

A Guide to Intercity Visits: Community Development Through Leadership Exchange

Joan Mobley

Ian Scott

Information in this book is accurate at the time of publication and consistent with the principles of good research and chamber management.

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Message from the Authors

We are pleased to bring you *A Guide to Intercity Visits: Community Development Through Leadership Exchange*. This publication both highlights the value of intercity visits for communities and provides a useful roadmap for launching a program. For chambers that already have an intercity visit program, we hope this will be a useful tool to help evaluate and enhance your program. For those who have not yet taken the plunge, we hope this guide will encourage you to jump into the pool!

Thank you to everyone who offered their insights and perspectives as we conducted research for this publication. The information contained here is based on many collective years of experience, and we greatly appreciate everyone's willingness to share.

We also want to thank our sponsors: Administaff, IBM and Jim Blasingame, Small Business Advocate. Without their generous support, the body of knowledge contained in this document would not have been chronicled.

It is our sincere hope that this publication will not collect dust on your bookshelf. Instead, we hope this will help every step of the way as you launch your own program or begin planning for next year's visit. We also hope that the discussion started here will lead to further exchange of best practices and lessons learned about intercity visits. We encourage chamber leaders to continue the dialogue online at <http://www.acce.org/icv>.

Happy reading and safe travels!

Joan Mobley and Ian Scott

Special Thanks

In addition to Administaff, IBM and Jim Blasingame, Small Business Advocate, our generous sponsors who made this publication possible, the following individuals deserve special recognition for their important contributions to this project.

Thank you to **Debby Dale Mason, Wendy Helgeson, Ginny Russell** and **Ellen Watters** for their review and enhancement of the *Producing Intercity Visits* section. Their years of experience organizing intercity visits helped us ensure we didn't miss a step.

Ian wishes to thank:

Harvey Schmitt, CCE; Drew Moretz, IOM, and everyone at the Greater Raleigh (NC) Chamber of Commerce who welcomed him along to chronicle their 2008 intercity visit to Nashville, Tenn.

Linda Lewis for being a gracious host on his visit to the Chamber of Commerce of Walker County (AL).

Ralph Schultz and **Debby Dale Mason** at the Nashville (TN) Area Chamber of Commerce for sharing insights collected during their long history of conducting intercity visits.

Aaron Nelson at the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce in North Carolina for his candid remarks about the unique aspects of his chamber's intercity visit program.

Bob Quick at Commerce Lexington in Kentucky for sharing his experience leading one of the nation's oldest and largest intercity visit programs.



*Small business is good for America.
Administaff is good for small business.SM*

Chambers of commerce have conducted intercity visits for decades with great success, resulting in the sharing of ideas and fellowship among community leaders. Now, with this publication, associated website and other collateral resources, veterans of intercity visits are able to share their experiences and best practices of this outstanding chamber tradition with all who care about growing and improving their communities through a strong local chamber of commerce.

In this spirit of seeking excellence and high level of community leadership, Administaff is proud to continue our support of ACCE and local chambers of commerce, and we're honored to be able to co-sponsor the development, distribution and perpetuation of the wealth of information about intercity visits contained in this publication.



Local chambers of commerce are the wellspring from which leaders of all disciplines and professions work together to improve and grow their communities and markets. One of the most exciting chamber programs over the years has been intercity visits among community leaders, which has resulted in a wealth of knowledge, experience and cross-community fellowship and goodwill.

With the vision of ACCE and the cooperation of intercity visit veterans, this resource has been developed and is now offered in hardcopy and an associated website. As a co-sponsor of this exciting resource, IBM is extremely proud to continue its work with ACCE and support the vital role chambers of commerce play in thousands of communities.



The connection between chambers of commerce and the health of local markets – and indeed the strength of our national economy – is something that we feel very strongly about. In fact our founder and president, Jim Blasingame, has been an active member of his chamber of commerce for more than 30 years. We consider promoting chambers of commerce to be a very logical part of our work in support of small businesses.

Therefore, Small Business Network is very pleased to say that this year, part of our support for chambers is the co-sponsorship of the bound volume and the intercity visit website. We believe it will contribute greatly to the cooperation and goodwill among chambers and communities, and promote a 21st century dynamic that is taking place across the country: communities working together on regionally rather than locally.

How to Use this Publication

There are many ways to approach intercity visits, and this guide does not attempt to capture them all. Nor can this publication hope to contain a fraction of the value communities have reaped by conducting these visits. What we will offer are two primary things:

1. An in-depth, step-by-step guide to organizing and conducting intercity visits; and
2. A wealth of examples to illustrate why these programs are a worthwhile venture for your Chamber and community.

For the novice intercity visit leader, the publication is intended to be a starting point. By providing a basic structural framework along with samples, suggestions, and lessons learned, we will give chamber leaders a foundation on which to build an intercity visit program that works in their unique communities.

For experienced intercity visit leaders, we hope this publication can serve as a valuable tool to evaluate your program. We also hope you will uncover some new ideas to energize your future visits and discover new messages to communicate the program's value to community stakeholders.

- ***For the first-time intercity visit leader:*** Cover to cover, this publication is for you. Start by reviewing **Intercity Basics** (page 1) to get a firm grasp of what intercity visits are, who they serve and why chambers organize them. Then check out our **Program Profiles** (page 8) to get a sense of how chambers conduct their programs and what value their members see in the visit. Finally, familiarize yourself with **Producing Intercity Visits** (page 32). This section is an invaluable, step-by-step tool that will help guide you from the program's inception to wrap-up meetings after the visit.
- ***Not sure an intercity visit is right for your Chamber?*** If you are not sure this kind of program is right for your chamber and community, start by reading **Why Intercity Visits** (page 4). If you are still not convinced this kind of program is worthwhile, turn to the **Program Profiles** (page 8) to hear first-hand from chamber leaders, chamber members and program sponsors why the intercity visit is a valuable experience and a top priority every year.
- ***For the experienced intercity visit leader:*** You already understand the value, but perhaps you are considering making changes to your program? Maybe you want to take a larger delegation, stay an extra day, or make your first cross-country trip. Check out the **Program Profiles** section (page 8) to read comments from intercity visit participants and have a glance at what other chambers are doing. As you prepare for next year's trip, the **Producing Intercity Visits** section (page 32) can serve as a handy checklist to make sure you are covering all your bases. As you narrow down choices for your next destination city, use our **Chambers on the Move** chart available online at www.acce.org/icv to connect with other chamber leaders

who've visited your top choices. You'll also want to check out sample itineraries online to get interesting session ideas.

- ***Think your Chamber is too small for an intercity visit?*** If you think your chamber doesn't have the capacity to pull off a successful intercity visit, think again! Go to the **Program Profiles** section and read about the Chamber of Commerce of Walker County, Alabama (page 20) to learn how chambers of all sizes can benefit from an intercity visit program. Also, **Producing Intercity Visits** (page 32) can help with some practical tips on how to work within your budget.

Intercity Visit Basics

What is an Intercity Visit?

While the term might seem self-explanatory, many people we interviewed could not describe an intercity visit. Even among organizers, different motivations for conducting the visit led to different definitions. To avoid confusion, let us articulate the working definition we will use for this discussion.

An intercity visit is a regularly scheduled trip to another city or region taken by a diverse delegation comprised of leaders from a community's public, private and nonprofit sectors. The visiting delegation and leaders from the host community discuss challenges and opportunities their community is facing. The visit provides an opportunity for interaction among city leaders and facilitates exchange of best practices and lessons learned. These visits are often organized annually and thus serve as a regularly scheduled chance for collective community visioning.

There is an important difference between an intercity visit and a trade mission, or even a delegation conducting research for a specific project. While participants on an intercity visit may bring back new ideas for a proposed project or establish a new business connection in the host city, neither of those valuable outcomes is the primary reason for the visit. For our purposes, an intercity visit has two primary goals:

1. Sharing best practices and lessons learned; and
2. High-level networking among community leaders.

Who Conducts Intercity Visits?

When we set out to chronicle intercity visits and create a guidebook for how to produce them, the first step was to find out how many communities already have a program. We also wanted to know the basics, such as destination cities, the number of people who join the visit, and the cost for participants. To help answer our questions, we conducted a survey of all ACCE member chambers to learn about their intercity visits.

One hundred and sixty members, roughly 12 percent of ACCE's total membership, responded to the January 2008 poll. Replies came from chambers in over 30 states as well as from Canada. Respondents represented some of the largest chambers in the country, such as those in Detroit and Cincinnati, each with over 40 full-time staff members serving metropolitan areas with millions of residents. We also received responses from chambers serving much smaller communities, such as Mount Airy, NC and Beaver Dam, Wisc.

Half of the respondents to our survey indicated that they have an active intercity visit program. This ratio may not reflect the activities of all 1,300 ACCE member chambers, but it suffices to say that many communities will conduct an intercity visit in any given year.

Among chambers that do have an intercity visit program, roughly 65 percent organize a visit annually. According to our survey results, chambers of commerce are overwhelmingly the lead organizers of intercity visits in their communities. On occasions when the chamber is not the lead, the visit is typically organized by an economic development agency or downtown alliance. It is also worth noting that some chambers partner with other chambers to conduct the intercity visit, particularly where they share elected officials and community priorities.

Our survey also shows that intercity visits are growing in popularity. A significant percentage (34 percent) of chambers have conducted these visits for fewer than three years, and a majority (54 percent) have had the program for fewer than eight years. That said, there are also many chambers with a longstanding tradition of conducting intercity visits, and a handful that have run the program for over 25 years.

Delegation size varies widely. The highest proportion of chambers (43 percent) take from 75 to 125 people on their visit; yet 20 percent of chambers conduct their trips successfully with fewer than 25 people. The wide variance illustrates that there is really no magic number of delegates to bring. What's more important is having a broad-based delegation inclusive of business, civic and elected leaders. It is also worth noting that very few chambers average over 125 participants on their visit. So while there may not be a magic number, our survey indicates that most chambers tend to keep their groups to a manageable size.

As with delegation size, there is no magic number for the fee participants pay. A majority (55 percent) of chambers charge between \$1,500 and \$2,500. This speaks to the sophistication of these programs and the importance participants place on the visits. However, 20 percent of chambers surveyed keep their cost per participant below \$500.

This wide variation in participation fees suggests that intercity visit programs may look very different for different chambers. Chambers at the upper end of the price-per-participant spectrum conduct multi-day trips to far-flung cities; their participation fees reflect airfare and hotel costs. Chambers with a lower price for each participant may travel by bus to a nearby destination and return in the same day. The important commonality is that the programs foster an exchange of best practices and lessons learned between two communities and allow for high-level networking among community leaders.

Anecdotally, autumn is the overwhelmingly preferred time of year to hold an intercity visit. Our survey shows that 60 percent of chambers go in the fall, compared with 20 percent in the spring, and only 10 percent in summer and winter. Weather is an obvious factor for choosing the fall, because intercity visits typically involve walking tours and sessions in locations all across town. State legislative calendars are another reason chambers typically prefer fall visits. Intercity visits are often organized through the chamber's government affairs department, and since most state legislatures are in session in the spring, staff has more time to plan the intercity visit in the fall.

60% of intercity visits occur in the fall.

The chambers that lead intercity visits are a very diverse group. Chambers of all sizes from all parts of the country have realized the value of this kind of program. In fact, it is incorrect to assume that all large chambers have an intercity visit program and that smaller chambers are less likely to have one. Some of the largest chambers that responded to our survey do not have an intercity visit program; while many smaller chambers, some with only one or two full-time staff, have made the trips.

Among respondents without an intercity visit program, when asked whether they are interested in building a program, 48 percent said "yes." Those who are interested cited a broad range of challenges and perceived barriers. Some of the most common were:

- I do not fully understand the goals of such a program.
- Our members don't understand the benefits of such a program.
- We need interest from a broader group to be successful.
- How do you make the trip useful with so many diverse viewpoints from individuals participating on the trip?
- No time, no money, no idea how to go about doing it.
- No available staff resources to devote time for researching and planning such a trip.
- Not sure that our community is large enough to benefit.
- Don't have the financial backing to do such a trip at this time.

Throughout this publication, we hope to answer these questions and allay these concerns.

Why Intercity Visits?

The most tangible reason to conduct an intercity visit is to get new ideas. The visit provides an opportunity to introduce your delegation of civic leaders to innovative programs and impactful projects that may be adapted and implemented in your community. Candid speakers in the host city can also alert your delegation to the challenges and pitfalls with which they are currently struggling. You should select a destination city based on the specific issues facing your community. By choosing a destination where the citizens are dealing with similar issues, the visit can focus on best practices and become a true peer-to-peer learning experience. The lessons learned by delegates on an intercity visit can yield positive results in your own community.

Through shared experiences and a common foundation of understanding, delegates become a more cohesive team working to solve problems on behalf of the community.

Though perhaps less tangible than learning best practices, the networking and relationship building begun or cemented on an intercity visit is equally important for your community leaders. Through shared experiences and a common foundation of understanding, delegates become a more cohesive team working to solve problems on behalf of the community. This teambuilding component provides the impetus for chambers to conduct these programs annually.

“The people who participate in the Music City Leadership Study Mission are some of our community’s most active leaders,” said Ralph Schulz, president and CEO of the Nashville (TN) Area Chamber of Commerce. “They are the folks you know you can call on; they understand the issues our community is facing.” Harvey Schmitt, CCE, president and CEO of the Greater Raleigh (NC) Chamber of Commerce, echoed a similar sentiment: “What is, perhaps, more important than the lessons learned is the relationship building among participants that leads to better cooperation and coordination when folks come back home.” Jerry Mallot, CCE, executive vice president, economic development, of the Jacksonville (FL) Regional Chamber, added, “In my opinion, the greatest value from the intercity visit is the opportunity to bring top business leaders and government officials together to discuss centrally important issues that we are never able to spend time on at home.”

“The people who participate in the Music City Leadership Study Mission are some of our community’s most active leaders.”

*Ralph Schulz
President and CEO
Nashville (TN) Area Chamber
of Commerce*

“The greatest value from the intercity visit is the opportunity to bring top business leaders and government officials together to discuss centrally important issues.”

*Jerry Mallot, CCE
Executive Vice President
Jacksonville (FL)
Regional Chamber*

Testimonials from hundreds of other delegates, organizers and hosts attest to the value of these trips. However, producing an intercity visit is a major initiative requiring time, money, and public support. Is it worth it for your Chamber?

Intercity visits will heighten the leadership profile for your Chamber. They are important catalysts for economic and community development, and can be instrumental in garnering support for policy priorities. Intercity visits can also drive chamber membership and be an important source of non-dues revenue. If your Chamber would like to diversify its revenue, attract new members, strengthen its public policy and economic develop-

ment activities, and bolster its position in the community, then you should definitely consider leading an intercity visit.

Leadership Role for the Chamber

ACCE's National Chamber Image Campaign research showed that many chambers have difficulty articulating their value proposition and do not have a strong public relations presence. The survey also revealed that many business owners and executives do not fully understand what chambers of commerce do or how the work of the chamber benefits the community and individual businesses. Conducting an intercity visit can help bolster the chamber's image and reputation.

By taking the lead and convening a delegation of your community's top elected, business and civic leaders, the chamber's profile is heightened. The best practices sharing and relationship-strengthening that result from an intercity visit are tangible benefits that your members will notice and appreciate.

Economic and Community Development

Economic development is no longer limited to offering tax incentives to attract new companies; it is about creating a climate that helps all to thrive. Companies that plan to expand their businesses are looking to invest in a city that will make it easier to attract and retain the skilled employees they need.

Skilled workers want things to do after work and on the weekends; they want to bike or bus to work; and they want to ensure that their children get a good education. Cultural amenities, entertainment districts, public transit, downtown housing, green belts, jogging trails and quality public schools are all community development issues, and they are all issues appropriate for discussion on an intercity visit.

Intercity visit trips yield new ideas, fresh perspectives and strengthened connections that translate to big wins for the enhancement of your community. Also, the trips provide an excellent opportunity to showcase the interconnectedness between economic and community development to sometimes skeptical leaders. Through an intercity visit, your organization can be the catalyst for growth and development in your region.

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Membership Development

To be truly successful, an intercity visit program must be broad-based, including various segments from across the community. Many chambers will have to reach beyond their core membership to convene an appropriately broad delegation. By reaching out to new segments of your community through the intercity visit program, you have an opportunity to connect with potential new members and expose them to the chamber's other activities and benefits. Also, some chambers only invite members at a certain investment tier or dues level to participate. If this is the case for your Chamber, a popular

intercity visit program becomes an incentive for members to increase their investment level.

That said, the intercity visit itself is probably not an appropriate place to actively seek new members. The trip should be seen as an investment of time and energy in the community, not as an opportunity to make a sale.

Issue Development and Support

Chambers of commerce exist to protect the interest of business, and as such, it is a chamber's responsibility to speak up on behalf of the businesses they serve in the halls of government. This means developing an advocacy program and taking a stance on the issues that matter. Developing a stance on the host of complex issues that will comprise your public policy agenda is not an easy task. It takes engagement from a well-informed delegation to craft and support a policy agenda. The intercity visit provides a unique opportunity to build consensus, frame the context of the issues, and bring the critical regional leaders to a common level of understanding and perspective.

For more information on launching a chamber advocacy program check out [Making your Chamber Make a Difference](#) by ACCE President Mick Fleming, available to download online at www.acce.org.

An intercity visit also provides your delegation the opportunity to see and experience what you envision for the future. Whether it's a light rail system, state-of-the-art library, performing arts center, main street development, new education program, or research park— before you try to sell your community leaders on a bold new idea, use the intercity visit program to help them visualize the end result.

The visit also provides the opportunity to present your delegates with background and reference materials to aid in the understanding of important issues. Furthermore, you can use the trip to gain valuable feedback and commitments from delegates. You will never again have the focus, energy, engagement and enthusiasm you can generate during the trip. The intercity visit can help you lay the groundwork to move your agenda ahead at home.

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Non-dues Revenue

The potential revenue generation of the intercity visit program is another positive factor to consider. According to the 2006-2007 ACCE Chamber Operations Survey, membership dues account for approximately 40 percent of most chambers' annual operating budget. The goal is to build a program that will, in time, cover all its costs and generate additional revenue for your bottom line. You have several options for generating net revenue: delegate fees, sponsorships, in-kind donations, grants, and underwriting. Each of these funding mechanisms is addressed in more detail in the **Producing Intercity Visits** section (page 32). *Making Intercity Visits Profitable*, from the August 2007 issue of *Chamber Executive*, also provides a detailed overview.

Program Profiles: First-Person Accounts

An old adage among chamber executives is that if you've seen one chamber, you've seen one chamber. The same holds true for intercity visit programs. Each program takes on unique characteristics based on the individuals who organize the visit and the communities that participate.

Having defined intercity visits and discussed their value for both chambers and the broader community, we will now profile five different intercity visit programs. The goal is threefold: we hope to paint a general picture of an intercity visit, draw out similarities and differences between the programs, and capture the value these programs add to their respective chambers and communities. Our intent is not to champion any of these programs as the gold standard, although all of these programs are admirable and worthy of imitation. Instead we hope to illustrate some of the ways chambers have tailored the intercity visit concept to fit their unique needs.

We will start with Chapel Hill, N.C., a quintessential college town where everything, including the intercity visit, revolves around the university. Then we'll take a look at Raleigh, N.C., a city in the same region as Chapel Hill, but with a very different perspective. We will then examine Nashville, Tenn., a city of similar size to Raleigh, with a similarly long-standing intercity visit program. From Nashville we'll venture to Walker County, Ala., a much smaller community that made its first intercity visit in 2007. In conclusion, we look at Lexington, Ky., a city with, perhaps, the longest running intercity visit program and largest delegation in the country.

Chamber: Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC) Chamber of Commerce

Community Size: 60,000

Chamber Staff Size: 9

Program Title: Intercity Visit and Leadership Conference

Years of Experience: 10

Average Delegation Size: 100

Program Frequency: Bi-Annual

In March of 2008, Aaron Nelson, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC) Chamber of Commerce, graciously invited me to sit in on his board of directors meeting. One agenda item was a status report on the 2008 Intercity Leadership Visit. Many of the board members had attended the most recent trip to Madison, Wisc. in 2006, and they wanted to know what Aaron and his team had in store for this year. Aaron informed the group that while all the details were not yet finalized, they would be going to Ann Arbor, Mich., in September. Following the meeting, Aaron and several board members spoke with me about their community's intercity visit program. From our conversations, I learned that the Chapel Hill-Carrboro community has a long history of intercity visits. Their story is distinctly rooted in the character of the town and its center of gravity, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH).

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro intercity visit program began in 1985 after a delegation from Lexington, Ky. visited the community the previous year and invited them to reciprocate. From the outset, the intercity visit program was not sponsored directly by the Chamber. Instead, a separate group of community stakeholders, including the Chamber, formed an organization called the Public Private Partnership (PPP) to sponsor the visit. While the Chamber played an active role in organizing the trip and setting the agenda, it was the PPP that functioned publicly as the lead organizer. This dynamic was integral to ensuring participation from the university and other key community leaders who were unlikely to attend a Chamber event.

Commerce Lexington has one of the longest-running intercity visit programs in the country; 2008 marked its 69th annual intercity visit.

After the first trip to Lexington, the PPP led visits every other year for 12 years to various cities. They visited six college communities including: Bloomington, Ind. (University of Indiana); Boulder, Colo. (University of Colorado); Princeton, N.J. (Princeton University); Charlotte, N.C. (University of North Carolina at Charlotte); Champaign-Urbana, Ill. (University of Illinois); and Ann Arbor, Mich. (University of Michigan). The Ann Arbor trip in 1997 was the last one organized by the PPP. Before the next trip, which would have been scheduled for 1999, UNC Chancellor Michael Hooker developed lymphoma and subsequently died in office. With his death, the university's commitment to the intercity visit program faded. Soon after, the PPP and its intercity visit program dissolved.

It took nine years to summon the political capital needed to reinvigorate the once highly anticipated and well-attended visit, a testament to the primacy of the university in the community. In addition to securing renewed support from the chancellor's office,

finding an appropriate organizational vehicle for the visits was vital groundwork needed to re-launch the program. The Community Leadership Council (CLC), formed in 2004, was the ideal choice.

The Community Leadership Council is underwritten by the Foundation for a Sustainable Community, a separate charitable entity chartered by the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber. The Foundation was created to promote “the triple bottom line of community sustainability— environmental protection, social equity and economic prosperity.” The CLC was formed, in turn, “to advance sustainability issues, to prioritize objectives..., to develop a shared reference point among community leaders, and to plan and implement an inclusive intercity visit.” By being twice removed from Chamber governance and having a specific, community-focused agenda, the CLC had the necessary credibility to convene the intercity visit. In much the same way as the PPP had functioned initially, the CLC is an important intermediary to convene all stakeholders to plan for Chapel Hill’s future.

The 2006 trip to Madison, Wisc. was a triumphant return for the program; 102 delegates attended. In addition to business and Chamber leaders, the participant list included 16 representatives from UNC-Chapel Hill, 22 from city and county government, 22 non-profit leaders, and three media representatives. The three day (Sunday through Tuesday) trip included sessions on downtown development, workforce housing, arts and culture, town-gown (university) relations, environment and land use, and university research parks. Featured speakers included several aldermen of the City of Madison, many University of Wisconsin officials, and the heads of various community non-profit groups. The number of representatives from the business community was thin among the lineup of speakers, again reflecting the broader community orientation of the program.

Nelson explained, “One of our biggest challenges is fighting a perception of elitism.” He continued, “Skepticism about the Chamber and the business community in general is high here. For the intercity visit we have to work very hard to include everyone and be transparent.” To help ensure inclusiveness and participation from the non-profits, over \$10,000 in scholarships was offered for the 2006 Madison trip. “No one is given a full ride,” said Nelson. “Everyone has some skin in the game.” “However,” he added, “we recognize that without scholarships, many important community leaders could not attend, and our delegation would not reflect the diversity of the community.”

“For the intercity visit we have to work very hard to include everyone and be transparent.”

*Aaron Nelson
President
Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC)
Chamber of Commerce*

The intercity visit is also very accessible to the media. “We are overly concerned that the trip may be perceived as a junket; as business people schmoozing university officials and elected leaders,” said Nelson. “To preempt those accusations we are very open about the visit with the media.” Local media are given information before the trip and invited to attend. Reporters from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, *The Chapel Hill Herald*, and local radio station WCHL 1360 AM made the 2006 trip. WCHL actually filed hourly reports from Madison. After the trip, the Chapel Hill Chamber uploaded videos of each

session on a specially designed intercity visit website. To view the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber's intercity visit website, go to www.madison2006.com.

Another important part of allaying allegations of junkets is selecting the destination. "We are careful to pick a destination similar to Chapel Hill, but ten or fifteen years ahead of us," says Nelson. Selecting slightly larger college towns helps strengthen the case for University officials participating in the trip. Nelson added, "I personally believe that we could get value from visiting almost anywhere, but to keep everyone interested we have to pick someplace that serves as a guide for us as we continue to grow." Nelson acknowledged that the host city can't be just any larger college town; it must be home to a top-tier university with active medical and scientific research programs.

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro program is volunteer-intensive to produce. The planning committee for the Madison visit had 19 members and 4 honorary co-chairs: the mayor of Carrboro, the mayor of Chapel Hill, the chairman of the County Commission and the chancellor of UNC-Chapel Hill. Additionally, each session had a volunteer manager who was responsible for assembling the panel and working through content with the speakers. Despite all the volunteer help, Nelson admitted that the program dominates staff time. However, the hours that go into planning are vital because, as he says, "the potential embarrassment factor is extremely high."

“It would take you six months to make the connections you get from a three-day intercity visit.”

*John McKinney
Regional Director
Bell South Telecommunications*

Barbara Jessie-Black, chair of the Parent Teacher Association Thrift Shop and chair of the Foundation for a Sustainable Community, described the intercity visit as "the great equalizer for non-profit organizations." "On the trip," she said, "we are all thrown in as equals." She recounted the story of how she met a former mayor on the 2006 trip when she stopped to help him at the airport self check-in kiosk. "We serve on several boards and committees together, but had never spoken," said Jessie-Black. "After our connection on the intercity visit, we touch base at least once a month."

John McKinney, regional director for BellSouth Telecommunications and a board member of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber, reiterated the networking value. "The intercity visit lets you build relationships in a condensed time frame," he said. "Being out of the office and traveling together creates opportunities to talk with people you would have never met at home." He added, "It would take you six months to make the connections you get from a three-day intercity visit." McKinney, who also participates in the Raleigh Chamber's annual visit, said, "Relationships forged on this trip go beyond just business, they are business and personal. The experience gives you a common bond with other participants." Aaron Nelson succinctly echoed McKinney: "It is hard to throw a brick at someone you've had breakfast with, and on an intercity visit you'll have breakfast with dozens of community leaders."

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President
Chapel Hill-Carrboro (NC)
Chamber of Commerce*

Besides networking opportunities, the 2006 trip to Madison yielded some important short-term wins. Nelson described a number of "a-ha" moments among the delegates. "I could see bulbs lighting up during our

tour of downtown Madison,” he said. “People were realizing that ten-story buildings don’t have to be an eyesore.” Chapel Hill is very proud of its vibrant and charming downtown and is keen to preserve its low skyline. Nelson hopes that trips to other college towns with taller buildings will help mitigate the community’s aversion to developing upward. Another short-term win following the Madison visit was a new strategy for dealing with panhandlers. Both Madison and Chapel Hill have downtown homeless shelters, which contributes to having a large number of panhandlers. To address this challenge, Madison hired a social worker devoted full-time to managing panhandlers. She got to know each one individually and checks on them daily to make sure they are accessing services and seeking help. In the long run, her efforts have reduced the number of people begging on the street, and Chapel Hill hopes to replicate that success with its own dedicated social worker. The delegates also experienced vibrant public art in Madison, particularly the city’s painted cows exhibit. The exposure to public art helped win support for a collection of new bike racks that are both artistic and functional.

But Nelson is careful not to sell the visit as an opportunity to pick up new ideas for immediate implementation. In fact, his visit has no final report and no stated objectives other than to learn. While some sessions are plenary, including the entire group, many are run concurrently so that delegates can learn about those topics that interest them most. The trip wraps up with something that Nelson calls a “Quaker-style” meeting, where microphones are placed around the room and participants are invited to make comments as they are moved to. This unscripted session provides the ultimate opportunity for shared learning.

The Chapel Hill-Carrboro visit is organized around the needs and concerns of the communities’ number one stakeholder, UNC-Chapel Hill. Everything about the program, from picking the destination to outlining the sessions, is done with the University in mind. This level of focus on a single entity would be unhealthy for most communities, but it is essential to creating a successful economic climate for Chapel Hill-Carrboro. Keeping the University at the forefront gives the community leaders an opportunity to come together and learn new ideas, which, in the end, is the primary goal for an intercity visit.

— Ian Scott