

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Dan Houston
RE: Okolona Technical Assistance
FILE: ARC South
DATE: June 17, 2003
FORWARD: Patsy Gregory, Russell Brooks, Kostas Skordas, Al Miles,
Interested Stakeholders, CivicARC.com website

Matt Cunningham and I had the opportunity to visit Okolona on June 9th and 10th, meeting with interested local stakeholders and potentially helpful outside resources.

ORGANIZATION

Patsy Gregory, Director of the Okolona Chamber of Commerce, will continue to serve as the primary liaison to both Civic Economics and ARC staff. Ms. Gregory and Russell Brooks, County Supervisor for the local beat, have drafted an invitation list for an 18 member Steering Committee. We have high hopes that all will agree to participate. Additionally, the National Council for Negro Women will need to be actively engaged throughout the process.

Because Okolona has attracted the attention of several helpful outside resources, Patsy will also invite a number of them to participate in a formal advisory role. Architects, planners, and public officials will be essential to implementation, so they will be involved from the start.

There has been some inconclusive discussion as to how to present the initiative, whether it will be under the auspices of the Chamber, the NCNW, or a freestanding group. The Northern CivicARC communities have chosen to identify simply as Team Brownsville and Team Nelsonville, which implies a very broad mandate and reaches across boundaries. We will leave that up to the Committee, but hope that the eventual title will be similarly broad.

BACKGROUND

Okolona is a small community with a rich history, and that history is clearly visible in the built infrastructure. Main Street storefronts are generally intact and in use, with a wide variety of merchandise available in the urban core. Striking older homes dot the Historic District, and many have been lovingly renovated. From 1902 to 1965, the city was home to Okolona College, a technical and collegiate institute for black students from throughout the region.

Like other communities in the region, Okolona has long struggled with racial divisions. However, we found strong consensus on all fronts to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the Technical Assistance program to pursue a unifying initiative. We hope the project selected will serve that purpose as well as meet the principal requirement of the program: to implement a project that addresses critical issues facing the community.

The Small Town Center at the MSU School of Architecture has already studied the Okolona College site once, in 1997 when Abbott Hall was still standing. Kimberly Brown of the Center has agreed to provide some continuing assistance as we move forward. Additionally, Al Miles of MSU Extension has offered to provide his services as needed, though his resources are stretched pretty thin at this point in time.

PROJECT SELECTION

Okolona's experience in the Technical Assistance program has been atypical. Shortly after the Subregional Workshop, MSU Extension had to withdraw from the project due to staff shortages. Thereafter, local planning continued through the Chamber of Commerce and the Save Okolona Society, a local organization dedicated to the preservation and rehabilitation of the building stock. That initiative predates the ARC program and should certainly outlive it.

When Civic Economics was tapped to provide Technical Assistance in Okolona, Dan Houston traveled with Sue Moreland and Kostas Skordas of the ARC to

meet with local stakeholders. After discussion of the nature of the Technical Assistance program, a quick, preliminary consensus was reached to consider using the Okolona College campus as the target project.

The choice of OC as the project is not without challenges. First, the property is privately owned. The owner, the National Council of Negro Women, Mississippi Chapter, has made it clear that they do not intend to alienate the land. Therefore, we will need to work very closely with the organization to produce a plan that works for all. The first issue to be resolved in that regard is a fairly broad Memorandum of Understanding, laying out the basic structure of this initiative and the willingness of all to give it a good chance at success.

The second challenge is the perception that the OC project is “a black thing.” We have high hopes that, as the project progresses, it will come to be seen as an Okolona thing. However, we will also have to be sensitive to the historic role of the institution and the desire of the NCNW to see it fulfill a training role for youth in the area.

The final challenge is the sheer scope of the project, substantially larger than what was contemplated in ARC’s Technical Assistance planning. With two large buildings, several ruins, and 77 acres, OC is not a small and simple project.

With those challenges in mind, I hope we will all keep an open mind as to the wide variety of uses possible, even necessary, on the property. The facility will have to serve multiple functions if it is to develop a sustainable financial status. The college is vacant today as a result of dependence on a single funding source, a reminder that we need to find a broad base of support and revenue in order to make this work.

ACTION ITEMS

Revitalization of the Okolona College campus is an exciting and ambitious venture, and we are working in relatively tight time constraints. The present intention of the ARC is to hold a closing workshop for all communities in

September. Therefore, it is essential that we move quickly, which will also help to capture the momentum we presently have.

1. Steering Committee: Gain commitments from the 18 names selected during our visit, or find suitable replacements for those who cannot participate. This should take place before July 1, if possible, allowing you to schedule a meeting with the group in early July. Things to do at the first meeting:
 - a. Get to know one another. It sounds like this group will include a great cross-section of community leaders with a wide variety of particular interests. The cross-pollination of ideas will be invaluable.
 - b. Go through one or two structured exercises – we will provide the framework for them. These will allow for the orderly sharing of visions and ideas from everyone.
2. Advisory Committee: You will want to engage helpful outside resources throughout the process, and many have expressed a willingness to help. We suggest that members of this committee formally invited to participate, and invited to the second Steering Committee meeting.
3. Solicit ideas for site uses from a broad range of stakeholders and advisors. Members of the Steering and Advisory Committees should be asked to provide suggestions, to identify comparable programs in other communities, and to think about funding and revenue sources.
4. The search for uses provides an excellent opportunity to engage the larger community in the project. The Okolona Messenger might provide an inexpensive way to reach out, perhaps printing a short survey form. Ultimately, success at OC will require broad community buy-in, and you only get that by inviting broad community participation.
5. Explore, in a general way, the potential roles of local, county, and state resources at the site. We will need to know early in the process the forms

public sector support may take, i.e. road maintenance, grass cutting, inmate labor, etc. If particular uses will trigger such public support, we will also need to know that.

We think these steps can all be completed before the end of July. At that time, Civic Economics, ARC staff, and the Steering Committee will begin reviewing suggested site uses and exploring funding opportunities. Additionally, with uses tentatively identified, ARC will then select a Mentor Community for the entire group to visit. That community will be one that has successfully done what Okolona is seeking to do, whatever that may eventually look like.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Okolona, “the little city that does big things,” has chosen to pursue a big thing, indeed. The recent history of the town will lead many to doubt your ability to see this through, but your state government and the ARC have faith in Okolona and are anxious to invest in your success. The role of Civic Economics is “technical assistance,” not funding delivery, so community leaders will have to carry the ball long after we have moved on. Make sure you get all you can from us while we are here.

This is an ambitious project, and funding will have to be secured from a variety of sources. So, the more we can achieve before September, the better.

Please do not hesitate to contact Civic Economics with any questions or comments. And, please visit the project website often:

www.CivicARC.com