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# Conway planning

BALANCING OUR BOOM IN DEVELOPMENT WITH SOUND PLANNING POLICY TO PLANT THE SEEDS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE.

*Modeled after the Greek agora, the open-air farmers market was a prominent feature of American cities in the 18th and 19th centuries before disappearing during the World War II era. Now, Conway contemplates joining other cities in looking at the farmers market as a tool to boost the downtown economy.*



## Betting the Farm

### How One City Transformed Downtown by Reintroducing Rural to Urban

When the socially and environmentally-conscious city of Davis, California (population 65,000) saw surrounding cities' downtowns follow the national trend of inner-city decay in the late 1970s, city leaders and citizens decided to pursue a bold and progressive approach to keep people living, visiting, and working downtown: a farmers market.

A farmers market? *Bold and progressive?* Those words hardly seem compatible. After all, throughout the latter half of the 20th century, many cities spent millions of dollars constructing entertainment districts and converting historic, deteriorated structures into downtown shopping malls. Those moves were deemed bold and progressive at the time, though many ultimately failed. The washout of Little Rock's ill-advised Main Street Market in the mid-1980s exemplified locally what many other cities with similar ambitious plans experienced.

To leaders in many cities, it seemed that downtown was a lost cause. Residents and businesses followed developers to the outskirts of town, where land was plentiful and unencumbered by dilapidated buildings and limited parking.

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Between 1960 and 2001, the number of farmers markets actively operating in the U.S. increased from 240 to 3,000, many of them housed in permanent, fixed structures.

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Civic and business leaders in Davis chose a different direction. They decided that if a multi-million dollar entertainment and shopping complex backed by federal, state, and local funds

could not succeed in other cities, then perhaps the answer to downtown's problems was something much simpler. Impressed by the successes of farmers markets in neighboring towns, Davis' downtown leaders carefully studied the rise and fall of farmers markets.

Urban farmers markets became a mainstay of American cities in the 18th and 19th centuries and were typically located in downtown areas. The farmers market provided an opportunity for rural farmers to sell their goods in a largely unrestricted setting, while allowing city residents the opportunity to buy products that were not typically available in local retail markets. Refrigeration, the loss of farmland, and self-service grocery stores were the leading factors in the municipal farmers market becoming obsolete during the 1940s. However, funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture led to a farmers market renaissance of sorts in the latter

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part of the 20th century. Between 1970 and 2001, the number of farmers markets actively operating in the U.S. increased from 240 to 3,000, many of them housed in permanent, fixed structures.

Could a cheap, metal, open-air structure do for Davis what malls and theaters were unable to do for other cities? In 1984, after ten years of success with an open-air market in a downtown parking lot, the City of Davis funded the construction of a permanent, covered pavilion downtown, which allowed the farmers market to operate year-round. A deck and performance area followed; the deck is frequently used by social and political groups for meetings, while the performance area is used by school and community groups.

The Davis Farmers Market has an ever-growing waiting list of local farmers who anxiously await the opportunity to sell their products at the market. Other

downtown businesses credit the market and its permanent, multi-use structure with keeping downtown vibrant and preventing the area from falling into the physical and economic disrepair that other downtowns across the U.S. have experienced. Countless cities—including Little Rock, Minneapolis, and Roanoke—tell similar stories and credit their farmers markets with playing a significant role in downtown revitalization.

The City of Conway's commitment to rethinking downtown in order to keep it vibrant and competitive has led city leaders to consider plans for a permanent, covered structure on city-owned property at the corner of Parkway and Main. The proposed structure would house a seasonal farmers market, where Arkansas farmers would be able to market their goods directly to the public. Because of its location near the epicenter of downtown activity, this prominent public space would

also be utilized during Toad Suck Daze and other downtown events that would benefit from the open-air nature of the structure. In some ways, the structure itself would be as significant for the community as the market it houses. Grouped with Simon Park, the planned downtown parking deck, and recently-announced businesses, both the market and the structure could be a boon for downtown Conway.

Forty years ago, farmers markets were thought to be obsolete; the few that survived the onslaught of self-service supermarkets were looked upon as quaint reminders of America's rural past. It is that very aspect, in part, that served as a catalyst to revive farmers markets over the last four decades. Perhaps Conway will be the next great American city to take the *bold and progressive* step of reviving the centuries-old tradition of farmers markets, bringing our nation's history back to the city center.

## A Look at America's Farmers Markets



Above: Artist's rendering of Conway Station Market, a permanent, covered, multi-purpose facility that would house a farmers market.

Below: The Little Rock River Market includes both an open-air, covered facility for the seasonal farmers market and an enclosed facility for year-round vendors. The covered pavilion is also used during Riverfest, Race for the Cure, and other high-profile downtown events.



Right: The St. Paul (MN) farmers market includes a multi-purpose structure similar to the structure proposed in Conway. The market structure welcomes weekly performances by local musicians.



Left: The farmers market in the historic town of Opelousas (LA) is housed in a permanent structure that also hosts zydeco festivals and other community events.

Right: Residents and visitors enjoy the Davis (CA) farmers market, which includes a pavilion for concerts and exhibits, as well as a performance area.



## Progress Report on Old Morrilton Highway Corridor Study

The Conway Planning and Development Department recently completed a series of public events to raise awareness and gather public input about the future of U.S. Highway 64, known to many long-time local residents as Old Morrilton Highway. The opening of a new exit connecting Interstate 40 with Old Morrilton Highway has prompted speculation about the corridor's future from residents, property owners, recreationists, and other stakeholders. On April 24 at the McGee Center, nearly 40 stakeholders attended a presentation highlighting existing conditions along the highway.

Stakeholders were encouraged to offer their own ideas of how the corridor should develop through several visioning exercises. At a public meeting held on April 26 at Ruth Doyle Intermediate School, 15 stakeholders voiced concerns about a wide range of topics such as potential commercial development and the negative

effects of noise caused by trucks' engine brakes. An open house hosted by the Planning and Development Department the following week saw 17 visitors, while 88 stakeholders gave their opinions via an online visual preference questionnaire. Comments received through the open house and visual preference questionnaire ranged from "keeping cyclists in mind should be very important" and "would like my property not to lower in value" to "less government is better".

The Planning and Development Department used public input to supplement best practices in creating a long-range plan for the Old Morrilton Highway corridor. The plan is part of *Old Morrilton Highway Corridor Study: Report on Existing Conditions and Plan for Future Development*, which includes a series of policies and action items grouped under four guiding principles (vehicular and pedestrian safety; accessibility and

connectivity; aesthetics and contextual design; and sustainable development). The guiding principles, policies, and action items culminate in the plan itself, which includes sections on roads, recreational opportunities, and land uses. Among the recommendations included in the plan: creating a recreational corridor connecting existing and proposed parks; developing an access management plan to prevent excessive curb cuts along the highway; and encouraging a broad mix of land uses through cooperative efforts.

A draft of *Old Morrilton Highway Corridor Study: Report on Existing Conditions and Plan for Future Development* and supporting documentation is available online at [www.conwayplanning.org](http://www.conwayplanning.org). The Conway Planning and Development Department will present the draft long-range plan to stakeholders at 6:30 PM, Tuesday, June 3rd, at the McGee Center.

### Lower Ridge Road Corridor Study Underway

Following a pattern similar to that of the Old Morrilton Highway corridor study, the Conway Planning and Development Department will hold a series of public events to discuss development alternatives and solicit stakeholder input for Lower Ridge Road throughout the month of June. On June 12th (6:30 PM at Raymond and Phyllis Simon Intermediate School), planners will give a presentation highlighting existing conditions along Lower Ridge Road and offering scenarios for future development. Stakeholders are welcome to make comments, offer suggestions, and ask questions about the planning process at a visioning exercise to be held on June 17th at 6:30 PM at Raymond and Phyllis Simon Intermediate School. The Planning and Development Department will host an Open House at City Hall June 18th through June 20th from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM each day. Stakeholders are also invited to participate in an online visual preference questionnaire available on the Planning and Development Department's website.

Upon completion of these events, the Planning and Development Department will create a report and plan, which will then be presented to the community for additional comments. By the end of July, the joint Old Morrilton Highway – Lower Ridge Road corridor study will be presented to the Planning Commission and City Council. If adopted by resolution, the plans contained in the studies will replace the corresponding sections of the City's Comprehensive Plan.

### New Parks to Join Conway's Network of Sports Facilities

*City of Colleges Park and Conway Station Park will provide boost to local economy while providing additional opportunities for local youth sports leagues*

The Conway Parks and Recreation Department has plans to expand recreational opportunities for Conway's residents and visitors. Two additional youth sports facilities will join the City's Soccer Park in providing playing fields for young athletes. According to Brian Knopp, Director of the Parks and Recreation Department, a girls' softball complex—City of Colleges Park—is scheduled to open by summer 2009. The first phase of the complex will include the fields and concession area, while additional features such as a trail, boardwalk, and playground will be constructed later. A youth baseball complex—Conway Station Park—will be constructed on the current fairgrounds site and should be completed by summer 2010. Knopp notes that Conway Station Park will feature a unique railroad theme that will draw upon Conway's rail history.

The naming of these new facilities comes on the heels of the completion of another successful youth sports event in Conway. In May, as many as 5,000 players, parents, and coaches representing nearly 100 soccer teams from across Arkansas ventured to Conway to participate in the annual President's Cup soccer tournament at Conway's Soccer Park on Trey Lane. Local hotels reported a boost in occupancy rates while the President's Cup was in town.

Though the economic impact of youth sports tournaments is evident in the long lines at local restaurants and lack of vacancies at nearby hotels, few economic impact studies have been conducted to determine the effects of such tournaments on hosting communities. One prominent study that appeared in the August 2003 edition of *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* estimated that the average family or tourist group that participated in a weekend youth sports tournament spent nearly \$382 on lodging, food, and other necessities. Because such events are economically lucrative, many cities have sought to distinguish themselves as destinations for youth sports leagues.

Conway's new network of athletic facilities will serve local youth leagues, while growing Conway's up-and-coming tourist economy. Marketed properly, these facilities should serve as a stimulus for the local economy for decades to come.

*Parks are more than pretty spaces for children to play. They can improve our physical and psychological health, make our neighborhoods more livable, and increase property values. The Partnership for Public Land has studied neighborhood and community parks extensively and offers this summary of how parks make life better.*

# The Benefits of Parks

Excerpted from *The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More Parks and Open Spaces*  
Paul M. Sherer, The Trust for Public Land

At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas and small towns, relatively close to the land. At the beginning of the 21st century, 85 percent of us were living in cities and metropolitan areas, and many of us are in desperate need of places to experience nature and refresh ourselves in the out-of-doors.

The emergence of America as an urban nation was anticipated by Frederick Law Olmsted and other 19th-century park visionaries, who gave us New York's Central Park, San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, and similar grand parks in cities across the nation. They were gardeners and designers—but also preachers for the power of parks, fired from within by the understanding that they

were shaping the quality of American lives for generations to come.

In the view of these park visionaries, parks were not “amenities.” They were necessities, providing recreation, inspiration, and essential respite from the city's blare and bustle. And the visionaries were particularly concerned that parks be available to all of a city's residents—especially those who did not have the resources to escape to the countryside.

## *5 Ways That Individuals, Neighborhoods, and Communities Benefit from Parks*

- Strong evidence shows that when people have access to parks, they exercise more. Regular physical activity has been shown to increase health and reduce the risk of a wide range of diseases, including heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes. Physical activity also relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety, improves mood, and enhances psychological well-being. Beyond the benefits of exercise, a growing body of research shows that contact with the natural world improves physical and psychological health.

- Numerous studies have shown that parks and open space increase the value of neighboring residential property. Growing evidence points to a similar benefit on commercial property value. The availability of park and recreation facilities is an important quality-of-life factor for corporations choosing where to locate facilities and for well-educated individuals choosing a place to live. City parks such as San Antonio's Riverwalk Park



*Pedestrian bridge at New York's Central Park*

often become important tourism draws, contributing heavily to local businesses.

- Green space in urban areas provides substantial environmental benefits. Trees reduce air pollution and water pollution, they help keep cities cooler, and they are a more effective and less expensive way to manage stormwater runoff than building systems of concrete sewers and drainage ditches.

- City parks also produce important social and community development benefits. They make inner-city neighborhoods more livable; they offer recreational opportunities for at-risk youth, low-income children, and low-income families; and they provide places in low-income neighborhoods where people can feel a sense of community. Access to public parks and recreational facilities has been strongly linked to reductions in crime and in particular to juvenile delinquency.

- Community gardens increase residents' sense of community ownership and stewardship, provide a focus for neighborhood activities, expose inner-city youth to nature, connect people from diverse cultures, reduce crime by cleaning up vacant lots, and build community leaders.

*Read the full report online at [www.tpl.org](http://www.tpl.org).*

## **America's Top Urban Parks**

Compiled by Urban Land Institute

- Allegheny Riverfront Park, Pittsburgh PA
- Campus Martius Park, Detroit MI
- Capital Plaza, New York NY
- Chess Park, Glendale CA
- Heart of the Park at Hermann Park, Houston TX
- Jamison Square, Portland OR
- Waterfront Park, Louisville KY
- Pier A Park, Hoboken NJ
- South Boston Maritime Park, Boston MA
- Wade Oval, Cleveland OH

## **America's Top State Parks**

Compiled by *Woodall's Camping Life*

- Petit Jean State Park, Arkansas
- DeSoto State Park, Alabama
- Big Basin State Park, California
- Cape Henlopen State Park, Delaware
- Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, Florida
- Cheney State Park, Kansas
- Mount Greylock State Reservation, Massachusetts
- Blue Mounds State Park, Minnesota
- Sugarite Canyon State Park, New Mexico
- Ohiopyle State Park, Pennsylvania



*City of Conway  
Planning Department  
1201 Oak Street  
501-450-6105*

*Please contact any member of the planning staff with questions or comments regarding planning, zoning, subdivision, or any other land-use policy within the City of Conway.*

**Planning Director**

*Bryan Patrick, AICP  
bryan.patrick@cityofconway.org*

**Assistant Planning Director**

*Ken Pickett  
ken.pickett@cityofconway.org*

**Planner**

*Donald Anthony  
donald.anthony@cityofconway.org*

**Planner**

*Christy Sutherland  
christy.sutherland@cityofconway.org*

**Planner**

*Wes Craiglow  
On Leave*

**GIS Coordinator**

*Jason Lyon  
jason.lyon@cityofconway.org*

**Planning Technician**

*Lileha Rhea  
lileha.rhea@cityofconway.org*