



Arkansas Visitors Find “Can-Do” Partnerships in the Lehigh Valley

Mayors, judges and community leaders from the Little Rock, AR region traveled to the Lehigh Valley in October to share best practices that could help them manage the transportation network in a four-county region of 700,000 people.

They left three days later, blown away by the Lehigh Valley’s can-do approach and willingness to work together to get things done.

“It just seems like everyone here recognizes challenges, but there’s this group buy-in that turns every challenge into an opportunity,” said Allen Dodson, Faulkner County

Judge, which is the equivalent of a County Executive in the Lehigh Valley. “I’m amazed at how much you get done by working together.”

Metroplan is the Metropolitan Planning Organization – the equivalent of the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study - that handles all things transportation in a four-county region in Central Arkansas. At 700,000, its population is almost identical to the Lehigh Valley in size and much like Northampton and Lehigh Counties, the Metroplan region is projected to grow rapidly through 2050. However, the Metroplan region is more spread out, with a footprint that includes 27 cities and 3,000 square miles – roughly four times the size of the Lehigh Valley.

About every two years, its 37-member board takes a “benchmarking” trip to another region to share best practices and learn new methods. With Lehigh Valley Planning Commission serving as hosts, Metroplan’s October visit itinerary read like a “who’s who” in Lehigh Valley government and business. It included appearances by Mayors Matt Tuerk in Allentown, Sal Panto in Easton and J. William Reynolds in Bethlehem, as well as County Executives Phillips Armstrong and Lamont McClure, each giving their take on how the region finds success. It also included municipal managers Cathy Hartranft of Hellertown, Brian Carl of Weisenberg Township, Stephen Reider of Bangor and Mark Saginario of Tatamy, who welcomed the 37-member group with a panel discussion on challenges and opportunities faced by small communities.

Business and agency leaders included Lehigh Valley IronPigs Co-Owner Joe Finley and General Manager Kurt Landes, Allentown Waterfront developers Mark and Zachary Jaindl, Easton Development Partnership Executive Director Jared Mast, ArtsQuest CEO Kassie Hilgert, Easton Community and Economic Development Director John Kingsley, as well as PennDOT’s Transportation Systems Management & Operations Manager Scott Benedict, who discussed Pennsylvania’s intelligent technology systems.

The Metroplan board members also met with LVTS and LVPC board members, including LVPC officers Chairman Steven Glickman, Vice Chair Chris Amato and Transportation Chair Kent Herman, LANTA Director Owen O’Neil, and Bethlehem Planning Director Darlene Heller.

With guided – and narrated - tours of all three cities, Coca-Cola Park, the Waterfront Development, SteelStacks and the D&L Trail, Metroplan members were struck by how many projects involved multi-municipal cooperation, or public/private partnerships.

“This has been eye-opening for me,” said Mayflower Mayor Danny Hester. “It’s refreshing to meet so many people with an entrepreneurial spirit, and a willingness to work together to find a way.”

As Neighborhood Improvement Zone (NIZ) Executive Director Steve Bamford and Mayor Tuerk led the group through a downtown that’s been the benefit of \$1 billion in development over the past decade, they explained that finding a way meant state

legislators creating the NIZ – perhaps Pennsylvania’s most powerful tax incentive district. But even that kind of investment can’t fix every problem, Tuerk explained.

“This road cuts right through our neighborhoods, creating a barrier that makes it difficult for people to get through,” Tuerk said pointing to the one-way, three-lane 7th Street that seems to invite both speeders and double-parkers. “We don’t have a solution for this yet, but we’re working on it.”

Landes and Armstrong explained how locating the Phillies Class AAA team in Allentown and the building of Cola-Cola Park was a unique private/public partnership that’s made Allentown home to the nation’s highest-drawing Minor League Baseball park.

“We have 8,300 seats and draw 9,000 on any given night – with 700 people standing,” Landes told his visitors. “Everything was designed for 6,000, not 9,000 – parking, points of sale, everything was planned with fewer people in mind, but within weeks, we adjusted. We’re now able to get 10,000 people out of here in 20 minutes after an event. You learn and you adjust.”

The visit to the Waterfront was a study in persistence, where Jaindl Development Company, now entering its second decade on a former industrial brownfield along the banks of the Lehigh River, recently opened the first of several office, residential, and parking structures. To go along with that long-term commitment that included Jaindl buying an abandoned rail bed, was a \$21.2 million federal grant secured by the LVPC, after six years of applying to build a multimodal commuter and recreation road and trail called Riverside Drive. With the state-created NIZ at its base, the Waterfront is expected to create thousands of jobs and close Pennsylvania’s largest D&L Trail gap, while providing a key link between disadvantaged neighborhoods and major employment centers.

They heard much the same story of persistence and collaboration from community managers whose municipalities are part of Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plans that enable neighboring communities to plan together, while keeping their autonomy.

“Where we are, it’s an uphill battle to get people to work together for a greater purpose – everyone is worried about losing their identity,” said Metroplan Board of Directors President Barry Hyde, who is Pulaski County Judge. “This has energized me to work toward what you have here. This is proof positive that it works.”

Perhaps their most inspiring visit was to SteelStacks, where the former Bethlehem Steel the blast furnaces are used as a backdrop for an entertainment campus that now annually holds hundreds of events and draws hundreds of thousands of people. The last of the more than 30,000 jobs that once made steel for wars, vehicles and city skylines was extinguished more than two decades ago, but the site has never been more alive, Hilgert explained. SteelStacks is also the result of a private/public/private partnership that started with Bethlehem Steel, continued with a tax financing district and blossomed with ArtsQuest’s vision.

“This is all built on a foundation of authenticity,” Hilgert said. “I’ve done some research on the Little Rock region. You certainly have authenticity to sell. You can do this.”

By the time Metroplan members headed back to Central Arkansas, Hilgert and her Lehigh Valley colleagues had many of them believing.

“This has definitely motivated me to be more focused on working with our neighbors,” said Mayorflower Mayor Hester. “If not on the Metroplan board, then in my own community. There’s a lot we can take away from this.”