

# COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP VISIT 2019

LEXINGTON, KY





“Everyone in your group is the author of your story.”

Bob Quick, Commerce Lexington Inc.

## BUILT ON STRENGTH

Sometimes it can be easy for midsize cities, especially in the Midwest, to get lumped together. The term “flyover country” was coined for a reason, after all.

But when you arrive in Lexington, Kentucky, there is no mistaking where you are. Whether you arrive by air or by highway, the city’s brand is evident. It’s all about “bourbon, basketball, and the blue horse” ... and it’s pervasive in nearly every part of this county of half a million people.

The brand is no accident. It’s the result of years of work figuring out the city’s identity and building on those strengths to create a brand that could be easily, well, distilled.

As the members of Springfield’s 2019 Community Leadership Visit delegation learned, that’s how the people of Lexington handle most things:

- They identify their strengths
- They address their issues – even those that are difficult to tackle
- And they make a concerted effort to include a place for everyone at the

table when discussing the path forward

It’s the way they’ve handled a whole range of concerns: growth planning, diversity and inclusion, downtown revitalization, the connection between the community and the university, workforce development, investment in education and more. It’s a methodical, focused approach that ensures everyone’s voice is heard and then joins those voices into one, mostly unified chorus.

Of course, not everyone agrees on every topic. That’s the nature of true discussion. But they are intentional about including everyone in the process from the beginning, building deep trust that spans different generations and diverse backgrounds in race, religion, ideology and experience.

That approach also has created an identity for the city that is truly authentic ... something that goes beyond a branding effort. Because Lexington has realized its biggest strength – just like most cities – is its people ... all its people.

“It’s clear that Lexington’s people are its biggest asset – because they all work together. Springfield has momentum to do great things, too, if we all pull in the same direction.”

Jeff Childs, SVN/Rankin Company  
2019 Board Chairman, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce

# A STRONG IDENTITY



There is no mistaking Lexington's brand.

On streets, on buildings, in public spaces and in marketing materials, you'll find three themes: that you are in horse country, the presence of the bourbon industry and the culture of University of Kentucky basketball ... what some of the locals affectionately refer to as "horses, hoops and hooch."

But Lexington's strong, identifiable brand is not about a city choosing its image. It's a story of how a community found its identity and spent decades investing in that identity to forge a brand rooted in authenticity.

"We're built on horsepower and people power," says Bob Quick, president and CEO of Commerce Lexington, Inc., the

city's Chamber of Commerce. "Our brands are global and have different meanings to different people, but they open doors for us."

## Horse sense

The city's identity is uniquely tied to its geography. For example, it's no coincidence that the Lexington area is horse country; wild horses were plentiful in the area before the city was founded due to the characteristics of the area's soil and water, and the region has capitalized on those equine assets ever since.

Today, horse breeding and sales are a significant industry in Lexington – agriculture and agritourism make up 9% of the city's economy. The industry also has brought unparalleled global

diversity for a town of its size, with 157 languages spoken in Fayette County, including 75 in the public schools.

For an example of the industry's impact, look no further than Keeneland, the race track and Mecca for horse sales. The 2017 annual sale at the venerable facility saw the purchase of \$539 million worth of horses in roughly two weeks.

"We represented, this year, about 26 different countries at the sale," says a Keeneland tour guide. "If you walked through here particularly at the beginning of the sale, you could hear Japanese, Korean, Italian, French, Arabic, all different languages being spoken."

City leaders have been intentional about protecting their horses, too.

They created the city's urban service boundary in 1958 to delineate the border between the urban development and surrounding Fayette County, much of which is inhabited by horse farms. That boundary has been important in protecting those operations over the years, as the city's population doubled between 1950 and 1980 on the strength of major employers like IBM and Lexmark.

But in recent years it has created a new challenge: scarcity. In short, the city is out of land to develop, and the boundary – which is reconsidered every five years – has not been expanded in two decades. As a result, some recent company expansions have gone to other towns in the region.

"We have nine neighboring communities with land for development; they're more rural in nature, but they have available space," says Gina Greathouse, Commerce Lexington's executive vice president for economic development, who noted that 87 percent of Lexington's tax base is based on revenue taxes, since the state prohibits charging sales tax. "When jobs go to a neighboring county, so do the tax revenues. Lexington gets the indirect and induced tax base from that, but man would we love to have those jobs here."

## Bourbon and basketball

Two of the city's other brands also grew organically, but for very different reasons.

The same limestone that produced soil and grass to attract horses to the Lexington region also produces a very distinct natural water source perfect for one activity: distilling.

Kentucky bourbon has a history dating back to when the area was the western portion of the Virginia colony, and

the city is capitalizing on that history today. VisitLEX, the city's convention and visitors' bureau, lists 14 different distilleries available for tours, while the Distillery District in the city's northwest quadrant has seen the revitalization of the original 25-acre James E. Pepper Distillery property into a vibrant area full of restaurants, entertainment and retail options.

Amir Peay bought the James E. Pepper brand in 2011 and reopened the main distillery, which had been shuttered for 50 years, in 2016.

"We're the front porch for the city, and we understand that. I want to make sure that when they walk up to the city's door, they see something that is special."

Mitch Barnhart, University of Kentucky

"When they heard we were going to be going back into the building, many other businesses moved into the area too," Peay says of his Distillery District neighbors. "It's developed into this eclectic mix of businesses and business owners. It's authentic; it's not shiny and new. And that's a good thing."

The third leg of the branding trifecta also has a long history.

UK basketball is like a religion to many in the state. The "Big Blue Nation" follows the team all over the country. As Kim Shelton, president of UK Sports & Campus Marketing for JMI Sports, says, the university's hoops team doesn't

even compare to other colleges in terms of community impact.

"We asked Nielsen to look at the value of team visibility," she says. "They dug into the numbers in 2017 and said, 'Let's not bother comparing to other colleges. Let's look at the NBA.' We came in fourth in comparison to other NBA teams."

## Building the brands

While all three of these strands of identity are unique to the area, they also have another factor in common: None were built into a full-fledged brand by accident. All required years of planning and effort by community and business leaders.

It's the intentional work of people like Mary Quinn Ramer with VisitLEX to brand the Blue Horse as the city's unofficial official mascot and to encourage entrepreneurs like Peay and others to invest in the city.

It's the vision of people like former Mayor Jim Gray to spearhead and champion the revitalization of downtown Lexington – including a \$308 million project to completely rebuild the Lexington Center that houses Rupp Arena, and millions more spent to rebuild the historic courthouse, plus future plans to partially daylight Town Branch (see the story on page 5).

And throughout many steps of the process, it's been public officials that have led the charge.

"The three most important words are focus, focus, focus," Gray says. "You have to have your finances right, but you also have to have a compelling vision and then implement your vision. If people want something really badly and work really hard, politicians will do their damndest to make it happen."



## A STRONG CORE

Any athlete will tell you that strength starts from the core. It's the same for cities, too.

The story of Lexington's city center is much like that of most other cities. Following the retail migration out of the downtown region in the middle to late part of the 20th century, there were significant portions of the city center requiring redevelopment.

Lexington also had an additional asset downtown: the University of Kentucky, complete with the basketball team's Rupp Arena, which is the centerpiece of the Lexington Center convention complex. But that facility was built in 1976 and needed work.

### Rebuilding the core

Enter Mayor Jim Gray, who took office in 2011.

"In 2011, Rupp Arena and the convention center were nearly 40 years old," Gray says. "Something had to be done, and I encouraged that in my first State of the City address. That also included a reimagining of the core of the city. It's so important to have a vibrant and vital urban space."

The timing for the plan might not have been ideal. The city was facing the need to fix its pension system and its health insurance plan, as well as a \$30 million deficit. "And that's when I announced that we needed to renovate Rupp Arena," Gray said.

But the idea wasn't a new one. VisitLEX had brought in consultants as early as 1986, the year after Lexington hosted the NCAA Final Four, to examine how the city's convention facilities compared to its competitors. Three different studies conducted over the next two decades said the facility needed a bigger exhibit hall and more meeting rooms to compete for conventions and the revenue they bring.

What prompted the decision to finally move forward? In part, it was movement on other downtown development projects, such as the redevelopment of the former Fifth Third Bank building into the 21c Museum Hotel, announced in 2012 and completed in early 2016.

That created momentum for the city to move forward on renovating the historic courthouse, which sat vacant after court facilities moved to a bigger building in 2012. The city invested two-thirds of the \$33 million price tag for that project, with the rest coming from private investment through historic preservation tax credits. Rent from the building's private tenants covers the operating costs for the building, preventing the city from being required to make additional investment.

Another example of new development is Town Branch Commons, a 2.5-mile trail system and park built around daylighting

a small portion of the buried Town Branch Creek. The planned project, which began gathering federal funding in 2016, would be funded through a combination of state and federal grants and private nonprofit funding. Construction began on the project in spring 2018.

### The college connection

But the centerpiece of the downtown development remains the \$300 million-plus Lexington Center project, which has at its heart Rupp Arena. Lexington Center CEO Bill Owen says he still marvels at the longevity of the arena and the city's connection to it.

"This project will make our commitment to Rupp Arena 58 years ... arenas don't last 58 years," he says. "Charlotte Coliseum was imploded after 19 years. I have shoes that are 19 years old."

"There's always this debate about whether a convention center will make money. Build it first for your own people and then others will come. It brings new people to the city; it brings vitality and diversity."

Jim Gray, former Lexington mayor

That longevity speaks to the importance of UK and its connection with the city. But it's not always been a connection the two sides were eager to build. Such was the case when UK Athletic Director Mitch Barnhart took the position in 2002.

"When I walked in, the conversation was, 'You need to leave downtown. You need to build your own arena on campus,'" Barnhart says, noting that then University President Lee Todd advocated to keep the arena downtown. "We needed to support the city – the city needed us, and we needed them."

Part of the issue, Barnhart admits, is that when he arrived the university wasn't a very good partner, making decisions like scheduling October football games at times that directly competed with horse races at Keeneland that forced people to choose between the two. He said the decision was made to change course, going to the Southeastern Conference and asking them to schedule as many night football games in October as possible.

"You know what happened? People wanted to go to the racetrack during the day and the football game at night, and it was a magical day for Lexington," Barnhart says. "All of a sudden, we went from having 20,000 at Keeneland and 40,000 at the football games to 30,000 at Keeneland and 65,000 at football – and they rode a shuttle that we sponsored to go from one to the other. And guess who one of our biggest sponsors is today at the football stadium? Keeneland."

#### Community pride

That feeling of partnership and shared ownership of the community is pervasive. You can sense it when talking to entrepreneurs like Sal Sanchez, owner of A Cup of Common Wealth coffee shop, who moved to Lexington in 2013.

"One of the things I noticed is that there's a spirit of celebration throughout



the city – people here celebrate things big or small," he says. "You just find this really powerful community feeling ... but that doesn't make Lexington unique. What makes us unique is that we somehow tap into that community."

It's the same with Rob Perez, a restaurant industry veteran who opened DV8 Kitchen to give employment opportunities to those dealing with drug and alcohol addiction through on-the-job training. He says when his business was first starting, he and his wife Diane were down to their last \$10,000 and close to closing – until he reached out to Mary Quinn Ramer with VisitLEX.

"I shared my story with Mary Quinn, and she put me in contact with a PR firm in New York," he says. "That turned into a *New York Times* article, and that turned into five-star Yelp reviews that turned our business around."

Or ask attorney Jessica Winters, who co-founded the PRHBTN street art festival with her husband, John, to bring in muralists from around the world as well as showcase local artists in a gallery show. The effort is completely paid for through donations and crowdfunding sources.

"The goal is to connect local artists with the worldwide art community and also to bring some art into everyone's everyday lives," she says. "My idea of an ideal community is one where each person gives something without an expectation of return."

So how did Lexington get so many people on board to move downtown forward? Lexington Center's Bill Owen says most people move in the same direction because they can see the vision.

"You need a compelling and convincing story to tell," he says. "And when it's about your downtown, everybody is a stakeholder."

## A STRONG FOUNDATION

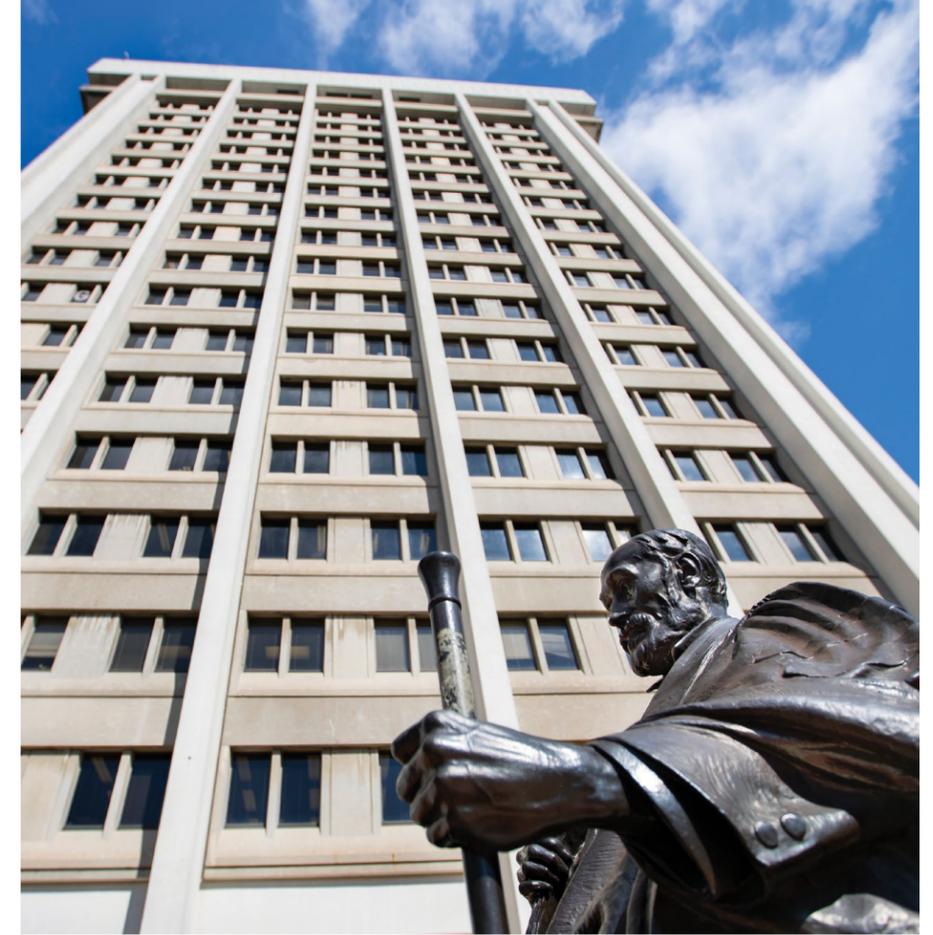
Lexington's leaders have realized that a strong city, like a strong building, must have a solid foundation. For the city, that means strong investment in education and workforce development – and both items were championed by the city's business community.

"During my year as Commerce Lex chair, there were two things I wanted us to focus on: public education and workforce," says Alan Stein, vice president of new business development for LM Communications and the 2016 chair of the Commerce Lexington Board of Directors. "We believed they were intricately entwined. They were both critically important to solving the issues that we had and continue to have."

#### Investing in schools

Fayette County Public Schools knew what issue needed their attention: improving school safety. The district developed the Comprehensive 10-Point Safety Investment Plan based on ideas from a council of 28 students, parents, educators, first responders, city officials, and business, faith and community leaders. The plan covered everything from physical issues to police presence in the schools and student mental health.

"The real goal was to get what's really hurting our kids – and it's that our kids hurt," says Ray Daniels, who serves on the boards of both the school district and the Chamber. "But it's easy to write a plan. It's harder to pay for it."



That's where the support of the Chamber and the business community came in. The school board recommended a 3-cent property tax levy to pay for a portion of the safety plan; community business leaders said if 3 cents wouldn't cover the full cost, the district should ask for 5 cents to cover the full bill.

Stein said the Chamber helped market the virtues of funding the proposal, noting that Lexington's tax system is unique in that the school district didn't have to ask permission to levy the tax increase but instead had to wait to see if a recall petition would be filed to put the levy on a ballot, which didn't happen.

"What resonated with me in the 10-point plan was the epidemic that we see of suicide among our school-age children," he says. "This plan specifically addressed the children who were in jeopardy – monitoring social media, investing in guidance

counselors – to directly address the epidemic that we needed to overcome. We think that has been incredibly valuable."

#### Investing in workforce

The other side of the schools' job, aside from making sure students are safe, is preparing kids for life after the classroom.

To that end, the Fayette County Schools implemented an academy model in three high schools, based on the Ford Next Generation Learning model that they saw on a tour in Nashville. The model lets students at a participating school choose from one of multiple fields of study based on their interests; the curriculum in their field is developed jointly between district leaders and professionals in the relevant industries.

The academy program touts improved preparation for either college or careers and better earning potential

for students, as well as offering young people the skills to better prepare them to enter the workforce and be immediately productive. It also benefits the community by creating a talent pool that attracts more industries to the city.

“There are 122 jobs at Baptist Health, and not all of them require a college degree,” says James McMillin, the district’s chief of high schools and former principal of Bryan Station High School, the first district high school to host an academy program. “If they’re interested in IT, it may not mean developing video games – it may mean working in health care. And then let’s work with employers so that what students learn in the classroom is actually what they need in the world.”

Lexington’s approach also included early buy-in from a wide range of sources. The rollout process for the program took more than two years and involved significant marketing efforts targeting all stakeholders – teachers, parents, business and community leaders.

And the business community was on board from the beginning.

“Before we even moved forward with our strategic plan, we went to the

business community and said, ‘This is something we need your support on,’” Stein says. “We had a foundation of supporters ready as we rolled out the program. That turned out to be a very valuable approach to making the whole process work.”

#### Beyond K-12

Change and growth are happening beyond the high school level as well.

The community’s “front porch,” University of Kentucky, has invested \$2.4 billion in its campus in the last eight years, funded by a combination of public funding, tuition, philanthropic giving and public-private partnerships.

Kim Kluemper, UK’s director of business engagement, says some of those investments have been driven by the rapid pace of change in the economy and the workplace. “Employers’ needs will change rapidly, so we need to be more nimble in meeting those needs,” she says. “There’s a new energy on campus – it’s fun to be part of.”

The region’s community college, Bluegrass Community & Technical College, developed its advanced manufacturing program specifically to train workers to meet the needs of area employers. That partnership with

area businesses is core to its mission, according to BCTC VP of Advancement and Organizational Development Mark Manuel.

“We work very closely with businesses to create the workforce they need,” he says. “Workforce is a big issue here, just like it is in every community. Whoever figures out the workforce issue wins.”

One of the biggest employers the school works with is Toyota, which opened its first North American plant in nearby Georgetown in 1988; it’s now the largest Toyota plant in the world, employing more than 8,000 people and producing more than a half-million vehicles each year.

“There’s a workforce shortage – the folks coming to us are not prepared like they need to be to hit the ground competitive,” says Kim Menke, regional director of government affairs for Toyota Motor North America. “We’ve had this strong partnership with UK and BCTC from Day One. This has been a 31-year journey to develop training to be successful.”

“The high school academies were developed hand in hand with business, because the business community got used to being at the table in the process. Graduation rates increased, disciplinary issues declined, and test scores went up.”

Ray Daniels,  
Fayette County Board of Education

## STRONG RELATIONSHIPS



Looking at all of Lexington’s strengths, none would be possible without the strong connections between the city’s people.

The presence of the University of Kentucky, and its connection with the city, is one example. UK Athletic Director Mitch Barnhart consistently reminds his students of the importance of the “town-gown connection.”

“I tell them, you have a right to be a student-athlete here, but with that right comes a great responsibility,” he says. “You don’t get to walk around and abuse people or think you’re better than them. You must be responsible for your actions and what you do and be a good citizen of this community.”

But the connections are not just between the city and the school. They go much deeper, and they go back decades.

#### Difficult conversations

They go back at least to when the city and Fayette County merged governments in 1974 – driven in part, according to P.G. Peebles, president and CEO of the Urban League of Lexington-Fayette County, by the need to integrate the city and county public schools.

Peebles says there was a stark academic achievement gap between white and black students. The Urban League and others pushed hard to address the issue, but as he says, “That did not start to resonate in our community until

the Chamber of Commerce lined up with us and said, ‘If we have a gap and some of us are falling behind, all of our community suffers because the product we send out only represents part of our population.’”

Peebles was chair of the school district’s Equity Council for eight years, working to monitor equity issues in area schools and report them to the school board. He also was one of the first African-American participants in Lexington’s own Community Leadership Visits.

“I said, ‘All those white people are getting on the plane and going somewhere – there’s got to be something good going on there. We need to know about it,’” he jokes.



## Key Lexington Programs for Relationship Building



### 01 COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

A framework for all segments of the community to discuss difficult issues

### 02 SCHOOL DISTRICT'S EQUITY COUNCIL

Having business at the table to help impact equity in education

### 03 NEW LEADERS COUNCIL

Engaging diverse YPs to help develop best practices to retain them

But his commitment to building deep personal relationships with leaders of all stripes in the community is no laughing matter – and he notes that not everyone understood initially why he would want to participate in these trips. “That’s what true leaders do. You go where other people have not had the courage to go,” he says. “And that’s what we’ve done, and as a result, I think we’ve played some role in diversifying this community.”

One of those recent visits was to Charleston, South Carolina, in 2016, just months after the murder of nine black

members of Mother Emanuel church. The participants on that trip wanted to know how the city kept from devolving into violence and instead rallied together to preserve peace and unite the community.

That experience helped spur the creation of Together Lexington, an initiative led by 16 business and community leaders focused on projects and positive marketing for the city to improve quality of life and a framework for the community at large to talk about key issues.

That included a series of “Courageous Conversations” about difficult topics: race relations, gentrification, LGBTQ+ inclusion, police relations, drug abuse, homelessness and poverty. “We wanted to know how Charleston rallied around itself,” says Rufus Friday, one of the founders of Together Lexington and former publisher of the Lexington Herald-Leader. “And we felt we needed to have a similar conversation here on some very difficult topics that people were talking about behind the scenes.”

Those conversations led to a number of improvements, including better relationships between minority groups and the police – thanks in no small part to efforts by the police department to proactively reach out to those groups and ask for their help.

“This group decided we needed to come back from Charleston and do something that was meaningful for our city – come back and follow up on what we had learned,” says Mark Barnard, who was then chief of the Lexington Police Department. “Having courageous conversations as a city is the most important thing you can do so that everybody can have a voice.”

Ultimately, it’s the strength and depth of their relationships – and a community expectation for broad engagement – that has created an environment for open, honest dialogue about where they are as a community and how to build a better community for all.

#### An inclusive future

That focus on equity and inclusion has also blossomed among the city’s young professionals. One example is Jonah Brown, an attorney who also serves as marketing director for Lexington nonprofit Community Ventures. He was

one of a handful of YPs who worked with the New Leaders Council, to create a daylong conference to look at issues facing YPs of color in the area.

“Lexington has a lot of cool events, food options, things to do, but you can go to the top websites and see the people who are represented in law, accounting, and business, and they’re all white – and that’s not representative of Lexington,” he says. “The gap that I saw was how we connect the people that I know are here to the things that we were looking for.”

Brown adds that his group was able to get buy-in from community and business leaders because they all want diverse populations to stay in the city and needed someone to help facilitate a conversation that included everyone.

“There are places where the changes we talk about might be met with resistance, but we’re making progress,” he says. “There are restaurants, finance businesses, attorneys, reflecting the actual demographics of Lexington. When you do that, the community rewards you here.”

That hope for the future is shared by one of the community’s most respected statesmen, the Rev. Dr. C.B. Akins, Sr. He says he is optimistic about the future of the city he has called home for 38 years – as long as everyone has a seat at the table and can bring their shared experience.

“Change does not come about easily; it comes about with folks that love their city and it starts with each of us, one on one,” he says. “We’ve gone through difficult days. We’re not a perfect city. But we’re a lot better than we have been, and we’re moving in the right direction.”

“We all pay our taxes to one place, we all have one mayor, and we’re really all one. The way you see things may be different from how I see things, but that’s not necessarily wrong, because our lenses were ground in our culture.”

Rev. Dr. C.B. Akins, Sr.,  
First Baptist Bracktown

# FINDING OUR STRENGTH



When you look at Lexington and its successes, the whole process looks deceptively simple: The community brought everyone together, determined its collective identity, built up its foundational elements, and now is working on building and growing the city around that shared identity and brand.

Simple.

“Lexington has built on its strengths and created an identity for itself. We can do that too, but we have to be willing to think big and take some risks. Risk-taking has to be in our DNA.”

Robin Robeson, Guaranty Bank;  
2019 Chairman-Elect,  
Chamber Board of Directors

And, of course, incredibly complicated. Because each of those steps takes time, focus and dedication on the part of numerous stakeholders:

- It’s not easy to ensure that all voices are at the decision-making table, representing diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.
- Finding a community’s identity takes time; developing a brand around that identity takes years of focused investment.
- Building up the foundation of your city – whether it’s the downtown core or the school system and workforce pipeline – takes multiple years, if not decades, of planning and work.

But nothing in Lexington’s success story was done by magic ... and none of it is particularly unique when you break it down.

Many of these same themes – strong community identity, investment in downtown, educational ingenuity, a focus on equity and inclusion – have been echoed in previous Community Leadership Visit locales, from Chattanooga to Boise to Huntsville and beyond.

So what did all of those communities have in common? In short, they had strength. Strong resolve, strong leadership, strong will and a strong desire to see their community succeed.

Each city we visit provides more insight into what it will take to make Springfield into a more thriving community.

Our community leaders worked to put many ideas into action recently, from gigabit Internet access to the recent Philanthropy Summit to the Friends of SPS efforts supporting bonds for our public schools. Efforts like the BUILD grant for the Grant Avenue parkway and the progress made on the IDEA Commons continue this momentum. And the city’s Forward SGF planning process gives us an opportunity to take inspiration and develop it into real, concrete plans that can shape our future.

It’s time to continue our own courageous conversations – about what our community really wants to be, about what it will take to get us there, and about making sure everyone has a voice and a chance to succeed.

We have the momentum. We have the strength. The time to act is now.

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Ozarks Technical Community College

**Joe Reynolds**  
City Utilities Board of Public Utilities

**Robin Robeson**  
Guaranty Bank

**Toni Robinson**  
Springfield NAACP

**Tim Rosenbury**  
Springfield R-12 Board of Education

**Ben Sapp**  
Sapp Design Associates Architects, PC

**Gary Schafer**  
BKD, LLP

**Jeff Schrag**  
The Daily Events/Mother's Brewing  
Company

**Mary Schrag**  
Physical Therapy Specialist Clinic

**Cora Scott**  
City of Springfield

**Jeff Seifried**  
Branson-Lakes Area Chamber of  
Commerce

**Denise Silvey**  
City Utilities Board of Public Utilities

**Councilmember Matthew Simpson**  
City of Springfield

**Andrea Sitzes**  
Show Me Christian County

**Mary Lilly Smith**  
City of Springfield

**Stephanie Summers**  
Ozarks Technical Community College

**Joel Thomas**  
Lamar Johnson Collaborative

**Shanda Trautman**  
Old Missouri Bank

**Brian Weiler**  
Springfield-Branson National Airport

**Paden Wilcox**  
The Network for Young Professionals  
Computer Recycling Center, LLC

**Jennifer Wilson**  
N-FORM Architecture