

## **Russellville, Arkansas: If It Can Happen Here....**

### **Introduction**

Russellville is a small western Arkansas town of around 30,000 people. It is roughly halfway between the state's two largest cities, just under eighty miles west of Little Rock and just over eighty miles east of Fort Smith. The cities are connected by Interstate-40, one of the country's major east-west arteries; however, Russellville is too far from either to be considered a suburb or even an exurb. As such, it is the center of its own micropolitan statistical area, known as the Arkansas River Valley or Tri-Peaks Region. Despite being an hour away from a sizeable metropolitan area, Russellville's population has more than tripled in the previous fifty years:

| Census Year | City Population |
|-------------|-----------------|
| 1960        | 8,900           |
| 1970        | 11,800          |
| 1980        | 14,000          |
| 1990        | 21,300          |
| 2000        | 23,682          |
| 2010        | 27,920          |

Source: U.S. Census

Like most of Arkansas, Russellville isn't exactly where one would expect progressive causes to have much of a foothold, despite its growth. In 2008, 71.5% of Pope County residents voted for John McCain, compared to just 27.5% for Barack Obama; contrary to much of the rest of the country, Pope County voted even more Republican in 2008 than in 2004 ("Pope"). More recently, the city made waves nationally as being the scene of a macabre crime: the cat of a Democratic campaign manager was found killed outside its house, with "liberal" painted on its mutilated corpse (Brantley). Clearly, progressive causes are met with some resistance here.

All that being said, there is something somewhat surprising going on in Russellville: this unlikeliest of small towns is becoming a regional vanguard in the implementation of "complete streets," and, as such, is one of the cities at the forefront of smart growth in Arkansas. Therefore, it provides an interesting case study in community planning, design, and development.

### **Background**

In the second half of the twentieth century, the U.S. government encouraged automobile-dependent development, as Pietro Nivola discusses in *Laws of the Landscape*. Transportation expert Kenneth Kruckemeyer says "How we live, play, shop, and work today is the result of changes that have taken place [due to] automobilization" (61). Again it wasn't just transportation that was affected by this; housing, social networks, and jobs are just some of the many other things that have also changed with the advent of the personal automobile in the post-WWII era.

However, times and attitudes are changing. The editors of one smart growth anthology claim "The planning profession has arrived at a crossroads" (Chavan et al. 3). There are many reasons for this. For example, traffic congestion leads to not just inconvenience, but also health hazards due to higher stress levels, unhealthy diets, and automobile accidents. Decreased personal mobility can lead to obesity. Pollution negatively effects both human and environmental health. An additional factor more thinkers are starting to pick up on is the "increasing economic inequality and social isolation" in metropolitan areas (Chavan et al. 3). Still another idea that is making more and more people hesitant to use cars as much as they once did is that oil consumption is sometimes perceived to be a national security issue. This reason might have more support in conservative areas like Russellville than would environmental reasons. While being

more environmentally responsible, biking and walking also won't fund "terrorists" or enemies of the United States, whereas filling your gas tank up twice a week might.

However, most people care primarily about their pocketbook. Cars are expensive! Price fluctuations are temporary, but for the last few years, the overall cost of oil has been rising, and it is only going to get worse. In addition to being more expensive environmentally and socially, the price of oil is also going to rise in terms of sheer economic terms. A buzz phrase often thrown around is "peak oil," the tipping point at which the maximum degree of oil production occurs. Whether it has already happened or will in coming decades, the reality is that oil is a finite resource. This time frame is shortened by the rest of the world (especially places like China, India, Malaysia, and South Africa) catching up to American rates of energy consumption.

As such, demand for improved access to alternative methods of getting around continues to gain momentum around the country. Yet even disregarding public transportation, the ways communities are planned, designed, and developed are changing. According to the editors of the *Planetizen* anthology, "With growing awareness of the environmental and geopolitical consequences of the typical American lifestyle, more and more Americans are beginning to seek a more sustainable lifestyle" (Chavan et al. 5). These days, sustainability is "trendy," almost a peer pressure of sorts in some circles. Cities are *expected* to offer sustainable amenities like bike paths. Increasingly, things like light rail systems, streetcar lines, and bikeshare programs are becoming en vogue. Also, "the walkability of our cities' streets has once again become a consideration among transportation planners" (Chavan et al. 45). One of well-known author/planner Richard Florida's main ideas is that to attract young, intelligent, talented workers, a city needs amenities that focus on quality of life, and a major way of doing that is offering walkable neighborhoods with lots of amenities. Not surprisingly, these changes have led to the renewal of downtown, downtown-adjacent, and/or walkable suburban neighborhoods across the country over the past 10-20 years.

In a city of Russellville's size/density, however, public transportation is not really a viable option. There are only a handful of Arkansas cities that offer an even limited service: small tourist towns or the largest metropolitan areas. Russellville is neither. Furthermore, there is an underlying cultural component (individualism; privacy; fear of "the other," especially in the rural South; love of cars and big private homes, etc.) that fosters resistance to transit. According to Alexander Garvin, "Since WWII, planning has shifted from strategic government investment in public works to government regulation of private property and private development" (75).

Along those lines, among the planning challenges the country faces over the next ten to twenty years is a rapidly-aging infrastructure. Though repaired over the decades, most interstates were initially built around fifty or sixty years ago. Many bridges are even older than that. Tragically, some incidents like the Minneapolis bridge collapse a few years back illustrate how much needs to be invested in improving the country's roads. Furthermore, the country has fallen behind other nations in terms of high-speed rail, subways, and other non-highway options. However, many state and federal government agencies are struggling at best, and broke at worst. Any additional highway funding is usually contested, and often voted down. Thus, poor roads exacerbate problems on the wear and tear of automobiles, which in turn makes driving even more expensive, once upkeep is taken into consideration. There are some important consequences to this. Many people are choosing to ditch using cars; it is more environmentally sound, often much cheaper, and frequently more relaxing or time-efficient. Likewise, when roads *are* funded, they need to be built or rebuilt wisely. With that in mind, here is a case study of how Russellville, Arkansas has tried something innovative in its most recent major road project.

## North Phoenix Avenue

One of the main economic and cultural engines of the Russellville area is Arkansas Tech University, or ATU, a fast-growing public school of around ten thousand students. On Wednesday, 13 June 2012, Dr. Robert C. Brown (university president) and Bill Eaton (city mayor) celebrated the grand opening of the new North Phoenix Avenue extension with a ribbon-cutting ceremony (Sprinkle 1A; KTHV). Dr. Brown said the opening had “been a long time coming” (KTHV). In terms of actual construction time, though, it happened pretty quickly, relatively speaking. Less than a month after initial approval, the route was cleared beginning in September 2011, and work on building up the road began the next month. Gravel was placed and the road was leveled in December, and all of the major drainage work was completed by February 2012. The bridge’s initial footings were placed in November 2011, and the bridge was completed in March 2012 (Russellville Public Works). In the end, the final costs ended up being some \$45,000 less than the allocated \$3.042 million budget! (Sprinkle 1A).

So it is a completed street extension in a small Southern college town, what’s the big deal? Well, this one was different. Heather Sprinkle of the *Russellville Courier* describes what makes Russellville’s new North Phoenix Avenue so unique. The new street is the first multi-mode streetscape in the area. The road includes two 12-foot lanes and a 5-foot bicycle or pedestrian lane on each side of the street; trees planted every 50 feet; period-style street lamps installed about every 200-300 feet; curb aprons to increase drainage; and a 90-foot bridge over Prairie Creek that features rustic stacked stone barriers on both sides (7A).

Clearly, the street is multi-functional. The bicycle/pedestrian lane recognizes and encourages car-free transportation. Trees add a “green” component in terms of both functionality and also aesthetics. The “rustic” bridge encourages a feeling of both beauty and a sylvan path, a break from the city. Drainage helps prevent flooding in a plain that is prone to flooding often.

At the ceremony, Mayor Eaton said although he and Dr. Brown were there for a ribbon-“cutting,” it would perhaps be more appropriate to have a ribbon-“tying” (Sprinkle 1A; KTHV). The expansion is the result of an agreement between the city and the university. In an August 2011 meeting, the ATU Board of Trustees agreed to terms to lease the land on which the street extension was built to the City of Russellville (KTHV). The city will now lease the 4.53 acres of land for 99 years at a cost of just \$1 per year; the initial lease runs through 30 June, 2110 (KTHV). Mayor Eaton called the project “a significant partnership between Arkansas Tech and the city” and said that the city owed Dr. Brown and Tech’s Board of Trustees “a great debt of gratitude,” for the “project would not have happened without” them (KTHV).

In addition to Dr. Brown and others associated with the university, Mayor Eaton also thanked the city’s public works director Michael Oakes, and also Jim Bowden, whose Bowden Specialties company supervised the road’s construction. “I’m excited to have had a local construction company do the work,” said the mayor. Bowden “took it on as if it were his own project and possession” (Sprinkle 1A). By not using an out-of-town contractor, the city was able to keep jobs for its own residents and promote its local economy, another benefit of the project.

President Brown, in turn, expressed his gratitude to the mayor, claiming that it was “through [Eaton’s] leadership this project has reached a successful conclusion” (KTHV). Brown explained some benefits of the new street, pointing out improvements in safety and also better transportation access for the students, faculty, and staff of the university (Sprinkle 1A).

Besides ATU, one of the other landmark institutions in Russellville, and essential components of the regional economy, is St. Mary’s Regional Medical Center, which serves as

the anchor of a cluster of healthcare providers on the west side of town. Within a few blocks of St. Mary's Hospital are dozens of clinics, dental offices, physical therapy locations, and pharmacies. The new North Phoenix Avenue connects Interstate-40, State Highway 7, and Arkansas Tech University (specifically student housing and classroom buildings) to St. Mary's. Pope County Judge Jim Ed Gibson felt this was a main reason why all area residents, not just those in Russellville, would benefit from the new street: "This project is a great benefit to the county... Emergency services coming from Highway 7 now have direct access to the hospital. This project benefits everyone" (Sprinkle 7A). Since Russellville is the region's medical hub and draws patients from up to three hours away, improving its accessibility from the north, east, and west is a tremendous improvement in providing essential services to the area's residents.

Judge Gibson also praised the road as "aesthetically pleasing" (Sprinkle 1A), among a number of other advantages. Making streets and public places enjoyable to be around, in addition to being functional, is important. Noted planner and author Jeff Speck explains:

Cities should be places that make the heart sing. For many of our citizens, especially those too poor or infirm to travel, the city is an entire world. For this reason, it is our responsibility to create and maintain cities that not only function properly but also offer moments of beauty (86).

Non-government figures were impressed with the new road as well. City resident Kirk Riggs said the night it opened "The highlight of my night [was] driving home on the recently complete N. Phoenix road. [It] should cut down on my travel time to work." In an interview with Heather Sprinkle of the *Russellville Courier*, resident Doug Skelton said the new street is "just a beautiful road...I don't know of a nicer road in Pope County." He also believed that his "wife will probably ride her bicycle and jog along the outer paths" (Sprinkle 7A).

Finally, the new street increases access not just to medical and college facilities but also other key locations. For example, it goes right by the Junior High School, and is also near Washburn City Park and Lake Dardanelle State Park on the west end. Alderman Mark Tripp felt the new street "is a great example of our 1-cent sales tax at work for improving our community," and that, as such, it "was a great endeavor that benefits our whole community" (Sprinkle 7A).

A key point to note is that NONE of the figures cited ANY exclusively environmental, sustainable, or green reasons as to why the new street was beneficial. All of the praises were about quicker access to healthcare, aesthetic purposes, and safety; more on this idea later.

### **North El Paso Avenue**

As admirable and notable of an accomplishment as building the region's first complete street was, Russellville has not stopped there. In fact, Russellville actually has a history of urban planning, though not necessarily of "smart growth." The city really developed along a new railroad and the Arkansas River in the 1860s and 1870s. In the twentieth century, highways emphasized Russellville's key location, as cars and trucks replaced trains and boats as primary transportation modes. Though sprawl has led to auto-based development (large shopping centers, subdivision housing, etc.) on the town's periphery along I-40, downtown streets are laid out on a grid, with distinct, orderly naming patterns for streets in the city's four quadrants (northwest, northeast, southeast, southwest), with the intersection of highways 7 and 64 as the center.

Looking at the future, though, the city is planning a renovation of North El Paso Avenue. Like North Phoenix, North El Paso terminates on the ATU campus, with El Paso on the south end of campus compared to Phoenix on the north. El Paso ends next to the stadium, student housing, and a number of restaurants. However, whereas North Phoenix takes a westerly turn toward the city's medical district, North El Paso leads south from campus to the downtown area.

A representative of the engineering firm responsible for the renovations recently presented the Russellville City Council with a plan to turn North El Paso into Russellville's second complete street. "We want to make sure that...we're bringing a strong multi-modal connection into downtown," said Wade Walker (Tolliver – "Preliminary" 8A). Like with North Phoenix, there will be an emphasis for cyclists and pedestrians as well as drivers. The firm will also "potentially [be] adding features such as streetscape or on-street parking" (Tolliver – "Preliminary" 8A).

Like downtowns throughout the country, Russellville's features the county courthouse, local restaurants, law offices, banks, art studios, and merchants. However, unlike many other downtowns, Russellville's is also still an economically- and socially-viable place. The Tri-Peaks Community Market is held once a week, bringing together a wide variety of interests. There is a farmer's market at the train depot. In the past, there has even been an ice skating rink around Christmas season, a rarity in the South. In addition to commerce, there is also apartment-housing on the top floors of downtown buildings. Plans are underway for new guidelines which will "maintain specific characteristics of the historic district" downtown, specifically dealing with infill of existing buildings or construction of new ones (Tolliver – "Final" 1A).

By connecting ATU and the city's north side with downtown, students and other residents may choose to walk or bike to downtown rather than drive. In 2012, a study confirmed that more and more young people are choosing to live car-free lifestyles (Lunau). While this is more prevalent in places like Portland, Denver, or D.C., it would seem to also carry over at least to some extent in small college towns like Russellville. In June 2012, a D.C. Capital Bikeshare member survey revealed that an astounding 100 percent of its members were college-educated (Salmon). Jeff Mapes also discusses the role of college towns in what he calls the country's "Pedaling Revolution" in a book of the same name. With this in mind, using streets adjacent to campus as experiments for complete streets – like North Phoenix or North El Paso – is a sound idea.

### **Conclusions**

Auto-dependency is not simply an environmental problem for the so-called tree huggers or hippies of the world; it also leads to social, economic, and even national security concerns that affect everyone, regardless of their feelings on climate change or political ideologies. Even so, the fact is that in places like Russellville, Arkansas, advocating advances in community planning, design, and development like complete streets on the basis of factors such as sustainability and walkability likely will not win you enough popular support. However, if you point out the other amenities that often come with smart growth – improved quality of life; better access to almost universally-desired things like healthcare, safer roads, parks, and education; cheaper transportation costs – then even the most ardent anti-environmentalist might be willing to give it a chance. For smart growth measures to continue in Russellville and elsewhere in other conservative areas, that is possibly the best route for advocates to take.

Cities that do not prepare for a more sustainable future are likely to be left behind. Things like mixed-use development, public transit, and green buildings are ideal, and indeed are being built in many places throughout the country, especially large coastal cities. However, in places like Russellville, Arkansas, these ideas are not merited by popular support (yet), nor are things like public transit really even feasible in such low-density towns. While all of that would be ideal, you have to start somewhere, and North Phoenix and North El Paso is at least a start for Russellville. The old Chinese proverb goes "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step;" better for that step to be on a pedestrian-friendly complete street than on a multilane, car-only highway.

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