



**COMMUNITY
LEADERSHIP VISIT
2021 SPRINGFIELD, MO**

“We get so wrapped up in our day-to-day that we don’t realize how incremental improvements are turning Springfield into a vibrant, welcoming community. We have had major and transformative progress, and that is worth celebrating.”

Logan Aguirre, 417
2021 Chamber Board Chair

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WHAT IS SPRINGFIELD?



It seems like a facetious question at first blush. But understanding who and what we are as a community is the first step to embracing our assets, continuing our progress and facing our challenges.

The answer, as with so many questions of this magnitude, is ... complicated. And it was part of the reason that the 2021 edition of the Community Leadership Visit was focused on taking a “trip” to our own hometown.

The Chamber has been leading these endeavors for nearly 30 years. Peer city visits are not uncommon among cities all over the country, but a community choosing to shift the focus and take a “trip” to study itself is a unique

approach. 2021 emerged as the perfect time to look inward – and not just because of the pandemic’s impact.

Springfield is at a major crossroads. The city and the region have made meaningful advances in the last 10-20 years in economic development, education, the arts and the outdoors and more, as you’ll read in the coming pages. The city is also planning for its long-term future and collecting citizen input on where investment should be made.

But there are questions to address. How does our community tackle the workforce shortage to meet employer needs and give individuals access to better jobs? How do we better define

and leverage our regional identity? How can we continue our efforts to be more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming?

It all comes back to the initial question: What is Springfield?

What is our identity? Who are we now, and what do we want to be in the future?

This community is many things. Our city and our region are awash with new ideas and opportunities that can help shape our future.

What we are – what we can be – is up to us. Because Springfield is on the cusp of incredible opportunity ... if we all step up and make it happen.



SPRINGFIELD IS... ON THE VERGE OF GREAT THINGS

This did not mark the first destination Springfield Community Leadership Visit. In 2010, on the heels of a global recession, trip participants also had the opportunity to look inward.

That first Springfield visit noted several exciting things happening in our community – a renewed focus on education at all levels, and the burgeoning entrepreneurial environment – and tremendous advances have been made in both areas in the years since that visit. The 2010 visit also noted key challenges, like rising poverty and a lack of diversity. Those challenges are still works in progress; poverty rates are declining, and diversity is increasing, though work remains in both areas.

Taking Stock

But the 2010 visit also provides an opportunity for comparison; a chance to look at how far our community has come in the last decade-plus.

“Sometimes, it’s easy to lose sight of progress we have made – and there

has been so much of it,” says Logan Aguirre, publisher of 417 Magazine and 2021 chair of the Chamber’s Board of Directors.

Attendees got a chance to look back at all of our region’s progress during the trip’s opening session, held at the Springfield Art Museum.

The Building Blocks

Broad investment in numerous areas in the region has been essential for creating a foundation upon which the region has flourished in the last two decades:

- **Economic Development** – The region has seen growth at the two Partnership Industrial Centers; the new terminal and expansion of the Springfield-Branson National Airport; the Roy Blunt Jordan Valley Innovation Center, IDEA Commons and The efactory at Missouri State University; development of citywide gigabit Internet access; and new facilities/expansions for countless major employers. New businesses have also located and expanded in cities around

the region, including Amazon and Convoy of Hope in Republic.

- **Infrastructure Investment** –

Continued support for the city’s quarter-cent and eighth-cent sales taxes, combined with state and federal funding, have funded improvements to all the major road routes circling the city, as well as improvements to major intersections. This proactive investment in our infrastructure has set the region up for growth and future progress.

- **Health Care** – The region’s largest employment sector has benefitted from more than \$1 billion in improvements by Cox and Mercy in the last 15-plus years. The creation/expansion of Jordan Valley Community Health Center, Burrell Behavioral Health and the University of Missouri Clinical Campus have also prompted growth in the health care sector.

- **Higher Education & Workforce Development** – The higher education sector has exploded in recent years. The student population at Missouri State University has increased by 5,000 since its name change in 2005, with multiple renovated academic

and athletic facilities to match. Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC), the fastest growing community college in the state, has served more than 100,000 students in the last decade and isn't slowing down. The Network for Springfield's Young Professionals is working to keep those trained professionals in Springfield after they graduate.

- **K-12 Education** – The passage of Proposition S in 2019 created nearly \$170 million in capital for improvement projects across the district, including the reconstruction or renovation of four elementary schools, and two high schools. It also allowed the district to expand its investment in early childhood education with two new facilities. And Prop S followed the passage of bond issues in 2006, 2009 and 2013, equating to more than \$380 million invested in Springfield school facilities in the last 15 years.

Quality of Place

All of these investments have spurred advancement in nearly all areas of the city and the region, which will continue to improve the quality of life for everyone who lives here:

- **Neighborhood Revitalization** – Neighborhoods all over Springfield have seen tremendous reinvestment in the last 20 years. The leader in the effort was downtown Springfield, where the renovated Heer's Building and revitalized Park Central Square form the nucleus of a vibrant Center City region that includes the newly expanded Vandivort Hotel and Vantage rooftop bar, theaters, restaurants and numerous other forms of entertainment and nightlife. That enthusiasm has spread to multiple other areas of the city, from Commercial Street to Rountree, the Cherry & Pickwick area, Farmer's Park and the Galloway neighborhood.

- **Regional Growth** – From Nixa to Ozark to Rogersville to Republic, communities throughout the region have expanded their amenities to include new entertainment, dining and outdoor opportunities. And Branson's continued boom as a tourist haven includes the expansion and growth of award-winning destinations and nationally recognized golf courses.

- **Arts Scene** – Those looking for visual and performing arts have countless options to choose from. Top-level performing arts spaces like Juanita K. Hammons Hall for the Performing Arts, the Gillioz, JQH Arena and the O'Reilly Events Center are drawing national touring artists and shows. Work on the Springfield Art Museum's 30-year Master Plan is already underway, and local artists are demonstrating their talents via First Friday Art Walk, the citywide Sculpture Walk and loads of new murals and public art all over the city.

- **Cultural Opportunities** – The cultural scene has also exploded, with the introduction of new festivals and outdoor entertainment that include food, arts and culture. The city is home to a craft coffee and beer market that would have been only a pipe dream 15 years ago. And don't forget what facilities like Hammons Field and the world-class Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium bring to our region.

- **Outdoors** – But perhaps the region's most valuable asset is its outdoor beauty – an asset that has seen extensive investment. We are a regional destination from the Buffalo River to Table Rock Lake. The Springfield-Greene County Parks Department has established or renovated a number of impressive sites, and Ozark Greenways now manages a trail system that is 77 miles and growing, with the development of 66 miles of new trails along Route 66 with the Dirt 66 project.

Reflecting on this progress serves as a reminder of what the community

has built and the ways in which we have worked to address needs and solve problems. It's also important to highlight and build on the decisions, investments, priorities, and collaborative efforts that brought us to where we are today.

Incremental improvements are turning Springfield into a vibrant, welcoming and dynamic community. The progress made over the last decade has been transformative – and that is worth celebrating.

All that work mattered because it had a collective impact. And what we do next matters, too.

On the Horizon

And yet with all this growth, major plans are in the works to take the region to the next level.

The Forward SGF long-range planning effort has been collecting input from thousands of residents about how they want to see the community grow and improve in the next 20 years. The Grant Avenue Parkway project will put \$26 million of federal grant money into redeveloping the corridor between the flagship Bass Pro Shops and the Center City region. And several other efforts are underway to address ongoing issues, from diversity and equity to poverty and homelessness.

“There is work to do – some of it exciting and some of it challenging,” Aguirre says. “But we live in an incredible place. And if you all didn't feel that way already, you wouldn't be here.”



SPRINGFIELD IS... A CITY, AND A REGION

The new Amazon distribution center. The Finley Farms & Ozark Mill development. The golf courses and development at Big Cedar. Silver Dollar City.

All of these projects have two things in common:

- They all have a tremendous impact on both the economy and quality of life in the Springfield region.
- None of them are actually *in Springfield*.

The City of Springfield is the center of strength for the region. The city's population has grown by nearly 6 percent in the last decade – twice the national average – and serves as the regional economic hub. While a significant portion of the population increase can be attributed to the advances made within the city (see page 2), the rate of growth outside Springfield has outpaced even that notable percentage during the same timeframe, as the total metro area has grown by nearly 9 percent since 2010.

It's undeniable: This part of southwest Missouri has a tremendous amount to offer, and realizing our full strength involves maximizing our identity and power as a region.

This year's Community Leadership Visit participants had a chance to experience some of what makes the entire area special. And taking stock of all those assets reinforced the idea that taking a more holistic outlook to the region is beneficial for everyone.

Regional Benefits

It's impossible to accurately evaluate progress in the past two decades if you look at the city in a vacuum. Springfield, the city, would not be

the vibrant place that it is without Springfield, the region.

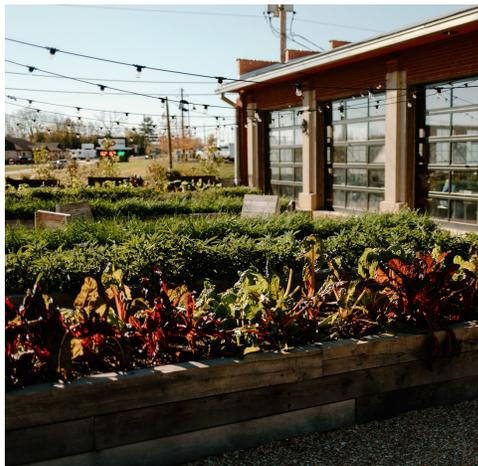
For examples, look no further than the tourism titan to Springfield's south: Branson. The past several years have seen continued development and expansion at Silver Dollar City and numerous other tourist destinations. But the area has also become a golfer's haven, with the opening of Top of the Rock, Buffalo Springs, Murder Rock and several other award-winning courses.

The communities immediately surrounding Springfield have also seen continual growth through their own developed identities. Nixa and Ozark are thriving with new residential options and additional community amenities like the recently opened Ozark Mill at Finley Farms in Ozark. Rogersville, Willard and Battlefield, meanwhile, each offer their own unique feel for those looking for proximity to big-city amenities in a quieter, more relaxed environment.

And all of these areas have benefited from the growth of Springfield, and are connected – even physically through trails development (see page 13) – through the region's hallmark natural environment.

But perhaps no community better exemplifies the impact of regional expansion than Republic. The neighbor to the west and southwest of Springfield saw its unique position at the confluence of U.S. Highway 60 and Interstate 44 and knew it could be a draw for companies with logistics and shipping needs – so, the community made initial infrastructure investments to prepare for potential future developments.







And developments are arriving. Several companies have located large warehouse, manufacturing and shipping facilities in Republic – most recently, an Amazon fulfillment center and the new headquarters for Convoy of Hope. The investment, geographic location and intentional approach to development makes the area poised for much more to come.

Expanding Our View

The rapid growth of Republic’s industrial sector has further highlighted the need to work as a collective that moves the region forward, recognizing that one community’s success benefits everyone in the region, rather than individual communities working against one another.

“As a region, we have all these (self-imposed) boundaries,” says commercial real estate developer Tom Rankin, who was involved in helping bring Amazon to Republic. “We have so many communities that want to be something that they’re not. Everyone doesn’t have to be everything to everybody. Republic is a great logistical site for industrial uses, while Nixa is incredibly well-suited for residential development.” We are better when we are playing to our strengths as a region.

Rankin discussed bringing prospective investors and developers to the area, and that they don’t navigate the region, or their potential development site, through our imaginary boundaries. They don’t see Springfield versus Republic; they see the strength of, and access to, the entire region.

David Cameron agrees. He has the advantage of both representing one of the region’s growing communities



as city manager in Republic and being from northwest Arkansas, an area known for its ability to cooperate and function as a region.

“How do we, as a region, unite and collaborate?” he asks. “I leverage Springfield in our discussions about Republic because that connection is an asset. Who cares which community a project went to? As a region, we all win. We have to knock down the traditional silos.”

They pointed to the fact that we are in a competition with other communities outside of this region, and that southwest Missouri needs to be a desirable place for jobs and people. “We have something in southwest Missouri that will bring people here,” Cameron says. “If we can lock arms as a region, we can do it better.”

Others from around the community, as well as those who participated in the Community Leadership Visit, agree. Andrea Sitzes, former executive director of Show-Me Christian County, would like to see a more regional approach – both from Springfield and from the surrounding communities.

Noting all of the region’s amenities and possibilities, from Springfield to Branson and everywhere in between, she likens it to “a string of pearls.” “Twelve million people visit our region every year,” she says, “and we need to capitalize on that.”

But in order to promote our assets, we first must recognize and celebrate them.

SPRINGFIELD IS... FINDING ITS IDENTITY



Do a quick web search for “Springfield” and the results are ... daunting.

More than 40 towns and cities across the country are called Springfield. Springfield, Missouri, is the largest of them in the U.S., but finding a way to identify our unique brand as a community has always been a challenge.

We have many points of pride, and more on the horizon. But making our community stand out from the pack is more difficult. It requires an ability to recognize our strengths, take pride in ourselves and coalesce behind a cohesive message. Among the delegation participants, most agreed we have more work to do here.

The delegation heard about many aspects of our growing cultural scene

– the outdoor amenities that meet the spirit of myriad adventurers, from kayakers to mountain bikers to leisurely lake goers (see page 13 for more on that), our status as an emerging foodie city, and unique neighborhoods that have grown up organically around the community. They also heard from those who are, literally, carrying the flag for the Springfield they want.

Delicious Designs

If you looked back 10 to 15 years ago, it might have been inconceivable that Springfield would have the kind of food and beverage culture that exists today. But in the spirit of leveraging strengths and building on assets, a food scene has emerged that draws on our agricultural roots and the industry that has grown up around that.

Springfield now offers a booming

market for local coffee roasters, a craft beer scene that boasts a dozen local breweries, eating options ranging from well-known national chains to locally owned farm-to-table restaurants, food trucks and even an artisan chocolatier.

For those who are helping to lead this “foodie revolution,” the experience is more than just offering delicious food and drink. It’s about developing a new culture and way of life.

“As our society has evolved, food has become a centerpiece,” says Dr. Lyle Foster, owner of Big Momma’s Coffee & Espresso Bar and Queen City Soul Kitchen, both located on historic Commercial Street. “When you have a cup of coffee from Brazil or from Ethiopia, you’re connecting with a farmer who knows how many steps that takes. I think of it in terms



of fellowship and how it builds community.”

And it’s not just eateries that are thriving. Organizations at all levels of the food chain have chosen this area as home. Take, for example, Askinosie Chocolate. Attorney-turned-chocolatier Shawn Askinosie started the single-origin chocolate company in 2006, now a worldwide phenomenon, having received numerous national and international awards and receiving a special mention from Oprah Winfrey among her list of favorite gifts.

Askinosie says his success could not have come without community, and a sense of history. “When it comes to community, we define that very broadly,” he says, noting that his company works directly with cacao bean farmers around the world to make sure the product is equitably sourced and farmers are compensated fairly.

He adds that Springfield’s previous success stories around food production and agriculture have paved the way for companies like his: “Here in Springfield, we stand on the shoulders of so many others who have done this before us.”

And food is shaping up to be the

future, too, thanks to several companies that have chosen Springfield as a base for growth. One of those is Vital Farms, which opened its egg washing and sorting facility in Partnership Industrial Center West in 2017.

The Austin, Texas-based company sells ethically raised and sourced foods in more than 14,000 stores across the country and is the second-largest egg producer in the U.S. The company chose Springfield because of both its proximity to many of its farm partners and the region’s strong workforce.

Chief Operating Officer Jason Dale says the region has room to grow that valuable asset even more. “People are most important to our business, and I would love to see a more diverse labor pool,” he says. “That would create incredible ideas.”

Organic Growth

Creating a vibrant new community, in all its forms, is a task that many individuals have taken on themselves.

Some of the best examples are the organic revitalization efforts going on in various neighborhoods around the city, including the last decade-plus of expansion and revitalization



on Commercial Street to more recent developments in areas like the Cherry & Pickwick neighborhood and the Galloway area.

Many exciting ideas and projects are being led by young professionals who have stepped up to drive the change they wanted to see. And many of them are YPs who were drawn to Springfield for one reason or another, have grown to love the city, and want to make it even better.

“In this community, you can push



your way in,” says Brad Erwin, Chicago native and owner of Paragon Architecture. “Our community does a really good job of allowing people to participate. That has contributed to our vibrancy.”

That means finding, or making, a seat at the decision-making table. Heather Hardinger has done just that, having been elected to serve on Springfield City Council in April 2021.

“I was drawn to the opportunity to join a group, influence and inspire people,”

says the councilwoman, who moved to Springfield after high school to attend Evangel University. “Just because you’re a small-or medium-sized city doesn’t mean you have to think small in your ideas.”

John McQueary didn’t run for elected office, but that doesn’t mean he’s not making an impact on the community. He’s the co-developer of the Hotel Vandivort, which has become a centerpiece of the Center City district since opening in mid-2015. The redevelopment of what was

constructed as a masonic temple in 1906 to a boutique hotel was hard to envision just a short time ago – but McQueary followed his passion and did his part to make Springfield something more than it was.

He has put efforts behind his words as well, working as part of the Springfield Identity Project that developed a prototype for a new city flag that the community could rally behind. The new design was adopted by Springfield City Council in January 2022, and now flies as the official Springfield flag.

“A phrase we live by is, ‘Make it the place you want to live,’” McQueary says. “Springfield is the right size where you can collaborate to get projects to the finish line and make a difference instead of just enjoying what someone else has done.”

He also hopes that his work and investment will inspire others to do the same and realize that Springfield doesn’t have to be a “big city” in order to support aspirational vision and development. “By taking a risk and demonstrating success,” he says, “we hope it would inspire others to do the same.”

SPRINGFIELD IS... OPEN TO NEW PEOPLE & IDEAS



Examine the current national landscape of public discourse and you might be tempted to think that no one is willing to work together or share ideas anymore.

Springfield, for the most part, takes a different approach. Nearly all of the region's most significant advances in the last several years have been the result of community collaboration, openness to new ideas, and willingness to embrace people with different backgrounds and viewpoints.

The delegation heard from numerous innovators and community leaders about the importance of supporting education, entrepreneurship, and diversity. They had many insights to share, but they all had one common theme: the importance of working together, supporting each other and moving Springfield forward.

Supporting idea makers

Springfield has a long history of producing and supporting those with the entrepreneurial spirit.

Most of us know the story of how Johnny Morris started by selling bait from eight square feet of space in the back of a liquor store and built it into the internationally renowned outdoor brand that is Bass Pro Shops. (Read about his newest venture, Finley Farms, on page 4.) Add to his legacy the work of visionaries like SRC Holdings and Great Game of Business founder Jack Stack or the O'Reilly family that built the Fortune 500 company. And that list is just the beginning.

The Springfield community has nurtured an environment conducive to generating ideas. For proof, look no further than Missouri State University's efactory. The facility opened in 2013 to serve entrepreneurs and business

owners with training, support and coworking space. The efactory has served more than 2,600 companies and numerous innovators.

Dan Cobb knows the importance of supporting entrepreneurs in our area. He has been part owner of two different health care IT companies, and now serves on the board of the Missouri Technology Corporation, which provides startup and seed funding to tech companies statewide.

He says support has grown for entrepreneurs since he began making his way in the business world. "The climate is so much better," he says. "The vibe of having a startup is different. Twenty years ago, if you started a company, people would say, 'Why? Just get a job.'"

Springfield has been known as an inviting environment for those looking to make their own way in the world, having been named one of the country's "Most Entrepreneurial Small/Midsize Metros" by SmartAsset in 2016.

This environment was inviting for Tim Baynes. The CEO and founder of digital commerce and development company Compatio was drawn to Springfield for a number of reasons. "It's quite easy to get to know people here, and there's a great attitude of helpfulness," he says of Springfield. "If you can express what you need, someone is going to step up to make that happen."

Springfield has also been a source of creative inspiration for Jeff Houghton. The Iowa native, in his own words, "followed a girl to Springfield," but the comedy writer, improviser and podcast host has grown to love the city for a variety of reasons. One of the biggest is its supportive nature.

“One of the things that courses through Springfield is a spirit of entrepreneurship and collaboration,” Houghton says. “Springfield responds to people who have passion. Celebrating and encouraging those people makes a big difference.”

Developing future leaders

The key to developing that next generation of entrepreneurs and collaborators in this area is the education system, an area for which our region has shown critical support over the years.

Springfield Public Schools (SPS) has seen remarkable growth and investment with multiple successful bond issues funding for new buildings, improvements, and security upgrades throughout the district.

That level of support is part of what convinced Dr. Grenita Lathan to move to Springfield for the job as the district’s new superintendent in summer 2021.

“When you look at moving, you have to think about what kind of experience you’re going to have,” she told a CLV panel gathered at the new Boyd Elementary School, which was made possible through Prop S. “The fact that the community respects the school district and has made a major long-term investment is huge. The new facilities and programs are built around collaboration, and collaboration is going to make us the best Springfield in the country.”

The growth extends to the region’s higher education systems as well. Missouri State University (MSU) dropped the “Southwest” from its name in 2005, and since then has experienced significant enrollment growth while financial support has increased exponentially, with \$60 million in gifts and grants in 2020 alone.

You can’t talk about educational growth and support for businesses without Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC). OTC has served more

than 108,000 students in the last decade. The passage of its own bond issue in 2018 is funding the Robert W. Plaster Center for Advanced Manufacturing.

The idea – which was based largely on similar programs seen on previous CLV trips to Huntsville, Alabama and Greenville, South Carolina – is set to transform how our area prepares the workforce. This facility will be dedicated to serving as the regional hub for all advanced manufacturing and technology-related education and training. It’s already a game-changer for business attraction even before its doors open, providing us with a unique asset that will benefit our region for decades to come as we work to upskill the workforce.

“OTC is successful for one reason: the community we serve,” says Dr. Hal Higdon, OTC’s chancellor. “The secret sauce of Springfield is collaboration; SPS, OTC and MSU are in lockstep. And we want to be community centered. If we’re focused on the community, the students will be served.”

Preparing for future growth

One important aspect for continuing the forward momentum is to make our community even more diverse and inclusive, as it ensures we are not selling ourselves short in the ever-increasing competition for talent.

The need for more diversity is not a new issue to the community, but the

intentional focus is growing by the day. These efforts complement existing work done by numerous groups in our community, such as the Multicultural Business Association (formerly Minorities in Business) and the Facing Racism Institute.

That work is part of what attracted Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe to move the headquarters of SAAB (formerly the Student African American Brotherhood) to Springfield. SAAB has a presence on over 300 college campuses in over 40 states, and the program is dedicated to ensuring men of color have the support needed to excel academically, socially, and professionally.

“When you give people an agency to feel a part of something, to feel valued, they connect,” he says. “We want these guys to complete what they start when they come to school, to have a game plan, and we want this community to benefit from their skills and their expertise.”

Despite the progress, there is more work to be done.

“I think Springfield has done a great job and we need even more diversity, inclusion and acceptance,” he says.

Shawn Askinosie agrees. “I wish we could facilitate little empathy machines that we could plug into and find ways to work with each other despite our differences,” he says.





SPRINGFIELD IS... USING ITS ASSETS



As has already been demonstrated, the Springfield region is on the cusp of further transformative growth and improvement. Many in the community are itching to help capitalize on that potential.

Throughout the 2021 Community Leadership Visit, participants heard about a variety of areas where Springfield and the region have made tremendous investment in inherent advantages already in our community.

Outdoors everywhere

One of the region's biggest assets is nature – the parks, trails and lakes that offer so many entertainment and recreation options. And there truly is something for everyone. Water lovers have Table Rock to the south, and options for swimming, fishing and kayaking abound all around the community. Efforts to create a mountain bike destination in Springfield are being realized. We're surrounded by options for hiking from beginners to the most advanced, and the casual outdoorsperson can explore the outdoors in a number of ways, including a rapidly expanding Greenway Trail system.

The Springfield-Greene County Parks Department is known for the quality and quantity of its park facilities, and the numbers have only grown in the last decade-plus. These include the Springfield Botanical Gardens at Nathanael Greene/Close Memorial Park, renovations of numerous historic parks like Doling, Fassnight, and Sequiota, the addition of three family centers and Rutledge-Wilson Farm Park. The

impact of the pandemic gave even more people a chance to experience the park facilities, only increasing their already abundant regional value.

And sporting facilities are expanding as well, from Cooper Tennis Complex to new soccer facilities and the city's recent purchase of the Fieldhouse for indoor sporting events.

"People want to go to where you feel good taking your family," says Bob Belote, director of parks for the Springfield-Greene County Park Board. "They don't really care who provides that as long as it's quality and memorable. What we always want to do is see how we can go about that together."

Belote highlighted the need for reinvestment in the older neighborhood parks, where more than \$6 million has been invested in the last five to six years, as well as the continued growth of the 77-mile trail system managed by Ozark Greenways. Those trails, which get nearly 3 million visits annually, bring the opportunity to connect the entire region together.

"We want to see our communities connected by trails," says Ozark Greenways Executive Director Mary Kromrey, who pointed to studies that say every dollar invested into trails returns \$17 in community economic benefit. "It's truly beautiful here, and our trail system can be even better at connecting all of these tremendous resources – our parks, other outdoor destinations like the lakes, our elementary schools, and even our



entrepreneurial network.”

Benefits of outdoor investment

Those outdoor amenities are encouraging a new spirit of growth from entrepreneurs like Danny Collins, founder and owner of 37 North Expeditions. Collins says that the outdoor spaces offer more than just entertainment for the community; they can also be a source of physical and mental health and a serious economic driver for the region.

And, he adds, our community needs to capitalize on those assets and be more conscious about competing with nearby regions like Northwest Arkansas.

“We have something amazing here – there is nothing like the Ozarks between the Smokies and the Rockies,” Collins says. “We need to capitalize on that, bring in amazing people to live here, work here, and benefit from that. How can we collaborate in our own community and others to capitalize on these amenities? Because it will impact all of us.”

Efforts expand beyond the region as well. Along with the Greenways effort to link multiple communities via trail connections, the Morris family has completely transformed the old Ozark Mill into the new Finley Farms development, a facility in the heart of the city of Ozark with expansive horticulture work, a farm-to-table approach to entertaining, and a Greenways connection in the works.

The idea of embracing the outdoors for community development is not unique to Springfield. Multiple previous CLV destinations have capitalized on their natural wonders, from the strong outdoor culture in Boise to the way Greenville “embraced its waterfall” in downtown development and Chattanooga’s work to transform itself into the “Colorado of the east.”

Efforts in those cities have made them incredibly desirable locations for young professionals and those looking for a place to settle down – concepts that are increasingly important in an

age of mobile work and workforce competition. Springfield has the ability to capitalize on similar ideas that, when combined with our relatively low cost of living and other quality of life investments, can benefit our region with talent attraction and retention efforts.

The arts and culture scene

The spirit of growth and invigoration extends to arts and culture as well. Recent years have seen an explosion of entertainment venues and options, including the renovation of the Gillioz Theatre and opening of JQH Arena and the O’Reilly Events Center.

And while centerpiece facilities like JQH or the Wonders of Wildlife National Museum & Aquarium draw in thousands of tourists and eventgoers, they are supplemented by a wide range of public art options – murals, sculptures, and the ever-growing First Friday Art Walk, just to name a few. There are also a variety of new festivals like Taste of SGF, the Birthplace of Route 66 Festival, and the new MIDxMIDWEST festival coming in 2022. Those complement reinvestment in long-standing cultural pillars like the Springfield Art Museum and Dickerson Park Zoo.

“Our initiative is about saying, ‘Let’s get eyes here,’” says MIDxMIDWEST founder Meg Wagler. “We can use art as a catalyst to show what’s going on in all aspects of the community. These things are interconnected; if we keep that collective mentality, we’re going to continue rising.”

All these assets have led to a boom in tourism for the Springfield area; hotel occupancy rates in 2021, even still recovering from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, were at record levels.

That demand, combined with a desire to create something unique for the city, was what led John and Billy McQueary to open Hotel Vandivort. John McQueary, for one, says the time is right to capitalize on the forward momentum and newfound confidence.

“The goal with Hotel Vandivort was not to copy something from another city, but to create something specific to Springfield,” he says. “This is not a time to be timid. This is the time for big ideas, and this is the time to get them across the finish line.”



WHAT WILL SPRINGFIELD BE?



The 2021 Community Leadership Visit clearly defined Springfield's vast assets and illustrated that they are ripe for extraordinary growth.

"We need to take advantage of what is a unique moment in time," says Councilmember Heather Hardinger. "We have to keep talking about the great things that make us unique and capitalize on them with pride."

And while taking pride in strengths and leaning into assets may sound like an easy task, setting aside the natural Midwestern bashfulness is easier said than done.

"Springfield is one of the most self-deprecating places I know of, and we don't have to be," says Jeff Houghton. "It's OK to be here in the Midwest, in Springfield, and be proud of it."

The moment has come to lean into what Springfield has to offer.

Major long-range planning initiatives are underway. The region is exploding. The cultural scene is brimming with creativity. Educators and entrepreneurs are innovating to meet the needs of tomorrow. And the business community is leading the charge for growth.

But if we want to be truly successful in making Springfield the "best in the Midwest," it will take a unified vision about what the community is, combined with a willingness to evolve. While we are building and investing in our bright and hopeful future, there is work to still be done in order to reach full potential.

There is palpable energy to solve some of our community's problems. Addressing the issues that the city and the region face – the need for greater diversity, homelessness and mental health – takes strength and resolve.

And for Gary Schafer, managing partner at BKD CPAs & Advisors, capitalizing on our strengths is key to finding solutions. "Our challenges are not unique," he says, "but our combination of assets is."

So how can we capitalize on our assets to make Springfield the city of choice for people, jobs, growth, and investment?

The answer lies, in part, in our focus and prioritization. Top takeaways from the 2021 Community Leadership Visit seemed to coalesce around three key ideas:

- Our strength lies in our regional collaboration.
- Solving the workforce puzzle will be key to growth.
- Developing our identity and brand with a special focus on our outdoor assets is key to future success.

Success in these areas is vital to ensuring that the Springfield region serves as the "Gateway to the Ozarks." And through that gate is promise and possibility.

And John Oke-Thomas, architect and 2022 Chamber Board Chair, hopes to make progress on these ideas by investing in our biggest strength: our people.

"We must continue to walk together to get these things done," he says. "Springfield has come a long way, and we have a long way to go. But we need to understand that we can always be better – and we are better together."

So whatever we want Springfield to be, our collective investment creates nothing but limitless opportunities.

DELEGATION LIST

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Chair, Chamber Board of Directors

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Director, Missouri State University efactory

Christina Angle

Chief Financial Officer, Erlen Group

Mandy Anthes

Past President, Leadership Springfield
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Max Buetow

COO & Executive Vice President,
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City Administrator, City of Republic

Kristin Carter

Vice President & Tax Officer, Central Trust
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Danny Collins

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Alina Lehnert

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Christian Lewis

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Abe McGull

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**The organization listed for each participant reflects their position at the time of the September trip.*

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