

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

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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 three-year program in community and economic development, known as **Breakthrough Solutions**.

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, and 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.
- **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, and 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:

- **Encourage high schools and colleges to work together.**
- **Work with ASU Jonesboro, U of A Fayetteville as well as area colleges.**
- **Increase the number of trained teachers in technology.**
- **Reduce the drop-out rate.**
- **Train students for new job opportunities.**
- **Utilize 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, and 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 is 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 uncrowded 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
- 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 dumpier 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? (Note – these are influenced by geography)

- 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, 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 percent 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 percent 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 percent 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 sixth 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 percent said their parents would say, “If you drink, I’ll kill you.” The other 40 percent 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 meth 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

Addendum: Data from Seven County Meetings:

Baxter County

Challenges

Graduating more students (lose 25% in 8th-12th)
Highway/Air Service
Adequate supply of trained teachers in tech.
Getting people

Money to implement our plans
80% of new jobs do not now exist
Managing growth
Public schools & colleges work together
Mtn. Home chose who is to come
Technology jobs
Work with ASU-J
Keep up with law enforcement
Work ethic lacking
Don't leave uneducated behind, give them tools
Vo-Tech & apprentice program
Capital for small businesses
Shortage of health professionals
Recycling
Protect our lakes & environment
Balance for younger & older citizens
Work together
Keep our kids home
Dev. of fishing industry/arts colony in Cotter
Incubator/recruit businesses
Market ourselves
Maintain tax level – balance
Motivate AARP members to become involved
Mix admin. & medical training
Define yourselfc market to the world
Tax our retired folks

Opportunities

Educating youth
Quality of life
Bring in tech., high paying jobs
Many opportunities (hospital, NCARED lakes, etc.)
Highway system
Business owners' network
College
Mkt. assets
Listen to people who moved here
Increase work force
Keeping & expanding current bus.
Manage our water uses in a balance
More medical demands more people
Need more jobs

Fulton County

Challenges

Jobs – higher paying
Getting people to come
Lack of community involvement
Health
Pandemic flu plan (?)

Opportunities

Top-notch school
Wonderful place to live
Low cost of housing
Great work ethic
Local government will be supportive

Fulton County, continued

Challenges

Where can young people go to work?
Taxes
Support for communities
Trouble attracting qualified work force
Educated work force
Education
Community development

Izard County

Challenges

Industry leaving (5)
Why are kids leaving?
Future growth
Jobs for kids
Impact of loss of jobs on county govt.
Better wage base
What can quorum court do?
Light industry
Keeping our youth
Train them to provide service for seniors
Businesses closing
Families – less income, family stress
Fuel cost – long commutes to work
Make a difference

Opportunities

Beautify our community
Volunteers – library
Boeing plant
Tourism – lakes, White River
Regional cooperation
Aircraft repair
Education – Ozarka College
Land & location
Newcomers–Horseshoe Bend
Acquire more businesses
Workforce
More retirees
People build on lots

Marion County

Challenges

Transportation access/infrastructire
Keeping jobs & our people here
Manufacturing
Vocational education
Small businesses
Educate the people – grow or die
Not many young people coming in
Children cannot make a living
Let people know about our area
Strong representation in state govt.
Help our youth appreciate what we have
More youth activities

Opportunities

Beauty of the Ozarks
People moving to the area
Jobs in the service and
building industry
Tourism
Technology available to do things

Searcy County

Our Vision

Ozark Mountain Water Alliance provides water to the county from Bull Shoals
County-wide water system
Access to natural gas
Highway 65 becomes four-lane to the Missouri line
Better road system, including better secondary roads
Inventory what we can make that China cannot
Take advantage of our natural beauty
Businesses with benefits
New small businesses
Expansion of existing businesses
Knowledge-based jobs that are environmentally friendly
Keep the jobs we have
National chain motel
Shop locally
Better access to health care – transportation
More health services
Trauma unit for emergencies
Better appearance/less junk

Challenges

Absentee landlords
Loss of sales tax base
Junky properties

Opportunities

Fix up old buildings
Beautify neighborhoods

Stone County

Challenges

Help people move forward
Jobs available – more than \$6 per hr.
Education in particular fields
Plan for orderly growth
Low income/lack of education
Build fire station

Young people go someplace else
Need diversity in our jobs
Infrastructure to pull it all together

Opportunities

Culture & heritage
Natural beauty
Retirement
Natural resources
Logging & rock
Utilize retirees as teachers
in trades
Agricultural industry
Tourist & retiree industry

Van Buren County

Challenges

Closing of Volex
We need: industries, small businesses
(Hispanic?)
Attract retail Businesses downtown
Road Industry
Revitalize downtown
Business incubator
More tourism
Find rental units
People who don't know about agriculture
Drug use among secondary school kids
Poverty level
Getting people to work together

Opportunities

200-acre subdivision
Investor for product
Natural gas plan
Growth rate
OSS boat races
To shape the growth
(we have what people want)
Hired 73 new people at
the hospital
Started a career center
Beautiful location
Continue tourism in FFB
2000-seat auditorium & gym
at the high school
Market ourselves
Branson traffic
Houses at \$100,000