

Aspirational Cities tour – one year later

Exactly one year has passed since 48 business, civic, government and education leaders returned from a three-day bus tour of aspirational cities. The trip was designed to be thought-provoking, to open eyes and minds to new ways of thinking and to inspire action. The group visited Greenville, South Carolina, as well as Winston-Salem and Raleigh, North Carolina.

These days were not spent taking comprehensive sightseeing tours of the cities; the days were targeted at specific subjects selected by an Aiken Chamber of Commerce task force. Every minute of the trip was carefully choreographed to maximize the investment of the participants' time.

Action was the ideal outcome of the trip. The plan was for participants either to act independently, create formal or informal groups or see formal groups, like the Chamber Board or the



Aiken City Council, take decisive action. The Aiken Chamber encouraged participants to use their know-how, their clout, their resources and their imagination to apply what they had learned on the trip to help build Aiken's future.

It was great to experience firsthand what thriving neighboring cities such as Greenville and Raleigh are doing to continue to grow. We gained valuable information and ideas to implement in Aiken. It was exciting to see how Raleigh has been able to attract young professionals and millennials. Greenville's idea to showcase their inviting downtown environment and nature trails to interest new and growing families was also very impressive.

Keyatta Priester, Aiken Electric Cooperative, Inc.



Seeing the accomplishments of the other communities helped me understand what can be accomplished when a community comes together with a vision and a mission to get it done. The tour provided some insight and ideas that we could possibly use in attracting someone for the redevelopment of the old Aiken County Complex on Richland Avenue and perhaps other areas in and around the City.

Clay Killian, Aiken County

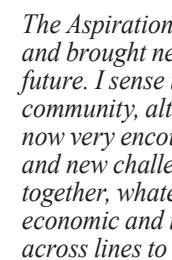
The tour improved my ability to envision what is possible for the downtown area of Aiken. The tour inspired a large group of people to begin collective efforts to further improve the downtown area of Aiken. The City's decision to implement the Main Street program and the positive public response to that effort are great examples of the tour's impact.

Scott Neely, SCE&G



It was extremely insightful to see how other cities approached their issues and found individual solutions to meet their objectives. It was a great personal learning experience for me. I think Aiken leaders saw the need for a dedicated leadership with a vision for aspiration that is unwavering. It resonated with participants that this vision has to be embraced by all, but strong leadership is key.

Rick McLeod, SRSCRO



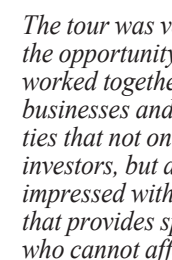
The Aspirational City Tour was very uplifting and brought new insights on how I see Aiken's future. I sense that our "little cosmopolitan" community, although once apprehensive, is now very encouraged to welcome new changes, and new challenges. I see all people coming together, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences, to reach across lines to help build a stronger Aiken community for generations to come. I believe if we commit ourselves to the common good, not merely at the misfortunes of others, we can live unified in a culture that embraces all humanity.

Collette Ball, State Farm Insurance Agency



The tour highlighted the notable innovations and achievements of other communities, all of which have faced the same sorts of challenges that our community faces, or worse. Time together on the bus and time spent in presentations and at meals-provided opportunities to get to know new people, hear different perspectives and to form new connections and friendships.

Dr. Tom Hallman, Pacer Performance, Inc.



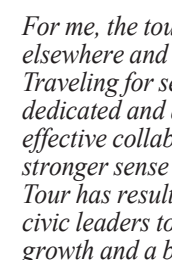
The tour was very enlightening. It gave us all the opportunity to see how other cities have worked together to ensure that they focus on businesses and retail and marketing opportunities that not only attract potential residents and investors, but actually keep them. I was most impressed with the "business hub" in Raleigh that provides space for small startup companies who cannot afford to rent large spaces. As a member of Aiken City Council, it was thought provoking. I realized that there is much to be done in Aiken, and we can no longer be swayed by "cave people," that do not share our vision.

Gail Diggs, Aiken City Council



We started out as individuals but quickly "grouped up." As topics changed new groups formed and shifted. The energy was focused and we realized ideas for attainable solutions were coming quickly. It was a spark to realize our single goals were shared by so many. Splinter groups have formed to move our common ideas along. The enthusiasm we built is contagious as we engage more people in areas of improvement.

Betty Ryberg, Civic Leader



For me, the tour highlighted what has worked elsewhere and what is possible in Aiken. Traveling for several days with committed, dedicated and active citizens fostered more effective collaborative relationships and a stronger sense of community. The Aspirational Tour has resulted in a renewed commitment by civic leaders to push for progress and planned growth and a brighter future for Aiken!

John Klimm, City of Aiken



The task of leaders is to get people from where they are to where they have not been.

J. David Jameson, Aiken Chamber of Commerce President/CEO at the 2016 State of Our Community Luncheon

Growth, Investment

Almost immediately upon returning from the trip, a hotel development company sought to change a City ordinance that would allow building heights to be increased by 5 feet in the downtown. Changing this ordinance would allow for a local hotel property to be transformed into a national branded hotel at a major downtown intersection with an investment expected to exceed \$10 million. The request was controversial; however, energized business and civic leaders presented a positive case for the change and the City Council agreed.

Economic Vitality Manager

Both the City of Aiken and the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce are committed to the goal of supporting business retention, expansion and attraction. A Business Vitality Manager was hired by the City in January to assess the needs of business for retention/expansion, advise businesses on various market development, financing and business planning resources, and to support the recruitment of business into the marketplace.

Speaker Series

The Aiken Chamber's First Friday Means Business monthly membership event served as a platform to bring a variety of speakers from each community visited on the tour to Aiken to expand on their subjects. This was intended to inspire action, provide knowledge to more folks and to begin a community conversation about Aiken's movement from being known as a very good community to a great community.

Vision

The Greenville visit underscored the public sector vision for Greenville's future, while we learned that in Winston-Salem the community vision was driven by the private sector. Vision in Raleigh was a public/private collaboration. At all three stops, one important theme was prevalent – develop a vision and be prepared to stay on course for many, many years. The first action step taken by the City of Aiken following the trip was to move forward with a community visioning process. This process led to the development of a strategic plan for the City of Aiken.

Main Street

Downtown is the heart of any prosperous city. The City of Aiken applied to re-enter the Main Street South Carolina program and was accepted. Main Street South Carolina empowers residents with the knowledge, skills, tools and organizational structure necessary to enhance their downtowns, neighborhood commercial districts and cities/towns into vibrant centers of commerce and community. A cadre of volunteers has been recruited by the Aiken Downtown Development Association and the Aiken Chamber to fill various roles for a successful launch of this ongoing program.

Innovation District

The announcement of a multimillion dollar Advanced Manufacturing Collaboration (AMC) by the Savannah River National Lab proposed to be located on the USC Aiken campus is exciting on its own. Now, business and government leaders have the opportunity to use this project as the centerpiece to model Winston-Salem's Innovation Quarter which was toured on the trip. Innovation Quarter promotes the creation of an ecosystem for innovation that supports the people, academic departments and companies in their discovery and development of products and services that can lead to treatments and cures and otherwise enhance the lives of mankind. More broadly, the Innovation Quarter serves as a catalyst for the innovation economy in and around Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. Over time, the AMC will have the same impact on Aiken and our region's economy.

Leadership

The group heard about community engagement at each of our stops. Community engagement is very important. Equally is using that feedback and other resources to make a decision that advances the strategic plan. Having this philosophy stated so often during the visit has emboldened business leaders and elected officials to move our community forward. The City of Aiken, with the support of the Aiken Chamber, has moved forward with numerous decisions that will help business grow and thrive.



I came back with positive energy and enthusiasm about what is possible in our community with hard work and commitment. An elevated level of commitment by elected and community leaders to impact positive growth and change has been seen.

Will Williams, Economic Development Partnership



The trip reiterated for me that Aiken is a great place to live and work and call home. It also showed me that Aiken can't stand still. We must continue to look for smart opportunities to make our city even better than it is today. It gave our community leaders and elected officials a burst of energy to tackle some tough issues.

Teresa Haas, Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, LLC

It allowed me to see the world through others' eyes. A great vantage point in seeing how Aiken can become an even more exciting place than it is today. It has raised the bar for all of us in Aiken and should inform our actions.

Chris Verenes, Security Federal Bank



Great chance to know other leaders! The talk of Aiken for months!

Charlie Hartz, Dunkin' Donuts



The tour impacted me by illustrating the possibilities available for Aiken. The tour impacted Aiken by encouraging our leaders to think freely and to be part of Aiken's movement to become a better, more interesting city.

Trent Arnold, Arnold Advisors, LLC



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