

Sleeping giant awakes

Months of public discussions, debate result in bold and optimistic plans for the Appalachian college town of Morehead.

Like a fairy-tale sleeping giant, Morehead is tucked into the Appalachian foothills of the Daniel Boone National Forest, relaxed and comfortable as the small-town home of a state university.

In recent months, however, the sleeping giant has begun to stretch. Morehead is now abuzz with plans to step boldly into the next decade, exploring everything from how to expand the local economy to how to enhance its charm.

This has happened with the help of the NewCities Institute, affiliated with the Kentucky League of Cities, which has helped Morehead civic leaders engage citizens in conversations about what they want.

PLENTY OF ADVANTAGES

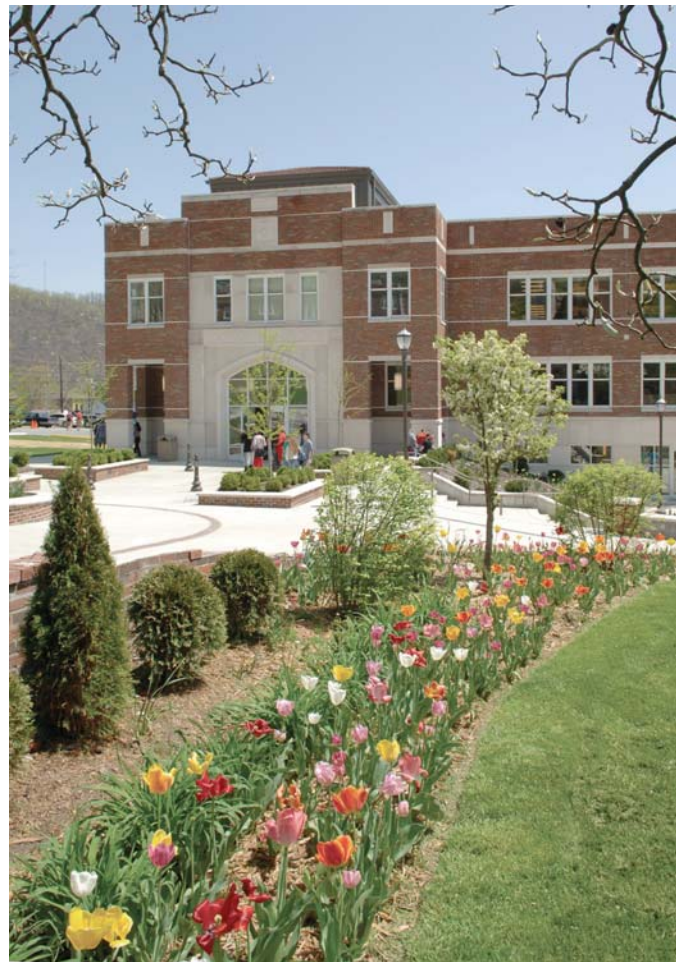
At first glance, you wouldn't think Morehead needs much help with community building, given its many advantages:

- It is located on Interstate 64, and isn't far from I-75 and I-71, making it more attractive to industrial prospects than many similar-sized towns in eastern Kentucky.
- Morehead State University has been ranked by U.S. *News and World Report* among the top 25 universities in the south.
- Cave Run Lake and the Daniel Boone National Forest provide abundant tourism opportunities.
- The community has a downtown conference center, regional hospital and a strong public school system.

But until last year, Morehead had never made an all-out effort to build on those advantages, though it had at times addressed specific disadvantages.

In the 1990s, for instance, many small cities in Kentucky began focusing on their downtowns that were declining partly because of competition from big-box stores on the city outskirts. In 1998 civic leaders created an organization, Morehead Tomorrow, to take the lead on downtown revitalization. Results included the conference center, and residents were delighted.

At the same time, Mayor **Brad Collins** said, it was just "a one-phase project for downtown, with little or no citizen input."



Morehead State University

A NEW DIRECTION

More recently, community leaders have become concerned about the bigger picture—sustaining the local economy in a time of globalization. Should Morehead make it a priority to branch out in new directions, or build on existing efforts? What would the trade-offs be? Local government officials revised Morehead's comprehensive plan, but realized in the process that they would need more input from citizens to make real change.

Ultimately they turned to the NewCities Institute, created by the Kentucky League of Cities in 2001 to help cities

engage citizens in conversations about their communities' immediate and long-term futures. NewCities had recently completed a pilot project with Moscow, Idaho, that led to a range of initiatives in that small community, home to the University of Idaho.

Collins admits that he was "a bit scared at what people would say" about the decision to hire a consultant to get people talking. And once community conversations got started, he wondered, what would they say about Morehead and its leaders?

Nevertheless, NewCity Morehead was launched in April 2006. For the next few months, hundreds of citizens and civic leaders met at community forums to discuss their values and express their hopes and fears.

To connect with people where they live and feel comfortable, the forums were held not only in the city but also throughout Rowan County in churches, firehouses and community halls. The idea was to gather different perspectives—but as it turned out, residents agreed more than they disagreed.

"It was enlightening and surprising to see that the views and ideas from all areas were the same," said Rodney Hitch, executive director of the Morehead-Rowan County Economic Development Council.

After sifting through the citizens' comments, NewCities found that they valued specific characteristics that already flourished in Morehead or could be built upon—its sense of place, small-town charm and heritage, friendliness, attractive surroundings, education, arts and culture, health care, belief in local people and optimism. Citizens also came up with strategies that NewCities incorporated into its recommendations for the Morehead community.

The recommendations were based on the citizen input as well as the 12 Principles NewCities has developed for community building in the 21st century.

The recommendations included focusing on 21st-century jobs in economic development, increasing government efficiency, planning for countywide growth and preservation, getting serious about more "green" initiatives to protect the environment, communicating the community's vision to the public and continuing to listen to the people.

As a result of the NewCity Morehead venture, Morehead now has a strong board and working committee with stakeholders from all facets of the community. The board has been meeting monthly in order to work on Morehead's short-, medium- and long-term strategies.

Collins said he has already seen better cohesion among government agencies. According to Hitch, "It is very exciting to see the leaders of the community and citizens alike come together for the common good."

So far, the community has made headway on short-term goals such as entrance beautification, signage and street light improvement, while more suggestions are being made daily.

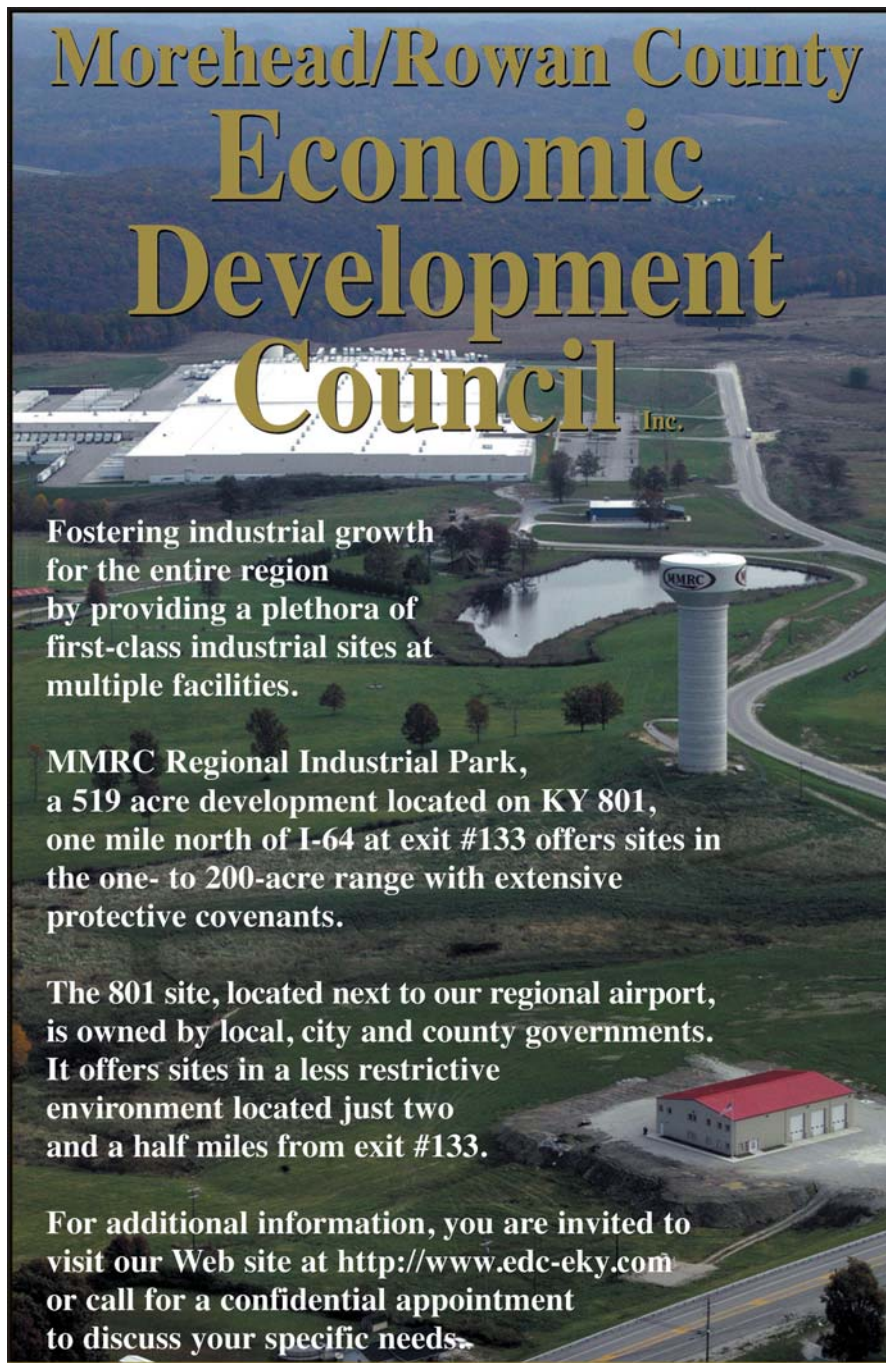
In line with its long-term goals, the city has begun working with Morehead State University, St. Claire Regional Medical Center, University of Kentucky

and the University of Louisville to develop ongoing projects and partnerships.

Both Morehead and Moscow realize that change does not happen overnight; citizens must be engaged, and that takes time.

"Sustainable community building involves ongoing dialogue among citizens, not just the offering of a few suggestions that others will implement," Hitch said.

—NEWCITIES INSTITUTE STAFF



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Idaho town serves as Morehead model



Downtown Moscow, Idaho

In 2005 Moscow, Idaho was chosen by the NewCities Institute to be the focus of its pilot project, "America's First NewCities." Both Moscow's community leaders and the Institute believed that engaging citizens on vital issues would lead to a permanent change in the civic culture of the community, how decision-making occurs, who has seats at the table and how government interacts with citizens.

As a result of the project in Moscow, local government has implemented new ways of being open to citizen input before decisions are made. Neighborhood meetings at the precinct level are being conducted to gather ideas and generate discussion. The local planning commission is on track to create a new comprehensive plan within 12 months that takes into account the unique issues that Northwest communities are confronting on water aquifers, environmental sensitivities and efficient growth.

The most prominent and innovative recommendation from the NewCities project was for the region to create the Palouse Knowledge Corridor. This meant that Moscow would work with area universities and local governments to leverage the region's educational assets to compete more fully in the global economy.

In October 2006, the first Palouse Knowledge Corridor Economic Summit was held with more than 100 citizens and key regional leaders in attendance. The purpose of the summit was to begin finding ways of formalizing and strengthening the current ad hoc working relationship between Washington State University and the University of Idaho. This summit is helping to create spin-off businesses from research at the two universities and generally help define the region's brand for the Super Region that includes Seattle, Boise, Salt Lake City, Portland, San Francisco, Las Vegas and Los Angeles.



12 Principles for NewCities

1. Connect to the world
2. Encourage youth, diversity and inclusiveness
3. Feed the mind, nurture the soul
4. Embrace healthy living
5. Remain true to the city's uniqueness
6. Don't merely grow; plan and develop over time
7. Build beautifully and steward the environment
8. Cultivate leadership and citizen involvement
9. Recruit, retain and generate wealth
10. Mimic bigness, but think small
11. Rethink boundaries
12. Buy locally, sell globally



www.newcities.org



Morehead Conference Center

*Events * Conventions * Banquets * Exhibits*

111 East First Street

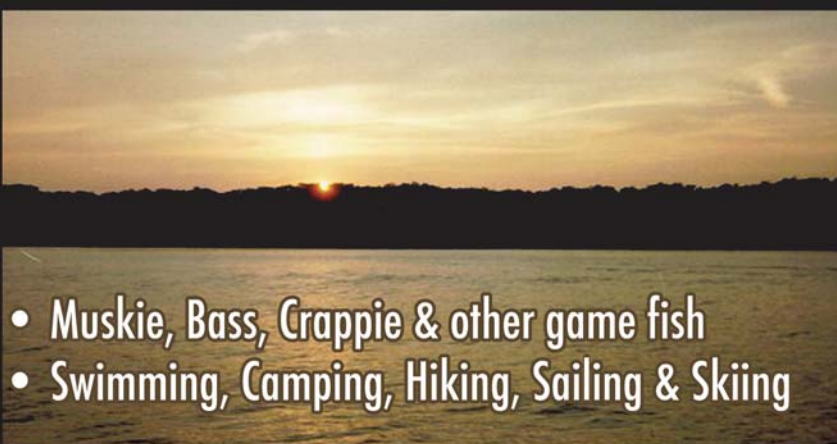
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- Morehead Antique Market, Feb. 23 & 24, 2008

Morehead Tourism Commission
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