

Alton, MO

Alton, MO (population 870) is a small community with big plans to put the culture of the Ozarks at the heart of its economic development. The Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-Op in downtown Alton is already showcasing the craft, foods, and heritage of the Ozarks. Now the town has plans to expand those efforts to also promote local food production and fruit farming as well as create a kitchen incubator, artisans' workspace and small retail outlet for locally produced products.

A 2014 Citizen's Institute on Rural Design workshop from USDA and the National Endowment for the Arts identified an available site on the town square as a perfect spot for this next stage. It also identified a significant gap between this vision and the public and private investment needed to achieve it. Alton leaders displayed a keen awareness that others in the region might have parallel visions that if harnessed, could support and fund the type of economic and cultural development that could lift and sustain the region in the coming years. And so in 2016, Alton requested and was awarded a technical assistance workshop from USDA Rural Development and Smart Growth America, and invited the towns of West Plains, Gainesville, and Doniphan, MO to join as well.

Together, Alton and its partners are working to support each town's vision and bring life back to their village centers. They share a commitment to creating a more formal structure for planning, funding, and implementation, supported by a focused regional co-ordination.

In July 2016, leaders from Alton, West Plains, Gainesville, and Doniphan came together with USDA and Smart Growth America for a two-day workshop on land use planning for the city's economic and fiscal health. The first day of the workshop began with a tour of downtown Alton and a public presentation at the Community Worship Center of Alton on the fiscal and economic impacts of different development patterns of small towns and rural places. The participants strongly agreed that the Ozark region boasts many of the components necessary to taking advantage of changes in demographic and economic development trends, but that regional planning had yet to leverage these assets. There was a shared commitment to create a more formal structure for planning, funding and implementation, supported by a focused regional coordination. Participants identified the following actions needed to make each of their plans more successful, the obstacles in place, and the additional opportunities implementation would create:

Actions for success:

- An Ozark Region Cultural Initiative is created
- Regional assets are clearly understood and broadly supported
- Planning is more broadly coordinated within the defined region
- Local elected leaders are informed and committed to the shared vision
- Existing advocates are recognized and empowered
- Ozark culture, assets and communities are widely known and appreciated as a national asset
- Jobs to create greater wealth and reduce poverty can be found in "cool" towns within the Ozarks
- Ozark children choose to be a part of the Ozark future
- Full broadband access across the region

Obstacles:

- Local leaders have not demonstrated personal and political commitment
- Ozark youth leaving the region
- Natural assets abound but poorly leveraged
- Lack of coordinated planning
- Projects developed in “silos” and not cross leveraged with others
- Lack of funding to complete envisioned projects
- Poor transportation connectivity within communities and across the region
- Poorly maintained public assets

Opportunities:

- Rich story of the Ozarks unknown to the larger nation
- Opening to leverage the draw of the Eleven Point River
- Courageous advocates
- Imaginative entrepreneurs
- Distinct culture—music, crafts, cuisine
- Intact village centers
- West Plains’ economic development and manufacturing efforts
- Natural beauty centered on the Eleven Point River and Mark Twain National Forest

Targets for near term success:

- Define a larger region than the four towns represented
- Formal structure to guide the region
- Map assets
- Share funding strategies
- Create letters of support for efforts
- Engage local elected and business leaders
- Assign tasks and responsibilities

After two days of hearing goals from Alton’s leaders, and sharing ideas from other communities across the country, USDA and Smart Growth America recommended seven actionable steps for the communities to take:

1. Create an Ozark Regional Culture Initiative
2. Map the diverse resources and efforts of the Ozark region
3. Define and tell a shared story of the Ozark region
4. Create the organizational structure to plan as a cohesive region
5. Develop a capital improvement planning process for the region
6. Start with what you can control
7. Employ walkability and connectivity as an economic development strategy