vendors and live music, and this year's three-day festival drew more than 350,000 people.

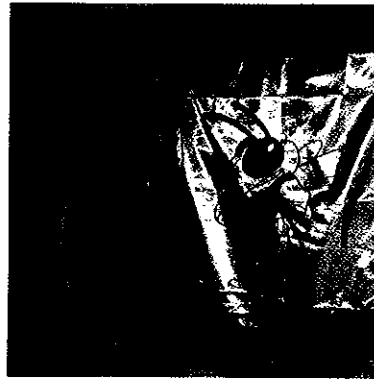
Scott Shuford, director of planning and development for the City of Asheville, outlined the four reasons why Asheville's center city is important to the overall community:

- **Symbolic** - the health of a downtown area is an indicator of the health of the region that surrounds it;
- **Fiscal** - In Asheville, the downtown represents more property value per square foot than any other part of the city and is a major tax generator;
- **Economic** - The center city is a drawing card that makes Asheville an appealing place to live, and helps attract talented and creative people to the community;
- **Physical** - Asheville's downtown is well connected with the local grid system of streets and highways, making it accessible from all parts of the city.

Community Support for Education

The health of a community can be gauged by the health of its public schools. In Asheville, we learned about a healthy school district that is tackling its challenges with the help of strong community support.

There are two school districts in Asheville/Buncombe County, one for the city and one for the county. We focused our study on Asheville City Schools, which is a district of 3,746 students in five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school.



Donteze Moore and other students at the KIPP Asheville Youth Academy have their sights set high.

Asheville City Schools has successfully narrowed the achievement gap between poor and wealthy students by providing a variety of educational options for its students and staff. They have successfully implemented the Yale University/Comer School Development Program throughout the

district. This program, which is also in place at several Springfield schools, emphasizes the importance of school, home, and community partnerships. It is based on child development and social relationship theories, with a focus on six different (but equally important) pathways for student learning: physical, cognitive, social/interactive, emotional, speech/language, and ethical.

In addition, Asheville has joined a very innovative program called KIPP, or Knowledge is Power Program. The mission of KIPP is "to provide educationally underserved students with the knowledge, skills and character needed to succeed in top quality high schools, colleges and the competitive world beyond." Three middle school students served as our tour guides at the KIPP Asheville Youth Academy. They proudly showed off their school while sharing their individual accomplishments and educational goals.

What was most notable to our delegation was the high level of enthusiasm, teamwork, and expectation for success among KIPP faculty and students. For example, one of our student tour guides, Donteze Moore, plans to attend Duke University, go to medical school and become a surgeon. He told us what is important is not "how smart you are," but rather to know "how you are smart" and build on those strengths. Needless to say, we learned quite a bit from these KIPPsters, as they are called.

This type of academic achievement and positive learning environment cannot happen without strong school district leadership and community support. They have both in Asheville. Asheville City Schools spends nearly \$13,000 per student, compared to \$6,400 per

student in Springfield Public Schools. Asheville's investment in education has contributed to strong test scores in math and reading in a district where 53 percent of the students are on free and reduced meal programs.

A key factor in achieving that level of funding is a local supplemental property tax paid by City of Asheville residents to help fund education. The tax has been in place since 1935 and this local revenue makes up more than 40 percent of the school district's budget.

Asheville's support of public education goes well beyond dollars and cents. School district leaders told us that a spirit of partnership and involvement exists within the community as well. An education coalition of 30 organizations and businesses helps support the schools by providing volunteers who serve as tutors and role models for the students.

The district also aggressively solicits parental involvement as a critical part of the educational process. For example, at Claxton Elementary School parent teams brainstorm the best ways to communicate school information and then personally coordinate the outreach to other parents.

Regional Partnerships for Economic Growth

The Asheville area is very comfortable identifying itself as part of the broader region known as Western North Carolina. Regional leaders there have come to look at economic development in a different and creative way.

Like Missouri, North Carolina is divided into regions for the purpose of promoting economic development. But unlike Missouri, the regions in North Carolina are allowed much more autonomy in the use of funds directly appropriated by the state. Advantage West is the regional economic development

commission for Western North Carolina. Chartered by the state legislature in 1994, Advantage West is a non-profit, public-private partnership responsible for marketing the mountain region of North Carolina to new and expanding businesses, tourists and filmmakers. Although established and partially funded by the state, a local board primarily representing the private sector governs the organization.

In carrying out this mission, regional leaders have found it imperative to build on the strengths of their region. One way they have done this is to look to their past for the economy of the future. The Blue Ridge Mountain region has a proud and independent heritage of music, crafts and literature to complement its pristine natural resources. In an effort to preserve that culture and build on it, the 24-county region has been designated the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

A "national heritage area" is a region in which residents, businesses and government join together to preserve, promote and celebrate their heritage, culture and natural resources for the benefit of current and future generations. The U.S. Congress has designated 24 national heritage areas around the country in which conservation and tourism activities are implemented through partnerships among federal, state and local governments, non-profits and the private sector. The National Park Service provides technical and financial assistance for a limited time (usually 10 to 15 years) following such designation. Once designated, the land in a heritage area remains in private hands.

Another major engine of the regional economy in Western North Carolina is an organization called HandMade in America. With a goal to become the



The picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains are the defining natural feature of the Asheville region.

“center of handmade objects in the U.S.,” HandMade in America serves as a support system for the region’s crafts industry. The 10-year-old organization does this by developing entrepreneurial strategies for crafts artisans and promoting community tourism throughout the Blue Ridge Mountain region.

HandMade in America has developed trails, tours and adventures through initiatives that focus on bonding visitors with craft, people, and place. “The magic is in the making,” said Executive Director Becky Anderson, adding that it is very important for them to be authentic and stay true to their roots. They also believe so strongly in the value of collaboration that one of the organization’s guiding principles is to always “partner with like-minded organizations,” according to Anderson.

Conclusion / Recommendations: Bringing Home Good Ideas

As we studied their community from various perspectives, some common themes emerged as key factors in Asheville’s success. First, they have strong leadership in place at various institutions ranging from the newspaper to the school district to their regional organizations. Asheville leaders described themselves as people who say, “we can do this” and then they proceed to do it. Along with this ‘can do’ spirit, they have very high expectations for their community.

Among these strong leaders there is a sense of collaboration and partnership that prevails. In fact, leaders in the Asheville region place a premium on working together. At Asheville City Schools, this means they focus on community outreach and parental involvement. At HandMade in America, it means they place an absolute prerequisite on partnership with other organizations.



Standing on the steps of the historic Grove Park Inn are members of the Springfield area delegation.

Leadership, collaboration and high expectations have brought success in the areas of downtown revitalization, public education and regional economic development. It was obvious that those we spoke with shared a collective sense of pride in what they have achieved together.

As we take a look at Springfield, leadership and collaboration are important strengths here as well. The recently released *Community Focus* report highlights the meaningful level of collaboration and coalition building that exists in Springfield and Greene County. With several key leadership positions at local institutions being filled in the next couple of years, it will be important to find new leaders who will embrace and continue the collaborative spirit that exists in our community.

Our delegation returned from Asheville with a sense of gratitude for our community’s visioning process, diverse economy, and competitive cost of living and doing business. Additionally, the positive achievements of Springfield Public Schools are put into greater perspective when we realize that per pupil expenditures in Springfield are half those in Asheville. We also have a renewed appreciation for the downtown amenities we enjoy such as Jordan Valley Park, the Expo Center, Hammons Field and our performing arts venues. These are the types of facilities that Asheville leaders told us they would like to have in their community.

The Asheville visit also instilled a sense of what is possible in terms of future opportunities for improvement in our community. Two general areas of Asheville's success should be guidepost goals for the Springfield region:

- Seeking increased financial and community support for public education; and
- Continuing the momentum to make Springfield's center city even more of a vibrant destination for residents and visitors.

The community leadership visit also highlighted a specific possibility for our region to consider. The national heritage designation has been very beneficial to the Blue Ridge Mountain region and many participants agreed that the Ozark Mountain region might also benefit from such designation. We believe this is a concept that merits further exploration.



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