

ARCO IN ACTION REPORT

A REPORT TO THE ARKANSAS REGIONAL
COALITION FOR THE OUACHITAS

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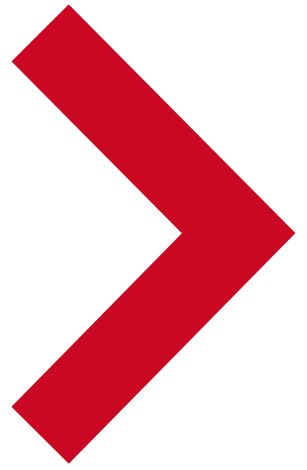


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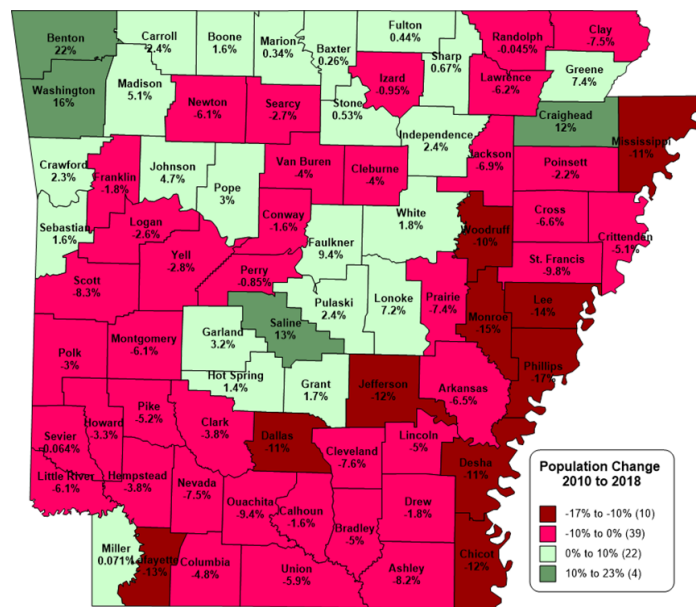
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I. INTRODUCTION

Like most counties in Arkansas, the three counties of the Arkansas Regional Coalition of the Ouachitas – Montgomery, Polk, and Scott Counties, are facing decline in population, due to the loss of manufacturing, farm and forestry jobs, lack of new jobs, inadequate infrastructure and declining quality of life.

Population Changes in Arkansas, 2010-2018



Source: Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau

Community leaders in the ARCO region recognize and want to address these issues by participating in a new initiative, ARCO in Action. ARCO in Action is a fresh and unique opportunity for the Arkansas Coalition of the Ouachitas regional leaders to come together and to grow the economy and enhance quality of life in the region. The focus is to identify the greatest opportunities and resources, and develop and implement strategies that will improve the lives of residents in the three ARCO counties.

ARCO in Action is a collaborative initiative between the ARCO board, local community leaders, and the Breakthrough Solutions Program of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. Breakthrough Solutions has multiple partner organizations committed to equipping community leaders to foster prosperous communities in the 21st century.

II. THE FOUR PHASES OF ARCO IN ACTION



Phase I. Initial meeting – May 8

Emily Smith and Mark Peterson from Extension's Community and Economic Development Unit traveled to the ARCO region and met with key leaders in each county. These meetings started the process of identifying the greatest challenges and opportunities in the region and discussed how ARCO in Action can be a springboard for regional collaborative actions that will grow the regional economy and enhance the well-being of regional residents.

Phase II. Breakthrough Solutions Partners Visited the ARCO Region – May 31

Emily Smith, Mark Peterson, and five Breakthrough Solutions partners visited the ARCO region to:

- Provide the partners with a windshield view of the ARCO region,
- Hear the concerns and ideas of community leaders and citizens in the three counties,
- Better understand the issues and opportunities in the region

Phase III. Breakthrough Solutions Pre-Conference Workshop – June 25

With the theme: “Creating Connected Communities: ARCO Pilot Community”, the 2019 Breakthrough Solutions Pre-Conference Workshop provided a unique opportunity to involve community leaders from across the state in exploring opportunities for the ARCO region, focusing on these issues:

- Tourism, Branding, and Marketing
- Business Development and Entrepreneurship
- Quality of Life and Place
- Workforce Development
- Funding and Financing Community and Economic Development
- Broadband
- Quilt Trail

An economic assessment and online assessment of the ARCO region was also shared at the pre-conference workshop.

Phase IV: Launching ARCO in Action – August 9

The launch event will hear reports about actions already underway, share the findings of Phase I-III with community leaders and citizens in the ARCO region, form action teams, and launch projects in each county and the region. It is hoped that these projects will provide the stimulus for improving the regional economy and enhancing the quality of life for regional residents.



III. ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT: AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF ARCO'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

By Dr. Wayne Miller and Tyler Knapp, Community & Economic Development
University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture

It is our belief that communities can best grow their economies and enhance the quality of life by using and building on local resources, while taking into account their strengths in the contest of the global economy.

Local leaders identified some regional strengths, including:

- Natural resources
- Economic diversity within region
- Rich Mountain Community College
- Airport
- Volunteer Spirit

Growing regional identity & commitment to collaborate across region

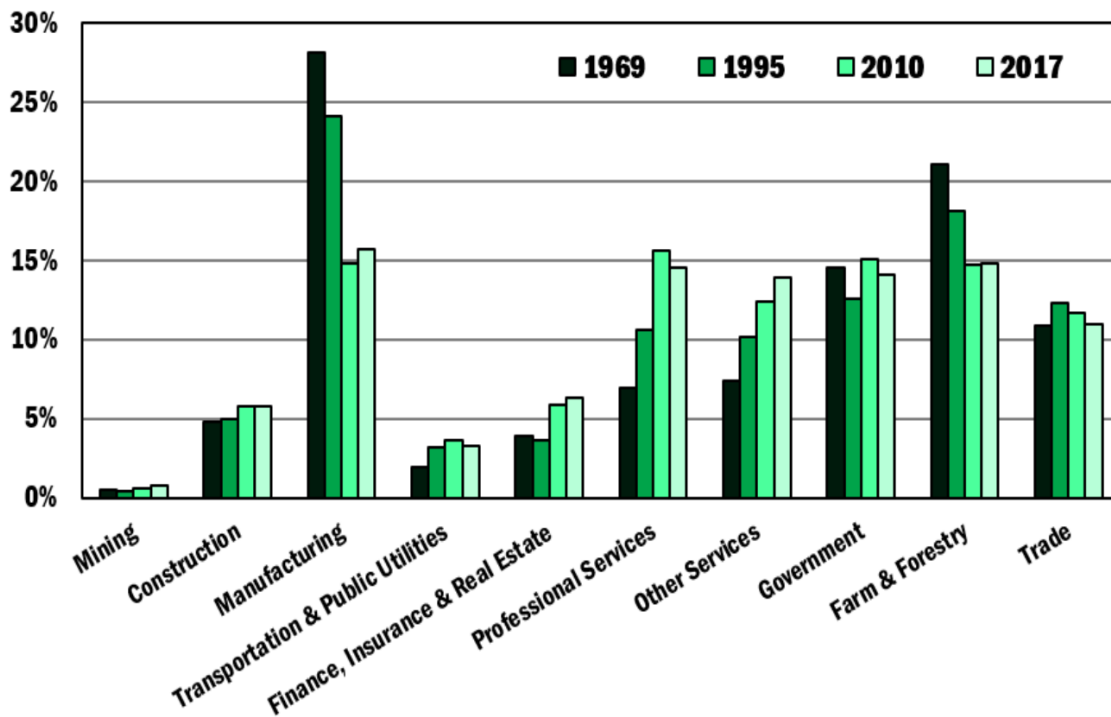
Since we were asked to provide an economic assessment, we will focus on an assessment of the economy, how it has changed, the current economic opportunities of the region and strategies to grow the economy and enhance the quality of life for residents.

Changing Economic Base

Natural resources have been a major engine driving the regional economy. This includes agriculture and forestry as well as the natural environment, which attracts tourists and retirees. However, the number of jobs the natural resource industries provided to local residents declined dramatically between 1995 and 2010 (Figure 1). The structure of the economy did not change greatly between 2010 and 2017.

- In 1969, approximately 50% of jobs in the Region were in natural resource based Industries, compared to only 30% in 2017.
- Jobs in the travel and tourism industry growing, but growth slower than for the State.
- Net in-migration of retirees slowed greatly from 2010 to 2017.
- Fewer jobs in manufacturing since 2000 and fluctuating since 2010. These jobs are primarily processing agriculture and forest commodities.

Figure 1. ARCO Region Employment by Sector



Source: Employment by Sector, 2019 Arkansas State Profile, Woods & Poole.



Economic Opportunities

There are opportunities to grow the regional economy by developing new products and services using existing strengths and resources of the region. The following is a list of some strategies.

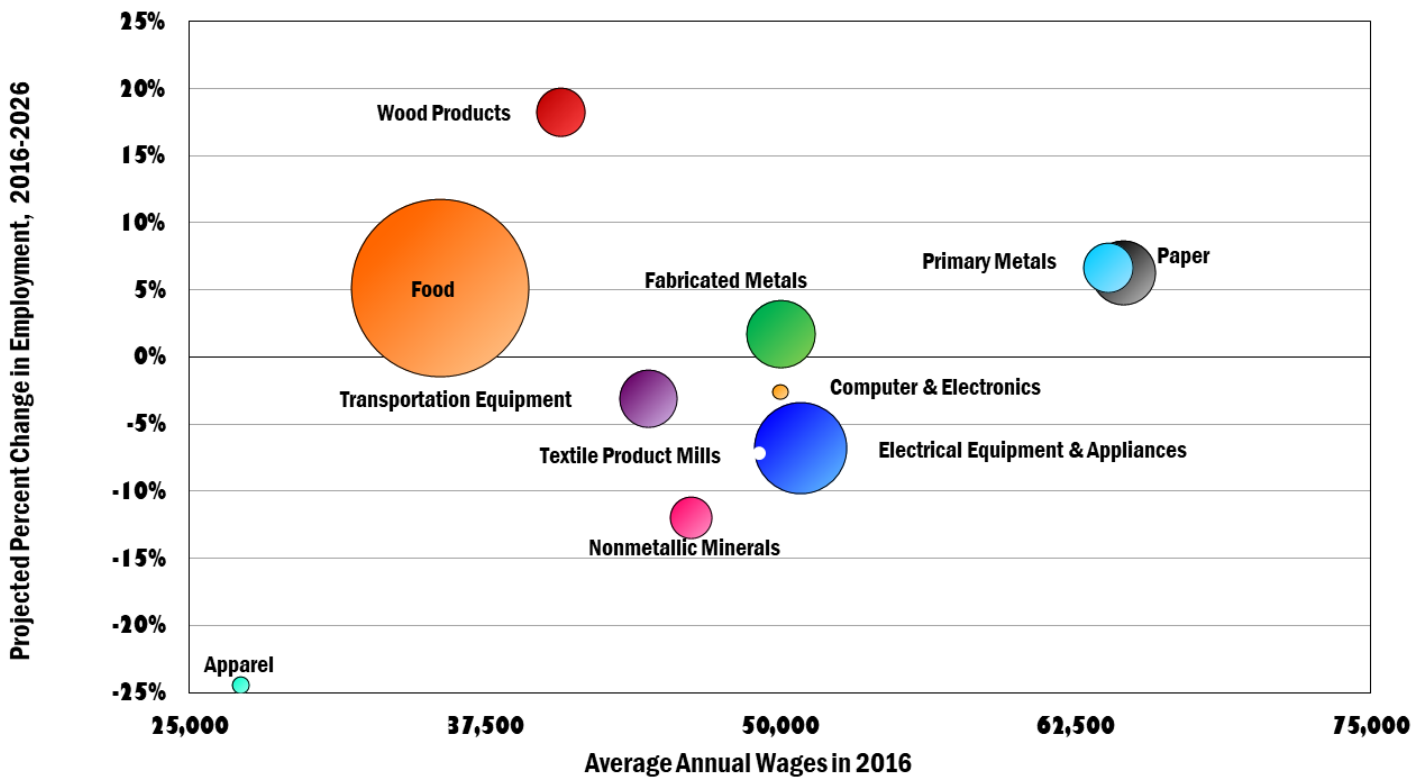
I. Increase Productivity and Value Added

The Region should refocus to produce products and services, from the current industry clusters, which have higher value than the traditional commodities currently produced.

These industries include:

- **Amenity Based Industries:** (1) Tourism, (2) Retiree Attraction and (3) Creative Economy
- **Natural Resource Based Industries:** (1) Agriculture and (2) Forestry
- **Manufacturing Industries:** (1) Appliances & Electrical Equipment Cluster, (2) Transportation Equipment Cluster and (3) Fabricated Metal Cluster
- **Retail and Service Industries:** (1) Businesses supporting tourism, retirees and the creative economy

Figure 2. Size, Wages, and Projected Growth of ARCO Manufacturing Clusters



Source: Arkansas Department of Workforce Services Employment

II. Retain, Develop and Attract Talent

The second strategy is to retain, develop and attract talent, which is essential to developing an innovative and creative economy with the potential to increase productivity and value added. Education and training at all levels is required: from primary and secondary school to two-year colleges, leadership programs and on-the-job training. Training should focus on technical skills while encouraging and supporting an entrepreneurial environment for creative and innovative thinking.

- Supporting existing and future leaders who think outside the box
- Improve education and workforce Skills
- Recruit talent for a creative economy
- Increase productivity and value added

III. Provide Infrastructure to Support Economic Development Strategies

An excellent infrastructure is critical to increasing productivity, growing value added businesses in the region and attracting and retain talent. A well-maintained infrastructure reduces the cost of doing business, helps businesses complete in the global economy, and is an asset that will help develop tourism and attract retirees and creative people to the region. The natural environment is an extremely important capital asset and the ability to protect and enhance this asset will greatly affect the ability of the region to grow and improve the standard of living of local citizens.

- Develop an excellent telecommunications system within the region
- Improve access to the region and transportation within the region
- Protect and enhance the natural environment

The diverse economic base of the region provides considerable potential for economic development. The challenge will be to retain and attract talent and nurture the development of an entrepreneurial environment that will encourage and support creative and innovative people to develop new products and services from the existing resources of the region.

IV. ONLINE ASSESSMENT



ARCO Website Exhibits Strong Links To

- Mt. Ida Chamber
- Polk/Mena Chamber
- Waldron/Scott County
- Visit Mena website
- Rich Mountain Community College

Chamber Websites

- All were up to date
- All presented/featured clear assets
- Great county-wide website linkage
- Not as strong regional linkage
- Strong Heart of the Ouachitas linkage

Businesses/College

- Evident chamber/business linkage
- Evident college/workforce linkage
- Regional workforce development linkage
- Community events linkage

Tourist-Heart of the Ouachitas

- Strong sense of “Things to Do”
- Strong county/city linkage
- Strong regional connections
- Assets linked together
- Scott County-missing links

Trip Advisor-Mena/Polk

- Wolf Pen Gap
- Mena Kansas City Southern Depot
- Mena Art Gallery
- Mena Antique Mall
- Janssen Park

Trip Advisor- Waldron/Scott

1. Joe’s Salvage Antiques
2. Nook & Cranny Gifts and More
3. Scott Theater

Trip Advisor-Mt. Ida/Montgomery

1. Wegner Quartz Crystal Mines
2. Crystal Vista
3. Ouachita Artist Gallery
4. Front Porch Stage
5. Heritage House Museum of Montgomery County

Recommendations

- Update ARCO website
- Update all events on Heart of the Ouachita website
- Fix Scott County link on Heart of the Ouachita website
- Identify which places each county wishes to feature in Trip Advisor
- Add identified places to Trip Advisor
- Conduct self-assessment via Google Maps, Arkansas.com, Zomato and other travel sites

V. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION IDENTIFIED IN THE BREAKTHROUGH SOLUTIONS PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP



Branding, Marketing, and Tourism

A robust brand, signage, and marketing strategies that leverage tourism assets in the region that attract people to come and stay in this emerging 21st century economy.

Possible Action Steps

- ARCO Steering Committee needs to develop written marketing and communications plan
- Establish quarterly tourism meetings
- ARCO assigns designated social media/event calendar person
- Grow ATV trails
- County Biker Rally Ride
- Historical/Natural Resource Map (could do as a cartoon asset map)
- Tourism Summit
- Identify Admin from each county for ARCO website
- Identify utilize state funds from parks and tourism department

Additional Possibilities

- Virtual reality
- Describe 1,2,3,4,5 day tourist itineraries
- Develop signage in each community, county, and the region
- Develop ecosystem of mountain biking environment – shops, services, etc.
- Work with Camp Ozark to add links to the local community/region on their website
- Shops don't stay open on weekends/evening – communicate the importance of tourism to the local economy and create a tourism mindset in the region
- Storytelling and/or Sidewalk Art Festivals
- Identify dedicated person in each county for communication
- Identify "Influences" (foodie, biker, hiker)
- Regional festival
- Offer incentives/discounts among local retailers, tourist stops, etc.



Broadband

Provide high speed broadband to all citizens in the ARCO region

- Possible Action Steps
- Cellular wifi options
- Satellite options
- Lobby electric company and rural electric cooperative
- Glean best practices from successful areas/states
- Conduct visit of successful areas/plans/programs

Additional Possibilities

- Explore funding options, including USDA Rural Development
- Meet with existing providers to learn of their plans and coverage areas
- Download Testit – a rural broadband mapping app
- Seek out and recruit broadband providers in AR and OK
- Review new Arkansas broadband legislation and involve local governments



Business Development and Entrepreneurship

Seeking strategies to support and grow our businesses, support entrepreneurs, recruit businesses, and provide necessary infrastructure.

Possible Action Steps

- Attract and retain talent/grow talent
- Invest in businesses to support tourism
- Diversify farms
- Contact regional tourism association

Additional Possibilities

- Request business retention and expansion training through Extension
- Work with Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center to provide
- workshops on small business development
- Create a Business Transition Committee to help businesses transition to younger
- entrepreneurs

Waldron:

- Consider creating an access road for access to the bypass,
- Create better signage for Pizza Hut and other employer on the bypass
- Visit successful chambers of commerce in other communities or invite successful chamber executive from similar community to speak



Funding and Finance

Provide adequate funding for local governments, non-profits, and community and economic development in the ARCO region.

Possible Action Steps

- Involve bankers and local business owners
- Form a community foundation
- AR Economic Analysis
- Develop capacity to learn about and write grants

Additional Possibilities

- Explore funding an ARCO economic developer from multiple sources within the region (U of A Cossatot College is a possible model)
- Subscribe to free grants e-newsletters (Extension, LISC)
- Host funding and financing community and development workshop from Extension
- Host grantsmanship workshop or zoom session
- Work closely with planning and development districts
- Explore other mechanisms such as 50 for the Future
- Explore inter-local agreements to fund public services



Quality of Life and Place

Making the ARCO region vibrant, for local people to enjoy and attract people to visit, live, and retire in the region. Includes downtown revitalization, trails, parks and recreation, things to do, beautification, health care, and other amenities.

Possible Action Steps

- Continue to work on historic map
- Unify social media
- Begin strategic planning
- Promote trails
- Connect with schools, chamber and businesses
- Leverage youth groups for beautification projects

Additional Possibilities

- Hospitality training through AR Department of Parks and Tourism
- Connect all trails in the 3 county region

Quilt Trail

Create a quilt trail that will attract people from all over the nation.

Possible Action Steps

- Do more research on quilt trails
- Identify a coordinator (each Quilt Trail must have a chapter and a coordinator)
- Identify partners and others folks to include in the process--this includes the organization of the Quilt Trail as well as the creation of the quilt trail and locations
- willing to display the quilt squares
- Contact the above the folks
- Promote the quilt trail via county fair booths (Amy will create & share with the other counties)
- Begin submitting squares for approval once 12 are identified (you must have 12 approved to be an “actual” recognized Quilt Trail)

Workforce Development

A motivated, skilled workforce that is drug-free, with housing and other necessary services available to support them and their families.

Possible Action Steps

- Develop Career Expo
- Internships
- Apprenticeships with local businesses
- Grassroots training
- Work with parents
- Funding
- Dr. Wilson will bring key workforce stakeholders together in Polk County
- Justin will do the same in Montgomery County



VI. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: A MODEL TO LEARN FROM

Kickstart Cleveland County is a county-wide community development organization that includes a few action teams that address county-wide issues, plus one action team from each of three smaller communities. This provides a way to address county wide issues as well as supporting and recognizing local community work in the smaller communities. So when Kickstart Cleveland County meets, they receive reports from each of these action teams. Applying this to the ARCO region, when you have a three-county ARCO meeting, you could hear reports from:

- Each county, and the activities they have underway,
- Action teams with chairs or co-chairs formed to address the most important issues in the region.

They would meet monthly or more often, depending on what is happening, and You may have local groups who are also recognized as action teams. Overall ARCO meeting could meet either once a month or every other month (You could meet every month and allow time for the action teams to meet as part of your agenda).

ARCO Board and action team chairpersons – meet once a Month – in person or by video conference. We would also suggest 6 month and 12 month check-ups. Breakthrough Solutions would be willing to come as you celebrate your accomplishments, identify issues and opportunities, and assist in setting priorities moving forward.

The focus would be on ACTION, so the meetings need not be lengthy and ponderous, but focused on getting things done. Some communities try to keep their meetings to one hour, focusing on action

You can also use videoconferencing to make it easier for people to participate.

Communication and publicizing action and results are critical to keep up momentum

Suggestions

- An e-newsletter that goes out to community leaders in the 3 county region plus outside stakeholders on a regular basis
- A person or persons in the region and each county who handles publicity within the ARCO organization, to local media, and to social media /website.

"If you want to win in the 21st century, you have to empower others, making sure other people are better than you are. Then you will be successful." -Jack Ma