



CONWAY

Area Chamber of Commerce

GETSMART

2022

ACCE CHAMBER OF THE YEAR AWARD APPLICATION

900

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

SECTION ONE

Contact Information

2022 ACCE Chamber of the Year Application

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce



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CHAMBER INFORMATION

CHAMBER NAME

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce

PERSON SUBMITTING ENTRY

Lee Hogan | lee@conwayarkansas.org

ADDRESS

900 Oak St. | Conway, AR 72032

Staff Size **18**



LEADERSHIP INFORMATION

PRESIDENT

Brad Lacy | brad@conwayarkansas.org

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

Laura Grimes | laura@conwayarkansas.org

BOARD CHAIR

Cate Ketcheside McConnell | removed for privacy | removed for privacy

BOARD CHAIR'S COMPANY

Smith Ford | 908 E. Oak St. | Conway, AR 72032

Board Size **36**





NAME

Laura Grimes | laura@conwayarkansas.org

ORGANIZATION

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce

TITLE

Chief Financial Officer

ADDRESS

900 Oak. St. | Conway, AR 72032

PHONE

501-327-7788

EMAIL

laura@conwayarkansas.org

CHAMBER OF THE YEAR FEE

\$250

METHOD OF PAYMENT

As a Horizon Investor, the application fee is waived.

SECTION **TWO**

Organizational Excellence & Resource Alignment

2022 ACCE Chamber of the Year Application

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce



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1

Does your chamber comply with annual federal, state and local income tax filing requirements?

Yes

No

2

Is your chamber audited annually? If so, in what month? July

Yes

No

3

Is your chamber's annual budget approved by your board? If so, in what month? December

Yes

No

4

Does your chamber have a strategic plan? If so, please include a copy.

Yes

No



The Chamber's
management letter
from the most recent
financial audit



The Chamber's
990 tax forms for
2019 and **2020**



The Chamber's
current annual budget
and **current financial**
statement



The Chamber's
current retention plan



The Chamber's
current recruitment
plan



The Chamber's
current marketing plan



1

How does your most recent strategic plan or business plan align with the biggest challenge(s) your community faces?

The Chamber’s current strategic plan is based on the [Conway2035](#) community visioning process, in which 1,800 Conway residents participated. This resident-led initiative produced a final plan with 142 goals across 14 sectors rooted in quality of place and amenity-building goals like parks, trails, arts, culture, entertainment, and beautification. The Chamber board (and boards of sister organizations) selected 80 community goals to incorporate into an organizational five-year, strategic plan.

These goals are diverse and represent some of the most important issues identified in the 2035 plan. The highest-ranked category was Arts, Culture, and Entertainment. The Chamber is taking the lead on several of the community’s goals from that sector.

The Chamber’s plan includes a goal of redeveloping the city’s original theater, The Grand, built in 1909, as a best-in-class, 300-seat, live music venue. The Chamber recently purchased the facility and will embark on a \$7 million fundraising campaign to redevelop The Grand. Another goal is to partner with the Conway Development Corporation to construct a 10,000-seat amphitheater, bringing national music acts to the market. The site is secured and plans are being developed. Both venues were identified as priorities by the public.



A rendering of The Grand Theatre in downtown Conway.

Finally, the fourth highest-ranked priority in the Conway2035 plan was Job Creation. As the lead economic development entities in the community, new job creation at wage levels above the county and state average is paramount to our investors as well. Coming out of the pandemic, **we ended 2021 with three economic development announcements: Westrock Coffee, Acoustic, and WestRock Packaging.** The three companies, combined, added 303 new jobs, \$178 million in capital investment, and average annual salaries of \$59,343.

NEW LOCATION



\$160 MILLION
CAPITAL INVESTMENT
250 NEW JOBS
\$28 HOURLY WAGE



EXPANSION

\$18.3 MILLION
CAPITAL INVESTMENT
33 NEW JOBS
\$24 HOURLY WAGE

NEW LOCATION

acoustic

20 NEW JOBS
\$38 HOURLY WAGE



2

Describe an internal program or process improvement used within the past year that had an impact on organizational operations. This may have helped to increase productivity, solve internal problems, address staff needs, etc. Explain your results.

The Chamber's for-profit entity, Conway Publications Inc., covers all print and digital advertising activities. Its monthly publication — the former *North Metro Business Journal* — had stagnated in both revenue and circulation with our former partner. Overall publications revenue had begun to decline and that revenue supports two Chamber staff positions and covers a number of other expenses.

In June 2021, the publications board challenged staff to reimagine its monthly business publication and double net revenue. It was determined meeting these challenges would require:

- a new circulation partner
- a new design and layout
- a new print vendor
- a new suite of editorial content that emphasized business intelligence rather than chamber events.

By November, the publications team had: brokered an insert agreement with the state's largest business publication company ([Arkansas Business Publishing Group](#)), created a [full mock-up](#), secured a commercial printer, and developed an editorial focus/calendar along with a website, [PulseofConway.com](#). This was done in advance of a new product roll-out and pre-sale to 30 advertising prospects. By the end of 2021, the sales team had pre-sold 55% of *Pulse of Conway* advertising for 2022.

In January, Conway Publications debuted the first print issue of its new monthly business publication, *Pulse of Conway*. *Pulse* content is now carried regularly on local radio and shared socially. As of May, Conway Publications is at 95% of its revenue goal for the publication. In 2022, gross revenue for *Pulse of Conway* will top \$180,000. In 2021, gross revenue for its predecessor, the *North Metro Business Journal* was \$28,500, a 531% increase. Overall Publications revenue is set to hit \$300,000, a 200% increase in 2021.

The quality of the publication and website, along with an improved distribution model has given Conway Publications a product that is attractive to its most well-capitalized members and raised the profile of the local economy statewide.



Pulse of Conway, January 2022



3

What is your strategy to ensure your Chamber has an inclusive culture and your leadership and staff make-up is reflective of the business community you serve?

Representation is the key to ensuring an inclusive culture in any organization. At the Chamber, this representation occurs within the membership, board, and staff, and the strategies to accomplish this level of diversity are deliberate.

The staff of the Chamber is among the most diverse in the industry with nearly 30% of the 18 team members representing racial and ethnic minority groups. An inclusive culture includes other areas of representation in addition to race. In a community where the median age is 28.9, it became apparent the Chamber staff was aging as the average tenure is 11 years. The two newest hires are under the age of 23, bringing a fresh perspective to all areas of the organization, and have attracted interest in membership from young business owners.

The board of directors has also become more diverse with increases in the number of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and LGBTQ+ representation over the past three years. The next two incoming board chairs will be minorities including the organization’s first Hispanic chair. However, the diversity and inclusive nature of the board’s 36 seats are also measured on industry sector, business size, geographic location, and number of years in business.



Natalie Stute, Gainwell Technologies chief human resources officer, was the keynote speaker at the 2021 Women in Business Awards.

As the staff and board have diversified so has our general membership. For example, 25 Hispanic-owned businesses joined the Chamber in the last quarter of 2021, as existing Hispanic members personally recruited them to the organization. The Chamber has a goal of including minority panelists and keynote speakers in all programming and events. As the membership diversified, we have seen a significant increase in diversity among award winners at all events. Each year, the Chamber gives nine awards at the Annual Meeting. A decade ago, there were occasional winners from minority groups. Over the past two years, eight of the 18 winners represented minority groups.



Conway Area Chamber of Commerce Staff, 2022



4

What is the most effective way you advocate for business in your community?

The most effective advocacy activities within the Chamber take place within the programming provided for its government affairs underwriters. This year, 21 companies and organizations paid \$3,000 each to participate, and among those investors are the majority of the community's major employers.

The most visible underwriter activity is the Chamber's annual D.C. Fly-In. More than 30 representatives from the local business community attended. The Chamber and the business community representatives take part in the following:

- Host an all-staff reception for Arkansas' three federal offices in D.C. Approximately 40 staff members attended.
- Host a chiefs and senior staff dinner with 3-4 most senior staff from each office attending.
- Held one-hour briefings with each member of Arkansas' federal delegation. All organizations represented on the trip were given the opportunity to share their top priorities and issues.



The Chamber's government affairs team meets with Arkansas' federal delegation.

Government affairs underwriters also attend regular virtual and in-person private briefings or Q&As from public sector leaders including:

- State Legislative Redistricting Voter Analysis
- New district maps, likely candidates, and voter demographics
- Private Q&A with Gov. Asa Hutchinson
- Private Q&A with Congressman French Hill

Finally, some of the best work is in the form of customized, project-specific advocacy on behalf of Chamber members. Examples include pursuing tariff exemptions on behalf of local manufacturers, advocacy for an SBA Regional Cluster grant for our local incubator, and advocacy for an EDA grant for an area community college. This goes beyond traditional letters of support and is done through continuous dialogue with senior congressional staff.



5

What strategies have you implemented to support talent development or attraction for your business community?

Talent development and attraction and workforce is a priority of the Chamber. The most recent development is hiring the organization's first, full-time, dedicated Existing Business & Talent Development Coordinator. This position allows for the consolidation of all workforce and talent programs and strategies with a single person.

In response to the ongoing need for technical talent, the Chamber partnered with the University of Central Arkansas to form the Arkansas Coding Academy. The coding academy is designed to help existing programmers acquire new skills, while giving individuals with technical aptitude, but no degree or experience, a path to certification in specific languages. Classes are taught by industry experts, last from a few days to a few months, and are available at night, on weekends, and online.

After a year of planning, the Chamber recently unveiled Launch Conway, a program to retain some of the city's best and brightest college students. Two cohort groups are chosen each year with 25-50 participants. Participants learn about the city and the various career opportunities available from existing employers, and receive life skills instruction including credit, how to purchase a home, and how to build a compelling resume. The program concludes with a matchmaking event between employers and students to help keep those high performers in the market.



LAUNCH
CONWAY

Finally, as the technology and medical sectors continue to lead growth in the local economy, the number of Indian team members moving to the community has increased. After a number of conversations with employers, the Chamber learned that this community identified deficiencies in the city. Focus groups identified the need for a greater variety of grocery items and opportunities to connect with other Indian community members. The Chamber has begun having conversations with one grocer to add more products and is exploring how to support an Indian-themed event.

SECTION **THREE**

Member Services & Connections

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Two consecutive issues of a regular publication



October and November 2021 issues of North Metro Business Journal.



Two communication/marketing pieces



2022 Conway+, Community Relocation Lifestyle Publication.




Two social media posts or campaigns

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce
Published by Lee Hogan · December 16, 2021 ·

Westrock Coffee announced plans today to expand its operations to Conway in the largest capital investment project in the city's history!

Westrock has purchased the former Kimberly-Clark plant in the Conway Industrial Park, and plans to invest more than \$100 million, creating 250 jobs.

Read more: <https://bit.ly/WestrockCoffeeConwayExpansion>



PULSEOFCONWAY.COM

Westrock Coffee Company Comes to Conway in City's Largest Capital Investment Project

13,260 People reached	1,861 Engagements	— Distribution score	Boost a post
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159 7 Comments 82 Shares

Facebook post,
#ListenConway — 30-day DBEI Campaign,
June 2020.

Facebook post,
Westrock Coffee Economic Development Announcement,
December 2021.

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce
Published by Adena J. White · July 8, 2020 ·

RONNIE WILLIAMS
Vice President for Student Services, UCA

I am a husband, a father, a brother, a grandfather, a neighbor, and a friend.
I am an educator, and "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."
I enjoy basketball, football, hunting, reading, and writing.
I am a Black man.


I am a human being in this world with the rest of you. As with you, I had no control over the brush with which God chose to paint me. And since God decided to give me a darker "hue," I've come to embrace and appreciate my Blackness. I am a proud, not angry, Black man. I will always try to build and not tear down others.

Growing up in America as a Black man has been a challenge. I know what it is like to be humiliated and denigrated by the sting (and pain) of discrimination and racism. I have experienced the pain of losing a loved one to hate. Like my brother Marvin, there are thousands of George Floyds in this country who will never be shown to you. Life as a Black man has taught me many lessons. One of the lessons that I've learned is that people of color, especially Black men, are the most mistreated, misvalued, and misunderstood communities in this country.

I share these feelings not as someone who has given up on our society; instead, I am someone who believes that our best days are ahead of us. My parents taught me the value of faith, family, and hard work. But they also taught me something else – and that is the power that love has over hate. I think in times like this, where everybody is on edge, I encourage my white brothers and sisters that if you see (or hear) something that makes you feel uncomfortable, then it is imperative that you speak up. Remember, silence is complicity.

#BlackLivesMatter #ListenConway

Ronnie Williams
Vice President for Student Services, UCA



#BlackLivesMatter
#LISTENCONWAY

13,392 People reached	2,188 Engagements	— Distribution score	Boost post
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290 29 Comments 74 Shares

Like Comment Share



1

How do your programs and services support your organization’s mission? Please include any key performance indicators you use to evaluate value and relevancy.



In June 2021, the Chamber board reviewed Conway2035 goals and identified those it wished to spearhead.

The Chamber’s program of work can be traced back to the community’s strategic plan (Conway2025 and Conway2035). The Chamber board identified those community priorities that have some chamber nexus. The Chamber designs its programming and services — down to staff job descriptions — with those overall community goals in mind. Its programs and services must maintain a balance of “performance-against-mission” and “performance-against-budget.”

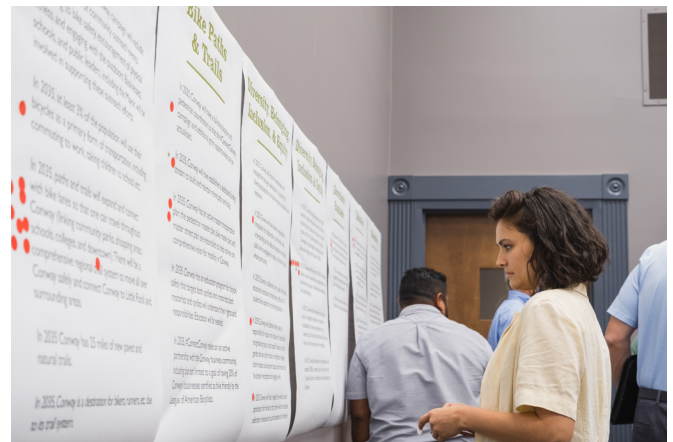
The Chamber’s mission is four-fold: sustainable economic growth, advocacy, supporting educational institutions and initiatives, and community vision. If an activity doesn’t strategically align with one or more of those four initiatives, it is work for another organization. Chamber programs and services are tested for relevance to the organization by senior staff and through annual one-on-one

sales meetings with 300-plus members. Relevance is also measured based on event surveys, attendance, and sponsorship renewals.

After testing for relevance, another key performance indicator is overall revenue. There is perhaps no better KPI - if a business is unwilling to financially invest, the program or service has limited to no value. Overall Chamber revenue has grown from \$4.98 million in 2017 to \$6.19 million in 2021, with growth across all programs and services.

Each missional area has KPIs specific to that area:

- Economic Growth: number of new jobs and capital investment created through incentive agreements;
- Advocacy: number of Government Affairs Underwriters and measured legislative wins or losses; Supporting Educational Institutions - financial performance of Toad Suck Daze (festival created to support educational initiatives); number and amount of grant funding for scholarships, PreK, and STEM initiatives;
- Community Vision: annual scorecard of progress on Conway2035 goals.



Finally, numbers like attendance, social media engagement, and web views are all tracked and compared — in context — with previous years’ results.



2 Trends are showing a larger percentage of non-dues and non-traditional revenue streams represented in the overall fiscal health of chambers. Explain how your Chamber is funded and how you are evolving toward this movement.

In 2020 and 2021, 7% of the Chamber’s total revenue budget accounted for membership dues. That is comparable to the 9% the Chamber saw in 2017. Overall revenue increased from \$4,983,267 in 2017 to \$6,210,666 in 2021, with only \$56,915 coming from an increase in dues income. Diversifying the Chamber’s revenue portfolio has been top-of-mind for senior leadership and its board of directors. Since the initial move to centralize all community & economic development organizations under a single staff in 2006, a diversified revenue stream became the most important goal.

These additional revenue streams include land sales; building and land leases; major events including a 100,000-plus attendee festival; a government affairs advocacy group; the Conway Area Leadership Institute program and a suite of publication offerings. The Chamber receives around \$200,000 in public money to resource and support the executive director of the Conway Convention and Visitors Bureau. Additionally, Conway Corporation, the local utility, underwrites a \$100,000 agreement for economic development work on behalf of the corporation.

2021 CHAMBER REVENUE

AMOUNT	SOURCE
\$2,474,932	Restricted Economic Development (office building lease income)
\$1,332,781	Unrestricted Economic Development (land leases, land sales, utility contract)
\$980,579	Event Income
\$588,156	Other (downtown activities, leadership program, leads groups)
\$494,587	Membership Dues
\$171,537	Convention & Visitors Bureau Contract
\$113,594	Advertising
\$54,500	Government Affairs
\$6,210,666	TOTAL



3 How do you evaluate individual and business motivations for chamber involvement and customize activities for those specific interests and needs?

The Chamber measures involvement by investment. At the end of the fourth quarter, the sales team begins scheduling one-on-one Blueprint meetings with 300-plus members. These meetings are intended to capture member feedback, identify needs of the member and discuss opportunities to align the member with Chamber sponsorships, publications and advisory and special-interest groups for the following year. These members fall into two categories:

Chairman's Circle Investors: Members who invest a minimum of \$7,500 with the Chamber, Conway Development Corporation and Conway Downtown Partnership. In 2020, the number of investors included 63 for a total contribution of \$1.3 million. The Chamber reached 80 investors with a combined total of \$1.7 million in 2021. The Chamber projects 100 new Chairman's Circle investors with giving close to \$2 million in 2022.

Prior-Year Investors: Members who have sponsored an event, purchased advertising and/or served on a special-interest group through the Chamber, CDC or CDP, but have not reached Chairman's Circle level giving. The sales team schedules meetings to confirm the member's recommitment to an event, publication and/or special-interest group and discusses other opportunities for involvement in hopes of increasing the member's overall giving by 10%.

Once Chairman's Circle and prior-year investors have been met with, the sales team identifies members who only invest at a membership level with a goal of connecting them to a minimum of one event, publication or special-interest group. Based on Chamber offerings and goals of the member, an investment strategy is designed for each member that falls into one or more of the following categories:

Visionary: An investor's financial contribution supports the Conway Area Chamber of Commerce, Conway Development Corporation and Conway Downtown Partnership in fulfilling its mission and strategic initiatives identified by the community and adopted by each respective board. Often, these investors do not want any type of sponsorship, advertising or recognition for their support.

Special Interest: Individual members and/or companies who have interest in government affairs, talent attraction and workforce development and/or leadership development.

Advertising/Impressions: Members looking to brand themselves to the greatest number of people through print/digital publications, social media platforms and/or major events such as the Toad Suck Daze festival and Illuminate, the Downtown Christmas Tree Lighting.

Connections: Members targeting a specific audience and an opportunity to network.



4 How has your Chamber evolved in the past two years to engage with individuals/companies at different stages of returning to work? What obstacles has this provided for connecting and convening stakeholders and how did you overcome it?

STAGE 1: EARLIEST DAYS OF PANDEMIC

We hosted live “[COVID Business Briefs](#)” on streaming/social media platforms. The content focused on getting accurate information from city and state government as well as local health officials in front of our members.



STAGE 2: FACILITATED RECOVERY

We focused on making sure our members had adequate information and access to local, state, and federal financial assistance like PPP, loan forgiveness, SBA programs, workplace safety grants, etc.



STAGE 3: A RESPONSIBLE RETURN TO WORK (FOR SOME)

The chamber partnered with local health officials and health care providers to facilitate vaccinations for employees. The chamber also used its own facility and return-to-office as an example of how small businesses could accommodate safety measures while being physically present for work.



STAGE 4: A RETURN TO GATHERING

The chamber began to offer in-person programming with restrictions. We asked that people be vaccinated to attend events in some settings. We required masks where recommended. Virtual options were still made available to most, if not all, chamber events. Two of our largest employers have been home-based and Chamber events were one of their only opportunities to network and connect.



STAGE 5: PRE-PANDEMIC NORMS AND PENT-UP DEMAND

Chamber programming is all in-person. Attendance exceeds pre-pandemic levels. Precautions are the responsibility of the attendee. In some cases, the chamber’s role was to model responsible behavior. In others, it was to provide a place to convene for employees who still haven’t returned to the office full-time. The chamber’s standard was to be gracious, respectful of host venue standards, and to follow state health official guidelines and recommendations. The Chamber is engaged with employers who still have significant numbers of home-based employees. We are currently discussing our investment in “Return to the Office” events.



5

How does your Chamber most effectively communicate value and relevancy and what is your strategy for storytelling? Please link or attach your most recent communications &/or marketing plan.

Our storytelling strategy begins by thoughtfully matching our content with the appropriate channel, audience, and distribution.

CHANNEL	CONTENT TYPE	INTENDED AUDIENCE	DISTRIBUTION
Social Media	<p>Chamber events and recognition. Local business news. Community development, branding, awareness.</p> <p>Shared media from chamber programming (streaming events, original video, interviews, etc.)</p>	<p>Anyone opting to follow Conway Area Chamber content including local business news, community recognition, and chamber events.</p>	<p>Facebook — 14,700 followers</p> <p>Instagram — 1,870 followers</p> <p>Twitter — 4,700 followers</p> <p>LinkedIn — 2,000 followers</p>
Conway+	<p>Annual resource guide heavy on lifestyle features and information useful to new and existing residents.</p>	<p>All chamber members</p> <p>4,000 highest-income households in the trade area</p> <p>Relocators earning >\$55,000</p> <p>Pre-locators — those calling for relocation packets or being recruited by a local company or organization</p>	<p>Direct-mailed to 4,000 highest-income households in the trade area.</p> <p>Direct-mailed to new movers each quarter.</p> <p>Distributed to all chamber members.</p> <p>Provided to major employers as a recruitment piece.</p>
Pulse of Conway	<p>A monthly business publication heavy on facts and figures about the local economy, major real estate transactions, and high-profile job changes.</p>	<p>Executives living in the trade area</p> <p>CEO or lead executives statewide</p> <p>Anyone wanting an “insider’s knowledge” of the Conway area economy</p>	<p>3,000 Arkansas Business subscribers receive Pulse as an insert. 2,000-plus live in our trade area. The remainder are CEO or lead executive subscribers statewide.</p> <p>1,000 copies are direct mailed to either chamber members or a business list tailored to that month’s editorial focus.</p> <p>Another 3,000 copies are distributed locally in high-traffic locations.</p> <p>More than 4,400 visit the website each month.</p>

**6 How does your Chamber partner with other organizations and what are your most effective partnerships?**

Prior to 2006, the Chamber had no strategic partnerships and the community had multiple economic and community development organizations competing for resources with no unified vision or plan. In December 2006, the Chamber and Conway Development Corporation entered into a contractual partnership to share staff while maintaining board and organizational autonomy. At the time, the organizations, collectively, had 6 staff members and a budget of \$1.036 million.

This initial partnership set the stage for a series of contractual agreements and mergers that give the community a unified group of sister organizations that share resources and 18 staff members and a budget exceeding \$6 million in 2021.

After the CDC agreement in 2007, the Chamber entered into a strategic partnership with the Conway Advertising & Promotion Commission to provide a home and staff for the Conway Convention & Visitors Bureau. The City's municipal utility, Conway Corporation, contracted for economic development services in 2011 and the Conway Downtown Partnership contracted with the Chamber to manage employees and operations in 2015. While not contractual in nature, the Chamber has ongoing strategic partnerships with the City of Conway. This includes running sales tax or millage elections for them when supported by the board of directors. The Chamber also uses private dollars to pay for benchmarking trips and its annual Washington D.C. Fly-In for the mayor and other elected officials.

These partnerships are key to the success of the organization. The tremendous growth in revenue and staffing continue to feed more ambitious goals for the Chamber and the growing number of investors is evidence of the buy-in from the private sector.

HISTORIC DOWNTOWN CONWAY

SECTION **FOUR**

Program Synopses

2022 ACCE Chamber of the Year Application

Conway Area Chamber of Commerce



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1

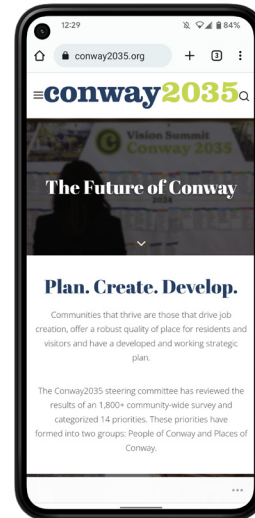
PROGRAM/INITIATIVE NAME

Conway2035

PEOPLE & PLACES

conway

2035



2

IMPACT AREA ADDRESSED

Economic Development; Community/Social Impact; Public Policy

3

PROGRAM/INITIATIVE SUMMARY

The Chamber was set to facilitate a new strategic planning process in 2020 built around convening large groups of people, which proved impossible as COVID emerged. The Chamber pivoted to an online process that resulted in a strategic plan for the community with 142 goals. While the process involves several Horizon Initiatives (Belonging & Gathering/Population Shift/Engaging the Public Sector), with over 1,800 participating citizens, Conway 2035 best exemplifies Catalytic Leadership. The Chamber chose to lead during uncertain times; provide hope for the future; become the change agent for the community, and provide a place for community members to connect around aspirational goals for the city.

4

NEEDS IDENTIFICATION

Part of the Chamber's mission is to "establish and execute the community vision." In 2010, the Chamber created the first community strategic plan — **Conway2025**. In 2015, a **mid-course update on goals** was facilitated by staff and community leaders. After ten years, most of the previous plan's goals had been accomplished or were no longer a priority; therefore, it was time to engage Conway citizens for a new plan in 2020. The very week the steering committee was scheduled to convene, COVID-19 closed our doors.



MISSION STATEMENT

The Conway Area Chamber of Commerce leads our community toward sustainable economic growth, advocates a pro-business climate for our members, builds upon Conway’s educational foundations, and establishes and executes the community’s vision.

The Chamber quickly consulted with and later hired the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute as a partner to lead us through a visioning process during a pandemic. Three audiences were identified:

Steering Committee: Thirteen individuals who represent a diverse, cross-section of the community, based on age, occupation, ethnicity, longevity of residency, religious affiliation and special interest. The steering committee made decisions regarding the survey tool, focus areas, and the final document.



The 13-person steering committee for Conway2035.

Conway Residents: Adults who live within the city limits who completed the survey and choose to be involved with writing the final plan.

Summit Leaders: Fifty-five representatives from local government, state/local economic developers, healthcare, utility, K12/higher education, major employers, planning commission, and chamber and sister organization boards. Summit leaders would review the plan for redundancy, viability, priority, and timeframe of goals.

The Conway2035 Steering Committee finalized the survey tool used to engage Conway residents. Surveys were conducted over six weeks. Over 1,800 residents completed the survey and ranked the topics according to their importance.



5 PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The Chamber and steering committee spearheaded the launch of a virtual community strategic planning initiative and established a timeline as COVID19 paralyzed the country. The steering committee established four measurable goals:

- 1,500 - 2,000 total survey respondents
- 300 community residents involved in plan construction
- Convene key stakeholders and organizations for a two-day visioning retreat
- Create a 15-year community strategic plan

Goals would be measured by:

- Number of survey respondents
- Number of residents participating in plan construction
- Number of key leaders convened for retreat
- Final plan completed and adopted by relevant organizations

Partnering with the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute increased the validity of the process, provided objective facilitators to lead volunteer discussions, afforded resources to facilitate virtually and allowed for expert advice in crafting a well written plan. Summit leaders provided an additional filter for goal attainability.

Communities that thrive are those that have a developed and working strategic plan that is resident-led. “Ask the people what they want and they will tell you.” The plan includes goals that require changes in public policy and covers a diverse spectrum of issues from economic and community development to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

6 METHODOLOGY

Methodology was categorized in three areas: survey responses, community plan participation and summit leader engagement.

Survey Responses: The Chamber used steering committee members in [video testimonials](#) and [graphics](#) to share the importance of taking the survey on social media platforms. Conway Corporation (city-owned utility) included survey information in every online account. Staff & steering committee members populated church, sporting, social and civic group lists in our networks and deployed a standard text message with a direct link to the survey.



Community Plan Participation: From November 2020 to March 2021, 450 citizens committed themselves to four, 2-hour meetings in one of 14 sectors. Participants created a vision statement; developed specific goals and suggested ways for individuals, families, businesses and organizations to get involved with a sector.

Summit Leader Engagement: In April 2021, the Chamber convened 55 community and business leaders at a two-day summit. WRI facilitated discussions with participants to create a prioritized list of goals for the community.

Conway2035 Budget

7 COMMUNICATION

MEDIA CHANNEL	MAJOR POINTS & CALLS TO ACTION	EXECUTION
Social Media	"Take the Survey" "Volunteer to serve in a sector group" "Opt-in for future communication"	10 Facebook posts netting 4,300 engagements from 33,000 impressions Created "Future of Conway" FB Group, added 800 members during survey outreach 7 LinkedIn and Instagram posts
Email	"Take the Survey" "Volunteer to serve in a sector group" "Opt-in for future communication"	Over 50,000 emails containing the link to the survey were sent. We had a click-thru-rate of more than 10%
Local Cable PSAs	A diverse group of steering committee members recorded testimonials about issues. They provided information on why they were motivated to participate and encouraged others to take the survey and participate.	2,000 30-second PSAs encouraging people to take the survey ran on the largest local cable provider
Online Utility Billing	"Take the Survey" "Volunteer to serve in a sector group" "Opt-in for future communication"	The link to the survey was featured and provided on every Conway Corporation (local power/water utility) online bill.
Direct Ask	"Take the Survey" "Volunteer to serve in a sector group" "Opt-in for future communication"	Community-wide residents were asked to include the link in their respective GroupMe, HOA groups, group texts, etc. At Chamber events, staff encouraged attendees to take out their phones and take the survey and then pass it along to a neighbor.
Virtual Kick-Off	"Learn more about the survey results" "Attend a virtual breakout room with other residents who share your interests"	200-plus people attended a community-wide Zoom before moving into issue-specific breakout rooms.



8 EVALUATION

Community Impact

Conway2035 was unveiled in May 2021. Throughout the remainder of 2021, various community organization boards identified goals to *own*. The Chamber, Conway Development Corporation, Conway Downtown Partnership, and Conway Advertising & Promotions Commission identified 80 goals to incorporate into their respective strategic plans.

The success of the plan rests with Conway citizens prioritizing issues and creating a plan to achieve them, guaranteeing *buy in*. Many community visioning plans fail because they come from the “top down”. This method often falls apart when tied to a public financing solution.

In December 2021, the Conway City Council finalized plans for a proposed **\$32.8 million community center and soccer complex**. The 140,000 sf, community center features an indoor competition pool, 12 pickleball courts, 8 volleyball courts, and an outdoor aquatic center, while the soccer complex includes 10 lighted fields. The proposal addressed 4 of 8 goals under the Parks and Recreation sector of the final Conway2035 plan. Voters would decide on the proposal in February 2022.

On February 8, 2022, Conway voters overwhelmingly passed the community center/soccer initiative with 81% of the vote. The impact of a community-wide, strategic survey is already paying dividends for the residents of Conway.

Communication Impact

The survey closed with 1,832 collected responses which was a 31% increase from the 2010 effort. From those surveys, 667 individuals indicated a desire to build the plan which was more than double the interest received in 2010. Ultimately, 450 of those community respondents consistently showed for meetings to develop the plan.

For the first time in Conway's history, executive leadership of the Chamber, Conway Development Corporation, Conway Downtown Partnership, Conway Advertising & Promotions Commission, Conway Corporation and Conway City Government gathered to share feedback and discuss next steps for implementation at the Summit.





1

PROGRAM/INITIATIVE NAME

Toad Suck Daze: Sustaining Arkansas' Largest Festival through a Pandemic



2

IMPACT AREA ADDRESSED

Community/Social Impact

3

PROGRAM/INITIATIVE SUMMARY

Owning and managing the state's largest festival — 100,000-plus attendees — is complicated in any circumstance. Having a global pandemic occur 60 days before it is scheduled and continuing through its 40th anniversary challenged our organization to adapt, innovate, and sustain the festival's role in the community and mission of giving — \$2 million since 1981 — along with the revenue it contributes to the Chamber's budget, \$600,000 annually. While the festival connects with multiple Horizon Initiatives, the most relevant for this time period is Belonging & Gathering. The desire to belong and gather was perhaps never stronger than in 2020 and 2021, opinions on how to do so safely were as well. Our team navigated those dynamics while meeting organizational goals and protecting sponsor brands.





4

NEEDS IDENTIFICATION

The Chamber was created to recruit higher educational institutions to our community in 1891. The festival is the Chamber’s primary mechanism to fund and support those institutions and other educational initiatives. The festival has five primary constituencies and provides something unique to each:

TARGET AUDIENCE	NEED	TIE TO MISSION
Sponsors	Many businesses wanted to maintain visibility during the peak of COVID-19. But they wanted it to be done responsibly way that enhanced their brand.	“sustainable economic growth”
Chamber Organization	The festival’s \$135k annual management fee is material to the Chamber’s budget. We had to recover whatever amount we could.	Our organization couldn’t do any mission focused work without revenue.
Recipients of Festival Proceeds	The festival annually awards a dozen or more college scholarships. The festival partners with the Museum of Discovery and local school districts on supplemental STEM curriculum.	“builds upon Conway’s educational foundations”
Festival Vendors	Many of our festival vendors are based locally. Their industry was completely disrupted by COVID-19.	“pro-business climate” and “sustainable economic growth”
Community	2020 and 2021 represented the 39th and 40th years for the festival—which is now the state’s largest. The need for events that united the community was intense during the pandemic. There was an expectation that the festival would be sustained in some way.	“establishes and executes the community’s vision”

The Chamber was committed to executing elements of the festival in order to partially fund operations and charitable commitments, create safe opportunities for the community to have experiences, and provide sponsors with brand visibility tailored to their level of comfort. Execution was dependent on a new paradigm of what was allowed and required a new series of individual meetings with sponsors, elected officials and healthcare leaders. What had traditionally been a three-day event transitioned into a series of alternative programming.



5

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The festival generates material revenue for the Chamber. Overall revenue generally exceeds \$600,000 with a \$135,000 management fee returned to the Chamber for running all festival operations. The festival also makes annual contributions of \$50k-\$100k in the form of college scholarships, STEM curriculum/training, downtown beautification, and early childhood literacy.

In the immediate wake of the pandemic we revised our goals to reflect the following objectives:

- Secure as much committed sponsor revenue as possible by creating alternative programming that could take place in a pandemic
- Fulfill our existing commitments to the charitable mission of the festival while making sure that the charitable activities we funded fit the “new normal” of a pandemic landscape
- Sustain the Toad Suck Daze festival brand by creating highest-profile content
- Encourage/Inspire the community by creating “shared experiences”
- Provide opportunities for local vendors to do business

The changing nature of the pandemic made it impossible to confidently plan in advance as would be normal. Events occurred quickly when opportunities arose and met the aforementioned goals. Festival events executed in 2020 were much more restrictive (participants watching from home or participating from the cars). While 2021 offered more familiar activities, the city’s first in-person concert, the spring timeframe did not allow for a full festival experience.



6 METHODOLOGY

Sponsors: The Chamber’s sales team met virtually with every existing sponsor to gauge interest in the concept of a modified festival. By mid April 2020, the sales team had secured nearly \$150,000 of sponsor revenue based on modified programming. By 2021, as COVID19 guidelines relaxed, events became larger and sponsor revenue increased by 27%.

Recipients of Festival Proceeds: We worked with festival beneficiaries like the Arkansas Museum of Discovery on delivering STEM curriculum virtually through festival social media platforms rather than in the schools as originally planned. In 2020 and 2021 revenue allowed us to give scholarships to graduating seniors, and in 2021 over 400 hanging baskets once again beautified downtown.

Shared Experiences & Sustaining the Brand: Over two years, the Chamber offered a number of high-profile, brand-sustaining experiences customized for the pandemic and associated restrictions. These included an airplane parade, nature & science drive-thru, and several broadcast television programs.

Local Vendors: Created opportunities like Taste of Toad Suck and Thrill of Toad Suck to allow local vendors an opportunity to do business with the community in the absence of a full festival.

7 COMMUNICATION

MEDIA CHANNEL	MAJOR POINTS & CALLS TO ACTION	EXECUTION
Social Media	Used to make announcements about festival programming and to amplify third party coverage.	Toad Suck Daze has over 25,000 followers on Facebook. Four of our top ten performing posts ever were pandemic-related festival events.
Earned Media	Opportunity to gain statewide exposure for the festival. Puts message in front of people who had not opted to follow on social media. Viewed as more credible and performs well when shared on social media platforms. When possible, sponsors are given the opportunity to participate in broadcasts.	As the state’s largest festival, any major change or development is “news.” For the last 10+ years we have built an effective relationship with each network. With COVID related stories taking up so much of a newscast, stories had to be thoughtfully pitched in order to get coverage. All of our major TSD events were covered by network affiliated news.
Paid Media	There were two primary strategies: Boosting social media posts to audiences relevant to each event Buying entire blocks of network airtime for festival content	Social media traffic was especially high during the “lockdown” period of the pandemic. High-performing posts were boosted in order to grow the overall Facebook audience. Purchasing blocks of network airtime created value for sponsors. We embedded sponsor commercials at a rate cheaper than they could purchase.



8 EVALUATION

Sponsorship revenue sustained two non-traditional festival years. In 2020, \$219,936 was secured while the number rose to \$278,433 in 2021. Charitable giving remained a priority. For two years the Chamber funded the following initiatives:

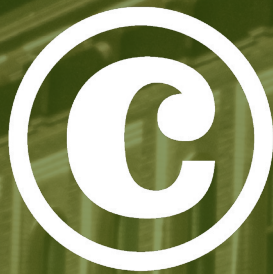
AMOUNT	INITIATIVE
\$39,000	Scholarships
\$61,506	STEM educational programming for elementary schools
\$22,000	Downtown Partnership for Hanging Baskets
\$19,930	Other educational non-profits
\$142,436	TOTAL

The investment in charitable giving is roughly 71% of what would normally be funded over two years by the festival. The Chamber avoided layoffs or staff reductions, at least partially, based on the performance of Toad Suck Daze. Festival proceeds were responsible for covering \$104,320 of administrative costs in 2020 and \$95,254 in 2021.

During the pandemic two communications trends became obvious: social media was more active (potentially due to lockdowns/work from home/isolation) and it was more difficult to get traditional news coverage (due to COVID stories taking the bulk of airtime). As a result some of our organization’s most popular content was created in the early days of the pandemic.

The practice of purchasing blocks of network airtime solved three problems for us. First, it gave us a totally COVID-19 safe product. Second, it gave us the potential for a new and even larger audience than a traditional festival. Finally, it gave us control over how we could recognize sponsors. Embedded commercials, screen graphics, and crawling info were all deliverables we could point to.

Sustaining the brand by pivoting to a modified festival experience gave the continuity needed to execute a full festival in 2022. In its 41st year, Toad Suck Daze saw record crowds return as did our local vendor community who also experienced record sales. Sponsorships reached an all-time high, exceeding \$410,000 and charitable giving returned to pre-pandemic levels.



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