IDEAS & VOICES

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- To provide an open forum of community voices.
- To present balanced views.
- To seek solutions to important regional problems.

SPRINGFIELD COMMUNITY MAKING HISTORY TOGETHER

Last fall, Springfield was unwillingly thrust into the national spotlight after a baseless rumor about its Haitian immigrant community was widely circulated. After a tumultuous year, city leaders and residents are hoping to take back the narrative about their community with Springfield 2051, a visioning and engagement project that will coincide with its 250th anniversary. Hear from organizers of the project about their hopes for the future of Springfield in today's Ideas & Voices.

Springfield 2051 Listening Session with BATS (Bringing Awareness to Students) student group at Springfield High School. BETH DIXON / CONTRIBUTED.

Springfield is gritty, complicated and magnificent

Marta Wojcik
Guest Columnist

The phrase "cats and dogs" used to make me think of heavy rain. Since last fall, it's an instant flashback to an enormous sense of disbelief, frustration and worry about Springfield being affected by a tsunami of misinformation.

This was a moment in our history that was profoundly unjust, and with real consequences for our residents, businesses, cultural sites, and, yes, our collective psyche, and after all the incredible progress we have made as a community over the last two decades. True, Springfield is not a pretty little town with a perfect curb appeal. Springfield is gritty, complicated and full of contradictions. It is also magnificent in so many ways, as often manifested through residents' daily actions to make it better, more livable, and more appreciated by both our own community and our neighbors. Not all partake, but the majority does. Thanks to those who do, Springfield has a hopeful path forward.

This is a painful yet necessary context for Springfield 2051. However, as the organizers of this movement, we decided not to fall into the trap of being reactionary. Instead, we created a process that will lead to an authentic story that is all our own. As someone said at one of the meetings, "Springfield needs a big couch to tell the psychiatrist how we feel."

True, but we also need a sophisticated approach to scientific data, as well as a deep understanding of the larger forces that will shape our region over the next two decades.

To make that happen, we partnered with Future iQ, an expert planning firm helping communities across the country prepare for the next generation. They designed a rigorous process rooted in data, conversation and local insight. Since August, more than 2,000 residents have taken part in the project – from Think Tank workshops to community listening sessions to an extensive community survey. And we're just getting started.

Some say we need more listening sessions. Others think it's too much talking! Some want deliverables right away, as if they could never believe that their input is being sought precisely to shape what these deliverables will be. Some people bring along the pain of systemic, multigenerational disadvantage and distrust. All valid and real challenges that a project like this cannot ignore. Most embraced the project with cautious optimism. Cautious is good. We will take it.

The year 2051 marks Springfield's 250th birthday. We have big plans, and big plans take time and effort. Our team chose a slogan "Let's Make History Together." Ambitious? Yes. I will say this: As far as I know, each one of us has one shot at this beautiful, crazy life of ours. I don't want to be a passenger, a mere observer. I want my actions to matter and to impact others in a positive way. And I know I cannot do it alone. That to me is history making at its best.

They say actions speak more than words. What I have learned so far is that talking is action. As long as there is a rhyme and a reason in how we come together and share, it is a very real manifestation of being intentional and taking the action.

All this talking will lead to tangible actions that will be validated by the will and wit of the people who live and work in our community. And then, these actions will speak volumes. They will be louder than words spoken about Springfield last fall.

Marta Wojcik is the director of Frank Lloyd Wright's Westcott House and a Springfield 2051 steering committee member.

To be Springfield's observer or architect is up to us

Dr. Raphael Allen
Guest Columnist

There is a moment in every city's story when reflection meets resolve – when we stop asking what went wrong and begin asking what we can do, together, to make it right. For Springfield, that moment is now.

Ours is a community with much to celebrate. Across Clark County, neighbors continue to show up for one another – in our schools, our churches, our nonprofits and our neighborhoods. From revitalized downtown spaces to grassroots initiatives strengthening our rural and urban corridors alike, we are witnessing collaboration, creativity and compassion at work every day. The resilience, generosity, and determination of our residents remind us that Springfield's greatest asset has always been its people.

Across every street – from the Southside to the North End, from the farms of Clark County to the heart of downtown – people are awakening to a shared truth: Our future cannot be written by a few and read by the many. It must be authored collectively, by all of us.

For too long, progress has often spoken in the voices of the few. Yet the truest measure of advancement lies in the harmony of many voices, especially those too often unheard. As we chart the next 25 years of growth and revitalization, it is vital that the narratives of our neighborhoods, families and youth be centered, not sidelined.

That's why Springfield 2051 matters. The planning for Springfield's future doesn't begin in 2051, it begins right now. The year 2051 is not a starting line; it is our destination. The choices, conversations and commitments we make today will define the legacy we leave for generations to come.

As director of community outreach and engagement at The Springfield Foundation, I see what happens when promises move beyond words and into action. People stop feeling like guests in the process and begin to see themselves as partners in shaping it. They bring more than ideas, they bring energy, ownership and hope.

That begins with listening to every corner of our community. It means drawing from the insight of educators and entrepreneurs, young dreamers and seasoned elders, and those whose voices have been historically undervalued. Expertise isn't confined to planning tables, it lives in lived experience. The ideas that will shape Springfield's next chapter are already here, waiting to be valued, validated and woven together.

So, now comes the challenge: Each of us must decide whether we will be observers or architects of our city's next chapter. Will we cling to the comfort of old divisions, or commit to the hard work of unity? Will we wait for change, or be the ones who create it?

2051 is where we're headed, but history is being written today. Let's write it together.

Dr. Raphael Allen is the director of community outreach & engagement for The Springfield Foundation & Springfield2051 steering committee member.

Our future is something that we create together

Horton H. Hobbs IV
Guest Columnist

Springfield stands at a pivotal moment in its history. For generations, our community has been defined by its resilience, creativity, and commitment to progress. From our roots as an industrial hub to our emerging reputation as a center for innovation, entrepreneurship and quality of life, Springfield has always found a way to evolve. The Springfield 2051 project represents the next great chapter in that story – a bold, community-driven vision designed to guide our growth and prosperity over the next quarter century.

Importantly, Springfield 2051 does not start from scratch. Our community has a proud tradition of long-range planning and collaboration that has paid real dividends. Initiatives like the Greater Springfield Moving Forward process, Vision 2020, and the Greater Springfield Community Strategic Plan helped set the stage for major wins in downtown redevelopment, workforce innovation, and business expansion. They fostered partnerships among business leaders, local government and educators that continue to fuel our progress today.

Springfield 2051 builds directly on that foundation – learning from what has worked, updating what has changed and focusing on the opportunities that will shape the next 25 years.

From a Chamber of Commerce and economic development perspective, the importance of this effort cannot be overstated. Businesses thrive in communities that plan intentionally and invest strategically. Springfield 2051 does exactly that – creating a roadmap that connects the dots between job creation, housing, education, talent retention and quality of life. By linking economic development goals with community development priorities, this plan ensures that Springfield doesn't just grow, but grows smartly and sustainably.

Every successful region has a vision that unites its stakeholders around shared outcomes. Springfield 2051 is doing precisely that – bringing together the private sector, local government, educators and residents to define what kind of community we want to be in 25 years.

It's not a top-down exercise; it's a community-wide call to action. The Greater Springfield Partnership, along with its many public and private partners, recognizes that long-term prosperity depends on this kind of civic alignment – one that encourages innovation, attracts investment and inspires confidence.

Economic competitiveness today is not just about cost or location – it's about collaboration, culture, and vision. When companies and families evaluate where to plant roots, they look for communities that demonstrate foresight and momentum.

Springfield2051 sends that message loud and clear: we are ready for the future. It tells employers, developers and entrepreneurs that Springfield is serious about creating a business-friendly environment while ensuring that growth benefits everyone.

But this vision cannot succeed without the voice of the community. The beauty of Springfield2051 lies in its openness – it invites every resident, business owner and student to participate. Whether you've lived here your entire life or just moved to town, your perspective matters.

We need your ideas, your concerns and your dreams to make this plan truly reflect who we are and where we want to go. Springfield's future isn't something that happens to us – it's something we create together. Join the conversation. Attend a meeting. Share your thoughts online.

Let's make sure that when the history of Springfield is written in 2051, it tells the story of a community that honored its past, embraced its progress, and built tomorrow, together.

Horton H. Hobbs IV is vice president of economic development for the Greater Springfield Partnership and a Springfield 2051 steering committee member.