



**Comprehensive Economic Development
Strategy
2025-2030**

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:	4
OVERVIEW:	5
SUMMARY BACKGROUND AND REGIONAL PROFILE:	6
Regional Profile/Counties	6
1. Crawford County, Arkansas	6
2. Franklin County, Arkansas	7
3. Logan County, Arkansas.....	7
4. Polk County, Arkansas	7
5. Scott County, Arkansas.....	7
6. Sebastian County, Arkansas	7
Populations and People	8
Income and Poverty	8
Educational Attainment and Enrollment Breakdown	9
Employment	9
Housing	10
Health and Disability	10
Families and Living Arrangements	11
Race and Ethnicity	12
GROWTH:	13
New Facilities and Expansions of Note	13
Western Arkansas as a Transportation Hub	15
Airforce Mission	16
Education	17
Agriculture	19
Quality of Life and Tourism.....	20
Manufacturing	22
History	23
DECLINE:	24
Business Closures.....	24

Natural Disasters	24
Drops in population	25
WORKFORCE OVERVIEW:	26
Largest Occupations in Western Arkansas, Ranked by Estimated Employment....	26
Largest Occupations in Western Arkansas, Ranked by Average Wage.....	27
Fastest Growing Occupations in Western Arkansas. Long Term	28
Projected Growth Occupations in Western Arkansas, Long Term	29
Largest Industries in Western Arkansas (Ranked by Base Year Employment)	30
Fastest Growth Industries in Western Arkansas, Long Term	31
Projected Growth Industries in Western Arkansas, Long Term	32
Unemployment Numbers, April 2025	33
List of Statewide Targeted Businesses	33
SWOT ANALYSIS:	34
Strengths	34
Weaknesses	35
Opportunities	36
Threats.....	38
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES/ACTION PLAN:.....	40
Vision and Goals.....	40
Goal 1: Preserve natural resources and expand opportunities for recreation....	40
Goal 2: Enhance workforce readiness.....	41
Goal 3: Promote regional collaboration	42
Goal 4: Support business development opportunities	42
Goal 5: Enhance quality of life and amenities.....	43
Goal 6: Infrastructure	44
EVALUATION FRAMEWORK, MEASURES/INDICATORS:	47
ECONOMIC RESILIENCE:	48
MAPS:.....	50
LIST OF AWARDS/GRANTS ACHIEVED 2021-2024:	52
COMMITTEE MAKEUP:	55

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

For almost sixty years, Western Arkansas Planning & Development District (WAPDD) has assisted communities with planning and the implementation of strategic priorities that improve upon the economic prosperity of the Western Arkansas region. Since 1966, WAPDD has had the mission of fostering the community and economic growth of Crawford, Franklin, Logan, Polk, Scott, and Sebastian Counties of Arkansas. WAPDD serves as the central catalyst for community-centered economic development that links counties, cities, and businesses with state, federal, and private resources to promote growth.

This Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) sets the foundation and groundwork for future collaboration and implementation of regional strategic priorities.

Feedback received from all six counties of Western Arkansas has informed the strategic direction for the region to undertake over the next five years.

While a review of socioeconomic conditions in the region shows vulnerabilities, numerous opportunities are available to support the economic growth of Western Arkansas. This document will identify and expand six goals with accompanying strategic approaches and priority actions. These goals include infrastructure and movement, regional collaboration, business development, workforce readiness, preservation of natural resources, and overall quality of life.

The strategic approaches and priority actions identified in the CEDS provide WAPDD and economic development partners and organizations with a roadmap for future economic improvement and success. While WAPDD will be the driver of these recommendations, the region as a whole will help to inform the implementation of plans and will continue to monitor economic conditions.

OVERVIEW:

Since the inception of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) has been established as the primary federal agency for economic development. A key provision of this act was the authorization of planning grants for states. This laid the groundwork for the designation of multi-county regional economic organizations and Economic Development Districts (EDDs). In 1969, the EDA formally established the districts as the bodies that would receive partnership planning grants and develop regional plans. EDDs were intended to be, “multi-purpose, multi-funded, multi-county planning and development organizations with control vested at the grass-roots level in the decision making process.” From their creation, EDDs have become a conduit for EDA funds and other development programs such workforce and community development grants and programs. Planning districts such as WAPDD are instrumental in identifying regional needs, developing projects, coordinating development, and providing workforce and business support.

- What is a CEDS?

“The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) contributes to effective economic development in America’s communities and regions through a locally-based, regionally-driven economic development process. The CEDS provides the capacity-building foundation by which the public sector, working in conjunction with other economic actors (individuals, firms, industries) creates the environment for regional economic prosperity.” – US EDA

Factors for Western Arkansas’s economic resilience:

- Connecting people through infrastructure by all means
- Collaborative workforce readiness solutions
- Regional economic development
- Quality of Life
- Business retention and development
- Opportunities to expand on recreation and tourism

SUMMARY BACKGROUND AND REGIONAL PROFILE:

Western Arkansas is made up of six counties running the gamut of urbanized manufacturing hub to rural agricultural cornerstones of the state. With areas of Western Arkansas originally founded for military and strategic purposes as the United States expanded its territories into the frontier, the area has continued to thrive as a supply and logistics axis reachable by road, path, air, and water.

Western Arkansas Planning & Development District (WAPDD) serves the counties of Crawford, Franklin, Logan, Polk, Scott, and Sebastian. The total population of the WAPDD service area is over 260,000 based on the most current census. Made of a network of 42 cities and towns, over 90% of Western Arkansas's communities have populations of less than 5,000 residents with many showing a drop in population from the 2010 to 2020 census results.

Employment by sector (All six counties)

21.9% Trade Transportation and Utilities

17.8% Manufacturing

17.7% Education and Health Services

12.7% Government (Federal, State, Local)

11% Professional and Business Services

9.2% Leisure and Hospitality

Source: Discover Arkansas Labor Market Reports, and US Bureau of Labor Statistics, BLS

Regional Profile/Counties

From the U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts and county profiles, reflecting 2020 decennial census, 2023 estimates, or 2019-2023 ACS 5-year estimates where specified.

1. Crawford County, Arkansas

Population (July 1, 2024 estimate): 62,258

Population Density (2020): 101.0 people per square mile

Median Age (2023): 39.1 years

Median Household Income (in 2023 dollars, 2019-2023): \$60,362

2. Franklin County, Arkansas

Population (July 1, 2024 estimate): 17,586

Population Density (2020): 28.1 people per square mile

Median Age (2023): 42.4 years

Median Household Income (in 2023 dollars, 2019-2023): \$51,919

3. Logan County, Arkansas

Population (July 1, 2024 estimate): 21,457

Population Density (2020): 29.8 people per square mile

Median Age (2023): 43.8 years

Median Household Income (in 2023 dollars, 2019-2023): \$54,237

4. Polk County, Arkansas

Population (July 1, 2024 estimate): 19,434

Population Density (2020 estimate, based on 19,221 population and 856.88 sq mi land area): Approx. 22.4 people per square mile (density not directly stated for 2020 in QuickFacts, calculated from 2020 population and land area)

Median Age (2023): 44.4 years

Median Household Income (in 2023 dollars, 2019-2023): \$49,252

5. Scott County, Arkansas

Population (2023 estimate): 9,839

Population Density (2020): 11 people per square mile

Median Age (2023): 42.4 years

Median Household Income (2023): \$45,955

6. Sebastian County, Arkansas

Population (July 1, 2024 estimate): 130,035

Population Density (2020 estimate, based on 127,799 population and 538.7 sq mi land area): Approx. 237.2 people per square mile (density not directly stated for 2020 in QuickFacts, calculated from 2020 population and land area)

Median Age (2023): 38.0 years

Median Household Income (in 2023 dollars, 2019-2023): \$56,450

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts (for each county)/Data Commons/Arkansas-Demographics.com

Populations and People

The populations of Western Arkansas's counties vary greatly with over a 120,000 difference between our highest populated county (Sebastian, population size 130,035) and lowest (Scott, 9,839). While all six counties may range in population sizes, they share a relative median age that reflects that of Arkansas as a whole. The average age of an Arkansas resident is 38.9 years old, while the counties are as follows: Crawford 39.1, Franklin 42.4, Logan 43.8, Polk 44.4, Scott 42.4, and Sebastian at 38.5 with an average regional age of 41.8. Additionally, these six counties also show overall growth of the population blocks reflecting ages 5-9 years old and under five years showing that while county populations have mostly dropped from the 2020 census to the 2024 estimates, birth rates may have increased. To the counterpoint of this, population blocks for ages 20-24 and 25-29 have lessened showing a potential outward migration, and ages 60 and older have stayed relatively steady. Older Arkansans ages 65 and up are represented throughout the six counties as follows: Crawford 17.5%, Franklin 20.3%, Logan 20.2%, Polk 22.5%, Scott 21.2%, and Sebastian 17.9%. The state of Arkansas as a whole averages an 18% older population.

Of these counties, the language predominantly spoken is English (all counties showing over 90% representation with the exception of Sebastian with 85.2%), followed by Spanish, with a representation of Asian and Pacific Islander languages represented by Laotian, Thai, Hmong, Marshallese, and Vietnamese dialects.

Income and Poverty

The average median household income in Arkansas is \$58,700 with the counties all coming in within \$13,000 of the state average. As listed before, the median incomes are as follows: Crawford \$60,632, Franklin \$51,919, Logan \$54,237, Polk \$49,252, Scott \$45,955, and Sebastian \$57,949. All six counties share the trend that married-couple families are the highest earners, followed by undefined families, and then nonfamily households.

Only two Western Arkansas counties fell less than the state average of 15.7% for poverty, Logan 14.4% and Sebastian 11%, while the other four counties run slightly higher with Crawford at 16.8%, Franklin with 18.9%, Polk with 19%, and Scott with 17.2%. All six counties show a regional trend of residents under 18 years of age being the largest demographic of those falling under the poverty line. Using estimates provided by Aspire Arkansas and Federal Reserve Economic Data, that just under 15,000 in the WAPDD service area are receiving food stamps/SNAP.

Western Arkansas as a region has a significantly lower cost of living than the national average. Arkansas in general, as reported through the Arkansas Economic

Development Commission as being 8-14% lower than the nation. Key indicators in this may be that the utility costs and groceries are on average 3-8% lower than the national average, and transportation 7% lower.

Educational Attainment and Enrollment Breakdown

Educational Attainment	Arkansas	Crawford	Franklin	Logan	Polk	Scott	Sebastian
High school or equivalent degree		36.30%	41.80%	43.70%	35.80%	43.20%	28.70%
Some college, no degree		22.00%	20.80%	21.80%	27.70%	22.40%	24.10%
Associate's degree		9.00%	11.30%	8.20%	6.60%	8.20%	9.10%
Bachelor's degree, graduate, or professional degree	26.20%	19.30%	13.20%	15.50%	17.20%	10.80%	24.20%

School Enrollment	Arkansas	Crawford	Franklin	Logan	Polk	Scott	Sebastian
Nursery school, preschool		6.50%	6.50%	7.00%	4.90%	3.40%	7.80%
Kindergarten to 12th grade	72.20%	80.10%	82.30%	73.10%	83.20%	80.20%	75.20%
College, undergraduate		11.30%	8.80%	15.20%	9.40%	15.00%	12.90%
Graduate, professional school		2.20%	2.40%	4.70%	2.40%	1.30%	4.10%

Employment

An overwhelming number of residents per county that are active within the workforce are employed by private companies (Crawford 70.4%, Franklin 66.8%, Logan 58.5%, Polk 58.8%, Scott 72.6%, Sebastian 71.1%), with the second highest category being local, state, and federal government workers, followed by a combination of self-employed/not incorporated/unpaid family workers, and private not-for-profit wage and salary work.

Transportation to and from work has shown to be a feat in our more rural communities with limited public transportation options and transit routes without full connectivity. Across the region, the average commute time is 23.7 minutes, slightly higher than the state average of 22.7 minutes. Additionally, the majority of travelers (79.7%) are driving alone to and from work, with a minimal amount choosing carpool, public transportation, bicycling, or other means – this is with the exception of Sebastian County that showed upticks in carpooling with 11.6%, walking with 2.5% and a utilization of public transportation. Over 90% of the active workforce is commuting in some way to work with only a small fraction of participating residents working from home or working in a hybrid environment.

Please see section titled, “Workforce Overview,” for detailed charts of workforce occupational and industry trends.

Housing

Over housing ownership is up in the region, with an average of 73.6% surpassing the state average of 66.2%. The highest residential ownership rate in the region is Polk County with 82.2%. Housing value has continued to rise in the region with a sharp spike in 2021-2022 followed by a phase of moderation. This increase in home values has created a ‘rent surge,’ causing rent in the area to spike as high as 16% in cities like Fort Smith and Van Buren. Homes within the Fort Smith MSA have a current recorded sale average of \$242,212, which is an increase from the median recorded sale price in 2020 for the area at \$144,000.

Due to the varying populations within our region, the number of housing units and occupancy characteristics differ greatly. Housing units in the area are on record as follows: Crawford 25,300, Franklin 7,716, Logan 9,744, Polk 9,612, Scott 4,851, and Sebastian with 56,749. Of these numbers, approximately 87-90% of all housing within the region is considered occupied. Most owner-occupied housing is by married-couple families, followed by female householder with no spouse present, and then male householders with no spouse present. The number of vacant homes within the region can be attributed to a combination of the following elements: new constructions, non-occupied homes for sale/rent, investment properties under construction/renovation, dilapidation, disrepair, and speculation/holding costs.

Health and Disability

Overall, the Western Arkansas region has a higher number of people living with disabilities than the state average of 18%.

Disability Rate	23.7%	22.1%	22.7%	21.4%	19.9%	23.7%
Hearing Disability	5.4%	6.6%	7.6%	6.3%	6.9%	5.4%
Vision Disability	5.4%	3.7%	4.4%	5.9%	3.7	5.4%
Cognitive Disability	12.5%	7.6%	9.1%	7.3%	9.1%	12.5%
Ambulatory Disability	11.1%	11.2%	12.6%	11.8%	10.1%	11.1%
Self-Care Difficulty	5.5%	2.1%	4.2%	5.5%	3.5%	5.5%
Independent-Living Difficulty	11%	9%	10.2%	10.6%	8.8%	11%

Healthcare in Western Arkansas is characterized by a rural-urban divide. There is disparity between rural and urban areas of the region with rural communities having fewer primary care physicians and dentists per capita. Although the region has a roughly 9% uninsured population, there are multiple charitable clinics and programs helping to compensate for this shortage and helping to improve access and health literacy.

In addition to two larger medical facilities and their outposts (Baptist Health and Mercy), the area is also home to a new VA Clinic in Fort Smith providing outpatient care including primary care, mental health care, specialty care, laboratory and pathology, pharmacy, and supportive services for veterans and their families.

Families and Living Arrangements

The percentage of children living within Western Arkansas closely reflects that of the state average, 22.9% with the following breakdown: Crawford 24.1%, Franklin 22.6%, Logan 21.4%, Polk 22.5%, Scott 23%, and Sebastian 23.6%. And while the state averages a family size of 3.01, the regional average is slightly higher at 3.06. 51.6% of families are married-couple family households, followed by female householder no spouse/family, and male householder no spouse/family. The marital status and history of residents in Western Arkansas falls below the state average of 30.5% of never being married, with 23.4% reported. Of those reported for household makeup, most identified as being married/never separated. 37% of families in Western Arkansas are reported as single-parent families.

Multigenerational living has increased across the region, showing families that have chosen to live under one roof with grandparents, grown children, and sometimes

extended relatives. Information provided by the Fort Smith Housing Authority states that contributing factors to this agreement may be saving money, choosing to stay close to loved ones, post-pandemic mindsets, and providing care for aging parents and relatives.

Race and Ethnicity

While the majority of Western Arkansas residents self-report as white/non-Hispanic, these numbers vary across the six-county region. The Hispanic population represents over 10% of the regional profile, but in several counties makes up less than 3% of the general population, while in Sebastian County represents almost 15% of those surveyed. Throughout the state of Arkansas, the largest identified minority group is Black/African American, while in our region it is the second highest reported.

	Crawford County	Franklin County	Logan County	Polk County	Scott County	Sebastian County	Total in #s	Total by %
County Population	62,258	17,586	21,457	19,434	9,839	130,035	260,609	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1,486	214	241	366	211	2,890	5,408	2.08%
Asian	947	163	328	100	278	5,789	7,605	2.92%
Black or African American	897	79	232	43	35	8,061	9,347	3.59%
Hispanic	4,567	491	640	1,278	748	19,328	27,052	10.38%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	35	10	8	9	5	105	172	0.07%
Not Hispanic or Latino	47,627	15,201	18,586	16,092	8,031	82,785	188,322	72.26%
Other	2,342	183	225	617	358	10,404	14,129	5.42%
Two or More Races	5,816	1,081	1,271	1,658	739	13,722	24,287	9.32%
White	48,610	15,367	18,826	16,428	8,210	86,828	194,269	74.54%

GROWTH:

Western Arkansas is home to a network of organizations focused on the growth and economic prosperity of our region. Western Arkansas Planning & Development Area works closely with organizations like The University of Arkansas Fort Smith Center for Economic Development at the Bakery District in Fort Smith that offers workforce education, upskill training, houses the Jim Walcott Family Enterprise Center, and also is home to the area's Arkansas Small Business & Technology Development Center [powered through SBA. The UAFS CED and ASBTDC work directly with all sizes of for-profit businesses, provide services for non-profits such as grant writing courses, and offer one on one confidential consulting and cutting-edge market research. UAFS has received more than \$5 million dollar Higher Industry Readiness through Educational Development (HIRED) grants, establishing a manufacturing academy, the ability to expand curriculums, supporting apprenticeship and upskilling, and allowing the university to launch its own Bachelors of Science in Advanced Manufacturing Engineering program.

Additionally, Western Arkansas serves as a matrix of city and regional Chambers of Commerce. The six county region is home to nine Chambers of Commerce working towards business growth in the River Valley. All have been integral to the relocation, expansion, and resilience of organizations across the region. They have worked on advocacy and policy influence working with elected officials to serve business, promoted local commerce through initiatives like Small Business Saturday, they have connected businesses through expos and networking events, and have helped with the beautification and downtown revitalization efforts of their communities, with many also aiding in tourism promotion. A project of note is the new Van Buren Chamber Business Resource Center opening in 2025. The facility will support 75 entrepreneurs on a monthly basis. The new facility will also provide space for a representative from the UAFS-CED, and as a meeting space for meetings and civic group events.

New Facilities and Expansions of Note

1. USA Trucking – In 2022 USA Truck in Van Buren was purchased by German logistics company DB Schenker for \$435 million USD. This increased the overall premium of USA Truck stock prices by over 117%. The primary goal of this acquisition was to allow DB Schenker to expand their network and market share in North America for land transport. It allowed the company to leverage USA Truck's existing US and Mexico freight network and integrate with global logistics services. At the time of the sale, the company had approximately 1,900 units in their fleet of trucks, 2,100 employees, and partnerships with over 36,000 active contract carriers.

2. **Mercy Hospital** – In 2025, Mercy Hospital in Fort Smith completed a \$186 million expansion project creating an expanded emergency department from 29 to 50 rooms allowing for 25,000 more patients per year. This project increased the capacity of the intensive care unit from 38 to 64, repurposed area so to be used as an observation unit, and improved parking among many other benefits. The expansion is expected to create 160 jobs in total when fully operational, including 50 new nursing positions, and there are plans to hire approximately 200 more caregivers over the course of the next five year. Mercy states that project will have an estimated \$50 million economic impact on the direct, surrounding area and a ripple effect of \$14 million within the region outside of Sebastian County.
3. **Mars** – Since 2020, Mars Petcare in Fort Smith has invested more than \$260 million into expansions to create more than 300 new jobs and building a new 47,000 square foot warehouse, two production lines, and creating a projected production capacity growth of over 75%. Mars has continued to show support and confidence in the local economy by growing its facilities. Jobs created include manufacturing, supply, logistics, maintenance, and administrative positions.
4. **Umarex** – Umarex USA/Walter in Chaffee Crossing/Fort Smith announced that they plan to spend \$30 million for expansion of their current presence over the next five years. Of the investment, \$8 million is planned to be used on expanding their facility and \$22 million to acquire machinery and equipment. A world-known arms manufacturer, the company plans to expand its research and development opportunities. The expansion is expected to create over 75 jobs and add 40,000 more square feet to their facility.
5. **Pernod Ricard** – In late 2022, Pernod Ricard announced a \$22 million dollar investment into expansion of their facility. The investment helped the plant with the purchase of a high speed canning line, allowing them to enter the ready-to-drink (RTD) market. This expansion was estimated to create over 50 jobs and helped them to move four of their drinks into RTD consumables. Before the expansion, the facility already employed 220 full-time workers.
6. **Bass Pro Shops** – Formally announced in 2025, Bass Pro Shop will open a new “Outpost,” in Fort Smith. Using a former Best Buy building, Bass Pro Shops plans to revitalize the space, increasing it to over 70,000 square feet with over 100

parking spaces, and hiring over 100 workers. The outpost is designed to be an experiential retail destination with immersive outdoor features. It is expected to open in early 2026. The estimated value of the construction alone is over \$20 million.

Western Arkansas as a Transportation Hub

Western Arkansas home is to many transportation organizations that have been working to revitalize the region as America's next transportation hub. Fronier Metropolitan Planning Organization is a regional transportation planning organization that serves the Fort Smith urbanized area which spans into Eastern Oklahoma. The goal of the MPO is to ensure that transportation projects and programs are based on continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning. They serve as the official forum for regional transportation planning, aiming to maximize the benefits of federal and state funds for transportation.

Western Arkansas Intermodal Authority (WAIA) is an organization focused on improving and expanding transportation infrastructure within the Western Arkansas region, with an emphasis on the efficient movement of goods and freight. Their mission includes advancing intermodal opportunities to meet current and future shipping demands, leading to economical, efficient, and dependable transport systems. Intermodal refers to the coordination of multiple modes of transportation such as road, rail, water, and air to move the freight, capitalizing on the advantages of each mode of travel. WAIA aims to facilitate transition with modes, optimize logistics, and reduce costs.

Western Arkansas serves as a home base for the ArDOT District 4 Field Office, F.O.R.T. (Friends of Recreational Trails), F.O.O.R.C (Friends of Off-Road Cycling), and Fort Smith Transit which is home to the area's only fully operational public transportation service with fixed bus routes.

Western Arkansas is home to the I-49 expansion, a significant and ongoing project aimed at completing a full corridor of transportation for Interstate 49, ultimately connecting to Shreveport, Louisiana, and Kansas City, Missouri. Critical construction updates include the Alma to Barling segment of 13.7 miles that will connect I-49 in Barling northward of the I-40 interchange in Alma. The total award for this section was \$282.5 million dollars. Construction will include a new bridge across the Arkansas River, and four interchanges.

Fort Smith to Texarkana has been identified as a needed project of 136-180 miles per mapping estimates, but no definitive timeline or full finding has yet to be identified. The ultimate vision for a completed I-49 would create a major north-south trade

corridor that would enhance domestic and international commerce opportunities, reduce travel times for freight and commuters, and open new avenues for economic development along the route by improving transportation and connecting Western Arkansas to the Midwest, Gulf Coast, and Canada. Current expansions in construction are estimated to be completed by the end of the decade.

In addition to the highway expansion, MARAD (the US Department of Maritime Administration) has funded a \$15.096 million grant to build a slackwater harbor off the main channel of the Arkansas River that will be approximately 1,000 feet long and 200 feet wide and have the capacity to moor and offload up to eight barges at a time. The harbor will have roughly 2,000 feet of dock frontage with a 50-foot-wide concrete deck for mobile cranes. The new harbor will enhance the reliability of the port, making it less susceptible to service and operational disruptions resulting from fluctuations in the flow rate of the water. The harbor will increase the barge handling capacity of the port and will improve port resilience because the concrete deck will be constructed above the 100-year flood level. By 2035, the facility is predicted to handle an additional 250,000 tons of freight annually. This harbor project will be located on a man-made channel off the Arkansas River at Five Rivers Terminal in Crawford County, who have pledged to provide the over \$3 million in matching funds.

Airforce Mission

The 188th Wing of the Arkansas Air National Guard, stationed at Ebbing Air National Guard Base in Fort Smith, has a multi-faceted mission that has evolved significantly over its history promising great economic payoff for the greater River Valley. The annual estimated annual economic impact should stand between \$500 million and \$1 billion per year with some estimates reaching as high as \$1.4 billion annually. At the “Fighter Jets and Fort Smith,” event held to commemorate the mission, local leaders estimated that beyond the creation of traditional jobs, with a potential mission lifespan of up to 40 years, the direct spending, business expansion, and infrastructure investment will create long-term economic sustainability and growth for the region.

The main objectives of the mission include technology and training related to the remotely piloted MQ-9 Reaper Aircrafts, targeting, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Additional key aspects of this operation include creating a global reach with international partnerships, combat readiness, and domestic response.

This program is expected to bring a significant amount of military personnel and their families into Fort Smith and the greater Western Arkansas region. Initial estimates were 500 military personnel and 300 dependent families, but current operations suggest as many as 1,500 military staff and families will be relocating to the region.

Additionally, several hundred support jobs will be created at Ebbing and off-base, including construction, technology, aerospace, and facility maintenance positions. The presence of the training center and mission is expected to attract subcontractors and other businesses to the area that will further support operations and feeding into the local economy. The boost to the local economy will play off the multiplier effect in that the money spent by military personnel on their families, groceries, retail, healthcare, entertainment, and other services not offered on base will ripple through the region. This has the potential to lead to a housing market influx, retail and service sector growth, and other opportunities to boost the amenities of the six-county area.

The infrastructure investment alone into this project is estimated to be \$1.2 billion dollars including a \$25 million dollar runway extension at the Fort Smith Regional Airport to accommodate advanced military jets, construction of the Academic Training Center, an F-35 bay aircraft maintenance hangar, and an F-35 squad operations mission planning facility.

Education

Western Arkansas is home to a variety of institutions that cater to different educational needs from co-enrolled programs, apprenticeships, technical degrees, to four-year traditional university programs, and specialized health education degrees.

Western Arkansas has opportunities for dual enrollment through multiple programs including WATC (Western Arkansas Technical Center through UAFS) offering modern apprenticeships, connecting students with business), the Office of Skills Development, and multiple adult education centers. A leader in dual enrollment within the region is the Peak Innovation Center, centrally located in Fort Smith, that offers career pathways for high-demand fields including advanced manufacturing, health sciences, information technology, emerging art and design, and skilled trades and construction technology. The Peak Innovation Center has boosted economic development within the region by addressing workforce shortages, creating a skilled talent pipeline, creating industry-responsive curriculums, and offering concurrent credits and certifications. By offering hands-on training and equipping young individuals with high-demand skills, this center has enabled entry-level workers to enter the workforce environment with the security of skills in a high-paying field. The Peak Center also supports incumbent workers who need to retain or upskill to adapt to evolving industry demands. The Peak Innovation Center was funded through a combination of Federal grants (\$1.4 million from the US Department of Commerce-Economic Development Administration), state grants (\$2.1 million from the Office of Skills Development), foundation grants from the Gene Hass Foundation and Windgate Foundation, and corporate and community donations and sponsorships. Additionally,

the facility was donated through an estate saving the school district approximately \$3 million that had been budgeted for acquisition.

Western Arkansas has four university levels systems within the region. University of Arkansas Fort Smith offers a wide range of bachelor's and master's degree programs across various disciplines. UAFS plays a significant role in providing higher education within the region and has recently announced their own Center for Non-Profits after a transformational donation of \$7.5 million dollars. Additionally, UAFS has made announcements that they plan to expand their educational network to include emerging technologies and healthcare solutions. Arkansas Tech University in Ozark is a two-year public college that offers technical and workforce-based programs. Their mission is to provide high-quality training and equip students with the skills for well-paying careers that will contribute to the local economy, workforce, and society. The University prioritizes industry-aligned programming, skilled trades, and specialized technical degrees. The last of the conventional higher education in the region is University of Arkansas Rich Mountain located in Mena. UARM is a two-year public college that serves the more rural parts of Western Arkansas, providing top-quality associate degrees and technical training. UARM allows for transfer degrees for those wishing to further their education, technical and workforce degrees, and adult education. UARM has focused on transfer pathways, responding to industry needs, and customized training. Additionally, UARM focuses on partnering with local businesses, industries, and community organizations to make sure that curriculums are meeting the needs of the economic network of the community.

The Arkansas Colleges of Health Education (ACHE) and it's founding program, the Arkansas College of Osteopathic Medicine (ARCOM), represent a deliberate effort to address healthcare needs and provider shortages within Western Arkansas – primarily shortages of physicians and providers in underserved areas. ACHE is a not-for-profit facility located in Fort Smith dedicated to healthcare and wellness education. ACHE was created after being provided with more than \$58 million in endowment from the Fort Smith Regional Healthcare Foundation after the sale of Sparks Health System. Additionally, The Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority (FCRA) donated 200 acres of land, providing a campus location. The school system has since expanded to be over 350 acres in a 102,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility with a 164 unit, residential complexes for students. Included in ARCOM is an active 3,500 square foot Biomedical Research Lab and a 66,000 square foot College of Health Sciences building which houses physical therapy, occupational therapy, and physical assistant degree programs.

Agriculture

Agriculture, particularly poultry and livestock, is a significant economic driver in Western Arkansas. It supports a substantial number of jobs directly on farms and indirectly through processing plants. Arkansas is the leading state in the nation for broiler chickens and turkey production with many large poultry operations such as Tyson, Bachoco Ok Foods, and Butterball either house facilities within the area or employ residents of the six-county region. Logan County's Census of Agriculture reported in 2022 that 96% of its market value of products sold came from livestock, poultry, and products. Similarly, Scott County reported in at 95%, and Franklin County at 83%. In Arkansas as a whole, 2023 numbers reported that \$6.7 billion or 51% of the total agriculture cash receipts within the state were associated with the poultry industry. In 2022, the USDA NASS data for Western Arkansas showed over \$957 million from poultry and eggs.

The economic landscape of Arkansas is also supported by other agriculture such as forage and hay, forestry, horticulture, and specialty crops. The production of hay and other forages is critical to the support of animal populations being processed within the region and the region is home to significant pastureland. Many areas in the region are also heavily forested, where timber production can be easily achieved without the reliance on outside support. Arkansas is often known as the, "heart of the nation's wood basket," and 4.1% of the state's GDP is attributed to forest industries. The top timber industries within Western Arkansas are logging, solid wood products, pulp and paper, wood furniture manufacturing, and forestry services.

While not as prominent as poultry or timber, the region is also known for horticulture and specialty crops such as fruit production, vegetables, and ornamental plants. The counties are represented by Cooperative Extension Offices that offer vital support to farmers and communities through research based information and education, programs on beef and forage management, pest control, soil testing, and plant disease diagnosis. Additionally, conservation services are offered throughout the region to assist in promoting sustainable practices, reducing soil erosion, protecting water quality, and enhancing natural resources.

- County sizes

- Crawford County 595.3/60th largest
- Franklin 609/52nd largest
- Logan 709/28th
- Polk 856.8/11th
- Scott 892.8/8th largest
- Seb Co 531.2 miles /74th largest

Quality of Life and Tourism

Western Arkansas has a rich history of natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and historical significance. Tourism has had significant growth, with a 33% increase of GDP from 2019 to 2023 and a state-wide tax revenue of over \$729 million in 2023. The main tourism sectors of Western Arkansas include specialized eco-tourism, museums and festivals, and wineries.

Western Arkansas's six county region is home to over fifty individual parks and recreation sites including city parks, state parks, splash pads, trails, and water features. The natural beauty of the region is enhanced by economic drivers that are leading the way for Western Arkansas to become a tourism hub within the state. Projects of note include:

Chaffee Crossing Redevelopment Area– While Chaffee Crossing checks the box for industrial, commercial, residential, education, and historic sectors – as a tourism bolster for the area it has created an attractive mixed-use development that enhances overall quality of life. The Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority (FCRA) was created in 1997 to oversee the transformation of the former Fort Chaffee Military Base. Chaffee Crossing is experiencing a major boom in residential construction with 44 neighborhoods and over 4,000 projected units. Chaffee Crossing is home to over 20 miles of trails and over 400 acres of dedicated public space. The development area is home to the Barracks at Chaffee that has been repurposed for commercial spaces, is home to the Chaffee Military and Barbershop Museum, and is host to a multitude of events including festivals, biking and 5k races, and seasonal farmers and artisan markets. It is also home to historic buildings, a memorial plaza, and has been designated as an entertainment district.

Creekmore Park Pool and Bathhouse – In 2024, the Fort Smith Board of Directors approved a \$5.997 million dollar plan to renovate the pool, diving facility, and bathhouse of Creekmore Park. Funded through \$4 million in extra revenue from 2012 and 2014 bond sales tax revenue, Fort Smith was able to provide citizens with a modern municipal swim facility with a permanent enclosure for the diving well. The bathhouse upgrade has amenities such as new showers, restrooms, dressing rooms and lockers, offices, concessions, and a party room. The new and modernized facility aims to position Fort Smith as a premier swimming facility for outdoor long course swim meets and will allow for year-long use creating a new capacity for hosting swim meets and supporting local spending through sports tourism. The facility will also serve as a training facility for local groups including Fort Smith Public Schools, the Fort Smith Fire Department, and the Army National Guard.

The Trails at Mena – This project will serve as a one-of-a-kind lift-served mountain bike and adventure park with connection from the City of Mena to Queen Wilhelmina State Park. Featuring 1,200 feet of elevation drop, beginner flow to expert jump trails, approx. 20 miles of full designed and flagged trails, and the ability for year-round riding, this project will serve as the premier mountain biking destination within the state. This trail system will span approximately 8,800 acres of the Ouachita National Forest when full constructed and linked, and is predicted to host over 250,000 in visitors by 2036. This project was the possible through the combined efforts of Arkansas State Parks, the U.S. Forest Service, Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation, the City of Mena, and endorsements from state and federal officials. With permits finalized, the design and development of this project will begin in summer of 25'. The project will create diverse spending within the region including lodging, hospitality, retail, transportation, and a boost to other services including bike and equipment rentals, shuttle services, guiding services, and repair shops. In 2022, EDA funded \$275,000 to support redevelopment and revitalization of the trail system for the creation of six miles of trails.

Fort Smith Museums – Fort Smith's diverse museum offerings including the Fort Smith National Historic Site, the new Fort Kids Children Museum, the U.S. Marshals Museum, Fort Smith Regional Art Museum and other visitor attractions that have created a spike in tourism and hospitality jobs and visits to the region. The Fort Smith Regional Art Museum was created with a \$12 million endowment to fund approximately 85% of the operating expenses, Fort Kids Children Museum is starting the process of groundbreaking and future construction after a capital campaign for \$16.3 million dollars was created in combination of a donated five acre parcel of land on the Arkansas Riverfront south of the Marshals Museum. This museum will stand as a nonprofit educational and cultural institution offering unique learning/play environments for children and their caregivers. Officially opening in 2023, the US Marshals Museum hosted approximately 85,000 visitors in its first year alone. It is marked as a cornerstone of Fort Smith Riverfront development and is a nonprofit organization. It was created through a combination of private donations, corporate sponsorships, and contributions from the State of Arkansas (\$8.432 million), the City of Fort Smith (\$300,000), and Sebastian County (\$230,142). The museum actively managed a multi-year fundraising mission and capital campaign that reached \$50 million in fundraising, including a land donation estimated at \$3.5 million dollars.

Mount Magazine Park and Amenities – As Arkansas' highest peak, Mount Magazine State Park's lodge, cabins, camping, and activities generate revenue through lodging, concession sales, and fees. The park directly feeds into the local economy of Paris and Booneville and contributes directly into employee wages.

According to Talk Business, Mount Magazine State Park consistently ranks as one of the highest revenue-generating parks in the Arkansas State Park System, bringing in several million dollars per year through its various operations. The park itself covers approximately 2,200 acres with picnic areas, pavilions, campgrounds, visitors center, and lodge with 60 rooms. This makes it a crucial financial asset for the state park system and a significant economic driver for Logan County.

The combined impact of tourism within the region has increased visitor spending, job creation, and tax revenue.

Manufacturing

Western Arkansas is a leader in manufacturing throughout the state. Manufacturing throughout the region focuses on food and beverage processing, metal and fabricated metal production, appliances, transportation equipment, wood and paper products, and advanced manufacturers focused on automation, robotics, and high-tech processes. The State Department of Finance and Administration states that for every \$1 in manufactured goods that comes from Arkansas facilities, \$1.43 of economic activity is generated due to the multiplier effect. Additionally, manufacturing jobs in Western Arkansas traditionally offer competitive wages that are higher than the statewide non-farm average. The greater Fort Smith MSA amounts to \$25,000 of goods produced per resident which is almost twice the nation-wide amount per capita per the Federal government census of businesses.

Western Arkansas is unique in the fact that our six-county region is home to more than 300 manufacturing facilities, and more than 20 traditionally categorized large-scale manufacturers including Rheem, ABB, Hytrol, Owens Corning, Gerber, Bachoco OK Foods, International Paper, Georgia Pacific Dixie Cup, Riverside Furniture Corporation, Simmons Foods, Bekaert Corporation, PepperSource, USA Truck, Butterball, Baldor, SGL Carbon, Rockline, Tyson, WeighTec, and Stark Industries.

While manufacturing is considered to be a top 20 occupation by annual exit, manufacturing-related roles have continued to grow within the region with Discover Arkansas estimating that over 25,000 people in the six-county region are currently employed in traditional manufacturing causing the sector to be considered an in-demand occupation for over ten years. Although there was a mid-pandemic rise in industry exits, there were no direct, long-term consequences of retirements due to incoming workforce.

History

The region is home to many historical preservation efforts and has a rich history in coal mining and timber production. Franklin County is the site of one of the first oil strikes in Arkansas and is home to the Cherokee Prairie and the Ozark Highland Trails. Logan County is home to some of the oldest settlements in Western Arkansas along with Mount Magazine State Park originally recognized by French explorers in the 1600 and 1700s. The earliest maps of this mountain date back to 1819 when Thomas Nutball was exploring the Arkansas River on a botany mission.

Crawford, Polk, and Sebastian Counties have an extensive list of locations on the National Historic Register. Crawford County has the Van Buren Historic District, which covers a large portion of the downtown and has well-preserved 19th century architecture, the Drennen Scott House known from the Trail of Tears, the Fairview Confederate Cemetery, and numerous historic homes. Polk County has the Mena Commercial Historic District, the Mena Kansas City-Southern Depot, and Janssen Park. Sebastian County is home to the most with the Fort Smith Historic Site, the Belle Grove Historic District, Garrison Avenue Historic District, and a number of historic buildings including the WHH Clayton House, Bonneville House, Commercial Hotel, and many temples and cemeteries. Sebastian County is also home to the Chaffee Crossing Historic District, a significant area that blends military history with modern community development.

DECLINE:

Business Closures

COVID significantly impacted businesses nationwide and Western Arkansas was no exception. A survey developed by the SBDC in April of 2020 estimated that over 60% of Arkansas small businesses would be at risk of permanent closure and more than half would see revenue drops of over 75%. The Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration reported that most businesses that closed as a result of COVID decline were independently owned, restaurants, and retail-based organizations. During the pandemic, there was a spike in unemployment rates with temporary reporting at 11.5% in April of 2020. Employment in the area has since recovered, and specific sectors are beginning to see pre-pandemic growth.

Although there is no single, comprehensive public database that tracks small businesses closures, the Small Business Administration office in Fort Smith estimated that over 100 small businesses have closed their doors within the six-county regions since January of 2020.

Post-pandemic, Western Arkansas' retail sector was greatly affected by the shift to e-commerce, resulting in the closure of some national retail chains that had local storefronts. Closures of stores like Tuesday Morning, Joann Fabrics, Big Lots, and Justice whose parent companies faced financial decline and corporate bankruptcy all ceased operations in Western Arkansas resulting in more than 40 jobs lost.

Western Arkansas' most notable business closure in the past five years was the closing of the Tyson poultry processing plant in Van Buren in May of 2023. This closure resulted in the loss of 969 jobs at the facility. Tyson stated that the closure was part of a broader strategy to strength their operations. Talk Business reported that due to the ripple effect, the potential indirect job loss could have resulted in almost 5,000 people being affected due to loss of job, loss of family income, loss of income spent in local establishments, loss of contracts, and loss of tax revenue. Workforce rapid response including job fairs, resume building, and WIOA deployment of dislocated worker programs were offered to all employees who lost jobs which helped mitigate the long-term effects of this lay-off.

Natural Disasters

Western Arkansas has faced a growth in natural, weather related disasters in the past five years with upticks in snowstorms, hail damage, flooding, and verified tornadoes.

The most common of these weather disruptions is severe storms with incurred hail damage. The region, commonly integrated into the River Valley has been prone to

river flooding, rainfall flooding, surface water flooding, and most commonly flash flooding leading to traffic accidents, infrastructure washout, and vehicle and property damage. Additionally, there has been an increase in tornadic weather with over 10 confirmed tornadoes since 2020.

In February of 2021, a significant winter storm causes widespread power loss and disruption across the region, this storm effected the region with 6" of snow accumulation, a number that was not seen again until January of 2025.

Additionally, over the course of the past five years, the Western Arkansas region as a whole has experienced an overall warming trend with an increased frequency of hot days registering above 95 degrees Fahrenheit. While not necessarily considered a natural disaster, this increase in temperatures has reduced crop yields and caused economic losses through delayed planting, and increased production costs. It has also created challenges to crop suitability and practices.

Drops in population

While general census information shows an overall drop in county residency from 2010 to 2020, initial 2024 American Community Survey estimates are starting to show that the populations may again be on the rise. The area has faced localized fluctuations, with more rural areas and counties showing outward migration of residents while more urbanized areas have fought national trends to show population movement and restoration of pre-pandemic numbers.

WORKFORCE OVERVIEW:

Information Provided by Discover Arkansas based on 2024 BLS and ACS estimates, all showing top 10 ranked by growth:

Largest Occupations in Western Arkansas, Ranked by Estimated Employment

Occupation	Estimated Employment	Average Wage	Entry Wage	Experienced Wage
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	3,480	\$59,947	\$35,122	\$72,360
Fast Food and Counter Workers	3,000	\$25,962	\$23,229	\$27,328
Retail Salespersons	2,830	\$31,499	\$24,292	\$35,102
General and Operations Managers	2,810	\$82,901	\$35,504	\$106,599
Cashiers	2,670	\$27,059	\$23,653	\$28,763
Stockers and Order Fillers	2,520	\$34,118	\$28,773	\$36,791
Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers	2,480	\$33,887	\$28,160	\$36,751
Registered Nurses	2,300	\$74,434	\$56,767	\$83,267
Office Clerks, General	2,200	\$38,410	\$27,550	\$43,841
Customer Service Representatives	2,000	\$39,688	\$31,357	\$43,854

Largest Occupations in Western Arkansas, Ranked by Average Wage

Occupation	Estimated Employment	Average Wage	Entry Wage	Experienced Wage
General and Operations Managers	2,810	\$82,901	\$35,504	\$106,599
Registered Nurses	2,300	\$74,434	\$56,767	\$83,267
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	3,480	\$59,947	\$35,122	\$72,360
Customer Service Representatives	2,000	\$39,688	\$31,357	\$43,854
Office Clerks, General	2,200	\$38,410	\$27,550	\$43,841
Stockers and Order Fillers	2,520	\$34,118	\$28,773	\$36,791
Meat, Poultry, and Fish Cutters and Trimmers	2,480	\$33,887	\$28,160	\$36,751
Retail Salespersons	2,830	\$31,499	\$24,292	\$35,102
Cashiers	2,670	\$27,059	\$23,653	\$28,763
Fast Food and Counter Workers	3,000	\$25,962	\$23,229	\$27,328

Fastest Growing Occupations in Western Arkansas. Long Term

Industry	Base Year Employment	Projected Employment	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Medical and Health Services Managers	477	641	164	34.40%
Home Health and Personal Care Aides	1,701	2,262	561	33.00%
Cooks, Restaurant	1,061	1,312	251	23.70%
Industrial Machinery Mechanics	710	839	129	18.20%
Stockers and Order Fillers	2,493	2,902	409	16.40%
Light Truck Drivers	996	1,129	133	13.30%
Registered Nurses	2,478	2,702	224	9.00%
General and Operations Managers	2,608	2,820	212	8.10%
Fast Food and Counter Workers	2,971	3,112	141	4.80%
Retail Salespersons	2,884	3,004	120	4.20%

Projected Growth Occupations in Western Arkansas, Long Term

Occupation	Estimated Employment	Projected Employment	Numeric Change	Percent Change	Annual Openings Change
Healthcare Support Occupations	4,887	5,768	881	18.00%	845
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	931	1,067	136	14.60%	74
Legal Occupations	444	509	65	14.60%	36
Architecture and Engineering Occupations	856	976	120	14.00%	73
Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	444	503	59	13.30%	52
Community and Social Service Occupations	2,559	2,877	318	12.40%	268
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	7,359	8,236	877	11.90%	537
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	3,984	4,396	412	10.30%	373
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	5,384	5,806	422	7.80%	520
Personal Care and Service Occupations	1,626	1,731	105	6.50%	301

Largest Industries in Western Arkansas (Ranked by Base Year Employment)

Industry	Base Year Employment	Projected Employment	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Educational Services	8,459	8,765	306	3.60%
Food Services and Drinking Places	8,048	8,474	426	5.30%
Ambulatory Health Care Services	5,304	6,324	1,020	19.20%
Hospitals	5,119	5,480	361	7.00%
General Merchandise Retailers	3,999	4,284	285	7.10%
Religious, Grantmaking, Civic, Professional, and Similar Organizations	3,225	3,532	307	9.50%
Merchant Wholesalers, Durable Goods	2,759	3,095	336	12.20%
Social Assistance	2,520	3,164	644	25.60%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	2,130	2,545	415	19.50%
Food and Beverage Retailers	1,501	1,890	389	25.90%

Fastest Growth Industries in Western Arkansas, Long Term

Industry	Base Year Employment	Projected Employment	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Food and Beverage Retailers	1,501	1,890	389	25.90%
Social Assistance	2,520	3,164	644	25.60%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	2,130	2,545	415	19.50%
Ambulatory Health Care Services	5,304	6,324	1,020	19.20%
Merchant Wholesalers, Durable Goods	2,759	3,095	336	12.20%
Religious, Grantmaking, Civic, Professional, and Similar Organizations	3,225	3,532	307	9.50%
General Merchandise Retailers	3,999	4,284	285	7.10%
Hospitals	5,119	5,480	361	7.00%
Food Services and Drinking Places	8,048	8,474	426	5.30%
Educational Services	8,459	8,765	306	3.60%

Projected Growth Industries in Western Arkansas, Long Term

Industry	Estimated Employment	Projected Employment	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Total All Industries	117,615	123,099	5,484	4.70%
Education and Health Services	23,906	26,315	2,409	10.10%
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	22,855	24,571	1,716	7.50%
Professional and Business Services	9,668	10,397	729	7.50%
Information	975	1,036	61	6.30%
Other Services (except Government)	5,160	5,474	314	6.10%
Government	6,255	6,571	316	5.00%
Leisure and Hospitality	9,213	9,610	397	4.30%
Construction	4,199	4,336	137	3.30%
Financial Activities	3,584	3,630	46	1.30%
Manufacturing	21,463	21,036	-427	-2.00%

Unemployment Numbers, April 2025

State/LWDA/ County	Civilian Labor Force	Number of Employed	Number of Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
Arkansas (State Total)	1,422,616	1,370,386	52,230	3.7%
Western Arkansas	113,489	109,787	3,702	3.30%
Crawford County	26,100	25,230	870	3.30%
Franklin County	7,451	7,200	251	3.40%
Logan County	8,927	8,595	332	3.70%
Polk County	7,433	7,180	253	3.40%
Scott County	4,049	3,926	123	3.00%
Sebastian County	59,529	57,656	1,873	3.10%

List of Statewide Targeted Businesses

Key Industries as identified by the Arkansas Economic Development Commission include aerospace & defense, ag-tech & forestry, firearms & ammunition, food& beverage, information technology, logistics & distribution, metals, and professional services.

SWOT ANALYSIS:

Strengths

What does our region do well?

What unique resources do we have?

What do others see as our strengths?

Infrastructure

- Investments into our military training and missions
- Hospitals and medical facilities are well kept and maintained
- Housing overall is still affordable compared to other parts of the country and state
- Water and wastewater are plentiful
- The interstate system is being expanded upon and extended for connectivity
- Transportation is affordable and intermodal
- Roads and facilities are relatively well kept

Outdoors

- Plentiful national forests that are beautiful and well maintained
- Outdoor recreation is bountiful in the area and drawing in tourists
- Quality outdoor attractions set us apart from other parts of the state and geographic region
- Parks, landscaping, and trails are well maintained and cared for
- Outdoor parks are booming in numbers with many being revitalized or expanded

Community

- We are rich in community leaders who are involved and well meaning
- Our Chambers of Commerce work well together and represent the region collaboratively
- Our Main Street and Downtown groups are developing and expanding, with more cities interested than ever before, and groups that are established are thriving.
- Our Civic Groups and Non-Profits represent the community and make sure that all people are taken care of
- Our higher education facilities are renowned beyond the state and are making innovative strides to be best in class
- Our workforce development system is cohesive, and partnerships are strong

Manufacturing

- Western Arkansas has proven ourselves to be a manufacturing hub that is welcoming to new businesses and supports existing facilities

Tourism

- There is always something to do in Western Arkansas. Between festivals, fairs, events, and museums we are an affordable and fun place to live.
- The area has interactive, creative arts showing up in rural areas
- People respect historic theaters and spaces and want to visit them
- Our area has natural spaces that can be used for events
- People want to come here to visit

Weaknesses

What could our region improve?

Where do we have fewer resources than others?

What are others likely to see as our weaknesses?

Funding

- A lack of clarity on funding and uncertainty about grant funds continuing
- A lack of general funds for large-scale projects
- A lack of resources within the community to fund special projects

Workforce

- A lack of skilled workforce to take on in-demand occupations
- A lack of available workforce in general due to a low unemployment rate
- Not feeling that the region has a motivated workforce that wants to take on jobs with traditional hours
- Efforts are not fully coordinated to educate incoming and existing workforce
- Overall workforce challenges with the ebb and flow of employee numbers
- Overall dependence on the manufacturing sector

Change

- Fear of change
- A region that leans towards tradition
- A need to bring in the next generation of leaders
- Community engagement and participation needs to be changed to include new faces

- Some leadership does not understand the evolving landscape of economic development
- A need of innovative thinking and approaches

Crisis

- The community is facing an increase in drug arrests
- The region needs to increase the number of mental health providers that serve rural areas
- Insufficient number of rural health care providers

Awareness

- A lack of visibility on our region, a worry that we may be overshadowed
- More research and development is needed for long-term solutions

Housing

- Not enough affordable housing within the area
- More housing developments are needed
- Overall growth of homeless population

Transportation

- Lack of cohesive transportation networks for commuters
- Not enough public transportation, especially in rural communities
- Not enough transportation education

Barriers

- Overall lack of resources
- People feel barriered in our region

Infrastructure

- Lack of water sustainability
- Expansions and improvements needed for water and wastewater facilities
- Current lack of rail/water/highway connectivity for freight
- Condition of roads and traffic signaling devices
- Lack of crosswalks and safe pathways
- Lack of broadband in rural areas and low-quality broadband region wide

Opportunities

What opportunities are open to the region?

What trends could we take advantage of?

How can we turn strengths/weaknesses into opportunities?

Partnerships

- The region has strong partnerships and communities that are willing to work together for greatness
- People are informed on how to contribute to their communities and are bringing new perspectives
- The creation of a town hall for each community for community resources and economic development opportunities
- The creation of an elected officials roundtable event that crosses city or county borders
- Chances to work closely with other areas to gain insight and new perspectives on projects and plans

Economic Development

- Opportunities with river, rail, interstate, and port to become a leader in transportation
- Our geographic proximity to other areas including Northwest Arkansas, Little Rock, and Oklahoma City
- Local Incentives at the city and county level that could encourage businesses to expand existing facilities or relocate to the area

Supportive Services

- Health education opportunities are growing with ARCOM and ACHE
- In-house mental health could be life-changing for our region
- Regional resource development opportunities
- Connections to health services on a regional level
- Creation or expansion of groups to help with healthcare transportation and assistance
- Increases in technical education for healthcare administration and processing
- Help research and develop initiatives to make establishing childcare centers more streamlined
- Find ways to help workforce partners holistically serve clients

Manufacturing

- New opportunities for manufacturing start-ups
- Building manufacturing supply chains for Chaffee Crossing
- Assisting start-ups with tax breaks and incentives
- Providing solutions for emerging businesses and the challenges they face

Education

- Building on our existing higher education opportunities
- Creating the world's best early childhood development educational programs
- Increasing technical education for students fifth grade and up

Water

- Water and wastewater improvements for the region

Coal

- Build upon the historic coal industry in Western Arkansas from a tourism standpoint

Threats

What trends could harm our region?

What is our competition doing?

What threats do our weaknesses expose us to?

Funding

- Our area has seen an overall cut in funding of projects and communities feel there are less grant opportunities than before
- The grants that are available are not promised to be funded
- Major changes in federal policy and funding have made reporting difficult
- A lack of education on changes to funding of projects

Lack of Growth

- Some people have more traditional ideas of how things should be done, and don't want to take innovative approaches
- There is a lack of participation on projects
- Change is deemed hard

Workforce

- There has been a decline in manufacturing employment
- Limited technology development and ecosystem growth
- Not enough specialized technology education
- Workforce challenges as a region
- Lack of childcare, and specifically overnight child care for shift workers

Politics

- Not enough people running for office locally, no succession planning
- Not enough turning up for local votes
- Not enough residents participating in public comment periods
- Uncertainty of how to collaborate between cities and counties

Outflow

- People are moving out of the area for a multitude of reasons
- Our rural areas feel left behind
- More people are leaving parts of the region than coming in for work
- Young adults are leaving the area for opportunities rather than seeking local employment after graduation

Employment

- Some feel local employers are losing steam
- Local companies do not have the ability to expand, reorganize
- Lack of succession planning

Water

- Water becomes unusable

Services

- There is a lack of services for rural areas in drug abuse, mental health, justice involved

Regionalism

- Lack of understanding on how to work together to drive large scale economic development

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES/ACTION PLAN:

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy establishes the goals and objectives necessary to solve economic problems and capitalize on the resources of the region. Strategic projects, programs, and identified activities are designed to help create a strategic flow and identify partners that may help with their achievement.

Vision and Goals

- Each goal contains multiple approaches and actions as to how they may be implemented
- Economic development partners as a collaborative effort across the region
- The region will continue to identify approaches to pursue as economic factors ebb and flow.

Goal 1: Preserve natural resources and expand opportunities for recreation

Invest in public and shared spaces, create and maintain attractive parks, community centers, walking trails, and common areas.

Protect critical habitats and watersheds

Expand multi-use trail networks

- Connect existing assets
- Diversify trail types
- River/lake access opportunities

Identify targeted investments for unique offerings to set Western Arkansas apart

Promote eco-tourism and nature-based education

Pursue outdoor recreation grants, transportation grants, and any opportunity that may help with the development of trails, parks, river and lake front properties, and streetscapes.

Engage in short-term and long-term planning efforts to identify and help secure funding for hazard mitigation projects related to natural spaces.

Work with community leaders to better understand flood plain management

Key Partners

Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, Cities and Counties, Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism (ADPHT), Arkansas Department of Transportation, Community Grant Organizations (AARP/Blue & You), FEMA, Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, Arkansas Natural Resources Division

Goal 2: Enhance workforce readiness

Improve career readiness of all levels of workforce participants

Support apprenticeship and higher education facilities that promote access to learning

Grow the strength of Western Arkansas' workforce development partners and look for opportunities for collaboration

Work on fostering education for in-demand occupations

Explore transportation options for improving connectivity to workplaces

Support training initiatives and opportunities to upskill the current workforce

Continue efforts to have all six Western Arkansas counties achieve ACT Work Ready certificates.

Understand the unique projects and needs coming to our area with the Airforce mission and establish workforce directives to have qualified, skilled workers for all manufacturers, contractors, consultants, and parties involved.

Use labor market indices to identify workforce development needs as they are arising and before they become an urgent need

Quarterly workforce development board meetings

Construction of a new regional WAPDD facility that will function as a Workforce, Transportation, and Community and Economic Development Center

Key Partners

Local governments and Counties, economic development organizations, chambers, Career Technical Education (CTE) groups/centers, school districts, workforce board and partners, cooperative extension, higher education partners

Goal 3: Promote regional collaboration

Find ways to diversify economic development within the region

Coordinate efforts so that efforts are not duplicated

Recognize that our region is primarily rural and find opportunities for cross-county/community development

Quarterly workforce development board meetings

Quarterly WAPDD board meetings

Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority meetings

Fort Smith Regional Alliance meetings

Advance the understanding of cities and residents of county and regional needs

Foster the mindset that counties and cities must both succeed if they are to prosper

Construction of a new regional WAPDD facility that will function as a Workforce, Transportation, and Community and Economic Development Center

Key Partners

Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, Chambers of Commerce, Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority, Fort Smith Regional Alliance, River Valley Chamber Executives, City/County representatives and officials, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, Municipal League, Association of Counties, Association of Arkansas Development Organizations, US Economic Development Administration, South West Regional Economic Development Association (SWREDA), University of Central Arkansas Community Development Institute

Goal 4: Support business development opportunities

Attract and retain businesses- make Western Arkansas an attractive location for businesses to relocate or expand, and provide support for entrepreneurs

Development of job opportunities

Focus efforts on further development of existing industry clusters and of the businesses and contractors that serve these groups

Coordinate efforts of similar production types within the region

Identify and support upcoming and established industries to determine assistance needed

Support local businesses- encourage entrepreneurship and patronage of local shops, restaurants, and services.

Collaboration of workforce partners to encourage business services for upcoming, established, and those in succession planning

Establish new utility infrastructure, and expand upon current network so that industry will have power supply needed for success

Facilitate partnerships with local governments and Chambers of Commerce

Communicate availability of small business resources within the six-county Western Arkansas region

Foster youth entrepreneurship

Understand and utilize the incentives that will recruit industry to the area

Support local and regional leadership programs for participants ages 50 years and younger

Construction of a new regional WAPDD facility that will function as a Workforce, Transportation, and Community and Economic Development Center

Improve wastewater facilities across the District to promote business expansions

Key Partners

University of Arkansas Center for Economic Development (UAFS CEDS Office), Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, Arkansas Small Business Technology Development Center (SBTDC), SCORE, Guy Fenter Cooperative/CTE, Chambers of Commerce, Boys and Girls Clubs, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, Main Street/Downtown Organizations

Goal 5: Enhance quality of life and amenities

Investing in public spaces

Enhance childcare opportunities

Expand healthcare access

Improve community infrastructure – sidewalks, utilities, well-maintained roads, public transportation, high-speed internet access.

Expand upon utility infrastructure

Promote art and culture- supporting local museums, theaters, and community events, fostering cultural vibrancy

Welcome new residents and discourage outward migration

Tell local stories

Address affordable housing

Highlight success stories

Encourage cities to join Main Street Arkansas support downtown development

Assist communities in joining Arkansas Downtown Network

Encourage cities to have an active downtown group

Continue to apply for grant opportunities for restoration and revitalization of spaces

Identify new and continue grant opportunities that support local well-being, health, and food security such as CDBG.

Review and revise local codes and policies to ensure they both discourage urban sprawl, and encourage brownfield development

Key Partners

Environmental Protection Agency, Downtown networks, Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, Chambers of Commerce, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, housing authorities, cities and counties, food pantries, KSU TAB, Laneshift, Arkansas Community Development Society,

Goal 6: Infrastructure

Seek out and apply for grant opportunities to optimize the potential of Western Arkansas's transportation network

Complete and optimize I-49

Invest in multi-modal connectivity- Support multiple modes of transportation to move goods and people throughout the state

Coordinate a follow-up to the Freight Roundtable

Encourage industry speakers to present at WAIA meetings

Port development

Support WAlA and Frontier MPO in increasing the channel depth of the Arkansas River Navigation Waterway to twelve feet

Continue support of a Regional Intermodal Port, slackwater harbor, and multimodal facility by promoting the port, and attending meetings with the Corp of Engineers.

Rail enhancement

Support the update of the Statewide Rail Plan

Airport

Encourage local travelers to utilize Fort Smith airport in hopes that it may one day expand out to more airlines and flight opportunities

Road network improvements

Support WAlA and Frontier MPO in their efforts to complete I-49

Apply for Safe Street 4 All grants, active transportation infrastructure improvement applications, and RAISE applications

Electric vehicle infrastructure

Apply for grants that fund electric vehicle charging stations for public facilities and parks

Continue to seek grant opportunities for alternative charging infrastructure and equipment.

Trucking/Freight

Route optimization/load planning

Support the Statewide Long-Range Intermodal Transportation Plan

Support the Statewide Freight Plan

Identify and support water/wastewater project sources and supplies, make use of what is available, and properly deal with wastewater runoff

Engage in long-range planning to identify and help secure funding for construction of facilities to provide water/wastewater supply

Construction of a new regional WAPDD facility that will function as a Workforce, Transportation, and Community and Economic Development Center

Improve wastewater facilities across the District to promote business expansions

Key Partners

Western Arkansas Planning & Development District, Arkansas Department of Transportation, Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization, Western Arkansas Intermodal Authority, Five Rivers Distribution, US Maritime Administration, port/harbor authorities and organizations, Laneshift, Arkansas Natural Resources Division, US Department of Agriculture, cities/counties, Communities Unlimited, US Economic Development Administration

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK, MEASURES/INDICATORS:

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) /Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) factors including student enrollment, apprenticeship participation numbers, graduation rates, unemployment rates, labor force participation rates, measurable skills gains and educational attainment

Amount of public land that remains available for development and wise multiple usage

Amount of green spaces that are available for parks and recreation

Increase in local public health programs and facilities

Increases in average household wages and income

Number of new customers added to public water systems through Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) funding

Number of meetings with local elected officials

Number of public meetings to prioritize community needs

Number of CEDS goals and objectives advanced or accomplished

Number of jobs retained

Number of jobs created

Number of new businesses and companies.

Number and types of public sector investments undertaken

Amount of Federal, state, and local investment in the district

Amount of private sector investments in the district

Changes in the economic environment of the district such as adjustments to taxes, fees, and new incentives

Trends in key economic development indicators and any significant changes in the district's economy will be monitored by WAPDD staff and CEDS strategy committee. The effectiveness in meeting the CEDS goals will be evaluated regularly and adjustments to the CEDS document and WAPDD annual plans of action will be made as needed to meet the economic development needs of the district

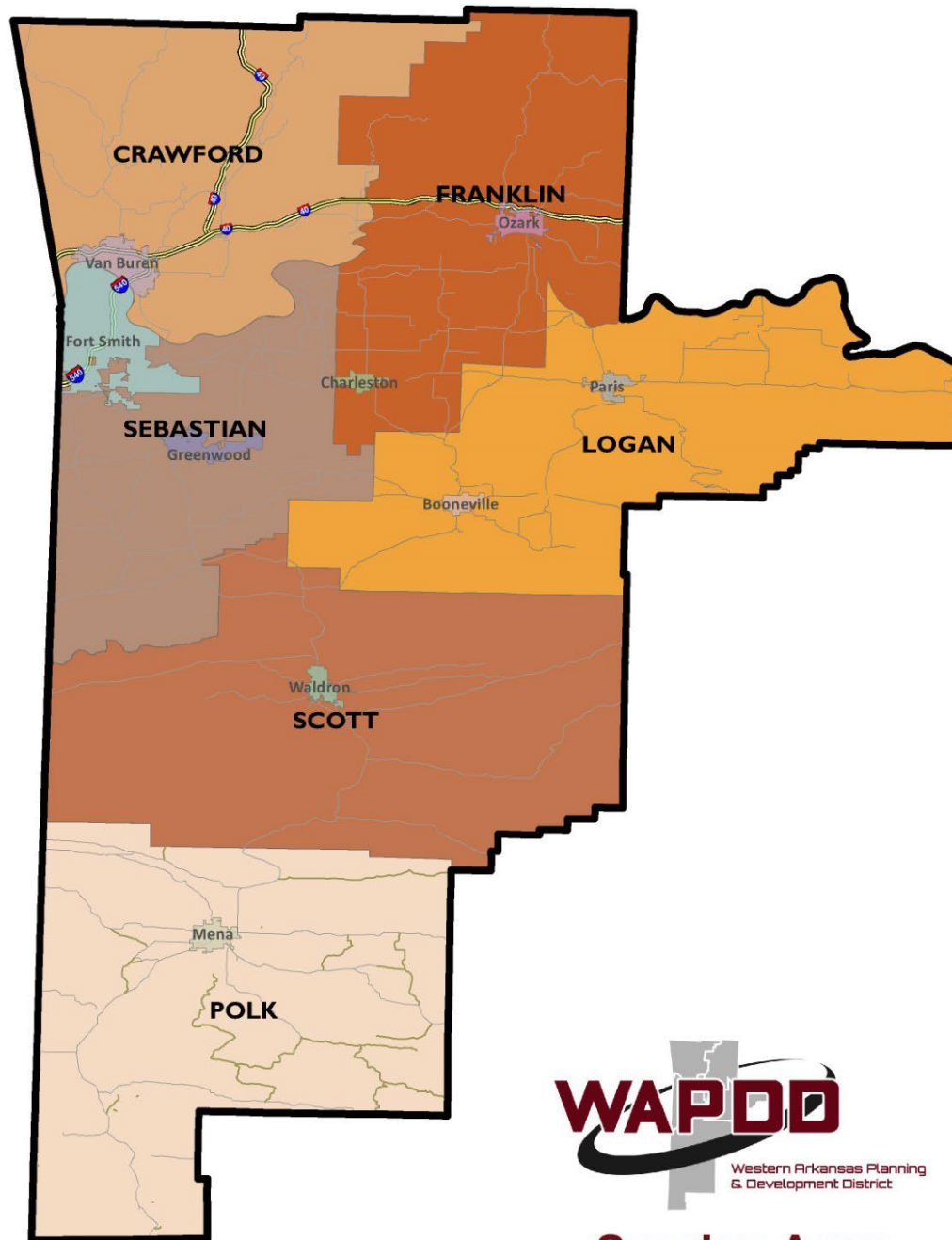
ECONOMIC RESILIENCE:

Regional economic prosperity throughout Western Arkansas is linked to our area's ability to prevent, withstand, and quickly recover from major disruptions to our economic base. Economic resilience is inclusive of three primary attributes: The ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid a shock. The United States Economic Development Administration states that these shocks are manifested in three ways: 1. Downturns or other significant events in the national or international economic which impact demand for locally produced goods and consumer spending; 2. Downturns that are particular to industries that constitute a critical component of a region's economic activity; and/or 3. Other external shocks such as natural or manmade disasters, closures of military bases, exit of a major employer, or climate change. Western Arkansas Planning & Development District has focused on economic resilience in the following ways:

1. The District is engaged in comprehensive planning efforts with all six counties (Crawford, Franklin, Logan, Polk, Scott and Sebastian) and municipalities within these counties, also including the School Districts, Colleges, and other groups such as the Salvation Army and local chambers. WAPDD currently assists all the above mentioned counties and participating jurisdictions in FEMA approved Hazard Mitigation Plans. Crawford County, Logan County, Scott County, Sebastian County and Franklin County have current Hazard Mitigation Plans. WAPDD is also working with Franklin County and Scott County in updating their Mitigation Plan to keep them in compliance with FEMA and engaged in the planning efforts to establish economic resilience. WAPDD also conducts pre-disaster recovery planning to define the stakeholders, roles, responsibilities and key actions needed.
2. WAPDD has a GIS department that maintains geographic information systems and mapping that link with business establishment's data, taxing information, zoning, fire department district boundaries/locations, transportation data and flood plain areas. Our GIS department can provide available development site data as well as property ownership information to our district.
3. WAPDD's community development department and GIS department assist communities, local chambers, industrial boards and businesses in employing safe development practices. Such strategies include assisting in city and regional planning in locating structures outside of floodplains, preserving natural lands and creating green spaces, and protecting downtowns and other existing development from the impacts of extreme weather

4. WAPDD's EPA Brownfields Assessment grant provides the crucial initial funding to inventory, characterize, and assess brownfield sites. This process determines the type and extent of contamination, which is a necessary first step before any cleanup or redevelopment can begin. By addressing the perceived or actual liability associated with contamination, the grant reduces the uncertainty for private investors and developers, making these properties more attractive for reuse.

MAPS:



Service Area

Western Arkansas Planning and Development District



LIST OF AWARDS/GRANTS ACHIEVED 2021-2024:

2021 Grant Awards			
Funding Agency	Grantee	Project Type	Grant Funds
AHPP			
	Logan County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$105,760.00
	Franklin County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$82,390.00
AEDC CDBG			
	Franklin County	Senior Center	\$107,602.00
	Branch	Water Tower	\$258,426.00
	Mulberry	Food Bank	\$300,855.00
	Booneville	Senior Center	\$300,150.00
	Van Buren	Boys and Girls Club	\$162,380.00
	Cedarville	Boys and Girls Club	\$314,500.00
	Franklin County	Disable Adults	\$290,835.00
	Huntington	Fire Truck	\$75,000.00
ARDOT TAP/RTP			
	Sebastian County RTP	Trail	\$100,000.00
	Paris RTP	Trail	\$50,000.00
	Mena TAP	Sidewalk	\$296,000.00
ORGP			
	Mulberry	Park Improvements	\$65,000.00
	Scranton	Park Improvements	\$50,000.00
	Scott County	Park Improvements	\$75,000.00
Comprehensive Opioid Abuse Grant			
	Scott County		\$12,500.00
2022 Grant Awards			
Funding Agency	Grantee	Project Type	Grant Funds
AHPP			
	Scott County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$20,000.00
AEDC CDBG			
	Mulberry	Water Treatment Plant	\$300,000.00
	Alma	Senior Center	\$262,500.00
	Paris	Food Bank	\$300,000.00
	Scranton	Food Bank	\$299,200.00
	Polk County	Senior Center	\$80,455.00
	Mena	Senior Center	\$190,416.00
	Hatfield	Street Improvements	\$148,075.00
	Waldron	Sidewalks	\$172,008.00

	Scott County	Senior Center	\$89,565.00
	Sebastian County	Senior Center	\$230,013.00
	Barling	Assisted Living	\$299,600.00
ARDOT TAP/RTP			
	Scranton RTP	Trail	\$50,000.00
	Greenwood RTP	Trail	\$200,000.00
	Sebastian County RTP	Trail	\$10,000.00
ORGP			
	Booneville	Park Improvements	\$215,000.00
	Caulksville	Park Improvements	\$100,000.00
	Mena	Park Improvements	\$250,000.00
	Greenwood	Park Improvements	\$250,000.00
	Hartford	Park Improvements	\$100,000.00
EDA	Fort Smith	Excelsior Drive	\$1,700,000.00
	Mena	Bike Trails	\$275,000.00
EPA	WAPDD	Brownfields	\$300,000.00
2023 Grant Awards			
Funding Agency	Grantee	Project Type	Grant Funds
AEDC Rural Services			
	Logan County	Fire	\$15,000.00
	Crawford County	Community Center	\$7,068.65
	Kibler	Walking Trail	\$14,590.00
	Branch	Generators	\$13,140.00
AEDC CDBG			
	Greenwood	Senior Center	\$534,750.00
	Hackett	Wastewater	\$524,420.00
	Ozark	Food Pantry	\$531,590.00
	Crawford County	Water	\$1,075,750.00
	Cedarville	Senior Center	\$527,700.00
FEMA HMGP			
	Sebastian County	Hazard Mitigation Plan Update	\$34,675.00
	Fort Smith	Acquisition	\$1,863,615.00
FEMA BRIC			
	Greenwood	Acquisition	\$1,072,345.00
ARDOT TAP/RTP			
	Charleston TAP	Crosswalk Improvements	\$60,000.00
	Lavaca TAP	Sidewalks	\$339,000.00
	Sebastian County RTP	Trails	\$108,000.00
2024 Grant Awards			
Funding Agency	Grantee	Project Type	Grant Funds

AHPP			
	Logan County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$171,281.60
	Franklin County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$20,000.00
	Sebastian County	County Courthouse Restoration	\$20,000.00
AEDC CDBG			
	Logan County	Senior Center	\$515,256.00
ARDOT TAP/RTP			
	Booneville TAP	Pedestrian Bridge	\$245,000.00
	Van Buren TAP	Downtown Streetscape	\$500,000.00
AEDC Rural Services			
	Hackett	ADA Parking	\$10,764.00
AEDC RSBGP			
	Scott County	Lake Hinkle Fire	\$50,000.00
ORGP			
	Barling	Park Improvements	\$250,000.00

COMMITTEE MAKEUP:

Name	R a c e	S e x	Position	Locality	L.E.O.	Econ. & Bus. Dev.	Comm. Org.	Private Bus.
Judge Ricky Bowman	W	M	Judge	Franklin County	X			
Julie Murray	W	F	Van Buren Chamber	Van Buren	X	X		
Sarah Dye	W	F	Mena Chamber	Mena	X			
Karen Hawkins	W	F	Ozark Chamber	Ozark	X	X		
Lorlla Wallace	W	W	Waldron Chamber	Waldron	X			
Rusty Myers	W	M	Businessman	Van Buren		X	X	
Bob Purvis	W	F	Greenwood Chamber	Greenwood	X	X		
Mundi Ross	W	F	Chaffee Crossing	Barling	X			
Hanah Fritshe	W	F	Booneville Chamber	Booneville	X	X		
Tonya Fletcher	W	F	Paris Chamber	Paris	X	X		
Emily Cooper Yates	W	F	AEDC	Rogers	X	X		
Tonya Sarlls	W	F	Fort Smith Chamber	Fort Smith	X	X		
Lindsay Dodson	W	F	Businessman	Van Buren				X
Bryan Huff	W	F	Alma Chamber	Alma	X			
Jim Eldridge	W	M	OG+E			X		X
Amber Mikles	W	F	Executive Director - B&G Club	Booneville			X	