



## Communications Department

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### **City leaders share, learn from Springfield trip**

Representatives of Jonesboro, including Mayor Harold Perrin, flew to Springfield, Missouri, this week to share experiences and ideas in city stewardship.

“It was wonderful to see what’s going on in Springfield, and they have been through a lot of situations that are similar to issues we are dealing with in Jonesboro,” Perrin said. “We exchanged ideas on quality of life issues, things you can partner on with your local university, and public-private partnerships – a whole range of topics.”

The Jonesboro group included Community Development Director Tiffny Calloway, three representatives of Arkansas State University (Vice Chancellor Len Fry, Incubator Manager Luna Acosta and assistant professor of management Hilary Schloemer), as well as businessmen Ted Herget and Brian Umberson, and Jonesboro Unlimited Vice President Mike Downing.

Downing, a former Missouri Director of Economic Development who spent three decades in that state department, arranged the trip. “Think big,” has been his mantra to those envisioning Jonesboro’s future. He said he watched Springfield grow over the years and was so impressed that he wanted to show Jonesboro leaders, who are working to accomplish similar objectives.

Springfield Mayor Ken McClure said one key element makes a city unique when creating quality of life.

“Most communities are pretty much the same, but where they differ is downtown,” McClure said. “The heart of a community beats downtown.”

One strategy employed by Springfield leaders a generation ago helped revitalize its downtown, and it started with a dilapidated eyesore. The city purchased a seven-story, 75,000-square-foot, crumbling feed mill and hired developers and consultants about how to restore it. Eventually, representatives of local Missouri State University came forward with a plan, and the city sold what is now the Jordan Valley Innovation Center to the university for \$1.

The university then invested \$25 million to make it what it is today.

“Partnership, collaboration, trust and respect were key to all our downtown development,” McClure said.

It sparked a lifeless downtown that now features new businesses, a minor league ballpark, and a beautiful “eFactory” – a shared office space for entrepreneurial startups and developers.

Perrin said the results Springfield has seen illustrates what many in Jonesboro hope can come from the vacant Citizens Bank building.

“Everyone in Jonesboro knows the biggest structure in our downtown is sitting empty and is an eyesore,” he said. “A lot of developers are exploring ways to turn it into something useful, because redevelopment could make it our crown jewel.

“Working to connect the owners of the Citizens Bank building with a buyer who will do something nice with it never strays too far from my mind.”

Springfield leaders noted that the southwestern Missouri city has demographics similar to Jonesboro, and found the exchange of experiences and ideas mutually beneficial.

The two groups discussed everything from economic development to safety to quality of life.

“My biggest take-away is that Jonesboro is on the right track – from our 24 parks to our cost of living to job security,” said Tiffny Calloway, director of community development for the City of Jonesboro.

“Springfield was encouraging because they show what can happen when an entire community rallies behind downtown development.”

Downing said Springfield has been successful because its various leadership entities “want to work together, have mutual respect and common goals about growth and development.”

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