

CROSSROADS and CONNECTIONS



by
**Joe A. Sumners
and Larry Lee**

Strategies for Rural Alabama



AUBURN UNIVERSITY



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

AUTHORS:

Joe A. Sumners, Ph.D., is director of the Economic Development Institute at Auburn University.
(E-mail: sumneja@auburn.edu, Telephone: 334-844-4704).

Larry Lee is the former executive director of the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, the Covington County Economic Development Commission, and the West Alabama Economic Development Authority.
(E-mail: larrylee33@charter.net, Telephone: 334-741-7635).

See pages 39-41 for author profiles.



No other university in the state has made more of an investment in rural Alabama than Auburn University. Initiatives by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Agricultural Experiment Station, and the University's research and outreach divisions have had much impact on rural communities. Yet dwindling state funding and an ever growing demand for resources cause us to carefully assess our strategies and create new comprehensive strategies to address the perennial economic, educational and quality of life issues facing rural Alabama. Partnership, collaboration and cooperation will be the keys to these efforts. *Crossroads and Connections: Strategies for Rural Alabama* outlines a number of practical new approaches for rural develop-

ment as well as ideas for repositioning our existing efforts for greater effect. Hopefully, this publication will launch a concerted discussion that is very much needed among all stakeholders in rural Alabama. I encourage you to read it and join us in that discussion.

- Ed Richardson

Interim President
Auburn University



In 2003, Joe Sumners and Larry Lee published *Beyond the Interstate: The Crisis in Rural Alabama* (see the report at www.auburn.edu/outreach/edi/beyondtheinterstate.pdf). That publication received much positive attention by state as well as national media and it has been lauded for its challenging redefinition of the problems facing rural communities. Many commissions and studies across the South have addressed rural issues. However, *Beyond the Interstate* was the first to challenge us not to revisit the old root causes of rural economic isolation, but to address the current barriers hindering prosperity in those communities. I next challenged Dr. Sumners and Mr. Lee to

propose solutions to the rural crisis. In *Crossroads and Connections: Strategies for Rural Alabama*, they have delivered on that challenge. Here is a roadmap, if you will, of many crossroads the state could take to shared prosperity. They challenge the conventional thought on economic development and demand of us to create the connections needed among our governmental and educational institutions to address effectively the crisis in rural Alabama. For example, the Governor's newly created Black Belt Action Commission brings together a number of regional stakeholders, including Auburn University, to create solutions for that rural area. We must take full advantage of this effort and create more such opportunities for innovative dialogue. I commend the authors and encourage you to read this report and share it with your community leaders.

- David Wilson

Associate Provost and Vice President for University Outreach
Auburn University

Foreword

We do not know what the rural Alabama of tomorrow will look like. But we do know this -- it will not look like the rural Alabama of today, and it certainly won't look like the rural Alabama of 50 years ago. The rural landscape in Alabama has changed dramatically, but our state's approach to rural development has not. Alabama's rural communities and small towns face a rapidly changing economy and many struggle to adapt – or even survive. Unfortunately, these rural communities are getting little help from their state leaders who either don't notice, don't know what to do, or lack the will to respond. We desperately need policies and actions to address a growing rural crisis and to secure future prosperity for our small towns and rural areas.

In *Beyond the Interstate: the Crisis in Rural Alabama*, we attempted to bring attention to the enormous challenges faced by rural communities throughout Alabama. That report also attempted to explain how our rural communities got into the condition they are in and suggested some general strategies for getting out. We recommended stronger state leadership, commitment, and coordination. At the local level, we stressed that rural communities must learn to join forces and work together, take steps to improve their quality of life, build local leadership capacity, and diversify their development strategies.

Crossroads and Connections: Strategies for Rural Alabama continues this discussion and offers recommendations for a more comprehensive rural development strategy. The central premise of this report is that a successful response to Alabama's rural development challenges will require contributions from all of us. And it will require much more collaboration and partnership at both the state and community levels – what we refer to as building “crossroads and connections.”

Most of the problems that plague rural Alabama are neither new nor unique to our state. Rural communities throughout the South have struggled for decades – and still struggle – to provide jobs, good schools, quality health care, adequate infrastructure, and an improved quality of life. Some states and communities have done a better job of addressing these issues than others. We highlight a few of these stories. Our hope is that this report will help stimulate an aggressive and intelligent response to Alabama's continuing rural crisis.

– Joe A. Sumners and Larry Lee

CROSSROADS AND CONNECTIONS: Strategies for Rural Alabama

Crossroads and Connections

Mention the word “crossroad” and most people will think about a highway intersection – asphalt, stop signs, and turn lanes. Folks traveling south from Birmingham find such a crossroads in the town of Harpersville. Turn left to go to Vincent, right to head toward Wilsonville or plunge straight ahead for Childersburg. This crossroad is home to a used car lot, an auto repair shop, an auto parts store, an antique store, two fast-food restaurants, a gas station, and a tax preparation office. It is the center of commerce for this small town, one of hundreds of such crossroads scattered throughout Alabama – places ripe with activity and opportunity.

Rural Alabama needs more of these crossroads (and the highway infrastructure that connects there). But rural Alabama desperately needs other types of crossroads. Places that give people a chance to make connections – to think, talk, and work together. Sadly, a universal observation by those of us who work in economic and community development – or almost any other field – is how rarely we see coordinated effort.

There are many excellent people, programs, and projects at both the state and community levels. But far too often individuals and organizations work independently rather than in concert with one another. We are accustomed to working on the equivalent of one-way streets.

We need more crossroads. And we need to strengthen rural Alabama’s existing crossroads – churches, schools, civic clubs, government boards,

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and chambers of commerce. More than this, we need to build “mega-crossroads” where leaders from all of these groups and institutions can come together to address community problems. Bringing prosperity to rural Alabama will require that all of the many players in community and economic development – across the state and in each community – adopt a “declaration of interdependence.”

Crisis in Rural Alabama

In *Beyond the Interstate: The Crisis in Rural Alabama*, we described how many of Alabama’s rural¹ communities are struggling for survival. They still are. In fact, for many rural communities conditions are worse than ever. Of the state’s 15 counties with the highest percent population over 65 years of age, 14 are rural. Of the 12 counties with double-digit unemployment, all are rural. Of the 20 counties with the lowest household incomes, all are rural. Of the 20 counties with the lowest percentage of high school graduates, all are rural.

Bringing prosperity to rural Alabama will require that all of the many players in community and economic development – across the state and in each community – adopt a “declaration of interdependence.”



During the decade of the 1990s, as people were flocking to counties like Shelby (44% population growth), Baldwin (43%), Elmore (34%), and Lee (32%), ten rural counties actually lost population. Thirty-one of Alabama's 45 rural counties experienced population growth below the state average.

To better illustrate economic conditions throughout Alabama, we put together a composite ranking of counties based on population growth, household income, educational attainment, and employment (see page 44). As expected, this Index of Economic Vitality reveals a huge disparity between rural and metro Alabama. The top 12 counties on the Index are metro. The bottom 28 counties are rural; 37 of the bottom 38 are rural.

There is a real crisis in many parts of rural Alabama. Changes in the national and regional economies have hit our rural areas like a spring tornado. Farms and factories that once sustained rural communities and economies are gone forever.

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Farewell to Farm and Factory

Once the hallmark of rural enterprise, the small “family farm” is rapidly disappearing. In 1950, Alabama was home to 220,000 farms. In 2000, there were only 47,000. In that 50 year period Alabama's farm acreage dropped from 213 million to 90 million acres. The family farms that once dotted the Alabama countryside have given way to a few large, integrated agricultural corporations.

The typical small farmer now derives a majority of his income off the farm. Even larger farms usually have at least one family member with a job “in town” to provide access to medical and other benefits. The slow death of family farming has had devastating effects on Alabama's rural communities.

With the loss of farm income, rural communities witnessed the exodus of the grain dealers, gins, restaurants, insurance companies, feed stores, chemical companies, banks and other businesses that were the backbone of their local economies. Gone also were tax revenues that funded rural schools, hospitals, highways, libraries, and all the other facets of life needed for a healthy community.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas



| | Metro Alabama | Rural Alabama |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Population (average county) | 143,494 | 28,683 |
| 2. Median Household Income | \$36,227 | \$27,281 |
| 3. Population growth, 1990-2000 | 16% | 6% |
| 4. Adults age 25-64 with a HS diploma | 79% | 67% |
| 5. Adults age 25-64 with a BA degree or more | 23% | 11% |
| 6. % below poverty | 15% | 21% |
| 7. Job growth 1990-2000 | 36% | 14% |
| 8. Unemployment | 5% | 8% |



Instead of exporting cotton, corn, or soybeans, rural communities now export their young people – their future. Rural Alabama has watched many of its brightest young people leave for good, returning only for holidays and family reunions.

Many rural economies survived for a time as textile mills and other low-wage, non-durable manufacturing provided jobs for rural residents. But the U.S. manufacturing economy that sustained rural economies is in rapid decline due to its inability to compete with the low labor costs in developing countries. This decline is particularly rapid in the textile and apparel sectors that rural Alabama communities have most depended on.

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Alabama's rural communities – already victims of the collapse of the rural farm economy – now also suffer from the demise of the manufacturing economy that replaced it.

Information from the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations shows we lost 56,500 manufacturing jobs from 1990 to 2002. 54,900 (97%) of these jobs were in nondurable goods and 41,200 were in apparel manufacturing alone. So 73% of all the manufacturing job loss was in one sector. Vacant buildings that once housed sewing plants are about as common in rural Alabama as kudzu.

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Alabama's Response to Rural Crisis

Since 1994, three commissions have identified strategies and goals for Alabama's overall economic development. The first was *Vision Alabama*, an effort coordinated by the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama and the Economic Development Association of Alabama. The second was the *Alabama Commerce Commission* and the third was *The Governor's Task Force on the Development of Economically Distressed Counties*. While the first two reports included recommendations that pertained to rural needs (*Vision Alabama*: consider regional marketing efforts; *Commerce Commission*: make regional economic development the state's No. 1 priority), the third dealt almost exclusively with rural concerns.

The *Alabama Commerce Commission* reported in 2000 that there are ...“two Alabamas, one urban and one rural. The first is enjoying relative success . . . the second, for the most part, is making little or no progress and continues to keep Alabama from being recognized as a successful competitor.” The report of the *Governor's Task Force on the Development of Economically*

Distressed Counties (February 2001) echoed this finding. In its letter to Governor Don Siegelman, the task force said,

In most of the state's urban centers and some predominantly rural areas, economic activity is tracking or exceeding the overall economic trends in the United States. The majority of the people living in these areas are enjoying high levels of employment and a rising standard of living.

On the other hand, in the seventeen "distressed counties" (and some other predominantly rural areas of the state), the opposite is the case. In these counties economic activity is stagnant or declining. Low wage jobs are disappearing as employers move unskilled jobs offshore to less developed countries. This is particularly true in the textile industry. Farmers are struggling to make a living on the land, and family farms that have been worked for generations are being abandoned. Unemployment rates are very high, and the best and brightest young people are leaving to build a life elsewhere.

Moreover, the basic physical and social infrastructure in the distressed counties is deteriorating. Schools, roads and bridges need to be repaired or upgraded. The quality and availability of health care facilities are substandard in many areas. A distressingly high proportion of children are living in poverty, and levels of illiteracy, school dropouts, teen-age pregnancy and infant mortality are alarmingly high.

Clearly, a plan of action must be developed to reverse these trends.

Unfortunately, there has been more analysis and talk than action in addressing rural concerns. And many rural leaders feel they don't have a seat at the table. They often feel ignored and abandoned. Of the 23 members of Governor Bob Riley's Commission on Existing Industries, only three call rural Alabama home. Leadership Alabama is now in its 14th year. But of the program's nearly 700 participants, only 15% have come from rural counties, while 63% have come from Madison, Jefferson, Montgomery, and Mobile counties alone.

Maybe this feeling of neglect helps explain why Amendment One (September 2003) fared so poorly in rural counties. Why send more money to Montgomery if you're getting so little in return?

Other States Address Rural Concerns

Alabama is far behind other southern states when it comes to responding to rural needs. Over the past decade, the South has seen the creation of several regional and statewide nonprofit rural development institutions, such as the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, the Foundation for the Mid South, and Southern Development Bankcorporation. These organizations provide funding, research, innovative ideas, and management capacity for ambitious rural development efforts in their states and regions.

In 2001, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Office of Rural and Community Affairs (TORCA). TORCA is assigned responsibility for developing a rural policy for the state of Texas, working with other state agencies to improve all state programs affecting rural areas, developing programs to improve communities' rural leadership capacity, and conducting research to find more effective ways to assist rural communities.

We only have to look east across the Chattahoochee River to see what can be done.

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Alabama is far behind other southern states when it comes to responding to rural needs.

The State of Georgia has established a number of programs to help rural counties and communities help themselves.

Georgia's Rural Development Council is the state's foremost advocate for rural issues. Its mission statement says, "The Georgia Rural Development Council advocates for rural Georgia, champions new development opportunities and partners with public and private initiatives to strengthen communities." The Council was begun in 1999 and is housed in the state's Department of Community Affairs. Governor Sonny Perdue (a native of rural south Georgia) chairs the council. A 25-member board, whose members come from throughout the state, governs the Council.

The OneGeorgia Authority is aimed toward helping more distressed counties. The authority has two major programs: EDGE, which is a fund used to "close deals" when a company is considering Georgia for either a relocation or a new facility, and EQUITY, which provides competitive grant/low interest loan funds to finance rural infrastructure. A local economic development official who formerly worked in Alabama and today works in Georgia says, "It's great knowing OneGeorgia is there to get you over the hump with a project. It's a lot different than in Alabama."

The Georgia Rural Economic Development Center (GREDC) was started in 2000 and is housed at East Georgia College in Swainsboro. Since many rural communities do not have the resources to conduct strong economic development programs, small grants from GREDC are often the catalysts to get effective, grassroots efforts moving and provide the foundation for larger grants. The center has assisted more than 110 entrepreneurs in 31 counties. Fifty of these have created more than 435 jobs.

The Georgia Academy for Economic Development, created in 1993, conducts economic development education programs for elected officials and community leaders. Workshops are held annually in each of the state's 11 rural regions. The program offers leadership training and an in-depth review of regional economic development opportunities and solutions.

Why is Georgia devoting this much attention to rural development? Interestingly enough, Atlanta may be the answer. "Atlanta is our great sucking sound," says one state official. "They're sucking up dollars, resources, human capital. Columbus is fighting with them about water. Moratoriums on sewage construction are not uncommon. Staying ahead of the growth is impossible. So it makes a lot of sense to help rural Georgia grow and hopefully take some of the pressure off Atlanta. It's a whole lot cheaper to four-lane a highway in south Georgia than to add another lane to an overcrowded freeway in Fulton County."

Statewide Strategy for Rural Development

Georgia and other southern states are providing emphasis and coordination for rural development that is sorely lacking in Alabama. We clearly have a lot of catching up to do.

A number of different government agencies have pieces of the rural development puzzle – USDA Rural Development, Small Business Administration, Economic Development Administration, Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, Alabama Development Office, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, and Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. Other pieces are found at universities, two-year colleges, the Alabama Association of Regional Councils and regional planning agencies, the Cooperative Extension System, non-profit agencies, major utility companies, trade associations, local governments, chambers of commerce, small business development centers, and elsewhere. It's well past time to put the pieces together. A lack of coordina-

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tion and probably even a lack of real understanding of the problems lead to duplication, excessive concern about “turf” protection, and waste of limited resources.

That’s why a statewide strategy for rural development should center on building crossroads and strengthening connections. The strategy should begin with seven primary objectives:

- 1) Creating an Alabama Rural Development Council;
- 2) Creating a position/office in state government that focuses exclusively on rural development;
- 3) Implementing a regional economic development strategy and program;
- 4) Supporting the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program;
- 5) Upgrading the rural technology infrastructure;
- 6) Supporting Interstate highway expansion in rural Alabama; and
- 7) Creating a comprehensive strategy for retraining displaced rural workers.

***RECOMMENDATION 1:
Create an Alabama Rural Development Council.***

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP) establishes rural development councils in states that want them. The primary purpose of the state council is to improve cooperation and collaboration on rural issues across program and governmental boundaries. The state council is responsible for coordinating,

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and serving as a resource to, all entities within the state with an interest in rural development. Grassroots participation fuels the work of the state council, and membership is open to all entities that wish to participate.

To date, 40 states, including most southern states, have established state rural development councils. Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina have Rural Development Councils. Alabama does not.

An Alabama Rural Development Council (ARDC) would serve as the state’s primary rural development crossroad – connecting all the many players who hold pieces of the rural development puzzle. It would convene regular meetings of all interested rural entities and act as a full-time advocate for the needs of rural Alabama. It would increase accountability and reduce duplication of efforts. Once an ARDC is created, a number of items should appear on its initial “to-do” list. For example the ARDC could:

- *Develop a “memorandum of understanding” with all entities currently involved in Alabama’s rural development. (There should be clear communication about who is doing what and what their goals are.)*
- *Create an inventory of existing national and state resources that support rural development.*
- *Support the creation of a foundation(s) that provides loans and grants to finance rural initiatives.*





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RECOMMENDATION 2:
Create a position/office in state government that focuses exclusively on rural development.

On December 30, 2003, Governor Bob Riley created the Alabama Office of Workforce Development to consolidate state workforce development programs into a single office. In announcing the change, Governor Riley said,

Workforce training is a key component of our state's economic success. Yet under our current system, there is no coordinating body organizing these efforts or holding agencies accountable for results. Individuals and companies face a myriad number of agencies when seeking assistance.²

Prior to this change, Alabama had seven different state agencies administering federal workforce development funds. Alabama was one of only seven states that did not combine core workforce development activities into a single state agency. In essence, the governor is attempting to convert the one-way streets of workforce development into a crossroad.

Similar coordination is needed for rural development. Alabama's rural communities face a crisis that demands the state's full attention and effort. There should be at least one person in state government who goes to bed at night and wakes up in the morning thinking about improving life in Alabama's rural communities.

This is the very least we can do. South Carolina has a Community and Rural Development Division within its Commerce Department and North Carolina's Rural Economic Development Center has more employees (44) than the entire Alabama Development Office.

Whether this rural development office is located within ADECA, ADO or elsewhere, there should be a close working relationship among these and other state agencies, the ACE Board of Directors, and the new Alabama Rural Development Council. One option for managing rural initiatives is for the state to create a new position within ADO or ADECA of Assistant Director for Rural Affairs.

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RECOMMENDATION 3:
Implement a regional economic and community development strategy and program.

For Alabama to approach its full economic potential, we must begin to adopt more regional philosophies and strategies, something common in most states. Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia all use regional efforts.

North Carolina is divided into seven regions and the state has a larger budget for these regional programs than we have for the entire Alabama Development Office. One of these regional programs is known as AdvantageWest-North Carolina

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and covers the 23 rural counties in the western end of the state. It is a non-profit public-private partnership that markets the entire region, works with existing business, and is also involved in workforce development, entrepreneurial development, and tourism. Forty-one corporate sponsors provide financial support.

Georgia began a regional approach to rural development in 1998. The state is divided into 12 regions, 11 of them outside Atlanta. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs (GDCA) and the Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism (GDITT) each assign two staff members to each region. In nine of the regions, state agency staffs work side-by-side with additional staff from Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia. Each region also has a 21-member Regional Advisory Council. The total budget for the effort exceeds \$3 million.

Tom Croteau oversees the regional program for GDITT. According to Croteau, “The regional approach takes advantage of economies of scale, pools resources and tackles common issues across county lines. We needed to bring state government closer to our rural counties and communities. Many smaller places had a hard time figuring out



what state resources were available, who could provide what kind of assistance, and how they might work with other folks to tackle a common problem. This is where we’re helping.”

Alabama regions?

The number one priority of the *Alabama Commerce Commission* was creating a regional approach to economic development. Dr. Thomas Meredith, then Chancellor of the University of Alabama System and vice-chairman of the *Commerce Commission*, spearheaded this effort in 2001. However, the initiative was eventually abandoned, in part due to the objections of existing agencies.

The Alabama Development Office tried another regional approach in 2002. ADO divided the state into eight economic development regions and helped create strategic plans for each. While ADO has not abandoned these plans, momentum for plan implementation has been slowed by ADO budget cuts.

With the current meager level of funding for ADO, implementation of a regional economic development program will require that the state partner with existing entities. One arrangement that makes sense is utilizing the resources of the existing 12 regional planning and development councils. The regional councils already provide planning, development, grant, and other assistance in rural communities all over the state. In fact, the eight economic development regions used for the 2002 planning process were based on the regional planning and development district boundaries. (The three northern regions were combined into one region and the two Montgomery area regions were combined with the Lee-Russell region to form a single economic development district).³

Regardless of how regions are defined, the regional councils could ensure that the planning and economic development needs of all communities in the region – urban and rural – are addressed. An important role would be to facilitate communication, coordination, and collaboration among all communities within the region – pulling together local governments, employers, universities

and community colleges, economic development organizations, utility companies, and others. Each council has the potential to serve as a “mega-crossroad” for the region’s economic development stakeholders.

The state needs to establish clear performance expectations for regional councils and make sure that each council maintains staffing sufficient to meet the region’s planning and economic development needs.

State support for distressed rural regions

In South Carolina, every rural county is assigned someone from the state’s Community and Rural Development office to help local leaders understand the very basic concepts of community and economic development and to provide advice and assistance. Alabama needs a similar approach.

ADO, ADECA, or both, should assign a staff person to each of the state’s economic development regions. Although a comprehensive statewide regional effort may not be feasible in the short-term, many rural areas desperately need this type of “hands-on” assistance right now.

Each December since 2001, counties have been ranked by the Department of Industrial Relations based on population changes, unemployment, and per capita income. The 23 lowest ranking counties on these criteria are eligible to offer a special tax incentive for business recruitment. Since this program’s inception, 18 counties have made the list every year: Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Conecuh, Coosa, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Lowndes, Marion, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Washington, Wilcox and Winston. Six of these counties have no economic developer and no economic development program. The regions containing these 18 distressed counties would be an excellent starting point for targeted state assistance.

State economic incentives and grants

The state has something all local communities want – incentives and grant monies to support

local development projects. So one sensible strategy for encouraging regionalism would be to revise economic incentive and grant programs to favor multi-jurisdiction projects.

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs has a Regional Assistance Program that offers grants of up to \$500,000 for such things as assistance with industrial parks and marketing programs – but only if the application is for two or more counties. South Carolina created an Infrastructure Authority that funds only multi-county projects.



Wiregrass Leadership Institute

The Wiregrass Leadership Institute (WLI) was one of the state’s best models of regional cooperation. WLI was created by the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission before becoming a stand-alone non-profit. The program began in 1990 and graduated its last class in 2000. It originally involved seven counties and later expanded to nine. Classes ran for nine months and averaged 40 participants from throughout the region. The program included an opening retreat and monthly meetings that rotated from county to county. Participants not only learned more about the region, but also received training in such things as team building and collaborative leadership.

WLI ran for 11 years, with more than 350 participants. In all, about \$500,000 in both in-kind and cash contributions and grants supported this effort. WLI received a \$120,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation to conduct regional roundtables about economic development, education and quality of life. These sessions attracted as many as 400 people from across the region. The Kettering Foundation provided substantial support and Dr. David Mathews, president of the foundation, called the program “one of the best in the nation.”

RECOMMENDATION 4: **Support the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) Program.**

As already noted, there are many agencies and organizations that provide assistance to Alabama’s cities and towns in the areas of community and economic development – utility companies, universities, regional planning commissions, state agencies, and others. As representatives of these entities regularly crossed paths with one another in Alabama communities, some decided it might make sense to think about working together. After three years of discussion and planning, the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) was created in 2003 as a non-profit corporation. It utilizes the collective expertise of its partner organizations to assist Alabama’s smaller communities as they attempt to become “Alabama Communities of Excellence.”

ACE is currently the state’s best model of cooperative effort for economic and community development. ACE partners include both public and private organizations. The ACE Board of Directors includes representatives from:

- Alabama Association of Regional Councils
- Alabama Cooperative Extension System
- Alabama Development Office
- Alabama Gas Corporation
- Alabama Historical Commission
- Alabama Municipal Electric Association
- Alabama Power Company
- Alabama Southern Rural Access Program
- Auburn University Economic Development Institute
- Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama
- Reading Alabama, Inc.
- Regions Financial Corporation

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- Tennessee Valley Authority
- United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development
- University of Alabama Center for Economic Development

Other partners include Auburn University’s Truman Pierce Institute and the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. Collectively these organizations represent a unique and powerful partnership. They possess the expertise, public and private resources, and commitment to help address many community development needs in the selected ACE communities.

The ACE program focuses on assisting Alabama communities with populations between 2,000 and 12,000. ACE communities are guided through three stages of assistance, including an inventory of community assets (phase I); creation of a leadership development program and strategic plan (phase II); and help with comprehensive planning, industrial attraction and retention, commercial and business development, tourism, education enhancement, health and human services, recreation, and general quality of life improvements (phase III). Upon completion of the third phase, the community is declared an Alabama Community of Excellence.

During the spring of 2003, the ACE Board selected eight Alabama communities as initial ACE program participants: Brewton, Demopolis, Guin, Guntersville, Haleyville, Monroeville, Wetumpka, and Valley. Each year, other Alabama communities will have opportunities to participate in the ACE program. Not only will the ACE program have a positive impact in the selected communities, it will create new standards of excellence that all Alabama communities may strive for (see page 42).

ACE provides an important crossroads for the many agencies and organizations that provide assistance to Alabama’s rural cities and towns.

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The ACE partner organizations already see tremendous benefits from the collaboration. Connections among the partners have created a synergy and strength that none of organizations – acting alone – could have realized.

ACE deserves the full support of state leaders. It currently operates with a part-time coordinator and depends for survival on the voluntary contributions of its partner organizations. With additional resources, ACE could do much more.

***RECOMMENDATION 5:
Upgrade the rural technology infrastructure.***

The “connections” we have discussed so far have been person-to-person. But today’s knowledge-based economy requires that rural areas also be connected to the outside world via a modern telecommunications network. The electronic information highway has joined asphalt-and-concrete highways as a core infrastructure. For many companies and industries, transportation of data, images, voices, and sound is at least as important, if not more so, than the transportation of goods by highway, rail, and air. If rural Alabama is to compete in the new knowledge economy, we must boost investment in building and upgrading the rural telecommunications infrastructure.

Advances in telecommunication technology have the potential to overcome one of the biggest barriers to rural participation in the global economy – its isolation. With the growth of the Internet and the introduction of broadband technology⁴, distance is becoming much less of a barrier to economic development in rural communities. With a well-planned infrastructure for broadband service, many business activities that require exchanges of large amounts of data, such as



telemedicine and e-commerce, now become feasible for rural communities.

Businesses that rely on these advanced technologies also tend to pay the highest wages. Unfortunately, rural areas have been mostly unsuccessful in attracting the cutting edge industries – computers, medicine, spacecraft, biotechnology, etc. The failure of non-metro areas to fully participate in the knowledge economy is one reason for the growing wage gap between rural and metro jobs. (The average rural job pays only 69 percent of the average metro job).⁵ Until rural areas are able to bridge the “digital divide,” rural wages will continue to lag behind the wages of their metro neighbors.

If rural Alabama is to compete in the new knowledge economy, we must boost investment in building and upgrading the rural telecommunications infrastructure.

The state must take the lead in educating and assisting rural decision-makers as they attempt to define their needs and craft appropriate technology strategies. We need a statewide plan for meeting minimum telecommunications needs. The state should also provide financial incentives for local governments wishing to pursue technological improvements and to encourage technology companies to locate in rural areas.



From Andalusia to anywhere

An example of the importance of global communications is found at Andalusia’s Henderson Sewing Machine Company. When James Henderson started this company in 1968, all of his customers were within a half-day drive. By 1976, when son Frank joined the company, Henderson Sewing Machine had 125 customers in Alabama and one part-time employee. At that time, most of their sales were new machines going to nearby apparel operations.

But as the apparel business changed and went offshore, so did the company. Today they have over 4,400 customers in 28 countries around the globe, including Canada, Europe, Central and South America, and the Far East. And the Internet makes it all happen. A customer can access the company’s web site from anywhere in the world

and order from a product line of more than 150,000 items. Today sales are 87% foreign, only 13% domestic. They have 36 employees, some of them in Central America and the Far East.

“Telecommunications allows us to be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” says Frank Henderson. “As the industry changed, so did we. But we could not do what we do from Andalusia without being able to communicate around the world.”

RECOMMENDATION 6: Support Interstate highway expansions in rural Alabama.

Lack of an adequate transportation infrastructure is a major obstacle to development in many parts of rural Alabama – especially in the western part of the state. An expanded highway system would allow rural Alabama to better connect with the outside world.

Northwest Alabama should greatly benefit from the completion of “Corridor X” – the 260-mile project that will expand U.S. Highway 78 to four lanes to better connect Birmingham to Memphis. Congress has already approved the designation of this roadway as Interstate 22. The designation will allow economic development officials to pursue manufacturing companies that require interstate access, along with the businesses that open on or near interstate access ramps. Construction should be complete in a few years. Rural west Alabama would benefit similarly from an extension of I-85 from Montgomery to Meridian, Mississippi and a north-south highway corridor in west Alabama.

Achieving this goal is certainly further from the grasp of state and local officials than other recommendations. Here state and local officials must garner the support of Alabama’s senators and representatives in Washington.

An expanded highway system would allow rural Alabama to better connect with the outside world.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:
Create a comprehensive strategy for retraining displaced rural workers.**

The first concern of any company decision-maker who considers relocating one of their facilities is labor – not taxes, not incentives, not the price of property. The questions they ask are, “How trainable is your work force? Will I have an adequate pool of quality applicants? What are their base skills? Do they know how to get to work on time? Are they dependable?”

So as we talk about “connections,” we can’t overlook the need to “connect” rural workers with the skills they need to compete in today’s rapidly changing job market. Leaders from the new Office for Workforce Development, the Office of Postsecondary Education, ADO, ADECA, and Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) must work together to devise a comprehensive strategy for retraining and upgrading workers who have lost jobs or fallen behind in their skills. We must make sure that our rural workforce is prepared for the higher-skilled jobs needed for the new high-tech, information-driven economy.

Strategies for Rural Communities

State level support and coordination for rural development is desperately needed and regional partnerships are essential. But the real work of rural development must take place within each individual community. Successful rural communities don’t wait around for someone else to solve their problems. They get to work. And they work together.

So if our rural areas are to survive and prosper, all parts of the community must develop an engrained habit of working together. Communities must work to strengthen the connections among

citizens, organizations, and institutions. This is the single most important strategy for changing rural Alabama for the better.

Too often state and local leaders have focused almost entirely on industrial recruitment as the solution to the problems in our rural areas. But restoring health to struggling rural communities will require much, much more than just enticing a company to open a new plant in the city industrial park. Communities are not just industrial sites and spec buildings; they are places to eat and places to play and places to go to the doctor and places to get a good education and places to shop.

While adding new and better-paying jobs is crucial to community vitality, economic development is

not just about jobs. Economic development is much more than that. It is the process by which a community improves the standard of living and quality of life of its residents. Industry recruiters have an important role to play in

the economic development of their community. But so do the local Head Start coordinator, the high school principal, the hospital administrator, the plant manager, the city beautification council, the League of Women Voters, the church benevolence committee, and the citizen who organizes a town meeting.

If we are to build vital rural economies, we must first build strong communities. And strong communities are characterized by strong and diverse leadership, engaged citizens, effective schools, quality medical care, good roads and clean water,

So as we talk about “connections,” we can’t overlook the need to “connect” rural workers with the skills they need to compete in today’s rapidly changing job market.

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If we are to build vital rural economies, we must first build strong communities.

among other things.⁶ A successful response to our rural challenges will require attention to all of these community assets, which are both a by-product of positive economic performance and a foundation for future prosperity.

The development strategy within each rural community should include the following five objectives:

- 1) Developing a strong and diverse cadre of community leaders;
- 2) Creating and carrying out a strategic plan;
- 3) Joining with other jurisdictions to maximize economic resources;
- 4) Embracing innovative economic development strategies; and
- 5) Providing a better quality of life for residents. In successful rural communities you inevitably find leadership, planning, partnerships, creativity, and a good quality of life.

***RECOMMENDATION 1:
Develop strong and diverse community leadership that is inclusive, collaborative, and connected.***

Successful communities all over the United States understand the importance of an expansive view of community leadership. The traditional notion of the community leader – often a mayor – as chief community problem-solver is giving way to a new, more dynamic model of the community leader as catalyst, connector, and consensus-builder.⁷

Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, in summarizing the findings of the Foundation’s research on community politics, says:

What stands out in the high-achieving community is not so much the characteristics of the leaders as their number, their location and, most of all, the way they interact with other citizens. The high-achieving community had ten times more people providing leadership than communities of comparable size. This [high-

achieving] community is “leaderful”; that is, nearly everyone provides some measure of initiative. And its leaders function not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation.⁸

This emerging leadership model recognizes that leadership is not confined to elected officials, business leaders, and those with specific titles. It recognizes that a community cannot do its work with just a few people. Rather, successful leadership requires mobilizing the talents of every segment of the community. This model recognizes that everyone has something to offer – individual knowledge, perspectives, and talent. In other words, today’s successful communities tend to be full of leaders.

The following stories from Tupelo, Uniontown, Demopolis, Bullock County, and Perry County illustrate how citizen leaders can take the lead in turning around struggling communities.

Tupelo, Mississippi

Vaughn Grisham, in a study of Tupelo, Mississippi, demonstrates how that community’s dynamic civic life provided the foundation for an economic revival during the past half century.⁹ During that period, Tupelo and Lee County Mississippi rose from the depths of poverty to become a model for community and economic development. In 1940, Lee County was one of the poorest counties in the nation. The county’s largest employer, a garment factory, had closed in 1937 after a bitter labor strike. That event deeply divided Tupelo and left a residue of anger and mistrust between the town’s workers and its leaders.

One person, George McLean, the editor of the Tupelo Dailey Journal, provided the leadership that sparked the evolutionary transformation of Tupelo. He wrote editorials, cajoled, and eventually convinced local businessmen and farmers that, if they worked together, Tupelo and Lee County

Successful leadership requires mobilizing the talents of every segment of the community... today’s successful communities tend to be full of leaders.

could become much more than it was. This is typical of successful community development efforts. In the early stages of community development there is often a champion, or catalyst, who is completely dedicated and who pushes the effort forward. In Tupelo, George McLean was that person. But McLean understood that even the best ideas would fail if they were not connected to a larger body of participants.

First, McLean convinced local businessmen that it was in their interests to help the region's farmers. He reasoned that the more prosperous the farmers, the more money they could spend in Tupelo stores. Tupelo's businessmen decided to form a cooperative, with local citizens investing money to create a dairy industry. The dramatic success of the dairy program reinvigorated Tupelo. It erased any doubts that a grassroots economic development project could work.

In 1946, Tupelo created a series of "rural community development councils" (RCDC's) to provide a structure for involving farmers in the development of their own communities. The RCDC's worked much like New England town meetings – they provided a forum where members of the communities in northeastern Mississippi could come together and decide upon their priorities and strategies.

Tupelo leaders next decided the city needed a new organization to be the community's vehicle for investing in itself on a continuing basis. In 1948, eighty-eight of Tupelo's leaders formed the Community Development Foundation (CDF). Anyone willing to pay the dues – which varied according to one's income – could join. The CDF was built on the philosophy that the citizens of Tupelo were responsible for creating their own future. However, the CDF also recognized from the beginning that neither it nor the community as a whole held all the answers. They consistently sought outside expert advice and assistance when needed.

From its inception, the CDF has epitomized a broad-based approach to community development. Not only is this organization heavily involved in the traditional economic development activities of recruitment, retention and expansion of business

and industry, but in many other activities as well. For instance, the CDF operates the Chamber of Commerce and is also involved in workforce development, education enhancements, legislative action, and a community leadership institute.

This network of community organizations provided ordinary citizens with mechanisms for influencing community decisions. With each new success, the community has looked to take on the next challenge.

Today, Lee County Mississippi is the second-wealthiest county in the state. It is home to more than 200 highly diversified manufacturers and is an industrial and commercial hub for northeast Mississippi. The county's poverty rate is approximately one-half the national average. The school system has received numerous awards and Tupelo has twice been named one of ten All-American cities by the National Civic League.

The Tupelo experience shows that as the attitudes of people within the community change, the attitudes of people outside the community also change. Tupelo, for example, has been able to attract new business and industry because people see it as a place worth investing in. Economic development came about because community development – the ability of citizens to work together on issues of common concern – made it possible.

The Tupelo story has already inspired leaders in one Alabama county.¹⁰ Following a visit to Tupelo in 2002, Clarke County officials decided to create their own community foundation. The Clarke County Community Development Foundation is structured to be a catalyst for economic growth in the region and aims to work closely with existing organizations. However, the mission of the CDF

Economic development came about because community development – the ability of citizens to work together on issues of common concern – made it possible.

isn't just economic development. It is focused on a broader improvement of the quality of life for all Clarke County citizens. Membership in the CDF is open to anyone in the county who wants to join – individual citizens, garden and civic clubs, government agencies, retail businesses, and industrial manufacturers. The amount invested equals the number of votes on foundation decisions.



*Uniontown*¹¹

Uniontown, a community of about 3,500, is located in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt, named for a deposit of dark, fertile soil extending from Mississippi's border through the heart of Alabama. This region, once the backbone of the state's agricultural economy, is now plagued by pervasive poverty and economic stagnation. An area of urgent need, the region faces declining population, inadequate health care, substandard schools, and weak business development. Uniontown is one of the poorest of the many poor communities in the Alabama Black Belt.

Uniontown has had several aggressive mayors who tried to bring assistance to the community through federal grants and the help of outside experts, including those from Auburn University and the University of Alabama. Citizens, however, had been mostly inactive. The few citizens who attended public meetings often took a passive role and appeared reluctant to express their viewpoints in front of others. They tended to look to a leader - - the mayor or the outside experts – for answers to community problems.

In fall 2000, Auburn University's Economic Development Institute began an outreach project in Uniontown that tried a different approach. The focus was less explicitly on problem solving and much more on facilitating dialogue, listening, and responding to the needs of Uniontown citizens as they defined them. Instead of working through the city's mayor, the Auburn team decided to actively engage ordinary citizens.

To do this, Auburn recruited about twenty-five individuals representing all segments of the community to participate in a focus group. This bi-racial group of citizens representing a wide range of age groups, income levels, and occupations continues to meet on a bi-weekly basis. In order to create a sense of shared identity, the citizens gave their group the name "Uniontown Cares."

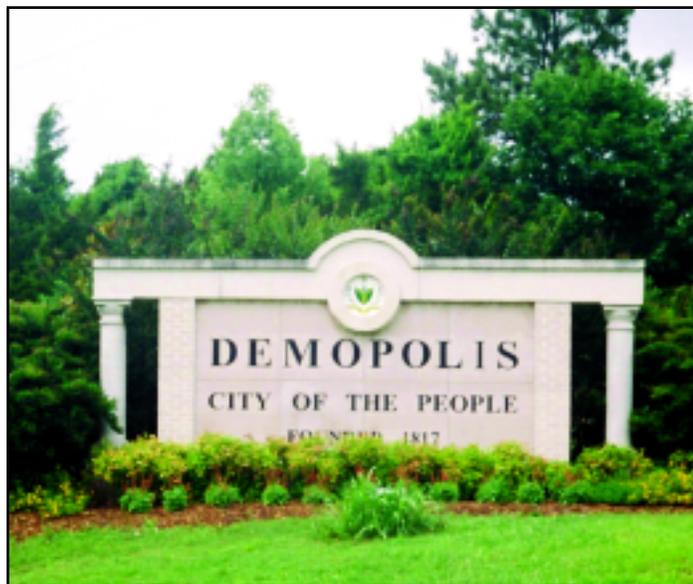
Since the creation of *Uniontown Cares*, citizens have taken advantage of new public space to talk about community issues in a deliberative way, identify and take ownership of community problems, and connect with one another and with their community. As members of the Uniontown community discussed local problems, they began to realize their capacity for doing something about them. Talk was turned into action. And these actions led to results – clean-ups of parks and cemeteries, creation of an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, creation of an adopt-a-park program, among many other successes.

Uniontown Cares is making a difference and others in the community are beginning to notice. More and more members of the community have joined the group. In fact, the group has outgrown their original city hall meeting room and has moved to a new public library – which *Uniontown Cares* members helped renovate and stock with new books and computers.

As members of the Uniontown community discussed local problems, they began to realize their capacity for doing something about them. Talk was turned into action. And these actions led to results.

The enormous problems of the Alabama Black Belt remain. But for the people participating in *Uniontown Cares*, things are looking better. They see themselves as citizens instead of victims, as public actors instead of clients of services. They see that they can control many things about their lives and community. They are creating small ripples of hope in a community where hope has been in short supply.

A lesson from the Uniontown experience is that government alone cannot solve the types of problems facing many of our state's economically challenged communities. Dealing with these problems requires a collaborative approach by government, citizens, other community institutions, and external resources. Relying solely on government – or outside experts – can relegate people to the sidelines and stifle the community-building process.



Demopolis

Demopolis, Alabama is a community that has seemed to avoid many of the problems of its Black Belt neighbors. In the late 1960s, when Alabama schools finally desegregated, Demopolis leaders – white and black – made the decision to work together to support an integrated city school system. In many other Black Belt communities, whites almost completely abandoned public schools, choosing instead to create a dual school

A lesson from the Uniontown experience is that government alone cannot solve the types of problems facing many of our state's economically challenged communities.

system through the creation of all-white private academies. Today, nearly every Alabama Black Belt community maintains a segregated school system, with blacks attending public schools and whites attending private academies.

But not Demopolis. Demopolis citizens are very proud of their schools and remain committed to supporting a racially diverse public school system. Not coincidentally, Demopolis is a socially and economically vibrant community and one of eight Alabama communities selected to participate in the Alabama Communities of Excellence program. While other Black Belt communities were coming apart, the Demopolis community chose to come together – and that made all the difference.

Returning to the Tupelo story, it is noteworthy that while most of the state of Mississippi was torn apart by racial division during the struggle for civil rights, the Tupelo community held together. As early as 1961, Tupelo's recreation department began refusing to allow any of the sports teams it sponsored to compete against communities that maintained segregationist policies. In 1965, Tupelo became the second community in the state to sign a school anti-discrimination agreement and desegregated its schools that fall without incident.

Demopolis and Tupelo illustrate that economic progress requires the resources of the “whole” community. Communities that are divided – racially, politically, or socially – face near insurmountable barriers to economic advancement. Instead of crossroads and connections, these communities build “one-way streets” and “dead-ends.”

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Bullock County

Prairie Street runs north and south through the heart of Union Springs, Alabama. Three blocks long, the street features a boarded up A & P, city hall, the courthouse, the library, a state-run liquor store, a drug store, a hardware store, some law offices, a statue of a bird dog proclaiming this community to be the “Field Trial Capitol of the World,” and not much else. At first glance, it appears to be just another small Southern town that time has forgotten.

And from an outsider’s perspective, there is little to suggest differently. Annual unemployment has been in the double-digits for 13 of the last 14 years. Whereas the county once had a population of almost 32,000, by the 2000 census only 11,714 people called Bullock County home. And 34% of those with a job leave the county to get to it.

But spend some time on Prairie Street and you discover an awakening sense of hope among local leadership. This stems in part to a re-energized

board of the Bullock County Development Authority and their recognition that it takes a lot of pieces of the puzzle to develop a community.

“We’re slowly undergoing an attitude adjustment,” says Julian Cope, who is the executive of the development authority. “We’re willing to tackle a lot of projects that some might think aren’t part of traditional economic development. For instance, we’re working with our local tourism efforts, we’re helping volunteer fire departments look for funding, we’re working to improve our airport and get work done on Highway 110 to Montgomery.” The economic development board is even considering giving the sheriff’s department money to upgrade communications equipment.

“In small communities like this,” says Cope, “you have to measure success in smaller increments than in larger places. This is sometimes hard for some folks at the statewide level to grasp. What may seem insignificant in Birmingham or Montgomery can be mighty big news for us. When you tell them you’re talking about 60 jobs, the first reaction is that this is not very many. But when you consider that for every person in our work force, there are 23.7 in Montgomery County’s workforce, this means 60 jobs in Bullock County have the same impact as 1,422 jobs in Montgomery County. This number gets their attention.”

And lately, Bullock County has been getting good news. Two local industries are growing substantially. C & W Industries is a metal fabricator that produces display racks for Wal-Mart, Lowe’s and others. They’ve bought 90,000 square feet of manufacturing space and leased another 45,000 from the development authority. The building they occupy once housed a company that made baby carriages. They expect to have 200 employees soon. Gulf States International produces janitorial and industrial strength cleaners and distributes them throughout the southeast and southwest. They will employ more than 30 people by year’s end. Hinge Tech USA is the county’s latest coup. A Korean company that produces conveyor belts and small cranes primarily for automotive suppliers, they’re going into a building in the industrial park

that once housed a textile operation. The development authority owns this building. Hinge Tech will create 60 jobs.

“What we’re trying to do is 1) Keep what we have; 2) Help our small businesses; and 3) Seek new businesses. Plus be willing to get involved in most anything that will improve our overall quality of life,” sums up Cope.

“It’s also critical that you work hard to show your leadership what can be done, that you give them hope and inspiration,” he says. “For example, we held a county-wide meeting where our keynote speaker was an economic developer from a very rural county in Georgia with demographics much like ours. He stressed that you have to work with what you have, that you have to understand your own limitations. That you have to crawl before you can walk. My goodness, they have a Gourd Festival in their county. And if you can use gourds to your advantage, you ought to be able to use most anything.”



Sowing Seeds of Hope in Perry County

In a different time and era, Perry County was the cradle of Baptist life in Alabama. Judson College, Samford University, *The Alabama Baptist* publication and the North American Mission Board all had their origins in the county. And now, Baptists from across the state have joined forces to help one of the poorest counties in the nation take a more proactive role in its own future.

Once one of the state’s most populous counties, today Perry ranks 65 out of 67. In median family income, it is 63 of 67. Nearly 50% of the children in the county live in poverty.

“Given the present situation in Perry County and its link to our Baptist heritage, what better place to put a faith-based effort in place?” asks Dr. Wayne Flynt, Auburn University history professor and the person who conceived the idea of *Sowing Seeds of Hope*. “But for this to work, it must be a partnership. All our efforts must be collaborative. We act only as enablers, responding to what the people of Perry County themselves decide are the best ways to provide health care, better education, job skills, economic development and adequate housing.”

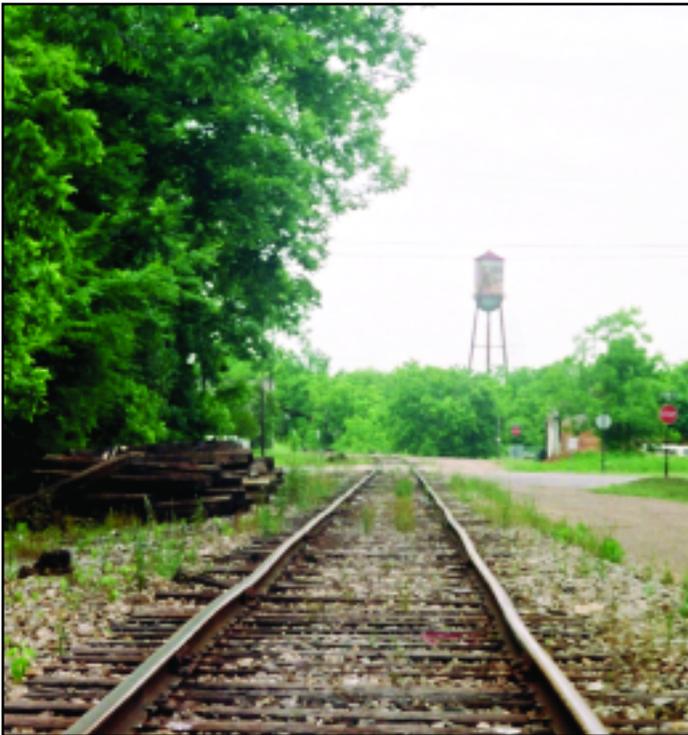
This effort began in 1999 with a steering committee of 22 people. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship agreed to a 25-year commitment. There are task forces working in eight areas: 1) education, 2) health care, 3) economic development/job skill training, 4) spiritual and social, 5) housing, 6) tourism, 7) arts and humanities, and 8) transportation.

There have already been successes in helping this community help itself. The City of Uniontown donated a former bank building that has been turned into a library. *Sowing Seeds* volunteers worked with members of *Uniontown Cares* to renovate and stock the library. Now some 500-600 families use the facility regularly and it’s not uncommon to see children lined up waiting to use a computer. Volunteers from churches all across Alabama have worked side by side with Perry County residents to renovate substandard houses. A child development center/job training technology center is in the works.

“You build a house a brick at a time,” says Judy Martin, who serves on the board and whose husband, John, is coordinator for *Sowing Seeds of Hope*. “And you build a community the same way. You start with the foundation and work your way up. Too often political leadership thinks only in terms of grand plans and quick success so you announce another study commission and have a press conference and nothing happens beyond that. There are some wonderful people in Perry County. Good, decent people who have good ideas but have never known how to get the resources to make their ideas a reality. Over time, we believe *Sowing Seeds of Hope* will change this.”

Final word on leadership

A successful leadership development program is a proven strategy for cultivating an ever-increasing network of community leaders. However, according to a 2001 EDI survey, only 35 percent of Alabama communities offer such a program for local leaders and potential leaders.



RECOMMENDATION 2: Develop a strategic plan.

There is an old saying that goes, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.” Unfortunately, too many Alabama communities don’t know where they’re going and won’t know when they get there. The 2001 EDI survey shows that 69% of Alabama communities operate without long-range strategic plans.

One major benefit of strategic planning is the process itself. It brings together a diverse group of stakeholders who, together, address basic questions for the community: Where are we now? Where do we want to go? and How do we get there? There are few other occasions when representatives from throughout the community come

together for an extended period of time to share hopes, dreams, knowledge, perspectives, ideas, and concerns. Broad-based strategic planning is a mega-crossroad and one of the best tools available for building and strengthening community connections.

Another benefit is the plan itself, which becomes the roadmap for a community’s future. It identifies community assets, challenges, and priorities as well as specific strategies to make the most of those assets and to meet each challenge.

But completion of the strategic plan should not end the planning process. Planning should continue as an ongoing process with regular meetings of community stakeholders from government, business, education, churches, and civic organizations.

Eufaula: planning for a “sustainable” community

A few communities throughout Alabama have come to understand that an era of rapid social, cultural and technological change requires a proactive approach to addressing current and future problems. Eufaula is one of those communities.

The key to the success of any strategic plan is to align the community so that it can take full advantage of its assets. Eufaula’s greatest assets are its abundant natural resources and beautiful environment. With Lake Eufaula and miles of shoreline along the Chattahoochee River, the city is a bass fishing paradise. The Eufaula National



Broad-based strategic planning is a mega-crossroad and one of the best tools available for building and strengthening community connections.

Wildlife Refuge hosts nearly 300 species of birds, along with 40 different mammals, including deer, bobcats, coyotes and foxes. Eufaula is also home to Lake Point State Park.

Ensuring that these treasured environmental assets will be preserved for future generations was the primary goal of the strategic planning process. In fact, the Eufaula 2020 strategic plan is the first in Alabama – and perhaps the first in the nation – to be based explicitly on the principles of “sustainability.” Members of the strategic planning committee were specifically instructed that decisions in every area – from economic development to transportation to education – must take environmental impacts into account.

Over 120 Eufaula citizens, representing a broad cross-section of the community, participated in the strategic planning process. They produced the following vision statement:

Eufaula, Alabama is a sustainable community committed to building its future while preserving its treasured assets. It is a family-oriented community that values its beauty, natural resources, and rich history. Eufaula is friendly, progressive, and inclusive. It is characterized by excellent schools, safe and attractive neighborhoods, diverse cultural, recreational, and employment opportunities, quality public services, a strong infrastructure, a vibrant economy, and active involvement of all citizens.

To make this vision a reality, Eufaula 2020 outlines six strategic issues: 1) Preserving the natural environment, 2) Empowering citizens, 3) Building a sustainable economy, 4) Building a strong community, 5) Preserving history, beauty and aesthetics, and 6) Delivering quality government. For each of these issues, the plan outlines broad goals and specific objectives, with a detailed action plan for accomplishing objectives. Several citizen committees are now busy working to implement the plan’s goals.



Eufaula 2020 has already produced impressive results. One goal was to revive the Eufaula Farmers Market, dormant for 10 years. They did it. Summer Saturday mornings in downtown Eufaula are now alive with folks sampling and buying Barbour County farmers’ tomatoes, corn, peas, squash, watermelons, and cantaloupes. Children get balloons and face painting. Downtown businesses open booths to serve hot biscuits, coffee and fruit smoothies. Another goal was to develop a Rails-to-Trails project. They did that too. The city bought 61 acres of right-of-way from the Norfolk Southern Railroad, which will be converted to walking and biking trails.

These are just two of dozens of goals that are being tackled by Eufaula citizens. And the community is even getting national recognition. Audubon International named Eufaula, Alabama the first “Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary” community in the United States and Cable News Network (CNN) covered the community meeting where Eufaula 2020 was unveiled. More importantly, Eufaula is now a community that knows where it is going and has a plan to get there.



**RECOMMENDATION 3:
Join forces with neighboring jurisdictions to maximize resources for economic development.**

For its report, *The State of the South 2002: Shadows in the Sunbelt Revisited*, MDC, a North Carolina public policy think tank, assembled a distinguished panel of southern leaders to identify strategies that would allow the South to better compete in the new global economy. One of their recommendations was to “preserve and enhance rural communities by forging regional collaborations and rural/metropolitan linkages to break their isolation and improve their competitiveness.”

Alabama communities clearly need a regional approach to rural development. Many of the important issues facing rural Alabama transcend the governmental boundary lines established in the 19th Century to meet the needs of folks who went to town in a mule and wagon. Because rural areas are sparsely populated, they lack a critical mass – of taxpayers, leadership, financial capacity, infrastructure, and skilled labor. So if rural communities are to survive, they must join forces and work together. Rural communities must learn to see the neighboring town as a competitor only for the Friday night football game.

The need for using a regional approach to community/economic development is obvious when you consider that of the state’s 457 incorporated municipalities, 365 of them have less than 5,000 people and 213 have less than 1,000. In fact, the 30 largest municipalities have as many people as the other 427 together. It’s simply unreasonable to expect a community of 5,000 to compete on an equal footing with a community of 50,000 or 100,000. This is about like expecting a Little League team to go to Turner Field and take on the Atlanta Braves.

Because rural areas are sparsely populated, they lack a critical mass – of taxpayers, leadership, financial capacity, infrastructure, and skilled labor. So if rural communities are to survive, they must join forces and work together.

A regional approach does not mean focusing on rural needs at the expense of their metropolitan neighbors. Strong cities need strong towns and vice versa. When rural Alabama prospers, so will urban Alabama. This realization is what drove the remarkable growth of Tupelo and Lee County, Mississippi more than 50 years ago. Merchants in Tupelo came to understand that when the dairy cows of farmers produced more milk, their owners had more milk to sell and more money to spend in town. So the merchants funded one of the first artificial insemination programs in the country that upgraded the quality of milk cows and, consequently, jingled their cash registers.

Strong cities need strong towns and vice versa. When rural Alabama prospers, so will urban Alabama.

A look at local sales tax paid per capita points this out dramatically. For example, this number is almost five times higher in Tuscaloosa County than in neighboring Greene County. Does this mean the people in Tuscaloosa County spend five times as much money as people in Greene County? More likely it means that a lot of people in Greene County go to Tuscaloosa County to buy things.

The same is true all over the state. Local sales tax paid per capita is more than three times as high in Houston County as in neighboring Henry County. Montgomery is nearly five times Bullock. Calhoun is more than double Cleburne. Colbert is nearly three times Lawrence.

Local sales tax paid per capita in Mobile County is more than four times greater than next-door in Washington County. Like the folks in Tupelo years ago, the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce has come to realize that when their neighbors prosper, they prosper. And this is why they’ve agreed to hire an economic developer for Washington County.



Alabama regional partnerships

Many Alabama communities already understand the value of multi-jurisdictional and regional alliances for economic development. For example, the West Alabama Economic Development Authority includes Pickens, Lamar and Fayette counties. Collectively, the 18 municipalities in these counties have 21,335 people, meaning that if they were combined into one community, it would only be about the size of Enterprise.

The Lake Martin Economic Development Alliance, which includes Coosa and Tallapoosa counties, offers another example of collaboration. Coosa County and Alexander City have jointly built a 327-acre industrial park. Coosa County paid 42 percent of the cost, Alexander City paid the rest. The two governments share non-educational tax revenues generated by businesses in the park based on the percentage they contributed to build it.

I-85 Corridor Alliance

Another example of regional collaboration is the new I-85 Corridor Alliance. This is a partnership among local government, private sector organizations, and educational institutions committed to increasing the prosperity of communities along Interstate 85 from Montgomery to the Georgia state line. This initiative began in July 2003 and includes leaders from Montgomery, Elmore, Macon, Tallapoosa, Bullock, Russell, Lee, and Chambers counties.

Leadership for the Alliance is structured around an executive council that includes representation from a diverse cross section of university, business and public sector interests found near the approxi-

mately 90-mile stretch of Interstate. The planning group has identified four potential economic development “clusters”¹² that could be cultivated along the corridor – an “educational services” cluster, a “transportation technology” cluster, a “tourism and community development” cluster, and a “business infrastructure” cluster.

The educational services cluster work group includes representatives from the region’s business community, six community and technical colleges, twelve school systems, and four higher education institutions (Auburn University, Tuskegee University, Auburn University at Montgomery, and Alabama State University). Their goal is to boost the role of education in the region’s economic development.

According to Francis Kochan, interim dean of the Auburn University College of Education, “This is a wonderful opportunity to work together to examine what it would mean to more fully establish an educational focus in our Region. The question that should be foremost in our minds is how we can come together to share our expertise and resources and make the entire Region stronger.”¹³



RECOMMENDATION 4: Embrace diverse and innovative economic development strategies.

If there is to be a positive future for rural Alabama, it is imperative that we do something we too often fail to do – think more about the future than about the past. And think big and bold, rather than timidly.



Too often, our rural communities become so tied to traditional approaches to economic development that they fail to see, and seize, other opportunities. Many rural communities continue to put all their eggs in the industrial recruitment basket. But to survive and thrive, rural areas must be open to any opportunities that align with community assets. This might include tourism, commercial and retail development, agribusiness, retiree attraction, technology parks, entrepreneurial support, or other types of development.

Many successful communities “think outside the box,” looking for ways to set themselves apart from the pack. They identify what makes their community special and then work to cultivate and promote those unique assets – e.g., a river, a lake,

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a mountain, or a unique history. They understand that their future will not look like their past and are open to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

Greenwood, South Carolina, Colquitt, Georgia and York, Alabama are three such communities. They each have been willing to try new and innovative approaches to community economic development.

Greenwood, South Carolina

If you’re going to Greenwood, South Carolina, you won’t get there on an interstate. Sure, you can get within 30 miles on I-26 that runs between Columbia and Spartanburg, but if you’re coming from the north or south or west, you’ll travel farther from a freeway.

And perhaps it was the realization that it was never going to have the benefit of an interstate that caused Greenwood to begin marching to the beat of a different drummer several decades ago. Or perhaps it was the realization that the world was changing and if they didn’t change their way of thinking, they would have trouble surviving in the upland of South Carolina, about halfway between Savannah, Georgia and Asheville, North Carolina.

Greenwood was the typical southern community in 1950. Two-thirds of the land in the county was in agriculture and two-thirds of the county’s 1,555 farmers tilled less than 100 acres. The non-agriculture economy was primarily textile-related. But that’s not the Greenwood of today.

In the 1980s local leaders made two bold moves by forming the Greenwood County Economic Alliance and making the financial commitment to utilize their abundant water resources. “We bit the bullet and began putting in water lines throughout the county to service industry,” says Peter Arnoti, who headed the Alliance for 18 years. “In one case, we ran a 24-inch water line eight miles. So if a prospect showed up who needed a lot of water, we didn’t tell him we thought we could get a community development block grant to service him, we asked where he wanted his tap.”

This commitment and forward thinking paid off when Fuji Photo Film selected Greenwood for its U.S. operations. Since 1986, Greenwood County has had \$2.3 billion in new and expanding manufacturing and technology-based investments, 5.6 million square feet of new and expanded manufacturing space built and 4,700 new jobs created.

Quite an achievement for a city of 22,000 — unless you are Greenwood. “We knew we’d been blessed, still, we were nervous about what was happening in manufacturing and trying to figure out which way to go,” says Arnoti. After a lot of discussion and strategic planning, a new organization emerged in 1999, the Partnership for a Greater Greenwood County, which was to provide added financial support for economic development and workforce development initiatives.

More than 150 corporations, individuals and organizations from both the public and private sectors invested \$4.7 million for the first four years operation of the partnership. The partnership administers and leverages fundraising efforts and contracts with the Alliance and the Greenwood Area Chamber of Commerce. The Alliance primarily focuses on economic development, while one of the primary missions of the Chamber is workforce development and other education initiatives.

After going through an intensive planning process, Greenwood set its sights on developing a broader “knowledge-based” economy. The community has been home to the Greenwood Genetic Center (GGC) since 1974. Here scientists, physicians and counselors diagnose genetic conditions, counsel individuals and families, research the causes of genetic disease and educate healthcare providers. The Center also operates the J.C. Self Research Institute of Human Genetics, where scientists seek a greater understanding of the causes, treatment and prevention of birth defects, mental retardation and related disabilities. It is one of only 50 institutions in the nation accredited to provide post-doctoral training in medical genetics. Together, they have 100 employees, 20 of them physicians or PhDs.

“We felt that our experience with GGC, and their experience with us, gave us a real head start in promoting research oriented activities,” says Arnoti. “Plus, Fuji, Park Seed, Pfizer and Velux already had research and/or development operations locally.”

By 2001, the Greenwood County Economic Alliance and the Greenwood Genetic Center, with the support of community leaders and legislators, were successful in getting the state to provide financial support for the state’s first biotech incubator. This is on the campus of the GGC and is designed to nurture start-up companies. Tenant companies have access to support staff with expertise in intellectual property rights, research grants, business plan development and financing. They also can consult with staff at the Self Institute, as well as at Clemson University, the Medical College of South Carolina and the University of South Carolina. In addition, the Greenwood Biotechnology Park is now being developed around the site that presently houses GGC, the Self Research Institute and the biotechnology incubator.

The Partnership for a Greater Greenwood County has now gone through its second four-year collaborative strategic planning process. They looked at what worked well in the first four years, what needs to be done differently and future possibilities. “In community/economic development, the only constant is change,” says Arnoti. “Either you try to stay ahead of the curve, or you wonder what happened. We don’t plan to wait.”

Colquitt, Georgia and a helping of “swamp gravy”

Miller County, Georgia is 283 square miles of peanut fields, pine trees and center-pivot irrigation systems located hard in the southwest corner of the state. The county had 6,383 residents in the 2000 census and in the last 100 years, the population has never reached 10,000. Colquitt, the county seat, has only 1,838 people.

It’s an unlikely place for a thriving cultural community and an arts council with an annual budget

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of \$1.6 million. And it hasn’t always been that way. Twenty years ago Colquitt was just another tiny southern hamlet watching stores close and people move away.

Luther Clearman served 12 years on the city council and 12 years as mayor, beginning in 1980. “We knew we needed to do something, but didn’t know what,” he recalls. “All we thought about was trying to recruit us a factory like everyone else tried to do. Then someone came up with the ‘swamp gravy’ idea and Colquitt hasn’t been the same since.” (Swamp gravy is the name locals gave a stew made from whatever vegetables and meat were available during the Depression.)

The Colquitt/Miller Arts Council was formed in 1989, primarily to present three or four small art events each year. In 1991 the council decided to adopt an oral history project that was first presented in October 1992 at the local elementary school auditorium.

The group’s annual budget has gone from \$2,000 to \$1.6 million. The arts council is the county’s fifth largest employer with an annual payroll of more than \$650,000. A combination of singing, dancing, tall tales and folklore, *Swamp Gravy* is recognized as Georgia’s official folk life play. A new play is produced each year and presented 30 times in October, March and April. More than 100 volunteers are involved.

Some 75,000 people have seen the performance in Colquitt; another 40,000 have seen it on tour. It’s even been performed at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. And the success of the play has enabled the arts council to take on more projects. One was the restoration of an old hotel into the Tarrer Inn, a Victorian bed and breakfast. The

inn, located on Colquitt’s square, employs more than 20 people and has been featured in *Southern Living*.

A 70-year-old cotton warehouse was transformed into a theatre and storytelling museum. The New Life Learning Center occupies a former fertilizer warehouse and is home to an after-school art program, summer art camps, tutoring program for at-risk youngsters, and adult education classes in pottery, quilting, cake decorating, and basket-making. In all, five historic buildings have been renovated in downtown.

“It just gave us new life,” says Clearman. “And it’s definitely changed how folks around here think. There’s a feeling of hope that perhaps didn’t used to be here. And I doubt a new factory would’ve given us that.”

*York*¹⁴

York, Alabama, a city of 2,850 nestled near the Mississippi line in Sumter County, seems an unlikely place to find a burgeoning arts community. But York is full of surprises. For example, York has both a museum director and a city artist on the municipal payroll. The York community also supports several artists-in-residence, some who have produced work for shows in New York City, California, and Minneapolis.

The story of York’s artistic and cultural renaissance began two decades ago. Dorothy Altman “Tut” Riddick grew up in York, married, and moved to Mobile, where her husband practiced law and she became a writer-photographer-craftswoman and art collector. It was about 20 years ago that she decided to donate to her hometown her collection of art, folk art, and regional crafts. But York didn’t have an art museum. So she worked with some of York’s older families and arranged a donation by the Coleman family of an abandoned pool hall and car repair shop for a library and art gallery. With donated money, the buildings were renovated for the library and the Coleman Center for the Arts and Culture.

For 20 years, the Coleman Center has been at the heart of York's transformation into the Black Belt's oasis of arts and culture. In what was once a crumbling and abandoned downtown block, there are now as many as eight artists at work. Amos Paul Kennedy is a book and letterpress artist. Kaye Kiker, a York native, is a glassblower and runs an art gallery and antique store.

Richard Saxton, York's city artist, is a sculptor who is converting an old bank building into additional living and workshop space for artists. As the city artist, Saxton is also given the job of finding creative solutions to city problems. For example, public works officials complained that using the city's only truck to deliver workers to cleanup and maintenance projects was wasting time and manpower. So Saxton devised a solution. He ordered Asian rickshaws off eBay and converted them into utility tricycles that city workers can now pedal to job sites. Saxton has since displayed his converted rickshaws at a Minnesota gallery.

Marilyn Gordon is originally from Mobile and spent her career designing and sewing dresses for Mobile high society and Mardi Gras balls. She was invited to York by Tut Riddick to teach a workshop for local women laid off from the sewing factories. Gordon was so impressed with what she saw that she packed up, moved to York, and created a business called Black Belt Designs. It features the original fabric creations of women from the region – many who had been laid off at the textile mill.

Lillie Mack is one of these fabric designers. She worked in a sewing factory for 26 years until it closed four years ago. Now she designs handmade outfits that sell for hundreds of dollars. Last November Black Belt Designs had a show in New York City where Lillie's recycled denim and African mudcloth outfits were displayed and sold. She's now thinking of starting her own line of clothes.

York also attracts many artists who come for brief visits of one-to-three months. One of these was Stuart Hyatt, a musician. He traveled all over Sumter County trying to find people with musical talent. And he found them. A little over one month after beginning his search, Hyatt produced an

album featuring 88 local residents performing original songs.

According to Amy Horst, executive director of the Coleman Center for Arts and Culture, "Communities can really benefit from the energy, creativity, and inspiration derived from the arts. We've seen what it has done in York. The great thing about this community is its willingness to be open to new ways of thinking. They're not afraid to try new things."



RECOMMENDATION 5:
Provide a better quality of life for residents.

In 1982, futurist John Naisbitt wrote *Megatrends*, which stayed at the top of the New York Times' best-seller list for 60 weeks. One of the trends he explored was what he referred to as "high tech - high touch." This is the yearning in all of us, in a world where we're increasingly bombarded by technology, to find the counterbalance of things we can touch and put our arms around. Our rural areas and small towns are places where we find that counterbalance.

The quality of life found in small towns is a valuable asset that must be preserved and enhanced. In fact, many city-dwellers long for what people in small towns already have, and often take for granted – a slower pace, friendly people who know their neighbors, open space and scenery, quaint shops, historic homes and buildings, parades, fes-



tivals, and streets that are safe and free of traffic congestion. Many of Alabama’s small towns still possess a sense of authenticity and charm that cannot be duplicated in bigger cities.

Of course, a slow pace and friendly neighbors are not all that is needed to survive and thrive. To maintain and attract residents and employers, rural communities also must provide excellent schools, quality healthcare services, and amenities – arts and culture, recreation, dining, shopping, and entertainment – that contribute to a high quality of life.

A thriving community will also work at improving its appearance and aesthetics. It’s not enough to *be* good; a community should *look* good.

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Communities that stand out tend to have attractive storefronts, landscaped highway medians, signage control, trees planted in parking lots, roadsides free of litter, and attractive community “gateways.” The physical appearance of a community sends a message – good or bad – to residents, visitors, and potential businesses.

Designing our future: YourTown Alabama and the Small Town Design Initiative

Alabama has two excellent programs geared toward helping small towns improve their quality of life through community design and planning – YourTown Alabama and the Small Town Design Initiative (STDI). These programs help small towns identify, rediscover, or preserve those things that give their community a sense of authenticity and make it a good place to live.

Each summer since 1998, citizen leaders and professionals all across Alabama have been participating in YourTown Alabama. The two-and-a-half



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day YourTown workshops, held in a remote retreat location, are highly participatory with lectures, case-study presentations, and interactive group problem solving, including work on realistic issues facing a hypothetical small town. Over 350 citizens, elected officials, and decision makers from over 100 communities have participated in the program. Participants have returned to their communities energized and armed with tools for capturing the potential of their special place in Alabama. Many seek out follow-up activities, including more locally directed planning and design work through the Small Town Design Initiative (STDI) of Auburn University's Center for Architecture and Urban Studies in Birmingham.

With the STDI, Auburn University faculty and students work with a specific community, helping residents make informed decisions about issues such as: establishing and preserving a community identity, downtown preservation and revitalization, housing opportunities, recreation and open

space, economic development opportunities, and vehicular and pedestrian circulation. One product of the approximately three-month process is a graphic summary of the community's preferred design for the future – through a booklet or poster presented to the community at a public meeting.



Investing in Alabama's Rural Economy

If we are to successfully address the serious and myriad challenges of rural Alabama, we must build crossroads and strengthen connections at all levels – state, regional, and local. This is absolutely necessary, but it is not sufficient.

Total Per Capita State and Local Tax Revenue (FY 2000)

| State | Taxes | Nat. Rank |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|
| 1. Georgia | \$2,841 | 25 |
| 2. North Carolina | 2,664 | 31 |
| 3. Florida | 2,624 | 35 |
| 4. Kentucky | 2,517 | 39 |
| 5. Louisiana | 2,436 | 41 |
| 6. South Carolina | 2,379 | 44 |
| 7. Arkansas | 2,230 | 47 |
| 8. Mississippi | 2,214 | 48 |
| 9. Tennessee | 2,185 | 49 |
| 10. Alabama | 2,117 | 50 |
| National Average | \$3,100 | |

Source: *Governing State and Local Source Book 2003.*

Education Spending Per K-12 Pupil (2002-03)

| State | Spending | Nat. Rank |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|
| 1. Georgia | \$8,238 | 17 |
| 2. South Carolina | 7,403 | 26 |
| 3. Kentucky | 7,274 | 28 |
| 4. Louisiana | 6,698 | 38 |
| 5. North Carolina | 6,547 | 39 |
| 6. Florida | 6,411 | 40 |
| 7. Tennessee | 6,048 | 44 |
| 8. Mississippi | 5,822 | 45 |
| 9. Arkansas | 5,789 | 46 |
| 10. Alabama | 5,418 | 47 |
| National Average | \$7,829 | |

Source: *National Education Association's Rankings and Estimates Update, Fall 2003.*

Alabama needs significantly more public investment if it is to revive its rural economy. It takes money to provide the vital infrastructure investments upon which we build our economy – to educate children, pave roads, provide water, sewer, and technology infrastructure, ensure public safety, and on and on.

Other states are making significant investments in the infrastructure of the new "knowledge" economy – K-12 education, community colleges and workforce development, public universities, and a modern telecommunications infrastructure. Not Alabama. Instead, Alabama tenaciously clings to economic development strategies best suited for the old agricultural and manufacturing

economies – low taxes, minimal public investment, and low wages. On those terms, we can't compete with places like Mexico, China, India, and other developing countries.

In the economy of the 21st Century, a strong system of education is essential. Unfortunately, education has never been highly valued in this state. Recent comparisons show that Alabama ranks last among southern states in education spending per K-12 pupil – just 69 percent of the national average. Thank God for Mississippi? Not really. Mississippi spends more per pupil than Alabama. Georgia ranks first among southern states, spending almost \$3,000 more per pupil than does Alabama.

One example illustrates well our state's uncanny knack for being "penny-wise and pound-foolish." There is a return of over \$9 for every \$1 spent on Small Business Development Center (SBDC) programs. Over the last five years procurement assistance provided by the SBDC at Troy State University has helped clients obtain more than \$100 million in local, state and federal contracts. Last year, 55% of their clients were rural. This year the state is investing only \$101,000 in the 10 statewide SBDCs. Next year funding will be eliminated completely. By comparison, North Carolina

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invests \$2 million annually into its statewide small business development program.

In *The State of the South 2002: Shadows in the Sunbelt Revisited*, MDC's panel of southern leaders recommended that southern states:

Other states are making significant investments in the infrastructure of the new "knowledge" economy – K-12 education, community colleges and workforce development, public universities, and a modern telecommunications infrastructure. Not Alabama.

•Modernize tax systems, so that states have the fiscal capacity to provide excellent education, widely accessible job training, necessary infrastructure, and community amenities that enrich the soil for economic advancement.

•Dramatically expand efforts to erase serious deficits along the entire education continuum in the South – from pre-kindergarten through university education.

No state needs to heed these recommendations more than Alabama. We are falling further and further behind our southern competitors. Our rural areas, which have limited ability to raise local funds, suffer most under our deficient state tax system.



Farmers and preachers don't seem to have much trouble understanding the idea that you're going to "reap what you sow." Our political leaders – and citizens – still have a little trouble grasping this concept. Alabama's rural areas will never reap the rewards if we refuse to make the investments.



Conclusion

We've talked a lot about crossroads. We've described the crossroad as a place where people come together. But the crossroad is also a place of decision – a place where we chose one path among many. The state of Alabama is now at such a crossroads. One road, the path we've been traveling much too long, is for those who think things are fine just like they are. It is the path of rural neglect and inaction. The other road is for those who know that Alabama, especially rural

The state of Alabama is now at a crossroads. One road, the path we've been traveling much too long, is for those who think things are fine just like they are. It is the path of rural neglect and inaction. The other road is for those who know that Alabama, especially rural Alabama, has the potential for so much more. It is the path of new and intelligent rural development policies and aggressive action. Now it's time to choose.

Alabama, has the potential for so much more. It is the path of new and intelligent rural development policies and aggressive action. Now it's time to choose.

Some may argue that many of our rural communities are too far-gone. They cannot withstand the onslaught of changes brought by the new global economy. They will continue to see their young people leave forever. Jobs will continue to migrate to the larger metro areas. A declining quality of life is their inevitable fate.

We don't believe it. Neither do the people in Tupelo, Demopolis, Uniontown, Union Springs, Colquitt, and hundreds of other communities that refuse to fall victim to the "tyranny of low expectations." Neither do the folks in Eufaula, Ft. Payne, and Clanton – selected among the top 100 small towns in America.¹⁵ These communities have a better vision for their future.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama has studied grades 3-8 in every school system in the state. PARCA projected the expected SAT scores for 935 schools (based on the known correlation between free and reduced lunches and test scores). Then the expected SAT scores were compared with actual performance. Classes that exceeded projections by 10 points or more were deemed "high performing."



If people of good will at the state, regional, and community levels focus their energies and resources and work together, we can see a better future for rural Alabama. But working together is the key. Again, it's about crossroads and connections.

There were 16 schools where every grade in the school was judged high performing. Seven of these were rural schools. There was only one system where every class in every school was high performing – Winfield, in Marion County.

So rural Alabama has the capacity to achieve. And if people of good will at the state, regional, and community levels focus their energies and resources and work together, we can see a better future for rural Alabama. But working *together* is the key. Again, it's about crossroads and connections.

We are reminded of the story of the old man who happened upon a boy among hundreds of starfish trapped on the beach at low tide. The boy is throwing them one by one back into the ocean. The old man laughs at the boy's efforts and tells him that he can't possibly save them all. The punch line, of course, is the boy's response as he hurls another starfish into the water: "It matters to this one."

We believe that this oft-told and inspiring story does not end there. As the story continues, the old man, inspired by the boy's commitment and the urgency of the task, pitches in to help. Soon tens, then hundreds, then thousands of people join in until the very last starfish is flung back to the safety of the ocean.

The "beaches" of rural Alabama are filled with stranded starfish – with good people trapped in unwelcome circumstances. They are worth saving. Indeed, in communities all across rural Alabama there are people who are already furiously flinging starfish. It's time for us all to pitch in and help.

Notes

1 We define as “rural” the 45 Alabama counties not classified in the 2000 Census as part of Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA). These counties cover 66% of the state’s 50,744 square miles and are home to 1.3 million of our 4.4 million citizens. Of course, there are other ways to define “rural.” If we define as rural those counties where over 50% of the people live outside cities with 5,000 or greater population, then 51 counties are classified rural. But even counties that are classified as “metro” have areas that are predominately rural.

2 Office of the Governor, “Riley consolidates programs into Office of Workforce Development,” December 30, 2003 Press Release. The executive order was later replaced by a second executive order number 17 (February 19, 2004), which, in addition to creating the Office of Workforce Development, created a Workforce Planning Council responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive state workforce development plan. The Chancellor of Postsecondary Education chairs the panel.

3 Policy makers often talk about “creating” regions. Instead, they should talk about “defining” those regions that trade patterns have long established. Basically, dollars in a region flow toward an urban core. Commuting patterns of workers point this out vividly. There are many other indicators such as daily newspaper circulations, regional medical facilities, etc. The boundaries of the 12 regional planning and development agencies were not established along such lines. Instead, local officials established them over a period of several years resulting in such notable ambiguities as the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission in Mobile serving only Mobile, Baldwin and Escambia counties. Clearly the economic influence of Mobile extends much farther into southwest Alabama. This was recently acknowledged when the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce and the Washington County Economic Development Initiative created a partnership in which the chamber will hire an economic developer to assist Washington County with its growth strategy.

4 Broadband or high-speed Internet access is the ability to send and receive data at volumes and speeds far greater than current access over traditional telephone lines. In addition to speed, broadband access provides an “always on” connection and a two-way capability, that is, the ability to both receive (download) and transmit (upload) data at high speeds.

5 Fred Gale and David McGranahan, “Nonmetro Areas Fall Behind in the New Economy.” *Rural America*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, May 2001, pp. 44-52.

6 MDC, Inc. a private, nonprofit organization in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has spent 35 years publishing research and developing policies and programs to strengthen the workforce, foster economic development, and remove the barriers between people and jobs in the rural South. In “The Building Blocks of Community Development” (October 2001), MDC has identified six, interrelated fundamental components of a community’s economic prosperity:

1. *Business development.* Creating a strong economic base requires that community leaders are as concerned about building the income and assets of local residents as they are about job creation and increased productivity. Many rural communities still concentrate their hopes for renewal on outdated concepts of industrial recruitment while ignoring or underutilizing local assets.

2. *Workforce development.* Rural communities can no longer rely on low-skill labor, low-wage jobs, and low-value-added industries if its workforce hopes to keep pace in a dynamic economy. Workforce development entails building a high-skill, high-value workforce, the human resource base required for the knowledge economy.

3. *Physical infrastructure.* A strong physical infrastructure entails utilizing transportation and telecommunications to connect the community with distant markets, people, and educational options; and providing essential infrastructure to ensure public health and safety. A strong telecommunications infrastructure can reduce distances to the click of a computer mouse.

4. *Social infrastructure.* A community’s social infrastructure, including such supports as health care, child and elder care, affordable housing, and income support programs, increasingly determines the success of development efforts that seek to build the capacity for sustainable economic prosperity.

5. *Cultural and environmental stewardship.* Preserving cultural and environmental assets is an increasingly central aspect of economic development in Southern rural communities.

6. *Civic infrastructure.* A strong civic infrastructure means creating a culture of civic decision-making and problem solving that is forward looking, accountable, and inclusive.

7 Southern Growth Policies Board, "Reinventing the Wheel: Report on the Future of the South 2003". The SGPB adopted the following regional objective in 2003: "Build the civic capacity of Southern communities to respond to emerging opportunities and challenges with new models of leadership, engagement and social capital."

8 David Mathews, "The Little Republics of American Democracy," Connections, Volume 13, Issue 2, March 2003, p. 6.

9 See Vaughn Grisham, Jr., Tupelo: Evolution of a Community. (Dayton, Ohio, Kettering Foundation Press, 1999) and Vaughn Grisham and Bob Gurwitt, Hand in Hand: Community and Economic Development in Tupelo. (Washington DC: Aspen Institute, 1999).

10 "CDF Detailed for Jackson City Council," The Clarke County Democrat, August 14, 2003.

11 For an expanded version of this section see Joe A. Sumners, "Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development," Connections, Volume 13, Issue 2, March 2003.

12 A cluster is a geographic concentration of companies, suppliers, and supporting institutions with relationships to one another based on similar products, technologies, worker skills, etc. Examples include the semiconductor cluster in Silicon Valley, California, the carpet industry cluster near Dalton, Georgia, and the furniture cluster in northeast Mississippi.

13 "Educators Join Forces in I-85 Economic Effort." AU Report, Vol. 37. No. 9. March 15, 2004.

14 Thomas Spencer, "York Blossoming as Arts, Crafts Oasis," The Birmingham News, January 8, 2004.

15 John M. Schultz. Boomtown USA: The Seven-and-a-Half Keys to Big Success in Small Towns. (Herndon, Virginia: National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, 2004).

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Profile: Joe A. Sumners



I grew up in rural Shelby County. Most people don't think of Shelby County as rural nowadays, but it sure was when I was a kid and parts of it still are. I usually tell people I'm from Harpersville, but I'm really exaggerating just a bit. I

actually grew up out in the country in a little rural community called Creswell, which is about a mile off U.S. Highway 280 on County Highway 85 about three miles from Childersburg, four miles from Harpersville, and five miles from Vincent. I claim Harpersville as my hometown because that's where the mail came from. Our address was Route One, Harpersville. I don't think we had a Route Two.

I can't imagine a better childhood. Looking from my front yard, I saw acres and acres of Mr. R.J. Green's cotton field. A barbed-wire fence usually kept the cows from wandering into our back yard.

On one side of the house, across a big open lot, lived my Uncle Paul and Aunt Estelle and my cousins Jimmy, Billy, and Wayne. Most people had trouble figuring out who belonged to whom. I was "Joey" back then and I was the youngest. Wayne



was almost three years older than me, Billy was seven years older, Ron, my brother, was eight years older, and Jimmy was ten years older. We were always together and times were good. It was a rare day that some type of ball wasn't being thrown, shot, or hit.

Granddaddy and grandmother, Ernest and Evie Sumners, lived on the other side of Uncle Paul. Granddaddy had worked hard all his life – as a farmer and a butcher. But when I was a child, he was the proprietor of a tiny gas station and country store – *Sumners Merchandise* – which was located between his house and Uncle Paul. Everybody in our little community loved granddaddy. He was kind and gentle and I really think running the store was just an excuse to swap stories and jokes with all the folks who would drop by to visit. Sometimes they would buy gas or maybe a Coke and a pack of Tom's peanuts. Sometimes not. It didn't matter to granddaddy.

As you might guess, family is important to me. My dad, Clyde Sumners, had a sister and five brothers. My mother, Virginia McGhee Sumners, had three sisters and three brothers. I have 34 first cousins. My happiest memories are from our family get-togethers – playing with my cousins and watching my uncles play Rook and listening to their wonderful stories about growing up together – about farming, fishing, fighting, dating, pulling pranks, and the wonders of country life.

On the other side of the house, about a mile away, was Providence Baptist Church, where my cousin Shane and I once got caught smoking a cigar in the church outhouse. It was very modern for the time – a three-holer.

Between our house and the church was a huge garden – corn, okra, peas, butterbeans, tomatoes, watermelons, and cantaloupes – that my dad worked religiously each afternoon after coming home from a hard day working as a boiler operator at Beaunit Mills in Childersburg.

The plant closed down and relocated to Oxford, North Carolina when I was in the ninth grade. Dad worked in North Carolina for about nine months, making the long trip home for a day or so



every two or three weeks. Not long before my mother and I were to join him, dad decided to quit and come home. When you live in a place a long time, the roots grow pretty deep. Dad realized that home would never be anywhere but east Shelby County, Alabama.

After dad came home, he found a job at a plant in Columbiana. He also was a pretty good electrician and made extra money wiring houses. He went to school at night at a community college to learn about electronics and landed a position as an instrument repairman at Alabama Power Company's E.C. Gaston Steam Plant in Wilsonville, where he retired over ten years ago.

Mom graduated as salutatorian of her class at Childersburg High School, married dad, and raised my brother and me. When I was about 9 she went to nursing school. She eventually earned her LPN and worked as a nurse to help earn enough money to send Ron and me through college.

Rural Alabama represents "home" to me. It's where I find people I love – my mom and dad and other family and lifelong friends. It's where many special people have touched my life – teachers, coaches, classmates, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and so many others.

In 1975, I moved away from Creswell to go to Auburn University. But each summer I came home to work as cotton scout for farmers in our part of the county. Not only did I establish a very intimate acquaintance with boll weevils and bollworms, I gained a deeper appreciation for the hard work, courage, and dedication of farmers. I also developed an even greater love for the land and rural life.

Since graduating from college about 25 years ago, I've lived in Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Auburn, Athens, Georgia, Birmingham again, Nacogdoches, Texas, and back to Auburn. But I've never forgotten where I came from. Those roots do grow pretty deep.

– Joe Sumners

Profile: Larry Lee



In the beginning, there was the land. That's what brought the early settlers to Alabama. One of them was William Greenberry Lee, my great, great, great grandfather.

In the 1820s he left Putnam County, Georgia and settled in south Butler County. For

generations, all our family knew was the land. Grandpa, Daddy and I all grew up among hogs and cows and crops. My son Kevin is the first generation since William Greenberry who never milked a cow.

This pattern is easy to spot when you look back at census numbers. In 1850, Alabama's ten most populous counties were: Greene, Dallas, Montgomery, Marengo, Mobile, Macon, Madison, Chambers, Barbour and Perry. Except for Mobile and Madison, all were in central Alabama where cotton dominated the economy. Greene County had more than three times as many people as Jefferson County.

But over the next 50 years, the face of Alabama began to change dramatically. The Civil War, freeing of slaves, Reconstruction and the lack of cash were all major factors in migration.

By 1900, Jefferson County had grown from 8,989 to 140,420 in population, making it the largest county in the state. The next nine were: Montgomery, Mobile, Dallas, Madison, Marengo, Henry, Tuscaloosa, Talladega and Lowndes. The land was losing its grip. Realignment was well underway.

And for the last 100 years, smokestacks and commerce have drawn our people like moths to a light. Thousands of acres that once felt the hooves of mules pulling a plow now hear only the wind whispering through planted pines. The Alabama that Grandpa, Daddy and I knew is no more. Greene County, once the state's largest, is now the

smallest. In 1900, 30% of our people lived in the ten most populated counties; today 53% live in Jefferson, Mobile, Madison, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, Shelby, Baldwin, Lee, Calhoun and Morgan.

Alabama is being homogenized. Fast food franchises, convenience stores and strip centers line what used to be country roads. Pastures that once grew hay now grow houses.

The fastest growing counties in the state are next-door neighbors to metro centers and clogged freeways strain under the pressure of rush-hour traffic. Developers gobble up open space and planning commission meetings are no place for the faint-hearted.

Coping with this growth is not easy. Enrollment in the Shelby County school system has grown 25% in the past eight years. Baldwin County schools have 16% more students than they did in the 1995-96 school year.

But it's a different story in rural Alabama. In the same eight years, Butler County enrollment is down 15%, Clay County is down 23%, Lamar County is down 16%.

Numbers such as these leave one to wonder at the logic of building new schools in one part of the state, while closing them in another, especially in light of the fact that we have fewer students in Alabama than we had eight years ago. Isn't it possible that investment in rural Alabama might lessen the strain on urban Alabama? And save much-needed tax dollars in the process.

More than two-thirds of our people now crowd themselves onto one-third of our 50,744 square miles. William Greenberry Lee would shake his head at the wonderment of it all.

– Larry Lee

What Defines A Com

Alabama Communities of

1. LEADERSHIP

Community Leadership

- The community has many dedicated, diverse, and energetic leaders.
- The private sector, community and civic organizations, and faith-based organizations are consistently involved in local initiatives and projects.
- The community has an active civic life with multiple opportunities for citizen involvement (e.g., town meetings, deliberative forums, concerts, festivals, community improvement projects).
- Local government leaders are committed to strengthening community partnerships and engaging citizens, especially for the planning and implementation of economic and community development initiatives.
- Elected officials maintain good working relations and seek to constructively resolve differences.
- Local government leaders build bridges and alliances with other jurisdictions and organizations to encourage economic development in the region.
- City and county governments are committed to the training and professional development of local government officials and staff.

Leadership Development

- The community/county has a formal, active leadership development program.
- Local government, the chamber of commerce, the business community, and civic groups actively support the program and encourage employee participation.
- There are adequate funds and staff to plan and conduct the program.
- Program participants represent the diversity of the community (racial, gender, geographic, political, economic, etc.).
- The curriculum includes instruction on basic leadership skills/strategies (e.g., planning, problem-solving, teamwork, interpersonal skills, conflict management, valuing diversity, etc.).
- The curriculum adequately addresses economic development, community development, and community planning and design topics.
- The program format is interactive, participatory, and innovative (i.e., not simply lectures and presentations).
- The program has a youth leadership component.
- The program provides the opportunity for real-world applications – connecting participants with community improvement plans or projects.

2. PLANNING

Vision and Strategic Planning

- The community has an up-to-date strategic plan that provides a compelling vision for the future along with specific strategies for realizing that vision.
- A large, diverse group of leaders and stakeholders participated in the process and support the plan (i.e., planning participants include a broad cross-section of the community).
- A detailed action plan specifies how the plan's goals and objectives will be implemented in the community (i.e., who will be involved, the time frame for accomplishment, needed resources, key milestones/benchmarks, and the expected results or product); and
- A mechanism for ongoing review and revision is incorporated into the plan – both to evaluate accomplishment and to correct implementation problems.

Comprehensive Planning

- The community has an up-to-date comprehensive land use plan that includes policies and strategies for land use, transportation, housing, community facilities, and resource conservation.
- The community has specific plans for zoning, development regulation, and design/appearance review that are actively enforced.
- All planning initiatives are consistent with community design standards and goals.

3. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Strategy

- The community has an up-to-date, comprehensive economic development plan (either separately or as part of the strategic plan). The plan addresses business retention, expansion and recruitment; commercial, retail and small business development; and tourism and retiree attraction.
- The economic development plan includes an analysis of the local economy – identifying strengths, potential opportunities, and the types of businesses that best fit the community.
- Local infrastructure is adequate to support the selected business targets.
- The community has a quality site that is suitable for desired business targets, free of easements and/or encumbrances, and available at a fair market price.
- The plan is fully supported by community leaders involved with economic development.

Community of Excellence?

Excellence (ACE) Program

Organization

- The community (or county) has an economic development or industrial development authority/board/individual responsible for business recruitment.
- A single point of contact is identified/designated for all economic development activities.
- The organization has a structured and trained prospect sales team.
- The staff (or officers) of the development organization regularly participates in state professional association activities.

Information and Marketing

- The economic development organization maintains current, relevant information about the community and has a quality promotional brochure.
- Available properties are monitored, listed in the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA) database, and updated regularly.
- The organization/individual effectively markets the community to appropriate businesses targets and maintains regular contact with state officials and other economic development professionals.
- The community/county hosts a website on the Internet with information appropriate to its targets.

Existing Business Program

- The community has a formal and ongoing business retention and expansion program that includes:
- Regular visits to business owners and managers,
- A process for addressing problems identified by industry leaders,
- An annual industrial and commercial recognition event,
- A survey of labor wages and fringe benefits, and
- Workforce education and training programs.

Commercial/Retail Business Development

- The community has an active Chamber of Commerce or Business Alliance with at least a paid part-time executive.
- The community maintains a comprehensive inventory of retail, commercial, and service properties, including spaces that formerly housed retail or commercial entities and those with that potential.

4. QUALITY OF LIFE

Education

- All schools in the community consistently achieve “academically clear” status with student standardized test scores at or above the state average.

- The schools/school system:

- Is Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredited,
- Offers Career/Technical Education counseling and programs,
- Offers enhanced mathematics and science programs,
- Coordinates formal parental involvement programs,
- Provides Adult Literacy programs, and
- Participates in formal partnerships with local businesses.

- Additional educational enhancements include:

- Participation in the Alabama Reading Initiative or a similar program,
- Extended-day/out-of-school-time programs,
- Leadership training for principals and superintendent,
- Pre-kindergarten programs, and
- Quality teacher education and professional development opportunities (in addition to the state appropriated professional development days).

- Appropriate curriculum for migrant populations (if applicable) includes “English as a Second Language.”

Healthcare Services

- Primary, dental, and mental health services are available to all age groups.
- The community has ready access to a hospital that provides an array of vital services, including emergency transport services and a 24-hour emergency room.
- The community has access to long-term care (i.e., nursing home/assisted living facility) and home health services.
- The community promotes wellness and prevention programs (i.e., health education, recreation and physical fitness).
- The community’s healthcare leadership is committed to planning for future healthcare services and needs (e.g., recruitment and retention of health care providers and professionals, workforce development, and the development of strategies for funding healthy initiatives).
- Public buildings are designated smoke-free environments.

Amenities and Aesthetics

- The community supports a variety of amenities that contribute to enhanced quality of life (e.g., arts, entertainment, recreation).
- Public property and buildings are well maintained.
- Attractive gateways are maintained at city entrances.
- The community supports downtown enhancements and preservation of historic buildings.

Alabama County Economic Vitality Index

| | | (b) Pop change 1990-2000 | (c) Pop change 2000-2003 | (d) HS grad | (e) BS or > | (f) Med HH Inc | (g) < Pov | (h) Job change 1990-2002 | (i) Unemploy | |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| United States | | 13% | 3.2% | 80% | 24% | \$41,994 | 12% | 18% | 5.9% | |
| Alabama | | 10% | -1.2% | 75% | 19% | \$34,135 | 16% | 22% | 5.9% | |
| County | (a) Index Rank | Metro/Rural | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | \$ (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) |
| Shelby | 1 | Metro | 44 (1) | 10.1 (1) | 87 (1) | 37 (1) | \$55,440 (1) | 6 (1) | 221 (1) | 2.4 (1) |
| Baldwin | 2 | Metro | 43 (2) | 7.5 (2) | 82 (3) | 23 (7) | \$40,250 (5) | 10 (2) | 83 (2) | 4.4 (13) |
| Autauga | 3 | Metro | 28 (7) | 6.1 (5) | 79 (8) | 18 (15) | \$42,013 (3) | 11 (5) | 38 (9) | 4.4 (12) |
| Elmore | 4 | Metro | 34 (3) | 6.8 (3) | 78 (10) | 17 (17) | \$41,243 (4) | 10 (3) | 30 (16) | 4.3 (11) |
| Madison | 5 | Metro | 16 (14) | 4.5 (8) | 85 (2) | 34 (2) | \$44,704 (2) | 11 (4) | 23 (24) | 4.4 (13) |
| St. Clair | 6 | Metro | 30 (5) | 5.7 (6) | 71 (22) | 11 (34) | \$37,285 (8) | 12 (7) | 69 (4) | 4.1 (8) |
| Tuscaloosa | 7 | Metro | 10 (27) | 0.9 (20) | 79 (7) | 24 (6) | \$34,436 (12) | 17 (31) | 39 (7) | 3.2 (2) |
| Limestone | 8 | Metro | 21 (11) | 3.8 (9) | 75 (15) | 17 (16) | \$37,405 (7) | 12 (8) | 19 (34) | 5.1 (20) |
| Houston | 9 | Metro | 9 (28) | 3.0 (13) | 77 (12) | 18 (12) | \$34,431 (13) | 15 (19) | 24 (22) | 3.9 (5) |
| Morgan | 10 | Metro | 11 (21) | 1.4 (18) | 76 (14) | 18 (12) | \$37,803 (6) | 12 (8) | 24 (23) | 6.3 (31) |
| Blount | 11 | Metro | 30 (5) | 5.7 (6) | 70 (24) | 10 (49) | \$35,214 (11) | 12 (6) | 21 (30) | 3.8 (3) |
| Lee | 12 | Metro | 32 (4) | 3.7 (11) | 81 (4) | 28 (4) | \$30,952 (28) | 22 (49) | 11 (45) | 3.8 (3) |
| Coffee | 13 | Rural | 8 (30) | 2.3 (15) | 73 (19) | 19 (8) | \$33,664 (15) | 15 (15) | 13 (39) | 4.2 (10) |
| Cullman | 14 | Rural | 15 (15) | 1.0 (19) | 70 (24) | 12 (30) | \$32,256 (18) | 13 (10) | 31 (15) | 5.4 (24) |
| Marshall | 15 | Rural | 16 (13) | 1.8 (16) | 69 (31) | 14 (23) | \$32,167 (19) | 15 (15) | 26 (21) | 5.5 (25) |
| Montgomery | 16 | Metro | 7 (36) | -0.7 (35) | 80 (6) | 29 (3) | \$35,962 (10) | 17 (36) | 22 (29) | 5.1 (20) |
| Lauderdale | 17 | Metro | 10 (24) | -1.1 (44) | 76 (13) | 19 (11) | \$33,354 (16) | 14 (14) | 29 (17) | 7.6 (42) |
| Jefferson | 18 | Metro | 2 (50) | -0.6 (32) | 81 (5) | 25 (5) | \$36,868 (9) | 15 (17) | 8 (48) | 4.7 (17) |
| Chilton | 19 | Rural | 22 (10) | 3.1 (12) | 66 (42) | 10 (44) | \$32,588 (17) | 16 (25) | 19 (33) | 4.1 (8) |
| Mobile | 20 | Metro | 6 (43) | 0.0 (23) | 77 (11) | 19 (10) | \$33,710 (14) | 19 (40) | 28 (19) | 6.4 (34) |
| Calhoun | 21 | Metro | -3 (63) | -0.2 (26) | 74 (14) | 15 (18) | \$31,768 (23) | 16 (27) | 20 (31) | 5.0 (19) |
| Dale | 22 | Metro | -1 (58) | 0.3 (22) | 78 (9) | 14 (22) | \$31,998 (21) | 15 (20) | 1 (56) | 4.6 (15) |
| Jackson | 23 | Rural | 13 (17) | -0.2 (26) | 67 (39) | 10 (39) | \$32,020 (20) | 14 (11) | 20 (32) | 7.5 (41) |
| Cleburne | 24 | Rural | 11 (22) | 3.8 (9) | 63 (60) | 9 (52) | \$30,820 (30) | 14 (12) | 12 (40) | 4.0 (6) |
| Dekalb | 25 | Rural | 18 (12) | 3.0 (13) | 64 (56) | 8 (58) | \$30,137 (34) | 15 (22) | 27 (20) | 5.1 (20) |
| Etowah | 26 | Metro | 4 (46) | -0.4 (28) | 74 (16) | 13 (25) | \$31,170 (27) | 16 (25) | 6 (50) | 5.7 (26) |
| Tallapoosa | 27 | Rural | 7 (37) | -2.5 (57) | 70 (27) | 14 (19) | \$30,745 (32) | 17 (30) | 70 (3) | 7.4 (40) |
| Colbert | 28 | Metro | 6 (38) | -0.8 (39) | 73 (18) | 14 (19) | \$31,954 (22) | 14 (13) | 1 (55) | 7.8 (43) |
| Lawrence | 29 | Metro | 10 (24) | -0.6 (32) | 66 (46) | 8 (66) | \$31,549 (25) | 15 (21) | 45 (6) | 6.0 (28) |
| Cherokee | 30 | Rural | 23 (9) | 1.8 (16) | 64 (57) | 10 (46) | \$30,874 (29) | 16 (23) | -15 (66) | 4.0 (6) |
| Talladega | 31 | Rural | 8 (30) | -0.5 (29) | 70 (29) | 11 (32) | \$31,628 (24) | 18 (38) | 16 (38) | 8.1 (46) |
| Henry | 32 | Rural | 6 (41) | 0.8 (21) | 67 (40) | 14 (19) | \$30,353 (33) | 19 (43) | 4 (51) | 5.9 (27) |
| Randolph | 33 | Rural | 13 (19) | -0.5 (29) | 62 (64) | 10 (42) | \$28,675 (39) | 17 (31) | 28 (18) | 8.3 (51) |
| Barbour | 33 | Rural | 14 (16) | -0.8 (39) | 65 (53) | 11 (36) | \$25,101 (56) | 27 (58) | 32 (12) | 5.2 (23) |
| Clay | 35 | Rural | 8 (34) | -0.5 (29) | 66 (44) | 8 (63) | \$27,885 (44) | 17 (34) | 31 (14) | 6.6 (35) |
| Pike | 36 | Rural | 7 (35) | -1.4 (48) | 69 (32) | 18 (12) | \$25,551 (55) | 23 (52) | 19 (35) | 6.1 (30) |
| Bibb | 36 | Rural | 26 (8) | 6.2 (4) | 63 (58) | 7 (67) | \$31,420 (26) | 21 (46) | 2 (54) | 6.9 (36) |
| Escambia | 38 | Rural | 8 (33) | -0.7 (35) | 69 (33) | 11 (37) | \$28,319 (42) | 21 (47) | 19 (36) | 8.0 (45) |
| Russell | 39 | Metro | 6 (40) | -1.6 (52) | 67 (41) | 10 (46) | \$27,492 (45) | 20 (45) | 38 (10) | 7.0 (37) |
| Walker | 40 | Rural | 5 (45) | -0.8 (39) | 67 (38) | 9 (55) | \$29,076 (38) | 17 (29) | 7 (49) | 6.3 (32) |
| Winston | 40 | Rural | 13 (18) | -0.9 (42) | 63 (61) | 8 (58) | \$28,435 (41) | 17 (34) | 32 (13) | 10.2 (58) |
| Marengo | 42 | Rural | -2 (61) | -0.9 (42) | 72 (21) | 12 (28) | \$27,025 (49) | 26 (55) | -4 (60) | 4.7 (16) |
| Clarke | 42 | Rural | 2 (49) | -1.4 (48) | 71 (23) | 12 (28) | \$27,388 (47) | 23 (51) | 12 (42) | 7.9 (44) |

| | | | (b) Pop change 1990-2000 | (c) Pop change 2000-2003 | (d) HS grad | (e) BS or > | (f) Med HH Inc | (g) < Pov | (h) Job change 1990-2002 | (i) Unemploy |
|---------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| United States | | | 13% | 3.2% | 80% | 24% | \$41,994 | 12% | 18% | 5.9% |
| Alabama | | | 10% | -1.2% | 75% | 19% | \$34,135 | 16% | 22% | 5.9% |
| County | (a) Index Rank | Metro/Rural | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | \$ (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) | % (rank) |
| Franklin | 44 | Rural | 12 (20) | -1.4 (48) | 62 (63) | 10 (46) | \$27,177 (48) | 19 (42) | 34 (11) | 9.5 (55) |
| Washington | 45 | Rural | 8 (30) | -1.2 (46) | 72 (20) | 9 (57) | \$30,815 (31) | 19 (40) | 2 (53) | 15.7 (67) |
| Hale | 46 | Rural | 11 (22) | -0.1 (25) | 65 (48) | 8 (60) | \$25,807 (54) | 27 (59) | 23 (26) | 9.2 (53) |
| Geneva | 47 | Rural | 9 (29) | -1.1 (44) | 66 (46) | 9 (56) | \$26,448 (50) | 20 (44) | -5 (62) | 4.9 (18) |
| Fayette | 48 | Rural | 3 (48) | -1.4 (48) | 66 (43) | 9 (52) | \$28,539 (40) | 17 (36) | 16 (37) | 8.2 (47) |
| Lowndes | 49 | Rural | 6 (38) | -0.7 (35) | 64 (54) | 11 (35) | \$23,050 (60) | 31 (61) | 38 (8) | 11.4 (61) |
| Coosa | 49 | Rural | 10 (36) | -3.3 (61) | 66 (45) | 8 (61) | \$29,873 (35) | 15 (18) | 11 (44) | 8.5 (52) |
| Covington | 49 | Rural | 3 (47) | -1.9 (53) | 68 (34) | 12 (27) | \$26,336 (51) | 18 (39) | -6 (63) | 7.1 (38) |
| Macon | 52 | Rural | -3 (63) | -2.8 (59) | 70 (28) | 19 (9) | \$21,180 (62) | 33 (62) | 11 (46) | 6.0 (28) |
| Marion | 53 | Rural | 5 (44) | -3.4 (62) | 63 (58) | 8 (61) | \$27,475 (46) | 16 (23) | 23 (25) | 8.2 (47) |
| Monroe | 54 | Rural | 2 (51) | -1.9 (53) | 68 (35) | 12 (31) | \$29,093 (37) | 21 (48) | -4 (61) | 9.4 (54) |
| Chambers | 55 | Rural | -1 (57) | -2.3 (56) | 64 (55) | 10 (51) | \$29,667 (36) | 17 (31) | -2 (57) | 6.4 (33) |
| Crenshaw | 56 | Rural | 0 (54) | -0.6 (32) | 60 (66) | 11 (32) | \$26,054 (53) | 22 (50) | -13 (65) | 7.1 (39) |
| Butler | 57 | Rural | -2 (60) | -3.4 (62) | 68 (36) | 10 (39) | \$24,791 (57) | 25 (54) | 22 (28) | 10.0 (57) |
| Pickens | 58 | Rural | 1 (52) | -2.0 (55) | 70 (29) | 10 (45) | \$26,254 (52) | 25 (55) | -2 (58) | 8.3 (49) |
| Dallas | 59 | Rural | -4 (65) | -3.1 (60) | 70 (26) | 14 (23) | \$23,370 (59) | 31 (60) | 12 (41) | 11.8 (64) |
| Wilcox | 59 | Rural | -3 (62) | 0.0 (23) | 60 (67) | 10 (41) | \$16,646 (67) | 39 (67) | 62 (5) | 13.9 (66) |
| Lamar | 61 | Rural | 1 (52) | -5.0 (67) | 65 (49) | 8 (63) | \$28,059 (43) | 16 (27) | -3 (59) | 11 (60) |
| Conecuh | 62 | Rural | 0 (54) | -3.7 (64) | 68 (37) | 9 (52) | \$22,111 (61) | 27 (57) | 10 (47) | 8.3 (49) |
| Greene | 63 | Rural | -2 (59) | -0.7 (35) | 65 (51) | 11 (38) | \$19,819 (65) | 34 (64) | -8 (64) | 11.5 (63) |
| Bullock | 64 | Rural | 6 (41) | -2.5 (57) | 61 (65) | 8 (65) | \$20,605 (63) | 34 (63) | 23 (27) | 12.5 (65) |
| Perry | 65 | Rural | -7 (66) | -1.3 (47) | 62 (62) | 10 (42) | \$20,200 (64) | 35 (65) | 12 (43) | 10.5 (59) |
| Sumter | 66 | Rural | -9 (67) | -4.3 (66) | 65 (52) | 12 (26) | \$18,911 (66) | 39 (66) | 3 (52) | 9.9 (56) |
| Choctaw | 67 | Rural | -1 (56) | -4.2 (65) | 65 (50) | 10 (49) | \$24,749 (58) | 25 (53) | -23 (67) | 11.4 (61) |

(a) Composite rank (unweighted average rank for all 8 variables).

The index captures four components of economic vitality: 1) population growth (change for 1990-2000 and 2000-2003); 2) workforce readiness (% of high school graduates and % college graduates); 3) personal income (median household income and poverty rate); and 4) employment (unemployment rate and job change for 1990-2002).

(b) percent population change, 1990-2000 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(c) percent population change, 2000-2003 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(d) percent of population 25 and older with a high school diploma, 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(e) percent of population 25 and older with a B.S. degree or higher, 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(f) Median household income, 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(g) percent of the population 15+ in poverty, 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(h) percent change in number of jobs, 1990-2002 (U.S. Census Bureau).

(i) average unemployment rate, 2002 and 2003 (Alabama Department of Industrial Relations).





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