

## Is Arkadelphia a 'town in decline'?

By Rex Nelson

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Earlier this year, I was visiting with the president of one of the state's major associations. This gentleman once lived in Southwest Arkansas but now lives in the booming city of Russellville. Since he knows I am a native of Arkadelphia, he mentioned to me that he had recently been in Arkadelphia. Then he said something that stunned me.

"Arkadelphia is really a town in decline, isn't it?" he said.

My job with the Delta Regional Authority takes me into struggling Delta towns in several states. I can tell you all about towns in decline. But I had never thought of Arkadelphia (along with Clark County and Southwest Arkansas, for that matter) in the same way. To me, Arkadelphia will always be one of the state's garden spots -- a beautiful old town with two universities, two rivers, interstate access, a popular lake just down the road, history, charm and character. As the masthead of the old Southern Standard weekly newspaper once proclaimed, it was the Athens of Arkansas. I had an idyllic childhood here and still have a hard time imagining a better place to raise children.

Yet I was determined that on my next trip home to Arkadelphia, I would try to view the city as an outsider. Here is some of what I saw: The stage was set immediately upon my exit from Interstate 30 at Caddo Valley when I came to the stop sign and looked straight ahead at a large dead tree before turning left onto Arkansas Highway 7. There seemed to be some symbolism in that dead tree. As I made my way through Caddo Valley, I was greeted on my left with the closed Bowen's Restaurant, once among the most vibrant places in the area. A temporary sign, its letters falling off, was still in the empty parking lot. On my right, what had originally been a Shoney's location also was empty, the "for sale" sign still out front many months after the demise of the Duck Inn.

As I drove south up the hill toward the Pizza Hut, I was struck by the "Welcome to Arkadelphia" sign that includes the logos for various civic clubs. It was choked with vines, and some of the civic club logos were badly rusted. Right beside it was a "for sale" sign. It was as if a whole rusting city were for sale. To say the symbolism here was dramatic would be an understatement. In our world, perception can become reality. I was beginning to see why that Russellville man thought of Arkadelphia as a town in decline. The sight of the rusting welcome sign covered with vines would send any visitor to Arkadelphia a message.

Just up the hill was an abandoned furniture manufacturing facility that originally had been a

discount store. A large sign that had served a twin cinema that closed years ago had never been removed. Why? It was here that the thought struck me even harder: This area on the main highway into town looks just like some of the dying Delta towns where I now work. This shouldn't be Arkadelphia. This couldn't be Arkadelphia, could it?

Granted, it got much better as I continued south beside Henderson, Ouachita and Central Park. But as I reached one of the city's most important intersections - 10th and Pine - the thought hit me again. In the blocks ahead there would be the closed Hardee's location, a former law office with broken glass, a couple of motels that aren't what they used to be and quite a lot of trash along the street. Again, I thought how much this looked like a shrinking Delta town rather than a thriving university town.

All this is to say that the Clark County Strategic Plan is among the most significant things ever to happen in Arkadelphia and Clark County. It has been heartening to see the strong participation of Clark County residents and the heavy coverage of their work in the Siftings Herald. It seems a lot of people are coming together to address the lack of growth and economic development in the county. Having viewed firsthand what a similar strategic plan is doing for Phillips County in east Arkansas, I suggested to Phil Baldwin of Southern Bancorp that Clark County do the same. Southern Bancorp was instrumental in getting the strategic plan off the ground in Phillips County, which started with far more severe problems than Clark County. But Clark County, not Phillips County, is the home base of this company. As usual, Phil was already ahead of me. He responded, "It is interesting you mentioned it because we're planning to do just that."

With the strategic plan now taking shape, here are some suggestions and food for thought from a native Arkadelphian now involved in economic development:

1. We should never stop seeking manufacturing jobs. At the same time, however, we must realize that too many towns across the country are spending too much time and energy chasing jobs that likely are headed to Mexico, China and India anyway. A city must play to its strengths, and Arkadelphia's strength will always be the fact that it is home to Ouachita Baptist University and Henderson State University. I firmly believe Arkadelphia's niche in the new century should be as an attractive Southern college town - a smaller version of Oxford, Miss., if you will. The goal should be to position the city as the educational, cultural, literary and artistic center of south Arkansas. Yes, the Athens of Arkansas, as the Southern Standard once proclaimed. Such a niche will attract more students to Henderson and Ouachita. For college students, quality of life is now more important than ever before. Enrollment must not be allowed to remain stagnant at the two universities. If properly executed and publicized, such an effort also will attract retirees, artists, writers and others looking for just such an oasis offering culture, a low cost of living and a safe environment.

2. Playing off that theme, organizations across the city should increase their emphasis on getting people to retire in Clark County. High-income retirees put much into an area's economy with their need for medical care, their spending in restaurants, the time they have

for volunteering, etc. They, in turn, take very little out. For instance, they pay property taxes to support the public schools but don't have children in those public schools. College towns across the country have become increasingly attractive to high-income retirees due to the steady diet of concerts, lectures, plays and sporting events. Arkadelphia is perfectly situated to take advantage of this trend.

3. As one of the state's most historic areas - and one with an active historical society - Clark County should host and highly publicize an annual spring pilgrimage of homes in order to bring new people to the area. It would never be as big as the event that fuels the economy in Natchez, Miss., but you might be surprised at how many people would come from out of town to tour the Captain Henderson House, the Barkman House, Magnolia Manor, the Bozeman House, the Habicht House and other historic buildings. Old river towns such as Camden and Helena don't have the benefit of being the home to four-year universities. And university towns such as Fayetteville, Jonesboro, Searcy, Magnolia and Monticello don't have the benefit of being historic river towns. In this case, Arkadelphia has the best of both.

4. Arkadelphia needs to get back in the Main Street Arkansas program and work to add missing elements to the downtown mix. The Streetscape initiative has been beneficial. Now, there should be a concerted effort to fill vacant storefronts with the right mix of businesses while restoring the buildings themselves before they all burn down. Two major downtown fires in recent months bring this point home. A bookstore much like Square Books in Oxford, one or two art galleries, a couple of additional downtown restaurants and coffee houses and a music store would make Main Street, Clinton Street and Clay Street places where college students, tourists, retirees and other local residents want to hang out, even after dark. The vision should be that of a funky, artsy place with loft apartments on the second floors of buildings. Visit the downtown square at Oxford and then envision a modified version of that for downtown Arkadelphia.

5. Arkadelphia also should have the state's strongest local affiliate of the Keep Arkansas Beautiful program. All major city streets should be made part of an Adopt-A-Street program for trash cleanup and landscaping. Clubs across the city and on both university campuses should sign up for streets and work to keep them clean. I remember that as a Boy Scout in Arkadelphia years ago, we distributed dogwood trees donated by the Ross Foundation. How about an organized effort to plant thousands of new dogwood trees across the city while encouraging people to keep them watered and healthy? Eventually, Arkadelphia could be promoted as the Dogwood Capital of the South, yet another draw for tourists and retirees.

6. The city must practice strict code enforcement. No excuses. No leniency. Abandoned houses should be torn down quickly. It is good to see the effort to remove eyesores has started. Absentee owners should be forced to adhere to the codes and brought to justice when they fail to do so.

Having lived away from Arkadelphia for more than 20 years, I have watched the city respond to major challenges from afar. When Reynolds Metals Co. shut down the Patterson

Plant in the 1980s, leaders in Clark County worked to bring in new jobs. Within a few years, Clark County had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. When the tragic tornado hit on March 1, 1997, people again responded.

I will never forget something President Clinton told me on Tuesday, March 4, 1997, after he finished his walking tour of what remained of downtown Arkadelphia. A reception was held at Elk Horn Bank, which was still without electricity. The president said, "A lot of towns would never recover from this blow. But with two universities and strong banks, Arkadelphia is better situated to recover than any other town in the southern half of the state."

The president was right. Arkadelphia did build back those areas that had been destroyed. Now, it faces another challenge. And I'm confident the Clark County Strategic Plan is the start of a golden age for Arkadelphia and the rest of the county in this new century. None of us want that rusting, vine-choked Welcome To Arkadelphia sign - with the "for sale" sign right by it - to be the symbol of this city. With the Clark County Strategic Plan as a start, Arkadelphia can indeed become one of the great college towns in the South.