

NCARED Regional Blueprint: A Call to Action

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This Blueprint Reflects the Work of the People of the NCARED Region,
From February 2006 to August 2008, and Reflects
Visions, Strategies and Action Plans for the Eight County NCARED Region



University of Arkansas, United States Department of Agriculture and County Governments Cooperating.

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NCARED Regional Blueprint

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NCARED Regional Blueprint A Call to Action

Executive Summary

NCARED – a Region of Opportunities

It is now the year 2013. Because of new opportunities that have emerged in the NCARED region in the last 5 years, Bob and Mary Jones have been able to move back to the region to be close to their families. Bob telecommutes to San Francisco from the business and technology telecenter in his home town, while Mary recently became employed by the regional agri-tourism initiative. Their son Roger and his wife just closed on a new house, which became possible when they learned of new financing opportunities on the NCARED website. Their daughter Melinda just graduated from the NCARED youth leadership institute, and is even talking about running for office. Bob and Mary remember the plants closing back in 2006, and are thankful for the work of NCARED to make these opportunities available.

This brief story of the future provides us with a glimmer of the opportunities before us, and of the vital importance of this blueprint and the work of NCARED to make this a reality.

This regional blueprint represents the culmination of several elements:

- input and suggestions from individual NCARED board members,
- information and fact-finding meetings in each county of the region,
- workshops and working sessions with the NCARED study action teams, and
- input from Dr. Wayne Miller's North Central Arkansas Regional Profile, NCARED Region Target Industry Study and Economic Analysis of the NCARED Region.

Each of these elements – input from NCARED board members and grassroots citizens, strategic thinking and planning from study action teams and analysis of the region's economy, contribute to a deeper understanding of the region and the fresh opportunities that are before it in this new era.

Like all rural regions in our country, the NCARED region is impacted by the global forces of globalization, outsourcing and rapid technological change. These global forces are like giant waves that wash over our nation, without our consent. Communities and regions that do not see them coming, or do not take advantage of their power, are at a distinct disadvantage to those who do. Our challenge is to learn to ride the waves—to harness the power of these forces to improve the quality of life in the region and make it more competitive economically. And that is what this regional blueprint sets out to do.

Through the information and fact-finding meetings in each county, we learned that jobs, workforce issues, and quality of life were important priorities. Each of the counties also identified multiple assets that could be used to address these issues, because the NCARED region has a diverse economic base with many strategic assets. The priorities are addressed in the action maps created by leaders in the region. These include:

Jobs and Infrastructure

- Manufacturing and Industrial Recruitment
- Entrepreneurship and Business Development
- Tourism and Attracting Retirees
- Creative Economy
- Value Added Agriculture
- Infrastructure
- Technology Use

Workforce issues are addressed by these study action teams:

- Education
- Workforce Housing

Quality of life and place issues are addressed by these study action teams:

- Quality of Place
- Health Care
- Social Issues

In addition, overall leadership and growth issues were addressed by these study action teams:

- Local government
- Leadership
- Emergency Preparedness

NCARED Priorities for 2008-2009

On July 19, 2008, the NCARED board met in a retreat setting to set priorities for the coming year. Based on feedback they have received from leaders and citizens in the region, a review of the 21st Century Vision reports, and their best judgment of the challenges and opportunities facing the region, the board identified these five top priorities for the coming year:

- 1) Education**
- 2) Entrepreneurship and Business Development**
- 3) Tourism and Attracting Retirees**
- 4) Manufacturing and Industrial Development**
- 5) Creative Economy**

At the same time, the board affirmed the importance of the other issues identified through the 21st Century Vision planning process, and to encourage interested community leaders and study action teams to address them as well.

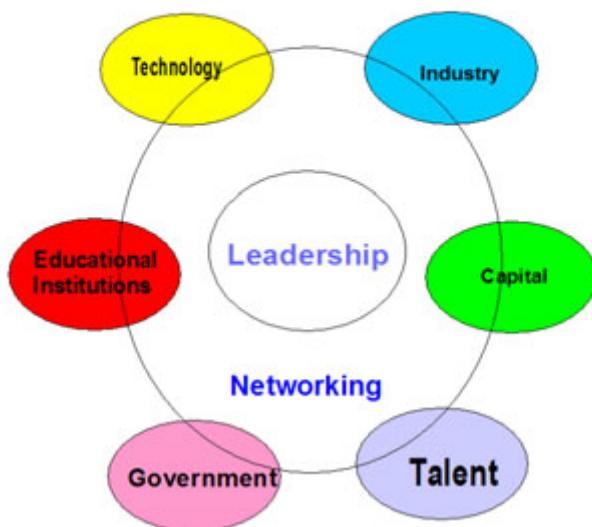
Keys to Harnessing the Forces of Change

Unlike the industrial era of the past 20 – 30 years, when industrial recruitment and attracting tourists were the primary economic development strategies of most communities, the 21st century—the knowledge-based, global economy— requires new strategies, but promises new opportunities. Here are some keys to being successful in this new era:

- a) Collaborate – working together across multi-counties supports the work of community and county development initiatives and brings more resources to bear on priority issues. A regional approach also communicates to prospective businesses that you have a much larger labor pool and customer base than a single community or county. NCARED was created to foster this collaboration, and is well positioned to do so.
- b) Clusters – are inter-related networks of core businesses, specialized suppliers, strategic business partners, professional services, skilled workforce, venture capitalists, institutions and associations, entrepreneurs and customers. Think of the rice growing and processing cluster centered around Stuttgart as an example.
 - o Because businesses in a cluster have a competitive advantage over those that are not, supporting the more complete development of your clusters is one of the most effective ways to create and retain jobs in your region. (At the same time, supporting existing businesses of all kinds continues to be important).
 - o Bringing together the key players in a cluster and engaging them in a simplified strategic planning process can lead to identifying the strategies that can lead to more jobs and greater competitive advantages.
 - o Dr. Wayne Miller identified these economic clusters as having particular merit for future growth in the region:
 - Amenity Based Clusters: tourism, retiree attraction and attracting telecommuters
 - Natural Resource Based Clusters: value added agriculture, forestry, and natural gas
 - Manufacturing Economic Clusters: plastics and rubber cluster, transportation equipment cluster and primary and fabricated metal cluster strategy
 - Retail and Service Industry Clusters: health care services

NOTE: A diagram of the key elements in a cluster follows:

Collaboration for Economic Cluster



- c) Connectivity, the Internet and Information Technologies: Broadband connectivity —high speed telecommunications— is increasingly becoming a requirement for businesses of all types. It is also essential for attracting retirees, as many retirees expect it for personal and business use. Broadband connectivity meets the need of boomers to continue to work full or part time from their new homes in the NCARED region. Finally, the Internet and information technologies provide NCARED with the opportunity to engage people in and out of the region in ways never before possible.
- d) Quality of Place – in an era where many people can live and work anywhere, creating a high quality of life and place becomes a very high priority. The NCARED region has much to build on in these efforts.
- e) Workforce Development - while many people can live anywhere they like, an increasing number of businesses move to where they find a qualified workforce. This makes workforce development a key to economic development.
- f) Traditional infrastructure - highways, airports, water and sewer continue to be needed to sustain growth in the region.
- g) Innovation – doing things in a new way, and doing new things has become one of the keys to business success in this new era and it applies to the public, private and non-profit sectors.

This regional blueprint not only includes the action maps, as well as recommendations to the board for sustaining the development process.

We leave you with these questions:

- 1) What would you do if you knew you would not fail?
- 2) If not you, who will develop this region?

- 3) If not now, when will this take place?
- 4) If not here, where?
- 5) What is holding you back? SO WHAT?

About NCARED

NCARED was formed to support collaboration and working together across multiple county borders. The (Breakthrough Solutions) 21st Century Vision initiative is the latest and most comprehensive effort to fulfill the mission for which NCARED was formed. This blueprint report summarizes this comprehensive effort, generated over two years using up to date economic data and systematic input from citizens in the region. The 21st Century Vision initiative builds upon the work that was done previously, and offers the opportunity to more effectively fulfill the mission of NCARED.

History:

- 1) Mountain Home Chamber of Commerce Industrial Development Committee
- 2) Baxter County 21st Century (1991)
- 3) Twin Lakes Economic Development Corporation (1999 Articles of Incorporation)
- 4) North Central Arkansas Economic Development Corporation (NCARED)
(2002 – Amendments made to regionalize)

The mission is:

***“To promote and develop economic growth of existing and new industry;
and to enhance employment opportunities for citizens in the area”***

The slogan is:

***“We can accomplish anything,
if we don’t mind who gets the credit.”***

Policies:

We will not:

- Encourage industrial development that is incompatible with our environmental quality
- Encourage transactions that are not beneficial to both the industry and the community
- Encourage industrial development that might jeopardize our current retirement and tourism industries.

We Believe:

- Things can be better in the community
- There is a shortage of trained and/or skilled craftsmen in the area
- The area is a great place to live, work and play
- We have the ability and the opportunity to improve
- There is a lack of unity
- Our community is inadequately and inaccurately perceived by outsiders
- There is a lack of focused leadership
- Wages are not adequate for the cost of living in this area
- Economic development is an essential community goal

Why Regional?

- Population of over 150,000 residents
- Represents a workforce of more than 54,000
- Represents a variety of land use and industrial park opportunities
- Enjoy the benefits of regional economic development

Organization:

NCARED's organization includes an Executive Director, a board of directors with 10 to 15 members, and elected officers including President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. The membership participates on committees.

Current Membership: Governments, businesses, organizations and individuals from Baxter, Fulton, Izard, Marion, Searcy, Sharp, Stone and Van Buren Counties participate through a structure with annual membership dues.

Planning Sessions:

1999 SWOT Analysis (Twin Lakes Economic Development Corporation)
2004 Strategic Planning Retreat (NCARED) at Shepherd of the Ozarks
2005 Strategic Planning Retreat (NCARED) at Ozark Health Medical Center
2006 Board Retreat at Gaston's
2007 21st Century Vision Regional Blueprint Workshop, Mt. Home Fairgrounds

Economic Summits:

2005 – Baxter County Fairgrounds, Mountain Home
2006 – Former Boeing Plant, Melbourne
2007 – Van Buren County Fairgrounds, Clinton

NCARED 21st Century Vision Core Values (From a September 2006 survey)

Our strategic visioning process should:

- Create an ongoing development process that continues as new opportunities emerge and circumstances change
- Be inclusive, seeking involvement and commitment from throughout the community
- Build on and support existing organizations and community development initiatives
- Develop leadership skills in the community
- Foster long-term vision and short-term action
- Encourage a can-do attitude
- Be a transparent process—no secrets, high trust

Planning Documents:

- Economic and Growth Survey of Baxter County Residents – 1995
- An Evaluation of the Economic Development Potential for Mountain Home, Arkansas with Special Emphasis on Site Selection for Mountain Home Area Industrial Park (Goodwin and Associates) – 1996
- Business Plan (ASU Mountain Home Small Business Management Studies) – 2003
- Strategic Plan (ASUMH Small Business Management Studies) – 2003
- “Draft” Strategic Plan (Entergy) – 2004
- Report from the People (Peterson and Rose, U of A Cooperative Extension) – 2006
- Regional Economic Profile (Miller, U of A Cooperative Extension) – 2006
- Target Industry Study (Miller, U of A Cooperative Extension) – 2007
- Economic Opportunities Report (Miller, U of A Cooperative Extension) – 2008

- NCARED Regional Blueprint – A Call to Action (Peterson and Rose, U of A Cooperative Extension Service) – 2008

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Marion County:	Gerald Hammon Steven Sanders
Searcy	Rep. Roy Ragland
Van Buren County:	Chip Ellis Linda Fisher

NCARED Regional Blueprint

Situation Statement

The eight county NCARED region is a beautiful area with many natural resources, a diverse economy and creative people. It attracts people from across the nation to visit, enjoy the many amenities and activities in the region and often retire to the area. And yet, like all rural areas of our nation, the region and its economy are impacted by the powerful forces of globalization and technology, which eliminate or move lower-skilled jobs off shore. In the calendar year 2006, six manufacturing plants closed in the NCARED region, with a negative annual impact of over \$13 million. But these forces bring opportunities as well, and leaders in the region have been very pro-active, supporting the attraction and creation of jobs in the region to make up for the loss.

The NCARED regional economy is similar to the larger Arkansas economy, although somewhat more dependent on farming and farm services. Compared to the U.S. economy, the NCARED economy is more dependent on farming and manufacturing. Both Arkansas and the NCARED region are more dependent on natural resource-based industries than is the U.S. economy. Arkansas and the NCARED region are also more dependent on manufacturing than the U.S. economy.

Assets identified in the region include:

- NCARED and other organizations actively seeking to improve the economic opportunities and quality of life in the region
- the growth in population across the region
- many natural resources, including rivers, lakes, Fayetteville Shale natural gas, forests, mountains and agricultural lands
- a temperate climate with mild winters
- golf and several other recreational opportunities
- strong culture and expertise in arts, crafts and music
- economic diversity within region
- well-defined, wide-ranging industry clusters with opportunity for growth
- shared labor markets
- five colleges that serve the region
- health care institutions that serve the region
- a growing regional identity
- a growing commitment to cooperate across the region

Challenges in the NCARED region:

- Losses of manufacturing jobs
- Shortage of skilled workers
- Young people often leave for college and don't return
- Amount spent by tourists is declining
- Number of farms is declining
- Difficulty of attracting citizens into leadership roles

- Shortage of affordable housing for working families
- Many knowledge workers can live anywhere, and choose urban centers
- Broadband is not usually available to families who live out in the country
- Low educational levels in the NCARED region
- Expense and time required to work across the eight county region

Opportunities in the NCARED region:

- Several manufacturing clusters in the region demonstrate a competitive advantage and opportunities for growth
- Movement of retirees can include early retirees and telecommuters
- Jobs available for skilled workers
- Broadband connectivity enables many entrepreneurs to live in the region and do business with the world
- Build on strong culture of arts, culture and music to create high-value visitor experiences, trails and markets for locally-produced arts and crafts, and market these to the world through the Internet
- Strong demand for value added agricultural products and experiences, including agri-tourism, agri-tainment, organic products and community-supported agriculture
- More leadership development opportunities are available than before, that equip citizens to be effective leaders in their community, county or region.
- Multiple loan programs available for families to purchase a home.
- NCARED has natural resource assets upon which they can build high quality of place amenities, thus attracting knowledge workers who want to enjoy rural life while they work on-line.
- Emerging initiatives such as Connect Arkansas have the potential to help deliver broadband infrastructure to rural areas in Arkansas.
- Increasing awareness of the importance of good education to create, attract and retain high-paying jobs.
- The Internet, web pages, conference calls, and other tools make it possible for leaders and citizens to work together across the region.

21st Century Vision Process

A Summary of Meetings, Workshops and Programs Provided to the NCARED Region:

Fall of 2005:	Initial Visits to NCARED Region – Fall of 2005
Board attendance:	Dr. Peterson and/or Ms. Rose have attended all but 3 or 4 NCARED Board meetings since the Fall of 2005. (approximately 20 meetings)
January 2006	Breakthrough Solutions presents and conducts educational program at NCARED Board retreat
January/February 2007	Assistance given to generate NCARED legislative agenda
February 2006:	Board approves Memorandum of Understanding for Breakthrough Solutions Program. (One year direct program delivery, two years indirect support)
March 2006	Ms Rose travels to North Carolina to visit with and interview staff members with the Handmade in America Program. (Information for NCARED)
March 2006	Fundraising publication produced, special fundraising workshop conducted, Mountain Home
April, May, June, 2006:	County Information Meetings, in each of seven counties High School Focus Groups in a high school in each County
May 2006	Breakthrough Solutions Conference, Brinkley Convention Center
July 2006 – present	21 st Century Vision Voice, electronic and hard-copy newsletter, implemented to keep local citizens informed of NCARED regional process. Circulation grew to 400 people. Published bi-weekly for the first year, with less frequency in the second and third years.
July 2006	Initial findings from County Information Presented
July 2006	Meeting of NCARED 21 st Century Vision Leadership Team Mountain Home
August 2006	NCARED Summit, Melbourne Attendees vote on issues from NCARED Report from the People

August 2006	Telephone conference call on recovering from job loss with Barry McKuin, Conway Co EDC Exec. Director
September 2006:	Breakthrough Leadership Skills Workshop, Stone County
	Breakthrough Leadership Skills Workshop, Baxter County
October 2006:	Harnessing IT Workshop, Marion County
October 2006	Special information meeting arranged on Business and Technology Telecenters with Guest Speaker from North Carolina
November 2006:	Asset Mapping, Networking and Collaboration Workshop, Fulton County
January 2007:	Sharp County joins NCARED – the eighth county
February 2007:	Sharp County workshop on leadership, visioning, action planning, held in Hardy.
February 2007:	Regional Blueprint Workshop, Baxter County
May 2007	Breakthrough Solutions Conference, Old Union Train Station, Little Rock
June 2007	Educators and Manufacturers Consortium meeting
July, 2007	Virtual Tourism Conference offered via Compressed Interactive Video
August 2007	Economic Opportunity Report presented at NCARED Board Meeting, Mountain Home
September 2007	Workforce Housing Information Meetings in Mountain View and Mountain Home
October 2007	UALR's SBDC announces receiving \$80K grant to deliver business training and a web portal for on-line education, exclusively for NCARED.
October 2007	NCARED Summit, Clinton
October 2007	Creative Economy Study Action Team meeting Stone County
October 2007	Sharp County Economic Summit and strategy mapping session, Cherokee Village

October 2007	Retiree Relocation Workshop, Cherokee Village
October 2007	Local Government Action Team meeting on public finance, e-government, and the Regional Mobility Authority, Mountain Home.
February 2008	Cooperative Extension Service offers its services to assist with tornado aftermath, through its "Triumph over Tragedy" program, dealing with personal trauma issues.
July 2008	Cooperative Extension Service receives grant from Extension's Public Policy Center to identify and assess amenity based businesses in the region, test potential regional brands, and measure interest in local co-branding.
Other:	Consultation with businesses in Searcy, Izard, Sharp and Van Buren Counties regarding opportunities for expansion. (2006, 2007)

21st Century Vision

A Report From The People

Based upon Inputs from Leaders and Youth in Baxter, Fulton,
Izard, Marion, Searcy, Stone and Van Buren Counties

Presented July 11, 2006

By the Breakthrough Solutions Program Coordinators
Dr. Mark Peterson and Maureen Rose
University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service

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21st Century Vision

A Report From The People

Introduction:

In March of 2006, the NCARED Board of Directors entered into an agreement with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service to conduct a 3-year program, known as **Breakthrough Solutions**, in community and economic development,.

From March through May, each of the seven counties in the NCARED region was visited at least once on the “M&M tour,” during which Dr. Mark Peterson and Maureen Rose conducted information meetings, listening to leaders in each of the counties, learning about their challenges and opportunities, dreams and visions for their communities and the region. They also met with youth ages 15 – 18 in six of the seven counties, conducting focus groups to learn how youth perceive their future in or out of the region. (A focus group has yet to be held in Baxter County)

During that time, the board chose **21st Century Vision** as the name for the process they are sponsoring over the three years of program support from Breakthrough Solutions. They sponsored a fundraising workshop for the seven counties, and prepared for the next steps.

With a regional leadership team in place, 21st Century Vision is poised to recruit and organize participants at the local level in each county. It is time to schedule workshops and action planning events for the regional blueprint.

21st Century Vision is the people of the region – the driving force for this important process. Breakthrough Solutions is the vehicle. You are in the driver’s seat. Read on to learn more about what the people in your region have said in the first three months of information-gathering.

What You Told Us:

A Summary Report Based upon Input from County Leaders in the NCARED Region

In each of the seven counties, a meeting was held to share information about the regional blueprint process being undertaken. At each meeting, county leaders were asked to share challenges and opportunities. The data collected has been processed to create a starting point for launching the action workshops. The following will discuss the key issues that arose, as well as explore some issues conspicuous by their absence.

I. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A. Jobs

In every gathering, the issue of jobs emerged as important. Concerns include:

- **Recent and anticipated loss of jobs in the region.**
- **Need more jobs that pay well.** Suggestions include attracting technology and knowledge industries and businesses. To make this happen, communities must offer a quality of life and place that will attract or grow new industries that offer at least a living wage.
- **Need more qualified workers to fill jobs.** Key issues in this area include expanding and improving workforce development, strategies to instill a strong work ethic and training for jobs that fill the need for the changing population in the region.
- **Want to keep existing jobs.** To accomplish this, business and industry must be able to compete in the global economy. Lean manufacturing methods is one way to reduce costs. Another is business retention and expansion programs.
- **Create new jobs.** See business development, below
- **Consider diversified agricultural products, value added products**

B. Business Development

- This will require multiple strategies, including business incubators and other ways of promoting entrepreneurship, growing new business and industry, and creating jobs around local assets and economic opportunities such as service jobs for retirees and tourism.

Assets in the region that were mentioned include: Fayetteville shale natural gas and supporting industries, natural-resources based industry, logging, rock, construction to provide for growing population, widening of Hwy. 65, expansive natural resources including forests, water and mountains.

Assets in the region related to workforce training and development include: ASU Mountain Home, Ozarka College, and local efforts such as a career center recently started in Van Buren County.

Challenges related to business development include securing capital to implement plans and start-up costs for new businesses.

Other opportunities in the region include: a start-up company offering the similar services to the closed Boeing plant, volume of traffic to and from Branson, potential for a larger fishing industry and arts colony in Cotter, development of a business owners'

network, an inventor in Clinton with a product to manufacture, development of support industries and workforce training for the natural gas industry, a national chain hotel or motel on Highway 65 to serve tourists.

II. INFRASTRUCTURE

A. Improved major and secondary roadways. As leaders consider the importance of an improved highway system, the benefit of acting as a region comes into play. Whether working for improvements and widening of Highway 412, or continuing improvements on Highway 65, these important goals carry more weight with elected officials when a region speaks with a combined voice. Other infrastructure concerns include:

B. Improved air service. With a large retirement population, and potential for expanding tourism, this is important. Retirees like to visit family and friends, and travelers are more likely to come to an area with an easily accessible airport.

C. Planning for future growth. Communities and counties within the region need to plan for growth before it arrives. This will allow communities to preserve and maintain downtown shopping, create new developments with amenities that will attract businesses, and plan ways to fund maintenance and expansion of existing infrastructure.

D. Manage our water use. This includes preserving rivers, streams and lakes, as well as providing communities with fresh water and maintaining adequate wastewater treatment systems.

III. EDUCATION

A. Better education for our young people. Even though some high schools in the region are ranked high in the state, the sense was that not enough students complete high school, and of those that go on to college, not as many earn a degree as would be desirable. Suggestions include:

- **Encouraging high schools and colleges to work together**
- **Working with ASU Jonesboro, U of A Fayetteville as well as area colleges**
- **Increasing the number of trained teachers in technology**
- **Reducing the drop-out rate.**
- **Training students for new job opportunities.**
- **Utilizing retirees as teachers.**

B. Educate for Trades and Vocations. “Don’t leave the uneducated behind” was a comment at one of the county meetings. “Give them tools.”

- **Vo-tech and apprenticeship programs are needed.**
- **Teachers in Industry** program to help teachers learn which skills are most important to employers.
- **Teach work ethic as well as job skills.**

IV. QUALITY OF LIFE AND PLACE – AMENITIES

In the global economy, people and business will choose communities with the highest quality of life and place. With this in mind, the following inputs created several likely actions. The inputs include:

- **Aspirations (Opportunities)** include creating a better appearance with less junk. Old buildings can be fixed up, downtowns re-vitalized, and neighborhoods beautified. (A systematic approach could create measurable impact in a relatively short time.) Balance amenities for younger and older citizens. Involve our AARP citizens in development in our communities.
- **Assets** in the region (not all groups listed these) include: new subdivisions, OSS Boat Races in Clinton, new auditorium and gym in Clinton, and a low cost of living throughout the region. Also, such tourist draws as Branson, Gaston's, Fairfield Bay, and others in our region and beyond.
- **Actions** to take include: Create a downtown business incubator, get people to work together, increase our volunteerism, get more youth involved in activities throughout the region, plan for law enforcement to keep pace with growth, increase our recycling programs, create a plan for marketing ourselves. Incorporate beautification programs (start or expand Master Gardener programs), attract new business to downtown by revitalizing buildings and streetscape.

V. HOUSING

Whether attracting business or industry, retirees or tourists, knowledge or factory workers, adequate and affordable housing is of key importance. The following issues were mentioned during the county meetings:

- There is a need for more rental units. Young people and those with lower paying jobs must be able to find affordable but adequate rental units.
- Affordable homes. The speaker identified these as homes in the \$100,000 range.
- Some counties mentioned that they have lots available for building. This is an asset for them and for the region.
- One smaller county mentioned a new 200 unit development coming in. Other counties are also experiencing growth.
- Several counties expressed concern for planning for future growth. This will allow neighborhoods and communities to grow with amenities that attract families – parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, nearby shopping and more.

Housing issues have a great impact on quality of life and place. 21st Century Vision will have the opportunity to further explore strategies in this regard.

VI. NATURAL RESOURCES

In a region with the natural beauty found in these seven counties, it is important to consider natural resources as an asset to preserve, as well as a feature for marketing as an economic development driver. The following were mentioned:

A. Protect our resources. Any regional blueprint should consider first how development can occur without jeopardizing the natural resources—lakes, rivers, streams and forests in the region.

B. Utilize our resources wisely. The natural beauty of the Ozarks is an economic driver. Land and location gives the region great opportunity. It is important also to plan for wise handling of wastes, with additional opportunities to recycle. In addition, our water use must be managed wisely and kept in balance.

VII. SOCIAL ILLS

Understanding the challenges for all citizens is important for any planning process. Societal problems for one segment of the population impact all of us at some level. Some of the concerns raised in discussions include:

A. Drug use and abuse. This is of particular concern among school age children, but impacts citizens at all age levels. Drug use contributes to unemployment, increased crime and health costs in the community.

B. High poverty level. The poverty level was mentioned as a concern. A difficult problem to solve, issues related to poverty include low morale, high unemployment, underemployment, child care issues, single parent families, higher incidence of tobacco and alcohol use, poor nutrition contributing to difficulty in learning, higher school dropout rates and inadequate housing.

C. Apathy and complacency. Mentioned as issues, these two make it difficult to generate change. (Because 21st Century Vision offers action, this may be a fresh opportunity to overcome apathy and complacency.)

D. Distrust of outsiders. The area is experiencing growth. Chances are, the people moving in didn't grow up here. One person attending an information meeting suggested "Listen to the people who moved here—get their ideas!" 21st Century Vision offers opportunities to involve new people.

VIII. HEALTH CARE

Although availability of health care varies across the region, health care is an issue for every person in the region. Specific issues mentioned in discussions include:

A. Access to health care. This includes transportation issues for senior citizens, and availability of doctors, nurse practitioners and clinics in counties with smaller populations.

B. Shortage of health care professionals. This is complicated by the issue of more people requiring more medical services.

C. Trauma unit for emergencies. An action team might explore possible solutions for rural areas in the region relying upon volunteer services. Meeting essential needs in a rural mountainous area presents unique challenges.

D. Planning. Having plans for emergencies (such as a pandemic flu plan) can give citizens peace of mind. Having no plans leaves populations vulnerable.

A healthy growing community with a good quality of life is more likely to attract health care professionals. The new hospital in Clinton brought over 73 jobs with it. Training for health care jobs is an opportunity, with needs for both medical and administrative staff.

In summary, this report does not assume that every challenge and opportunity was identified. Each person attending information meetings was asked to state one challenge or opportunity. In this setting, there was a time constraint on creating an exhaustive list. This summative report is an important starting place for you.

The most important and unique asset of your region is its people. As more and more of them become involved in this process, more and more good things will happen. Reach out and invite people to become involved!

As you enter the action workshop phase of 21st Century Vision, you will begin to shape your blueprint for the future. The next step will seek input from citizens in your community to add to this list. Through a simple visioning process, you will learn about additional issues in your community—as well as reinforce the information gathered thus far.

21st Century Vision - NCARED Region Report on County Youth Focus Groups

This report reflects ideas and opinions shared by teen-agers, primarily 15 – 18 years old, in six counties: Fulton, Izard, Marion, Searcy, Stone and Van Buren. The goal of the focus group was to learn about how teens view their communities and the region in which they live. Topics of discussion included attitudes about their lives as teen-agers, their goals and aspirations for the future, and exploration of negative influences with potential to impact their young lives.

Where do you tell people you live?

Teens tend to think of themselves as from their hometowns, with a strong identification with their high schools. They do not tend to think of their counties as their home base, nor do they think in terms of a region.

They do, however, identify themselves as “100 miles north of Little Rock” or “one hour south of Branson” in order to help outsiders know where they are geographically.

What do you like about living here?

It's unanimous. Of the teens asked, they like:

- growing up in a small, friendly and safe environment.
- safety as an important benefit – “No bullet holes in my door or drive-by shootings.”
- knowing everyone
- being close to nature, lakes and rivers, hunting and fishing
- the sense that there is less pollution and cleaner water
- the un-crowded feel of their communities

What would you change about the place where you live?

Some of the positives show up as negatives, too. Most groups wanted a larger population, with the accompanying amenities. Frequently mentioned were:

- too small
- everyone knows us, so they report to our parents!
- larger or more stores and restaurants, including in rural areas: Wal-Mart, Starbucks, McDonalds, Target, etc.
- recreation opportunities, including a YMCA, bowling alley, youth center, a place to hang out—more things to do
- need places for young adults, also – not just teens
- clean up the dumpy places
- clean up the trash and litter
- fix things up so we don't look so backward
- more jobs, especially for teens and young adults (factories have closed)
- lights on our baseball field
- consolidation has changed our school – it feels less like a community
- teachers now have to teach around tests
- jobs for teens are hard to find now
- a few wouldn't change anything

You say there is not enough to do. What do you do in your spare time or for recreation?

- Drive around. Hang out in parking lots.
- Not many outside groups or activities for youth.
- Have to go 30 miles or 45 miles to go to a movie or for miniature golf.

- Ball games, basketball, soccer, drama club, some 4-H, church groups, mentor younger students through Alpha Omega, bible study, school newspaper.
- Internet use
- Hang out at Wal-Mart
- Have to go to a city park and Huddle House, which is not open all the time.
- Sit at home a lot
- We get kicked out of parking lots. We go to the Exxon parking lot.
- Need a place where we could hang out
- Fishing, hunting

What would you like to be able to do?

- A pool hall would be cool
- We really need a youth center
- A mall would be nice
- Skate board park
- Movie theater

NOTE: in Izard County, youth stated a desire for a school play or a drama club. In a unique twist, the NCARED board member in that county is a sponsor for a school club. He is also involved in local theater. Perhaps this could lead to a future partnership between high school youth and retired adults?

What do you plan to do after high school?

Over 90 percent of all teens participating in all focus groups state that they intend to go to college. A few have plans for vocational training such as welding or taxidermy.

The colleges mentioned range from U of A, ASU, UCA, Henderson, ASU Mountain Home, Monmouth College, U of Texas, Harding, Rhodes, Arkansas Tech. and Hendrix. Career interests include physical therapy, business, turf management, film, broadcast journalism, engineering, sociology, international business, elementary education, linguistics, radiology, sports therapy, pre-med, psychology, criminology, law school, teach math, science, social work and children's defense attorney

Where will you live after college?

These young people recognize that they may not be able to pursue their chosen careers close to home. ***"What I want to do, I can't do here!"*** They said that their parents are resigned to the fact that they will leave. ***"Our parents believe we will do better in a larger town."*** Some said that they would live where the job takes them. Others were more specific, including: Italy, California, central or northwest Arkansas, Hollywood, Conway, Mountain Home, someplace with a beach, a place with mountains. Only one respondent plans to go into a family business.

What would bring you back?

There were three overwhelming responses to this question:

- 1 – I would come back if my family needed me
- 2 – I would like to come back to retire
- 3 – I would come back if the town improved and changed

How do adults perceive teens?

Some things are timeless. Teens push for freedom, and adults keep watch for the pitfalls of youth. Their responses reflect a mix of feelings, depending on maturity and experience:

- They say we drive around too much
- 50/50 see us as good or bad
- Different cliques of people think differently
- They think we get by with more than we really do
- They think we have lower moral standards
- Some appreciate that we are responsible
- “Neanderthal brats” “hoodlums” “rednecks”
- In general they see us as good kids
- They are very supportive of us
- It isn’t always a fair judgment
- We try to live up to expectations
- “People are so old-fashioned. They think that girls who ride around are wild.
- Teens who have tattoos or dye their hair are wild.”

What are the scariest things for today’s teenagers in your county?

This question led to discussion about four important issues facing teens today: tobacco, alcohol, drugs and teen sexual activity. One savvy teen also found gasoline prices to be pretty scary! There was some difference in the issues in each county.

On tobacco:

“A lot of teenagers smoke. Some chew tobacco, do grass. A lot of guys do. They know about mouth cancer. They do it because their parents do it and because they think it is cool.”

In one county, the students estimated that 50% of the male students dip. Cancer? They believe it won’t happen to them, even though “a guy with half a face came and talked to us.” They estimated that 60 – 80% of parents smoked.

Some teens said smoking was related to “who you hang out with.” Teens in several counties said that parents who smoke had a big influence on kids. Students are aware of studies on the harmful effects of smoking, but seem to believe that they will be able to stop smoking at will.

On alcohol:

The consensus is that alcohol use is a problem. Whether consuming it or not, teens know how and where to get alcohol. Two main sources are 1) older friend or sibling, who had an older friend or sibling buy it for them, and 2) parents either give it to their kids, or kids take it.

In one county, the teens estimated that 75% drink occasionally. Some drink at school (clear liquid in water bottle) and others come to school drunk. In another county, teens said that drinking may start at 14 –16 years of age, with some as young as 6th grade. “It’s not a party unless you have booze.” This group said they tend to camp out and have a bonfire, so that there would not be driving after drinking.

On parents’ attitudes toward teen drinking, in one group, 60% said their parents would say “If you drink, I’ll kill you.” The other 40% said their parents would say “If you get in a situation where you drink, call me and I will come and pick you up.” Teens view alcohol use both as a “serious problem” and “part of growing up.”

On drugs:

The illegal drug of choice in most schools is marijuana. Kids said that they know who uses it, and that it is easy to get. Some adults know who is using it. One group said of marijuana users “It’s like beer to them.”

In one county, off-label use of prescription drugs was described as a serious problem. One student died—they believed from an overdose of a prescription drug. The drugs are obtained by: theft from parent or grandparent, purchase from another student or directly from a physician that the students said made drugs available to teens.

Although meth labs have been found in every county, the teens agree that methamphetamine use is most prevalent in the young adult age range, primarily 20 – 30. They believe that people try it to see what it is like, believing that they can't get hooked. They said that busy people use it to energize themselves, and that young women use it as a way to lose weight. In every group, the students said they can spot meth users: "missing teeth, bad skin and hair, real skinny, "wiggled out" and "looking skanky."

Students said that teens in one town use heroin. They get it from college kids at ASU.

On teens and sex:

Most teens said that sex education was limited to health class, and that they did not get much information. One group said that parents did not want sex education in school. Teen pregnancy occurs in every school we visited. (5 – 6 in one, 3 in another, a 13-year-old in another) Most young mothers keep and raise their babies. Some make it to college, but most do not. That requires a lot of support.

Most kids do not talk with their parents about sex. They are more comfortable talking to a stranger. Some learned from watching Oprah, others read about it. In one school, the kids had participated in "Baby Think It Over" with the computerized baby dolls that both boys and girls take home for a real life experience meeting the needs of an infant. The computerized record of care determines their grade.

In spite of believing that it is not good to have babies at such a young age, most teens seem to accept teen sexual activity as a rite of passage. "If you are old enough, you should be able to do it. It's no big deal." AND "Once you are old enough, use a condom, it's OK."

Some health classes taught about STDs, and had photos posted. One group said that to talk about this issue, they had to get a teacher off their topic for the day.

Most of the youth believed that the higher incidence of tobacco, alcohol, drug and sexual activity could be related to the lack of accessible activities for young people. One person said "I think it will happen anyway."

What is the most exciting thing that has happened in your community in your lifetime?

Wal-Mart Super Center
We got another traffic light
Johnny Knoxville came to town
Hunting Season
They burned down the barn
4th of July parade
A log house burned down in town
Old Timer Days with street dance, 5K run, carnival, a sprint race
We get to volunteer at Old Timer Days
Our FFA school rodeo
Big football game
New high school gym
Pioneer Days – parade, rodeo, ride horses (we are not involved)
Junk Fest – in August

Biggest yard sale west of the Mississippi River

What would you do if you were a community leader?

“Let more business come in – businesses are not allowed to come in (a few people own all the land and buildings) Tyson couldn’t come because of the Buffalo River. Wal-Mart didn’t come because the city leaders wouldn’t let it in. Our economy is based on old businesses—nearly all businesses are passed down from the older generations. Older people don’t want anything to change so they vote against it. They are much more resistant to change than we are.”

Build a youth center

We need more stuff to do, but they’re not going to do that.

Clean up a few yards. Some parts of town look like a ghetto.

Clean some places up—really junky places

A county beautification project—there is a lot of trash along roads

One place has about 400 tires, goats walking around

Build a bowling alley

Need more restaurants

More industry and jobs

Open gym at the school

Pave the roads—no dirt roads

Beautification is important

Get rid of methamphetamine labs

More shopping—mall

The police department—they tend to harass teen-agers

In summary:

The messages from the teens echo some of the concerns expressed by adults. They also have other concerns unique to young people. **These teens are just a few years away from being your workforce, your young professionals, your new leaders. Or, will they be doing these things in another place?**

Consider ways to involve high school youth in your 21st Century Vision efforts. They will be delighted to be asked, honored to be taken seriously and happy to be involved.

This report was prepared and presented to the NCARED 21st Century Vision Steering Team by Maureen Rose and Dr. Mark Peterson, U of A Cooperative Extension Service, Little Rock, Arkansas, as part of the Breakthrough Solutions Program. July 11, 2006

NCARED Priorities for 2008-2009*

- 1) Education**
- 2) Entrepreneurship and Business Development**
- 3) Tourism and Attracting Retirees**
- 4) Manufacturing and Industrial Development**
- 5) Creative Economy**

* Set by the NCARED board on July 19, 2008, the NCARED board, based on feedback they have received from leaders and citizens in the region, a review of the 21st Century Vision reports and their best judgment of the challenges and opportunities facing the region, the board identified these five top priorities for the coming year:

At the same time, the board affirmed the importance of the other issues identified through the 21st Century Vision planning process, and to encourage interested community leaders and study action teams to address them as well:

- Value-Added Agriculture
- Workforce Housing
- Infrastructure / Highway 412
- Health Care and Emergency Services
- Social Issues
- Leadership Development
- Local Government
- Technology Use
- Emergency Preparedness
- Quality of Place – is woven in to the other issues

NOTE: Considerable interest was also expressed in natural resources.

ACTION MAPS

EDUCATION

The Situation Today:

Important issues to address in education include adult literacy, broadband access, technical and two year degrees, improved basic employment skills, collaboration among educational institutions, retention of student enrollment in K – 16.

Our Vision:

Seamless web of educational service partners to meet regional needs, with education that provides basic and advanced skills, supports adult literacy, does not support social promotion of students, involves parents in the education process and promotes collaboration to meet the needs off the workforce at all levels. The educational system addresses the needs of the emerging (K – 16), existing (employed), transitional and entrepreneurial (small business) workforce, including vocational training.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Educational partnerships formed.
- Improved communication among educational institutions.
- Education goals have a broad focus.
- Increased secondary and post-secondary school measures (retention, completion, etc.)
- More professional development for educators.
- Increased adult education offerings, fewer adults illiterate.
- Investment in vocational training.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Public schools

Educational cooperatives

Literacy Councils

Early childhood care providers

AATYC Workforce Training Consortium

Economic Development – ADED, Chambers of Commerce, NCARED, Development Corps

Adult Education Programs

Actions:

1. Collaborate with business and industry to adopt educational priorities
2. Combine / Coordinate educational resources for new programs
3. Conduct regional needs assessment for education
4. Develop new “Career Pathways” – 2+2+2
5. Market to add value to education

Additional Opportunities:

- Seek grant funding from U.S. Department of Labor and other sources to build the capacity of community colleges to offer courses on strategic career clusters in the region.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The Situation Today:

The region is rich in talent and resources, but needs access to information and capital for new business formation. There is an in-migration of retirees, which impacts businesses and their opportunities. Like many other areas, young adults who seek education outside the region seldom return here to work. There is a need to understand how to identify and support entrepreneurs or potential entrepreneurs, including: venture capital, information on GAP funding, better utilization of talented retirees and a regional SCORE Chapter.

Our Vision:

This region is known for its entrepreneurship and innovation, providing a safe environment for start-up and existing small businesses, information and training, mentoring, capital and ongoing assistance for businesses.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Export businesses created (10 – 15 new businesses each year)
- Growth in number of employees in existing businesses
- Industrial sector diversity
- Public supports businesses, empathizes with needs
- Local government encourages new-business friendly local regulations, including simplified rules and regulations for businesses, making new start-ups easier.
- Business retention and expansion programs in place for small businesses (monitoring problems and preventing business closings, exploring expansion or spin-off businesses.)

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Potential for SCORE Chapter (non-profit organization that supports entrepreneurship)

Multiple local banks

Educational Institutions: ASU Mountain Home, Ozarka College, North Arkansas College,

Arkansas Small Business Development Centers, UACC Batesville and Morrilton, Local K-12, Career Centers, U of A Cooperative Extension in each county.

Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development Corporations

ACTIONS:

1. NCARED becomes a regional clearinghouse for business information (create a resource list, both on-line and hard copy)
2. Community and business leaders learn to nurture entrepreneurship (mentoring)
3. Incubators are formed to share costs for start-ups
4. Create network of small businesses, including existing associations and trade groups
5. Vo-tech and hands-on training create higher skill levels
6. Program for business retention and expansion
7. Identify and provide infrastructure support to new businesses
8. Identify existing funding and create new funding mechanisms for entrepreneurs

Additional Opportunities:

- Work with Arkansas Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to promote small business grant program, develop virtual business development sites, enrich NCARED web portal.
- Invite U of A Cooperative Extension Service to bring their programs for small business retention and expansion and development of entrepreneurial communities.
- Collaborate with colleges, SBDC and other resources to promote entrepreneurial training

TOURISM AND ATTRACTING RETIREES

The Situation Today:

In the NCARED region, there is growth in fishing, river sports, camping, biking and a continuing trend for retirees to locate here. There is a decline in golfing. Tourists are often in the region to visit friends and relatives, or to explore the possibility of retiring in the region. They are likely to take advantage of free attractions. There is one popular juvenile sporting complex, and an abundance of community festivals, crafts and cultural heritage activities. A trend that creates concern for the regions economy is that although there are more tourists, they are spending fewer dollars per tourist than in the past.

Our Vision:

The region offers well-developed infrastructure, bountiful natural resources and regional collaboration to create unique trails and vacation packages that draw tourists from near and far, and support the services for a quality of life demanded by retirees.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Water quality is excellent
- Health care is readily available for all
- The population demographics indicate continued influx of retirees
- Tourism expenditures show steady growth
- National and international recognition of the experiences offered for visitors

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Appealing tax structure

Low crime rate and low cost of living

Centralized location

Established attractions and social clubs

Established tourism promotion organizations

Mild climate with four seasons, natural beauty and recreation

Current retiree population

We are a destination, with some national recognition

Actions:

1. Region-wide hospitality training
2. Capitalize on state and local communication resources
3. Regional mindset and strategy (regional chamber meetings)
4. Cooperative event and festival planning (avoid duplication of dates, so there is always a festival going on in the region.)
5. Support natural resource conservation group efforts
6. Support government and legislation for proper infrastructure development.
7. Communication with NCARED county leaders concerning development, opportunities and challenges.

Additional Opportunities:

- Develop marketing plan for region, including identifiable brand and image
- Market the region – globally, nationally, regionally
- Target telecommuters and work-from home semi-retired in marketing efforts
- Restoration of historic sites
- Survey tourists to assess their needs, identify business opportunities
- Clean-up of blighted areas
- Local leaders and citizens develop blogs to attract tourists to fishing, golf, arts, etc.

MANUFACTURING AND INDUSTRIAL RECRUITMENT

The Situation Today:

The region has lost several manufacturing firms, offset in part by formation and attraction of new industries. Other major manufacturers are at risk, with offshore low cost labor giving tough competition. One large employer reports an inability to find adequate workers to add production capacity to an existing plant. The region falls within the footprint of several higher education facilities, (ASU Mountain Home, Ozarka College, UACC Morrilton, UACC Batesville, North Arkansas College) offering resources for collaboration in workforce education.

Our Vision:

The region offers diverse, higher paying jobs in more mid-sized companies and plants, supported by an adequate workforce trained through a regional higher education collaboration for technical and vocational training.

Key indicators that vision is realized (5 years)

- Wage scale approaching or exceeding national average
- Educators and industry foster meaningful relationships that benefit both industries and higher education organizations.

Strategic assets from within and outside the region:

Regional Target Industry Study to guide planning
NCARED regional organization
Quality manufacturers
Population is suited to formation of a SCORE chapter
Educational institutions
Lowest cost manufacturing environment in 12-state region
High quality of life

Actions:

1. Form a Regional Business Council
2. Form a coalition of education and industry key leaders
3. Increased job training related to regional demand
4. Encourage competitive recruiting incentives
5. Foster formation of business incubators

Additional Opportunities:

- Invite outside resources to conduct a systematic business retention and expansion program in the region. (Note: There are separate programs suitable for mid to large-sized manufacturing industry, and for rural small businesses.)
- Engage in proactive cluster development for the economic clusters identified in the Target Industry Study as having the greatest potential to create jobs in the region. (Cooperative Extension Service can assist with this.)

CREATIVE ECONOMY

The Situation Today:

Local trends in the arts include annual tours (*Off the Beaten Path* – Stone County), a strong presence of arts, music, organic and herbal gardens, tourism attractions related to arts and heritage. Major forces and trends in other regions mirror and set the example for trails in arts, gardens, and other heritage attractions. The natural resources of the region complement the creative economy to draw tourists to the area. Of concern is the fact that although the region is attracting more tourists, those tourists are spending fewer dollars per tourist than in the past.

Our Vision:

Thriving art communities, trails, studio tours, artisan gardens and music throughout the region supports cultural tourism, supported by a creative economy network, partner organizations, government and business. The creative strength of the region contributes to a high quality of place and an enhanced economy.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Cultural organizations and artists have been identified and are networking together to achieve desired vision.
- Joint cultural marketing, both traditional and on-line, is supported by government and business.
- Cultural tourism has increased.
- More artist and cultural events exist and increased funding targeted to artists.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Artists and arts organizations

Arkansas Department of Heritage and Arkansas Arts Council

Chamber of Commerce and civic clubs

Artists, crafters, musicians and gardeners

Funding sources

Local media

New regional web portal: www.ozarksu.com

Higher education in the state and region

Natural resources and natural beauty

NCARED and its website

Ozark Folk Center

Regional tourism offices of the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism

Small Business Development Center, classes and support for small businesses

Actions:

1. Inventory existing cultural resources and develop directory
2. Work with and coordinate existing assets
3. Have regional conference and peer sessions on arts, crafts, music
4. Develop a regional calendar to post on all websites, incl. regional and NCARED
5. Share valued information
6. Identify who, what and how much we advertise
7. Work with government to develop tourist friendly policies (including liquor laws)

Additional Opportunities:

- Development of a regional performing arts center, perhaps in Mountain Home.
- Creation of a set of complementary regional trails: Creative Arts, Farms and Gardens, Inns and Bed & Breakfasts, Cultural Heritage and Cuisine

VALUE-ADDED AGRICULTURE

The Situation Today:

The number of small farms in the region and nationally is declining. At the same time, large farms are increasing. Over 90% of small farm families have one or more people working full time off the farm. There is strong national interest in organically grown food and locally-grown food, offering opportunities for niche agriculture marketing and truck farming for local farmers markets.

Changing demographics in Arkansas offer an opportunity to respond to demand for ethnic foods, such as meat goats. There is an increase in the number of horses on farms. Tourists look for opportunities to experience agriculture, creating demand for agritainment and agritourism.

Our Vision:

There is a balance between natural farmland and urban growth, with agriculture an important part of the fabric of the region. Small farm operations supplement income by offering experiences and locally grown produce. Hardwood timber in the area supports specialty furniture manufacturers.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- The number of family farms and acres of farmland remains stable.
- Tourists and residents are drawn to farmers markets, specialty agriculture and the locally-grown produce available.
- Community supported agriculture is important, with a strong Web presence.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Farm Bureau, Cattlemen's Association and producer organizations

Health Department

U of A Cooperative Extension Service

City, county state and federal Officials

Hardwood forest resources

Diverse land in the region, with areas suited to grazing, crop production, and niche market farming.

Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism

Actions:

1. Programs on new opportunities with value-added agriculture to expand interest
2. Gain support of local and county government, local chambers of commerce
3. Producer support
4. Radio, PSA, Media efforts to reach public for support
5. Cross-county sharing of information, communication and resources
6. Links to resources in place (websites, etc.)

Additional Opportunities:

- Incorporate value-added agriculture with creative economy initiatives.
- Tap outside resources to enhance local efforts.

LEADERSHIP

The Situation Today:

In many communities, the same few people step forward to provide leadership to activities and events over the course of many years. This is especially true when there is no mechanism in place to train new leaders to take responsibility. In the NCARED region, a few counties have adult or youth leadership training programs. Nationwide, youth participation in organized clubs is declining, and there is a greater emphasis on athletic accomplishments. The communities in the NCARED region would like to keep our bright trained leaders here. Many adults and youth feel that they do not have a voice in decision making, and often do not know how to participate in quorum court, city council, school board meetings

Our Vision:

Through life-long leadership development, NCARED Regional Leadership Program has trained and empowered a continuous pool of leaders for business, government and community, inspiring positive change and fostering development of ideas and skills that create a healthy economy and a high quality of place.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Active participation in the regional leadership program as well as county leadership programs for youth and adults.
- Many residents are still living in the area, and young people return to live here after they complete their education.
- The regional economy is trending upward.
- The number of candidates for elected office has increased.
- Youth and adult participants in local clubs and civic organizations has increased.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Current leadership training programs (LeadAR, Connect AR and other leadership programs)

Alumni of leadership training programs

Higher Education institutions serving the region, including ASU Mountain Home, Ozarka College, U of A Fayetteville, UACC Morrilton, UACC Batesville, North Arkansas College.

U of A Cooperative Extension Service in each county

Public Schools

Utility Companies

Arkansas Economic Development Commission

NCARED

Foundations such as the South Shore and Twin Lakes Community Foundations

Community organizations

Actions:

1. Assess current leadership program status.
2. Create consistent adult / youth leadership programs in each NCARED county.
3. Create a regional Leadership Training Program (LTP) to serve as an intermediary between local LTP and larger more global LTP such as LeadAR.
4. Continue LTP from youth to adult to advanced levels, creating lifelong leaders.
5. Find business owners who are not currently active in their communities. Recruit them to be leaders.

Additional Opportunities:

- Actively recruit or sponsor leaders within the region to participate in state leadership programs such as LeadAR.
- Actively involve leadership program alumni in NCARED initiatives.

Workforce Housing

The Situation Today:

The housing market has taken a hit, and there is uncertainty in the economy that discourages investment in housing. Nationwide, the economy trends downwards without the presence of knowledge based industries and jobs. Retail and tourism jobs tend to pay less, and there is very limited housing for lower to medium income workers. Land prices remain high, although interest rates have been lowered to stimulate investment.

Our Vision:

NCARED region is recognized for having affordable housing across all income levels, with a surge in green building and construction of \$100K, 1200 sq. ft. homes, resulting in more renters and young families becoming home owners.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Growth in population of home owners
- Adequate infrastructure for housing growth
- Promotion of incentives for developers
- Larger numbers of homes available for low to moderate income workforce

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Financial resources – USDA, Arkansas Development Finance Authority, etc.

Bankers with interest in housing (Bank of the Ozarks, Regions, etc.)

Developers, contractors and builders

Natural resources and beauty

Intellectual inventory

Excellent healthcare

Safe—low crime

Educational opportunities

Interest in educating for the building trades

ACHANGE – Arkansas Coalition of Housing and Neighborhood Growth for Empowerment

Actions:

1. Develop and market a plan for additional workforce housing
2. Promote workforce housing with education, a fact sheet for developers
3. Inventory—survey people's needs
4. Develop collaborative strategies to encourage government to build infrastructure
5. Research and promote incentives available for construction of affordable housing
6. Green building—offer seminars for developers

Additional Opportunities:

- Place list of financial grants and loans on the NCARED web page / portal.
- Offer home buyer seminars for local families within the region as a prerequisite for some loan programs.
- Offer seminars for builders on green affordable housing.

QUALITY OF PLACE

The Situation Today:

North Central Arkansas is rich in natural resources and environmental opportunity. One of the natural resources, Fayetteville Shale, is creating both economic opportunities and environmental challenges because of water use. Other environmental concerns include gravel mining, water quality, adequate drinking water supply and national forest. The implementation of planning and zoning for development and infrastructure could be considered safeguards of the standard of living. The region is rich in heritage culture — music, arts and crafts—that draw visitors to live, work and play here. A high number of retirees creates a demographic that makes good health care extremely important.

Our Vision:

Maintain quality of life and place, keeping the region a desirable place to live, raise a family and visit because of extraordinary natural beauty and environment and rich opportunities that abound in the region. Local food production, excellent education, strong leadership, high paying jobs and business growth draw young people to live and work here. Cultural heritage is a carefully guarded resource, with support for arts, crafts and music. Transportation infrastructure allows ease of travel in all directions.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Unemployment is lower
- Average wages in real dollars is up
- Infrastructure is improved
- Graduation rates are higher and crime rate is lower
- Long term regional planning and zoning regulations in place
- Cultural opportunities abound, with collaborative organizations to support them.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Environment and natural resources
Gaston Center, Berry Nature Center
Civic Groups – Rotary, Kiwanis, Elks, Lions and others
NCARED organization
Government agencies—local, state and federal
Elected officials
Environmental advocacy groups
Arts groups, libraries
Technology education and EAST programs

Actions:

1. Regional planning and zoning
2. ACE / Keep Arkansas Beautiful affiliates
3. Community involvement – C of C, volunteer fire departments
4. Educate community on importance of preserving environmental quality
5. Local involvement in Arkansas Economic Development Commission programs
6. Build on cultural heritage to expand tourism base

Additional Opportunities:

- Formation of cultural trails for arts, music, heritage, farms, gardens and other amenities
- Infrastructure in place to bring high speed internet to the most rural areas of the region.

TECHNOLOGY USE

The Situation Today:

Today's global economy requires the increased use of broadband communication and other information technologies to be competitive. In the NCARED region, there is mixed access to and ability to use advanced technologies. The region has competing broadband providers and a geography that limits affordable high speed Internet access. Schools with EAST (Environmental and Spatial Technology) programs offer practical application of advanced technologies in solving real world problems. Some schools choose not to offer this opportunity.

Our Vision:

The NCARED region has adequate connectivity, training opportunities and technology utilization to compete in the global marketplace. Rural homeowners have access to affordable broadband, and the number of telecommuters is growing.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Broadband access available to 100% of population
- One tele-center per county
- Latest (current) technology training available
- 75% of businesses utilize the internet for some aspect of business operations.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Key people:

Network providers, telecommuters
Local/state/federal government
Educators, healthcare industry
Agriculture and forestry
Business, organizations and media
Good infrastructure
Educational Institutions
Training availability
NCARED leadership
Support of other organizations
Community cooperation
Good economy
High growth area
Excellent health care facilities

Actions:

1. Comprehensive plan to establish a Technology Tele-center in each county.
2. Identify and fill broadband gaps in the region (infrastructure and application)
3. Develop an incremental STEP program for technology training (K – 16 and business / Industry training).
4. Create a public awareness program for broadband availability and application.

Additional Opportunities:

- Apply for a grant to establish one or more Technology Tele-centers in the region, providing

- technology training and business opportunities.
- Promote SBDC Web Optimization classes to assist existing businesses with their efforts at e-marketing goods and services.
- Promote the use of e-Government services to local citizens with broadband access.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Situation Today:

Local government today is faced with the need to improve infrastructure, including local roads, bridges, and broadband Internet service. They must also work to successfully lobby for issues such as a four-lane Highway 412. In addition, growth and retiree relocation put pressure for countywide planning. Law enforcement and emergency services continue to have high priority, especially in areas with population growth and a retiring baby boomer population.

Vision of Desired Future:

Local government implemented a comprehensive regional plan to manage growth, support education and grow the economy while preserving the natural environment, with broad input from citizens in the region.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Transportation is improved
- Comprehensive plan is adopted and is being implemented
- Water quality is preserved and protected
- Area cooperation impacts state policy making at state legislature
- Economic opportunity expands for youth
- Educational achievement increases

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Natural environment and resources
Retirees with knowledge and expertise
Ozark culture and ingenuity
Low crime rate
Positive values
Welcoming community
Farmers

Actions:

1. Increase affordable broadband availability
2. Positive public and government communication, dialogue and interaction facilitated among all stakeholders
3. Network using NCARED to influence legislators
4. Regional highway development strategy
5. Best practices implemented for agriculture

Additional Opportunities:

- Encourage local and county government leaders to develop websites if they have not done so. Utilize state services to offer e-government opportunities for local citizens to pay taxes, apply for permits, pay fines and other business details.
- Promote e-Government as important for successful local government, utilizing the services of Information Network of Arkansas.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Today's Situation:

There has been slow progress with the regional airport, and funding is limited for new transportation, water and sewer projects. There is also a lack of a regional sewer and water system. At the same time, there is an increase in environmental concerns.

Our Vision:

- Through united and focused leadership the region is a network of communities with a well balanced 1) transportation system including completed 4-lane highways and daily airline service, with uniform code enforcement and 2) environmentally-friendly water, sewer and communication infrastructure to meet the needs of all people, business and industry.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Number of new 4-lane miles completed
- Formation of regional water/sewer districts
- Enforcement personnel
- Multiple routes in and out of Ozark Regional Airport

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

Local and state legislature

Lakes, rivers and the environment

Quality of life—low crime

Retirees

Highway Commission

Health Care

Highway 412 Group

Actions:

1. Pursue or promote alternate sources of funding (lottery, tollway)
2. Active participation in east-west regional group for HWY 412
3. Continue improving legislative relationships
4. Educate electorate

Additional Opportunities:

1. Increase awareness of Regional Mobility Authority as a tool for funding infrastructure.
2. Utilize U of A Cooperative Extension Service Public Issues Education Center to inform the electorate on ballot issues in region.
3. Utilize public finance programs offered by Extension.
4. Promote e-Government as important infrastructure, utilizing the services of Information Network of Arkansas.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Situation Description:

The region recognizes the use of methamphetamines and other drugs and alcohol, with a need for more treatment and transitional support. There is a need for education in the schools about domestic violence. It is difficult, due to human nature, to acknowledge a lack of family and life skills leading to domestic violence, gang activity and drug use. As a result, there is not enough funding for social programs, and access to mental health facilities is limited. There is concern about cultural and media influence on youth. On the positive side, there are family and consumer science courses offered in schools.

Vision of Desired Future:

An educated and empathetic regional community that will join forces to create healthy families and students better prepared for life by providing 1) education, 2) financial support, and 3) community support for halfway houses, social services for women coming out of prison, a reactivated community chest and an active quest for grants and other funds to support programs to support strong family values.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Collaboration of social service agencies
- Support for social issues (DHHS – state budget, grants, individuals, corporations, church alliances.)
- Provide regular social issues presentations in area schools.
- Reduction of divorce rate
- Reduction in teen pregnancy rate
- Reduction in drug and alcohol abuse
- Reduction in family violence

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

State and local government

Public and private social service agencies

The courts and the justice system

Economic development and planning

Educational systems—the schools

Law enforcement

U of A Cooperative Extension Service Parenting Journey and other programs

Actions:

1. Conduct a needs assessment
2. Present a concise, unified message to stakeholders
3. School programs on parenting and child care
4. Intensive education programs on drug and alcohol use and abuse
5. Public participation to support programs to address social ills
6. Identify and get buy-in from regional stakeholders
7. Identify funding sources (grants, tax revenue, legislature, private donations.)

Additional Opportunities

- Work with Healthy Home Town initiative to make these things happen.

HEALTH CARE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

Situation Description:

Three counties do not have hospitals. There is a shortage of facilities and out-migration of services and professionals. Patients needing specialized care will see visiting specialists. Uninsured and underinsured patients create a drain on existing medical facilities. With an influx of retirees, there is a greater need for in home services and support for the aging population. Wages are an issue for medical personnel. Trends toward tele-medicine, digital medical records and distance education for medical professionals offer some relief. The emphasis on preventive medicine has continued importance for the region.

Our Vision:

The region offers ready access to quality health care and emergency services available for the entire population (regardless of financial status), including a systematic approach to primary and specialty care, with emergency services within a ten to twenty mile radius and overall health services adequate for a growing aging population.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Expanded urgent care centers
- Expanded tele-medicine in rural areas
- Retain and recruit licensed, qualified staff
- Reduction of chronic illness and disease.

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

- Hospitals (5 within NCARED region) (4 – CAH)
- Home Health system
- Mental health services
- Community outreach projects
- Networking opportunities
- NCARED

Action :

1. Forum for regional health care providers and citizens
 - a. Subcommittee of NCARED
 - b. Feasibility study of urgent and emergency health care facilities and needs
2. Prevention education to reduce the burden on the healthcare system
3. Tele-health—internet connections— video capabilities
4. Staff incentives / scholarships for health care staff

Additional Opportunities:

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

The Situation Today:

All counties currently have emergency operations plans addressing all potential hazards, as well as completed hazard mitigation and assessments to identify all possible incidents, natural or man-made.

Important considerations are Arkansas' propensity for earthquakes, global terrorism threats, flash flood potential in hills and mountains and the possibility of violent winter or summer storms (tornadoes).

Our Vision:

Region will have an emergency preparedness plan, addressing pandemic, fire, earthquake, flood and tornado issues.

- Provide residents of communities with information and training.
- All communities prepared for whatever large or small disaster could occur.

Key Indicators that Vision is Realized (5 years)

- Inter-operable communications
- Interchangeable and identified resources (Nimscast)
- Exercises are conducted to test readiness
- Stockpiled resources include medical, food and water supplies
- Identified avenues of egress, ingress to support an incident

Strategic Assets from Within and Outside the Region:

- Trained responder, educational resources, knowledge from past events
- Interoperable communications
- R.A.C.E.S. and A.R.E.S. Radios
- Food and water resources
- Medical supply reserve (72 hour minimum)
- Transportation, including air, buses and transport vehicles
- Refrigeration and generator sources (service agencies)

Actions:

1. Identify grant opportunities for funding to update all transportation and communication equipment
2. Locate training to bring all responders up-to-date and on same level
3. Utilize LEPC to bring all key players together

Other Opportunities:

Implementation – Board Engagement

This blueprint was developed through involvement of citizens and leaders in the NCARED region – through county information meetings, working sessions with study action teams and the Regional Blueprint Workshop. It builds on the targeted industry study and economic analysis conducted by Dr. Wayne Miller, and provides a unique opportunity for the NCARED region to move forward if it is embraced and implemented by leaders and citizens in the region.

We recommend that the NCARED board set priorities for the coming year, and select elements of the blueprint to implement in the coming year. Effective regional blueprints (strategic plans) are constantly changing as the environment changes and new challenges and opportunities emerge. Nevertheless, this regional blueprint is a starting place for action. As the board identifies new priorities that are not reflected in the blueprint, those components can be added. Additional recommendations are listed under “Organize NCARED to take action” under “Recommendations for Sustainability”.

Recommendations for Sustainability

Two of the greatest challenges facing regions across the nation are how to sustain momentum and ongoing funding. Consequently, we recommend that you consider these actions:

- 1) **Biennial (or annual) county meetings with local leaders and citizens**, for these purposes:

- increase awareness of NCARED opportunities and activities
- identify the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the county
- gain input for an NCARED legislative agenda

These meetings could be instituted by the board members in each county, with support from the executive director and the entire board. Local elected officials and state legislators, could receive a special invitation, encouraging them to participate in the process.

NOTE: Another approach is for NCARED board members to attend regular meetings of key organizations in their counties, keeping them aware of NCARED activities and opportunities, and seeking their input and involvement.

- 2) **Development of a legislative agenda for the NCARED region**, reflecting the highest priorities that emerge from the county meetings, study action teams, and the NCARED board. An effective legislative agenda would identify what would truly move the region forward, and provide state and national legislators with a focused opportunity to make a difference in the region. Steps toward developing an effective legislative agenda might include:

- County meetings held early in each even numbered year,
- NCARED study action teams are encouraged to make recommendations for the NCARED legislative agenda,
- The NCARED board, or a committee appointed by the board, formulate a draft legislative agenda,
- Seek informal input from individual legislators—they may have valuable contributions to make,
- Meet with the NCARED legislators as a whole, seeking their support of the legislative agenda. This may include an NCARED (or state-wide regional)

legislative day, where citizens and leaders from the region meet with state legislators, perhaps in Little Rock.

- 3) **Interact with other regions** to share information on resources, common issues, and opportunities for collaboration. The latter might include a legislative agenda that support funding for regions in Arkansas.
- 4) **Build the organizational capacity of the NCARED board and staff.** The board and executive director are in the best position to decide what is needed and would be most effective. Building organizational capacity might include:
 - a) **Identifying tasks to perform**, such as:
 - representing NCARED in local, state and national initiatives,
 - handling communication within NCARED and to outside groups
 - working with the news media
 - handling NCARED data bases
 - supporting grantsmanship in the region
 - developing meeting agendas and logistics
 - communicating with outside resources and elected officials
 - overseeing the NCARED web page
 - b) **Increasing staff capacity**, such as:
 - hiring full-time or part-time staff
 - tapping volunteers, such as retirees (Perhaps an organization of retirees could be formed, with support of NCARED as one of their goals).
 - a loaned executive or staff member (full or part time) from a corporation in the region
 - a shared staffer with another non-profit organization
 - a graduate student or VISTA volunteer
 - undergraduate interns
 - a regional community development specialist, co-funded by the U of A Cooperative Extension Service (would require a proposal)
 - UPDATE: The board is addressing this issue.**
 - c) **Seeking high-impact board training for the NCARED board** – a series of seminars focused on how the board can most effectively achieve its mission and vision. For example, one topic could address how NCARED board members can keep local officials informed of NCARED activities.
 - d) **Identify an individual who would be willing to author the NCARED newsletter**, carrying on the 21st Century Voice, which currently reaches over 400 leaders and citizens in the NCARED region. The newsletter, available in e-mail and hard copy formats, is an important means to keeping community leaders and citizens informed of resources, opportunities and NCARED activities.
- 5) **Develop long-term funding mechanisms for NCARED**
 - Consider creating a regional foundation to support development initiatives in the region. This could also be done by expanding an existing community/county foundation. The Arkansas Community Foundation could be a useful resource for this process.
 - Consider each county funding NCARED by population. Example: The Cornerstone Coalition charges each county \$.50/person living in their respective counties. Some county governments pay it all, while others split it with their cities.

UPDATE: This has been done.

- Form a grants committee to actively seek grants to support NCARED and its initiatives
- Include funding requests in the legislative agenda (see above)
- Revisit dues structure; some regions are financially supported almost entirely from membership dues, some do not have dues but rely on other sources
Example: The Golden Triangle Economic Development Council relies on dues from their corporate members (\$200), educational members (\$100) and individual members (\$50).

UPDATE: This has already been done.

6) **Organize NCARED to take action.** Some ways this could happen include:

- Increase the number of board members from each county. Several counties currently have only one board member, which makes it difficult for them to stimulate action, particularly if they miss a meeting or two. Examples:
 - a) The Cornerstone Coalition has five board members/county, which provides
a critical mass for projects, spreads the responsibility and creates synergy.
 - b) The Arkansas River Valley Economic Impact has four representatives from each county—including the county judge and one representative from each city of the first class.
- Form broad-based development study action teams (such as Community Development, Economic Development, Leadership Development and Infrastructure), with a broad range of activities taking place within each team.
- Encourage each board member to actively participate in at least one study action team.

UPDATE: Study action teams have been formed to address each of the top five issues, with at least one other issue also being addressed.

NOTE: A useful Action Plan Worksheet is included in APPENDIX A.

7) **Take advantage of technology for the work of NCARED:**

- Freeconferencecall.com provides a way for the board, study action teams and other groups to hold conference calls at no cost other than to each person making a call.
- The www.ozarksU.com Web portal was developed by the UALR Small Business Development Center to provide a way for study action teams or the board to post shared documents and share information across the region.
- Because the NCARED Web page is accessible to people across and outside of the region, actively posting new opportunities and the work of NCARED helps keep people informed and attracts visitors to the region.
- Linking the NCARED Web page to other resources around the state also increases traffic.

8) **Continue to tap outside resources to support regional development efforts.**

Although these initiatives should be driven by NCARED, outside resources can provide technical expertise, information and grant funds that can be extremely helpful.

APPENDIX A: Action Plan Worksheet

Study Action Team: _____

Goal

__: _____

<u>Strategies</u>	<u>By Whom</u>	<u>Starting Date</u>	<u>Completion Date</u>	<u>With What</u>
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a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

f)