

The Morning News

Local News for Northwest Arkansas

Predictions Not Always Destiny

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"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Derek Bok, President of Harvard University

Many years ago I was fortunate to spend some time working with a Professor of Economics at the University of Arkansas. He made a statement that, at the time, puzzled me. "Springdale," he said, "Is doomed to become a bedroom community." I asked him to explain why and how this was our destiny.

"Bentonville and Rogers are very close physically," he said, "Just a bit over 4 miles. They will become the financial center of the area due to Wal-Mart. Very soon now, Wal-Mart vendors will be moving into the area. Then there is talk that the new Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport will be located near Highfill. There is simply no way that the Bentonville-Rogers area will not become the more prosperous area."

He went on to explain, "The University of Arkansas assures Fayetteville of being the center of culture and arts for Northwest Arkansas. The student population plus the teaching staff will exceed 20,000 in the near future. There is private money in Fayetteville that will help finance such things as performing arts, museums, and libraries.

"The future will see the population of Springdale spending a large portion of their income either in Fayetteville, or the Rogers-Bentonville area. As a consequence, the larger retail stores will suffer in Springdale, while towns to the north and south reap the tax dividend. Eventually you will see some stores close in Springdale and reopen in more profitable locations."

"And then what happens?" I asked.

"Normally small towns follow the same pattern," said the professor. "As the city revenue drops as it must when large stores either close or relocate, they find it necessary to cut spending. Unfortunately, most cities cut such things as art centers, museums, libraries and even schools. Those are the very things that attract new retail stores and manufacturing firms. It is a 'Catch 22' situation. On the surface it appears that anything to do with the arts, culture and education is not absolutely essential. Yet, cutting the budget of any of these facilities is a sure guarantee of less revenue in the future."

The regional airport became a reality, as did other of the professor's predictions. As most of us know, population needs almost always lead tax income. As a result, cities like Springdale will find it increasingly difficult to provide services and needed infrastructure.

There are some things about our city that the professor could not know, and therefore factor in his predictions. For example: There are very few small cities in the United States that have anything comparable to the Jones Center for Families. This is a concept that is far beyond the budget of most American cities.

Springdale took a great leap forward with the completion of Arvest Ballpark, one of the finest minor league ballparks in the nation. Only last year our citizens "bit the bullet" and decided to close a section of Emma Avenue so that we could renovate Springdale High School. This school, when finished, will be a second showplace. A few years after the dire prediction of the professor, the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History completed its new central building. Many people of our area are discovering that the museum is not just a lot of older items on display, but is a vital part of the educational facilities of the area. Thousands of schoolchildren tour the Shiloh Museum and participate in its many programs.

The Springdale Public Library has recently been remodeled, and brought up to new and higher standards. The Library is located on a corner of Murphy Park, one of the finest parks in all of Northwest Arkansas.

Our Arts Center of the Ozarks continues to grow and bring quality entertainment to the area. With a modest beginning, it now has excellent amenities.

Recently a neighbor passed away unexpectedly. The police arrived within minutes. I have never been more proud of our police force. They were highly professional and courteous. They helped the widow through a very difficult time and impressed everyone present.

During the past years I have found it necessary to call on the fire department, once for a minor fire and several times for EMT service. They responded very quickly and were a unit any city would be proud of.

We have a new mayor and an experienced city council to try and lead us through the difficult times ahead. How do you finance the growing needs of the community with shrinking tax revenue? I will admit that I do not have an answer. I do have faith in the city council to work through this difficult time. I believe the council members have the good of the city in mind when they cast a vote. As might be expected, some of the council members have different ideas of what is good for the city. They have a demanding and often thankless job.

It is imperative that we, as a city, do not let new demands cut our funds for education. Our city schools, the Shiloh Museum, arts center and library must be supported. These four educational services are all that stands between Springdale, the city, becoming Springdale, a bedroom community. I sincerely hope that the needs of our city can be met

through the cooperation of every department by trimming their budget in places where it will do the least harm.

No one wants more taxes, but we might do well to look at Fayetteville and its tax structure. The so-called "hamburger" tax is one that really is not all that painful. When my wife and I go out to eat it doesn't make much difference whether the bill is \$18.20 or \$18.38. The small increase in tax doesn't keep Springdale people from eating in Fayetteville or shopping at the mall.

I would also like to see the council explore fully any tax concessions we can make to attract new retail and manufacturing firms to Springdale. Whatever the council comes up with, let's give them our support. There is a difficult task.

Springdale a bedroom community? Never, I say, not if we all work together.

Bruce Vaughan is a long-time Springdale resident and freelance writer.