

## Conversation Starters for Progress in Franklin County

Changes in our economy -- even during a pandemic -- have positioned Franklin County to take advantage of a number of opportunities for growth and development -- opportunities that cannot be ignored. Individuals are no longer attached to their offices or desk jobs and are making life-changing decisions in search of healthier work/life balances, locations with a lower cost of living, and multiple quality of life conveniences. We can achieve smart growth and sustainable development while not sacrificing our natural resources or what makes our community unique.

A plan that is not solely dependent on state government or traditional manufacturing is necessary. While valuable partners in the past, state government and traditional manufacturing cannot support the well-rounded thriving community we aim to be. The time is now to plan for a sustainable future for our community by building on our countless strengths. I encourage our community to embrace new opportunities and consider the following sectors as conversation starters: education, trades and apprenticeship, agricultural development, manufacturing re-imagined, health care, tourism, and quality of life.

Creative and innovative thinking is required to enhance our vision and investment in our future. A growing, thriving population is needed to sustain any economy. Franklin County's population has essentially stagnated over the last two decades. Long-term sustainable growth can be ours through comprehensive approaches that bring new partners with new ideas to the table.

So where do we begin? Success requires investment in strategies that provide economic stability and permanency and meet the needs of our citizenry, our businesses, and our community.

### Education

Within 100 miles of Franklin County, there are more than 20 accredited private and public postsecondary institutions offering diverse curriculums and career pathways for those pursuing two- and four-year degree programs, technical credentials, and apprenticeships in employee training programs. The economy thrives when skilled laborers, trade positions, and those with a postsecondary degree provide balance to the community's workforce needs.

The *Legacy and Legends Scholarship Program* at Georgetown College enables students graduating from any public, private, or home school in Franklin County and enrolling in Georgetown through the Fall of 2029, to attend college tuition-free. This scholarship, worth \$160,000, is an educational springboard only offered to students in **four** Kentucky counties. The advantage to Franklin County is immeasurable and can serve as a selling point to families seeking a community with this kind of benefit.

Governor Andy Beshear's November 2020 initiative *Never Underestimate You!*, an enhancement of the Work Ready Scholarship, is a valuable opportunity for Franklin

County. It pays tuition and fees remaining after federal, state and postsecondary institution-offered grants/scholarships are used and is available for up to 60 credit hours in more than 350 courses in healthcare, manufacturing, construction/skilled trades, transportation/logistics, and business/information technology.

Collaboration and cross-generational learning gives all levels of students the chance to learn and innovate. One way to accomplish this might be to launch a project-based learning academy with Kentucky State University to help develop K-12 students living inside Franklin County. In other institutions, this concept offers those who desire a more rigorous curriculum, incorporates best practices, collaboration, organization and innovation in elementary and secondary education, promotes educational research, provides direct classroom experiences for university students, and forges a permanent alliance between the community and the university. This could serve as an additional inducement for young families to consider Franklin County as their home.

KSU's Aquaculture Program and its Harold R. Benson Research and Demonstration Farm could offer local middle and high school students unique and unparalleled hands-on experiences across a broad spectrum of subjects. Soil management, organic agriculture, livestock nutrition, honeybee and urban agricultural research are examples of existing tracts of study at the Farm. Offering students the chance for dual credit and exposure to university-level programs will blend academics with hands-on, career-themed curriculum.

### **Trades and Apprenticeships**

Both the workforce and workplace of today have changed drastically from that of the model of the baby boom generation. Workforce preparation for occupations which pay high wages no longer require that individuals follow the university or college path. Plumbers/HVAC technicians, electricians, iron/steel/sheet metal workers, surgical and MRI technicians, certified nursing assistants, dental hygienists, auto technicians, web developers, and many more can use multiple modes of instruction to quickly enter the workplace and begin earning a family sustaining wage.

Franklin County has a wealth of wisdom in its business professionals. This wealth could be shared with our student population in the form of an outreach panel or speakers bureau representing local corporations and organizations that could become internships. By connecting students with real-world experience, we stimulate and encourage ideas. This would also serve to forge and strengthen the bond between business and education.

*Frankfort Impact*, a program pioneered by the Frankfort Area Chamber of Commerce, could be an excellent initiative for emphasizing the concepts of technology and digital literacy. It includes in-school career exploration lessons that lead to practical experience: up to three hours of career exploration and immersion in the education pathways which lead to careers. This could range from basics such as email, word processing, and spreadsheets, to sophisticated mobile points of sale in the retail and hospitality industry, and electronic medical record systems in the healthcare industry.

Apprenticeship programs blend on-the-job training with classroom instruction. Employer worksites and labor union-developed instruction are ways to participate in such programs. Those attaining a credential through an apprenticeship often find themselves at an advantage as they begin their career.

## **Agriculture**

Many view agriculture as a one-dimensional vocation and thereby omit it as a career choice. From agronomist to agricultural engineer, commodity trader to veterinarian, farmer to food scientist, long-term career prospects exist. Companies like Alltech demonstrate just that. Its scientific innovations have elevated basic agricultural concepts, increasing not only productivity yields in livestock and crops but also a whole new range of career diversity. We need to emulate this kind of creative thinking.

In Rowan and Madison Counties, AppHarvest is pioneering large-scale, indoor, sustainable, growth platforms. Given KSU's pioneering aquaculture program and the 300-acre Harold R. Benson Research and Demonstration Farm, community collaboration with Kentucky State University on such topics as sustainable farming, resource conservation, and the logistics of transporting fresh fruits and vegetables to large population centers can benefit both economic development and agriculture in Franklin County.

## **Manufacturing Re-imagined**

The pandemic has reinforced the advantage of having goods produced in locations where they can easily be transported. With Franklin County's placement along I-64 and proximity to I-65, I-75, and the Bluegrass Parkway, we are strategically positioned to reach major population centers within a 5-6 hour drive. In addition, our community possesses the infrastructure (industrial parks) much needed by industry.

Many manufacturing jobs have evolved from workers who stand at labor-intensive, rote production lines to critical thinkers who work with cutting edge technology. Given Franklin County's proximity to auto manufacturers like Ford, General Motors, and Toyota, recruiting companies that produce automotive parts is a natural and logical strategy. However, let's look at opportunities to recruit those that focus on progressive, modern components such as autonomous driving systems, automatic proximity detection, emergency braking systems, smart key fobs, adaptive lighting systems, electric traction motors, thermal systems, etc.

This demands a more educated and skilled workforce. The postsecondary institutions within that 100-mile radius of Franklin County could provide vital resources to meet the demands of this changing workforce. It will also require innovative, cooperative research and development initiatives carried out in partnership with the state's leading research universities.

With a number of large hospitals near Franklin County, and many others within the aforementioned 5-6 hour drive, attracting medical supply manufacturers to our community would have the benefit of limiting interruptions in the critical medical supply chain. Never before has a break in this supply chain been more of a threat than during the current pandemic. Access to medical supplies, medical equipment, and medication are critical for hospitals, clinics, medical centers, and other health care providers. It is essential that Franklin County develop a strategy to be part of this manufacturing sector.

## **Health Care**

Kentucky State University should serve as a leader in the medical services field for our community. Its School of Nursing currently offers an Associate of Applied Science and a Bachelor's Degree in Nursing, as well as a Doctor of Nursing Practice.

The current pandemic has shown a spotlight on the need to grow our medical resources throughout the country. Expansion in medical disciplines will most certainly result, and the manner in which healthcare is provided will position KSU to be a critical participant in this evolution. To enable increased employment in diagnostics, direct care, administration, and support services, KSU could enhance existing programs and add specialty programs. In addition, KSU's School of Business could develop programs such as a Bachelor of Science Degree in Health Science/Health Policy (perhaps with a focus on Hospital Administration), Health Informatics, Medical Records Technicians and Specialists, Human Resources/Health Care Credentialing Specialists, and others.

Utilizing our local resources at KSU and energizing its leadership to explore expansion of medical programs definitely merits further conversation. Medical care is needed at some point in every person's life. Having KSU be a part of improvements in the healthcare system is a win-win.

## **Tourism**

Tourism provides multiple benefits to residents and visitors alike. It can be the pillar that supports who we want to be and define the character of this area. We have too often focused solely on Frankfort as a historical destination, but we have so much more to offer as a community: world class natural resources, our bourbon industry, craft breweries, and amazing art and cultural venues that are unique to a town our size.

Public and private partnerships, including the expansion of overnight accommodations and the growth of recreational and entertainment options, produce jobs and revenue. An expanded tourism industry can be a major factor in attracting new residents looking to relocate from bigger cities or declining regions.

Our priorities and the way we interact in our diverse communities is changing. We can capitalize on this evolution to create a business- and family-friendly tourism strategy that encourages job growth, learning, enjoyment and community enrichment. Diverse and dynamic tourism sends a signal that we are open for expansion of jobs, creation of new products, and creative educational partnerships.

## **Quality of Life**

Franklin County possesses the quality of life characteristics that other communities envy, including a thriving river culture for pleasure boaters, water skiers, fishermen, and those wishing to take advantage of the recently reopened locks on the Kentucky River. Our creeks allow for fishing, canoeing, kayaking, and stand-up paddle boarding. Franklin County has diverse mountain bike trails, in-town bike lanes, and scenic country bike routes with gentle rolling hills. The hiking, camping, and outdoor recreational landscape is unmatched. Easily accessible area parks, spread across our community, offer a variety of family-friendly opportunities such as water amenities; children's playground equipment; golf courses; a skateboard park, softball and soccer fields; sand volleyball, pickleball and tennis courts, frisbee golf courses, dog parks; pavilions; and paved and unpaved trails, yet have endless possibilities to be so much more. According to Lexington-Bluegrass Association of Realtor data, Franklin County's housing market for year-to-date 2020 through November demonstrates that the median sales price is less than Anderson, Scott and Woodford, which are the only LBAR-member, contiguous counties to Franklin. These indisputable facts set our community apart and even ahead of others. Yet we lack a multi-purpose facility where we can hold events, community functions, meetings, conferences, concerts and more. This leaves a major void where a key quality of life component should be. Swift action is needed as we head into our third year without this type of facility. The longer our community doesn't have one, the longer we remain behind others that do.

## **Future conversations**

Information from the Kentucky State Data Center demonstrates that Franklin County, even with our advantages, lags behind every neighboring county but Owen in population growth. Bringing new people and new conversations to the table can only generate new ideas. We can achieve smart growth and sustainable economic development with the proper vision and investment in our future. With the Franklin County Comprehensive Plan revision poised to commence, the convergence of opportunities for Franklin County to maximize its potential is unparalleled. The suggestions I offer are meant to start conversations about what progress looks like. I welcome your feedback; let's talk about it as we develop the blueprint together to move Franklin County forward.

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