



COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP VISIT 2022 NORTHWEST ARKANSAS



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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS: A REGIONAL APPROACH



In Northwest Arkansas, it is not often clear where one city boundary ends, and another begins. And as the 82 participants on the Springfield Chamber's 2022 Community Leadership Visit to the NWA region learned, that has become the point.

Within Northwest Arkansas, commerce, tourism and investment thread through Bentonville, Rogers/Lowell, Siloam Springs, Springdale and Fayetteville. Each city and the surrounding communities maintain their own unique identity and are significant economic drivers in the state.

But decades ago, private sector leaders realized that the future success of the region did not lie in any individual community; instead,

each one plays a collective role in maximizing the strength of the entire region to support the area's growing demand for a strong workforce.

And this approach to strategic growth has paid off tremendously. The region known as Northwest Arkansas (NWA) is now a leader in the competition for jobs, talent and economic growth.

They are doing so with one brand and identity, and this booming region has no plans to slow down.

From 2013 to 2018, the region grew by 2.9 percent - higher than state and national averages. They now boast population growth equating to 30 new regional residents each day (*U.S. Census Bureau*). Over the past 11 years,

the Northwest Arkansas MSA has grown by 24.7 percent in comparison to the Springfield MSA's 10.3 percent.

This regional growth, spurred in part by its "Life Works Here" brand and approach, stands out from the rest of Arkansas. NWA is consistently identified as one of the top places to live, work, and play. The region was recently rated as the seventh best place to live in 2022 (*U.S. News & World Report*), the 21st most dynamic metro (*Heartland Forward*), the eighth best-performing large city (*Milken Institute*) and sixth for fastest growing cities in America (*Virtual Capitalist*).

The region is also home to three Fortune 500 companies - Walmart (#1), Tyson (#81), and J.B. Hunt (#311)

– and the private sector has led the region’s growth with robust capital investment, talent attraction efforts and job creation.

While there is healthy competition for jobs, businesses, people and investment among the individual communities, local leaders recognize that the growth of the region benefits each of their areas.

Bentonville has leaned into the phrase, “Everyone is Welcome Here” to brand themselves as a travel and talent destination. Through significant investment over the last ten years, Bentonville has recruited quality talent from all over the world to support the strong private entities in the area. The global Walmart Home Office is headquartered in Bentonville, and many business, community and philanthropic leaders have led the charge in this area to create a workforce destination. Through vision and investment, Bentonville benefits from world class amenities such as the Crystal Bridges Museum of Modern Art, walking and bike trails, The Momentary, and more on the horizon, including the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine.

Rogers/Lowell has turned what was once a self-described “sleepy bedroom community” into a destination for commerce and hospitality. The area showcases a revitalized downtown, the Pinnacle Hills Promenade shopping area with high-end retail, a growing live music scene attracting top talent, and strong community pride.

“We’re the downtown of Northwest Arkansas,” said Raymond Burns, president of the Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce.

Siloam Springs sits on the Arkansas and Oklahoma border and is rich in history and education. It boasts local amenities and several industries, including the arts, agriculture, and its claim as the region’s poultry-hub.

Fayetteville is often described as both “funky” and one of the catalysts behind

the growth and success of the region due to the presence of the university. The University of Arkansas anchors the southern end of the region with its robust education and research opportunities, expansive offerings within the entrepreneurial arena, efforts behind innovation and next-generation mobility, and a dynamic healthcare sector.

Springdale sees itself as the melting pot of Northwest Arkansas. The city focuses heavily on food manufacturing, has the most diverse population in the region at 53 percent racially and ethnically diverse (*Northwest Arkansas Council Diversity Report, 2022*), and maintains the largest public school district in the state with nearly 22,000 students.

“Our identity is tied to the diversity of employment,” noted Bill Rogers, Springdale Chamber of Commerce president.

The Razorback Greenway physically connects many of the unique communities in NWA through a walkable and bikeable pathway that acts as a ribbon of commerce, prompting business growth and connecting people and attractions through the state’s outdoor assets.

This physical connection extends into the regional mentality, with one significant strategy in common: what

is good for one city is good for the region.

Mike Malone, vice chancellor for economic development at the University of Arkansas and a deeply rooted community leader, is proud of the area’s regional evolution.

“One of the greatest growth stories over the last 30 years in the United States is this region,” Malone said.

However, this area did not always harmonize in the way it does today.

This spirit of collaboration has been cultivated in large part by the Northwest Arkansas Council. Founded in 1990 through private sector collaboration, this group was, and continues to be, a spark behind the momentum and shared regional vision. And for an organization focused on regionalism to generate and maintain success, Malone, the Council’s president and CEO for ten years, explained, “there must be something in it for everyone.”

This spark was part of the early conversations among private sector leaders when they set out to plan the future of the region. It all started with an airport, five miles of trails and a collaborative vision.

NWA Growth Data

- \$3.365 billion in regional GDP growth since 2015
- 16.4 percent increase in Median NWA household income since 2019
- Regional unemployment rate lower than the state and national average
- 2.9 percent business establishment increase from 2016-2021, higher than the state of Arkansas



IT BEGAN WITH FIVE MILES OF TRAILS

It may come as a surprise that Bentonville is the trademarked “Mountain Biking Capital of the World.” But for those in the community, it is no surprise that Northwest Arkansas has turned a passion for biking and the outdoors into a regional brand. The biggest surprise may actually be how this designation came to exist.

The bold “Mountain Biking Capital of the World” declaration was a self-proclaimed designation that began as an idea from the private sector.

Tom and Stuart Walton, grandchildren of Walmart’s founder Sam Walton, realized the significance of Northwest Arkansas’ geographical location and terrain. Led by their passion for mountain biking and a desire to create a sense of place they felt was lacking from their hometown, they set out to make investments in the trail system.

Thus, five miles of Slaughter Pen trail was built and opened for use in 2007.

By 2017, over 100 miles had been added and millions of dollars invested. The number of avid bicyclists who had eyes on Arkansas began to grow rapidly.

Phases two and three expanded this trail system within the City of Bentonville, including connections to their downtown, and to other communities. A significant turning point for the region occurred in 2016, when the International Mountain Bicycling Association chose Bentonville for the IMBA World Summit, a premier event for hundreds of mountain bikers participating from across the globe.

“This is when mountain biking went from recreational to an economic development tool,” explained Gary Vernon, senior program officer for the Walton Personal Philanthropy Group/ Walton Family Foundation.

The commitment continued when, in 2020, the Coler Park Mountain Bike

Preserve opened as an area dedicated solely to providing mountain bikers world class trails to ride. This was also the year Bentonville became the trademarked Mountain Biking Capital of the World.

Today, Explore Northwest Arkansas reports over 250 miles of intertwining bike trails within the Northwest Arkansas Region.

The initial investment in outdoor assets has paid off, evidenced by the individuals and families who travel to the area from around the world for the regional trail system. This buildout has led to millions of dollars flooding into the community from outdoor enthusiasts, including **\$137 million in annual benefits to the economy, \$85 million in health-related benefits, and over 90,000 annual mountain bike tourists visiting the region** (Walton Family Foundation, 2018).

The economic impact continues to expand outside of tourism as well. The region supports industry events that draw worldwide crowds and businesses that cater to outdoor biking enthusiasts. NWA has capitalized on its status as the place for mountain biking, and the community is reaping the benefits.

Erin Rushing, NWA Trailblazers executive director, has provided both visionary leadership and boots-on-the-ground support for trail design. NWA Trailblazers is a non-profit organization that designs and develops multi-use trails for cycling, running, walking and most importantly, discovering the beauty found across Northwest Arkansas.

Ultimately, Rushing and others knew that for trails to provide a significant return on investment, they must be properly designed, built and maintained – and just as importantly, adequately funded.

David Wright, Bentonville Parks and Recreation director, explained that after seven years of maintaining trails at no taxpayer expense, the demand and use had grown enough to require public funding to encourage a larger return on investment.

Now, Wright says, “We don’t get a return on anything like we do our trails.”

Just five miles of trails sparked a movement that draws significant talent and has altered the culture of the region in a way most could not have imagined.

“It’s a small footprint, but a big impact,” Vernon said.

The private sector in Northwest Arkansas understands the connection between biking and trails to talent attraction. Because of this investment, many individuals now want to move to the region before they’ve even secured a job.

To further expand on the talent attraction benefits of trails, Wright encourages additional involvement beyond the private sector.

“Get public partners involved,” Wright said. “These trails were built with private funds, but they’re maintained by community and public support.”

The Razorback Regional Greenway Trail is an example of cross-sector collaboration that benefits the region. Stretching from Bella Vista south to

Fayetteville, this 37.5 mile off-road and shared-use trail was the result of more than two decades of work from the public and private sector.

Now, it acts as the backbone of the region.

“People want to live and work close to trails,” Wright said. “We’re seeing development occur solely because the property touches the Razorback Greenway.”

By weaving the Greenway through regional tourism attractions and arts and culture anchors, the trails provide ample chances to be a part of the biking experience, no matter a person’s age or skill set.

Southwest Missouri mirrors NWA in many ways. But where do we go next with our own outdoor investment?

“Figure out your story and talk about it,” Wright encouraged. “Go find your thing, make it specific to Springfield, and then commit to it.”

Vernon agrees. “If you are looking for a way to invest in your community, develop a sense of place and use that to create an economic impact,” he said.



COLLABORATION, TRUST, AND THE NORTHWEST ARKANSAS COUNCIL

Although the success of NWA cannot be attributed to one entity, the Northwest Arkansas Council is at the center of much of the region's progress.

At its formation, the Council grew from a need to economically succeed. Sam Walton, Walmart; Don Tyson, Tyson Foods; and J.B. Hunt, J.B. Hunt Transport Services, Inc., determined that for their companies to grow, and for the area to succeed, Northwest Arkansas needed infrastructure that matched their vision for the future. To do this, the Council originally focused on one priority: the need for a regional airport.

Raymond Burns, Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce president, was involved in early conversations regarding the formation of the Council and stated that the region would not be unified in the way it is today without the initial airport project.

“Public and private business leaders rallied around this project, and slowly over time, you couldn't tell who was from where,” Burns said. “We created strong, collaborative relationships, and continue to foster those today.”

With a bold vision and regional spirit, the airport was intentionally built in a location not “owned” by any one city. This project helped establish the Northwest Arkansas Council, a sustainable organization that is the primary driver for considerable forward momentum within the region.

The path to the Council's success took years of nurturing relationships, inviting key players to the table, proposing daring ideas, and backing those ideas with public and private funding.

“The region was fortunate to have iconic business leaders help bring all the communities to the table around

initiatives that were meant to bring the region forward together in a collaborative way,” Nelson Peacock, Northwest Arkansas Council president and CEO, said.

The Council's current portfolio of work is expansive and vital to the future success of the region. To this day, their priorities are driven by the needs of employers. This includes addressing workforce and infrastructure needs, encouraging economic development, working to grow the entrepreneurial sector, supporting the arts and culture scene, expanding diversity and inclusion efforts, and more – all accomplished while fostering collaboration and equality between the regional communities.

“The Council has done a great job of attracting businesses and growing a workforce,” Peacock said.

Leaders from the founding private companies remain engaged in the Council's work and have driven the regional approach.

Referencing his family's engagement in the Council over the years, as well as his love for his own community, Jim Walton shared the advice of his sister, Alice Walton, with the delegation while at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Alice Walton served as the first chair of the Northwest Arkansas Council's Executive Committee.

“Find your spark, get your community to buy in, and go big,” Jim Walton shared.

This mentality is exactly how the region has approached growth. However, while the Council has been instrumental in the development of the area, it took the residents to make these goals a reality.

Arkansas Congressman and former Mayor of Rogers Steve Womack said, “We took the city's vision and communicated it to the people, and they started buying into the idea that we can be something different.”

Encouraging residents to buy in to the shared vision and showing the community that bold goals can result in significant success continues to be a strength of the Northwest Arkansas Council.

Springfield has many strengths of its own, including a passionate community with a strong private sector, and a region with unique assets. Gary Schafer, managing partner at FORVIS, LLP and current chairman of the Springfield Business Development Corporation, sees these assets as our opportunity.

“While we don't have a Northwest Arkansas Council, we can use the resources we have to dream big, and I know the private business community can set that spark in motion,” he said.



A REGIONAL BRAND



The regional brand of Northwest Arkansas wasn't built overnight, nor was it easy for the area to overcome misperceptions about life in NWA.

But when regional leaders were faced with the need to meet workforce demands, encourage population growth, and enhance the economic footprint, deliberate steps needed to be taken to entice talent and investment. This, NWA leaders admit, was easier said than done.

"I grew up in Aurora, Missouri, and used to never come to Arkansas for anything," said Krista Cupp, vice president of community affairs for Runway Group. "This area was doing itself no favors by trying to individually brand each city."

The Runway Group, founded by Stuart and Tom Walton, focuses on making investments in real estate, outdoor initiatives, and hospitality – all with the overarching goal to move Northwest Arkansas forward. It quickly became clear that this group would play a

necessary role in giving the northern region of the state a visionary facelift.

Cupp, along with Nate Green, communications director for the Northwest Arkansas Council, worked with top marketing and PR firms, local leaders, and residents to create an identity that could meet a variety of needs and encompass the entire region. To do this, community leaders had several questions to ask themselves.

How do we rethink the way we talk about ourselves? How do we encourage investment that has a material impact on our region? And how do we remain authentic to who we are?

Green noted the NWA Council worked to ensure there was significant stakeholder input during the process to answer these questions.

Ultimately, the brand needed to both attract new talent and feel inclusive to residents who were already committed to establishing their lives in NWA.

"We have to attract the talent our large companies depend on, but we have to also make sure our smaller local businesses have the talent they need to grow as well," Green explained.

As a result, the Life Works Here initiative was developed.

Administered through the Northwest Arkansas Council, this brand is intended to capture the attention and interest of talent from across the country and highlight the region's significant career opportunities and lifestyle amenities.

"It is a business attraction mindset," Cupp explained.

This tagline included an attraction initiative launched in 2020 aimed at enticing top-tier talent to the region. The program encouraged relocation to the region in exchange for \$10,000

and a bike and targeted areas from which the region was already attracting talent. Over 66,000 individuals applied and 100 were awarded the incentive; 65 percent of the applicants had no connection to Northwest Arkansas.

However, one of the biggest benefits was the broad exposure and national media attention the region received due to the campaign, resulting in more people, jobs and growth.

The private sector notably understood the importance of attracting a strong, qualified, and robust workforce and how the vibrancy and inclusivity of their community impacted this effort.

This understanding encouraged business leaders to put weight behind growing the initiative. These efforts included partnering with airlines to encourage travel to the region, creating innovative physical “food” trucks in other markets that encouraged people to “order” the life they want in NWA, and expanding super-regional marketing efforts to reach areas where people may be looking for similar living amenities with more outdoor opportunities.

Capitalizing on the outdoor assets and boldly declaring Bentonville as the “Mountain Biking Capital of the World” further placed NWA on the national

scene for talent and business attraction.

“We want to be a catalyst as a workforce talent attraction pipeline,” Toby Teeter said. Teeter is the director of the University of Arkansas Collaborative in Bentonville, which is focused on supporting startups and the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The Collaborative’s efforts have been expedited by a brand that shows NWA can be a place for creatives to thrive.

Teeter noted that a majority of the NWA workforce is under the age of 40 years old. This talent demographic is seeking specific qualifications when considering a place to live: a life-work balance, outdoor amenities, walkability, arts, culture and more. By giving several individual cities one cohesive brand, NWA has illustrated that, as a whole, the region has these amenities and more.

April Seggebruch, chief strategy officer and co-founder of the software platform Movista, has seen real-dollar entrepreneurial benefits from this branding effort.

“Ten years ago, the idea that you could attract talent and capital to this area was almost laughable,” Seggebruch said.

But that idea is now a reality.

“A brand is a promise, and we’re really just fulfilling the promise of what it is actually like to be here,” Seggebruch said.

This promise helped her convince investors and companies to move to the area.

Northwest Arkansas leaders are equally focused on keeping talent in the region, and fulfilling this promise means creating a community for everyone to feel welcomed and included.

While the racially and ethnically diverse population in NWA has increased, ongoing inclusion and welcoming efforts will continue to shape the region’s identity.

Looking ahead, the region plans to continue to raise the bar through their brand and the many offshoots that have organically and intentionally grown from the initial campaign.

And all opportunities are on the table, because for the region, they believe life can truly work there for everyone.



A WORLD CLASS REGION LEADS TO WORLD CLASS TALENT



If Northwest Arkansas' talent attraction philosophy could be summarized, it would likely reflect the sentiment shared by Rogers-Lowell Area Chamber of Commerce President Raymond Burns.

“World class companies need world class people. The only way to get world class people is to have world class communities.”

A long-time community leader, Burns has watched the rise of the region and knows that a cohesive region is a source of opportunity for talent attraction.

“When it comes to workforce needs, regionalism is the biggest opportunity,” he said.

Graham Cobb, former Greater Bentonville Chamber of Commerce president, now with the Walton Family Foundation, agrees.

“There is power in people and power in collaboration,” Cobb explained. “Set your ego aside and work together to make your community better.”

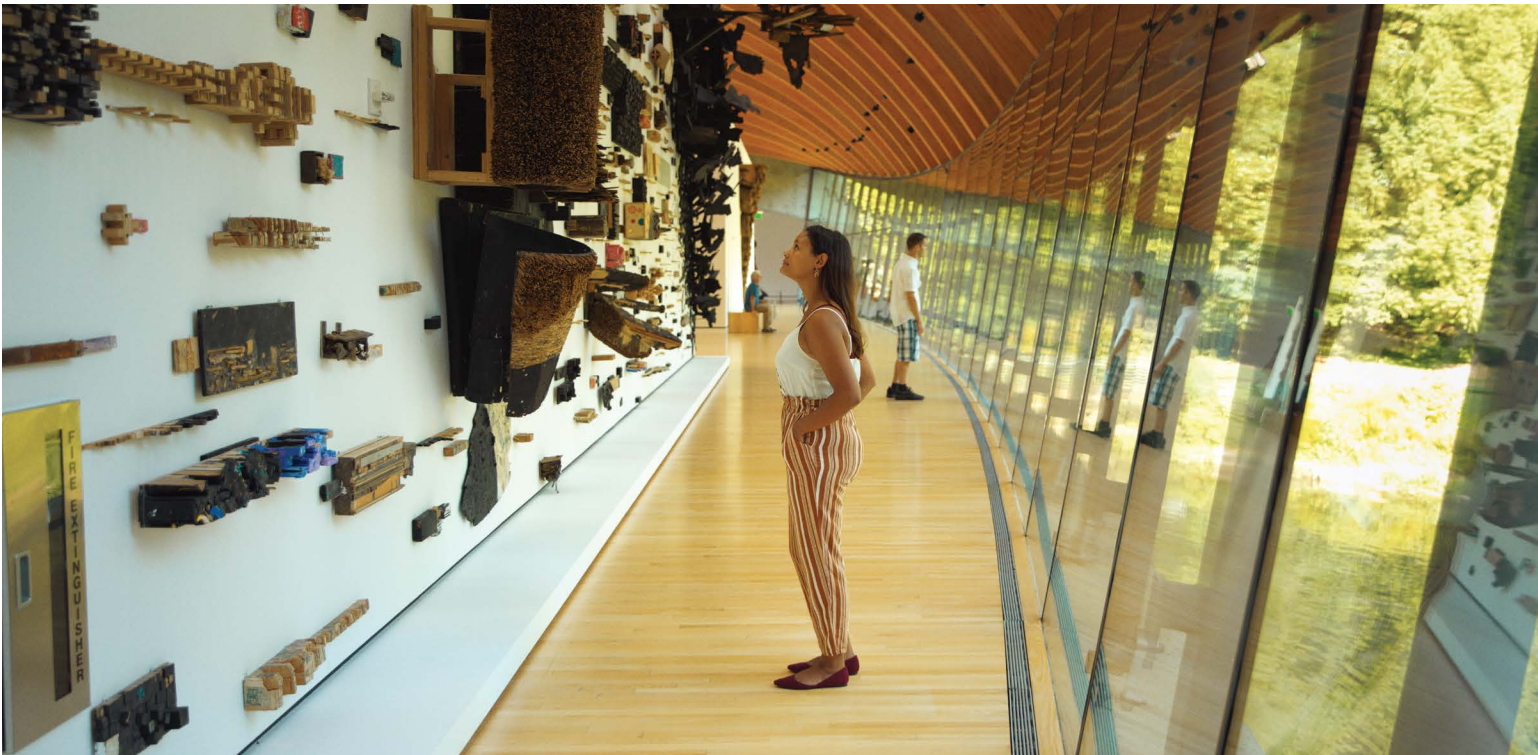
Cobb believes that Arkansas is more than just a typical state in the middle of the country, and Northwest Arkansas has proven that the state should not be counted out as a place where people

want to live, work and play.

Heartland Forward, a “think-and-do-tank” focused on changing the narrative about the country’s heartland states and improve economic performance, has used research to show the significant impact the middle of the country has on the U.S. economy.

The Heartland, defined as the 20 states in the middle of the country, produces about one-third of the U.S. GDP. This amounts to more than \$6 trillion, equivalent to the third largest economy in the world.

NWA has leveraged their impressive economic drivers to turn a fly-over



Midwest state into a true destination, attracting world class, and worldwide, talent.

In 2022, the U.S. News & World Report recognized Northwest Arkansas as the 18th fastest-growing place and one of the best places to live; LinkedIn found Bentonville to be the top city for career growth. The region created 7,500 new jobs between 2019 and 2021 and has grown the median household income by 16.4 percent during the same timeframe.

People are moving to the region for the outdoor amenities, job opportunities, and quality of life initiatives, but they are staying in part due to access to leaders and community connectivity.

Clint Schaff is a recent Los Angeles transplant who moved to the area with his wife, who is employed with Walmart, and brought his own talent to the area.

Immediately after their arrival, Schaff connected with the Bentonville community. With communication, political campaign and media production experience, he began a hip-hop radio show, plugging him into the arts and culture scene where he

found greater and more immediate connection to the community than when he lived in LA – an unexpected surprise upon moving to the area.

“One of my favorite things in the region is the community and sense of belonging,” Schaff said.

Allyson de la Houssaye, executive director of Women of Oz, was another regional transplant who found connection. She capitalized on mountain biking to create inclusivity in an area she felt was not initially accessible to everyone.

Women of Oz is a non-profit working to remove barriers to mountain biking to ensure the opportunity is accessible to all, specifically women. Although the volunteer-based organization was only established in 2019, they have had over 3,000 participants in their programming to date and host the largest women’s mountain biking event in the country.

“One of best things I did after moving here from Chicago was lean into what NWA had to offer,” de la Houssaye said.



Women of Oz is only one example of the strong sense of community and intentional inclusivity behind the welcoming mentality of Northwest Arkansas.

As an entrepreneur, April Roy found access to entrepreneurial programs, resources, and capital she never thought possible in NWA.

Roy is the founder of a company focused on providing easily accessible feminine hygiene products in times of emergency. An Arkansas native,



she was convinced to move to the northwest part of the state after spending time in the region and seeing the immense support available to her. Roy utilized accelerator and incubator programs, and the support of mentors within the local Chamber of Commerce, to grow her business.

“When it comes to entrepreneurship, I haven’t seen it done better anywhere else than NWA,” said Roy. “I went through an accelerator program, I was connected to so many amazing individuals who wanted to help me, and I want more people to have the same opportunities I have had.”

This support was also experienced by Kristin Mann, who grew up in central Arkansas but left for several years to work in the film industry – and she never thought she would come back.

“I started craving a change of scenery,” Mann said. “I thought I would just come to this area for a while and then go back to Los Angeles or Austin.”

But after receiving the Life Works Here incentive, she quickly fell in love with the region.

As a film and television producer, she was unsure what professional opportunities would be available in NWA. But what she found was an industry ripe for growth.

Through community and business support, and public interest in her work, Mann is now attracting film talent, attention, and millions of investment dollars to the area.

“I have never been a part of such an authentic community,” she said. “People want to see you succeed and help you, not to get something for themselves, but to get you where you want to go.”

Cobb claims that inclusivity is key to attracting and retaining talent in the region.

“If folks move somewhere and don’t feel like they are a part of something, they likely won’t be great neighbors and citizens,” he said. “We want people to come here and feel married to the vision of NWA.”

Even with the immense opportunity, there are still difficult issues to address that impact talent attraction, including

challenging political tensions and rapid growth that has heightened transportation issues and decreased housing options in the area.

Despite the challenges, Schaff likened the area to an “upward spiral” unlike anywhere he’s ever seen.

“This place only has a positive narrative spiral, and once you’re in it, if you contribute to it and treat it with respect, it will keep lifting you up,” he said.

Springfield can learn from these storytellers as Southwest Missouri has many advantages to celebrate.

de la Houssaye encouraged regional leaders to identify community assets and capitalize on what they can mean for talent attraction and retention – and to lean into our own regional upward spiral.

“If you give people with authentic passion the tools to grow their spark, you’ll find something much more impactful,” said de la Houssaye.

FLYING CARS AND JOBS OF THE FUTURE



Innovation and entrepreneurship are deeply rooted in Northwest Arkansas. From the founding of Fortune 500 companies and the startups they inspired, to a culture that invests in the Fortune 500 company of tomorrow, the area is prioritizing the economy of the future.

“Innovation and entrepreneurship are the lifeblood of any economy,” said Blake Woolsey, chief communication and development officer with Heartland Forward. “And right now, we’re focused on figuring out how we support this industry instead of chasing traditional economic development smokestacks.”

As the home of one of the nation’s fastest growing economies, the region is home to a vast entrepreneurial ecosystem that has grown significantly in the last several years. And this type of growth is always on the minds of regional leaders.

“You can’t get focused on the pothole of today instead of how to build the road for the future,” explained U.S. Congressman Steve Womack (AR-3).

Local leaders have collaborated on unique strategies to identify pathways for growth, and as a result, are often industry leaders in areas that some might consider “punching above their weight” for NWA.

This approach, combined with the long-standing interest in utilizing their central geographic location as a transportation and logistics hub, has produced a region ripe for further focus in this area.

In early 2022, Governor Asa Hutchison announced the creation of the Arkansas Council on Future Mobility, a public and private sector collaboration focused on attracting next-generation businesses and innovators. This fueled the bold claim that by 2030, Arkansas

will be a global leader in innovative next-generation transportation, which includes drones, driverless vehicles and flying cars.

Following this announcement, more than 250 industry executives gathered in Bentonville over the summer to host the UP.Summit to focus on the future of transportation.

Private businesses have since latched on to this opportunity to expand their use of drone and driverless vehicle deliveries.

DroneUp provides drone delivery services for businesses and has partnered with Walmart to support their last-mile delivery efforts in NWA. This equates to an average 22-minute delivery time for those who order within the drone-delivery area.

“We are focused on pleasing the end customer and getting them deliveries as quickly and efficiently as possible,” said DroneUp’s Director of Business Development Alex Buckley.

Canoo, an American manufacturer of award-winning electric vehicles, has also noticed the growth of the region in this industry and recently announced the selection of Bentonville for a 270,000-square-foot advanced industrialization facility. The company plans to eventually relocate its headquarters to Bentonville.

Chris Moore, vice president of governmental relations at Canoo, noted he is proud of the innovative technologies being brought to electric vehicles and hopes to see more progress in advanced mobility.

“This industry will be a magnet for talent and suppliers to this region,” Moore said.

This continued progress and investment in next-generation transportation is supported by the ecosystem of innovators and entrepreneurs in Northwest Arkansas, anchored by the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.

Dr. Heather Nachtmann, professor of industrial engineering and associate dean for research in the College of Engineering at the University of Arkansas, highlighted the significant role the university plays in mobility.

“We cannot just keep transporting goods the way we are right now,” Nachtmann said. “Consumers are desperate for disruption and innovation in this space and the University is building a vision to be the preeminent institution on smart mobility for both education and the workforce.”

The growth in next-generation mobility opens a world of opportunities for high-wage jobs and increased talent attraction and education opportunities.

“We’re looking for additional ways to target K-12 students and ensure our engineering education is accessible for all individuals,” Nachtmann explained.

Jeannette Balleza Collins is leading the Northwest Arkansas Council’s work in the entrepreneurial sphere to grow an

ecosystem that supports the jobs of the future.

“We want high growth, high impact communities with significant job creation,” Balleza Collins said.



Another example of the region’s innovative spirit can be seen in their efforts to expand healthcare services and education.

To meet the needs of area employers and residents, growing the area’s healthcare options became a necessity. NWA is taking strides to put the region

on the map as a healthcare destination, both through providers and education.

This includes strengthening healthcare threads through each community in the region and the recent announcement of the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine, planned for opening near the Crystal Bridges’ property in 2025. This medical education facility will offer a four-year, medical degree-granting program that integrates conventional medicine with holistic principles and self-care practices.

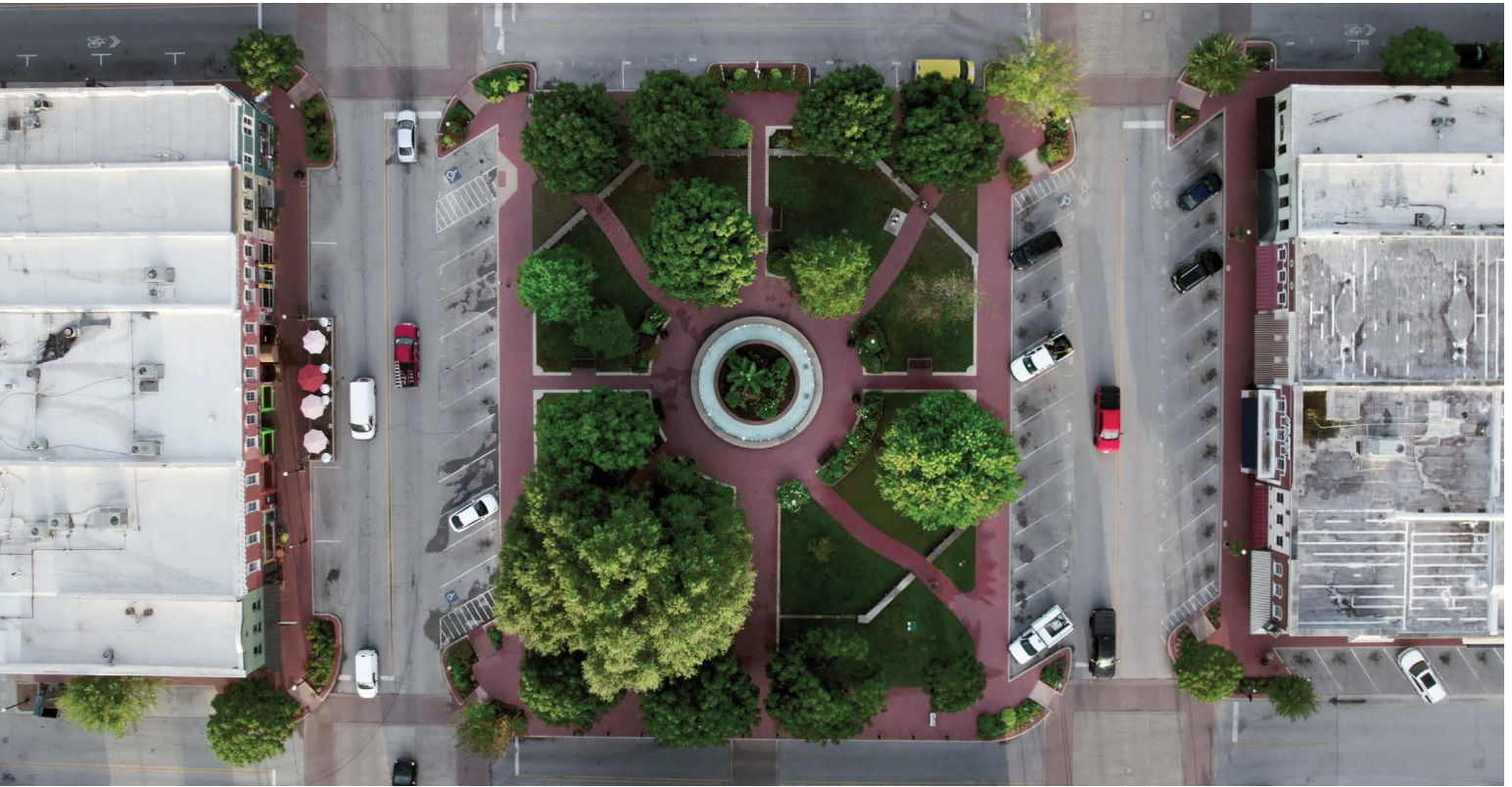
Moving forward, the region will continue to grow in industries that may be surprising to those outside of Northwest Arkansas, but this work to continue to grow and shape the local economy is part of the vision.

“Right now is a golden opportunity for states in the heartland to get in the game and pick up jobs being re-shored,” explained Moore with Canoo. “When you can get a manufacturer in an emerging industry investing in your community, that is exactly what you want.”

Springfield has significant opportunities to expand on our already thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem and efforts around innovation and jobs of the future.



THE IMPACT OF GROWTH



Northwest Arkansas is clearly in the midst of meaningful growth, prompted by intentional decisions and investments over time. With that growth comes the opportunity to utilize data to track the economic progress of the region to drive future success.

Heartland Forward found that Northwest Arkansas ranks fourth among metros with populations above 500,000 in population growth since 1990, and third in job growth from 2013 to 2018. Northwest Arkansas is second in wage gains for metros with populations between 500,000 and one million people.

This growth is fueling economic opportunity and contributing to community and individual prosperity. Since 2019, the average worker in Northwest Arkansas saw a \$3,990 gain in annual wages. According to the University of Arkansas, Northwest Arkansas accounted for *all* of the net

job growth for the entire state in the past two years.

In conjunction, regional poverty has decreased by 2.8 percent from 2019 to 2021. It currently sits at 9.8 percent, far lower than the state's poverty rate of 16.3 percent (*Northwest Arkansas Council State of the Region, 2022*).

This growth is not slowing down. The region's population is anticipated to increase by ten percent by 2026, growing from around 555,000 to 611,000 people.

As a result of this growth and intentional efforts around inclusion and accessibility, the region is diversifying. NWA's racially and ethnically diverse population has increased dramatically from less than five percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2021. The region's Hispanic population saw the largest gains, accounting for over 17 percent of the population in 2021 and forecasted

to grow to 19 percent by 2026.

Even the region's major challenges are connected to their rapid growth.

"The work of the region has resulted in significant population growth which has put a squeeze on housing stock," said Nelson Peacock, president and CEO of the Northwest Arkansas Council.

Both housing affordability and availability have the potential to threaten regional prosperity, as well as the region's comparative affordability with larger metros.

The Northwest Arkansas Council knows the region is at an inflection point in areas that have historically been assets. They are leading efforts to ensure their strengths do not grow into significant liabilities, including addressing growing housing concerns.

The Council launched the Workforce Housing Center in 2021 to spearhead housing strategy around accessibility and affordability. This includes leading communication and policy efforts, advocating for model housing policies that remove barriers and incentivize development, and increasing developer engagement.

Duke McLarty, executive director of the Workforce Housing Center and part of the Northwest Arkansas Council team, has spent his career focused on housing policy. He explained that many of the essential workers within the region, including teachers, firefighters, healthcare and manufacturing workers cannot afford to live in the communities they serve.

“We’re focused on improving the development climate creating housing options that are centrally located and accessible for people that are the fabric

of our community,” McLarty said.

Although the Northwest Arkansas Council is leading the charge on many of the area’s initiatives, everyone in NWA plays a significant role in keeping the region top of mind. The success of NWA is dependent on all parties

coming to the table to help grow current opportunities, expand assets and tackle challenges.

These efforts have paid off, and the growth mode of the region is supporting employees, employers and the entirety of NWA.



MAXIMIZING OUR REGION



During the 28th Community Leadership Visit, attendees consistently heard a narrative of positivity, passion, and a “can-do” regional attitude, all under the umbrella of one cohesive vision.

But many in the delegation found themselves waiting to hear more about regional challenges, as there was relatively little discussion about the issues that plague NWA.

“All the Northwest Arkansas leaders we’ve heard from, whether they’re coming from business or the community at large, they’re all going in the same direction in the same boat,” Jennifer Wilson, principal architect at N•FORM Architecture, said.

It almost appeared as if those who spoke to the delegation from Northwest Arkansas pre-determined the talking points they stuck to when discussing the region.

And in a way, they did.

But speaking with the same perspective was not something NWA leaders agreed upon before any panel discussion. Instead, this cohesion has been cultivated over years of investment, collaboration, communication, trust and community buy-in that has created the best advocates a region could ask for: their own citizens.

The quality-of-life amenities and forward momentum of the region have given citizens a vision to rally behind. And they are planning for much more.

The goal of these annual leadership visits is to inspire the delegation, hear from another community and determine what can be developed or implemented in our own region as a result of what was learned. And always, the delegation also walks away with a

sense of all the assets we have in our own backyard.

It became clear to participants on this trip that the Southwest Missouri region has a significant opportunity to garner community pride and, as Jim Walton challenged, dream big.

Former Siloam Springs City Administrator and current Republic City Administrator David Cameron agrees.

“We need to define our region, define who we are, and then define the goals related to that,” he said.

Cameron has seen first-hand the benefits of the Northwest Arkansas regional approach.

“They invest in who they say they’re going to be and know their ‘why,’” Cameron shared. “We need to determine what our own ‘why’ is.”

So, what is Springfield's 'why'?

The 'why' and the subsequent 'what' are important next steps for the community to consider. Part of the answer certainly includes meeting employer needs and embracing the reality that attracting talent is vital to our collective growth.

"The community conversation is driven by primary employers, and they have a conviction that it's in their interest, and in fact necessary to their business, to be driving this conversation," said City of Springfield Mayor Pro Tem Matthew Simpson.

And as mentioned, this region has gifts and unique assets that can and should be leveraged to meet our future goals, including an engaged business community, expansive outdoor assets, a strong education community, world-class talent, and the opportunity and energy to grow as a region.

Private sector leaders see tremendous opportunity to use these currently underutilized assets as a part of determining what our region's brand and identity is; we know that we indeed

have much to be proud of, but there is opportunity to better articulate and define those assets.

This part of Missouri, for instance, has an incredible opportunity with our abundance of waterways. Community leaders have often expressed that tremendous opportunity lies within this natural asset; building on what we have, specifically our waterways, may open the door for additional economic growth opportunities.

Delegation members also saw the opportunity that could exist within a "super region" in connection with NWA and other surrounding areas. Marketing and tourism efforts are already in progress to encourage this type of branding and growth, but the chance to build on the Ozarks' identity is ripe with potential. Leaders in NWA expressed interest in the "super region" concept as well and hoped to continue that conversation – just one advantage of visiting our "neighbors" for the 2022 trip.

In the end, the Community Leadership Visit to Northwest Arkansas reminded delegation members that it isn't about

duplicating the specific successes the NWA region has had. Rather, the opportunity to learn from their cohesive vision of building on their assets, investing in shared priorities, and growing a region that draws and retains top talent, are relevant and applicable for Southwest Missouri.

We may not be the Mountain Biking Capital of the World. And more importantly, we do not need to be. But we are on the precipice of opportunity to be the urban heart of the Ozarks.

2023 Chair of the Springfield Chamber Board of Directors Joselyn Baldner, Central Bank, summed it up well.

"Now it's up to all of us to figure out what story we want to write," Baldner said.

And this region has a lot to begin sharing.

"There were many takeaways from our visit to Northwest Arkansas, chief among them the need to leverage our natural resources and waterways as a cornerstone of economic growth and talent attraction. The visit also crystallized the benefits of 'regionalism' and validates the Chamber's drive for stronger regional collaboration."

**-John Oke-Thomas,
2022 Chamber Board Chair**



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417

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Brandi Bailey

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Joselyn Baldner

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Brent Baldwin

Commercial Division Manager Southwest
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David Cameron

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City of Republic, Missouri

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VP, Business Development & Shareholder
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Founder
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*The organization listed for each participant reflects their position at the time of the September trip.

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