The Citistate in Brief

Owensboro, with a 1990 population of 53,549, is Kentucky's third-largest city, located 100 miles south of Louisville on the Ohio River. It is the capital seat of Daviess County, which had a population of 87,189 in 1990, up 1.4 percent in a decade. The county covers 463 square miles in the western Kentucky coal field region. Except for Owens, the county has only one other incorporated town – Whitesville. There are separate city and county school districts, and six special districts.

The Peirce Report Glossary

Fiscal Court is the name assigned to the county government (a throw-back to early days when territorial moneys flowed through it.) ***Griffith Avenue*** is a major Owensboro residential street, known for its lovely dogwoods in the spring, a route on which many prominent citizens build their homes. One such citizen, shopping mall magnate David Hocker, has such a massive Griffith Avenue home that the text makes jocular reference to it as the ***"House of Hocker." Stone Creek*** is an area where homes are more properly identified as estates. ***Thorobred Acres*** is a typical middle-class housing development filled with a labyrinth of residential streets rather than anything like the straight-away racetrack its name suggests.

The ***West End*** historically housed Owensboro blacks, as well as a spare scattering of poor whites. The ***East End*** tended to be dominated by poor whites. ***Smothers Park***, on the waterfront, has fountains, flags, and boat launching ramps. ***English Park***, also on the waterfront, has an outdoor amphitheater capable of seating 10,000 to 15,000 people for music festivals and other activities. ***Downtown Owensboro Inc.*** promotes the downtown's business and commercial life. The ***Campbell Club*** is Owensboro's "establishment" social club. The ***Owensboro Career Development Association*** seeks to help young blacks, mainly in grades four to eight, raise their sights academically so that more will become interested in going to college and into business and professional lives.

Owensboro, Kentucky: Reforging Community

(Originally published in the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer* September 29-October 3, 1991.)

On a perfect spring day, the little Cessna lifts off from Owensboro-Daviess County Regional Airport, quickly revealing to us three worlds: western Kentucky's fertile fields, the city of Owensboro, and that mighty lifeline and geologic creator, the Ohio River. We had come for several days of interviewing, to meet and talk with a broad cross section of the leaders, exalted and humble, of Owensboro and Daviess County. But first, to our delight, we were able to get this bird's-eye view of the Owensboro region.

In a broad semicircle, we flew west over the Audubon Parkway, sighted Alcoa's red and white smokestacks across the river, identified the future Scott Paper Company site.

Then our pilot picked up the tree-lined, meandering Green River, took us in a wide arc over McLean, Muhlenberg, Ohio, and Hancock counties, and finally, from a spot near the Cannelton locks, picked up the Ohio and flew us downriver to Owensboro again.

A thousand feet above the earth, an hour in a small plane, watching meadow and water, town and mine site, factory and forest and field roll out below you, makes it clear why so many people love this part of Kentucky—and why some worry, too, about its environmental future.

It was May, and the fields were being prepared for another season of corn and soybeans, wheat and tobacco. Tractors furrowed many fields, tiny clouds of dust rising in their wake.

On some pastures, planted even earlier, the tender and luminescent greens of first growth soothed the eye. And here and there, great splashes of yellow sprang to view: canola, considered the new "health plant" because it has the right chemistry for more health-conscious diets—more monosaturated, less polysaturated fats.

Occasionally the air tour produces extraordinary surprises: right in the midst of grassy farm country, for example, Delbert Glenn's huge Diamond Lakes spread—breeding lakes for fish, laid out with geometric precision, together with restaurant and country music theater and campgrounds, miles from any settlement.

Over Muhlenberg and Ohio counties, the countryside gets a lot hillier, and suddenly more and more chunks of territory have been laid bare for strip mining. The vast gashes upon the earth, monstrous earth-moving machines astride them, are a visual shock. Far pleasanter to the eye are some of the green, recovered mine strips. Saddest of all are the "orphan mines" stripped before the reclamation laws came in.

Mighty industry greets us along the waterways, a muscular, raw presence, whether for power or aluminum or paper or brick, a reminder that this region's economy depends as much on making things as growing them. Companions to the gritty factories are the great barges moving up and down the Ohio—common-sense, cheap transport that holds on tenaciously in the age of the monster truck and interstate America.

As Owensboro looms into view again, multiple images rush before us: the lacy blue steel of the bridge spanning the river from Indiana, the town's orderly grid, church spires and the two hospitals, the massive Executive Inn Rivermont at the water's side, the great white silos of Owensboro Grain. White homes, modest and expansive alike, line many streets. There's Griffith Avenue, springtime's Dogwood and Azalea Trail, one corner anchored by the multiwinged House of Hocker.

Yet for all the beauty trees give to Owensboro, they don't shade the blotches of multiple downtown blocks that have lost their historic structures and now stand vacant for parking. On the periphery, asphalt seas surround the shopping centers. Owensboro has become car country and paid a price for it.

But not everyone is encapsulated in two tons of steel. Kids are playing baseball on a green diamond. And down near the river, crews are getting ready for the yearly International Barbecue Festival. Some 50,000 people will pack the scene. We hear they'll consume beef and pork by the carload and 20 tons of mutton. Wow!

Central Challenges

If the community that consists of Owensboro and surrounding Daviess County is going to make itself a more desirable place to live and "hack it" in the harshly competitive world of the 199Os, it will have to face up to a challenging set of shifts—some psychic, some civic, some economic and social.

A new, broader concept of regional citizenship will have to be nurtured. Ugly and counterproductive city-rural antagonisms will have to be alleviated. Power sharing will have to be opened up. A dramatically enlarged role for women in local leadership must be created. The *Messenger-Inquirer*—and its critics—will have to reach some understandings.

On the economic front, the focus of job development will have to switch from fishing expeditions for the increasingly rare big catch to something closer to aquaculture—nourishing smaller, more numerous, homegrown fish. The environment will have to rise higher on peoples' lists of concerns. We will propose a "safe growth committee" to evaluate industrial deals on economic and environmental grounds. We'll suggest a stronger focus on agriculture as a base for economic growth. Owensboro must pledge itself to an intensive campaign to recreate a downtown with character and attractiveness, a true meeting place for the region's

people and visitors from afar. Developing a fully accessible, lively waterfront must be a top priority.

On the social front, Owensboro-Daviess County can strengthen itself by reaching out more aggressively to support and "deal in" sometimes estranged communities, from the children and parents of troubled families to senior citizens to the area's small but significant African-American community. Finally, we'll suggest it's time to create a strong community foundation to support the multiple civic adventures of the coming years—first because "risk capital" is critical to community progress, second because strong corporate supporters (Texas Gas, for example) could be buffeted in an increasingly tumultuous international economy.

The reader may detect an undercurrent of sharp criticism as we make some points. We acknowledge that. On the other hand, there are a lot of things about Owensboro-Daviess County that strike a visitor very positively. Chief among these is the community's capacity to turn goals into reality. In the mid-1980s the Citizens Committee on Education sparked the creation of Owensboro Community College, opening opportunities for the region's residents to gain sophisticated new workplace skills. The creation wasn't easy. There were fears of negative impact on Brescia College and Kentucky Wesleyan; community leaders disagreed about the location; big state dollars had to be collared.

But the competing visions were resolved; a new institution was born; a handsome campus took shape. And college participation by Daviess County's young people has soared from 45 percent to 61 percent.

RiverPark Center, when it opens in 1992, won't merely be home to Owensboro's symphony, theater, dance group, and a new bluegrass museum. Nor will the 1,500-seat auditorium and 300-seat theater just be spaces for use. What the center will represent is the caring and commitment of Owensboro people to the distinctive shared culture of their community—Bach to Balanchine to bluegrass. The $9-million fund-raising effort to make it happen is simply extraordinary for a city of Owensboro's size.

If Mayor David Adkisson thinks of the downtown riverfront district as the community's living room, then RiverPark Center's three-story atrium overlooking the Ohio River will indeed represent its picture window.

Of course, visitors have to be impressed by the immense outpouring of public support that complemented the industrial recruiters' work in landing the Scott Paper Company plant last year. The "We" in the newspaper's jubilant banner headline—"We got Scott"—referred clearly to the whole community.

Could this be the same community that managed, in 1990, to rip itself apart on a city-county merger issue, revealing rather scary urban-rural animosities, a yawning gulf between political elites and regular folks?

As we listened to leaders from across the city and county—bankers and farmers, entertainment moguls and neighborhood activists, industrialists and environmentalists—a string of remarkable contrasts sprang into focus.

Take the familiar Owensboro-Daviess County lament about isolation: "The interstates don't come here. Our only bridge is on its last legs. The big planes don't fly in here any more. It takes hours to get to a big city. We're cut off. We need better and bigger roads and bridges."

The visitor hears a lot of those sentiments, and they sound like complaints. Yet in the next breath, the very same people will turn the tables and tell an astoundingly different-sounding story:

"This is a safe community. We don't have to lock our doors. This is a family-oriented town, a churchgoing town. It's a terrific place to raise kids. There are no porn shops. No places to buy adult videos. No dangerous street types here. This is the way we want it."

Not everybody agrees; some (especially young singles) complain the community is too safe. They say there's not enough street life, diversity, excitement. Like all humans, Owensboro people may want the impossible—the advantages of quick connections with the world, but without the social consequences that come swirling in its wake. Here's a town where one hears a lot of expressions of fierce independence—a community that many residents claim is the best place to live in

North America. Back in the 1920s, when industrial might was prized above all else, Owensboro called itself "the Chicago of the South." Today its "Rooster Booster" events draw up to a thousand people for monthly breakfasts. Another side of the community is deeply suspicious of new ideas. Back in 1963, Owensboro voted not to accept federal urban renewal money.

"There's a sense around here that right or wrong isn't relevant, it's how we do it,"' one civic leader told us. "Owensboro," he continued, "is a very comfortable place to be, especially if you can ease into the feeling of the place, if you can accept what most of the people accept."

A veteran journalist in town reminded us that the statue on the Courthouse lawn memorializes a Civil War soldier who wore a gray, not a blue uniform. Owensboro-Daviess County and its surrounding territory, he said, were Confederate then and remain fundamentally conservative today.

From a leading entrepreneur in town we heard: "People around here get worked up over anything that's changing, and they get mad at the people who cause it." But all's not hopeless, he added. "Later on, they're proud of the result."

Owensboro-Daviess County's fundamental challenge, as we sensed it, is to meld its skepticism, its reluctance to change, with recognition that no city, anywhere in America, is going to be safe against buffeting economic and social change in the years ahead. Since the Scott announcement, the Owensboro-Daviess County area has lost more jobs in the aluminum industry alone than all the jobs that the Scott plant promises to bring.

The community college was a great accomplishment for the 1980s. But the acid test will be whether it can prepare constantly increasing numbers of people from the Owensboro-Daviess County region, the underprivileged as well as the affluent and senior-college bound, the rural as well as the urban, for the fearsomely tough job requirements of the years ahead.

The RiverPark Center could be a white elephant, not a center of community pride and accomplishment, if it's not managed as well as it was conceived, if bluegrass development isn't pushed forward with verve and imagination, and if the surrounding downtown can't be made a more welcoming place. It could become the cultural mecca of western Kentucky and southwestern Indiana—but only with the right leadership and foresight.

Home-Grown: The Key to the Economic Future

The echoes of "We Got Scott!" were still reverberating when we came to visit. And why not? Snaring the gigantic paper maker's manufacturing plant, with its cutting edge technology, represents a sensational industrial recruitment hit for the region as it approaches the 21st century.

Here is a firm nationally admired for civic interest and an acceptable environmental performance. The Owensboro-Daviess County area gets a state of-the-art new factory, set to roll out a near recession-proof product—paper tissue. And then there are the jobs—500 to start with, at high wages, and maybe more later. "Scott will be here for a hundred years," a bank president told us. "It's a massive investment they can't walk away from. In two years they'll be closing other plants and bringing those jobs here, too." Owensboro-Daviess County would be very foolish, though, to think other Scott deals are out there waiting to be tapped. The community lucked out this time; to anticipate a similar future "hit" would be foolish. Footloose factories are getting to be as rare as buffalo on the range.

The way American communities first attracted industries, through the 19th century and until World War II, was by sitting in the right place—on rivers or beside great harbors, on top of mother lodes of such natural resources as coal and gold. In the 1920s, industries started moving from the North to the South for cheap labor alone. Then came the post–World War II era of active "smokestack chasing," as communities searched far and wide for factories, promised tax exemptions and low-interest bonds and sometimes outright grants to companies who'd succumb. Kentucky's catch of the Toyota plant was a sensational

"smokestack win."

But the 1980s ushered in a dramatically different era. The number of potential catches kept growing smaller as more and more manufacturing facilities moved offshore. The Southern Growth Policies Board actually likened smokestack chasing to buffalo hunting—pursuing a constantly thinning herd.

Today most states and communities are pursuing a much more sophisticated strategy. States have set up venture capital funds and supported high-tech research laboratories tied to new industrial capacity. They've emphasized the training of a broadly capable work force.

Today education is a top economic development tool, as skills, not low wages, become the new magnet for growth. Smart states and localities now identify the encouragement of entrepreneurs and the growth of existing businesses as their most important economic development strategy. Indeed, the most dramatic growth of businesses in the Owensboro-Daviess County area itself has been in existing firms, manufacturing and service alike.

For some really significant numbers, take a look at the Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital, which has expanded its work force from 1,000 to 1,400 workers and today ranks as the county's largest single employer. The Owensboro-Daviess County Hospital is, to be sure, a not-for-profit operation. But it is also a major business, grown from 50 doctors in 1969 to 150 today. It offers a carefully selected, profitable group of treatment technologies such as a cardiac catheterization unit and laser gall bladder treatment. On every front from open heart surgery to sophisticated cancer therapies, it's become a prime regional center, drawing patients from considerable distances. And in a time when most U.S. county hospitals depend on property taxes to cover their growing deficits, here's an institution that functions virtually free of local subsidy.

Or consider Terry Woodward's WaxWorks record and video operation. Here's an industry born and grown in Owensboro that expanded to $172 million in sales in 1990—the country's fifth-largest video distributor. Terry Woodward, with his 145 music stores in 35 states, has kept his operation in downtown Owensboro, constantly outgrowing his space. Today he has 1,500 employees nationwide, 220 in Owensboro.

It would be silly to ignore opportunities for good buffalo hunts—especially when an unusually fat critter gets sighted. But most importantly, the city and county need to plunge into a day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out effort to strengthen and expand the base of the area's existing firms, the industry and service partners already here. If job growth is the goal, then helping the Terry Woodwards, large or small, is a savvy strategy.

Looking at what's already on the ground must include what's growing out of it. Agriculture is a vitally important part of the local economy, but not taken seriously enough in many quarters. Tobacco, the area's traditional crop, is still a massive business but may be imperiled more and more by health concerns. Canola, the new crop, is on the opposite edge—a low-fat oil with immense potential.

And there are lots of other potentials for a community that keeps its antenna up. Consider tomatoes. Owensboro's Ragu plant needs them badly, but up to now has had to import all of them from points far distant. We wondered why a major local effort wasn't under way to see that Daviess County—an ideal tomato-growing area—produces the fruit that this processor needs so badly. It did seem good news when word came recently of a state-of-the-art tomato processing plant and warehouse to be constructed near Friendly Village in Daviess County. But the plant would eventually want commitments for 3,000 acres of tomatoes each year—12 times what Daviess County farmers have been producing. Some major readjustments are obviously in order.

And the challenges go well beyond production of a single crop. Today's agriculture is as much people operating computers and scientists working in laboratories as farmers plowing fields. With enough imagination, multiple new products and

processes could be developed—right in Owensboro. Farm chiefs used to look for strong backs; now they want strong minds, too. "I need people with good math, biology, chemistry, microbiology backgrounds—and they're hard to find here," a leading local agribusiness leader told us. He made us wonder, in fact, why Owensboro Community College hadn't begun a special effort in agribusiness-related biotechnology.

We believe Owensboro-Daviess County needs a new way to think about economic development in the 1990s.

First comes understanding how critical education is to any and all growth—a subject that's already received intensive local attention, and for the right reasons. Without a trained and motivated work force, few other inducements the city and county have to offer are likely to cut much ice with prospective targets.

A second strategy must be protection of the region's environment. What, after all, is more important than the health and quality of life of the people who live here? With sound education and a quality environment, we argue, job expansion—whether internal or through industrial recruitment—will come almost naturally.

We recommend an independent Committee for Safe Growth for Daviess County and the city. This would be a specially constituted group to advise the public on the critical issues—environmental issues, plus potential economic deals or opportunities—that face the region. Such a group would have no official power. But we believe it could empower the region's people by obliging industry and government alike to share more critical decisions.

Let's face it. Typically, massive economic deals, like the Scott agreement, get made behind closed doors, with the public knowing little if anything about what's happening—even when vast sums of public money are getting committed. We think the public deserves to know more, and that progress wouldn't get stopped in its tracks if that happened.

The rigor of environmental debate in Owensboro-Daviess County lags well behind that in most American communities. One has to assume it was corporate responsibility—not retreat under ferocious criticism—behind Scott Paper's recent announcement that it would radically reduce the potentially dangerous emissions from its new plant by using new chemicals in the manufacturing process. Some credit belongs to local environmentalists who first raised the issue and to the *Messenger-Inquirer* for reporting and editorializing on the issue.

Yet it would be naive for Owensboro-Daviess County to believe that every corporate citizen will be as responsible, or indeed that some future generation of Scott executives might not chart a different course.

We're aware that in a job-hungry area of massive power plants, huge aluminum factories, and strip mining, relatively few people have wanted to rock the boat. Yet there is also some history of environmental activism in Owensboro-Daviess County, exhibited perhaps most strongly a dozen years ago when three massive "synfuels" plants, intended to create synthetic fuel by coal liquification, were proposed for the Owensboro area. As Lee and Aloma Dew write in *Owensboro: City on the Yellow Banks:*

> Owensboro became the center of a . . . battle over the environment and quality of life versus industry at any cost. It was a battle of esoteric arguments about clean air and water, floodplains and prime agricultural land, earthquake faults and cancer risks against the palpable promise of jobs and paychecks to a group of people frustrated by unemployment and underemployment.

As it turned out, the grand vision for synfuels collapsed on economic, not environmental, arguments. But the community had been awakened enough to reject the 1982 proposal for a hazardous waste treatment plant at the Owensboro Riverport. The safety of the technology was doubted; there was fear that Owensboro might get a name for drawing hazardous industry, driving

away others.

But how, on any industry-related environmental question, does a community know how to make a judgment? How can people know if there is or isn't a potential threat to their family's health? How does the average citizen find out? Whom does he or she trust?

We believe the Owensboro-Daviess County area will be confronted with more and more debates of this type, related to new and existing industries, to business and government activity alike. We think it's insufficient to rely, as some local officials are prepared to do, on Kentucky's air and water quality regulations unless, of course, you believe government always stays clean itself, and of course makes the right decisions.)

Owensboro-Daviess County needs the capacity for thorough, independent analysis of all manner of environmental issues. There's some promise in the new environmental organization—POLAR, or Protecting Our Lives and Resources. "Official" Owensboro's reaction to POLAR has been cool, but we advise the community to think twice. Experience across the country teaches us that environmental groups don't just fade away—they end up either screaming on the outside or talking at the table. We think the table makes more sense.

But environmental organizations, by their nature, are advocacy groups. What's missing is an independent voice, backed up by solid research, that hears all sides.

Industry, let us note, needs this dialogue, too. Its operations require a clean environment; its executives and workers drink the same water, breathe the same air as everyone else in town. And who would want all those children—for whom everyone claims Owensboro-Daviess County is such a great place to grow up—to be exposed to environmental hazards that could distort their lives, even subject some to premature death?

The Safe Growth Committee would be a good arena in which these issues could get aired. In addition to industry representatives and environmentalists, it would have a majority composed of citizens with no special ax to grind. We think of college presidents, clergy, a barbecue waiter, a farmer, a retired professional, college faculty with expertise in the environment. To provide some independent research to the group, an interdisciplinary environmental task force could be formed at one of the local colleges, or perhaps cooperatively among them.

We're aware that an environmental committee of sorts was formed, at Scott's request, to funnel community concerns back to the corporation. The members were appointed by local officials and told to report to the local economic development director.

That may have been a useful gesture, but it shouldn't depend on the goodwill or responsibility of any corporation. The process needs to be open, independent, the expected way of doing business in Owensboro-Daviess County.

Members of the Committee for Safe Growth might be appointed by the Daviess County judge-executive and the mayor of Owensboro. But multiple nominations should also be solicited from civic and business groups, urban and rural, across the region. And the appointments should be for enough years to give members time to learn and to speak independently. It's important not to have an automatically harmonious group. All points of view need to be represented, so that the right questions get raised. That kind of process may be tougher, but in the end, the committee's advisories will have far more credibility.

We can imagine such a committee attacked as a threat to industry and economic development. We believe quite the opposite—that it would promote sound economic development by raising legitimate issues. Conversely, when a scare is raised over some environmental issue and there's no evidence it's truly serious, the public ought to be given a reassuring advisory.

Ninety-nine percent of Owensboro-Daviess County residents endorsed the Scott deal in a poll in December 1990. The morale boost the big catch gave to the community was clearly enormous. But it was also a frightfully expensive agreement, all at taxpayers' expense. The city and county agreed to come up with $4 million in job training money for Scott's new workers. The

firm was assured a $300 bonus for each worker it took on. The county said it would build and pay for a $3.5-million wastewater line from the new factory to the Ohio River. Free water lines would be constructed to the plant. The county would pay for any wetlands mitigation that might be needed. A series of industrial revenue bonds, locally and state-authorized, would provide Scott with well over $100 million in financing, the interest rate subsidized by the public.

The concession list leaves one almost breathless. The *Messenger-Inquirer* calculated the public cost at more than $300,000 per job—one of the most expensive deals, job for job, in American history.

But even if the public seems happy, one has to ask: should agreements of this magnitude, with such vast sums of public expenditures involved, be signed before the public knows the terms?

Kentuckians seem to hate taxes with a passion. The idea that some people might pay marginally higher taxes helped send the city-county merger referendum down to defeat last year. But the Scott deal obligated the city, and especially the county, to vast financial obligations, a massive hit on taxpayers' pockets. And it all seemed to be accepted without a murmur.

What if a Committee on Safe Growth had been in existence and had a chance to take a look at the Scott agreement and evaluate it for the public before the official signing? Would it have made any difference? Would publicity have killed the deal and handed it to Indiana? Or would public attention have stiffened the back of the local negotiators, emboldened them to bargain from greater strength?

No one can answer for sure, but our guess is that a little sunlight on the negotiations would have won better terms for Owensboro-Daviess County and landed the Scott plant anyway.

Our suspicion, though we can't prove it, is that Scott had already settled on Daviess County and was out to get it on the best terms it could. Owensboro's problem—as in all such negotiations—is that it had to play a poker game in which the company could see all three hands—its own, Daviess County's, and the Indiana competitors'. It sounds like a funny analogy, but under those rules, the house always wins. And this time it was the local taxpayers' money on the gaming table.

We asked local political leaders if there was any price that would have been too high to offer Scott, if it had asked. We were shocked: they couldn't think of a limit!

We asked them if the city and county could entertain another Scott-type proposal. Would there be enough funds in the public treasuries, anytime soon, for another corporate payment demand? We must report that the answers we got to our questions seemed quite evasive, even from officials with otherwise exemplary records. We suggest that unless the residents of Owensboro-Daviess County like the idea of writing blank checks, they ought to blow the whistle on indiscriminate buffalo hunting.

There is a possible antidote, and the idea hit us after Owensboro financial leaders provided us with one of their pet ideas—to establish a dedicated revenue source (perhaps a payroll tax of 0.25 percent or so). The sole use of the cash, they suggested, would be financing infrastructure or other inducements to draw new corporations.

But we saw the potential a lot differently. First, we recommend that any such tax fund should be capped at a reasonable level, thus providing a clear giveaway limit—a point beyond which the taxpayer's wealth couldn't be placed in private corporate hands. Secondly, we'd suggest that at least 50 percent of the proceeds from any such tax be dedicated to holding and strengthening existing businesses—a fund for the county and city's own firms, to help them flourish and expand their work forces.

Leaders of existing firms told us they were pleased Scott had been recruited. But they felt the inducements offered the paper giant were discriminatory against the city's and county's own firms. We think they were right.

There's one thorny problem in imposing a countywide occupational tax. At the last moment in the Scott negotiations, the

company's attorneys demanded that Daviess County agree not to adopt the same kind of payroll or occupational tax that's been in effect in Owensboro (but not outlying portions of Daviess County) since 1960. It was as if Scott, getting ready to come to town and use the local schools and roads and facilities, not only asked megabucks to move in and build its plant, but freedom for its executives and workers to escape a fair share of area costs.

Was the tax concession truly critical to the Scott deal? Some insiders we talked with thought not, that Scott's attorneys threw it in at the last minute and that county officials, paralyzed at the thought of losing the deal, crumbled. County officers even put it on paper: they'd plead with their successors not to pass such a tax.

It's hard to imagine Scott would want to let anything get in the way of its extraordinarily positive image in Daviess County-Owensboro. Our suggestion would be that Scott's senior executives, as an act of good corporate citizenship and commitment to a diversified, healthy regional economy, voluntarily relieve Daviess Fiscal Court from its pledge not to adopt the occupational tax. Then a countywide occupational tax for economic development could go into effect, creating not just a rush of goodwill but some dedicated dollars to build a strong and diversified future economy.

Education: The Foremost Challenge

As tough as new state and national goals for schools and higher education may seem, the Owensboro community hardly starts from ground zero in this area. It added a community college to its base of two fine independent four-year colleges in the 1980s. The Citizens Committee on Education, sparkplug of that effort, has lived on to push for constant improvement. The Daviess County and Owensboro school districts do so well, at least compared with the rest of the state, that they fear the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act will actually hold them back, while poor and deficient districts catch up.

Owensboro has a very high incidence of single-parent households—reportedly as high as 70 percent. Nearly half the kids qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. Still, the city educates so well that no grade level falls below national averages on standardized tests.

Both the city and county schools have seen their college-going rates increase dramatically in recent years. There was evidence of long-term thinking in former Owensboro Superintendent J. Frank Yeager's tough challenges to invest early and often in the youngest children, especially those from troubled homes.

But just when you think Owensboro education is a success story, you hear of employer after employer who can't find qualified workers. When WorldSource came to Hancock County and started hiring, it was shocked to find 3,000 of the 4,500 applicants had to be ruled out because of insufficient skills. And clearly there's lots of underemployment. In 1989, when Pinkerton Tobacco advertised for 20 openings, more than 1,200 would-be workers applied.

Then there's the problem that more than 21,000 adults in Daviess County have less than a high school education. And we hear that a persistent anti-intellectualism holds on, especially in lower-income white families where education isn't taken seriously. School officials tell sadly of parents marching into school on their child's 16th birthday to remove the child from the classroom. That might once have been a rational act, given the lower-skilled employment needs of 1950. But today, parents who make that choice may condemn their kids to perpetual poverty.

Add to that the projection that of the 348,000 new jobs likely to be created in Kentucky by the year 2000, more than 90 percent will require at least two years of college.

All that suggests to us there's much for the Owensboro-Daviess community to address on the education front. This is no time for complacency.

Owensboro's Downtown: A "Living Room"?

In renewal accomplished and grand things to come, Owensboro's waterfront and downtown are standouts. We doubt if the citizens of Owensboro and Daviess County fully appreciate the importance of what's occurred already—and what will happen soon—on their doorstep to the Ohio River.

Like most cities, Owensboro saw its downtown retailing flee to the shopping centers and Wal-Marts. The familiar, dreary story of so many cities was repeated here: mindless demolition of many fine, still serviceable old buildings, the appearance of gaping holes in the flow of a once-proud streetscape.

But during the last decade, the pattern of downtown decay in Owensboro has met its match. First came coal mine owner Bob Green, who stumbled into the hotel business in Evansville and liked it so much that he decided to build on the waterfront in Owensboro. By booking Las Vegas-quality shows into the Executive Inn Rivermont, Green not only captured a lot of hotel trade that used to go to other towns, he also encouraged people to come to Owensboro, stay overnight, spend their money. Green became the Father of Tourism for a city that had never known it.

Terry Woodward, by contrast, became Owensboro's Entrepreneur Extraordinaire. He was the man who carried off one of America's great business success stories of the times, right in downtown Owensboro, which virtually everyone else had declared dead.

Woodward took his father's business and parlayed it into one of America's leading music and video distribution firms—WaxWorks. (Sales soared from $200,000 in WaxWorks' first year to $172,000,000 in 1990.) Choosing Sears' old downtown store in Owensboro as his staging area, Woodward expanded almost constantly until he'd taken over the entire building. Today he owns all four corners at Second and Crittenden.

Bob Green and Terry Woodward are at least half the story of downtown's historic turnaround. But they aren't all of it.

There's also the saga of the host of Owensboro leaders who got engaged in the process of planning for their city's future, decided downtown was critical to the city identity and well-being, and then went to work to make it happen.

In 1987 their thoughts and plans came together in a broadly representative "Strategies for Tomorrow" for Owensboro-Daviess County. The official players in the strategic planning effort ranged from the city and county governments to the Chamber of Commerce and Metropolitan Planning Commission. Three hundred private citizens took part. While the future of downtown and the riverfront was only one element of "Strategies," it was a critical one.

Here was the community's first official call to implement the long-held dream of a cultural/civic center, built directly on the riverfront. The center ought to be, said the "Strategies" committee, a new home and stage for Owensboro's leading performing arts groups, a civic gathering spot for speakers and special events; a place, in short, where the entire Owensboro Daviess County community could come together. The facility also would be linked to a new Bluegrass Museum and Hall of Fame.

"Strategies" urged the building of a major corporate office center downtown—also directly on the river. It recommended public construction of downtown parking, which had been identified as a major barrier to further development.

And on the existing riverfront, which they called "woefully underutilized, unsightly and unattractive," the "Strategies" planners called for a stem-to-stern clean-up, redoing all the riverfront property from Smothers Park to English Park.

Many cities' strategic plans go on the shelf, honored only in the breach. But in the last half decade, the steps the "Strategies" report outlined for the downtown and waterfront have left the realm of abstract dreams to become very tangible brick, glass, concrete, and walkways. Today the corporate center, the waterfront cleanup, the parking facility are well advanced. And RiverPark, the name with which the new civic/cultural center got baptized, is to open in 1992, the crown jewel of the

downtown redevelopment.

A remarkable quotient of civic "imagineering," replete with all manner of citizen input, has been added to the new downtown formula in recent years.

Take bluegrass. In the mid-1980s, Terry Woodward had the idea to launch an annual bluegrass festival on the riverfront at Owensboro. It was a compelling case. Bluegrass sprang from this area of Kentucky: father-of-the-art Bill Monroe was born 30 miles from Owensboro at Rosine. Jerusalem Ridge, of the bluegrass ballad, is nearby.

The Bluegrass Festival started in 1985, culminating in a joint concert by the Osborne Brothers and the Owensboro Symphony—the first time a symphony orchestra anywhere had ever performed at a bluegrass festival.

But Woodward's mind already was racing ahead: why not found an International Bluegrass Music Association and make sure its headquarters got located in Owensboro? How about a bluegrass awards show? Why not, by the fifth year or so, create the Bluegrass Museum and Hall of Fame and put it right beside Owensboro's new RiverPark Center?

So far, the Woodward timetable is working almost perfectly. And it would be tough to think of a better business move: 40 million Americans listen to bluegrass; 1 million call it their favorite music.

Or consider barbecue. The art is legendary to Owensboro, dating at least from the 1830s. We were amused when Mayor David Adkisson took the trouble to prepare a fully researched article for the *Messenger-Inquirer* to certify the community's standing as the barbecue capital of the world. (Adkisson's measure: More barbecue restaurants per capita than any other city. No competitor came even close.)

In the late 1970s, Ken Bosley, whose family owns Moonlite Bar-B-Que Inn, was one of a bunch of Chamber of Commerce members dreaming up new ideas to promote tourism in Owensboro. Recalling how big church barbecue picnics are, they settled on Bosley's idea—a barbecue festival. Soon Owensboro's International Barbecue Festival became an annual event, drawing tens of thousands of carnivores from far and wide to the barbecue pits around Smothers Park.

Bluegrass and barbecue, twin legends, demonstrate Owensboro's skill at capitalizing on longstanding local tradition, turning popular custom into stunning commercial success. They suggest the potential of turning Owensboro increasingly into a "celebration city," offering a year-round diet of events that attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

Yet, however impressive the downtown and waterfront revival has been, it's too soon to celebrate, to rest on one's oars.

Take the challenge of Owensboro's looks. A downtown design review commission has been seeking to encourage owners to build with good taste, to preserve the integrity of historic buildings, to see to it that buildings and streets, old and new, work well together.

For the entire city, Mayor Adkisson has pushed a "Streetscape 2000" initiative to work year by year at improving the main arteries and central business district. The effort embraces planting trees and bushes along streets and in the medians, banishing ugly signs, sprucing up buildings with fresh paint.

These efforts are critical to Owensboro's future—critical to the way the town sees itself, vital to the city's image to the world. Looking at the community through the eyes of a prospective new business, one city official said, you "notice every bad sign, every sagging wire, every pole and weed. Fighting for good aesthetics isn't an interest in botany. It's a competitive thing." And nowhere is the competitive challenge greater than downtown. People insist on top-level services in their neighborhoods, where they have major personal investment. But downtowns so often lose out. Their future is everyone's interest, but no one's in particular.

So one has to ask: What particular advantage do downtowns offer that suburbs can't? One answer is history, color, variety—rare commodities in the world of homogeneous subdivisions and shopping malls. But in today's world, there's an

equal value to downtowns: compactness. Only in downtown do you have a chance to get where you want to go on foot, to shake dependence on the automobile for every move.

On this score, Owensboro's quite lucky: it has a remarkably compact downtown. The points of attraction—from English Park to RiverPark Center, Executive Inn to Courthouse and City Hall—are close enough to walk between (or, at most, to ride to on simple downtown shuttle buses). That's an asset to build on.

But downtown streets also have to be attractive and enjoyable—and lead somewhere interesting. Again, Owensboro is lucky. While some cities consider spending millions to create the waterfronts nature didn't give them, Owensboro has the banks of the Ohio River, which helped spawn the town in the first place.

During our stay in Owensboro, we found ourselves fascinated by the river, by the constantly moving panorama of mid-America's brawny commerce. The river constantly changes its face. At one moment its waters are roiled by the winds and churned by currents. And then, as if by magic, the powerful flow seems to dissolve into a placid pool.

Clearly, there's the potential for so much more use of this waterfront. It was a stroke of genius to pick this location for the new RiverPark Center. We predict the grand lobby, overlooking the Ohio, will become renowned among public places along the river's 700-mile span.

As Owensboro's planning goes forward, we'd keep a clear view to the water for every street and walkway possible. As Dick Rigby of the Washington, D.C.-based Waterfront Center said when he visited Owensboro, Owensboro people need "to go and get inspired" by what other cities—from Charleston (South Carolina) to Wilmington (North Carolina) to South Bend (Indiana)— have done with their waterfronts, in some cases with more difficult situations to start with than Owensboro.

For Owensboro, it makes sense to do everything possible to encourage lively recreational boating activity. Multiple restaurants, walkways, and viewing spots should be sited with river exposure. The Executive Inn should cooperate—gladly, voluntarily—to let the walkway from Smothers to English Park pass by its water side. Indeed, the Inn could benefit a great deal by reviewing and rebuilding its entire river exposure with promenades, open-air restaurants, and cafes all oriented to the city's expanded water and boating future. (Bob Green's entrepreneurial spirit has given a lot to Owensboro, but he also owes this hospitable host town a great deal.)

But what about street activity when downtown workers have gone home for the day, when the festivals take a holiday, when tourists aren't thronging the scene? Owensboro, like every other downtown in America, needs people who select the center city as their neighborhood and decide to live there full-time. We think there ought to be a market for downtown Owensboro housing—among office workers who'd just as soon be in the center of action near the river, among senior citizens who prize a walkable environment.

Downtown housing doesn't need to depend on a wave of upscale buyers willing to plunk down hundreds of thousands of dollars for a pricey condo with a river view. A successful downtown neighborhood encourages residents at all points along the income scale. Owensboro ought to think about multiple public-private incentives for a mix of people to live in and help create a lively downtown.

Housing, in turn, can be a big inducement to specialized retailing. When enough people live downtown, one can expect the retail landmarks of a strong community—hardware stores and beauty shops, newsstands and dry cleaners, grocers and florists—to return. Downtown living may not be everyone's choice in the age of the automobile and sprawling lawn culture. On the other hand, not everyone drives, or cares to, all the time. If a livable, walkable downtown environment is offered, more people than you'd think will snap up the opportunity.

To anyone who suggests downtown retailing is irrevocably dead, never to return, we'd suggest that the shopping patterns

have always been volatile, always in flux. It's true many downtown retail stores became stagnant, forgot how to compete. But in some American cities today, the smart small retailers are discovering special niche markets and competing successfully, on the turf they choose, with the Wal-Marts and other mass outlets.

Oftentimes, downtown retailers begin a comeback when they think anew about their potential customers—not the thousands following the red-tag or blue-light specials at a mall or outlying mass retailer, but the downtown resident who pursues quality at a reasonable price, or the tourist who isn't above impulse buying of memorabilia, or the downtown worker who squeezes in a purchase over the lunch hour.

Owensboro is fortunate to have Downtown Owensboro Inc. working on these issues. But all the downtown players will have to encourage some form of what's called "centralized retail management." The idea is for the downtown stores to collaborate and mimic some of the advantages of a mall. They could establish systems, for example, to recruit stores missing from the mix, survey customer preferences, standardize hours. (Why not set downtown store hours at 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., to catch both lunchtime and after-work customers? Then keep downtown stores open every night there's a special festival or event, so people can count on the opportunity for late shopping on those days.)

Successful retail management efforts in other cities have made the whole downtown environment predictable, accessible—and newly attractive—to customers. A prime example is Neenah, Wisconsin, an old manufacturing town of 35,000 people, so successful in marketing its downtown that the outlying mall last year took downtown's marketing theme as its own. Another is Oak Park, Illinois, which chalked up 20,000 square feet of new downtown leases over three recent months.

There is a lesson to be learned from all these towns: serious staff time and long-term commitment have to go into the process. Consider that the average shopping mall agent works 200 hours, or five weeks, to sign a single new merchant. Retail management won't work without a real commitment to outreach, organizing people, holding intensive meetings. But it is doable, and Owensboro could do it if it cared.

Sadly, we ran into some prominent Owensboro citizens who've effectively written off the downtown as a safe or attractive place to do business. But that judgment was the exception, not the rule. A refreshing majority of Owensboro leaders appeared not just to have hopes for, but to believe in, their downtown.

Communities across the country might copy the counsel of Mayor Adkisson:

> Downtown is the living room of our community. It's where we all come together to see each other. The suburbs are like the bedrooms. If you give a kid everything he needs in his room, you'll never see him again in the living room. We need to provide the arts, entertainment, restaurants, cultural celebrations. Downtown is our gathering place. It's our people place.

A Wider Role for Everyone—Including Women

We believe the people of Owensboro and Daviess County have a remarkable opportunity to define and practice a powerful, exemplary regional citizenship for the 1990s.

Every urban area in America faces a challenge to its old ways of doing things. Downtown power elites find their decisions don't get respected any more. Old-fashioned county politics is discredited. All sorts of groups can block any new idea; few can make things happen.

The successful communities of the 1990s will be those that transform splintered power into shared power. They'll be those that consciously include all groups, learn to be mutually supportive, to work cooperatively on shared problems. They'll create all sorts of imaginative mechanisms (a countywide child support program, a downtown management district, for example). They'll

have an open spirit about new ideas. Job recruitment will be important—but only as a means to the larger goal of developing the civic, spiritual, and economic potential of all the region's people.

Owensboro-Daviess County may have a better shot than many American communities at the new regional citizenship because its problems are of manageable scale. Another plus: despite what seemed a divisively bitter fight over city-county merger here in 1990, the best of the new city and county leadership that emerged in the 1980s has laid a foundation for creative regionwide approaches.

What about governmental reorganization issues of tax and spending fairness, efficiency of services? We heard a great deal of discussion about how government might be made more rational, tax bases distributed more fairly, services combined for delivery on a countywide basis.

And we heard some constructive short-term suggestions for building better city-county relationships. One example: joint sessions of the City Commission and Fiscal Court, perhaps monthly at first, and beginning with uncontroversial, "apple pie" issues. If that worked, touchier issues (taxes, for example) might be addressed later.

To us, such careful, incremental steps are the wise way to go. On merits alone, merger made a lot of sense. But the results proved the community wasn't ready. It's probably fruitless to try for changed systems of government until a sounder base of shared interests and mutual trust can be built. Merger or some variant may come some day, but only when the entire community sees it as a "win-win" scenario.

In the meantime, regional citizenship can be built by multiple strategies designed to create trust relationships across the city and county. Today's lack of trust is disturbing. So are the contradictory ways Owensborans talk about their community. On the one hand they boast about life in their prosperous, serene, comfortable, solid middle-class American community. "I wouldn't want to live any other place," person after person seemed to be saying. "This is a good community. I never moved anyone here who didn't love it or who wanted to leave," a prominent agribusiness leader told us.

But there's another Owensboro-Daviess County mind-set. It's rife with deeply held suspicions—urban-rural, white-black, privileged elites versus regular folks.

We heard that folks in Owensboro-Daviess County have great love for stability, resist any kind of unproven change. But a thin line separates what's stable from what's stale. Ask leaders of this community about its downside and they often reach for such words as *stubbornness, complacency,* and *resignation*. We heard echoes of the all-American quotient of selfishness and shortsightedness—"I got mine, you get your own."

Yet in Owensboro today, there are ripples on the still waters—stirrings of outreach, the beginnings of new connections. They suggest to us that city and county people may be ready to grasp the strands of opportunity on every front, from enriching young children's lives to shared leadership visits aimed at learning how other communities address their problems.

Nearly everything the Owensboro-Daviess County community needs to do to achieve full regional cooperation and citizenship exists already, at least in fledgling, embryonic form. The secret of the future is really quite simple. It is to take these efforts, broaden and diversify them, until they're stretched to their full potential and translate into major advantage from Whitesville to the west end, English Park to Thorobred Acres.

Working for its children is perhaps the best test of whether a community is looking forward, shaking off short-term expediency, concerned about its most critical resource—its people—in the 21st century. We were fascinated to hear of the variety and vigor of programs operating across the city and county to reach kids, especially very young ones.

The leadership seems to be coming from various organizations. Owensboro got on this wave length—well ahead of many communities—when then-Superintendent J. Frank Yeager addressed a meeting of community leaders to warn of an alarming

rise of poverty among the Owensboro school district's children. Half the kids, he said, come from families eligible for subsidized lunches—more than twice the national average.

So there's been a committee for children in need, appointed by Mayor Adkisson. A foundation for children was founded by Larry and Frankie Hager, with initial funding of $1 million. The Audubon Area Community Services is in on the act with a broadening of its services for children. The idea of citywide preschool for all children—"Kiddy Tech"—has been raised. The Owensboro Citizens Committee on Education has a subcommittee discussing at-risk youth, alternative schools, mentoring, self-esteem efforts, and a community awareness effort targeting potential dropouts.

And a critical role has been played by the United Way, which has determined to provide "venture grants," to put a heavy emphasis on preventive programs and less, comparatively, on after-the-fact remedial efforts. (If you've watched other United Ways around America, you know that's a tough drill—risking heated reaction from existing agencies likely to receive less if a creative new strategy gets adopted.)

Yet with United Way encouragement, a consortium of 16 local agencies has agreed to work as a team on a pilot basis in a single school, coordinating a full range of services for children from kindergarten through the third grade. Critically important is the fact that the families are to be involved, too. United Way hopes it's developing with charitable dollars a program that public dollars can pick up and broaden, as the Kentucky Education Reform Act kicks in with a full program of parent resource centers and a dramatic broadening of early childhood education. (Right now Head Start is reaching just 21 percent of eligible children in Daviess County; if KERA money flows as planned, 50 percent could be covered.)

We see in all this an extraordinary start at getting special help to children—especially those from poor families—so that they'll be ready for school and able to succeed once they get there.

Experience around the country proves that quality, early help means that kids are much more apt to stay in school, less likely to get pregnant, more likely to end up in college than in jail. Eventually, kids who get this kind of an early lift stand a much better chance to live fulfilling rather than frustrating lives, to become taxpayers rather than tax-eaters.

It's hard to think of a more imaginative investment a community can make in its future. But the test for Owensboro-Daviess County remains: can the early childhood/family programs cover the entire community, all families in need? Pilot programs and committee studies are great but don't accomplish much unless they lead to across-the-community action and results.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the community's most valuable untapped resource today may be its retired and elderly citizens. And they're an expanding resource. Figures show Daviess County people 65 and older increasing in number more rapidly than any other population segment.

Most communities have programs to take care of senior citizens; what impressed us most in Owensboro was mention of programs to reach out to senior citizens, capture their skills and wisdom for multiple volunteer tasks waiting for attention across the community.

As a very senior citizen of Owensboro told us: "With company policies shoving people out at 65, or early retirement programs, we end up with people with vast experience and vast ability doing nothing but playing golf or—in the case of men—having their wives say 'Get out of the house.'"

We suggest the mobilization of senior power needs to go a critical step further—to retirees themselves organizing to serve the community. Today's seniors are the most "helped" generation of our history on every front from Social Security to Medicare to Medicaid. Most enjoy a health and vigor no generation older than 65 ever has before.

And they represent a resource too valuable to waste. Nowhere is that resource so needed as in multiple efforts to help

children—particularly in a time of shrinking public budgets for social service workers, teachers' aides, childcare workers, park and recreation workers and supervisors. Each seniors' organization in the community should decide on the role it could play and then start scheduling its members to work with the schools and parks and social agencies and neighborhood centers.

As seniors organize themselves, we believe respect for them will escalate. Reengaged in the community, they'll be more fulfilled as individuals and will add to the substance of the new regional citizenship. These kinds of dividends are already being recognized in Asheville, North Carolina, where 1,500 retirees are participating in multiple activities—ranging from career counseling for college students to helping hospitals to running discussion groups for adults in rural communities. There's a seven-week Leadership Asheville Seniors training course in which leaders from the schools, government, and education brief retirees about the community's needs. Work in the local schools has become a special focus of the program.

What about woman power—and potential? Owensboro-Daviess County has a dismal record in tapping it. We were shocked to hear that of the 47 elected positions in Owensboro and Daviess County, only one is held by a woman—the vice-chair of a school board.

"The political culture here is mostly good-ole-boy, male-dominated politics," one veteran—a male—noted. No woman, for example, has been elected to county office since 1961.

We found that record almost incomprehensible. Consider just cities in and around Kentucky that have elected woman mayors in recent years. The list includes Charlotte, North Carolina; West Lafayette, Indiana; Rock Hill, South Carolina; and Little Rock, Arkansas (which has actually elected two women as mayor). In big, manly Texas, the cities of Houston, Dallas, El Paso, Austin, and Fort Worth have all seen fit to elect women as mayor in recent years. Up near Washington, D.C., the chairman of the board of supervisors in Fairfax County is a woman. Both the mayor and city manager of Alexandria, Virginia, are women.

So why the virtual blackout of women in political posts in Owensboro and Daviess County? Why aren't women encouraged to run, given support when they do? We didn't get any clear answers. But one thing's clear. If a community fails to regard women as serious leaders, it writes off half its potential leadership pool. It loses the distinctive leadership qualities that only women may contribute. That may have been an affordable luxury in the 1920s or even the 1950s; it isn't in the 1990s.

Who's in Charge Here?

How do Owensboro and Daviess county get ready for an even more challenging future? Not, we'd suggest, by throwing their traditional caution and conservatism overboard. Nor by failing to honor the bursts of creativity and imagination that created the community college and RiverPark Center and went out to successfully land a "biggie" like Scott Paper.

What Owensboro-Daviess County needs now, in our judgment, is a more expansive view of who can lead, who needs to be consulted and involved.

Take corporate leadership. In the 1960s, General Electric Company and Texas Gas Transmission Corporation were relied on for community leadership. Today Texas Gas carries on a sparkling array of civic outreach. Yet, as the GE experience reminds one, economic change generated outside a city's borders can destroy a business-city relationship that once looked like the Rock of Gibraltar.

Today, more corporations need to be asked to accept major responsibility. Some are more ready than you think. Corporations homegrown and still growing, like Terry Woodward's WaxWorks, are becoming as important on the local scene as any traditional utility or megaindustry.

Among the Owensboro area's colleges, substantial expertise is building in multiple fields—sometimes insufficiently

appreciated in the community.

On the political front, voters are casting aside the old politics with the election of people like David Adkisson as mayor of Owensboro, or Buzz Norris as county judge-executive. Each has a bagful of bright ideas. But neither of those two men seems to believe he's the whole show. As Adkisson himself said when he first ran, the community needs to unleash the talents and energies of more citizens: "We cannot afford any spectators."

Every community, to move forward, needs a vision. Cities without vision are all but certain to fail in the harshly competitive new national and international economy.

But in today's world, when every civic group, every ethnic enclave, every geographic area believes it's entitled to a voice, building vision is tougher than ever. What's the secret? We suggest it's including people, being willing to hear their concerns, taking their suggestions seriously.

The shots in Owensboro used to be called by a crusty old-boy network that met informally—oftentimes at the Campbell Club—to cut deals affecting everyone. As in cities across the country, that model no longer works.

The decisive change in Owensboro was signaled by the 1982 formation of Leadership Owensboro. The program has continued since, a deliberate effort to build a network of new leaders, within business, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The program's had 300 graduates and is still growing.

But Leadership Owensboro's outreach hasn't been perfect. Its alumni haven't reached out aggressively enough to stimulate community discussions of critical issues. Sign-ups among farmers, ministers, and grassroots groups have been too rare. If Leadership Owensboro is to build the region's leadership for the 21st century, it will need more of all those.

Even with broader leadership, there's danger that the good ship Owensboro, bearing down on certain critical issues, will find itself bogging down, scraping bottom, taking on water like a carelessly piloted sternwheeler of old.

It's time for a wake up call. Owensboro and Daviess County need to think much harder about their assets, their liabilities, and how to broaden leadership.

Owensboro is unlikely to ever again be declared an All-America City, for example, until it clears some of the most dangerous rocks in the stream—the stereotypes various parts of the community have about each other.

The urban-rural stereotypes may be the most perilous of all. From rural interests, we heard: "People in Owensboro aren't interested in us at all—except when they want our money. City people don't work very hard. But they live pretty well. Agriculture has become just a stepchild."

City people sounded just as estranged: "Farmers still practice a barn-raising culture—they'll show up at the drop of a hat to help each other, but not anyone else. They're not members of the Chamber of Commerce. They're only concerned about being watchdogs."

The 1990 merger vote, we concluded, was less about the critically important issue of consolidation of services, taxes, and efficiency than it was about feelings of alienation, about power. Even merger proponents said not enough people had been brought into the thinking and planning process early on.

And from a leading opponent, we heard there wasn't that much actual disagreement about merging of services. The gut problem, he said, was that the "city crowd" was trying to put one over on rural Daviess County, to strip "county people" of "their" government. From that base, a whole range of antiestablishment feelings, in city and rural areas alike, rose to quash the merger.

A passel of other stereotypes hobbles the Owensboro-Daviess County area—professional versus working class, black versus white, and especially in a community with one of America's slowest rates of population turnover, the few newcomers versus the

big majority of lifetime residents. All too often, major community decisions in Owensboro-Daviess County "appear to turn less on what was said than who said it."

If truth be told, the stereotypes are probably less extreme and severe than a generation ago. But they're a massive barrier reef leaving no safe harbor for honest conversation and productive action. The challenge now is to carve a channel through those stereotypes, and probably not so much by frontal attack as by getting people to work together on all sorts of projects, building constructive interaction, building trust. Trust, in time, will drive out suspicion. Interaction softens the isolation.

We believe the *Messenger-Inquirer* needs to play a major role in this transition. Friends and critics alike, in our conversations, kept honing on the paper's relationship to the community.

We need to confess, up front, our grounds for liking the paper. It invited us to town, gave us free rein to write an independent account, free of editorial direction. Not many newspapers in cities this size would take that kind of chance. And it is accurate to say that not many papers in the *Messenger-lnquirer*'s circulation size are of comparable quality, from its appearance to the range of national and international news it covers. If one of the national newspaper chains bought up the paper, you could expect a strictly bottom-line mentality to take over and a lot of the paper's spunk to fade away.

But the relationship between a locally owned paper and its home community is intimate, fragile, as prone to misunderstandings as the ties among members of any family. A simple error can get read as a slight. And it's too easy to blame the paper for reporting unpopular or bad news when it's only doing its job.

In a single newspaper market, a town that even lacks its own television stations, a special burden of responsibility falls on the *Messenger-lnquirer.* What it fails to print won't get reported. The issues it fails to raise oftentimes won't get debated.

The paper may not have to do a lot of investigatory journalism, trying to prove scandals and wrongdoing in high places. But it has an obligation to do what we'd call exploratory journalism—looking carefully at trends, causes, and prospects on every front from the complexion of local industry to the quality of the local schools and colleges to environmental hazards. Based on that kind of thoughtful, quality reporting, the paper has a compelling opportunity to get people thinking harder, and more honestly, about the problems the community faces.

We heard legitimate complaints raised about the *Messenger-lnquirer.* Several interviewees said they'd like more coverage of state government and economic trends in other regions of Kentucky. They wanted to see the editorial page reflect more local opinion. Rural people felt the paper was simply not respecting their point of view. Others said the African-American community shouldn't just be covered when it starts to raise some modest hell—that ongoing events in black neighborhoods need coverage. And it was suggested that in a community where women rarely win office or get top business posts, the paper should be on a constant lookout for legitimate ways to give rising female leaders a clearer community profile.

The paper should respond to those kinds of criticism. If new, unconventional, different voices can't be heard on its pages, where can they be?

But the newspaper can't do it all itself. The community has to make a vigorous effort to overcome the old biases and stereotypes, to enable and empower more kinds of people in spirited planning and action on topics ranging from downtown development to agricultural land protection. For better or worse, the *Messenger-lnquirer* will be the critical means of communication as the region learns to talk to itself far more effectively.

That's a tough challenge, but we see no reason it can't be met. Learning from its errors and building on its breakthroughs, the Owensboro area has every prospect, through the l990s, to set a high standard of civic cohesion that works for city and countryside alike.

Recipe for Success: Learn from Others, Support Innovation

How do Owensboro and Daviess County build the new institutions they need to undergird an expanded regional citizenship for the 1990s?

A first and critical step for many communities is to learn—and keep on learning—from others. We were heartened to hear that Mayor Adkisson has organized community leadership visits to such other communities as Iowa City and Bloomington, Indiana. It may be even more important that the Owensboro-Daviess County Chamber of Commerce has scheduled a three-day visit for 30 business and government officials to Augusta, Georgia. For a community in which 83 percent of the people were born in the county, there's special need—in Adkisson's words—"to put up the periscope and look around."

Chambers of commerce and other civic leadership groups in many of America's smartest cities—Seattle, Charlotte (North Carolina), Louisville, Jacksonville (Florida), Greenville (South Carolina) among them—believe there's important payoff from intercity visits in which dozens of city leaders plunge into two- to three-day briefing sessions in other communities. As Owensboro joins the cities undertaking intercity visits, it has a lot to gain.

And it's not just that an Augusta, for example, has an ambitious riverfront development project the Owensboro crowd can learn from. "In your own city," a Seattle government executive told us, "you have your facade, your place. Go to another place and you're all fellow travelers in a foreign land. A different bonding takes place."

The intercity visits have stimulated some of urban America's most candid "show and tell" sessions. A Charlotte leader explained that delegations get both challenge and reinforcement out of the visits, stimulation from other cities' superior models, comfort when they register the fact that other towns' problems may be worse than their own.

Intercity visit delegations get "turned on" by the experience. Their imaginations, their competitive spirits get aroused. And when they come home, their enthusiasm easily spreads through the entire community.

It may matter as much *who* goes as *where* the group goes. "Establishment" business and government executives need to be balanced with some of the council members, journalists, and civic activists with whom they may even be at odds back home. To make the project "click" for the Owensboro region, we'd add agribusiness leaders, educators, social service leaders, African-Americans, and—as we suggested earlier—a strong contingent of women. The more people who get included on an intercity visit, the more "co-conspirators" there'll be for getting some of the positive ideas implemented.

Blacks don't have much to celebrate in Owensboro. True, they get honored for top performance on championship basketball, baseball, and football teams. They can point with pride to some who made it all the way to the NFL and NBA. And it's true the premiere performance at the RiverPark Center will be about Josiah Henson, the famed liberator of thousands of black slaves who spent five years in Owensboro before his escape north. (We were impressed to hear local governments and businesses contributed $50,000 to commission the drama, designed to later become an outdoor drama—the only play with a black theme and principally black characters ever written for an outdoor stage.)

But overall, Owensboro's African-Americans are invisible people, nonparticipants in the mainstream life of the city and county. They're just 6 percent of the city population, and the evidence is that young blacks are increasingly leaving town. And it's not hard to figure why.

Blacks in leadership roles are disappearing. Today there are none in public school administration, none on the faculties of either of the private colleges, only one in elected office. We heard there's not a single black doctor or lawyer in the community. The total number of black professionals appears to have fallen by half in the last dozen years.

Most black children are assigned to a public elementary school that's more than 40 years old, bounded by a grain company, the city's sanitation operation, and heavy industry. Its equipment looks worn and old.

The black community believes it does not receive a fair share of funds for road improvement, utility upgrading, parks maintenance. Kendall Perkins, the only park in the west side neighborhood that has the heaviest black population, has a long, tall, forbidding wall and deteriorating shrubbery. The condition of its play equipment isn't up to what's found in the other city parks. There's general neglect of the grounds and shelter. The only occasion when the park seems to become part of the city's larger culture is each July when it hosts its "Dust Bowl" summer basketball competition and players come from across the city.

One hears of a certain passivity, quiet desperation, a disinclination in the black community to question "the way things are done." There seems to be a matching cynicism in the larger community. When west side residents last summer complained they were being shortchanged in basic city services, the mayor and council and city manager did respond with special hearings, and the neighborhood's condition got several days of airing in the press. There seemed reason to believe the residents' concerns would receive a lot more attention than in the past—perhaps even that such basic changes as assignment of regular foot patrolmen would get on the city's agenda. (It's absurd, we'd suggest, to think it's sufficient just to send a patrol car through a troubled or neglected neighborhood, without having police become personally acquainted with the people on an intimate, daily basis.)

Yet ongoing attention is essential for such neighborhoods. We were a touch alarmed when a longtime observer remarked almost laconically that minor protests like those of the summer of 1991 do surface every few years, but quickly subside, not to be heard again for another decade or so.

It's certainly true the Owensboro community has been spared the racially charged turmoil other American cities have suffered. We were told Owensboro's public housing, located on the west side, was something to avoid, to steer around. Yet when we saw it, it resembled rather well-maintained, lower-cost market-rate housing anywhere else. Compared to public housing in a Chicago, New York, or Atlanta, the Owensboro public housing stock looks like Eden on earth.

But the challenge to Owensboro goes a lot deeper than providing decent-looking public housing. Basic respect has to be built. Owensboro must acknowledge it needs its African-American citizens as productive and participating members of its future society. To ignore them isn't fair; it's also not smart.

One answer can be a far more conscious effort to draw blacks into civic activities, to try to open multiple gates of opportunity. The community's new outreach to disadvantaged children ought to have a strong, positive effect in the black community. A black-based community organization, Owensboro Career Development, is trying to stem the flow of school dropouts and is having reasonable success. (In the Owensboro School District, the black dropout rate is *lower* than that for whites.)

But blacks themselves need to take their natural share of political power. As a local minister told the *Messenger-Inquirer* last July: "Blacks are overlooked because they have no political clout, because half don't register to vote, and half of those that register don't vote. Then when you want something, you complain to the city, but they know you can't hurt them because you don't vote."

Few of Owensboro's young blacks are going to college. We find that surprising, because in most cities where new community colleges start, there's a rush of enrollment by minority groups that previously never made it into higher education. Indeed, community colleges have been a powerful democratizing force in higher education, a bridge over which hundreds of thousands of young blacks and Hispanics and poor whites have made the journey to a world of wider opportunity.

Yet there's this perplexing fact: the minority enrollment in Owensboro Community College is only 2 percent, while blacks represent 5.9 percent of the city, 3.9 percent of the county population.

If the community cares enough about the quality of its future work force—and opportunities for all its citizens—this is a correctable situation. If the problem is that young blacks don't see college as a place for them, then there could be a community effort to guarantee any graduate of its high schools at least one year of community college.

If transportation from the west and east sides of Owensboro is a problem—and of course it is, given the community college's outlying location—then a bus or van service has to be instituted, diligently promoted, and seen as more than a passing experiment. Having chosen quite consciously to locate the community college outside of the town center, in fact at a location quite inaccessible to heavily black neighborhoods, the community has a special obligation here. Dismissing the special bus line idea for lack of interest or low fare receipts without advertising it actively and promoting the entire community college opportunity for minorities strikes us as insincere.

If some potential students have already taken on family responsibilities, lack of day care may be the biggest barrier. There are some stirrings on this front. Owensboro Community College has been considering a contract with the vocational school Kentucky Tech's childcare program, hailed as one of the country's best, to offer a care program on campus. We also heard talk of a communitywide center for child care, oriented to child development rather than mere warehousing of young kids while their parents work.

All the planning is encouraging, but the community has to recognize it has a near emergency on its hands. For a growing proportion of families, day care is no longer an option—it's a necessity. If Owensboro-Daviess County can foster a set of services that are available broadly and democratically, then a lot of closed doors to college and work will swing open, especially for young women.

The sum of the strategies we've touched on—a Committee for Safe Growth, downtown revitalization, expanded help for kids and families, a more active senior citizen corps, and a community college that moves minorities into the mainstream—ought surely to be a stronger, more resilient community.

But even experimentation with new ideas—civic research and development work, so to speak—costs money. A community may be awash with new ideas but unable to try them for lack of modest research money. Ask any civic entrepreneur: social innovation requires some walking-around money.

Owensboro has been uniquely fortunate in the presence of Texas Gas, with its imaginative giving to community causes and pacesetting commitment of 5 percent of pretax profits for charity. With luck, this company and the banks and other corporations that follow its lead will be a feature of Owensboro life for decades to come. But in the shark-infested waters of American corporate life, nothing's guaranteed. Across America, business giving to communities has flattened out or begun to decline. It's time for the community to think about a backup.

Across America, hundreds of cities and regions have created, and now nourish, what are known as "community foundations." People who may have money to give, but not enough to start a megafoundation on their own, make gifts and bequests. Indeed, a little shopping around may locate a national foundation willing to put up matching dollars to get a strong local community foundation up and running. The Mott Foundation, located in Flint, Michigan, started doing that a few years ago and since has been joined by such heavies as the Ford, MacArthur, McKnight, and Lilly foundations.

Lilly, in fact, has committed $47 million over the next 15 years to help Indiana communities get up and running on the community foundation front. It recently gave the Fort Wayne Community Foundation a challenge grant of $1.7 million. An appeal to spread a little of Lilly's megabucks across the Ohio River might conceivably work.

We asked about private wealth in the Owensboro region and heard of more than enough names to start and maintain a healthy community foundation. The outpouring of contributions for the RiverPark Center proved the potential.

An Owensboro community foundation was begun some years ago, but it's essentially dormant. It needs to be revived or a new effort inaugurated. Such an organization could be immensely helpful in launching the new efforts critical for regional citizenship—in providing social services, in supporting open space and the environment, in inaugurating new educational efforts,

in researching governmental improvement. Look around America and you find hundreds of examples of what community foundations can do. Indiana's Elkhart County Community Foundation, for example, is now the lead supporter of a new riverwalk project on the St. Joseph River. In Louisiana, the New Orleans Committee Foundation has a "good neighborhood fund" to provide timely interim aid for people about to become homeless. The community foundation serving both Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, sought to encourage cooperation between local governments by giving one county sheriff's office a computerized "identi-kit" program—but only on condition it would be shared with all the neighboring jurisdictions.

In Trion, North Carolina, the Polk County Community Foundation put up money for clearly numbered and lettered green and white signs along rural county roads, so that crews responding to "911" calls can get to the scene of the emergency.

Within the next few years, we believe Owensboro may be ready to form a regional citizens organization that examines critical public issues, develops new policy directions, acts as a sounding board for sensible solutions. Such an organization could take a consistent, conscious, regionwide view—something it's hard for elected officials, under the drumbeat of parochial constituent pressures, to do.

It's for that kind of situation that a community foundation could be invaluable. Community foundations manage the loose change in American society. They don't hand out huge sums of money, but their funds are the most flexible, potentially creative money around.

If the Owensboro-Daviess County community has a single big institutional goal for the early 1990s, we suggest a community foundation ought to be it. With its resources, such a foundation could enable continuing and expanded initiatives to strengthen city and county, to make proud regional citizenship a reality. And it could work to develop the informed, imaginative leadership needed to make Owensboro a flagship city among the urban centers along the Ohio.