

Reclaiming its spot

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It's just before 6 p.m., and I'm having an early dinner at the Country Kitchen on Dollarway Road in Pine Bluff. This restaurant has been around since 1953, and a meal here is a step back in time. As I wait on my fried shrimp and catfish, I look around and think about the days when Pine Bluff was among this state's most vibrant cities.



You can sit on a stool at the counter in the Country Kitchen if you wish. And you can still buy a copy of the Pine Bluff Commercial at the cash register. Counter service and newspapers at the cash register are equally rare in restaurants these days. It's easy to conclude that Pine Bluff's best days are in the past, and that places like this are as close as you can get to reliving that time. But across town at the Pine Bluff Convention Center, almost 200 policy wonks from 37 states have gathered for the second annual Rural Rise Summit. The three-day event is designed to teach people how to get rural economies moving again. "There's a need for this type of conference, one that's specifically focused on entrepreneurship and on some of the positive aspects of how communities can empower themselves," says Joe Kapp from West Virginia, one of the conference's organizers.

Why Pine Bluff? According to Mildred Franco of The Generator, an innovation hub for entrepreneurs at Pine Bluff, the city is "an example of a rural community on the move, a community that's working hard to put all of these things together."

Don't scoff. If you haven't noticed, there's a lot happening at Pine Bluff.

After dinner, I drive by the huge construction site where the Quapaws will spend more than \$300 million to build the Saracen Casino Resort. While the main resort is being constructed, work is concluding on an annex that will soon open and offer 300 electronic games. A convenience store already is open. It serves plate lunches and has proved to be a hit with the hundreds of construction workers at the site. Meanwhile, people in offices at 316 W. Sixth Ave. in Pine Bluff are busy interviewing and hiring what eventually will be 1,000 Saracen employees.

Numerous Arkansas associations, whose directors like to move their meetings to different areas of the state, would bring conventions to southeast Arkansas if there were enough quality hotel rooms. When the Saracen hotel and restaurants are completed, you can expect to see lots of conventions there. Perception is important for association directors. It will look good to go to southeast Arkansas for the first time in many years.

Activity isn't limited to the Saracen site. In downtown Pine Bluff, a recently completed aquatics center has proved to be a regional draw, and a library is under construction a few blocks away. Those two projects represent a \$20 million investment in downtown.

At the Pine Bluff Convention Center, more than \$500,000 (with help from Simmons Bank) was spent last year to prepare the center's arena for the return of the King Cotton Holiday Classic, which was once among the top high school basketball tournaments in the country. The rebirth of this beloved event provided a morale boost for all of southeast Arkansas.

This year's tournament will be Dec. 27-30 and feature 12 teams. There will be squads from Arkansas, California, Illinois, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi and Texas. The tournament is put on by Go Forward Pine Bluff and Simmons Bank. Go Forward Pine Bluff, a nonprofit organization founded in 2017 to help revitalize the community, works with the city to invest proceeds from a special sales tax that was approved by voters.

In the medical sector, it was announced last week that Arkansas Children's Hospital is partnering with Jefferson Regional Medical Center of Pine Bluff to establish a pediatric clinic on the JRMC campus. Money is being raised for the \$17.5 million project.

The JRMC board is considering a 300,000-square-foot project that would feature a six-story tower with 200 hospital beds. That \$180 million initiative would firmly establish the city as a regional medical draw. In April, the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences opened the \$6 million UAMS Family Medical Center at JRMC.

In the industrial sector, it was announced last week that a Texas-based company will hire more than 70 employees to make biological and chemical protective suits for the military. The plant will be located at the Pine Bluff Arsenal.

In a strange way, population losses in cities throughout southeast Arkansas could benefit Pine Bluff if the city plays its cards correctly. I was reminded of this recently when I joined Howard Hurst, the president of Little Rock-based florist Tipton & Hurst, in visiting the Pine Bluff business he bought two years ago from the Shepherd family.

Shepherd's has been a Pine Bluff tradition for decades. Employees explained to me that, as smaller towns across the region lose population, florist and gift shops cease operation. Residents of those towns must come to Pine Bluff. This store is about more than flowers. There are gifts, works by local artists, toys and food. Southeast Arkansas couples planning to get married register here.

Whether it's a place to eat out, attend a sports event, shop or go to the doctor, Pine Bluff is positioned to reclaim its spot as a true regional center, just as Jonesboro has done in northeast Arkansas. There's much work to be done (especially in the area of public education), but the good news is that the work has started and signs of progress already are noticeable.