

# Downtown Pine Bluff Innovation District Placemaking Plan





Center on Rural Innovation  
[www.ruralinnovation.us](http://www.ruralinnovation.us)

Prepared for the  
City of Pine Bluff  
August 2024

©CORI

# Contents

## Preface

A word from the Economic & Community Development Director  
Executive summary

## Introduction

Placemaking, rural places, and innovation  
Innovation district project stakeholders and community input  
The innovation district area and Pine Bluff in context  
The Vision and “Ordinary and everything” Narrative

## Objectives

Introduction to the Objectives  
Increase perceived safety  
Foster connections across projects  
Forge a new narrative

## Placemaking

Introduction to placemaking actions, key places map  
Placemaking actions at a glance table  
Placemaking actions  
Other suggestions  
Now what?

## Appendix

Grants resource guide  
Endnotes

04

06

14

18

42

## A word from the Economic & Community Development Director

Pine Bluff is a port city with a rich multicultural, agricultural, and industrial heritage. Despite years of population losses, it remains the most populated trade center in the Southeast Arkansas River Basin farming area. As one of the oldest settlements on the Arkansas River, Pine Bluff's history dates back nearly 2,000 years with Native American roots.

The city's economy originally thrived on cotton commerce, fueled by the early plantation economy. Rapid growth occurred in the 19th century with the establishment of utilities, and during WWII due to defense investments. Historically, African Americans have made up significant portions of the population—enhanced by the city's post-Civil War reputation as the "Negro Paradise of the South" and the influence of what is now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

During the late 20th century, Pine Bluff and Jefferson County experienced population declines after losing 5,000 jobs in the early 1980s recession. Despite economic recovery efforts, the population has not surpassed the 1980s Census figures. Corporate closures, plant consolidations; population decline; suburban developments; and new commercial nodes all took their toll.

Pine Bluff's downtown area, central to the city's 205-year history, has experienced every economic boom and bust. It has served various roles, including as a neighborhood, government seat, river port, cotton warehouse district, Civil War battleground, industrial district, transportation hub, corporate center, shopping and entertainment area, and cultural center. Today, it is the focus of revitalization efforts. I am excited about the potential of this downtown innovation district, just as

I am excited about all of the efforts at work to help build a vibrant downtown for the next generation of Pine Bluffians.



**Sincerely,**

**Lori V. Walker-Guelache**

*Economic & Community Development Director*

## Executive summary

The Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) is pleased to present the Innovation District Placemaking Plan to the City of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The Innovation District Placemaking Plan (the Plan) is a blueprint for practical and deliverable placemaking action.

The goal of the Plan is to communicate a vision for a five-year placemaking program to a wide audience who may support, implement, fund, and enjoy all that the “innovation district” of Pine Bluff has to offer. The objectives that underpin the vision—increase perceived safety, foster connection between projects, and forge a new narrative—are supported by 9 placemaking actions that range from easy, low cost, and quick implementation to longer term ones that require greater funding and coordination.

The Plan is for city officials, downtown building owners, nonprofit leaders, downtown employees, community members, and anyone else who shares the vision of a downtown Pine Bluff that is a place of possibility and innovation for everyone. The actions cover

a diverse range of topics, from events that enliven public space to “cleaning and greening” initiatives to improving public processes. Some are ones that anyone can take while others are best considered by specific organizations and individuals.

This Plan builds upon the groundwork laid by the City Council, local nonprofits, and countless dedicated individuals involved in previous placemaking and downtown redevelopment efforts. Their collective endeavors have positioned Pine Bluff for a promising future, and this Plan aims to further advance the city’s trajectory towards success.

### About this plan

The Pine Bluff Innovation District Placemaking Plan is the culmination of extensive research, on-site place assessments, community consultation, a survey, and a workshop conducted in Pine Bluff in 2023.

The Plan, city-wide priorities, and placemaking actions identified within are informed by a shared vision and three objectives vetted by community stakeholders.

The funding for the development of this plan came from the USDA, through their 2022 Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge grant. This opportunity for Pine Bluff was undertaken with the support from The Generator and with assistance from the City’s Economic and Community Development office.

### Methodology overview

The project methodology was based on proven community development approaches, combining collaborative processes with placemaking mentoring, prototyping, and evaluation.

Community engagement was undertaken between July 2023 and August 2024 to generate awareness of placemaking opportunities in Pine Bluff. Pilot projects were undertaken to test community interest in leading placemaking actions.

Surveys and interviews supported the development of the shared vision for Pine Bluff and determined feasible placemaking actions that foster an inclusive innovation district.

## Rural challenges

When the 2008 recession occurred, many jobs were lost. By 2013, jobs in metropolitan areas had recovered and have continued to grow. Rural job numbers still haven't recovered in many places. Pine Bluff's current unemployment rate is low, but there are thousands fewer jobs here than there once were, and the population has declined correspondingly.

Metro and rural areas experienced significant job losses in the manufacturing sector over the past 20 years, but rural communities, unlike metro areas, have not offset these losses through job growth in the professional and business services sectors, including tech.

### Why do tech jobs matter?

Rural America has 12% of the workforce, but only 5% of tech jobs, many of which bring in salaries of \$78,000 or more per year. For Jefferson County, only 1.2% of workers are employed in tech, compared to 4% of their urban counterparts. In a place where the average income is closer to \$23,000, a deficit of high-paying jobs impacts the entire local economy. Studies have found that each high-tech job leads to the creation of 3 to 5 additional local jobs.

Every tech role often enables a non-tech role in sales, operations, design, etc. These jobs expand the demand locally for retail,

restaurants, healthcare, and other roles. Since people can enter tech jobs from non-traditional education pathways, rural communities with strong broadband have the opportunity to add capacity and thrive. However, attracting or retaining tech workers is a lot easier in rural places that have a strong sense of community and a high quality of life.

## What is placemaking?

In short, placemaking is **“people-powered public space design.”**

In other words: it's a method of community planning that empowers local people to participate in the creation of physical spaces that better meet their needs. This collaborative process involves a range of stakeholders, place users, and place managers in the design, planning, development, and creation of public and public-facing places.

Through the process of placemaking, participants are delegated power to shape their community, and in doing so, they develop a shared responsibility for their local places as well as a deeper connection to the community that surrounds them.

The community-building that comes about from participating in placemaking activities creates a positive feedback loop: Most people

are drawn to places that other people are enjoying, and when new people interact in a space with others, community bonds are forged.

Thus, the simple act of people being together in space for even the smallest of projects has a ripple effect on those people, along with anyone who sees them or hears about the project.

Projects implemented without community involvement are likely to miss out on this peer-to-peer buzz.

### Why rural placemaking?

Placemaking is typically associated with efforts to improve urban communities' walkability, safety, and access to services. However, placemaking benefits rural communities too. Aside from job opportunities, many people who leave their rural towns cite a lack of “things to do” as a reason to go elsewhere.

Having a variety of activities to participate in, especially ones that were created with community needs in mind, can improve a rural place's ability to draw in or keep community members.

Additionally, participating in placemaking builds leadership skills and project management capacity within a community — something that many rural places, where one person might wear several civic and volunteer hats, are often in need of.

## Placemaking and innovation districts in rural towns



**“The new innovation districts will be more like the market districts of a hundred years ago than the financial districts of fifty years ago.”** -Ramon Marrades, Chief Strategy Officer at La Marina de València in Barcelona, Spain

This is good news for many rural downtowns. Featuring blocks of mixed-use multi-story buildings, a relatively high density, and a lower cost of living than their metropolitan counterparts, many “micropolitan” cities, including the City of Pine Bluff, have the bones of a good market district in place of a spiritless financial district or the neighborhood-cleaving interstate that often served it.

Furthermore, with the rise of remote work,

a trend reversal has begun to take place: some young people are moving back to their hometowns, while newcomers or second-home-owners have made a permanent shift to the rural lifestyle. to the slower pace of life found in the countryside.

Innovation districts—areas that attract entrepreneurs and facilitate business growth—have the potential to spur economic development that is resilient and inclusive. With a renewed interest in rural places, it’s a great time to foster the conditions that make one possible.

A successful innovation district has lively public places and low barriers to entry. They often feature open-ended spaces that respond to the needs of people as producers and innovators, not just consumers.

In these places of possibility, “weak ties” between strangers can be formed and “strong ties” between collaborators can be strengthened, highlighting a complex social web where commercial and social exchanges blend together. To support “strong tie”-based innovation, successful districts often feature a cluster of businesses or individuals engaged in the same industry, facilitating resource and knowledge sharing. In a rural community, this likely includes people who engage in that industry as a hobby, too.

For the would-be innovator, the lower cost of living, ease of building relationships, and access to resources in a space that reinforces the idea that “anything is possible” make a rural innovation district an ideal place to grow.

# Innovation district project stakeholders

To inform the development of this placemaking plan, a number of stakeholders across Pine Bluff were engaged. They completed worksheets, participated in workshops, tested “Lighter Quicker Cheaper” (LQC) placemaking actions, and reviewed this plan.

## Stakeholders

Codney Washington • Donna Ryles • Owen Mouser • Jim Miller • Ryan Watley • Angela White Smith • Rachel Miller • LaTisha Brunson • Angelisa Henry • Tavante Calhoun • Carly Vanhook • Jennifer Kline • Lori Walker • Ricky Williams • Karen DeJarnette • Grace Swygert • Brandi Godwin

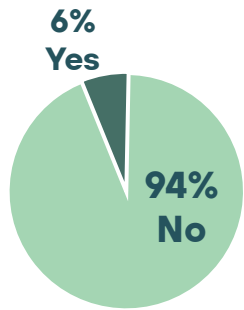


Pine Bluff Innovation District Placemaking Plan

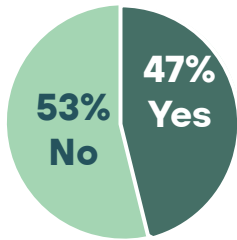


# Community input

Feedback on the ideas in this plan were solicited from the entrepreneurship students over zoom in November and through an online survey.

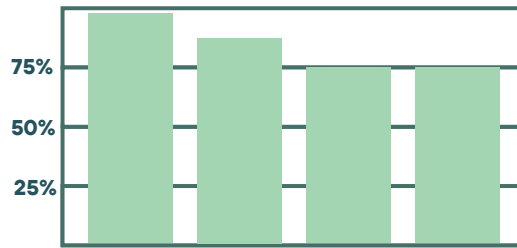


Do people in Pine Bluff see opportunities for themselves here?



Do you feel that improvements to downtown have positively impacted you?

I'd be there a lot more if it had...



Restaurants bars, and food trucks  
More things to do in public  
a security presence  
Live music



©CORI

"There are a limited number of places to eat and the parking can be tricky. My husband is in a wheelchair."

"I like the small shops with personable owners."

"It's scary and doesn't feel safe."

"I love the library, enjoy the events I've attended and my church is in the area. That feels like home."

"No cultural venues of interest."

"The city makes it difficult for local residents to start and sustain a business downtown."

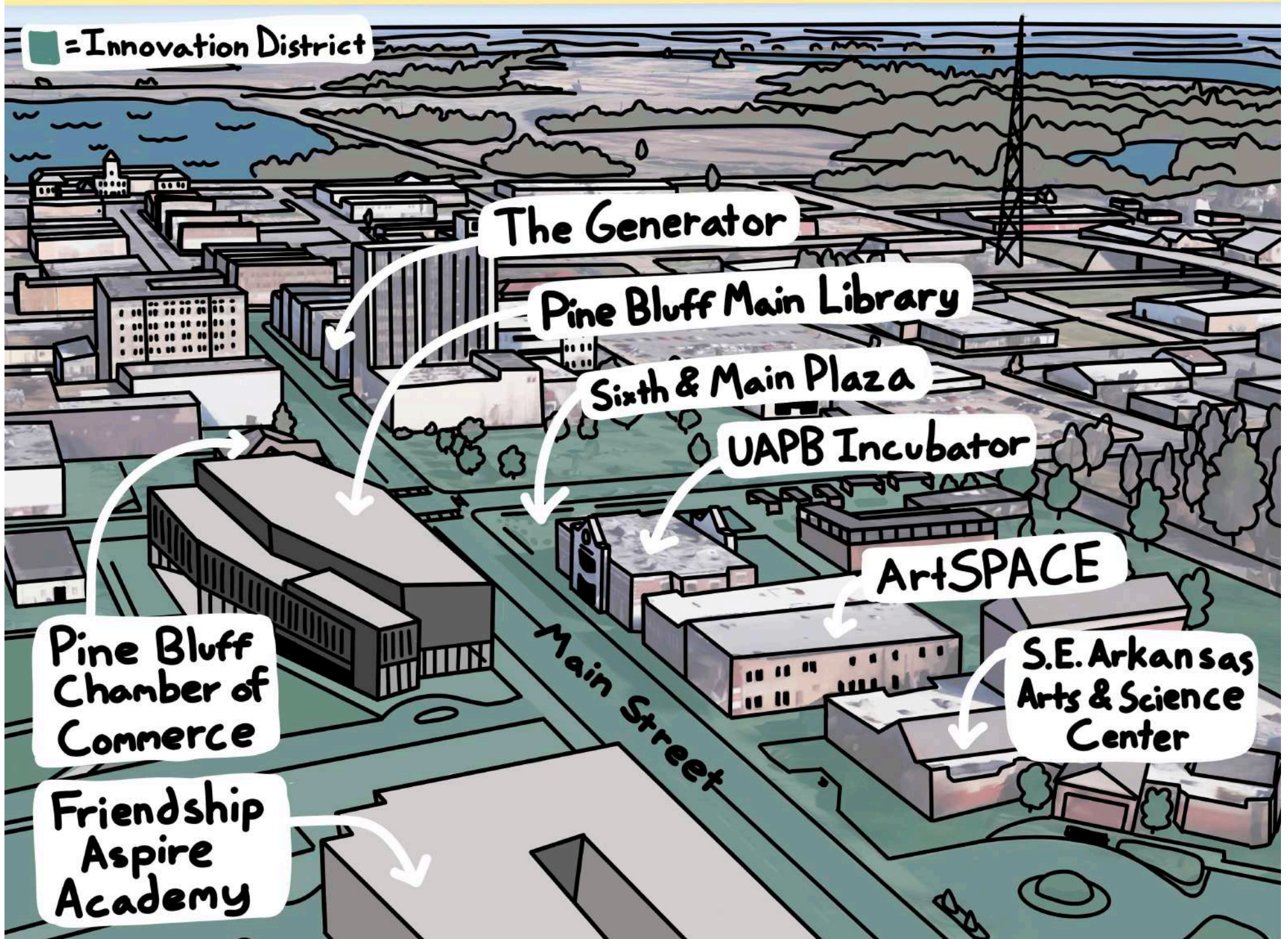
"The inviting landscaping is nice. I think it will encourage pedestrian traffic."

"There just isn't anyplace I want to shop or visit."

"I like seeing people walk from one venue to another, while enjoying the murals and landscape of downtown."



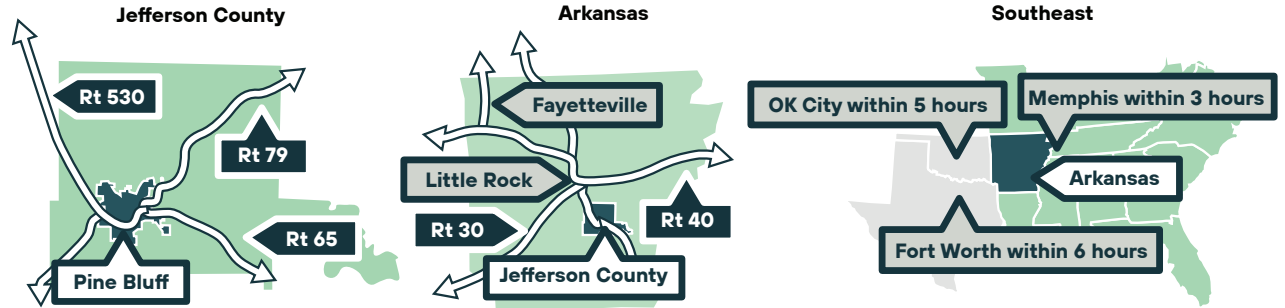
©iStock



Market conditions and transportation methods are often primary drivers for how space is arranged and how people use it for business purposes. As a place chartered in the 1830's, the heart of innovation in Pine Bluff, like the path of the Arkansas River, has shifted as the transportation of goods progressed from wagons to steam boats to trains to trucks to WiFi. The Innovation District extends along Main Street from 4th St to 8th St in downtown. It is shown in dark green. All throughout downtown, shown in light green, revitalization efforts have been taking place, including streetscaping projects and the Rhythm and Bayous cultural district.



## Pine Bluff in context



In the mid 1800's, the City of Pine Bluff was a major center for trade in Arkansas. This was due to its location along the Arkansas River, fertile delta soil, and large population of enslaved people farming cotton under the threat of violence.

The emancipation of Black people led to many newly free individuals settling in Pine Bluff in the latter part of the 19th century. Due to its port city status and rail lines, it quickly became one of the highest concentrations of Black innovation and wealth in the country. The city has seen numerous challenges: the Arkansas River has repeatedly threatened the city with floods; thousands of jobs were lost after NAFTA went into effect; drugs and violent crime have plagued certain neighborhoods. Yet Main Street has recently been the site of numerous revitalization efforts, and many residents are working hard for the bright future they know is possible.

Many people who live in surrounding towns work in nearby manufacturing plants or can easily reach downtown, enabled by route 530

and many secondary highways. The state's most populous city, Little Rock, is only 50 miles northwest.

Within the context of the Southeast, it has convenient road connections to Memphis, Oklahoma City, and Fort Worth: places where expenses might be outweighing opportunities in the work-from-anywhere age. While places like Oklahoma City may remain as regional centers of capital, innovators in Pine Bluff looking to make a personal connection to fund their venture won't have far from home to go.

Pine Bluff has been trotted out nationally for years as a sad tale of decline and disinvestment, yet such a view doesn't take into account the recurring tale of the city over its nearly 200 year history: one of a phoenix rising repeatedly from the ashes. If the people of Pine Bluff can collectively leverage its story of rebirth to spur equitable investment and economic growth, the City could be a leading example of how rural places can foster possibility and prosperity.

# The Vision: Acknowledge and move forward together

## A brief overview of conditions

Downtown Pine Bluff has the bones of a thriving destination. For years, many deeply committed people have been putting in the work to make it so. Though many of its buildings are in need of serious repair or even tear-down, individual places hum with activity. A streetscape revitalization project started at the courthouse and continues to move up Main Street. A historic Black university, the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff, is only five minutes away. Southeast Arkansas College is also located nearby. Several large regional employers including Simmons Bank, Jefferson Regional Medical Center, Tyson Foods, and Saracen Casino Resort are located in or near the city.

A fair amount of places are flourishing on or near Main Street in Pine Bluff, from The Generator innovation hub, to the Pine Bluff Library, to Friendship Aspire Academy, to ArtSPACE, to the Arts and Sciences Center, to the UAPB Incubator. There are also eateries and “third spaces” like the Indigo Blue Coffee House, RJ’s Sports Grill and Bar, and micro-enterprises hosted in the new Sixth and Main Plaza. Every year, thousands of people gather for the historic UAPB homecoming parade.

## Focus on momentum

To achieve economic prosperity and innovation, Pine Bluff must foster a mindset of “permission to think the impossible.” This means recognizing challenging problems and encouraging creative solutions without fear of failure. Conversations might sound like, “We may not achieve this goal due to ABC reasons, but if possible, we’d try XYZ.” This shift in mindset promotes experimentation

and increases the chance of finding viable solutions.

Rebuilding Pine Bluff is a gradual process, with changes happening one space at a time, bringing life to downtown. However, adopting this innovative and experimental approach can help downtown Pine Bluff to once again be a place of prosperity as it has been in the past.



# Ordinary, and everything.

By Grace Swygart

**This narrative can give you an idea of how the city of Pine Bluff could be experienced if the vision is achieved.**

It is 2029. I drive to my destination while talking to my sister on the phone. My mind comes to an instant realization: I'm back in my hometown of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, after four years. Back now to help host the Pine Bluff Fashion Week that we implemented before I left. Honestly, I'm surprised it's still going. I tell my sister I'll call her back; there is a bit of traffic. I'm not used to seeing traffic in Downtown Pine Bluff. There are even people walking.

I finally snag a parking spot near the library, and I glance at the library lawn. People reading books and talking to each other sit on benches around the perimeter. Across the street, I notice the pop-up shop at Sixth and Main, a building added a few years ago. Kids are running around the fountain, friends are laughing while taking pictures for their socials, and small businesses are enthusiastically showing off their products. The Sixth and Main project doesn't feel new anymore, it seems to be working harmoniously with the surrounding area.

Looking at the Incubator next door, a young

woman is coming out on the phone, she talks and walks briskly: business owner. The Incubator has always been a hub for small businesses and now it seems to be bustling. I glance at the elementary school near the library and my heart swells. There used to be a small patch of unused land between the two, but not anymore. The area now has flowers and a mural created by the students.

As I continue walking, my ears fill with talking, laughter, and music. I've heard these sounds before, walking along cities I have visited and lived in. But, it's different this time, it's in my hometown. Before when walking downtown, you would hear the sounds of cars passing by, the occasional construction, and the rocks beneath your feet. Hearing the joy of the community is a different feeling, it's proof that the near-dead downtown has come back alive. Is this what the adults, when I was young, felt before downtown had slowly withered?

Crossing the street, my steps get more anxious as I'm anticipating what's going to happen next. I see people walking their dogs down the street and others on a daily jog. Usually, when you see dogs, there are dwellings nearby. Passing Sixth and Main, I arrive at an apartment complex that was built two years ago. A friend told me about them, but now I see them with my own eyes. A new apartment complex feels like a dream.

The sun has been setting this entire time, but somehow it's not dark. It still feels so welcoming: probably the new lighting that comes not

just from street lights, but from shops that are open into the evening. The atmosphere feels safer. The pocket park, originally an abandoned parking lot across from the bank, that I had a chance to work on, is in view. Now it has a vibrant mural, mini library, and seating areas; with minor changes, the atmosphere feels completely different. I pass by what was an uninhabited building, now surrounded by people coordinating the moving of furniture; maybe a new business is moving in? Finally, I'm at the place where some of this started, The Generator. It now has a mural on the building and a light-up sign to make it more noticeable. A once-abandoned lot next to the building now hosts a small cafe: one of the Sixth and Main pop-up shops' first move-out-and-up success stories.

Many of these sights and experiences may not mean a lot to people who didn't grow up here, and might seem ordinary or even not worth noting. But to me, it's everything: it shows that the hard work of so many to overcome what had been was worth it. Pine Bluff is well on its new journey: moving on and moving forward.



Center on Rural Innovation

## Objectives

In this section, you'll find three community-derived objectives that individuals, civic groups, and elected leaders can pursue in an effort to foster an inclusive innovation ecosystem in downtown Pine Bluff. The context for each objective is explained, an overview of the solution is provided, and page numbers for the placemaking actions that contribute to that solution are listed.

In the Placemaking section, you'll find highlighted objective symbols as a quick reference for what objective the action contributes to.

### Individual inclusion is key to successful placemaking

Empowering individuals and small community groups to engage in placemaking activities is key to transforming the feel of a place. Even tiny, uncoordinated actions, such as playing music on a public bench, picking up trash, or using sidewalk chalk contribute to creating a vibrant environment. These voluntary, everyday actions send a powerful message that the space is cherished and lively, making it a place worth being. Pages marked with a "community" symbol of two people high-fiving offer opportunities for individual or small group involvement, alongside any listed key partners.



***"A key principle of placemaking is about creating exciting environments that foster human interaction and innovation. If we fabricate an artificial space with too many top-down, preconceived ideas then we aren't allowing for natural evolution and development."***

-Oliver Mathers, design officer at Design West

**1. Increase perceived safety**



**2. Foster connection between projects**



**3. Forge a new narrative**





## Objective 1. Increase perceived safety

### Places we avoid

Downtown Pine Bluff sees little day-to-day activity compared to other cities its size or even ones that are smaller. This is primarily because there are few reasons for people to go downtown on a regular basis, and because there is the perception that it is



*A well-designed downtown plaza that may feel less safe because it is rarely used and has little upkeep. ©CORI*

unsafe. Although downtown isn't absent of crime, there were fewer than one reported offense per month in 2023: far less than many other parts of the city. Main Street from 11th street to Saracen Landing is one of the safest places for people to be in Pine Bluff, but the blocks of empty buildings with little street life can make the places that are active feel like islands of refuge that are only accessible by car.

As social animals, we take cues from others on how to act. If we rarely see other people downtown, or if the only people we do see aren't in our peer group, we're less likely to spend time outside ourselves. For downtown Pine Bluff to be an even safer place with the kind of deeper and wider social networks where innovation thrives, public space should be activated more often than not.

### Space activation

One of the simplest things a community member can do to improve a place is simply spending time there themselves. One of the simplest things an organization can do is to activate it is to install a passive project that visitors can engage in

at any time. For spaces that are safe but are perceived to be unsafe, increasing the number of people who visibly spend time there with their friends or families is a winning strategy. Through initiatives such as pop-up markets, outdoor concerts, art installations, and community gatherings, we can transform downtown Pine Bluff into a lively hub where people feel welcomed, connected, and secure.

Local governments can also play a critical role in fostering active spaces by "cleaning and greening" lots, as well as developing programs that address the root causes of crime and violence, like Oakland California's "Ceasefire" program. If these actions are taken together, Pine Bluff can become safer and feel safer in the long run.

### Placemaking Actions that support Objective 1:

- Take it outside p. 21
- Downtown liveliness p. 22
- Passive activation p. 24
- Cleaning and greening p. 30
- Decreasing gun violence p. 38



## Objective 2. Foster connection between projects

### Improvements made in isolation

Many improvements have been made downtown and many more are still budding: Downtown streetscape projects; Saracen Landing; the Sixth and Main Plaza; the Generator; the UAPB Incubator; the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Cultural District, and many others. Yet as different initiatives have come online, the way that many of them could interweave with their surroundings has received less attention.

This can look like the 2000 foot detour that pedestrians must travel between the Jefferson County Courthouse and Saracen Landing, despite the fact that those two points are less than 500 feet apart. Or that there are multiple plans for overlapping areas of downtown Pine Bluff that aren't coordinated with each other, even when they take place at the same time. This disconnect can even be found in Pine Bluff's digital spaces, where the online payment option for the city's Occupational Tax leads to a dead website link.

### Filling in the gaps and bridges of connections

There will always be some missed connec-

tions and opportunities that don't pan out. But like a tree isolated from a forest, a project that doesn't connect to its surrounding area will be more vulnerable and less impactful. To build a more resilient Pine Bluff, people leading projects, changes, and initiatives should consider the context that surrounds them.

That can look like knowing not just who uses or could use the place or service, but having an understanding of how they got there, why, and where they're going. By deeply connecting projects and changes in Pine Bluff with the ecosystem of needs their users have, it ensures that initiatives are not only relevant

but also effectively address the community's specific challenges and aspirations. This approach fosters meaningful engagement, promotes inclusivity, and ultimately leads to sustainable development that genuinely improves the quality of life for residents.

### Placemaking Actions that support Objective 2:

- Downtown liveliness p. 24
- Passive activation p. 24
- Reaching the unhoused p. 28
- Demystifying licensing p. 36



*The shortest distance between Saracen Landing and downtown has no crosswalk and is fenced off. ©CORI*





## Objective 3. Forge a new narrative

### The recent story of the city

For many years, news in Pine Bluff has tended to cover a larger portion of negative stories than positive or neutral ones. In 2013, large news organizations began to tout Pine Bluff as the “most dangerous city in America”. Then, after the 2020 census was released they began sharing stories about Pine Bluff’s plummeting population rate. This constant spotlight on the city’s struggles can deeply affect the morale and psyche of its residents.

Being labeled as a “failing” or “problematic” place not only impacts how outsiders perceive Pine Bluff but also influences how its own residents view themselves and their community. It can create a sense of hopelessness and resignation, making it difficult for people to envision a brighter future for their city or themselves.

### An expanded view of Pine Bluff

It’s crucial to remember that Pine Bluff’s story is much more than its recent struggles, or even the struggles from the 1980’s that live on in the memories of many residents today. Throughout its nearly 200 year long history of settlement, Pine Bluff has faced

and overcome numerous challenges, from devastating floods to seismic economic shifts. Despite these obstacles, the city has always found a way to persevere and even become an icon in the south.

By expanding our perspective to consider



*The great flood of 1927 devastated Arkansas and took months to recede. ©EncyclopediaofArkansas.net*

Pine Bluff’s entire history, we can gain a deeper understanding of the resilience and strength that define this community. Recognizing the city’s past successes can serve as a source of inspiration and motivation for its residents as they navigate the current difficulties. Then, instead of allowing themselves to be defined solely by the negative narratives imposed upon them, the people of Pine Bluff can reclaim their story and forge a new narrative. Cultivating a renewed sense of optimism and agency, they can envision a future where Pine Bluff thrives once again, building upon its rich heritage of resilience and community spirit. This can be done through participating in positive activities, learning more about the city’s history, and promoting both throughout the wider region.

### Placemaking Actions that support Objective 3:

- Take it outside p. 21
- City lot p. 29
- Cleaning and greening p. 30
- Innovator streetscapes p. 32
- Decreasing gun violence p. 38

# Placemaking: Actions, plans, and other suggestions

These projects (some of which have already been happening) each support one or more of the **objectives**, and are examples of how to make progress towards achieving them.

Some projects are simple and may not require special permission or planning, while others involve many **key partners** working together over a longer period of time.

## Project costs

Approximate cost ranges for Placemaking Actions are outlined as follows and represent a general guide.

- \$ = \$0 - \$5,000**
- \$\$ = \$5,000 - \$50,000**
- \$\$\$ = > \$50,000**

## Time frames for delivery

The Plan articulates placemaking actions suitable for delivery in the following time frames:

- Up to 1 year **Short-Term**
- 1-3 years **Mid-Term**
- 3-5 years **Long-Term**

Some long term projects may continue on past five years to be fully realized.

## Pre-placemaking project checklist

With public and public-facing projects, there's a greater chance for success if you go through the following list first:

1. Spend time in the place just observing what it's like there and who visits.
2. Who owns the space that the potential project will be on? For public places, what is the process like for using it?
3. Who else has a stake in this space, or who else uses it? Is it adjacent to local business owners, is it frequented by local youth, who decorates or cleans it?

## Acronyms for some Key Partners

- BGCJC:** Boys & Girls Club of J. C.
- ECDD:** Economic & Community Development Department
- FAA:** Friendship Aspire Academy
- GFPB:** Go Forward Pine Bluff
- P&D:** Planning & Development Dept.
- P&R:** Parks and Recreation Department
- PBCC:** PB Chamber of Commerce
- PBDD:** PB Downtown Development
- SD:** Street Department
- UAPBI:** UAPB Incubator

4. What plans have been made about this place in the past? Check with your city and county planning organizations, such as the Pine Bluff Economic & Community Development Department or the Southeast Arkansas Planning Commission.
5. What changes do the owners, users, and other stakeholders want to see?
6. Who else that has done a similar project can vouch for the idea or provide advice?

## Golden Questions of Placemaking:

When a project hits a snag, whether it be hesitant property owners or infrastructure disagreements, ask yourself the following:

1. Does this idea uplift the needs of those with the greatest connection to a space?
2. Is there a Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) way of testing the idea?



A creative example of local care. ©CORI

# Key locations for placemaking actions



## Innovation District

- Passive activation p. 24
- Reaching the unhoused p. 28
- City lot p. 29
- Innovator streetscapes p. 32





































## Downtown

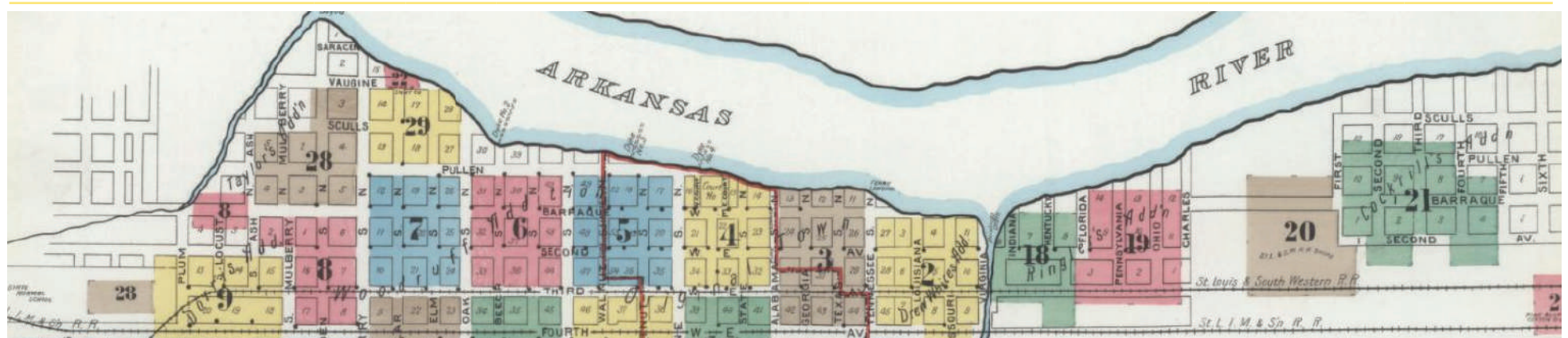
- Take it outside p. 21
- Downtown liveliness p. 22

## The City

- Cleaning and greening p. 30
- Demystifying licensing p. 36
- Decreasing gun violence p. 38

# Placemaking actions at a glance

Name	Page	Cost	Timeframe	Partners	Objectives	Inclusive
Take it outside	p. 21	\$\$\$	Short-Term	Anyone who visits downtown, Pop Up in the Bluff	  	
Downtown liveliness	p. 22	\$\$\$	Short-Term	City Council, ArtSPACE, Delta and Bayous Cultural District	  	
Passive activation	p. 24	\$\$	Mid-Term	All local organizations that have a stake in downtown	  	
Reaching the unhoused	p. 28	\$\$	Mid-Term	The City of Pine Bluff, Opportunity House	  	
City lot	p. 29	\$\$\$	Short-Term	ECDD, PBCC, PBDD	  	
Cleaning and greening	p.30	\$\$	Mid-Term	P&R, SD, Group Violence Intervention Program, PB Clean and Beautiful	  	
Innovator streetscapes	p. 32	\$\$\$	Long-Term	ArtSPACE, PBDD, The Generator, Jefferson County Historical Society	  	
Demystifying licensing	p. 36	\$\$	Short-Term	PBCC, The City of Pine Bluff, UAPBI	  	
Decreasing gun violence	p. 38	\$\$\$	Long-Term	Pine Bluff Police Department, Group Violence Intervention Program	  	



# Placemaking actions

## Take it outside

\$\$

Short Term



### Key partners:

Anyone who visits downtown, Pop Up in the Bluff and other groups

### Background

In the city of Pine Bluff, people mostly try to park in front of the place they're going, and are seldom seen walking from one place to another: combined trips on foot are rare for those who have a car. For many people this is for reasons of feeling unsafe.

Evidence of human-powered transportation (or the lack of it) is a helpful baseline, as it illustrates where people feel safe going to. If people feel safer in their cars, they'll use them even in cases where walking between nearby destinations would be just as fast.

As mentioned in Objective 1, we take cues from other people on how to use different places. When we don't see people there, and we know that the city itself has a high crime rate, it's easy to believe that the space is unsafe, which has a detrimental effect on street life and entrepreneurial culture.

That said, for those that are comfortable doing so, spending time in public places can actually help them to be safer and used by more people. When other people see you using a public space, it gives them the idea that it's a place for them to be in, too. If you're less

comfortable being alone in a public space, consider inviting a friend or two to join you.

### LQC placemaking actions

The sidewalks along Main Street between 4th and 8th Street, the 6th and Main Plaza, and the City lot are places downtown where individual activation could go a long way. The following are a list of quick activities anyone can do in these places, without prior planning or permission, to contribute to a thriving downtown:

- Walking between different places you need to go (combining trips)
- Reading a book or magazine on a bench
- Sketching or drawing in a notebook
- Drawing with sidewalk chalk
- Playing a small musical instrument
- Taking pictures of something
- Meeting up with others for a walk
- Picking up and disposing of trash
- Doing yoga or other exercises

While these might be easy activities that anyone could do, people are more likely to try new behaviors when there is an invitation

or an incentive. For example, The Generator, ArtSPACE, the Library, or other groups could create social media campaigns for a brainstorm together day, sketch outside day, or read outside day. Or they could work together to create a downtown Pine Bluff bingo card, in which community members participate in activities, get stamps on their bingo card, and receive a small prize like a book or a coffee for hitting "bingo".



This bench outside of the arts and science center makes for a great place to sit and read. ©CORI

# Placemaking actions

## Downtown liveliness

\$ \$\$

Short Term

### Background

Outside of the occasional festival or UAPB's homecoming, the sidewalks of downtown Pine Bluff are often very quiet. Even when events are happening at places like the library or the Generator, it's rare for the joviality to spread to spaces around them. People often go where they see other people, where there's something to "do", or where both can be found. In a place where many buildings are in need of expensive repairs before becoming places with things to do again, it can be helpful to look at small, inexpensive ways of bringing life into downtown. One such way is to foster space for busking.

Busking means entertaining people in a public place. It can include dancing, singing, drawing, writing, or many other art forms. For hundreds of years, buskers have entertained the public in hopes of earning money or other gifts from passersby. Busking gives newer local artists the opportunity to hone their craft, established artists the chance to earn a few dollars while passing through, and even professional artists a space to delight fans with an unexpected performance.

Though many people find that performances



### Key partners:

City Council, ArtSPACE, Delta and Bayous Cultural District

enhance their experience of public places, most cities have regulations that seem to prohibit performance. Officials may cite public safety or noise concerns as reasons to not legalize busking. Yet studies have shown that public spaces with buskers are more "visitable and preferable" to people. If Pine Bluff's artists and officials want to build a more vibrant place to call home, especially in light of the nearby up-and-coming Delta Rhythm & Bayous Cultural District, they might look to their neighbors in Montgomery Alabama for inspiration.



Blues music is part of the local culture; musicians like Duwayne Burnside perform it at RJ's Sports Grill. ©RJ's

### Montgomery Busking Project

In 2022, a group called the Hilltop Howlers petitioned the City of Montgomery to create an ordinance that explicitly allowed busking. "If we want a vibrant downtown like Atlanta, or New York, or New Orleans, or places like that, a busking scene is part of that," said McGough, of the art and music nonprofit The Hilltop Howlers. "There's lots of protections. It's not near your schools, it's not near churches. It cuts off at night."

The ordinance makes it legal and straightforward for buskers to register for a weekly or yearly permit (at \$7 and \$25 respectively) and then perform their talent for voluntary donations, be it strumming a guitar or typing poems on a typewriter, in permitted public spaces during certain times of the day.

Proactive engagement from the local creative community shaped a policy that supports and encourages artistic expression in public spaces. The policy is also a testament to the city's commitment to fostering a vibrant cultural scene and providing opportunities for artists to showcase their talents while enhancing the downtown experience for residents and visitors.

## Path to policy change in Pine Bluff

Allowing busking, especially at the Sixth and Main Plaza and the future Delta Rhythm and Blues Plaza, could foster a lively downtown atmosphere. If local artists and city officials work together, the change has the best chance of being effective for everyone involved. The following four steps should be considered:

1. Write a draft busking ordinance to propose to the city council. Start with ones that have already been written, like Montgomery's, and adjust it to meet the specific needs of Pine Bluff. Share this with city officials for feedback, adjust it, and see if an elected official would consider proposing it. Attending council meetings to explain why such an ordinance is necessary can help public-proposed changes like this to be taken more seriously.
2. Write a draft of busking exceptions to

existing ordinances and petition that they be changed as well. Several existing ordinances in Pine Bluff imply that activities like busking might be illegal. Thus, it could be helpful to add language along the lines of "This does not apply to permitted buskers or busking acting within the terms of the ordinance." to:

- *Code Chapter 18-2 Outdoor Solicitation Recommendations.* This chapter indicates that "solicitation" can only be performed in front of a business, and only for the services of that business, by someone who works there. In some cities, buskers coordinate with shop owners to draw attention and customers to their shops, so it could be beneficial for there to be a sanctioned method for doing so.
- *Code Chapter 18-12 d: Fairs, carnivals, and amusement parks." Activities conducted primarily for amusement or enter-*

*tainment and located within the county fairgrounds, the convention center complex, an established amusement park, or the city parks (when approved by the parks and recreation commission and when all required permits/licenses are obtained).*

Though there could be an existing channel for busking by applying for a park use permit through the Parks and Recreation Commission, since the commission meets only once a month and busking is often an impromptu action, carving out an exception for quickly-permitted busking into this chapter could increase opportunities for local music.

3. Ensure that these changes are enacted by politely but persistently asking for updates and to see if there is anything you can assist with to move them forward. When enacted, be sure to publicly thank officials who have championed the cause
4. Connect with local music, visual, written, and other arts organizations, to ask their members to consider purchasing a busking permit and performing once a month, to socialize this as an opportunity for artists and visitors in Pine Bluff.

Taking these steps would help foster a more vibrant downtown where business owners see possibilities and people of all ages have another reason to stay.



A busker playing the violin. ©Hilltop Howlers



Pine Bluff has a number of small parks, making it a natural place for busking. ©CORI

# Placemaking actions

## Passive activation

\$\$

Mid-Term



**Key partners:**

All local organizations that have a stake in downtown

### Background

Many organizations put on events in downtown Pine Bluff, with the UAPB homecoming parade being the largest, drawing crowds of alumni, current students, and community members every year. There are also regular events put on by “Pop up in the Bluff,” which is a community development initiative focused on revitalizing underutilized areas of Pine Bluff by illuminating their potential. At Lake Saracen, the “jazz on the lake” concert series draws people to the waterside to enjoy live music.

These events play an important role in drawing people to be outside together, and anyone putting them on is doing great work to revitalize Pine Bluff. Most of these are also large productions that take a lot of effort, and there’s only a short window of time for people to participate in them. For organizations looking to make a longer-lasting impact for a comparatively smaller effort, there are a variety of passive activities that can activate downtown spaces for longer stretches with little maintenance. The bench and murals around ArtsSPACE, and Grow Somethin LLC’s Community Garden are great examples



Banner showing the Sixth & Main Plaza plan. ©CORI

of how people in Pine Bluff are already enlivening space in passive, community-minded ways.

### LQC placemaking actions

“Passive participation” activities are excellent for enlivening downtown areas as they

require minimal maintenance and encourage engagement from passersby. For installation on public or public-facing private land, one will need to ask the city or landowner for permission, though it can be helpful to know who else wants to support your project first.





Objects for play invite people to use them. ©CORI

Here are some project ideas with hints on who to connect with:

- **Pocket Parks or Parklets:** Transforming underutilized spaces into small green areas with seating, plants, and possibly even mini-gardens can provide tranquil retreats for downtown visitors. Some property owners with underutilized space are willing to allow low-risk changes to be made by people in their community. Potential Site: City lot (see p. 29)
- **Chalkboard or Art Walls:** Installing chalkboards or designated walls where people can add drawings, messages, or graffiti art can create a dynamic and ever-changing canvas. Art groups may be willing to advocate for and guide such projects. Potential Site: ArtSPACE Alley
- **Outdoor Libraries/Book Exchange:** Setting up small bookshelves or kiosks where people can borrow, exchange, or

donate books fosters a sense of intellectual community and provides leisurely browsing opportunities. The Pine Bluff Library or a local school may be a helpful partner in this, and kiosks can be built or even remade from small pieces of furniture. Potential Site: City lot (see p. 29)

- **Public Musical Instruments:** Placing instruments like pianos, xylophones, or drums in public spaces invites spontaneous music-making and encourages social interaction among strangers. People behind the Pine Bluff Live Music Facebook page may have a lead on people who could donate or build simple instruments. Potential Site: Sixth and Main Plaza
- **Game Tables or Stations:** Providing tables with chess boards, checkers, or other board games encourages casual gaming and fosters socialization among players. Schools with gaming clubs may be good partners for such an installation. Potential Site: sidewalk near the Library
- **Community Gardens:** Involving residents in planting flowers, herbs, or vegetables in designated areas promotes environmental stewardship and beautifies the urban landscape. Grow Somethin LLC has successfully developed a community garden in Pine Bluff, and could provide advice on how others can approach ones downtown. Potential Site: Empty lot north of the Generator



A welcome sign doubles as a photo op. ©CORI



A garden space in downtown waiting for use. ©CORI



The library's backyard offers many possibilities. ©CORI

## Case study in passive activation: Gathering points at the Sixth and Main Plaza

The Sixth and Main Plaza development includes much open space for festivities, pop-up spaces for small businesses, and a food hall. Poised in the middle of many existing amenities, with new apartments set to be developed nearby and the UAPB Incubator within walking distance, the plaza could become the center of downtown life in Pine Bluff.

Yet the renderings of the space between Main Street and the food hall—the open plaza—don't illustrate the potential verve and camaraderie that good plazas foster. While it will have a mix of green spaces and tastefully-designed concrete ones, the current visual of the open plaza shows an open savannah with little refuge from the hot Arkansas sun.

Despite this, the open plaza is nearly set up for success. It's next to pedestrian-oriented retail spaces as well as buildings where a wide variety of people go, like schools and libraries. Nearby tall buildings allow for "eyes on the street": the natural surveillance of a public gathering space, which increases the perceived and actual safety of that space. With those key ingredients already present, all it needs are "gathering points" and some people to demonstrate their use.

Gathering points are small instances of infrastructure that draw people from the surrounding places.



Community gardens can allow people without space to grow plants a shared space to tend. ©iStock

They could be:

- Chairs that can be moved around
- benches under a shade structure
- River rocks for sitting on that evoke the Arkansas river bank
- A "Play Box" that has sidewalk chalk and other inexpensive, borrowable play items
- Anything else mentioned in the previous section about passive activation activities.

After a big infrastructure project is complete, it can be challenging for a city to find the money to address the finer points of public space activation like this. That's where lo-



Checker or Chess boards built into tables make it easy to share a game with a friend or a stranger. ©iStock

cal organizations can be especially helpful. Most people want to use public spaces, and seeding the space with reasons to gather can be helpful in places where the activity level has tended to be below average. If SEARK were to install an Art Piano and host student blues players, or if one of the yoga classes at ARTSpace were to be moved into the plaza, or if the Friendship Academy added a “Play Box” and held a classroom activity in the plaza once a week, the space would have more gathering points and more people primed

to use them.

Bold individuals can help, too. Using “gathering point” infrastructure or choosing an activity from the list on p.21 to populate the plaza themselves can help the space feel safe and welcoming. As previously mentioned, humans are social creatures, and we look to others for clues on what to do or where to go. It can feel awkward to sit by oneself, reading a book, in an otherwise empty plaza. But every person driving or

walking past will see you, and over time, some of them will join in with their own solo or group activations. With the addition of gathering points and the attention of organizations and individuals, the Sixth and Main Plaza, already poised for entrepreneurial success, will flourish.



*A little free library gives a neighborhood something to explore every day. ©iStock*



*Art pianos or other public music instruments draw a variety of people into public space to play and listen, and only need the occasional tune-up. ©iStock*

# Placemaking actions

## Reaching the unhoused

\$\$

Mid-Term

### Background

Homelessness has been a challenge in Pine Bluff for many years, as is the case for many cities. According to a recent article, there are approximately 152 individuals who are suffering from homelessness in the city.

For the past several years, the Salvation Army operated an emergency overnight shelter, though it closed in June 2024. In May, the city opened a day shelter to meet basic needs.

With these changes, unhoused folks in Pine Bluff may be more present downtown than they had been previously. While some individuals are using existing services and working to find permanent housing, others who have met significant challenges in receiving assistance may be more wary of accessing the available resources. For either group, placemaking tactics could build community while connecting people to key services.

### Example: Recharge station

In New York City's Times Square, a nonprofit called Fountainhouse and the design group Project for Public Spaces teamed up to build a kiosk where anyone could sit down, charge their electronics, have a free coffee, or en-



### Key partners:

The City of Pine Bluff, Opportunity House

gage in conversation with a social worker.

It's a location all can use, which is crucial for building trust for those who are wary or have felt let down by service systems.

As relationships are built, needs are shared. On a typical day, the kiosk may facilitate obtaining ID cards, Social Security cards, benefits, doctor's appointments, housing applications, and more.

### LQC idea: Recharge cart

This tactic could be helpful in public places that see a fair number of chronically unhoused folks AND are otherwise low in daily community interaction, such as Barraque Plaza. The Sixth and Main Plaza is another potential site for such a cart.

It would give a wide variety of community members a reason to be in the space while also serving as a low-stakes way to ask about connections to different services.

A coffee cart that begins by making an appearance for four hours once a week, staffed by a regular group of volunteers who know these services well, could test this idea.



Time Square Recharge Station ©Courtney D. Garvin



A Ferla Cart, which can be easily moved by one person

# Placemaking actions

## City lot

\$\$

Short Term

### Background

Among the new and restored buildings in Pine Bluff’s Innovation District are several neglected empty lots. One is a city-owned lot at 120 West 5th Ave: a former bank building with a Main Street-facing courtyard that has long been overgrown.

Though the site is just a short walk from the under-construction Sixth and Main Plaza, spending a small amount of money to improve this lot will go a long way toward uplifting the image of the whole district. After all, many thriving innovation districts have a variety of small public spaces (sometimes called “pocket parks”), each designed to meet different community members’ needs. Given this one’s close proximity to two entrepreneurial spaces, its revitalization could provide an oasis for ideators and business owners outside the office.

### LQC placemaking actions

People are more likely to feel welcome in and care for spaces that already look cared for. Thus, the first steps for this empty lot are to restore it with a basic level of care:

- Prune all healthy trees and bushes



**Key partners:** ECDD, PBCC, PBDD

- Remove/sweep out any dead plants
- Edge the lawn
- Powerwash all concrete surfaces
- Once this maintenance is complete, actions that bring vibrancy and creativity to the space can be explored:
- Replant barren spaces in partnership with a local gardening group
- Place art in the buildings’ windows
- Add a picnic table
- Install a shade structure/rain cover
- Install a “Little Free Library” or similar object that invites regular visits

Believing in this project, Pine Bluff Downtown Development has contributed \$2,200 to support this effort. This is being used to powerwash the surfaces and perform other maintenance tasks.



The empty lot in fall, 2023. ©CORI



Rendering of how the lot could look with “LQC” changes. ©CORI

# Placemaking actions

## Cleaning and greening

\$\$

Mid-Term



**Key partners:**

P&R, SD, Group Violence Intervention Program, PB Clean and Beautiful

### Background

In downtown Pine Bluff, there are dozens of empty lots where buildings once stood. Crumbling building cornerstones and old floor tiles with tufts of grass poking through make it clear that the space isn't even used for parking cars. Many are on or just a block away from Main Street, and contribute to the quiet of downtown—forgotten spaces attract few visitors.

However, some derelict spaces tend to accumulate garbage and even crime, and Pine

Bluff is by far from the only city that has more than they can quickly handle. Some cities, like Philadelphia, have seen these forlorn lots become neighborhood assets through “cleaning and greening”.

“Cleaning and greening” initiatives are about improving the physical environment by cleaning up blighted areas and creating green spaces. This approach has been shown to reduce violence and improve community well-being in a few ways:

- **Social Cohesion:** Green spaces and clean environments encourage community interactions and social cohesion. When people spend more time outdoors, they get to know their neighbors, which can lead to a stronger sense of community. Neighborhood clean-up projects can also give people something in common to talk about, which increases trust.
- **Mental Health:** Access to green spaces improves mental health and reduces stress, which can lower aggression and violent behavior.



Pine Bluff’s Clean and Beautiful Commission’s “Adopt a Spot” program encourages groups to care for various green spaces around the city.



Pine Bluff has many lots that once had buildings on them and now appear abandoned. ©CORI



*This empty lot in downtown is owned privately, but could be a candidate for “cleaning & greening.” ©CORI*

- **Economic Benefits:** Cleaning and greening can attract investment and economic development, providing jobs and improving the local economy, which can reduce crime associated with poverty.

“Clean & Green Philly” has seen such success in small initiatives that they’ve created a map guidebook for neighborhoods, indicating potential properties to “clean and green”, and explaining how to maintain them for shared benefit. Their work has been found to reduce gun violence in neighborhoods by 29%.

### LQC Placemaking Actions

Cleaning and greening works best when there are many local-to-a-lot people. Given that there are many empty downtown lots and fewer people living in or working downtown than there once historically were, the work of cleaning and greening in downtown

Pine Bluff will likely be slow.

That said, if it is undertaken in coordination with other crime-reduction initiatives, it could rally and motivate a wider array of the community than a simple beautification effort might:

1. Meet with the Pine Bluff Clean and Beautiful Commission to understand where they see the most opportunity, what challenges they’ve faced, and if their upcoming projects align with your goals
1. Connect with local garden groups to understand what low-maintenance native plants are best suited for sunny and shaded locations in Arkansas.
2. Share information from “Clean & Green Philly” with the Pine Bluff Police, Group Violence Intervention, MLK Commission, or other crime-concerned groups in Pine

Bluff and see if they would be supportive of such an initiative

3. Make a list of neglected lots that would make the largest difference in various Pine Bluff neighborhoods, including downtown. Use county mapping records to find out who owns each parcel and what permission may be needed to “clean” or “green” it. The website [OpenStreetMap.org](http://OpenStreetMap.org) could be a helpful base for this information, as it allows anyone to tag infrastructure or other land uses, including brownfields and greenfields.
4. With the support of a local non-profit, apply for grants or programs to support equipment or basic infrastructure purchases. For example, Trex offers a recycling program in which plastic bags are turned into benches for public spaces.
5. Coordinate “paired” efforts, in which neighbors “clean” a vacant lot in their neighborhood, and community members “green” a vacant lot in downtown, to build camaraderie between people and connection between places. For example, one pairing could be the lot between the Friendship Aspire Academy and the Pine Bluff Library (620 Main Street) and a lot owned by the school district across from the PBHS Academy, on the eastern corner of West 11th Ave and South Laurel Street.
6. Develop a maintenance plan in collaboration with neighbors or city officials

# Placemaking actions

## Innovator Streetscapes

\$\$\$

**Long-Term**



**Key partners:**

ArtSPACE, PBDD, The Generator, Jefferson County Historical Society

### Background

Though it has had more than its fair share of challenges in recent years, Pine Bluff has been a celebrated place of innovation throughout its history. As it was written in "African Americans of Pine Bluff and Jefferson County", "African Americans of Jefferson County, and particularly those of Pine Bluff, have innovated, endured, and achieved in breathtaking fashion" and "the area has been a virtual mecca attracting or producing African Americans who have achieved milestones in every imaginable field".

For the past few years, there has been hope that these inspiring innovators would be celebrated in public space in downtown Pine Bluff. In an April 26, 2018 article in the Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette about the initial Pine Bluff Plaza development (prior to it being redeveloped as Sixth and Main Plaza), it was noted that "there are plans to dedicate the plaza to entrepreneurs that have contributed to the city, and names are being accepted." Lori Walker, assistant director of the Pine Bluff Department of Economic and Community Development, was quoted in the article saying "We want to inspire the new



*The improvements to Pine Bluff's downtown make it look like a friendly place; adding reasons for people to stop, such as history-related sculptures, could draw more interest to these sidewalks, ©CORI*

entrepreneurs of the city by making them aware of Pine Bluff's rich legacy."

With so much development happening downtown, there is again the opportunity to celebrate the likes of Wiley Jones, Ferdinand

Havis, and Dorothy M. Hoover.

### LQC placemaking actions

To build public support for this kind of project in a way that cultivates inspiration for



budding entrepreneurs in the city, we first recommend creating a “living history scavenger hunt”. Such an event would provide individuals with a passion for history or acting the opportunity to take on the persona of a famous Pine Bluff resident.

Depending on the weather, they could be stationed indoors or outdoors at locations around the Innovation District, and throughout the afternoon or evening, families could approach them to learn more about who they were and how they changed Pine Bluff or the world. Once they’ve learned about that particular innovator, they’d receive a clue for how to find the next one.

For example, if an actor playing Wiley Jones were at the Library, the clue to find him might be:

*To find the next spot where history thrives,  
Take an invisible streetcar to where words  
come alive.*

*A man who used iron to forge laughter  
and cheer,*

*His legacy waits where the books are  
near.*

The event might end at the Generator or another place where participants could “invent” something using craft materials. This kind of event could build connections between different locations around the district, encourage walkability downtown, and help those most excited about seeing innovators celebrated in a more permanent way to see

who and what about them is most impactful to the wider community.

### Long-term action

Once this has been tested for a year or two, there may be enough community excitement over local innovators to propose a more permanent ode to Pine Bluff’s innovators. One way this could be done would be to commission local sculptors to create medium-sized art pieces representing each innovator and their most well-known innovation, in a way

that could be placed on sidewalks or other public spaces without interfering with the flow of people, around the innovation district. Paired with a pamphlet or even a spoken history walking tour accessible online, visitors or school groups could then learn about innovators as they tour downtown. And of course, the “living history scavenger hunt” could still take place alongside the sculptures once a year.



Wiley Jones ©Se Arkansas Arts & Science Center Archives

## Famous innovators of Pine Bluff

### Wiley Jones (1848-1904)

One of the most successful African-American businessmen in the South during the late 19th century. He was a pioneering African-American businessman in Pine Bluff, owning one of the first African-American-operated streetcar lines in the U.S. and providing recreational facilities for the African-American community through his ownership of Jones Park.

### Ferdinand Havis (1846-1932)

An African-American entrepreneur and community leader during the late 19th and early 20th centuries

He was a successful African-American entrepreneur and real estate developer in Pine Bluff, known for his significant property holdings, ownership of the Havis Hotel, and philanthropic support for local schools and churches.

### Freeman Owens (1890-1979)

Owens was a pioneering inventor in the film industry. He created significant advancements such as slow-motion photography and contributed to the development of sound-on-film technology with Phonofilm. Owens worked with notable figures like Charlie Chaplin and filmed historical events, including Babe Ruth's home runs and World War I battles. His inventions

also extended to panoramic photography and plastic lenses that are still used today. Owens' work left a lasting impact on cinematic technology and media measurement.

### Joseph Bocage (1819-1898)

Bocage held numerous roles, including attorney, judge, planter, and mayor. Bocage patented an improvement to the Jack Screw Press for cotton ginning and manufactured the Wood Reversible Oscillating Steam Engine. His efforts in rebuilding Pine Bluff after the Civil War left a lasting impact on the community's industrial landscape.

### J H Beckwith (1870- unknown)

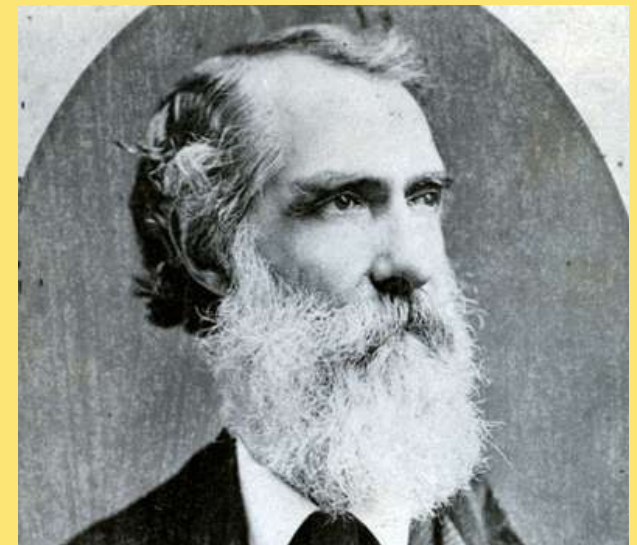
Renowned as the best African American journeyman carpenter between Monroe, Louisiana, and Little Rock, Arkansas, Beckwith achieved significant success in his trade. He held two United States patents: one for a brick mold capable of holding ten bricks used to make concrete bricks, and another for a sliding door. His inventive contributions reflect his expertise and impact on construction and carpentry.

### Harvey Couch (1877-1841)

He founded the Arkansas Power and Light Company, bringing electricity to rural areas and fostering economic growth. Additionally, he established the Arkan-



Freeman Owens ©Explore Pinebluff



Joseph Bocage ©Encyclopedia of Arkansas

sas-Louisiana Gas Company, ensuring reliable natural gas supply. His vision extended to transportation, where he played a key role in developing railway systems in the Southern United States.

### **Samuel Kountz (1930-1981)**

An Arkansas native schooled at what is now known as UAPB, he was a pioneering transplant surgeon known for his groundbreaking work in kidney transplantation. He performed the first successful kidney transplant between non-identical twins in 1961 and revolutionized transplant medicine. Kountz's contributions significantly advanced the field, making organ transplants from unrelated donors routine.

### **Dorothy M. Hoover (1918-2000)**

A Pine Bluff native, she was a pioneering mathematician and physicist whose work significantly impacted aeronautics and space research. As one of the first black women to be published by NASA, she co-authored research on swept-back tapered wings, essential for the development of the U.S. jet fighter, Sabre. Her contributions helped advance supersonic flight technology.

### **Raye Montague (1935-2018)**

A Pine Bluff native, she was a pioneering naval engineer known for her groundbreaking work in computer-aided design. She became the first person to draft a U.S. Navy ship design using a computer,

significantly reducing the time required for ship design from years to mere hours.

### **Ben Pearson (1898-1971)**

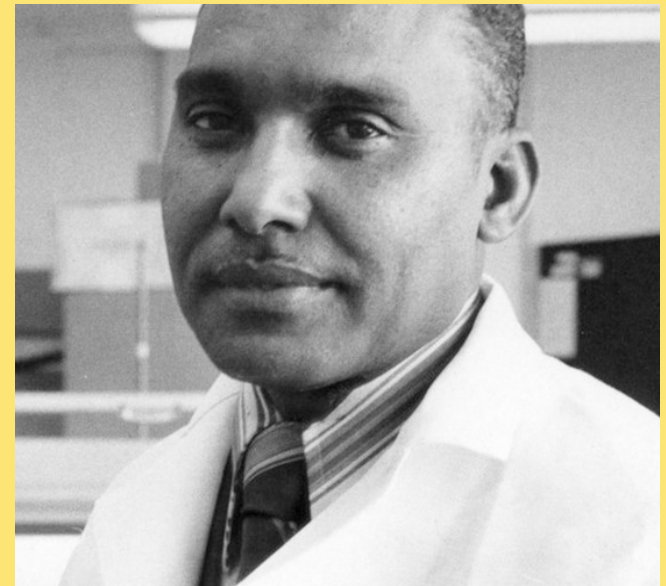
A Pine Bluff native, he was a pioneering figure in the archery industry. He founded the first company in the U.S. to mass-produce archery sets and equipment, making the sport more accessible. Pearson's innovations and high-quality craftsmanship earned him a place in the Archery Hall of Fame. By the 1960s, his company was producing thousands of bows and arrows daily, revolutionizing archery with affordable yet high-end equipment.

### **John Rust (1892-1954)**

He revolutionized agriculture with his mechanical cotton picker. His design, which used smooth, moist spindles to pick cotton, greatly increased efficiency compared to hand-picking. Rust and his brother Mack patented 47 designs. Despite financial struggles, Rust's perseverance led to collaboration with companies like Allis-Chalmers and Ben Pearson Company. Rust's invention transformed cotton harvesting, reducing labor demands and altering the Southern economy.

### **Other notable inventors throughout Pine Bluff's history include:**

- Theodis C. Davis
- Emmanuel Moore



Samuel Kountz ©Same Passage



Dorothy M. Hoover ©Explore Pinebluff

## Other actions

### Demystifying licensing

\$\$

Short Term

#### Background

In Pine Bluff, a lot of people have been in business, but aren't "in business" according to Angelisa Henry, Interim Executive Director at the UAPB Incubator. This means that a lot of people are working on their own business—in food, in products, in services—but they haven't completed all of the steps to legally be in business with the city of Pine Bluff or the state of Arkansas.

In Pine Bluff, one of the reasons for this is the multi-step process that is business licensing. The paperwork isn't available online and requires multiple visits to City Hall to complete. If one has a physical location, zoning compliance further complicates the process.

Simplifying business licensing procedures is crucial for fostering economic growth, promoting downtown vibrancy, and enhancing the overall quality of a place. Here is how a straightforward licensing procedure can positively impact downtown innovation and business:

- **Lower Barriers to Entry:** Simple and straightforward licensing procedures reduce the administrative burden on en-



**Key partners:** PBCC, The City of Pine Bluff, UAPBI

trepreneurs, making it easier for them to start new businesses.

- **Increased Business Activity:** Businesses with licenses can apply for loans or attract investors, increasing opportunities for them to grow, employ more people, and rent or renovate downtown spaces. This results in a more diverse and dynamic commercial landscape, attracting more visitors and consumers.
- **Enhanced Livability:** A vibrant downtown with a variety of shops, restaurants, and services creates a lively and engaging atmosphere, improving the overall consumer experience and increasing foot traffic. In turn, a thriving business environment often leads to better-maintained properties and public spaces, as businesses invest in their surroundings to attract customers. All of this enhances social cohesion and trust between neighbors.



Having a retail location like this coffee shop means working through the licensing process. ©CORI



Many buildings in downtown stand empty. ©CORI

## Other actions

To foster the downtown vibrancy that comes with additional business activity, we recommend the following user-centered approach be taken to updating the business license application process:

1. Learn more about the pain points of the business licensing process from the Chamber, UAPB Incubator, and local small business owners
2. Learn about the internal processing of business licenses from employees and officials at City Hall, to understand why the process is multi-step and what unmet needs they might have
3. Develop options for simplifying the process and present them to the employees and officials
4. Train city employees on the new process
5. Update the business license application form to reflect these changes and add it to the city website as a fillable document
6. Update the business licensing web page with an accurate flow chart and other key

information about the business formation process

7. Design and print pamphlets about the new process, and deliver them to the local Chamber, UAPB Incubator, the Generator, and any other places where small business owners who are presently unlicensed are likely to see them

Straightforward business licensing procedures are essential for promoting economic growth, enhancing downtown vibrancy, and improving the overall quality of rural micropolitan areas. Simplified processes lower barriers to entry, attract investment, and foster a lively and diverse commercial environment, which collectively contribute to a more vibrant and thriving community.



*When faced with a convoluted licensing process, many entrepreneurs forgo licensing. ©iStock*

# Other actions

## Decreasing gun violence

\$\$\$

**Long-Term**



**Key partners:** Pine Bluff Police Department, Group Violence Intervention Program

### Background

In 2023, Pine Bluff was found to be the least safe small city of the 660 communities with 30,000 to 100,000 residents studied<sup>1</sup>. While all of the placemaking actions mentioned in this plan will contribute to a more resilient Pine Bluff, and can even help at-risk young people turn away from violence and turn toward projects that make them a vital part of their community, they alone are not enough to solve the complex challenges that contribute to disproportionately high levels

of property and violent crime.

Targeted programs that are proven to reduce violence should continue to be funded and implemented, or young people will keep losing their lives and people will keep moving away from Pine Bluff out of fear. Fortunately, many people in Pine Bluff are not only working on this issue, but have begun working together on it. Judge Earnest Brown said in September 2023, "It's not the court's responsibility, it's not law enforcement. it's not the mayor's. It's all of us together, saying that we

want Pine Bluff to be a safe city."

### Other actions

Organizations across the city have implemented a multifaceted approach that combines community engagement, law enforcement initiatives, and support for proven programs like Gun Violence Intervention (GVI). By fostering partnerships between law

*Speakers from a Group Violence Intervention Program affiliate in Philadelphia spoke in Pine Bluff in August of 2023 about the effects of GVI programs on crime reduction. ©Pine Bluff Commercial*



Pine Bluff Innovation District Placemaking Plan



Center on Rural Innovation

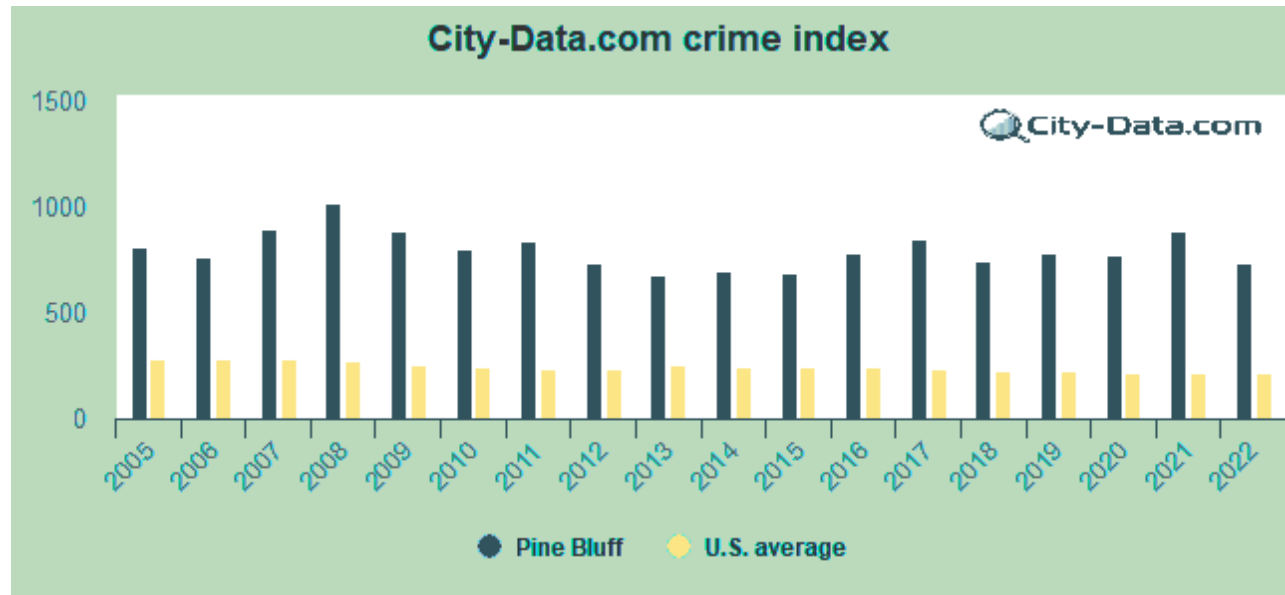
enforcement, community leaders, and social service organizations, Pine Bluff is working to create a comprehensive support network for at-risk youth.

“We send them a letter, let them know that we’re not going to tolerate violence, and then I’m the credible messenger that gives the warning, and then after me comes to law enforcement,” said Kevin Crumpton, Director of Group Violence Intervention.

Through GVI and similar programs, which prioritize intervention, prevention, and rehabilitation, the city aims to disrupt cycles of violence and provide pathways towards education, employment, and positive community engagement.

Sustaining and expanding these efforts will help Pine Bluff become a safer place for everyone. When residents and stakeholders support this approach, they can become part of the solution, connecting people in need to services that can get them out of the cycle of violence. And if rehabilitation efforts can include placemaking projects, such as “Cleaning and greening (p. 30)”, at-risk individuals may more quickly see the value in engaging differently in their neighborhoods.

**“Social services cannot [reduce violence] alone. Community members cannot fight that battle alone...nor do I think police can. I think that we’ve got to work together.”**  
**-Reygan Harmon,**  
**Ceasefire Program Director,**  
**Oakland Police Department**



For a long time, Pine Bluff’s crime incident rate per 100,000 people has been higher than average. ©City-Data.com

## Now What?

There are many ideas and potential paths forward outlined in this plan- too many for any one administration, planning organization, or highly motivated civic group with too many things on their plate to tackle.

You may feel somewhat overwhelmed, but hopefully you also feel informed about your own community in new ways, inspired about future possibilities, and excited to ask more questions to the experts of various spaces.

### Big changes- for momentum builders

Quite of few of these projects have already been tested or are in the works. To have the best chance of making serious progress on big projects, it can be helpful to join projects that already have buy-in from civic groups.

The following ideas have the greatest opportunity for making large changes fast:

- Passive activation p. 24
- Cleaning and greening p. 30
- Decreasing gun violence p. 38

### Medium experiments- for the inspired

If a given placemaking action has lit a fire under you, the best place to start is there. Talk to the “Key Partners” listed on that page about the idea, go back to p. 18 and walk

through the “Placemaking Best Practices”, to ensure that the suggested course of action is still accurate.

Practicing placemaking can seem daunting at first, because, like a science experiment, there’s always the chance that it won’t go as expected. Thus, if you’re able to overcome some initial hesitancy with a can-do attitude, the following experiments would tell you a lot about how to make a meaningful difference for a lot of people.

- Downtown liveliness p. 22
- Demystifying licensing p. 36

### Small wins- for the already too busy

In a world where ribbon cuttings on million dollar projects are often the dream, it can be challenging to choose purposefully small actions. For those juggling full-time jobs and families though, that might be the best way to make a difference in your community right now.

Remember that even walking around town, picking up a piece of trash, or talking to someone new contributes to a higher quality place. The following actions could be a good place to find inspiration for quick, everyday actions:

- Take it outside p. 21
- City lot p. 29



ArtSPACE side alley. ©CORI



The Generator. ©CORI





## Grants and other resources guide

Name	Details	Website	Applicable Projects
AARP Community Challenge	This grant provides \$500-\$50,000 to fund quick-action projects that can help communities become more livable for people of all ages, though some opportunities are age-specific.	aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge	Passive activation (p. 24) or Cleaning and greening (p. 30)
Arkansas Outdoor Recreation Grants Program	This grant provides up to \$250,000 towards the development of outdoor recreation facilities and land acquisition, and requires a 50% match.	adpht.arkansas.gov/office-of-outdoor-recreation/arkansas-outdoor-grants	Passive activation (p. 24) or Cleaning and greening (p. 30)
Capital Magnet Fund	The CMF Program offers competitively awarded grants to CDFIs and nonprofit affordable housing organizations to finance affordable housing solutions and community revitalization efforts that benefit individuals and families with low-incomes and low-income communities nationwide.	cdfifund.gov/programs-training/programs/cmf	This is something that Community Development Financial Institutions can apply for build their capacity to assist with local projects.
CDFI Program	The CDFI Program uses monetary awards and training opportunities to invest in and build the capacity of CDFIs, empowering them to grow, achieve organizational sustainability, and drive community revitalization.	cdfifund.gov/programs-training/programs/cdfi-program	This is something that Community Development Financial Institutions can apply for build their capacity to assist with local projects.
Challenge America	Challenge America offers support primarily to small organizations for projects in all artistic disciplines that extend the reach of the arts to groups/communities with rich and dynamic artistic and cultural contributions to share that are underserved.	arts.gov/grants/challenge-america	Any projects that involve ArtSPACE, such as Downtown Liveliness (p. 22)
Community Arts Projects-Arkansas Arts Council	The proposed Project must involve either the creation of an open community arts project or event or show an expansion of an existing project reaching an underserved community. Up to \$10,000 with a 1:1 match.	arkansasheritage.com/arkansas-art-council/about/aac-grants	Any projects that involve ArtSPACE, such as Downtown Liveliness (p. 22)

Community Change Grant	This funding is available to support community-driven projects that build capacity for communities to tackle environmental and climate justice challenges, strengthen their climate resilience, and advance clean energy.	<a href="https://epa.gov/inflation-reduction-act/inflation-reduction-act-community-change-grants-program">epa.gov/inflation-reduction-act/inflation-reduction-act-community-change-grants-program</a>	Parks- related projects, including Passive activation (p. 24) and Cleaning and greening (p. 30)
Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program	This program provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas.	<a href="https://rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program">rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program</a>	Reaching the unhoused (p. 28)
Garden Grants- Farm Bureau of Arkansas	Up to \$500 can be awarded to school-adjacent gardens where students can learn about how to grow food.	<a href="https://arfb.com/pages/education/garden-grants/">arfb.com/pages/education/garden-grants/</a>	Passive activation (p. 24)
Grants for Art Projects	This NEA program provides expansive funding opportunities to strengthen the nation's arts and cultural ecosystem. Grants are available for arts projects in a wide variety of artistic disciplines.	<a href="https://arts.gov/grants/grants-for-arts-projects">arts.gov/grants/grants-for-arts-projects</a>	Any projects that involve ArtSPACE, such as Downtown liveliness (p. 22)
HUD Home Investment Partnerships Program	This provides funding in partnership with local nonprofits for building, buying, and/or rehabilitating affordable housing for rent or homeownership or providing direct rental assistance to low-income people.	<a href="https://hud.gov/program_of_offices/comm_planning/home">hud.gov/program_of_offices/comm_planning/home</a>	While not noted in this plan due to the longer timeline of housing challenges, this is a helpful resource for those focusing on housing
NAR Placemaking Grants	The National Association of Realtors grants up to \$7,500 for temporary projects that create new, outdoor public spaces in a community on unused or underused sites. A member of a REALTOR® association must be involved.	<a href="https://realtorparty.realtor/community-outreach/placemaking">realtorparty.realtor/community-outreach/placemaking</a>	Any project that has "LQC Placemaking Actions" as a sub-heading.

## Grants and other resources guide

Name	Details	Website	Applicable Projects
Nation Endowment for the Arts: Our Town	The program supports activities that integrate arts, culture, and design into local efforts that strengthen communities over the long term. They require a partnership component, and grants range from \$25,000 to \$150,000; match needed.	<a href="https://arts.gov/grants/our-town">arts.gov/grants/our-town</a>	Downtown liveliness (p. 22), Passive activation (p. 24), Reaching the unhoused (p. 28), City lot (p. 29), Cleaning & greening (p. 30), and Innovator streetscapes (p. 32)
New Market Tax Credit	The NMTC Program incentivizes community development and economic growth through the use of tax credits that attract private investment to distressed communities.	<a href="https://cdfifund.gov/programs-training/programs/new-markets-tax-credit">cdfifund.gov/programs-training/programs/new-markets-tax-credit</a>	This is something that Community Development Financial Institutions can apply for build their capacity to assist with local projects.
Public Works Program	The EDA's Public Works program helps distressed communities revitalize, expand, and upgrade their physical infrastructure. This program enables communities to attract new industry; encourage business expansion; diversify local economies.	<a href="https://eda.gov/funding/programs/public-works">eda.gov/funding/programs/public-works</a>	Any brownfield sites in downtown
Recreation Economy for Rural Communities	This planning assistance program helps communities identify strategies to grow their outdoor recreation economy and revitalize their main streets.	<a href="https://epa.gov/smartgrowth/recreation-economy-rural-communities">epa.gov/smartgrowth/recreation-economy-rural-communities</a> #Background	Any projects that involve parks or other outdoor areas.

## Grants and other resources guide

Name	Details	Website	Applicable Projects
USDA Multi family housing programs	These assist rural property owners through loans, loan guarantees, and grants that enable owners to develop and rehabilitate properties for low-income, elderly, and disabled individuals and families as well as domestic farm laborers.	<a href="https://rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/multi-family-housing-programs">rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/multi-family-housing-programs</a>	While not noted in this plan due to the longer timeline of housing challenges, this is a helpful resource for those focusing on housing
USDA Single Family Housing Programs	These offer qualifying individuals and families the opportunity to purchase or build a new single family home with no money down, to repair their existing home, or to refinance their current mortgage under certain qualifying circumstances	<a href="https://rd.usda.gov/programs-services/single-family-housing-programs">rd.usda.gov/programs-services/single-family-housing-programs</a>	While not noted in this plan due to the longer timeline of housing challenges, this is a helpful resource for those focusing on housing

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2023/aug/13/pb-ranks-as-the-least-safe-us-small-city/>

## Documents References

**The following plans and policies informed the development of this Innovation District Placemaking Plan. This plan builds upon these plans and does not replace them.**

- City of Pine Bluff Comprehensive Plan 2022
- 6th Ave District- Schematic Update
- Go Forward Pine Bluff Plan
- Re-Live Downtown Pine Bluff Plan



