

Arkansas Coalition for the Ouachitas Moving Forward

Hello.

I am Gar Eisele chairman of the Arkansas Regional Coalition of the Ouachitas or ARCO. The coalition counties are Scott County where the county seat is Waldron, Montgomery County where the County seat is Mt. Ida, and Polk County where the county seat is Mena.

Why the need for a coalition?

As individual counties we are relatively low populated areas but as a coalition of counties with so much in common we are much more politically relevant. While it is not a perfect comparison our coalition works much like a regional Chamber of Commerce. Do you think the 10 largest cities in Arkansas have influence in the state legislature and Congress? If our 3 County coalition was a city it would be the 10th largest city in Arkansas. That makes us more politically relevant.

Another motivation for forming our coalition is the Arkansas Economic Development Commission's focus on Regionalism. As per the Governor's Strategic Plan for Economic Development, AEDC is encouraging communities to look to neighboring communities and counties as partners. In other words if a business is looking to locate in our coalition area we will now have the attention of the AEDC in helping us land that business here. In fact we received a grant from AEDC to build our website ARCOstrong.org.

The formation of ARCO strengthens our region, fosters relationships, and increases lobbying efforts at the state and federal levels.

So with help of Professor Otto Lower at the U of A Fayetteville we formed ARCO.

And then a year ago along comes Mark Peterson and "Breakthrough Solutions". Mark suggested a broad based initiative between ARCO, Rich Mountain Community College and the U of A Division of Agriculture. It would be called "Partners for the Future." It would be an effort to create a vibrant and sustainable future for our region. We have raised over \$20,000 to fund this initiative to date.

Our incentive was in the alarming statistics.

POPULATION: Between 2000 and 2010, the population of Arkansas increased by 9.1%. During this same period, the population of the ARCO region increased by 2.1%.

JOBS: Between 2000 and 2010, the number of jobs in Arkansas increased by 2.5%. During this same period, the number of jobs in the ARCO region decreased by 11.1%. This represents a loss of 2,224 jobs since 2000.

We needed to take action.

After identifying assets common to all 3 counties such as tourism we began efforts to leverage those assets to our advantage.

Progress to date:

Polk County: A downtown revitalization project is underway. We have a “core” group of 5 people called the “Hub” and we have a larger group of downtown business owners, downtown property owners and city officials called the “Downtown Partners Group.”

Montgomery County: Is working on a proposed “Montgomery County Outdoor Market.” In February they toured the “Southwest Arkansas Farmers Market” in Nashville Arkansas to gather ideas about how to go about it.

Scott County: is working on ideas suggested by architect Ed Levy. One of which is to develop really unique signage to direct folks from Highway 71 bypass to their downtown.

I believe the “Partners for the Future” initiative has changed the conversation in our region. We now feel empowered to change things ourselves.... to make things happen. And that the only way it will happen is for us to take action.

I think the breakthrough came when members of our group partners for the future took a road trip to learn about economic development efforts in Eureka Springs, Harrison, Leslie and Mountain View.

We were fortunate to be mentored by these communities, particularly Harrison where we went into more depth about their efforts in downtown revitalization.

We not only learned how they accomplished their goals but the pit falls and bumps in the road we could expect.

Keeping this initiative moving forward is both necessary and challenging.

A couple of keys to this are leadership and vision.

But the great thing about this whole process is that we are developing new leaders and finding new visionaries.

Thank you Mark Peterson and Breakthrough Solutions for showing us how to help ourselves.

Gar Eisele

Chairman-ARCO