

# Leading the Regional Growth Trend in Saline County

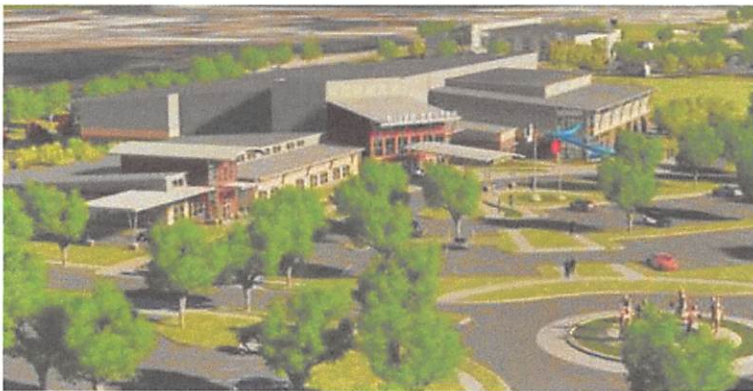
Saline County has logged some impressive growth statistics in recent years. So far in the 2010 decade, it gained population at an annualized rate of 1.7 percent. While down from 2.5 percent annually from 2000 to 2010, it is enough to rank Saline County as the region's fastest-growing (Faulkner County ranks second, at 1.4 percent annually 2010-2015).<sup>1</sup> Saline County is not only the state's sixth-largest county, it recorded the third highest rate of growth among Arkansas counties in the years 2010-2015. For the moment, it also remains a bedroom community. The latest commuting statistics show that 54 percent of workers who reside in Saline County commute to jobs in Pulaski County; in fact about 27,000 people make the journey on a more-or-less daily basis.<sup>2</sup>

Benton, approaching 35,000 population, is now the fourth-largest city in the Central Arkansas region, and Bryant,

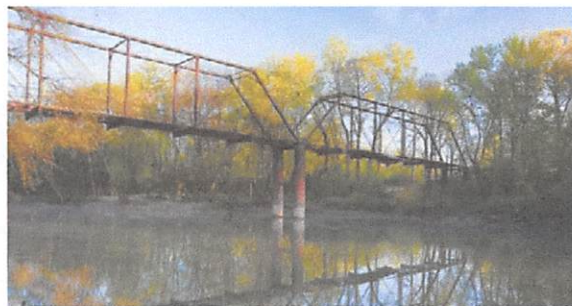
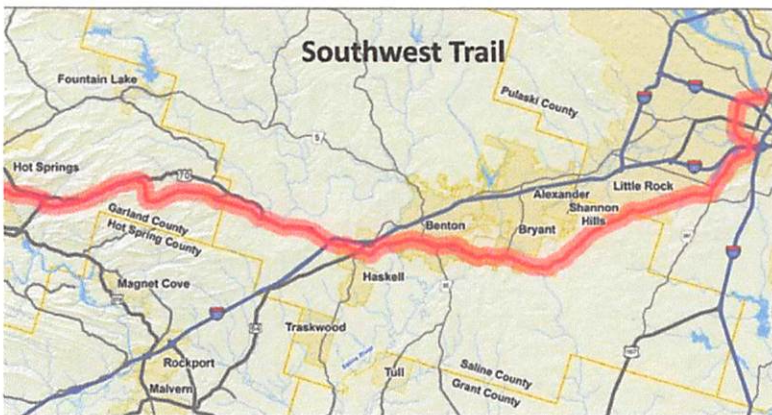


The Longhills project is adding 612 multifamily units north of I-30 in Benton.

passing 20,000, has grown by a factor of twenty in just fifty years. Saline County is seeing changes that may transform it from a suburb and bedroom community into an important regional center in its own right. **M**



Construction of the River Center is part of Benton's ambitious plan for Riverside Park on the Saline River. The Center will include a community center, basketball and volleyball courts, space for civic events, offices, exercise equipment and meeting rooms. The Park will also house a new Boys and Girls Club building and a senior center. Photo illustration credit: <http://cdicon.com/project/111/benton-riverside-park>



The Old River Bridge is slated for a bike-and-pedestrian conversion as part of the Southwest Trail. Photo credit: [Facebook.com/southwest-trail](https://www.facebook.com/southwest-trail)

<sup>1</sup>Based on Census estimates for population on July 1, 2015, compared with Census 2010 (April 1, 2010). Rankings by Metroplan.

<sup>2</sup>CTPP 2009-2013. CTPP stands for "Census Transportation Planning Package," which is based on ACS data from the Census Bureau.



# Benton's Downtown Initiative

One of the oldest cities in Arkansas, Benton has seen its share of history. The oldest buildings in downtown Benton date from the early 1900s, including the Saline County Courthouse (1902) and the Hughes Building (1908). Benton community leaders have banded together with the city government to establish the Benton Commercial Historic District over an area of slightly over four square blocks containing a majority of historic structures. New standards will preserve property values and encourage high-quality restoration work. Like most older U.S. downtowns, central Benton is nicely walkable, and several retailers continue trading downtown. The city government has already built a small park, and will soon construct a farmers' market. Downtown Benton aims to develop the kind of entertainment and dining activity that extends past 5 pm. Since gentrification—downtown living—has not yet arrived in a big way, property values remain low enough to provide entrepreneurial opportunities.

ACDI (Access Control Devices), a growing Little Rock-based technology company, is moving in. ACDI has about 38 workers and a niche in print management solutions and pay-for-print services. Owners Josh and Mandy Lane are moving the 21-year-old technology company back to their home town. ACDI's new corporate headquarters will occupy an old Harvest Foods site, one block north of the Historic District. Family ties are part of the attraction, along with a desire to be located in walking distance of a reviving urban center.



Benton's Courthouse square contributes to a sense of place downtown.

The downtowns in Little Rock, North Little Rock and Conway are already making successful comebacks. Benton is primed to be next. It's a good deal for taxpayers, too, since the infrastructure and service costs of walkable downtown businesses run far lower per square foot than for businesses with a low-density, parking-intensive suburban format.<sup>1</sup> Located in the center of a county soon to pass 120,000 population, downtown Benton is giving Central Arkansas its newest infusion of urban vitality. **M**



Downtown retail combines variety and walkability, while costing taxpayers less to develop and maintain.



Efforts to save the historic Royal Theater continue, but downtown Benton is reviving in any case.

<sup>1</sup>See *Metrotrends Demographic Review and Outlook* July 2015, pp. 10-11 for a Conway case study, available at <http://metroplan.org>.