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Big green dreams inspire one small town

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CNN Sci-Tech
Sunday, October 20, 2002 Posted: 9:22 AM EDT (1322 GMT)

EUFULA, Alabama (CNN) -- This little Southern town wants to go green in a big way.

Though the 14,000-person town has high unemployment and poverty rates, Eufaula's residents want to use their abundant natural resources to reinvigorate their city's economy and spur harmony with nature.

As part of this "Eufaula 2020" Strategic Plan, everything the city does -- from school issues to economic development to senior citizens concerns -- will take into account the impact on the environment.

About 200 people packed the Eufaula/Barbour County Chamber of Commerce, a refurbished building that used to be the train depot, when the plan was presented to the city council October 10. Young and Old. Black and white. They represented the more than 1000 people who took part in the 17-month project to create the proposal, from formal written surveys to candid suggestions in churches and at the barber shop.

All of this planning already is paying off.

The town recently was named the first "Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary" city in the United States by Audubon International, a non-profit group based in New York that unifies business, government, and environmentalists to protect the environment. The group is not affiliated with the National Audubon Society.

"It brought people together, something that should have been done a long time ago," Eufaula resident Lue Simmons said of the plan. "We need jobs, we need people to immediately embrace this project and let everyone have a voice."

Challenges ahead



Being the first "Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Community" will have its challenges, said Mayor Jay Jaxon, Jr. No other town has a blueprint for his city to follow.

Quarterly meetings will track the progress of the plan. But Jaxon says he's already seen a big benefit: Residents are getting to know each other in ways they never did before.



Turtles and alligators are among the reptiles found in Eufaula's many waterways.

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Residents packed Eufaula's Chamber of Commerce as the city unveiled its strategic growth plan.

"We're trying to get everybody in the community to try to establish what kind of community we want to be, then develop a strategy of how to get there," he said.

The idea for creating a sustainable community got started with a golf course. A few years ago one of Eufaula's courses earned a special designation from Audubon International for conserving water, using fewer pesticides, and preserving habitat for wildlife sharing the space. Since 1992 more than 300 courses have earned this certification.

Neil Yarbrough, who worked on that project, wondered if the entire city could incorporate similar ecological principles. City officials liked the idea. Yarbrough became the city's horticulturist, and co-chaired the 2020 mission with city personnel director Mo Erkins.

Water is key to success

Lake Eufaula and miles of shoreline along the Chattahoochee River is key to the success of the town's plan. The two already make the city a bass fishing paradise.

Audubon's president Ron Dodson, a wildlife biologist, sees the 11,000 acre Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge as a key to developing a clean industry: tourism. Nearly 300 species of birds spend part of their year there, along with 40 different mammals, from deer to bobcats, coyotes and foxes.



Eufaula's downtown is that of a typical small town.

Dodson says residents need to think in more entrepreneurial ways about how to bring clean, sustainable jobs to the region. Bike paths, canoe rentals, camping, bird watching expeditions, bed and breakfasts could all be part of the equation.

Tourism, he says, could focus on recreation, nature, history and black heritage. And Alabama's mild weather might make the city a destination for retirees, especially active people who golf and fish.

Staying ahead of the curve

City leaders realize the environmental awareness must be just one aspect of solving Eufaula's problems.

Though there are still some antebellum mansions left from cotton's heyday, many residents live in dilapidated housing. Some remnants of the old south, like an all white country club, still exist.

Organizers of the 2020 project say citizens realize that if they're ahead of the curve in protecting natural resources, they can make their own decisions before the government steps in.

Joe Summers, director of Economic Development Institute at nearby Auburn University, helped the town formulate the plan. He called Eufaula "a city that is prepared for progress."

"If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there," Summers said. "This is a community that knows where it's going."

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