



TASK FORCE REPORT
June 4, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Initially, a guiding observation of the Task Force was that while many individuals and some organizations have identified and articulated the problems facing downtown Hot Springs, few have offered viable solutions.

The Downtown Game Plan Task Force conducted three public meetings where they heard testimony from the folks charged with implementing downtown development, enforcing building and fire safety codes, and in implementing economic development strategies. It also heard from property owners and tenants in the downtown Hot Springs area, the mayor of Bentonville, a chamber of commerce CEO from Conway, and developers from selected Arkansas cities that have experienced success in the development/redevelopment of their respective downtowns.

Subsequent to the Task Force hearings, an online survey was conducted which determined that there is a great deal of interest in doing business, living and investing in the downtown area.

The following report contains the Task Force's significant findings as well as its recommendations to be followed by the respective organizations going forward.

This is intended to be a working document which will be updated on a regular basis as conditions change **and** recommendations are implemented.

The five recommended community goals for the continued development of Downtown Hot Springs:

Downtown must once more become the shining crown of the city and Arkansas, a space not only rich in history, but also filled with potential for the future.

Downtown is the location of city and county governmental functions and sets the tone for the decisions community leaders make toward the improvement of all of Hot Springs and Garland County.

Downtown is the social center of the community and provides expanded opportunities for retail, dining, entertainment, the arts, and other experiences that promote a high quality of life and place.

Downtown should be a mixed-use development where business, visitors, and residents co-exist in a community that thrives year round and is a welcoming gateway to guests from throughout Arkansas and worldwide.

Creative partnerships between the private and public sectors are at the core of any successful downtown redevelopment effort and require all groups working in collaboration to address issues, propose ideas and make efficient use of available resources to promote continued growth.

Recommended Action Items to be implemented.

(Immediate Action Items)

- 1) Formalize the relationship between the Hot Springs Metro Partnership (HSMP) and the Hot Springs Downtown Initiative (HSDI) to provide staff, admin, and management assistance to this organization and to provide for HSDI to furnish advisory oversight for downtown economic development activities of the HSMP.
- 2) Employ a full-time Downtown Economic Development Director under the direction of the Hot Springs Metro Partnership, a professionally managed economic development organization, who will implement the action items of the Downtown Development component of the Strategic Plan For Economic Development as well as the action items dictated in these recommendations.
- 3) The Task Force encourages the City to implement compliance of the new Thermal Basin Fire District Ordinance with expressed flexibility to those property owners who are working to meet the new requirements. It wishes to also compliment the City of Hot Springs officials and staff who are charged with enforcing the new ordinances and acknowledge that this activity will lead to a safer and more vibrant downtown.
- 4) Pursue financial assistance and expertise from the EPA, FEMA, the US Congress, and appropriate Arkansas agencies to take actions to prevent possible future natural disasters in the downtown area. The potential for natural disasters in future years includes but is not limited to floods, rock and dirt slides, and others as evidenced by slides and flooding in recent years. Be wary that prevention is most often less expensive than repairs and reclamation following a major natural disaster.
- 5) Pursue continuing growth of programs and funding for the Hot Springs National Park via the National Park Service.
- 6) Create a Downtown Investment Fund that will be funded by investing stockholders. The Fund will be formed to enable the purchase, management, remodeling, development, leasing, and sales of selected properties located within the boundaries of downtown Hot Springs.
- 7) Begin regularly scheduled forums for downtown property owners and tenants to share thoughts and ideas. Use this as a forum to detect issues

that may need to be addressed and remedies pursued by DHSI, the Chamber, and other organizations.

[Year One Action Items]

- Through a Facilitated process, prioritize a set of downtown visitor, resident, and business attraction projects such as a performing arts venue, a public "hot springs" pool, a Plaza entrance to ASMSA, and others, and pursue implementation of them methodically to enhance customer traffic in downtown. Pursue the public funding required for the design, construction, management, and maintenance of these projects.
- Make ASMSA an anchor at the north end of Central Avenue. Work with the Chamber's Government Affairs Committee to enhance the relationship with the University of Arkansas, the Arkansas State Legislature, and the Arkansas Governor's office to provide for additional funds and additional programs for ASMSA. Coordinate new signage for ASMSA through the City of Hot Springs, Garland County, and the Arkansas Highway Transportation Department. Begin a strategy to demolish the former St. Joseph's Hospital and to develop the "Majestic Property" to the benefit of enhancing the front door of ASMSA.
- Develop a working relationship with the Arkansas Career Training Institute (ACTI) to explore opportunities to enhance their presence in the downtown area and to protect the integrity of the historical significance of the building.
- Design, print, and distribute a Guide to Investing in the Rehabilitation and Redevelopment of Downtown Buildings. Included in this publication should be all of the City of Hot Springs building guidelines, permits, and rules for occupancy and use of the remodeled buildings and signage.

In 2011, the HSMP commissioned TIP Strategies, an Austin, Texas economic development strategy consultant to formulate a Strategic Plan for Economic Development for Garland County. The plan contains four primary elements, one of those being Downtown Development. The Task Force validates and endorses this plan. Further, the Task Force recommends that the plan be reviewed by the DHSI on an annual basis and revise the elements as deemed necessary. The Downtown Development element of the plan should fall under the purview of the Full-time Downtown Development Director.

STRETCH GOALS

This section includes great ideas submitted by citizens - including property owners and downtown tenants - during the Task Force's hearings, on a blog at the City of Hot Springs website, and in subsequent conversations and correspondence. These are goals which don't presently fit into the Task Force's immediate goal structure, but may ultimately be incorporated into the work of the Downtown Hot Springs Initiative, the Greater Hot Springs Chamber, the Metro Partnership, the City of Hot Springs and other organizations. They are organized into three categories:

- 1) **Planning & Policy**
- 2) **Infrastructure**
- 3) **Amenities**

1) **PLANNING & POLICY:**

Update development processes, zoning codes, and land use plans to support downtown redevelopment.

Develop policies and incentives to promote urban housing, including zoning changes and tax abatements.

Work with building owners to conduct a survey of available space within the downtown area to determine available, unoccupied space that could be converted to loft-style housing.

Identify parcels of land that would be suitable sites for infill development.

Create a corridor plan along Central Avenue to connect Oaklawn to downtown.

A tax revenue source should be created to pay for specified voter-approved downtown infrastructure projects which "Sunsets" as projects are completed.

Create an overlay district to encourage reinvestment in buildings within a new downtown innovation district.

Create a technology infrastructure grant program.

Support the development and attraction of software firms to Hot Springs.
Attract destination retailers to downtown Hot Springs.

Coordinate convention center activities with downtown redevelopment initiatives.

To secure needed lands and construct new parking structures, a Downtown Parking Authority should be established as a bonding and management agency. In their analysis of downtown parking needs, the Parking Authority should also study alternatives for vehicular and pedestrian traffic in the downtown area.

A methodical signage plan should be put in place to create a system and a consistent modern look that will identify and direct tourists to major attractions throughout the city.

To help identify residents of downtown, parking permits should be issued to occupants of apartments.

Hire more City staff to address blighted areas with assertive efforts to make the buildings safe and unavailable to vagrants.

Reviving downtown Central Business Improvement Districts #1 and #2 to fund needed improvements in those areas should be explored with affected property owners.

Downtown merchants should be encouraged to adopt a uniform schedule of business hours.

Investigate Tax Increment Financing (TIF) opportunities.

Work with the Visit Hot Springs office and Oaklawn to create more cross promotions aimed at tourists visiting both areas.

Work with the National Park Service to find developers for vacant bathhouses.

2) INFRASTRUCTURE

Identify a location or structure that can be identified as a community gathering place for outdoor art exhibits; outdoor performances, cook-offs, registration for tub racing, etc. where the public can gather in a sheltered yet outdoor environment.

Negotiate with the Federal Government to acquire the property at Central & Reserve where the Federal Building sits for use as a gateway city park.

Explore the development of a transportation system linking downtown to Oaklawn and Lake Hamilton.

Open Whippoorwill Avenue behind the buildings on the west side of Bathhouse Row to relieve traffic from delivery vehicles.

Designate true bike lanes through the downtown area.

3) AMENITIES:

Negotiate with nearby College Theater departments to create a Summer Stock program in Hot Springs, using the Muses performance venue on Orange Street and ASMSA for housing.

Build a performing arts center for concerts and events.

Create an open-air public thermal water pool.

Bring back the historic reproduction trolley cars.

Work with the Clinton Library to sell their land on Lake Hamilton and develop the area around President Clinton's boyhood home on Park Avenue.

Open up part of Hot Springs Creek to create a "river walk" area.

Work with nationally recognized entertainers to open music show theatres.

Create new music festivals and better support the existing festivals.

Create a "splash park" in the downtown area.

APPENDICES

- A) Task Force Members
- B) Minutes from Public Hearings
- C) Comments from Blog Site and Comment Cards
- D) Online survey results
- E) Map of downtown Hot Springs