

# NORTHEAST ARKANSAS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2022

Thank you for your continued support of economic development in Jonesboro and Craighead County. This report highlights activity in the first quarter of 2022 and reflects on our partners as they begin implementation of a second five-year strategic plan for economic development. Jonesboro is a dynamic city, and we are excited to see the growth and advancements that will be made this year.

Sincerely,  
Al M. Heringer III, Chairman

## TALENT RECRUITMENT

Everyone needs great talent! A key component of Jonesboro Unlimited's economic development strategic plan is Talent Recruitment – keeping the talent we have and bringing new talent to Jonesboro. One tool being developed is an additional section to the Jonesboro Unlimited website for talent attraction. Currently in development, this website will be designed to be utilized by those looking to relocate to our city.

Another tool being redesigned is the Jonesboro Jobs website. This site is getting a refresh and redesign to pull job seekers and employers alike to the site for exciting, new job opportunities. Be on the lookout for a rollout in July.

The importance of keeping up with growth trends for our city and county cannot be underrated. We live in an ever-changing world. To remain dynamic and vibrant for recruiting talent and families to our region, we must stay attuned to our changing demographics.

	Jonesboro 2010	Jonesboro 2021	Percentage of Growth	Craighead County 2010	Craighead County 2021	Percentage of Growth	Arkansas 2010	Arkansas 2021	Percentage of Growth
Population	67,356	80,586	16.4%	96,443	115,686	16.6%	2,915,918	3,116,869	6.4%
Median Age	31.4	33.9		33.2	35.5		37.4	39.2	
Average Household Size	2.45	2.45		2.49	2.48		2.47	2.47	
Housing Units Owner/Renter/Vacant	49.9% / 42.3% / 7.8%	49.3% / 42.5% / 8.3%		55.8% / 36.2% / 8.0%	54.6% / 36.9% / 8.5%		58.4% / 28.8% / 12.9%	56.9% / 28.9% / 14.2%	

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010 Summary File 1. Esri forecasts for 2021 and 2026 Esri converted Census 2000 data into 2010 geography; ESRI Community Analyst; May 31, 2022



Draft day was an inaugural event hosted by the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce and Be Pro Be Proud. Held at the Jonesboro High School campus, the event introduced over 700 high school students from area schools to industrial careers by paring students' skills with regional industries' job opportunities.

Governor Asa Hutchinson kicked off the event by speaking to students and industrial leaders. Students had the opportunity to network in a job fair setting and had scheduled interviews with more than 30 companies needing talent in our region.



Networking at the Draft Day Job Fair



## ARKANSAS SCHOLARS

Arkansas Scholars is a program that encourages students to do well in high school. To be an Arkansas Scholar, students are asked to meet a set of criteria that prepares them for both the workplace and for additional education after high school. Visits are made to students from area schools each year to review the criteria and get students lined up to participate in the program. A new video has been created to talk about the program.

## QUALITY OF PLACE

The City of Jonesboro and Jonesboro Unlimited are partnering to fund a comprehensive soft surface trail study. Soft surface trails are ideal for mountain bike users, runners, joggers, and pedestrians. The final report is expected in July.

## BUSINESS ATTRACTION & RETENTION

### INDUSTRY EXPANSION UPDATE

**Spirit Fitness** received approval from the city and county for state Tax Back program participation, and construction continues on their 150,000 SF facility in the Craighead Technology Park



**Camfil APC** continues construction on their 247,000 SF plant in the Craighead Technology Park, with complete move-in scheduled for fall of this year.



**Nestlé** is continuing their expansion project of adding a Hot Pockets line to the Jonesboro facility. They will create 100 new jobs with this expansion.



## ACTIVITY

Activity during the first quarter of the year was strong, with ten industrial inquiries, six business retention & expansion projects, and five market research requests.

## PLANT MANAGERS' ROUNDTABLE

A roundtable discussion was held recently with area plant managers. These discussions are important for networking and sharing ideas about topics of importance to our manufacturers.

## WAGE & BENEFIT SURVEY

2021 Jonesboro Area Industry Wage & Benefit Survey was recently completed, with 5,552 manufacturing employees represented. This survey is used in business recruitment efforts and provided to our participating local existing industries. It gives an accurate overlook of our manufacturing sector's wages and benefits.

## INFRASTRUCTURE



## LAND

Shovel ready is a term consultants like to hear when looking at a proposed site for their clients. As reported last quarter, the Jonesboro Economic Development Corporation (JEDC) recently purchased 412.69 acres south of the Craighead Technology Park to be used for industrial activity. JEDC is currently going through the process of re-zoning 237 acres of that site from R-1 to I-2 through the City of Jonesboro. This makes the site one step closer to being shovel ready for development.

## INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Infrastructure improvements, such as roadways, rail, and utility extensions are costly. Our economic development partners have spent millions of dollars over the years on infrastructure improvements for the Craighead Technology Park, making it a premier location for industry. Potential funding grants and opportunities are being sought by our economic development partners to provide the infrastructure needed at acreage recently purchased.

## AIR

New flights to Nashville from Jonesboro! Air Choice One has served Jonesboro since 2012 under federally subsidized Essential Air Service contracts from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). They were recently selected by the DOT to continue service for Jonesboro through February 2026. With the extension of service, Air Choice is offering added service with daily flights to Nashville, in addition to their current service to St. Louis.

In March, Southern Airways Corporation purchased Air Choice One. Plans are to continue services as scheduled by Air Choice One. In May, Southern Airways agreed to a merger with the electric aviation firm Surf Air Mobility. With the merger, Surf Air Mobility will upgrade Southern Airways' current fleet of 40 aircraft to hybrid electric aircraft.

## MARKETING

It takes community, state, and national partnerships to be successful in economic development. Below are just a few of the organizations and collaborations some of our partners participated in this quarter.

**The Northeast Arkansas Economic Development Coalition** is made up of eight counties in Northeast Arkansas – Craighead, Clay, Cross, Greene, Jackson, Poinsett, Randolph, and Lawrence. Steven Lamm, VP of Economic Development for Jonesboro Unlimited, is active in the organization and is working with the Coalition to commission a labor study for the region.

**The Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce** recently held a planning retreat to look at policy and a legislative agenda for the next few years. Mark Young, President of Jonesboro Unlimited, participated in this discussion, as it has a huge impact on economic development in the years to come.

Steven Lamm, VP of Economic Development, participated in the **Arkansas Economic Development Commission's** Consultant Event in Chicago recently.

Rex Nelson, with the **Arkansas Democrat Gazette**, came to Jonesboro and met with community leaders to get a good feel for our city. He wrote an article in the Democrat-Gazette highlighting Jonesboro's strong economy and future. See it attached to this report.

The **Arkansas Economic Development Foundation** held their annual luncheon in April. Mark Young and Steven Lamm, with Jonesboro Unlimited, and several community leaders attended this event and heard keynote speaker David Burritt, U.S. Steel President & CEO.

Mark Young and Shelle Randall taught a workforce development class at the **Mid-South Basic Economic Development Course**, held in April this year.

# OPINION | REX NELSON: A strong economy

Diversity is the key to Jonesboro's industrial growth by [Rex Nelson](#) | April 24, 2022 at 2:16 a.m.



deering art for sunday style

For decades, residents in the northeast quadrant of Arkansas gravitated toward Memphis. They watched Memphis television stations, read Memphis newspapers, and listened to Memphis radio stations. They went to Memphis to visit the doctor, to eat out, and to shop. Slowly, those habits changed as Jonesboro emerged as the regional center for northeast Arkansas. People in towns

such as Trumann and Harrisburg once went to Memphis. They now go to Jonesboro.

What happened? There's the growth of Arkansas State University, the emergence of Jonesboro as a medical hub thanks to St. Bernards Medical Center and NEA Baptist Memorial

Hospital, and the explosion in shopping and dining opportunities.

In the 1980 census, Jonesboro had 31,530 residents. That figure grew to 46,535 in 1990, 55,115 in 2000, and 67,263 in 2010. During the following decade, Jonesboro grew another 16.8 percent to 78,576 residents in the 2020 census. There's little doubt that the population has surpassed

80,000 since the census was taken.

Jonesboro is now the state's fifth-largest city behind Little Rock (202,591), Fayetteville (93,949), Fort Smith (89,142) and Springdale (84,161).

I'm sitting in a conference room at the Jonesboro Regional Chamber of Commerce headquarters with a group of city leaders as they discuss how to keep the momentum going. They have a deep understanding of the fact that economic development in the 21st century is all about attracting and retaining talented people. The days of focusing entirely on industrial parks in an attempt to lure manufacturers are gone.

"Talent attraction is the thing we talk about all of the time," says Mark Young, the chamber's president and CEO. "That's the key."

In 2019, a proposed 1 percent sales tax increase that would have funded quality-of-life amenities failed in a close election. One thing that has held Jonesboro back has been the political

influence of regressive remnants of the Tea Party movement.

"The election outcome disappointed me because the new funds would have been earmarked solely for quality-of-life and community improvement projects, and to increase budgets for our firefighters and police officers," Jonesboro banker Gabe Roberts wrote in a recent column for Talk Business & Politics.

Roberts, a vice president at First Community Bank in Jonesboro, noted that "nice things cost money. In order to compete with other cities in the state, we need to step up to the plate and offer more in regards to quality-of-life activities."

The Jonesboro City Council responded last September by passing a 2 percent restaurant tax to go along with an increase in the hotel tax from 3 to 4 percent. The restaurant tax, which went into effect Jan. 1, is expected to produce between \$3 million and \$4 million in annual revenue that will be used to construct a regional sports complex.

Studies have shown that such a complex could produce \$30 million a year or more for businesses in the city as people come from across the region to watch children and

grandchildren participate in tournaments.

In December, the Jonesboro Advertising and Promotion Commission appointed a 10-member steering committee to plan a sports complex that likely will include basketball courts, volleyball courts, and an indoor swimming pool. In February, the commission hired Eastern Sports Management to conduct a feasibility study.

The city recently opened the Jonesboro Shooting Sports Complex, a \$10 million facility that features a rifle range, pistol range, three trap and skeet fields, and two archery ranges. It's already attracting out-of-town visitors.

Jonesboro Mayor Harold Copenhaver drew more than 500 people for his annual state of the city address in March. He says that's proof of the strong community involvement that has helped build Jonesboro.

One of the first things Copenhaver did after becoming mayor last year was to create a caucus with mayors from seven counties in northeast Arkansas. He says regionalization is crucial to the city's future.

Copenhaver, a former state legislator, is a graduate of Jonesboro High School and ASU. He has worked as a

business development officer for Centennial Bank, as a farm manager, and in the insurance industry. He understands the city's history and how it became a regional attraction. He has joined forces with municipal and county leaders in western Tennessee and northern Mississippi to form RegionalSmart, an organization designed to bring major projects to the Mid-South.

In addition to opening the shooting sports complex, Copenhaver has done other things to enhance the city's quality of life during his first 16 months in office. In 2021, the city tripled spending on sidewalks to \$750,000 while increasing funding for street and drainage projects. The mayor has also worked to improve high-speed broadband access for homes and businesses.

Copenhaver also realizes the benefits of a clean town. The city entered into a partnership with Breaking Bonds Ministries in which its members clear litter from streets and waterways.

"They've become an invaluable asset; we've even hired four of them as city employees," Copenhaver said during his state of the city address. "And I'm proud to say that with the teamwork of Keep Jonesboro Beautiful,

our city is significantly cleaner than it was 12 months ago."

During our morning meeting, I'm handed a report titled "Jonesboro Quality of Life and Connectivity Master Plan." Those around the table are quick to point out that the folks in northwest Arkansas aren't the only ones who recognize the importance of quality trail systems.

The report states: "Jonesboro has many positive attributes, which have been championed by community leaders: a thriving college, an extensive health care system, a robust industrial and manufacturing sector, and steady population growth. However, compared with national averages, Jonesboro's citizens have a relatively low income and health issues associated with inadequate opportunities for physical activity.

"Jonesboro is vehicular-oriented and lacks safe multimodal active transit access such as well-defined pathways for pedestrians and cyclists. This report proposes a city-wide connectivity network. ... Bike and pedestrian networks act as catalysts within cities, improving citizens' quality of life and connectivity between neighborhoods, major

employers, public institutions and parks."

"We have to do a better job communicating the importance of such quality-of-life upgrades," Copenhaver says.

Young says Jonesboro has become a city that "always has its foot on the gas pedal. We're not comfortable sitting back and enjoying what we've already accomplished."

I meet a staff member who has been hired by the chamber to focus on talent attraction and retention, another example that Jonesboro's leaders understand what it takes to succeed in a knowledge-based economy.

"If we can get people to come here and visit, the community will then sell itself," says Chris Barber, the St. Bernards Healthcare president and CEO. Jonesboro has come a long way since 1858 when a state senator named William Jones proposed the creation of a new county.

"The proposal called for the county to incorporate land from an area represented by Jones' fellow state senator, Thomas Craighead, who opposed the idea," writes Arkansas historian Nancy Hendricks. "When the bill passed, Jones proposed that the county be named for

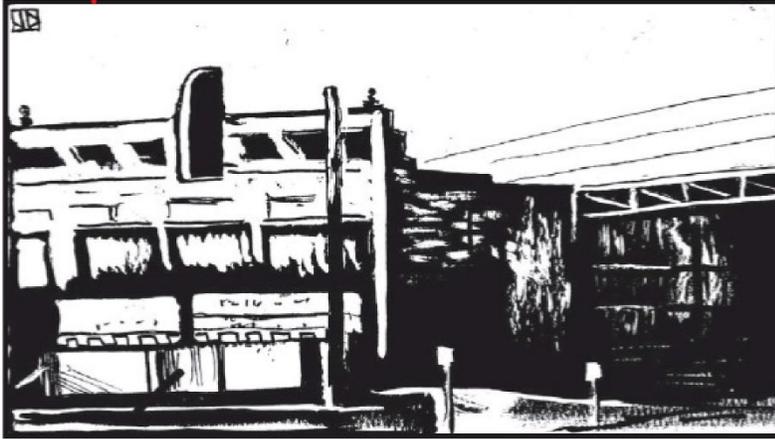
Craighead, who, in turn, proposed that the county seat be named for Jones. The town of Jonesborough was created, with the spelling later simplified.

"Craighead County and Jonesboro were officially born Feb. 19, 1859. Farmer Fergus Snoddy donated 15 acres for a town in the area that's now downtown Jonesboro. In 1883, with the railroad coming to Jonesboro, voters finally approved the town's official incorporation. ... The town was a center of the logging industry, requiring efficient transportation to get the timber to market."

Several railroads were built in the area during the 1880s.

"Jonesboro's growth was enhanced in 1906 with the creation of City Water & Light as a municipal utility," Hendricks writes. "It continues to serve the town and, due to its reasonable utility rates, is often cited as a major factor in Jonesboro's growth, attracting business and industry."

Following a malaria epidemic, sisters from the Olivetan



Benedictine order established a six-room hospital in 1900. It was named in honor of St. Bernard Tolomei, founder of the Olivetan Benedictines. More progress followed in 1909 when the Legislature established four district agricultural schools.

"Jonesboro competed against Greene County and Mountain Home to house the school," Hendricks writes. "After a pledge of \$40,000 and 200 acres of land, Jonesboro was chosen. Classes were first held Oct. 3, 1910, at the First District Agricultural School. Now known as Arkansas State University, it was the first of the district colleges to be granted university status.

"Also in 1910, a group of area farmers decided to try growing rice in fields outside town. Their success led to the creation in 1930 of what at the time was the largest rice mill in the world, operated by Riceland Foods. The rice industry continues to be

among Jonesboro's leading businesses."

Jonesboro grew from 2,065 residents in the 1890 census to 10,326 in 1930. Though it sits on Crowley's Ridge, its economy at the time was dependent on the fortunes of farmers in the lowlands on either side of the ridge. Those farmers were devastated by the Great Flood of 1927, the Great Drought of 1930-31 and the Great Flood of 1937.

Jonesboro was helped by the 1912 election of Thaddeus Caraway to the U.S. House of Representatives and his 1920 election to the U.S. Senate. The Jonesboro resident served in the Senate until his death on Nov. 6, 1931. Caraway brought a number of federal projects to the city during his years in Congress.

"In 1932, his widow, Hattie Caraway, became the nation's first elected female senator," Hendricks writes. "She often helped Jonesboro by finding jobs on federal projects for poor and

handicapped residents, interceded at Arkansas State to find work-study positions for needy students, and lobbied to build a post office. "When World War II began, Caraway helped convince the U.S. government to establish a military training detachment at the college. The college training detachment brought GIs from across the country to Jonesboro. Many settled in town after the war. ... In 1952, Jonesboro resident Francis Cherry was elected governor."

Cherry was defeated after one term by Orval Faubus of Madison County. The city still managed to grow from 16,310 residents in the 1950 census to 21,418 in 1960, even as Craighead County's population fell from 50,613 to 47,303 during the same decade.

"The town saw dynamic growth in the 1950s and 1960s with the establishment of businesses such as Arkansas Glass, Colson Caster, Frolic Footwear, General Electric and Hytrol Conveyor," Hendricks writes.

Following our morning meeting, Young drives me to the Jonesboro Industrial Park, where manufacturers built facilities from the 1960s through the 1980s. We then head to Craighead Technology Park, which

began in 1986 with the purchase of 750 acres. It doubled in size in 2006, and another 400 acres recently were acquired. The city owns six miles of railroad spurs in the park.

Jonesboro's record of industrial growth is well known across the state. It became a food processing center as Frito-Lay, ConAgra, Post and Nestle built facilities there. Add in the growth of the education and health care sectors--along with retail and restaurant growth--and one has the makings of a vibrant regional hub.

"We truly have a diversified economy," Young says.  
"That's our strength