

*“Nothing is insurmountable
or too big to solve if you
bring people together.”*

—Mayor Rosalynn Bliss,
City of Grand Rapids

LEADERSHIP EXCHANGE

A project of One Acadiana

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LESSON 1: Think Boldly

Summary:

- Led by the private sector, “Grand Vision” cast a bold vision for the Van Andel Arena and DeVos Convention Center.
- A destination asset study provided a roadmap for the next wave of downtown catalyst projects, including a riverfront amphitheater and a soccer stadium.

Reflections from attendees:

- “What I saw in Grand Rapids is boldness and a willingness to look past *why not.*”
—Christiaan Mader
- What is our bold vision for transformational destination assets?

Next steps:

- A group of core institutions will meet to build alignment, with broader engagement to follow.





LESSON 2: Plan Collegially

Summary:

- Born out of “Grand Vision,” the business community formed “Grand Action” to lead the planning and execution of downtown transformational projects.
- Business leaders, philanthropy, and the public sector came together through Grand Action to work toward a collaborative plan.
- Private funding leveraged public funding for a common purpose.

Reflections from attendees:

- “In order to achieve success, broad collaboration is needed. Government, business, and philanthropy. No one can do it alone.”
- “Plan the future you want, inclusively. Sell people on it. Then implement it.”



LESSON 3: Act Urgently

Summary:

- Grand Rapids' business leaders understood that without drawing more activity into their downtown, their community was at risk of being hollowed out.
- Also, by diversifying its regional economy, Grand Rapids put itself on a growth trajectory, unlike other Rust Belt cities.

Reflections from attendees:

- “We need to strike a balance between intentionality and urgency.”



LESSON 4: Concentrate Investment Downtown

Summary:

- “We had a President of the United States from Grand Rapids, and we couldn’t even host a parade in our Downtown for the man,” said Grand Action executive director Kara Wood, describing the embarrassing moment that sparked a sense of urgency led by the private sector to reinvest in the city’s downtown.
- “The real heartbeat of a region is the Downtown, and without that heartbeat the region doesn’t thrive,” Wood continued.
- That’s what inspired leadership from the private sector to turn downtown Grand Rapids into an economic engine and to focus their philanthropic investment there.

Reflections from attendees:

- “Downtown Lafayette is key to a regional cohesive strategy for people and place.”
- “A vibrant Downtown benefits all of Acadiana.”



LESSON 5:

Embrace “P3”s that Include Philanthropy

Summary:

- Public-private partnerships (P3s) are the standard operating procedure in Grand Rapids, where P3s often include philanthropy.
- This is especially true of Grand Action’s downtown transformational projects, which were initiated through the support of large philanthropic gifts.

Reflections from attendees:

- “Two years ago in Pensacola, we saw how smart, proactive philanthropy rallied a community behind a collaborative vision. In Grand Rapids, we saw it again. Philanthropic organizations prioritized philanthropic investments around making downtown a great place.” —Carlee Alm-LaBar



LESSON 6: Higher Ed is a Cornerstone

Summary:

- Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine was a critical piece of the puzzle in the growth of Grand Rapids' Medical Mile – a burgeoning health science district.
- Higher education partners are also critical to powering Grand Rapids' Tech Strategy.

Reflections from attendees:

- “Other than a med school, we have all the same pieces as Grand Rapids already in place.”

Next steps:

- With the expansion of the New Iberia Research Center and the construction of a new CDMO, UL Lafayette will continue to lead the growth of a regional “Bieux Tech” cluster.



LESSON 7: Tech can Drive Economic Growth

Summary:

- Grand Rapids has a bold strategy to double the number of tech jobs over the next 10 years, led by the Technology Council of West Michigan, which includes 70+ employers.
- Technology can bolster every industry, and Grand Rapids is positioning itself to be at the forefront of technological change for industry and the workforce.

Reflections from attendees:

- The 'unplanned collisions' generated by Grand Rapids' Tech Council have led to organic partnerships and positive results.

Next steps:

- Key stakeholders will meet to discuss the formation of a Tech Council for Acadiana.



LESSON 8:

Ensure Benefits are Shared

Summary:

- Reflecting on how Grand Rapids is growing, community leaders are being intentional about how this growth is benefitting the population as a whole, rather than just one segment of the population.
- This growth can't be sustained without greater supply of attainable housing. That's why groups like Housing Next are focused on fostering quality housing for all.

Next steps:

- Strengthen collaboration to address homelessness and housing supply.

LESSON 9:

Leadership Development Never Stops

Summary:

- As one generation of community leaders takes a step back, they are being intentional about helping the next generation of community leaders take a step forward.
- Leadership development doesn't happen by accident, said Atomic Object Co-CEO Shawn Crowley. "You have to ignite people's curiosity and ambition."
- "We have to get the next generation involved, get them plugged in, be mentors to them, and show them the way," added Grand Action Co-Chair Carol Van Andel.

Reflections from attendees:

- Grand Rapids has a continuity of vision that transcends generations and political administrations.
- "We need to give up-and-comers an at bat."





LESSON 10: Do More of These Trips

Summary:

- The lessons learned and relationships built on Leadership Exchange have energized us, affirming the value of traveling as a delegation to aspirational cities like Grand Rapids.

Next steps:

- Attendees continue to unpack lessons learned and meet about carrying these lessons forward.
- It is anticipated the next Leadership Exchange trip will take place in the fall of 2026.

Carlee Alm-LaBar William C. Schumacher Family Foundation	Dr. Lisa Broussard University of Louisiana at Lafayette	Leah Graeff Maison Title	Alex Lazard Lafayette Public Trust Financing Authority (LPTFA)	Jerry Prejean First Horizon Bank	Travis Schugg VieMed Healthcare
Dr. Kristi L. Anderson, Ph.D. University of Louisiana at Lafayette	Craig Campbell ADG Engineering	Emily Hamner Pinhook Foundation	Christiaan Mader The Current	Chris Rader RADER Solutions	Eric Singleton Kinchen Funeral Home, Inc.
Missy Bienvenu Andrade Community Foundation of Acadiana	Justin Centanni Lafayette Parish Assessor's Office	Jessica Hauerwas Downtown Lafayette Unlimited	Joseph Marino DDG	Jude Ramsay Catalyst Bank	Ken Stansbury Lafayette Parish Council
Kristin Askelson The Acadiana Advocate	Charlotte Clavier City of Carencro	Rachel Holland Downtown Development Authority	Larry Marino Oats & Marino	Erica Ray William C. Schumacher Family Foundation	Jennifer Stelly St. Martin Economic Development Authority
Kyle Bacon Jones Walker LLP	Eric Crozier AQ Studios	Thomas Hooks Lafayette City Council	Mark D. Mouton Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA)	Jan-Scott Richard City of Scott	Dr. Geoffrey Stewart University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Ben Berthelot Lafayette Convention & Visitors Commission	Adam Daigle The Acadiana Advocate	Marlene Janetos Louisiana Economic Development (LED)	Sam Oliver Acadiana Center for the Arts	M. Larry Richard Iberia Parish Government	Mike Tarantino Iberia Industrial Development Foundation
Stuart Billeaud JB Mouton, LLC	A.D. Daniel Lafayette Public Trust Financing Authority (LPTFA)	Ben Johnson Technaux	Destin Ortego Opportunity Machine	Ken Ritter City of Youngsville	Rob Tasman Our Lady of Lourdes Health
Heather Blanchard United Way of Acadiana	Dr. Kumer Das University of Louisiana at Lafayette	Robert Kallam Kean Miller, LLP	Sami Parbhoo Lafayette International Center (a division of LCG)	Bill Rodier St Landry Economic Development (SLED)	Sam Viator Castle Row Construction LLC
Kevin Blanchard Downtown Lafayette	Christina Dayries Lafayette Consolidated Government	Dr. Ramesh Kolluru University of Louisiana at Lafayette	Al Patin Ochsner Lafayette General	Jeremy Rogers Our Lady of Lourdes Health	Jennifer Whitmore Billeaud Companies
Kenneth Boudreaux Lafayette City Council	Cearley Fontenot Oats & Marino	Will LaBar CGI	Ryan Pécot Stirling Properties / Adopted Dog Brewing / Tchoup's Midcity Restaurant + Bar	Troy Romero MacLaff, Inc.	Jaron Young GHC Architects
Elroy Broussard Lafayette City Council	Patrick Gandy Ochsner Lafayette General	Callie Laviolette City of Broussard	Dr. Andre Perez South Louisiana Community College	Jaci Russo brandRUSSO	Blaise Zuschlag Acadian Companies