



BAXTER COUNTY FORWARD  
**AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
BLUEPRINT AND ACTION PLAN**

**MAY, 2019**



**UofA**  
DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE  
RESEARCH & EXTENSION  
*University of Arkansas System*



## BREAKTHROUGH SOLUTIONS —

Equipping Communities to Become Vibrant & Sustainable  
in the 21st Century Economy

The Breakthrough Solutions program is a partnership program of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture with the purpose of equipping communities and regions in Arkansas to be vibrant, sustainable and resilient in the 21st century economy. The program supports communities and regions as they plan for and take action, has 20 Breakthrough Solutions partners and holds an annual conference. Baxter County Forward is a terrific example of pro-active, visionary leaders who are demonstrating that:

- Citizens and community leaders can really make a difference in their communities.
- An asset-opportunity mindset is effective to move toward action.
- Communities that come together and take action will be the ones that succeed in the long term, because they generate and attract resources.

Breakthrough Solutions provides a community or county with:

- A way to take a fresh look at their community – challenges and asset-based opportunities from several perspectives.
- A process to prioritize key issues and opportunities for their community.
- The opportunity to receive follow-up technical assistance from of the University of Arkansas Systems Division of Agriculture and Breakthrough Solutions Partners.

For more information about the Breakthrough Solutions program and partners, go to <http://www.uaex.edu/business-communities/strategic-planning/breakthrough-solutions.aspx>.

# BAXTER COUNTY FORWARD AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BLUEPRINT AND ACTION PLAN

## OVERVIEW

Baxter County is known for its beautiful lakes and rivers, many opportunities for outdoor recreation, natural beauty, and high quality of life. It attracts visitors from all around the country, many of whom return to live and retire. Yet in spite of these advantages, major forces and trends impacting rural America – urbanization, globalism, and the rise of high tech centers, draw people away from rural areas, including Baxter County. This dynamic is felt across the state, as 2/3 of Arkansas counties are experiencing population decline, according to the most recent Census estimate. So Baxter County is experiencing a population decline.

The pace of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is increasing, and what worked well even 5 years ago may not be working as well today. To respond to this challenge, it takes pro-active leaders who engage their citizens to develop a strategic direction and action plan that will enable them to succeed in this new environment. And that is what is happening in Baxter County.

Through discussions with members of the community, the Mountain Home Area Chamber of Commerce engaged the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Breakthrough Solutions Program to lead an action planning process in our area to address challenges this decline could mean. From there, Baxter County Forward has emerged as a broad-based community initiative for our whole county - public, private, non-profit sector, key leaders of the area, and the citizens of Baxter County. We seek to support existing organizations and a prospective economic base, and be inclusive of all initiatives that are healthy for Baxter County.

## MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose of Baxter County Forward is to assess the total community and to bring together the best ideas from throughout the community to set goals and strategic initiatives to move forward together.

## BAXTER COUNTY FORWARD STEERING COMMITTEE

A Baxter County Forward Steering Committee was formed, and the steering committee identified these core values to express throughout the development and implementation of a blueprint and action plan:

- Creativity, seeking breakthroughs that will move us forward
- Being pro-active, with a can-do attitude
- Serving as a catalyst that brings people together to make things happen

A series of working sessions took place from October 2018 through April 2019, and included a community survey to identify the concerns and issues of Baxter County residents.

## COMMUNITY SURVEY

In October and November of 2018, Baxter County Forward conducted a community survey, with 538 responses. When asked to prioritize the most critical issues or greatest opportunities facing Baxter County, they identified these issues:

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1) Drug abuse and crime                             | 7) Retail development       |
| 2) Higher wage job recruitment                      | 8) Entrepreneurship and     |
| 3) Youth and family activities                      | small business development  |
| 4) Education and workforce development              | 9) Tourism development      |
| 5) Broadband / high speed internet                  | 10) Downtown revitalization |
| 6) Preserving our environment and natural resources |                             |

**From these priorities, these action teams were formed:**

- Business and Industry
- Drugs
- Education and Workforce Development
- Funding and Finance
- Quality of Place
- Retirees and Retiree Attraction
- Tourism, Marketing, and Branding



When asked what words best describe the personality of Baxter County, respondents identified these words:



## BAXTER COUNTY FORWARD LEADERSHIP TEAM

**Co-Chairs:** Jeff Pipkin and Christy Keirn

**Communications Chair:** Angela Broome

**Action Team Co-chairs and Chairs:**

- Business and Industry - Jeff Pipkin and Kate Wright
- Drugs - Jamie Leach
- Education: Dr. Jake Long and Janel Cotter
- Funding and Finance - Dr. Robin Myers
- Quality of Place - Jeff Quick and Ashley Havens
- Retirees & Retiree Attraction - Jim Whalen
- Tourism, Marketing, & Branding: Christy Keirn and Denise Weber

**Baxter County Extension Agent – Staff Chair:** Brad Runsick

**Breakthrough Solutions Program, University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture**

- Dr. Mark Peterson, Professor of Community and Economic Development
- Emily Smith, Community Development Associate



## ACTION TEAMS, GOALS, AND STRATEGIES

### BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY ACTION TEAM

**Co-Chairs:** Jeff Pipkin and Kate Wright

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known as A TREMENDOUS PLACE TO START OR OPERATE A BUSINESS because of its supportive business climate, services, and 21<sup>st</sup> century infrastructure?**

### SHORT TERM GOALS

- 1) Develop process for updating available buildings and sites.

### FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. The Chamber of Commerce will develop a business retention and expansion program to support existing businesses to insure that no existing manufacturers close or reduce operations without the community doing everything possible to exist.
  - a. Chamber economic developer will schedule at least annual meetings with all existing industry's management teams to learn as much as possible about each company and their challenges.
  - b. Chamber will keep a database of collected information and continually review to be aware of changing trends and opportunities.
  - c. In response to potential business closings, create a Business Transition Committee to help that business transition to a new owner rather than close and lose that business.
  - d. Continue to maintain and publicize a comprehensive listings of jobs available in the Baxter County area on the Chamber website.

2. Complete the Competitive Communities Program through the Arkansas Economic Development Commission.
  - a. Chamber will identify the types of industries that are a good fit for Baxter County and develop a plan to effectively recruit those industries to the area.
  - b. Conduct recruiting trips, attend, and possibly exhibit at, industry trade shows, participate in site consultant events organized through the AEDC and the Southern Economic Development Council (SEDC), and host site consultants.
  - c. Develop and implement a new marketing strategy, including increasing social media presence.
3. The Chamber of Commerce will work closely with city and county leaders to create a comprehensive 21st century infrastructure development plan.
  - a. Work to extend water and sewer services beyond the city of Mountain Home.
  - b. Improve broadband connectivity throughout the county by finding funding sources to assist providers in running fiber and improving wireless coverage. (Possible funding sources: Delta Regional Authority, USDA, EDA, AEDC, ADFA.)
  - c. Work with city to enable citizens to pay water bills on-line.
4. ASUMH, MHHS, the Chamber of Commerce and other interested parties will work together to develop a business incubator and maker space to nurture small businesses and entrepreneurs.
  - a. Develop this incubator in conjunction with ASUMH's existing School of Business and Technology Center.
  - b. Connect with ASU's Innovate Program, that has a mobile maker space.
  - c. Continue to provide general, technical and financial assistance to small businesses and entrepreneurs, working with the Arkansas Small Business Technology and Development Center.
5. Support retail development in Baxter County.
  - a. Chamber of Commerce work closely with owners of existing shopping centers and local commercial realtors to develop a database of available buildings and space to house retailers.
  - b. Form a committee of local retailers to develop a 'shop local' campaign that will run continuously by seasons.



# DRUGS ACTION TEAM

**Chairperson:** Jamie Leach

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known as THE COMMUNITY THAT IS DOING THE BEST JOB OF ADDRESSING THE DRUG PROBLEM in the whole state?**

## SHORT TERM GOALS

- ▶ 1. Support the MHHS East #BeTheChange initiative.
  - a. Celebrate the initiative the students have taken to highlight addiction and recovery, including a testimonial and informative video series
  - b. Partner with the students to create a Community Awareness Event focusing on local resources, on May 11th, 2019.

## PURPOSES:

- a. Bring awareness to drug problem
- b. Celebrate recovery!
- c. Inform community about available resources
- d. Provide hope for those suffering
- e. Build strong network of recovery providers

## KEY ELEMENTS:

- a. Partner with Music on the Square on Friday, May 10th, to announce event
- b. On May 11th, host a Community Resource Awareness Event to include recovery- focused vendor tables, live music, and free food
- c. Integrity First Bank will provide hot dogs and BRMC will supply bottled water
- d. Viewings of EAST documentaries focusing on substance abuse and recovery issues
- e. Live music from Isaac Helm and band on the south side of the square

- ▶ 2. Continue working with the MHHS East initiative through the 2019-2020 school year to develop a brand and online presence for the awareness movement
  - a. Create logo/brand design for the Regional Recovery Network
  - b. Create monthly topics (mental health, addiction, etc.) to promote on a recovery-based Facebook page
  - c. Develop an online catalog of all local economic/treatment/recovery resources
  - d. Partner with annual Drug Awareness week at the schools

- ▶ 3. Work with local businesses and recovery/treatment centers to create Recovery Friendly Workplaces
  - a. Visit with TLHRA to discuss ideas
  - b. Options for eliminating criminal record check boxes on employment applications, “Ban the Box”
  - c. Discuss offering treatment to employees and review EAP offerings

- ▶ 4. Move five women between the ages of 20-50 years old to recovery, housing, jobs that pay above minimum wage, and a healthy lifestyle
  - a. Partner with Serenity and Gamma House
  - b. Partner with local employers
  - c. Partner with ASUMH
  - d. Partner with Workforce Development
  - e. Partner with treatment facilities and counseling, among others

## FIVE YEAR GOALS

- ▶ 1. Develop an effective, local recovery pathway
  - a. Short term and long term treatment options
  - b. Trained case managers assigned to clients
  - c. Explore partnership opportunities with established ministries/organizations and local industry
  - d. Explore funding/grant opportunities
- ▶ 2. Continue to bring awareness, celebrate successes and create solutions for other identified gaps/needs as they arise



# EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Jake Long and Janel Cotter

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known for its MOTIVATED, SKILLED WORKFORCE that came from the great educational programs and training available through Mountain Home Public Schools and ASUMH?**

## SHORT TERM GOALS

1. Expand job fairs, career expos, internships, and mentoring programs to lower grades to encourage MHHSCA and ASUMH students to remain in Baxter County after their graduation is complete
2. Look at new pathways relevant to our area
3. Align skills and pathways
4. P-16 Vocabulary - standardize
5. Create workforce development magazine that highlights local business and industry

## FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. Create and implement P-14 (MHPS & ASUMH) essential knowledge and workforce skills vocabulary, competencies, or standards for every grade level and create MHPS Graduation Profile:
  - a. Critical Thinking & Problem Solving
  - b. Communication
  - c. Collaboration
  - d. Creativity & Innovation

2. Reestablish key planning structures - Align skills and pathways in 6th-12th grades + ASUMH Technical Center to plan career and workforce development

- a. Steering Committee
- b. Building Leadership Team
- c. Business Advisory Board
- d. Career & Technical Education (CTE) Advisory Board
- e. ASUMH Advisory Boards

3. Create/ReVision/Revise new and current pathways through MHHSCA relevant to our area and workforce needs - support current pathways

- a. ReVision Keystone
- b. Require Capstone
- c. Medical Sciences
- d. Computer Sciences & Technology
- e. Family & Consumer Sciences
- f. Business
- g. Food Production
- h. Construction & Manufacturing
- i. Agriculture
- j. Engineering
- k. Law Enforcement
- l. Education & Training



## FUNDING AND FINANCE ACTION TEAM

**Chairperson:** Dr. Robin Myers

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known for its strong support of community and economic development, its creative funding and financing mechanisms, and its laying the foundation for future generations?**

### FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. Work to include all of Baxter County in the A & P Commission taxing district, which would enable additional promotion of the Mountain Home area.
2. Develop a loan fund that would be utilized by merchants in a designated revitalization district to modify their business facade.
3. Develop a “shark tank” of local investors that would review business plan options in consideration of financing/investing in start-ups.

## QUALITY OF PLACE ACTION TEAM

**Co-chairs:** Jeff Quick and Ashley Havens

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known for a REALLY HIGH QUALITY OF PLACE that attracted people from all over the nation to come and enjoy its amenities and unique, authentic experiences?**

### SHORT TERM GOALS - WORK UNDERWAY

1. Create a Chamber Leadership Banner.
2. Establish hanging baskets downtown.
3. Power wash businesses on the square.
4. Install benches and planters on the three sides of the square.
5. Purchase and install colored lights to light the courthouse that change each month for different causes (Pink/Peitz, Orange/Hunger, Blue/Diabetes, etc.)
6. Enhance our presence and postings on social media and the web.



### FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. Develop a master plan of downtown (Hickory St. to South Church St. & 4th St. to 8th St.)
2. Develop a master plan for parks (Hickory, McCabe, Cooper, etc.)
3. Promote Mountain Home Education Foundation Promise to prospective residents
4. Develop walking and bike trails
5. Develop a splash pad

### SECOND TIER GOALS

1. Plant maple trees around courthouse
2. Complete a mural on the east side of the Me on the Square building
3. Develop a climbing gym
4. Create a list of desired businesses for downtown area
5. Develop a driving range
6. Develop a downtown program calendar of events
7. Encourage downtown businesses to be open during Music on the Square and farmers' market

### ADDITIONAL DREAMS/IDEAS:

1. Identify all vacant and occupied buildings downtown
2. Plant vegetables in boxes/hanging pots around the square
3. Add food trucks to Music on the Square and farmers' market
4. Plant cherry trees in McCabe Park
5. Develop signage and maps for NATS buses
6. Create downtown housing and community-wide housing (\$100 - \$150K)
7. Develop off square parking and shuttles for Music on the Square and farmers' market

## RETIRES & RETIREE ATTRACTION ACTION TEAM

**Chairperson:** Jim Whalen

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known as THE BEST PLACE TO RETIRE in all state, regional, and national media?**

### FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. Apply for American Association of Retirement Communities certification, including:
  - a. Local housing availability and costs profile
  - b. Adult education resources list
  - c. Local crime profile and stats
  - d. Recreation venues (individual initiatives and sponsored)
  - e. Volunteer opportunities
  - f. Community pride and involvement.
  - g. Documentation of an active downtown center that includes retail shopping, eating establishments, and social interactive sites.
  - h. Establishing a toll free number at the chamber of commerce office (a prerequisite for AARC Certification)
2. Develop a retiree brochure (now being developed)
3. Obtain designation on the Arkansas Quilt Tour
4. Work with the city of Mountain Home to establish content on their website to would appeal the retirement aged audience.
5. Work with the Quality of Place Action Team to:
  - a. seek funding from ARDOT to fund and develop a municipal bicycle trail,
  - b. pursue funding for a market and economic analysis for downtown development from UA Little Rock
  - c. establish a community center, and seek Tree City certification.

## TOURISM, MARKETING, & BRANDING ACTION TEAM

**Co-Chairs:** Christy Keirn and Denise Weber

**What would it look like if Baxter County became known as AN AMAZING TOURIST DESTINATION for people in and out of Arkansas?**

### SHORT TERM GOALS

1. Host business branding workshops for tourism businesses so they will be informed about increasing their visibility online (Google listings (6/20/19), Trip Advisor, Zomato, Yelp, etc.)
2. Create lists of things to do and update the design of them.
3. Work to coordinate calendars across the county and make the Chamber's calendar the "go to" calendar for all things happening in Baxter County.
4. Create a "pride in the area vibe" in the Chamber building with photos of the area (on TV screens or prints) and featuring of the VR guide and other resources. Move boat and Virtual Reality video into the Chamber office to showcase it when not in use.
5. Follow up on Lead Management System through Chamber website and the Arkansas.com website to determine the flow of data and follow up on those inquiries to maximize benefits for Chamber and members.
6. Develop a plan to utilize the Virtual Reality video as a digital asset, beyond the trade show tool it is currently (QR code, push out to Chamber members to share, etc.). Work with Derek Huber to create a marketing plan.

### FIVE YEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES

1. Develop a unique tourism spot on the lake: Wilderness Point - Push for state park status or a weigh-in for Game and Fish; create partnerships with ASUMH and other state agencies to bring this prime area back to life.
2. Communicate to Baxter County residents the value of tourism to the community and its economic impact.
  - a. Create PSA's about the number of visitors who come to Baxter County each year and the dollars they spend.
  - b. Did you know: 75% Corps of Engineers fee are returned to Baxter County.





3. Review information from Norfolk Lake, Bull Shoals Lake, and other data sets about who is visiting, where they come from, and the activities they participate while they are here.
4. Identify what draws youth and others here: fishing, events, tournaments, etc.
5. Explore the Vacation Relocation Guide becoming a digital asset that has monetized advertising tie-ins for Chamber.
6. Create a focus group to take a fresh look at the Brand for the Mountain Home Chamber of Commerce and Baxter County. Identify a new mark and tag line that is appealing to millennials and showcases experiential tourism opportunities.
7. Enhance Baxter County's online presence.
  - a. Review online-assessment of Baxter County from the UCA Center for Community and Economic Development
  - b. Audit all websites in Baxter County that relate to Tourism to insure they are up-to-date, linked, and share key messages with coordinated calendars (OMR, Resorts, ASUMH, KTLO, etc.)
8. Be proactive in marketing Baxter County.
  - a. Chamber of Commerce continue to host calendar for entire area.
  - b. Collectively promote events that happen in the community (Red, White Blue Festival, etc.)
  - c. Highlight the diversification of activities in Baxter County.
  - d. Increase social media feeds and share information among various organizations.
  - e. Create a monthly e-blast to tourists and create an advertising opportunity for Chamber members on it (similar to Oxford, MS tourism emails, First Security, etc.) on various topics (hiking, antiques, celebrating the 4th of July, etc.)
9. Explore the viability of a dedicated staff member for marketing (part-time or full-time) or outsourcing marketing to an agency or freelancer.
10. Be the source for all information on "What to do" for families visiting – What to do when it's raining, what to do for families who visit retirees, what to do for women while husband's fish.
11. Capitalize on the Art Odyssey tours
12. Create an App for Baxter County (EAST or ASUMH could assist)
13. Link on the Chamber's website for day trips etc. Create monetary opportunities for advertisers (Mountain View, Gainesville Mill Trail, etc.)
14. Develop niche tourism markets (historical, culinary, mountain bike, art, plein air painting, writer's workshops, etc.)
15. Continue to develop fishing tournaments for college, high school and pros.
16. Explore opportunities for content from Recreational Boating and Fishing associations, etc.

## SUMMARY

The purpose of Baxter County Forward is to assess the total community and to bring together the best ideas from throughout the community to set goals and strategic initiatives to move forward together. This Baxter County Forward Action Plan communicates our priorities and commitments to communicate to key stakeholders that we have a shared vision for the future of Baxter County, and are willing to work with partners (local, county, state and federal) to help achieve these goals. We invite you to join us to make these a reality, for the future of our children, our grandchildren, and our community.

***IF YOU WANT TO GO FAST,  
GO ALONE.***

***IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR,  
GO TOGETHER.***

*SOURCE UNKNOWN*

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like to become involved in Baxter County Forward or would like more information, contact the Mountain Home Area Chamber of Commerce:

<https://enjoymountainhome.com/>, 870-425-5111,

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