



# Go Forward Pine Bluff

Project Initiative Update  
January 2021

## Mission:

The mission of Go Forward Pine Bluff is to increase the revenues of the city government, enabling it to provide the level of services expected by our citizens.

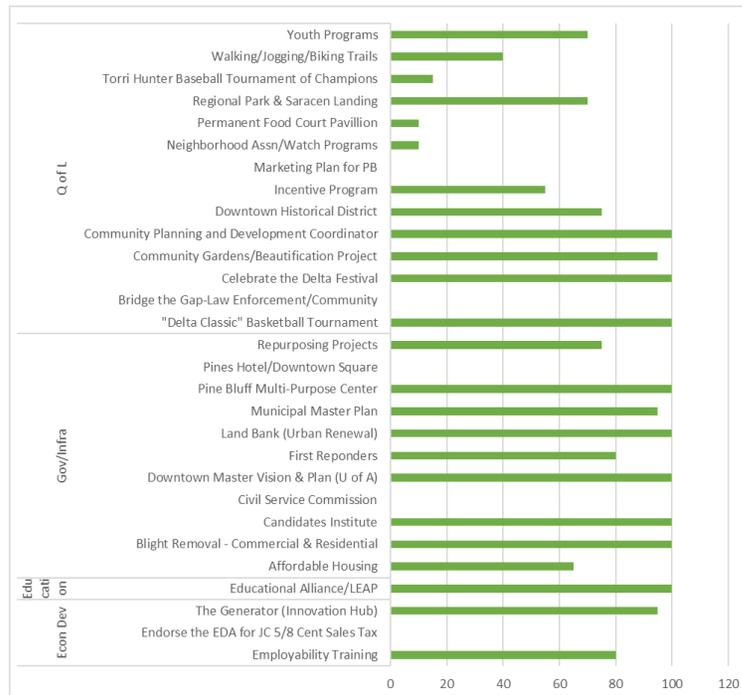
## Values:

Go Forward Pine Bluff is guided by three main values:

1. Retain population
2. Relocate population, and
3. Attract tourism and consumers throughout the region

## Goal:

The goal of Go Forward Pine Bluff is to serve as a bridge between the public and private sector that establishes the necessary working relationships to move Pine Bluff forward.



Initiatives – Percentage Complete

**Initiative**

*Projected Phase for Implementation*

Update

**Land Bank (Urban Renewal Agency) COMPLETE – THE PINE BLUFF URBAN RENEWAL AGENCY CONTINUES ITS WORK**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

GFPB and the City worked together to resurrect the Urban Renewal Agency, first established as the Local Public Agency in 1962. The Urban Renewal Agency will be an effective, responsible way for Pine Bluff to reduce blight, encourage business growth and generate economic progress. Five commissioners were appointed to the Agency and have been meeting since October 2017.

After public meetings in each ward, the city council approved the PBURA’s Central City Urban Renewal Plan in June 2018. Work has begun to eliminate blight and other components of the Plan. The PBURA has adopted the Downtown Master Vision and Plan as a guide.

**L. E. A. P. / Educational Alliance COMPLETE – EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE CONTINUES ITS WORK**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Leadership, Education, Accountability & Pipeline, LEAP, is a strategy to focus on attracting and retaining qualified teachers in the three Pine Bluff school districts. We will work with the schools through the Educational Alliance who will focus on improving student success through the coordination, communication and alignment of educational resources and providing incentives to the city’s public schools.

The initial meeting of the Educational Alliance was on November 28, 2017. This group focused on developing priorities to ensure the LEAP strategy is successful.

The Teach Pine Bluff incentive was announced on May 8, 2019. The program was developed to recruit new and retain currently certified teachers by offering full tuition fellowships towards obtaining a master’s degree, inspiring current students through the Teacher Cadet program, or providing a grant to cover the cost of the initial National Board Certification exam. Nine Fellows were awarded a scholarship in 2019. Seven Fellows were awarded a scholarship in 2020.

A Visiting Professor position was funded for nine months. The incumbent will aid in making systemic improvement to the current Educator Preparatory Program curriculum and how that content is delivered to EPP candidates. Focus will be given specifically on the Praxis exam, the primary qualifying mechanism needed to receive an Arkansas Standard Teacher License.

**Employability Training IN PROCESS**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Our current workforce lacks soft skills. To make job prospects attractive to employers, we will propose a training curriculum that will include accountability, customer service, reliability, and other skills needed. GFPB will also work with the local manufacturing alliance to develop needed workplace skills training needed for our local industries.

A Workforce Development Taskforce was formed and worked to develop and identify training needs and solutions. Employability training was addressed during this process. The taskforce has enhanced the corporate relationship with educational institutions to increase the number of internships offered to local students. The Generator’s Executive Director is working with SEARK to deploy a training program at SEARK.

A summer internship pilot program was launched in 2019 with eight local employers. 15 students from UAPB were offered jobs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was suspended in 2020.

**Neighborhood Associations**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Neighborhood Associations are formed to improve public safety, increase property value and provide cleaner streets. We will work with existing associations and help to form new associations to accomplish this goal.

**Community Planner & Grant Writer** **COMPLETE – THE CITY’S GRANT WRITER CONTINUES TO EXPLORE GRANT FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CITY**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Communication is key to the success of our city. We will work to encourage a marketing plan and coordinate established efforts to publicize our city and its efforts to improve relations, economic development and our quality of life. A partnership with the Advertising and Promotion Commission is being developed.

A Grant Writer has been hired and is working to identify, write and submit grants for the city. The grant writer is also passing on grant information to GFPB and The Generator when applicable.

**Community Gardens/Beautification** **IN PROCESS**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Under the leadership of Mayor Washington, a partnership with the Agricultural Extension Office for funding of the initial phases for a garden to be located on the grounds of the former Davis Hospital (Cherry Street & 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue) was made. Equipment was purchased and Liberty Utilities provided water to an installed irrigation system. A pavilion was on the site and two summer harvests have come in.

During the 2019 MLK Day of Service, citizens put together many more raised beds. The Mayor’s office hosted a work day and opening of the garden on March 30, 2019. Citizens can adopt a bed for planting. A pavilion, playground equipment and fence enhance the area.

Other community gardens are being discussed. Spring Garden Weeks is observed.

The Mayor’s office and other groups hold community cleanup days throughout the year.

**Candidate’s Development Institute** **COMPLETE**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

GFPB partnered with the Pine Bluff Chamber of Commerce to re-establish the **Candidate Development Institute**, a source of education for citizens interested in public office. This is a 6-week program, which meets once a week for 3 hours. The Institute held its first session on Sept 19, 2017 with 28 participants.

A second program was unable to be held in 2020 due to scheduling conflicts. Plans to hold a second session in the fall of 2022.

**Youth Programs** **IN PROCESS**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Keeping our youth involved in positive experiences will provide a way to keep them active and good citizens. First class youth programs will be introduced and assisting existing youth programs will help form interests in areas such as sports, arts, STEM, nature, and more.

A \$25,000 grant from State Farm’s Neighborhood Assist Program was received in September 2018 for the kitchen renovation at the Merrill Community Center. The renovated kitchen will allow healthy meals to be prepared on-site as well as cooking classes for the youth and their families.

Groundbreaking for a renovated Merrill Center was held on February 21, 2020. Work should be complete February 2021. A grand opening is scheduled for March 5, 2020.

Property has been purchased on Harding Street that will see a blighted building (Regency Inn, formerly Admiral Benbow Inn) be razed and replaced with a go-

kart and family-friendly entertainment in 2021.

Other support for youth programs is being evaluated with one program emphasizing both sports participation and literacy.

### **Municipal Master Plan COMPLETE – PLAN SHOULD BE FINALIZED IN 2021**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

Requests for Qualifications were advertised and submitted. A committee, led by Larry Reynolds of Southeast Arkansas Regional Planning Commission, reviewed the RFQs and selected Crafton Tull to prepare a new Plan. The Planning Commission also endorsed the Plan. The city council approved the RFQ in December 2018. Compilation of the Plan will take approximately one and half years.

A steering committee was formed to start the process of developing the Plan. Community meetings were held for input and education on what Crafton Tull was contemplating. The plan should be finalized February 2021.

### **Downtown Master Vision & Plan (U of A) COMPLETE**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

The University of Arkansas Community Design Center (ACDC), under the direction of Steve Luoni, completed the Downtown Master Vision and Plan. Mr. Luoni presented the final document to the community on December 20, 2018.

The Arkansas Economic Development Institute (AEDI) compiled comments of the three listening sessions held in August 2017. We were pleased to see that the recurring comments of the citizens who attended the sessions are aligned with the vision, mission and values of GFPB. It is a validation that the work we are doing is what the residents want for Pine Bluff.

We are working on implementing the Plan.

The ACDC won the 2019 WAN Gold Medal award in London, beating out New York City, Toronto and China for its design of the Re-Live Pine Bluff plan. WAN Awards are given to "...individuals and groups to show their incredible work to an international audience." [www.wanawards.com](http://www.wanawards.com)

### **Delta Festival COMPLETE AND CONTINUING**

*Phase 1: Jan 2017 – Sept 2018*

What began as one big festival, GFPB worked in 2018 to energize some of the current festivals and quality of life events already in place. The plan is to have a schedule of events which will engage all segments of the community throughout the year.

Festivals in 2018 were:

- GFPB partnered with the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas on their Crossroad Festival: Exploring Jefferson County's Cultural Heritage in February 2018.
- We partnered with the Pine Bluff Convention Center and M.K. Distributors to host the highly successful ForwardFEST: Beer, Batter and Blues on June 9.
- Pop Up in the Bluff, in partnership with Downtown Development, was held on September 29 and featured live music, vendors, children's games and more.
- A Homecoming Comedy Showcase was held on Friday, November 2, at the Pine Bluff Convention Center and featured four well-known comedians.
- Mistletoe Magic: Believe in Miracles was highly successful despite the weather. The Christmas Parade at 5:30 on December 6 on Main Street kicked off the weekend with 24 floats. There were bands, characters and firetrucks in the parade as well. Saracen Landing was the site for an ice skating rink, a 32-foot-tall snowman bounce house and a life-size snow globe. Food trucks were there throughout the weekend. Due to rain and freezing

temperatures, retail vendors were not able to set up.

- The return of the King Cotton Holiday Classic was held Pine Bluff December 27 through 29, 2018 at the Pine Bluff Convention Center.

2019 Festival Schedule:

- Forward Fest-Beer, Batter & Brew-Volume 2 – June 22, 2019
- Pop-Up in the Bluff, TBD (September)
- Smoke on the Water, TBD (September)
- Homecoming Comedy Showcase – October 5, 2019
- Mistletoe Magic – December 5-8, 2019
- King Cotton Classic – December 27-29, 2019

Forward Fest was originally scheduled to be held in Regional Park at the Amphitheater. Due to record flooding, the festival was moved to Hestand Stadium's fairgrounds.

The 2020 Festival Schedule included a two-day Forward Fest. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, Forward Fest, UAPB Homecoming Show, Pop-Up in the Bluff, Mistletoe Magic and King Cotton were cancelled.

Options for festivals in 2021 are being discussed.

### **Food Court IN PROCESS – ON HOLD**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

A permanent food court in the downtown area will provide a venue for local food trucks to gather in a safe and attractive area. Local musicians can entertain, groups can meet, and a choice of diverse foods can be accessible to downtown employees and visitors.

We are exploring sites for a food court in the downtown area.

### **First Responders/Bridge the Gap IN PROCESS AND CONTINUING**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

Our first responders are extremely important and protect our assets – people, property and community. GFPB will partner with the mayor, city council, police and fire chief to explore issues such as increased wages, training and retention. GFPB will also explore other means available to attract and retain our first responders.

A housing loan program for first responders was announced and the first housing fair was held on December 10, 2018. Other housing fairs will be held and the loan program will continue throughout the life of the sales tax. The Homebuyer Assistance Program was expanded in 2020. The program assists uniformed employees with down payment and/or closings costs for a home purchased or built within the city limits. Assistance for home improvement can be obtained.

Although more is needed, first responders received raises and additional salary increases. After the pandemic subsides and a levelized economy is seen, additional funding will be considered.

An internship program was developed to employ SEARK and UAPB students who are focused on public safety as a career. One student interned with the police department in 2019.

The Bridge the Gap initiative is to provide a mechanism to improve relations between our first responders and the community.

**Blight Removal - Commercial & Residential COMPLETE – PBURA CONTINUING ITS WORK**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

The Pine Bluff Urban Renewal Agency’s (PBURA) Central City Urban Renewal Plan and the updated Municipal Master Plan provides mechanisms to encourage and enforce existing blight. Our city will become a cleaner, more appealing place for residents and visitors.

The PBURA began demolition in September 2018 with three houses. Equipment was purchased and employees hired to enable the PBURA to perform demo work in-house at a lower expense than out-sourcing the work. Demo work continues today.

The PBURA purchased three buildings on Main Street to rehabilitate. Work began in July 2020 and should complete in six months. Only the façade and exterior will be rehabilitated and will be ready for a retail establishment, bar, or restaurant to purchase and complete the interior.

**Multi-Purpose Center COMPLETE**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

GFPB pledged \$4M towards a Multi-Purpose/Aquatic Center that contains meeting rooms, classrooms, recreational areas and a state-of-the-art aquatic center. The Center attracts out-of-town visitors to swim meets (when appropriate after the pandemic) and provides a local outlet to our citizens for additional recreational activities.

Ground was broken in May 2018 and the grand opening was held on June 29, 2019. Pine Bluff’s swim team, the Sharks, practice there. Locals utilize the facility daily.

**Downtown District - Cultural & Historic IN PROCESS**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

The University of Arkansas Community Design Center (ACDC), under the direction of Steve Luoni, worked with Pine Bluff Downtown Development and Bayou Rhythm & Blues and other groups to ensure we have a viable cultural and historic district to attract visitors when developing the Downtown Master Vision and Plan.

GFPB continues to meet with various groups about the cultural and historic district.

**Town Square (Pines Hotel, etc.) IN PROCESS**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

Pine Bluff Collaborative, formerly Pine Bluff Rising, is working to attract investors to renovate and repurpose the iconic Pines Hotel. They have also purchased other property in the downtown area with plans to renovate for a restaurant, blues venue, bar and brewery.

The Community Theatre hosted a re-opening in November 2017 after a facelift. Local investors purchased the theatre in March 2020 and are developing their plans.

Simmons Bank has made a sizable investment to ensure Pine Bluff has a downtown square. Officials are looking for a location that will attract foot traffic and create a green space for outdoor activities. Location and partnerships are in process.

Businesses have opened downtown and/or plans announced to renovate. Downtown is becoming a place of destination. The excitement downtown continues to grow.

These additions to downtown will complement the new Pine Bluff/Jefferson County Library that opened in November 2020.

The new Pine Bluff Plaza at 6<sup>th</sup> and Main was completed and a Ribbon Cutting was held on May 1, 2019. This is a perfect venue for photos, music events, lunch on the grounds, etc. A lighted 23-foot tree was purchased in 2020 with funds from the cancelled Mistletoe Magic festival. Many group photos were taken in front of the tree.

Christmas decorations for the light poles in the newly finished Streetscape area were also purchased with Mistletoe Magic funds not used in 2020.

## **Hub – The Generator    IN PROCESS**

*Phase 2: Oct 2018 – Sept 2019*

**The Generator** is part of the Economic Development Pillar. It seeks to create a collaborative entrepreneurial ecosystem – through programs and partnerships to drive innovation, entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in Pine Bluff and Southeast Arkansas.

The Arkansas Economic Development Commission awarded \$250,000 towards an EAST lab in March 2020. Other grants are being explored.

The Generator was selected to be part of a national cohort, Rural Innovation Network (RIN), and received technical assistance to prepare the EDA i6 Challenge grant. Although we were unsuccessful in securing this grant, we have received recognition with the work we are doing and have been able to be in a position to apply for other grants. The Generator continues to receive technical assistance as a member of RIN.

Workshops focusing on small business issues began in August 2018 through partnerships with the U.S. Small Business Association, Communities Unlimited and the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center. Workshops continued throughout 2019 and even virtually in 2020. The Generator has entered into a partnership with Google and Wix Studio that will allow The Generator to deploy digital skills training.

The idea is to enhance and to leverage assets already in the community. We are working to partner with Southeast Arkansas College as well as other public and private entities in the city and the region. The Generator is working with UAPB's Economic Research and Development Center Incubator to establish an MOU.

GFPB signed a Professional Service Agreement (PSA) with the City of Pine Bluff to operate the innovation hub. This PSA will provide part of the funding needed.

GFPB has been selected to join the Rural LISC network of partner organizations. Rural LISC is a national program created by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to expand its reach to include rural communities. LISC is a community development support organization working in metropolitan areas across the country. Currently, Rural LISC partners with 87 rural community-based organizations across 44 states, helping them identify challenges and opportunities, and delivering the most appropriate support to meet local needs. Rural LISC has offered technical assistance on grants for capacity buildup. Through the partnership with Rural LISC, GFPB is now a KIVA trustee. The Generator has applied for LISC's Digital Navigator Program.

The opening of The Generator was scheduled for April 27, 2020, but COVID-19 has put this opening on hold. Makerspace classes will begin on February 1, 2021. The classes will be in-person for a limited number of patrons due to the COVID safety guidelines. There will also be opportunities for private instruction.

## **Baseball Tournament of Champions**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

Pine Bluff has long been known for our outstanding baseball teams. We want to work to provide a place to showcase our local teams and attract teams from

other areas and what better way than to involve Pine Bluff's own Torii Hunter and his friends. Our nationally known Taylor Field and Torii Hunter Field at UAPB will offer baseball fans a place to compete and attract visitors to our community.

**Delta Classic – Basketball COMPLETE**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

The King Cotton Basketball Tournament that was once the attraction to local and nationwide teams has been revived. December 27 through 29, 2018, Pine Bluff hosted seven teams including Columbus High School (Columbus, Mississippi), Houston Math, Science and Technology Center (Houston, Texas), Landry Walker High School (New Orleans, Louisiana), Gulliver Preparatory School (Pinecrest, Florida), Park School of Buffalo (Snyder, New York), Polytechnic High School (Long Beach, California), Jacksonville High School (Jacksonville, Arkansas), and Pine Bluff High School.

2019's tournament expanded to 11 teams. Although COVID restrictions and concerns cancelled the 2020 tournament, officials are eyeing 2021 possibilities.

**Civil Service Commission**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

GFPB and other groups will explore the possible reinstatement of the Civil Service Commission that will provide an independent body to hear complaints and make personnel decisions. Protection for police and fire personnel from undue influence by elected officials, and accountability to the Mayor by the fire and police chiefs will be discussed.

**Repurposing Projects IN PROCESS**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

The updated Municipal Master Plan and Downtown Master and Vision Plan will encourage repurposing structures that are salvageable. The Pine Bluff Urban Renewal Agency will also play an important role with repurposing structures and is working on a plan.

**Affordable Housing IN PROCESS**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

The Pine Bluff Urban Renewal Agency has secured real estate in the downtown area for housing. It is anticipated construction will start in 2021.

**Walking, Bridge, Jogging & Biking Trails IN PROCESS**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

Statistics prove that walkability is key to satisfaction among residents. GFPB will work to connect our existing walking trails, provide biking trails and other outdoor facilities. A way to connect Saracen Landing to downtown is being explored which will connect downtown to the trail around Lake Saracen and the pavilion. The City's grant writer is applying for funds to generate bike paths.

EAST students at White Hall High School were working on mapping the trails before the Coronavirus pandemic struck. We will follow up once we are able to contact the instructor and the students.

**Incentive Programs IN PROCESS**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

GFPB will work with local financial institutions, Pine Bluff Downtown Development, and city government to create an incentive relocation program to attract restaurants, young professionals and commercial vendors to the renovated downtown district.

We are working to reinstating a small business loan program and exploring other programs. The Pine Bluff Urban Renewal Agency has purchased three

buildings on Main Street and are rehabilitating the buildings to a shell in order to attract businesses to come in and finish out to the specifications of their particular needs.

**Regional Park & Saracen Landing IN PROCESS**

*Phase 3: Oct 2019 – Sept 2020*

Saracen Landing has the infrastructure to support better amenities that will meet the demands for increasing the quality of life and activities for families and youth.

Regional Park's softball complex fields will be leveled through the use of FEMA funds as a result of the June 2019 flooding. Improvements to the concession stand, fencing, seating, etc. are being completed.

In addition to Go Forward Pine Bluff, other organizations are working to improve Pine Bluff:

- The Saracen Casino opened its Annex in October 2019. The Casino complex for gambling and restaurants opened Phase 1 in October 2020, the hotel and entertainment facilities were scheduled to open in December 2020 but those plans have been delayed.
- The Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas opens a renovated ARTSpace on Main. Plans to open the ARTWorks by summer 2021.
- The Pine Bluff/Jefferson County Library new library downtown has opened and remodeling of the Watson Chapel and Alzheimer branches completed.
- SEARK opened Seabrook to the community for intramural and youth sports.
- UAPB partnered with the Bowen School of Law.
- UAPB and SEARK partnered to offer an "A to B" program (associates to bachelors degree program).
- GTL plant development progresses.
- Jefferson Regional begins demolition work
- Southeast Arkansas Economic Development District receives a grant to build a new headquarters facility
- CARTI Cancer Center builds a new location in Pine Bluff
- Arkansas Children's Hospital builds new clinic and partners with Jefferson Regional
- Jefferson County Health Departments builds new site
- Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System opens a new clinic
- A military clothing company, a disabled workforce employer, begins operations at the Pine Bluff Arsenal
- Good Day Farm Arkansas locates in Pine Bluff
- Streetscape Phase 1 ending soon, Phase 2 is beginning.

GFPB and other entities continue to work to stimulate economic growth, improve our educational system, and provide an attractive quality of life. We are working FOR you and BECAUSE of you.

To download the full plan, go to our website [www.goforwardpinebluff.org](http://www.goforwardpinebluff.org). Check the website often to keep updated on the happenings of GFPB. Also, "Like" us on Facebook and email us if you have any questions and/or suggestions. We would love to hear from you.

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