

MISSOURI

Feels like Home

While speaking at the annual Missouri Community Betterment (MCB) Conference in Oct. 2013, Mike Downing, director of the Missouri Department of Economic Development (MoDED), offered to organize a team of resource providers to visit, assess and provide written recommendations and resource opportunities to the first five communities that sent him an email expressing an interest. Before Downing could even walk off the stage, he received emails from six rural MCB communities eager to participate! Due to those initial emails being received in a near tie, all six communities were selected to participate in the first year of what would become known as the Missouri Feels Like Home Tour (FLHT), a partnership between the MoDED and MCB.

When it came time to organize the “travel team” of partner organizations, the list of those willing and eager to help included: USDA Rural Development, MU Extension, Missouri Division of Tourism, Missouri Municipal League, local Workforce Investment Boards, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Council of Governments, utility providers and many more.

Over the three years this program has run, a consistent comment from all partner agencies has been the benefit of having a better, clearer understanding of the prominent issues facing our rural communities. These



More than a dozen rural communities across Missouri have offered a warm welcome to the Missouri Department of Economic Development, Missouri Community Betterment and partnering agencies for Feels Like Home Tours.

visits have allowed the assessment team to see and hear first-hand some of the roadblocks, struggles and needs of rural communities, and utilize that information to help develop new and innovative approaches for assisting them.

MCB Communities interested in participating in a FLHT were asked to complete a short application where they identified key issues to discuss and any actions taken regarding these issues. Once notified of acceptance into the program, the community point person was then tasked locally with organizing individuals and organizations to provide a detailed summary of the identified issues and current strategies. This practice of bringing together individuals and groups within a

community that may not have been collaborating in the past to work together towards a common goal proved to be a tremendous initial benefit to the process.

Visits begin with a familiarization bus tour of the community to provide a visual for the discussions that will take place throughout the day. To better understand the community and the struggles they are facing, local groups also make presentations to the assessment team, providing an overview of community needs, issues, barriers to growth, as well as any actions taken to address these issues. These local groups include local government officials (city/county), chambers of commerce and business organizations, education providers, business leaders and local youth groups. The goal is for the assessment team to have a clear impression

of the needs within the community so that they can utilize their expertise and resources to assist the community in overcoming some of these obstacles.

Once the issues and needs are described in detail, the assessment team provides an abbreviated summary of initial thoughts and recommendations. Later, a final written summary of recommendations is provided back to the community that includes an overview of the needs discussed, links to available resources, direct contacts for specific program information and recommendations for community strategies based on successful strategies/initiatives currently utilized in other communities faced with similar challenges.

Of the 16 communities that have participated in the FLHT, the most evident and common trait seen throughout these communities is the abundance of community pride. These communities have struggles, many have seen a decline in jobs, revenue and population, but they have not given up. Instead, they are rolling up their sleeves and getting to work – they are demonstrating a can-do attitude! This drive and determination, that has historically defined rural citizens and communities, is vital to their own sustainability and growth. Economies across the country have changed and will continue to change. Those regions and communities that are succeeding are the ones that continue to evolve. The days of low-skilled manufacturing companies locating new facilities across rural landscape have slowed to a near stop. An evolving agriculture industry has seen its share of ups and downs, but continues to remain a key industry in rural America. So, what does a rural community do in today’s global environment? They must instigate and implement change.

At their core, rural communities tend to struggle with many of the same issues, yet there is not a one-size-fits-all answer. Communities must look at both their local and regional assets to understand where potential opportunities may exist. Factors such as geographic location, existing industries, population, broadband capacity, educational institutions, workforce skill levels, natural amenities, and proximity to all those listed, help shape a community’s identity and provide the building blocks for long-term sustainability and growth.

MoDED continues to engage with rural communities across the state and work with the many fantastic resource providers to make sure we are all deploying the tools necessary to help communities help themselves. The city of Pleasant Hill responded to their 2015 Feels Like Home Tour assessment with these words:

“Since the event, we have made substantial progress following up on a number of the recommendations. For example, working in partnership with two of the Team members, we are actively pursuing certified site status for our industrial site that was one of the key recommendations contained in the final report. Meanwhile, the downtown marketing and promotions committee are developing an ad campaign using



some of the resources provided by team members from the MO Division of Tourism. These two examples serve to illustrate that we not only received specific and practical recommendations from this process, but also valuable contacts with potential partners serving on the tour team. If called upon to describe the benefits to Pleasant Hill from our participation in the Feels Like

Home Tour, one might expect a list of the many valuable recommendations made by the team in the final report. However, the community would have benefited greatly from the process even if there hadn't been a final report at the end." □

Learn more about how the Missouri Department of Economic Development can assist cities at www.ded.mo.gov.



(left) Community partners come together in West Plains to discuss key economic development issues at its Feels Like Home Tour.

(below) Community leaders at the Salem Feels Like Home Tour discussed how to make the most of nearby tourist traffic at the new Echo Bluff State Park, which opened July 30, 2016.

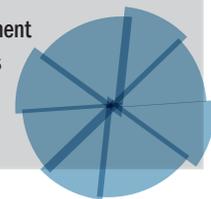
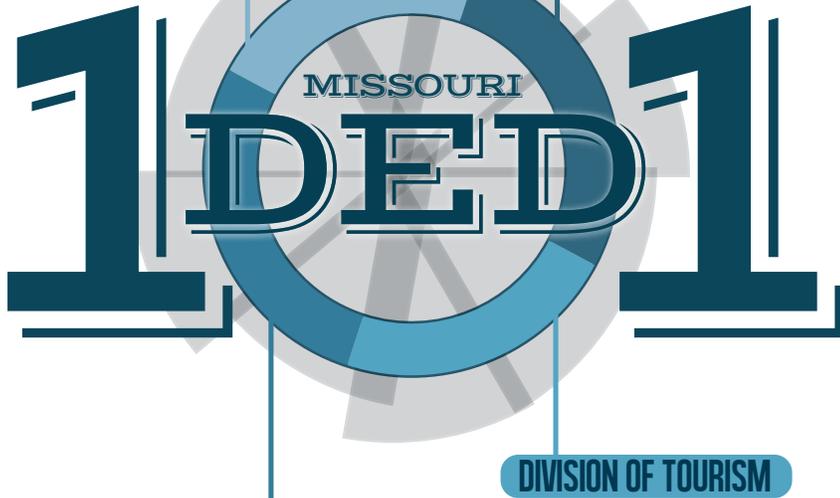


DIVISION OF ENERGY

DIVISION OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

THE MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (DED)

is divided into four development related divisions: Business and Community Services, Division of Energy, Division of Workforce Development and Division of Tourism. The department also includes several councils and commissions that contribute to the objectives of economic development including: Missouri Technology Corporation, Office of the Public Counsel, Public Service Commission, Missouri Arts Council, Missouri Housing Development Commission, Missouri Development Finance Board, Missouri Women's Council, Missouri Military Preparedness and Enhancement Commission, Small Business Regulatory Fairness Board, and Missouri Film Office.



DIVISION OF TOURISM

BUSINESS & COMMUNITY SERVICES (BCS)

Existing Business Retention and Expansion, and Community Development

BCS serves as a partner in the economic development professional community to facilitate the expansion of existing business in the state; to facilitate the location of new business to the State; and to facilitate the startup of new business in the state. The division also serves as a partner with local governments, non-profits, community organizations, and private citizens to help develop and grow Missouri's communities. The services provided by BCS include professional technical assistance and project management; training; research; financial assistance; and program compliance. DED contracts with the Missouri Partnership to promote Missouri to out-of-state businesses.

BUSINESS PROGRAMS

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

