

Issues and Challenges of Local Government  
Supporting a Development Project of Regional Importance

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**Introduction**

In 2006, a master plan was developed by the City of Bolivar Downtown Development Corporation (DEVCO) to promote rural stewardship and to develop tourism assets for Bolivar/Hardeman County. This is also one of the key elements in the City of Bolivar's strategic plan, which is to develop a destination community program.

Lone Oaks Farm 4-H and Conference Center was bought by the University of Tennessee in 2015. The main thrust of this report will be the city's efforts and partnerships required concerning the development of and success of the Lone Oaks Farm 4-H and Conference Center.

**Important Initiatives of this Study**

- Meet the challenges of a regional project while continuing with the city's original initiative which is to identify, expand, and promote the unique cultural and physical assets that are in this area. Foremost are the efforts of the Hatchie River Park and Nature Center Museum and the 167 acre Pleasant Run Nature Park, which are under construction.
- Build strong and viable links to Lone Oaks Farm by accommodating and attracting people with Bolivar's events, parks, and recreation facilities. The City of Bolivar and local government have focused efforts to actually help attain and complete a new 4-H Camp and Conference Center which will serve all of Tennessee, particularly West Tennessee.
- Approach the challenges involved with local government and the on-going part in making this vision come true. The Vision Statement Document of the University of Tennessee carries the vision to state, national and even international possibilities. Partnering in such

an effort puts greater emphasis on Bolivar's efforts in helping make this happen. The success of this project is the key to increased economic prosperity for the community. Many forces, public and private, are converging on Hardeman County. State and federal agencies are helping in economic and tourism development. Private citizens who are moving here are taking advantage of the rural lifestyle. These are creating an engine for economic development in new and innovative ways. The Community is striving to make this growth successful without losing a unique sense of place.

## **History and Background**

Hardeman County is located in the southwestern corner of Tennessee, bordering Mississippi and bisected by the Hatchie River. With a 668 square mile area, the county is the fifth largest in Tennessee. The 2010, Census placed the population at 27,253. With fertile soil and gently rolling hills, Hardeman County, Tennessee, is renowned through the southeast as the "Hardwood Capital of Tennessee". This is a title bestowed upon Bolivar/ Hardeman County who hosted the "Tennessee Forest Festival" for many years. The Hardwood lumber industry employs over 300 people, with twenty (20) sawmills and ancillary operations.

Bolivar, population 5,700, is the county seat. It is a town rich in history, with four historic districts, beautiful antebellum homes, and a completely restored downtown business area. The school system is a county wide system with two (2) high schools, five (5) middle schools, and five elementary schools, sixty-one bed community hospital, and Western Mental Health Institute. The city provides all utilities, fire protection and police protection. Bolivar Recreation Department provides recreational opportunities that serve over 10,000 people yearly.

The other towns comprising Hardeman County are Middleton, Grand Junction, Whiteville, Toone, Saulsbury, Hickory Valley, Hornsby, and Pocahontas.

The county is an hour east of Memphis and 2 ½ hours west of Nashville. This is an area rich in history, where northern industrialists built their hunting lodges at the turn of the century. Grand Junction is home of the Ames Plantation, where the National Bird Dog Field Trials are held each year. The National Bird Dog Museum, Field Trial Hall of Fame, and Wildlife Heritage Center are also located there. The Davis Bridge Civil War Battle site is located in Pocahontas. Bolivar/Hardeman County is fortunate to have two state parks; Big Hill Pond State Park is located in the southeastern portion of Hardeman County near Pocahontas and Chickasaw State Park which borders Hardeman County and Chester County.

Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development lists Hardeman County as a tier four economically distressed county. Bolivar alone has lost over 2,500 manufacturing jobs in the last fifteen years. The economic plight of this community and the failure to get new industry in Hardeman County has driven a new mind set pertaining to industrial development. Bolivar and Hardeman County are not giving up on industrial development; in fact, the Bolivar Industrial Park is a Tennessee Select Certified Deal Ready industrial park and has recently been approved as a Foreign Trade Zone park.

The plan now is to work diligently to develop this area and improve the economic development by showcasing and taking advantage of these cultural and natural assets. Bolivar/Hardeman County is committed to getting new industry, while utilizing the principles of “Smart Growth” and “Rural Stewardship”. “Smart Growth” is a comprehensive approach to community development that creates a sustainable economic engine for growth. “Rural Stewardship” is an incentive based

regional growth strategy that preserves and enhances the best of the county, while directing and amplifying the potential for growth.

### **Description of the Opportunity or Need that the Project Addresses**

In 2009, the Buford Ellington 4-H center in Milan, Tennessee, was closed due to state budget cuts. The University of Tennessee Extension desired to replace it with a modern and effective educational facility. The replacement process began in 2011, when a vision was developed to create a premier 4-H and Conference Center that would serve the region, as well as the entire state. Over the next two years, nineteen sites were identified as potential sites for the Center, and three were selected as finalists. A site selection team from the University of Tennessee visited and researched each finalist site and evaluated them on twenty- three criteria. Lone Oaks fulfills all aspects of the vision for less total money, and significantly shortens the development phases because of existing farm buildings, residences, and landscape infrastructures. The committee, unanimously, recommended Lone Oaks Farm in Hardeman County to be the 4-H Center's home. The University of Tennessee acquired the Farm in 2015. A great amount of effort was expended, not in political action, but individually by local governments and the citizens of Bolivar/Hardeman County. Bolivar/Hardeman County funded an economic impact statement and made a concerted effort to take advantage of the unrecognized assets. Many calls and trips to Nashville helped convince the powers to be that not only was Lone Oaks Farm the best site, but Bolivar/Hardeman County desperately needed the resulting, enhanced quality of life and economic prosperity that this project will ultimately bring to the community.

This project will greatly impact not only Bolivar and Hardeman County, but will be a strong economic driver for the State of Tennessee the corporate retreats, are even attaining an international flavor. The complex will serve over 21,000 attendees with the camps, educational enrichment programs, conferences, corporate retreats, family reunions, or other functions. The total budget for this project is over \$32 million. Without any fundraising effort, over \$8 million has been pledged from the public for this project.

**This Capstone Project** will entail the past efforts of local government and on-going plans to help support the success of this endeavor. The strategic planning process of the city and local government was ongoing and susceptible to change as the University of Tennessee's vision evolved. The information obtained in the Tennessee Economic Community Development classes under The Tennessee Managing Economic Development and The Tennessee Marketing Attraction courses have been and will be utilized in the assistance to this regional project. The stakeholders and local leaders are finally achieving results and outcomes that were initially planned and desired.

The vision of Lone Oaks is attractive, worthwhile, been widely shared, and achievable. The commitment of the University of Tennessee and local governments is commendable. These regional partnerships are beginning to pay off.

### **State or National Trends Identified in Research**

According to the American Camp Association, providing and hosting camps is an \$18 billion industry and has steadily increased since 2002. American Camp Association statistics show that since 2002, the number of day camps has increased by sixty-nine percent (69%) and resident camps have increased by twenty-one percent (21%). Each year, more than 14 million children and adults attend camp in the United States. Additionally, camps employ more than 1,500,000 camp staff.

Lone Oaks Farm will not only fill a void in West Tennessee and North Mississippi, but it will provide a means of employment for many in the area, while enhancing public education.

Future plans call for making contact with the other key rural attractions such as the Discovery Park of America in Union City. Efforts, such as these, would be relative to collaboration of events and offerings. Joint marketing would be beneficial to this region.

**Project Description:**

The Name of the project is *“Issues and Challenges of Local Government Supporting a Regional Project “*

**Who is Involved?**

Issues and challenges of local government supporting a regional project, both current and future, could not be solved without the outstanding support of the following: The City of Bolivar; University of Tennessee; former owners, Scott and Kathy Ledbetter; Hardeman County officials; Southwest Development District; Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency; Bolivar Downtown District; Hardeman County Chamber of Commerce; State and Federal Legislators; and numerous public spirited citizens of Tennessee.

The City of Bolivar was the driving force in the initial submission of a potential site for the 4-H Camp. This site was Lake Lajoie at Chickasaw State Park. Numerous requests were forwarded, and several trips were made to Nashville to the Department of Environment and Conservation in order to see if that underutilized site could be transferred to the University of Tennessee. While this was pending the Lone Oaks site became available, and the process started over. When the choice was narrowed to three potential sites the whole process became highly politicized. Challenges of local government in dealing with state government were varied and many. The most

important thing that the City did at this point is to pull together local help and funds to have an economic impact statement prepared. Additionally, Hardeman County's Presentation to the Governor, which was produced for the Bolivar Downtown Development Corporation, (DEVCO), supports Rural Stewardship as its core endeavor and the County promotes "Outdoor Family Recreation as its chief attraction. The City of Bolivar's strategic plan closely parallels and encompasses many of the same visions. The City of Bolivar Utility Departments continue to support the Farm with emergency issues and provide assistance as needed. The City is helping fund a position that is focusing on the tourism of Bolivar/Hardeman County and Lone Oaks.

### **Important Goals of This Study**

The goals and objectives for this project are for the full potential of Lone Oaks Farm and 4-H Conference Center to be brought to reality. The role of the City of Bolivar will be the furthering and enhancing of local assets while partnering with Lone Oaks Farm, which means providing a high degree of cooperation and collaboration with the University of Tennessee. The goal and vision is for Lone Oaks Farm to become the premier destination for 4-H campers across the State of Tennessee as well as for governments and organizations to build teams, enhance project ideas, and grow businesses, all while partaking in the beauty and resources Lone Oaks Farm has to offer. Bolivar/Hardeman County's dream is for Lone Oaks to be a place where children visualize their future success in life, and corporations create and build their own visions for success. The community wants Lone Oaks Farm to be known as "the place where it all started" for countless individuals and companies. The overarching vision is to make this project become reality. This is one of the major stepping stones in bringing prosperity back to this area.



## **Project Timeframe**

The timeline started from the original owner's inception in 1998, until the University of Tennessee's search for a facility in 2011, ending in purchase of the farm in December 2015. The University is having a new *Master Plan* developed which will be published in July 2017. It is expected that this will encompass a period of twenty years in the future. Local Government will collaborate and partner with Lone Oaks Farm maximizing the potential for growth.

## **Results**

The State of Tennessee purchased Lone Oaks Farm for \$16 million in December 2015. This represents about half of the investment made by the Ledbetter's over the past fifteen years and is millions less than the appraised value. The purchase price includes all of the farm's facilities, farm equipment, the antique tool collection, and most furnishings. Existing structures and facilities enabled educational programs to begin immediately. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) has agreed to build a \$2,800,000 world class sport shooting facility at the farm. The University of Tennessee will seek funds for future development of the property through public and private sources.

During the years 2013-2015, while the University of Tennessee was gathering state support for the acquisition of the property, the complete maintenance costs of the property was provided by the sellers. Further development of the property to add additional 4-H and Conference facilities is estimated to cost about \$17 million. This would include lodging for the 4-H camp, a small inn and conference center, recreational facilities, and repurposing of some existing facilities. The total budget for this project, including land acquisition, is \$32 million.

## **About Lone Oaks Farm 4-H and Conference Center**

Lone Oaks Farm consists of 1,200 contiguous acres. The farm lies within a valley surrounded by rolling hills where eighteen stocked lakes and ponds and five creeks and waterfalls define the property. Nearly fourteen miles of well-maintained limestone gravel drives, with wooden bridges built over the numerous creeks, were positioned to meander in and out of deep woods connecting all farm buildings and guest cottages. This creates an ideal setting for sightseeing, whether driving, biking, walking or jogging. In addition, fifteen miles of horseback, hiking, jogging, biking, and ATV trails have been meticulously created throughout woods, across fields, and along creeks. Numerous wildlife viewing vistas and hidden food plots dot the landscape. This allows for an abundant supply and variety of wildlife which can be seen throughout the property. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the land is in pine and hardwood forests and forty-five percent (45%) in open pastures, hayfields, and lakes. Over fourteen miles of fencing surround the property's perimeter and divide pastures for the farms' cattle and horses. There are numerous outdoor educational and recreational areas intertwined by walking trails and pedestrian bridges. Large stone fireplaces, deck fire pits, and conversation seating areas are located next to ponds and throughout the entire farm. The property is already equipped with thirteen residences, a large cattle sale barn with one of the largest antique tool collections in the United States, and most furnishings. Horse stables, other farm buildings, shops, and underground utilities are in place. Quality roads make the entire property accessible. The size, beauty, natural resources, and existing facilities at Lone Oaks Farm make it a site that will become one of the premier 4-H and Conference Centers in the nation.

Of major importance to the future of the region is the partnership Lone Oaks has with the Hardeman County School system. This is the implementation of a Science-Technology-

Engineering-Math (STEM) education program at the Farm. This program is novel and has the potential for a large impact.

### **Operating Expenses and Revenue**

Based upon the farm's historic operations and benchmarking against other comparable 4-H facilities in Tennessee and surrounding states, the annual operating revenue of a 4-H and Conference Center at Lone Oaks is projected to be \$2.5 million. In addition, the annual operating expense is projected to be \$1.9 million. The Center would require a staff of about twenty-two full time employees and fifteen summer employees.

### **Use of the Facilities**

It is estimated that 20,000 young people will be served by the center each year. Of these, approximately 1,500 will attend 4-H Summer Camp, and others will attend specialty camps and educational enrichment programs. In addition, an estimated 15,000 adults will use the Center annually as part of educational conferences, corporate retreats, family reunions, or other functions. Agricultural literacy has been identified as a crucial need in the *Governor's Rural Challenge: 10-Year Strategic Plan for Tennessee Agriculture*. The Lone Oaks Farm facility provides hands-on educational opportunities for youth throughout the state, especially diverse inner-city youth from Memphis, Jackson, and other urban areas. A rapidly expanding interest from the entire region, especially by Farm Bureau, believes this would be one of the best investments in 4-H education and Tennessee agriculture that the state has ever made.

### **Lessons Learned**

The selection process was very competitive; initially, Hardeman County had proposed Lake LaJoie, an underutilized portion of Chickasaw State Park. The owners of Lone Oaks Farm, Scott

and Kathy Ledbetter, heard about the site search and decided to enter Lone Oaks Farm into consideration. Until this request was made, the selection committee struggled with making a decision for the new site. The top three finalists were all very eager for their site to be chosen, but Lone Oaks prevailed; not because of politics but due to the size, beauty, natural resources, and existing facilities at Lone Oaks Farm.

The children will learn life skills and make lifelong friends on visits to the new University of Tennessee's new 4-H Youth and Education Center in West Tennessee. It is the goal that each child will get to know themselves better and come to decisions during moments that will, perhaps, seem momentous only in hindsight.

Bolivar/Hardeman County has played a small, but critical part in the selection of Lone Oaks Farm 4-H Conference Center. An economic impact report was commissioned and paid for with contributions from all nine cities in Hardeman County. It was prepared by Dr. Rachel Chen, Director and Professor for the Center for Sustainable Business & Development, the University of Tennessee. The following is a listing of some of the specific findings of this report: The expected 4-H participants (annual effects) and the planned establishment of the 4-H facility and (one time effects) in Hardeman County are estimated to provide \$38.1 million in direct contributions in the regional economy. The establishments are forecasted to generate an additional \$8.8 million in indirect and induced sales for a total of \$46,844,286 in total industrial output. The total value-added to Hardeman County resulting from annual 4-H participants and facility constructions/development is estimated to be \$23,594,177. Additionally, \$18,682,243 in total income and 684 full and part time jobs will be contributed by annual participants, 4-H facility, natural agricultural development, and the future attached corporate conference center. The \$37 million 4-H Conference and Event Center will make contributions to state and local tax in

employee compensations (\$29,552), tax in production and import (\$797,131), households (\$72,206), and corporation (\$42,547).

## **Conclusion**

Bolivar/Hardeman County is well on the way to becoming a “Destination Community,” by promoting “Outdoor Family Recreation” as its chief attraction. This will be achieved by utilizing the philosophies of “Smart Growth” and “Rural Stewardship”. “Smart Growth” is a comprehensive approach to community development that creates a sustainable economic engine for growth. “Rural Stewardship” is an incentive based regional growth strategy that preserves and enhances the best of the county, while directing and amplifying the potential for growth, these are the core endeavors.

The educational and economic impact Lone Oaks has made in the short time it has existed will only continue to grow. This project will leave a lasting impact on this region. Bolivar/Hardeman County will continue to support and partner with Lone Oaks Farm 4-H Conference Center by continuing to develop plans and projects until it fully evolves as a place of education, inspiration, reflection, and joyful interaction.

Bolivar/Hardeman County will accept and positively deal with the “Issues and Challenges of Local Government in Supporting a Development Project of Regional Importance.” The prosperity of this area depends upon it.

## **State or National Trends identified in Research**

Guidelines and information from the following agencies and resources were utilized in this project:

- **Governor's Office** [TN.gov/governor](http://TN.gov/governor)
- **Tennessee General Assembly** [@capitol.TN.gov/legislature](http://capitol.TN.gov/legislature)
- **University of Tennessee**, [TCED@tennessee.edu](mailto:TCED@tennessee.edu)
- **Department of Tourism**, [TN.gov/tourism](http://TN.gov/tourism)
- **Department of Agriculture**, [TN.gov/agriculture](http://TN.gov/agriculture)
- **Economic and Community Development**, [TN.gov/ecd](http://TN.gov/ecd)
- **Environment and Conservation**, [TN.gov/environment](http://TN.gov/environment)
- **Wildlife Resources Agency**, [TN.gov/twra](http://TN.gov/twra)
- **The Nature Conservancy**, [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org)
- **The Wildlife Federation**, [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org)
- **Hardeman County Board of Education**, [www.hardemancountyschools.org](http://www.hardemancountyschools.org)
- **Ducks Unlimited**, [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org)
- **Delta Waterfowl**. [deltawaterfowl.org](http://deltawaterfowl.org)
- **National Wild Turkey Federation**, [nwtf.org](http://nwtf.org)
- **Hardeman County's Presentation to the Governor**, A countywide Test Case for Rural Stewardship in Tennessee , September 2007
- **DEVCO, Bolivar & Hardeman County, 10 Year Plan**, March 15, 2013
- **Hardeman County, Tennessee Five Year Asset Based Strategic Economic Development Plan**, 2010-2014

- **Sain, Jimmy**, Mayor of Hardeman County, Interview of Hardeman County Adventure Tourism Act Designated Areas, March 12, 2015
- **Hardeman County Tourism Guide**, May 2016
- **The Nature Conservancy**, Letter dated August 15, 2007, Monica Pope, West Tennessee Program Manager, to the Hatchie River Conservancy
- **Parish, Gerald**, CPRP/CPSI Director, Letter of official notice from Department of Environment and Conservation, approval of the Local Parks and Recreation Fund (LPRF) Grant
- **West Tennessee River Basin Authority**, July 2015 Board of Directors Monthly Meeting
- **American Camp Association**, [acacamps.org](http://acacamps.org)
- **Economic Impacts of West Tennessee 4-H Camp and Conference Center in Hardeman County, Tennessee**, Rachel J. C. Chen, PHD, CHE
- **Chamber of Commerce Brochure** [www.hardemancountytn.com](http://www.hardemancountytn.com)