

GO FORWARD PINE BLUFF

Quality of Life Meeting

May 18, 2016

The committee began the May 18th meeting by reviewing the agenda and discussing what should be included in the proposed Innovation Hub in Pine Bluff. Those who were familiar with the Innovation Hub in North Little Rock and those who attended the recent tour of the facility were able to provide some insight to the committee. The list will be given to Ms. Mary Pringo.

Speaker- Sharon Priest

Sharon Priest, retired director of the Downtown Little Rock Partnership and former Arkansas Secretary of State, was our guest speaker. She was also instrumental in the revitalization of MacArthur Park in Little Rock. She provided the committee with lessons learned from revitalizing a downtown and local park, ways to entice businesses, housing and restaurants to the downtown area or to relocate, marketing, and available resources.

Priest provided the following points/suggestions:

Consider recruiting both Millennials and retirees to reside in the downtown area. Downtown living would be an ideal situation for retirees who are no longer able to drive and still able to maintain a level of independence.

Establishing anchor institutions are critical to the success of the downtown area. In Little Rock, they have the Nature Center, River Market, Clinton Museum, public library, and the two parks Riverfront Park (north anchor) and MacArthur Park (south anchor).

The Entertainer's Hall of Fame in Pine Bluff is a "jewel" and may need to be relocated to a more central area in Pine Bluff to allow it to be opened on a regular basis.

Aesthetics are an essential aspect of the downtown area. Pine Bluff should start small with landscaping, but realize that the maintenance of the flowers and trees is also important. Little Rock tried to encourage businesses to maintain and pay for the upkeep but in the end decided to use the Partnership crew after some push back. The crew watered the plants early in the morning to avoid the crowds.

Downtown Little Rock housing has gone from condominiums to an increasing number of apartments. Condominium occupancy wasn't as good, but apartment occupancy is doing better.

The Food Truck Festival has been a success for Little Rock. The first year, there were 17 trucks and 5,000 people. Last year the Festival had 25,000 attendees. The city also has Food Truck Fridays from April to June and then September to October. She suggested working with the Convention Bureau to get the festival off the ground.

The downtown area, which is now the Clinton Boulevard was desolate in the early years, with only a furniture store and a Shrimp and Oyster Bar. There was little or no reason to venture down that part of downtown. Several buildings were in bad repair. Owners were not always cooperative. The area is now, busy and showing much promise.

The city should seek both public and private dollars. The EPA Grant and Brasfield Grant might be good ones to consider. Mayor Stodola was able to secure the EPA Grant for downtown Little Rock.

Local developers may have more of a vested interest in the area. Be realistic in your dealings with your developers.

And finally, economic development is a lot of hard work. Success doesn't happen overnight.

Community Gardens and Actions Steps – Mike Collins

Mike Collins presented a report and summary on Community Gardens. The purpose of his discussion was to clarify the actual gardening process and provide tips to develop action steps or "to do" tasks. The key starting point will be having the county extension agency to analyze the soil and site, determine the availability of electricity, the purpose of the garden and the types of plants that would grow in specific areas. He indicated that while there are private and corporate sponsorships available, the projects are driven by individuals. He stressed that the same process or action steps would need to be applied to the assigned projects by the QOL's three subcommittees.

Subcommittee Report and Updates

The Things to Do Subcommittee gave an update about their last meeting. They researched the STARS Program in Ft. Meyers, the feasibility of a similar program in Pine Bluff and who the program might be housed under in Pine Bluff. The subcommittee decided that the program should be available to 6-14-year-old children. The program would use mentors, tutors, and partnering with sports leagues. Full or partial scholarships would be available for those in need of support. Sports teams and athletics would be available, but so would dancing, chess clubs, and the arts.

The Things to Do Subcommittee also introduced the Pine Bluff Challenge Program. The program is model off the Kansas City Challenge Program. There are 33 events in the Kansas City Program. Businesses are heavily involved, and they rally around the events. The Pine Bluff Challenge Program would include golf tournaments, bowling, kickboxing tournaments, and a 5K Run. The

program would be free to the public. Teams would have to solicit sponsorships and concessions would be a source of income.

The Things to Do Committee wants to establish a Freshwater Fish Tournament in Pine Bluff to be held in late June. The Tournament would include bank fishing and in the boat fishing. There will be different prizes for the different competition. There would also be a cooking contest, the amphitheater would be used for bands, and the Pine Bluff Softball Tournament would be incorporated into the event. Food Trucks and vendors would be available.

Other discussions

Discussion turn to the PARK Program being started in Pine Bluff. Committee members were interested in the status of the program that was financially supported by Pine Bluff Sand and Gravel. The Committee would like to have a guest speaker talk to the group about this program at the next meeting. Ms. Blankenship would make contact with key individuals.

The QOL Committee also had a discussion about housing and owners; it was later determined, that the Infrastructure and Government Committee had completed extensive research on the housing issue in Pine Bluff.

Surveys-Mr. Tommy May

Mr. Tommy May spoke to the committee about two separate attitudinal surveys that he was conducting with Pine Bluffians. The first survey was for any citizens not affiliate with the Go Forward Pine Bluff Program and the second version was directed at high school seniors from Pine Bluff High School. The survey for Pine Bluffians is a two questions survey, which included a ranking of issues in Pine Bluff. The high school survey included five questions about activities available in Pine Bluff. The outcome of the surveys will be discussed at a later meeting.

Next Meeting

The next Go Forward Pine Bluff Meeting will be held at Southeast Arkansas College on Wednesday, June 15th.

The Marketing Committee has requested a preliminary meeting to finalize their project.