



INDEPENDENCE COUNTY, ARKANSAS

A HISTORY OF PROGRESS

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Judge Robert Griffin

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From its scenic perch at the foothills of the Ozark Mountains, Independence County boasts a rich history of progress. It all began in 1820, when Lawrence County was divided along the watershed between the Black and White River valleys, establishing a new county that was named in commemoration of the Declaration of Independence. Today, Independence County is one of the most progressive counties in Arkansas in terms of business, education, medical, economic development, public services, community initiatives, tourism/retirement, and infrastructure. Its incorporated towns of Batesville (the county seat), Newark, Sulphur Rock, Oil Trough, Moorefield, Pleasant Plains, Magness, and Cushman are home to exciting events and ongoing projects that keep Independence County vibrant and thriving.

In Arkansas, the county judge serves as the chief executive officer of the county government. In Independence County, that position has been held by Judge Robert Griffin since 2011. Business View Magazine recently spoke with Judge Griffin, and two of the county's influential financial leaders: Founder/CEO of First Community Bank of Batesville, Dale Cole; and CEO of Citizens Bank, Phil Baldwin. Together, those two banks have close to two billion dollars in deposits and greatly contribute to the remarkable success of Independence County. The following is an edited transcript of that conversation.

AT A GLANCE INDEPENDENCE COUNTY, ARKANSAS

What: Ninth oldest Arkansas County, est. 1820. Population approx. 37,000

Where: Northeast Arkansas

Website: www.independencecounty.com

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BVM: *Judge Griffin, how would you describe Independence County, and what are some notable achievements?*

Griffin: “We’re a community that’s on the move. We continue to expand, and our economy is good. Historically speaking, our employment is great. Our sales tax collections are indications of the economic forces at work here. If you look at our sales tax data, you’ll find we’re more of a sub-regional hub. Retail chains including TJ Maxx, Hobby Lobby, and Ashley Furniture have invested in locations here and a new Hampton Inn is currently under construction.”

Cole: “We have a population of 37,500-plus in Independence County, with a population over 10,000 in the city of Batesville. But our daily population in Batesville is close to 100,000 because people come here, primarily, for healthcare and employment, and to shop. We have been able to attract some national retail

businesses because we have a strong economy and we’re a merchant center for a population of around 206,000, when you take into account Independence County and the six counties that touch it.”

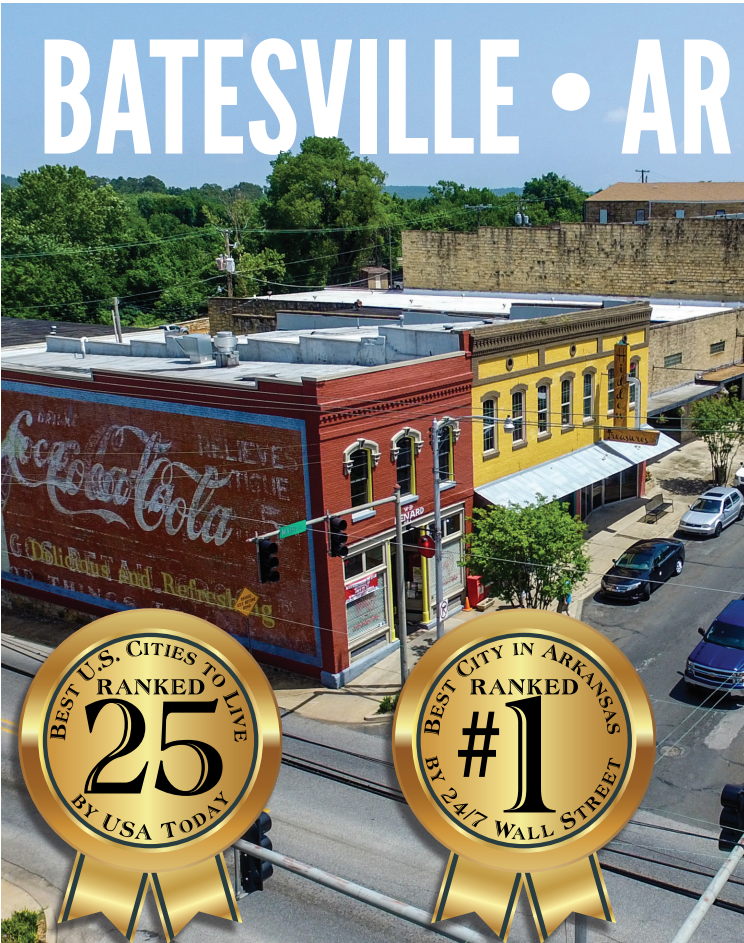
Baldwin: “I’ve only been in Batesville for five years, so I have the perspective of a new person. Independence County has incredible natural beauty. I can actually sit on my back porch and watch bald eagles fly down the majestic White River, which is a world-class destination for trout fishing. Something else that’s unique for a small southern town in the United States, is that we have a great group of young professional families. It’s one of our strengths. Those families, along with Batesville and Independence County, jointly created our strategic plan. It’s rare for a community to come together like that and actually change its direction, and the young people really made it happen.





“The business plan of Impact Independence and the vision it created, has completely revitalized the downtown area of Batesville and it’s now the heart and soul of the town. Batesville was also named a Forward Arkansas City, one of only five in the state, by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Walton Foundation. But I think the best ongoing effort we have is our quality education, specifically, the Indepen-

dence Promise program. Funded by the business community of Batesville, it’s a partnership between the business community, our K – 12 public schools, Lyon College (a private liberal arts school), and the University of Arkansas Community College of Batesville (UACCB) to get our children a 4-year college degree for a total cost of only \$25,000 each. The programs can be tailored to just about any industry in



THE **BEST** OF BOTH WORLDS

Nestled in the foothills of the beautiful Ozark Mountains, Batesville serves north central Arkansas as a regional hub for education, industry, healthcare and retail.

QUALITY OF LIFE
As the second oldest township in Arkansas with a population just over 10,000, Batesville is a picturesque town that boasts high quality secondary and post-secondary education, an award-winning medical institution, and top-notch community facilities.

THRIVING ECONOMY
Although a small community, Batesville serves as a merchant center for over 200,000 people daily. As the headquarters to multiple national and international businesses, Batesville has a strong, skilled workforce trained across many industries.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BATESVILLE HERE:
www.cityofbatesville.com chamber.batesvilleareaalliance.com
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the area that has a need for skilled workers, so graduates will have a job and stay in the community.”

BVM: What are the major industries and how do you attract new business?

Griffin: “For a business person wishing to come to Independence County, pretty much our attitude is “tell us what you want and let’s work together to make it happen.” Our industrial parks are full, and we need to expand them, but we’re still able to find a way to put leases together – and/or options to buy property that was never listed for sale before. This community has a unique ability to bring those forces together.

“We have a thriving poultry industry. Two national brands: Peco, and Ozark Mountain Poultry (OMP) now owned by George’s, are flourishing in our community. The Ozark Tourism Council is based in Batesville and millions of

people come through this region every year for outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, caving – you name it.

“Manufacturing is a major economic driving engine in our local economy. Our main manufacturing facilities include Future Fuel Chemical Company, the producer of biodiesel and a multitude of other chemical compounds; Lifeplus, an international exporter of vitamin products; Bad Boy Mowers, a nationally-recognized, leading manufacturer of zero-turn mowers; LaCroix Precision Optics, a manufacturer of custom precision optics that ships all over the world; Intimidator, Inc., a world-class, American-made, side-by-side manufacturing company and their sister company Spartan Mowers, a zero-turn mower manufacturer that has made an aggressive entry into the mowing industry; and Arkansas Lime, another big employer that ships nationwide along with Midwest Lime. Flowers Baking Co., a wholesale bakery, is also





located in Batesville, and those are just a few of our valued businesses.”

BVM: With all the economic growth, do you have sufficient housing stock available?

Baldwin: “With the population increase and demand in the county, the availability of housing has declined. In my opinion, that’s a good problem to have, because we have grown to the point where we need to work on it. Our local hospital in Batesville has started a residency program for family practice and internal medicine in partnership with the University of Arkansas and once it’s fully engaged, 80 young doctors and their families will need quality housing. Dale and I like to make loans to people to buy existing houses and there are also some housing developments being built now.”

Cole: “I’ve lived here 31 years, so I’ve seen it change dramatically, and the population is really starting to grow now with the healthy industrial base. In housing, we have what I call a balanced product available. And we struggled with that for a number of years, until three

years ago, a local builder started construction on a very nice 104-unit apartment project. The success of this project proved the market. Today there are new subdivisions and housing options for all market segments in Batesville



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and the surrounding areas of the county. But we do need more new housing and further land for development.”

BVM: Is there support for entrepreneurial endeavors?

Baldwin: “Bad Boy and Intimidator are locally-grown businesses that started here and have built nation-wide companies. Nothing happens by accident. I’ve always thought that economic development is a three-legged stool. You need to have business leadership, strong educational institutions, and good government to makes things happen, keep businesses going, and help entrepreneurs grow bigger. And Independence County has good government at the county and the city level.”

BVM: Five years down the road, what are the county’s key objectives?

Griffin: “We need to acquire more industrial and residential land and revisit our tax structure to accommodate that growth. One other issue we have to address is solid waste. Instead of going to landfill, there’s a process for burning solid waste and converting the chemicals. We’re in talks and looking at doing a feasibility study for that very innovative op-



portunity.”

Cole: “I envision an expanded industrial park in Batesville, including an intermodal rail yard on a small scale. I see the industrial base almost doubling in the next five years, and a strong push for recreation in this area, in the way of hiking and biking trails and further developing the White River.”

Baldwin: “I also see Independence County being able to capture new internet-based businesses once we have fiber optic cable throughout the area. We specialize in green space here and I can see, with the right technological infrastructure, young people and families continuing to move here to get the quality of life they can’t get in the big city, while still being able to conduct their business. We have the underpinnings to make it happen.”

PREFERRED VENDORS

■ **Tri-State Truck Center** - www.tristatetruck.com

■ **First Community Bank**
www.firstcommunity.net

■ **Citizens Bank** - www.thecitizensbank.net

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