

Spring 2022 Volume 79, Issue 4

The Alabama

MUNICIPAL

Official publication of the Alabama League of Municipalities

Journal



In this issue: **RURAL AND SMALL TOWN TOURISM**



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The Alabama MUNICIPAL Journal

Official publication of the Alabama League of Municipalities

Spring 2022 • Volume 79, Issue 4

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The Horton Mill Covered Bridge is a wooden covered bridge off State Route 75 about five miles north of Oneonta in Blount County. Opened in 1935, it's one of the highest covered bridges in the nation, standing at 70 feet above the Black Warrior River. It is also one of three which still exist in Blount County, Alabama's Covered Bridge Capital, and home of the Covered Bridge Festival each fall in Oneonta. Photo by Scott Baker, scottbakerphotography.com.

ALM Continues to Recruit Partners, Expand Services, Host Events

Gregory D. Cochran • Executive Director

It has been an interesting time for Alabama's municipalities. The COVID virus continues to impact our lives and how we interact with our neighbors. We have mourned the loss of family, friends and business associates in our communities. Yet, despite two years of COVID, our communities have continued to provide quality-of-life services to their citizens. Municipal employees continued to work by delivering clean drinking water, utilities, policing and fire protection and providing sanitation services for our homes and businesses. They also kept our parks and recreation areas clean and functional to provide families a safe place to play and relax. We do not take lightly the commitment it took from each of these employees and officials in providing these services to their community.

Our association, along with the engagement and leadership of our members, has emerged from COVID's impact with greater intention and determination to provide the resources, tools and training our members need to deliver the quality-of-life services their constituents deserve. We have already taken the steps to reach outside our own walls to be a resource provider through implementing our strategic partnership program. The partnership program provides unique and intentional collaboration opportunities with local, state, federal and community stakeholders to foster vibrant communities where businesses want to invest and where citizens want to live, work, play and prosper.

Additionally, in January, we kicked off the ALM Economic Development Academy training sessions in partnership with Neal Wade, the Alabama Community College System and numerous organizations involved with economic development. There are 30 communities from across the state participating in the first class of the Academy and we commend them on

their commitment to this program. With their engagement, it has the ability to produce substantial results that empowers our officials to create legacy programs and projects within their cities and towns.

We also hosted several events this winter with the Municipal Advocacy Day (January), the Women in Government Leadership Luncheon (March) as well as the Alabama Caucus Reception, breakfast with Alabama's senators and Congressional Dinners during the NLC Congressional Cities Conference in Washington, D.C. (March). Each of these events was designed to allow our elected members to network and build relationships with state and federal policy makers and strategic partners. During these events, we heard from outstanding speakers such as Governor Kay Ivey, U.S. Senators Richard Shelby and Tommy Tuberville, Congresswoman Terri Sewell, Congressman Mike Rogers, Congressman Robert Aderholt, Congressman Jerry Carl and Congressman Barry Moore, Myla Calhoun, Vice President of Alabama Power's Birmingham division and several other state leaders.

The 2022 Annual Convention is right around the corner! This year's event will be held in Tuscaloosa, May 11-14. We have a wonderful line-up of speakers and events, which include Governor Kay Ivey; Coach Nick Saban; author and breakout star of the Netflix documentary series *Last Chance U*, Brittany Wagner; and CEO of the National League of Cities, Clarence Anthony. We also will have our popular "Ask your Attorney" panel and round table sessions back! The Expo Hall is filling up quickly with vendors, so be sure to email Cindy Price on our team to secure your spot. Also back by popular demand – Party on the Moon will perform Friday evening to close out convention! If you have not registered yet, please be sure to visit almonline.org to do so. We look forward to seeing you there!

In closing, we are honored by your trust in hosting these in-person meetings and we value your time and presence. Therefore, we always strive to ensure we are providing you with excellent resources, tools and training at these events. Thank you for your engagement with the League and your leadership in your communities.

Peace be with you. ■



Leadership Perspective

Mayor Gary Fuller • Opelika • ALM President



As I complete my term as League President, I want to thank you for entrusting me with the honor of serving and representing you. My year seems to have flown by as we have navigated our way through (and hopefully out of) the COVID pandemic. And while the past two years have tested all of us and our communities, there have also been some silver linings. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding that is now coming into our state, counties and individual cities and towns will provide Alabama's municipalities with opportunities for quality of life enhancements that may never have been realized otherwise. Broadband expansion into our rural and underserved areas is going to be a game-changer on every level, from healthcare to education to workforce development. The League has played an invaluable role in the ARPA distribution process – from working with the Alabama Department of Finance to ensure municipalities were in the system to providing guidance on use of funds and reporting requirements. I'm extremely proud of our staff. They never slow down. We are fortunate.

Speaking of not slowing down, the League has helped us all ease back into "normal" by offering in-person events this year. Our Advocacy Day in January was well attended as was our Legislative Reception that evening at League headquarters. Our one-day CMO regional training sessions have begun and are scheduled throughout the state so visit our website to register. And, of course, the event we all look forward to – our Annual Convention – will be held in Tuscaloosa May 11-14. The agenda is excellent, featuring Coach Nick Saban as well as Brittany Wagner, academic athletic counselor, author and breakout star of the Netflix documentary series *Last Chance U*. I hope you have made plans to be in Tuscaloosa. Our staff has outdone themselves planning this event and I look forward to visiting with you there.

Thank you for supporting our outstanding organization. Thank for selflessly serving your communities. And thank you again for allowing me the honor of serving you. ■



Mayor Lawrence "Tony" Haygood, Jr. • Tuskegee • ALM Vice President

While this issue of the *Journal* is dedicated to rural and small town tourism, the information is valuable to communities of all sizes. Tourism is an important economic driver throughout our entire state and I encourage every city and town to take advantage of this sometimes overlooked opportunity. Every community has something unique to offer, from history and culture to scenic spaces such as parks and hiking trails to distinctive murals and interesting mom and pop restaurants and retail establishments. Determine your municipality's charm factor and then find ways to capitalize on it! Is your municipality located near a state park? Can you offer an outdoor experience such as hiking, camping, bird-watching, kayaking, boating? What is there to see and do in your area? Festivals? Special or sporting events? Unique eateries? Places of historical or cultural significance? How are you marketing those opportunities to people outside your community? Is your municipal website dynamic? Is your social media presence interesting? What about grants? Do you know what to apply for, where to apply or how to apply? Read on to learn more! Additionally, Tami Reist with Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association (an ALM strategic partner) has written an excellent article outlining the steps your community should consider as you begin devising ways to attract tourists. She also includes a list of resources every municipality should keep close. There are also several articles about public art, particularly murals, that provide beneficial information when thinking about how to add visual flair to your community. I believe you'll find that this issue not only offers encouragement but a great deal of useful "how to" information. Enjoy!

One final thought, the League is continually working with our strategic and community partners to identify resources and training to help local leaders enhance community quality of life. Many of our partners will be represented in some capacity at our annual convention in Tuscaloosa this May so I encourage you to visit their booths at the Expo Hall and make a connection. I look forward to seeing you there! ■

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Sean Duke Named President of the Alabama Municipal Insurance Corporation



Following the December 2021 retirement of Steve Wells, the Alabama Municipal Insurance Corporation (AMIC) Board of Directors named Sean Duke as its new president. Sean, who began his tenure with AMIC on March 1, was a 24-year veteran of the Alabama Department of Insurance; holds a degree in Finance from Auburn University at Montgomery; and resides with his wife in Grady, Alabama. He brings excellent skills in insurance operations and regulatory requirements as well as a solid understanding of budgetary and financial applications in the support of AMIC's growing customer base. The AMIC Board is pleased to welcome Sean to the AMIC family and wishes him the very best.

ALM Women in Government Leadership Luncheon Celebrated Women's History Month

The League kicked off Women's History Month in March with its annual Women in Government Leadership Luncheon! We were thrilled to have Governor Kay Ivey and Myla Calhoun, vice president of Alabama Power's Birmingham Division, deliver remarks during the luncheon. Also in attendance were several municipal officials, strategic partners, stakeholders, lawmakers and ALM staff. Each woman represented at the luncheon plays a vital role in local, state and federal government, working to ensure that Alabama is a place where citizens can live, work, play and prosper and where businesses can invest.



Myla Calhoun with Alabama Power (left) and Gov. Kay Ivey addressed attendees during ALM's annual Women in Government Leadership Luncheon on March 1, 2022, in Montgomery. (Photo of Gov. Ivey by Hal Yeager, Director of Photography for the Governor's Office.)

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By Lori Lein, ALM General Counsel

Just Because You Can Doesn't Mean You Should Private Business Activities and the Municipal Official

There is little doubt that creating and maintaining an attractive municipal environment for recruiting retail business is key to the long-term success of a municipality. Doing this effectively requires ongoing relationships between elected officials and private businesses, not only the retail businesses being recruited but the businesses that help create and maintain all aspects of the overall municipal environment – everything from banks to construction companies and contractors to utilities. These relationships can present potential conflicts of interest for municipal elected officials, especially officials who are themselves involved with private business in some way – personally through employment or ownership interests. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “conflict of interest” as “a conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust.”

This article, which is part of a larger article titled “Conflicting Offices and Interests” found in the Selected Readings for the Municipal Official (2020 ed.), will focus on some of the legal prohibitions municipal officials need to be aware of regarding their private business dealings and their role as an elected public official.

The Law Specific to Municipal Officials

A number of statutes prohibit municipal officers and employees from having specific dealings with a municipality, but the one most widely referred to is found in Section 11-43-12, Code of Alabama 1975. It provides, in part, as follows:

“No alderman or officer or employee of the municipality shall be directly or indirectly interested in any work, business, or contract, the expense, price, or consideration of which is paid from the treasury, nor shall any member of the council, or officer of the municipality be surety for any person having a contract, work, or business with such municipality, for the performance of which a surety may be required.”

The law not only prohibits officers and employees from having contracts with the municipality, it prohibits their being employed by the municipality. As with most laws, the devil is always in the details and the specific facts of any given

situation. There are numerous opinions of the Attorney General that have been issued interpreting Section 11-43-12 against factual questions presented. The AG has determined that this section prohibits a town from purchasing land from its mayor. AGO 1981-239 (to Hon. Charles Couch, February 10, 1981). A municipality may, however, condemn the property of a municipal officer or employee provided that the officer or employee refrains from the decision-making process regarding the condemnation. AGO 1996-231. A municipality may purchase property owned by the mayor’s mother when the mother is not a member of the mayor’s household, not financially dependent on the mayor and the mayor does not participate in either the discussion or the vote. AGO 1997-140. A city may enter into an agreement, which involves the mayor’s son as a real estate broker, provided the mayor does not reside in the same household as his son, is not financially dependent on his son, and does not participate in the discussion or vote on whether or not to enter into the agreement. AGO 2005-181.

The section also prohibits a company in which a councilmember owns a majority of the stock from selling materials to an independent contractor who is working on a city project if such materials will be used in the city project. AGO 1981-258 (to Hon. William J. Trussell, February 19, 1981). A councilmember who is a landlord may not participate in a community block grant program in the municipality for which he or she serves. AGO 1996-323.

A councilmember may not be employed by an engineering firm as a resident inspector for a project where the engineering company is performing services under direct contract with the city. AGO 1982-077 (to Hon. Charles E. Bailey, November 16, 1981). A councilmember may participate in the appointment or election of a son-in-law or stepfather to a city board provided the relative is not financially dependent upon the councilmember and is not an employer or employee of the councilmember. AGO 1983-112 (to Hon. Fred W. Purdy, December 29, 1982). A police dispatcher cannot serve as an agent for a bail bonding business in the city. AGO 1993-116. A mayor and members of the council may receive water and cable television discounts only if granted as part of their salaries. AGO 1991-173.

continued page 64

Alabama Power Helps Alabama Municipalities Shine

LED lighting team is taking the company's mission to power a better Alabama to the streets

Dennis Washington • Alabama Power

New state-of-the-art LED lighting in communities across Alabama are shining a brighter light on streets and sidewalks, allowing residents to enjoy neighborhoods and city centers more safely. This wave of enhancement is the handywork of Alabama Power's Lighting Team – a group focused on helping communities' glow to their full potential.

"Lighting truly makes communities brighter," said Terrance Moultrie, Alabama Power's Lighting Sales Manager. "Our team of lighting specialists has the knowledge, expertise and experience to design LED lighting systems that provide quality, energy efficiency and reliability to your community."

LED light fixtures not only reduce municipal energy costs and consumption, these upgrades also increase neighborhood safety and security, allowing businesses to extend their operating hours. The LED lighting team offers a complete range of services – including design, installation and maintenance of the system. Since 2015, Alabama Power has worked on more than 187 projects with municipalities, with more than 180,364 fixtures replaced.

Recently, Alabama Power began work in Auburn to upgrade fixtures with LEDs as part of a joint project to increase neighborhood security and visibility.

"We're excited about it," said Alison Frazier, director of Engineering Services for Auburn. "We get a lot of complaints from citizens that their neighborhood is dark or their street is too dark. One of the benefits I'm hoping for is minimizing those phone calls."

Auburn joins a growing list of cities and counties in Alabama working with Alabama Power on LED lighting upgrades. Similar projects have been started in Mobile, Birmingham and Montgomery.

"The new lights provide better-quality lighting," said D.J. Taylor, municipal account manager in Alabama Power's Lighting Services division. "That enhances safety and security throughout the city."

The new lights are brighter and require less maintenance than the older, high-pressure sodium, mercury-vapor and metal halide streetlights. They are more durable and last longer than traditional fixtures, in addition to providing better-quality lighting and visibility for motorists and pedestrians. Under the contract with these cities, Alabama Power installs the LED equipment and continue to provide maintenance, repairs and replacement service for the lights and poles.

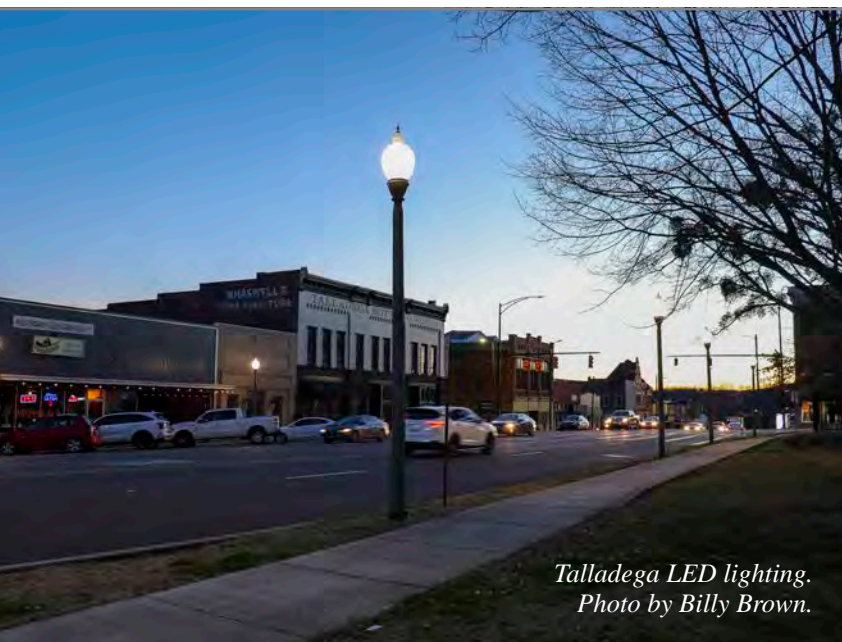
Taylor said the upgrades in Auburn are scheduled to be completed in 2022, thanks in part to the city's help in coordinating installations. "This is a great partnership," he said. "The citizens of Auburn will be extremely satisfied."

Clean, Consistent Lights in Talladega

The company works with municipalities of all sizes on LED lighting upgrades, from larger cities to more



LED lighting installation.



*Talladega LED lighting.
Photo by Billy Brown.*

rural communities. Early in 2021, Alabama Power began working with the city of Talladega to convert more than 2,000 old style fixtures to LEDs. The project is around 85 percent complete, with positive feedback already pouring in.

“We’ve received so many compliments from our residents on the lights so far,” said Karen Phillips, director of Public Works and Animal Control for the city of Talladega. “They provide a clearer and brighter light – taking away the dark and making Talladega a brighter community.”

Robert Richardson, lighting market specialist for Alabama Power who is working on the Talladega upgrade, added that previously the cityscape had three different light types and each one had a different color temperature. A goal of the project is to get all the lights on the same page, no matter where you travel throughout Talladega.

“We are thrilled to jump right in with Talladega to provide a clean and consistent look throughout the city,” said Richardson. “The upgraded lights not only emit the same bright white color, but they have a much higher lifespan, with little degradation to the light output over time.”

Phillips said increased community security is important to the city. “Well lit areas can help reduce crime,” she said. “We want each neighborhood and park in our city to be walkable and inviting, even as the sun goes down. These lighting upgrades have helped us create a more connected community.”



Talladega LED lighting.
Photo by Billy Brown.

LED Lighting Program Resources

To learn more about Alabama Power’s LED lighting program and its partnerships with municipalities, go to Alabamapower.com and search for “LED lighting.” ■

LED lighting benefits

Energy-efficient and environmentally friendly, LED lighting offers additional benefits:

- Superior lighting quality for enhanced safety and security.
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- Industrial Facilities
- Residential Developments
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Alabama Power, a subsidiary of Atlanta-based Southern Company (NYSE:SO), provides dependable, affordable electricity to 1.5 million customers across the state. Supporting the communities we serve is at the core of our mission and we are focused on providing innovative solutions to grow the state and enhance the lives of our customers. Learn more at www.alabamapower.com.

NATIONAL CHAMPION OF LOCAL LEADERS

Clarence E. Anthony • CEO and Executive Director

When a crisis strikes a community, it's not the President or Congress who acts first. It isn't the talking heads or pundits we see on the news each night who folks look to for answers. It's the local leaders of America, including those here in Alabama, who take action and provide comfort to residents.

Local government is the level of government closest to the people – this is especially true for small cities and towns. We live among those we serve. We are the ones who residents see at the grocery store and run into when dropping kids off at school each morning. There is no running from accountability when you're a local leader and we are the ones who can deliver real, meaningful change to our communities.

Local leadership can be a challenging, and at times lonely, path of service. As a former mayor of a small city myself, I know all too well what it's like to lose sleep over a challenge that my community is facing and feel alone. During my years of public service, I found so much strength and support in my state municipal league and the National League of Cities (NLC) – www.nlc.org.

In line with the Alabama League of Municipalities' mission to strengthen municipal government through advocacy, training and the advancement of effective local leadership, NLC serves as local leaders' champion at the national level. We are the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people across the country, and every day we work to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC recognizes that each municipality is different, so we work to make sure that our efforts support communities of all sizes. More than 80% of our membership is made up of small municipalities and for the last two years, local leaders from Union City, Georgia, and Lexington, South Carolina, (municipalities

of less than 25,000 residents) have served as presidents of our organization. NLC also convenes a Small Cities Council (www.nlc.org/initiative/small-cities-council/), open to municipal officials from our member cities with populations of 50,000 or less, to share ideas and creative solutions to challenges affecting small cities and towns.

We know that these small municipalities may have the same challenges that larger cities have but without as many resources. From maintaining a sense of community during quarantine, to addressing addiction, from utilizing and accessing data effectively to ensuring compliance with EPA lead and copper rules, Alabama's small cities and towns are doing it all and the National League of Cities is working hard to fill the gap in support with additional resources and guidance.

In short, if you are a municipality serving your residents, NLC is serving you. When COVID-19 struck, NLC worked tirelessly with the Alabama League and other state leagues to advocate for federal relief for towns, cities and villages throughout Alabama and the rest of the country. Through our *Cities are Essential* campaign, we pushed Congress and the Administration to act.

In 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed but only supported states, tribal governments and local governments with a population of more than 500,000 people. We knew this wasn't enough – too many municipalities (especially smaller communities) were being left out of America's recovery, so we continued to fight.

Finally, in March of 2021, NLC and the League delivered \$65.1 billion in critical, direct and flexible relief for communities through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA.) The state and local funding provisions in ARPA have been a true lifeline to municipalities. This funding will allow municipalities in Alabama and across the country to fill budget gaps, maintain vital services, complete or restart stalled infrastructure projects and much more.

For example, in **Foley**, ARPA funds will be used to increase digital access for residents through its local library and additional wi-fi hot spots throughout the city. In **Jemison**, resources from the American Rescue Plan Act will be used to address sewer issues in the South Ridge subdivision, improving water service on the north end of the city. In **Haleyville**, ARPA funds will be used to make much-needed improvements at Lakeland Community Hospital to enhance patient and guest experiences.

While COVID-19 has provided historic challenges to our country, resources from the American Rescue Plan will provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity for local leaders to invest in our communities. During our annual Congressional City Conference this past March in Washington D.C., local leaders further jumpstarted their community's economic recovery by accessing best in class resources and connecting with experts and federal agencies on how to leverage historic federal programs and funding.

Together, we can make sure that we leave not one community or resident behind in America's recovery from COVID-19. We may not know what the future will bring, but we do know that we can address any challenge that comes our way together. ■

Clarence E. Anthony is the CEO and Executive Director of the National League of Cities, and previously served as the Mayor of South Bay, Florida.



It Only Takes A Spark

Developing Small Town Tourism

Tami Reist • President and CEO • Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association

Small towns and rural communities across the United States are struggling with their futures and how they can be prosperous in today's world while operating on a shoestring budget. More than ever before, rural communities must become proactive and creative in terms of economic development. Fortunately, sometimes it only takes a spark.

Why Tourism for Economic Development?

While many cities focus their economic development efforts on recruiting major industries such as manufacturers or large retailers, relying on recruitment of large, big box employers alone can be a challenge for small towns and cities. Small communities often are unable to offer the same level of resources and incentives as larger cities, which makes it difficult for them to compete. Many times, tourism and economic development are not considered complimentary; however, by identifying existing assets and resources that make an area unique, tourism can become a main instrument for regional development. There are many reasons a community should use tourism for economic development.

1. **There is a low startup cost.** A small festival or special event can be launched for less than \$1,000.
2. **Sometimes there is no need to develop additional infrastructure.** New tourism projects use existing roads, power supplies, waste facilities, law enforcement and public lands, etc. and there are no overhead costs for construction of spec buildings, development of industrial parks, construction of new roads, addition of streetlights and power lines or expanded sewer lines.

continued page 54



The Horton Mill Covered Bridge is a wooden covered bridge off State Route 75 about five miles north of Oneonta in Blount County. Opened in 1935, it's one of the highest covered bridges in the nation, standing at 70 feet above the Black Warrior River. It is also one of three which still exist in Blount County, Alabama's Covered Bridge Capital and home of the Covered Bridge Festival each fall in Oneonta. Photo by Scott Baker; scottbakerphotography.com.



Alabama's only state tax refund municipal debt recovery program

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Why use Municipal Intercept Services (MIS) when you already have a debt collection service?

MIS is **NOT** a debt collection agency or service. MIS does not do what debt collection services do and debt collection services cannot offer what MIS does. MIS is a unique way to attempt to recover money owed to your municipality by “intercepting” an individual’s Alabama State tax refund. Debt collection agencies can NOT offer you this service. MIS is a legislatively sanctioned conduit with the Alabama Department of Revenue (ADOR) that enables ADOR to recover delinquent debts owed by individuals to your municipality by collecting this debt from the individual’s Alabama state tax refund. This system was made possible by an Alabama legislative change enacted in 2014 through which ADOR agreed to process these debts through only two clearinghouse organizations: the Alabama League of Municipalities (ALM) for municipal entities and the Association of County Commissions of Alabama (ACCA) for county entities. In 2015, ALM formed MIS to act as the clearinghouse on behalf of its municipal entities. **NOTE:** If the debtor is not eligible for an Alabama State tax refund, no money can be collected.

Who is eligible to use the MIS system?

Only municipal entities within Alabama are eligible to use the MIS system. This includes cities, towns, certain utility boards, housing authorities and hospitals. **For more information, visit: www.alintercept.org.**

Every little bit counts. Bigger doesn't mean better.

These euphemisms most certainly apply to grant funding for small town community development. As a grant consultant working for cities, towns, counties and water and sewer boards in Alabama, we often tend to focus on the larger “buckets” of grant funding such as Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants and, most recently, American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds made available from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM). However, sometimes the smaller grants can have the greatest impact on the rural communities throughout Alabama.

If you are new to local government and don't know where to begin, there are many resources available to you. Reach out to your Local Regional Planning Commission (alarc.org) – these organizations are filled with professionals with expertise and knowledge and can help you get started. Also, if you use a private grant consultant, reach out to them as well. For our company, Grant Management LLC, we make it a standard practice to help our clients on all grant projects if we are engaged on a larger project. Also, your city staff may have the right person ready to learn. Do you have an assistant who is willing to try something new? See if he or she would be interested in learning about grants. I have seen many Town Clerks master grants with skill and grace.

A smaller grant award doesn't necessarily mean less work or competition or time commitment. Sometimes they are even harder than the big dollar projects. However, the reward can be meaningful, especially if a community seeks those funds each year. For example, a \$5000 grant over 10 years results in \$50,000 – which results in consequential impact in your community.

Excel, Alabama – Small Town Grant Funding Success

Let's use the Town of Excel in Monroe County as a case study. If you have ever been lucky enough to meet Mayor Jenny Countryman, you will most definitely remember her. She is one of those people who can get things done unequivocally. Mayor Countryman has taught me valuable lessons about hard work and leadership, but one of the most important lessons I have learned from her is there is never a grant too small for her community.

The Town of Excel is located southeast of Monroe County with a population of around 600 people. Like most small towns in rural Alabama, Excel very easily could be withering on the vine. However, when you drive through Excel, you see a bustling downtown with restaurants, a grocery store, a vibrant public school and even new subdivisions. The growth in the community is “home-grown” – it is not blessed by proximity to the beaches like Baldwin County or adjacency to a variety of jobs like Madison County. Most notably, the Town has a high-quality public K-12 school – founded in 1911 that enrolls nearly 1,200 students in grades 4K-12 – which makes it a desirable place to live. Secondly, the Mayor and Council cultivate positive relationships with business owners and churches to grow a thriving community. Lastly, Mayor Countryman doggedly goes after every single grant opportunity that comes her way to improve the water, sewer, roads, landscaping, parks and sidewalks in her community. She has been consistently successful with the big grants, but she has also been successful with the smaller opportunities. She asks me to help her apply for these grants each year – and her hardworking Town Clerk also rolls up her sleeves to get it done.

Here are some examples of the smaller grants that have had a big impact on Excel and could also help your community.

Alabama Power Grants - Foundation Grants | Alabama Power Foundation | The Power of Good (powerofgood.com/grant/foundation-grants/). Alabama Power provides several grants for cities, towns and counties tailor-made for gateway signs and to plant trees. The grant applications must be submitted online, and you may have to track down someone who can make a map, take pictures and create budgets. However, the effort is most definitely worth your time. The website above



Mayor Jenny Countryman

has been updated with deadlines for 2022 so make sure you note the deadlines and start the process early. Completing the application can be a bit time consuming. Through Mayor Countryman’s encouragement, the Town of Excel has applied for Alabama Power grants each year resulting in numerous lovely welcome signs coming from each direction into the Town of Excel along with hundreds of native trees planted throughout the Town along sidewalks, on Main Street and in the parks. These subtle improvements grow pride in a community as well as support for the local government.

Walmart Local Community grants - Local Community Grants (walmart.org). If there is a Walmart serving residents in your community, I highly suggest you apply each year for a Local Community grant from Walmart. These grants provide from \$500 to \$5000 for a project which benefits a wide range of activities such as Community and Economic Development, Diversity and Inclusion, Education, Environmental Sustainability, Health and Human Service and Hunger Relief and Healthy Eating, Public Safety, and Quality of Life. In other words, this opportunity provides a broad range of resources your community may need. Is there one thing a community member has asked for that just isn’t in your budget? Get them involved and ask them to help you apply for these funds. The application process is not easy; you will need time and patience as Walmart uses a third party (Cyber Grants Front Door) to handle the application process. But if you apply each year, you may get some much-needed things done that are outside your financial reach. Mayor Countryman has used these funds to purchase flowers, fertilizer and soil for the town-owned planters in the spring and summer – something everyone in town can see and appreciate and that goes a long way to instilling community pride, not to mention one less expenditure in the General Fund budget. During the process, make time to stop by and meet your local Walmart manager and let them know you are applying. They can check on their end and help guide the funding to you.

Resource Council and Development (RC&D) grants - RC&D Council Contacts | Alabama RC&D (alabamarc.org). Resource Conservation and Development Councils are non-profit organizations designed to address unmet community needs by creating solutions. The Alabama Association of RC&D includes nine Councils throughout the state that have an annual grant program (see web link above). Most grants are available beginning on April 1, 2022, and there is a great deal of flexibility on how funds can be spent. The Town of Excel applies for these grants every year and has used them for garbage cans and renovating the dugouts at the ballpark. Another client has used these funds to construct elevated raised beds at the Senior Center so the seniors don’t have to bend over while growing flowers and vegetables. Although small, this project has resulted in more participation and enthusiasm than ever expected.

Grants from endowments, foundations and community development organizations. Another great tip we have learned from Mayor Countryman is to read the newspaper, social media posts and other press releases announcing a new project/grant. She will find out the name of the grant or sponsor (regardless of location) and investigate the source to determine if that organization will fund a project in Excel. This investigative bird dogging has paid off – even if the grant doesn’t pan out, we always wind up learning some valuable information.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, adopt Mayor Countryman’s work ethic and go after every single grant opportunity for your city or town. No amount of funding is too small especially when saving taxpayer dollars. Don’t be afraid to ask your grant writer or Regional Development Council staff for help if you run into roadblocks. Finally, when funded, make sure you reach out to the funder to thank them for their support. I suggest demonstrating to the funder how their funding has improved the community. A simple e-mail with a picture or a social media post goes a long way and lets them know their funds were well spent. ■



A native New Yorker, Cara landed in coastal Alabama after graduate school where she began her career working for the Baldwin County Commission and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Cara left the public sector in 2011 to establish a woman-owned consulting business to secure and manage grant-funded infrastructure projects for towns, cities, counties and water and sewer authorities in Southwest Alabama. Her company, Grant Management LLC, has achieved a high level of success serving over 50 clients and securing over \$90 million in funding for water, sewer, road, coastal restoration and economic development projects throughout Southwest Alabama. Cara graduated with a BS from the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington in 1994. She obtained her MS in Wetland Ecology and Natural Resource Management from the University of Florida in 2000. She lives in Spanish Fort and has one teenage daughter, Mia. She has developed a deep connection with rural Alabama and enjoys learning about its rich natural and cultural diversity. She is an amateur naturalist with specific interest in land conservation, butterflies and birds. She served on the Baldwin County Planning Commission from 2006-2012 and is passionate about the

role local government can play in community development.

PUBLIC ART FITS ANY SIZE COMMUNITY

MISSY MILES • MULTI-MEDIA/MURAL ARTIST • OWNER, MILES OF MURALS

Public art is all around us every day.

The Association for Public Art (APA) has stated that public art is not one specific art form: “Its size can be huge or small. Art can tower fifty-feet high or call attention to the paving beneath your feet. Its shape can be abstract or realistic (or both). And art may be cast, carved, built, assembled or painted.”

What distinguishes public art is the unique association of how it is made, where it is and what it means. Placed in public sites, this art is there for everyone to enjoy. Public art includes murals, sculptures, memorials, integrated architectural or landscape architectural work, community art, digital new media, events and festivals.

In my opinion, the most successful public art design plan for a community is one that is cohesive on all the above. Working together and having a well-conceived plan is key. Including public art in all parts of downtown areas shows that the community is connected and cares. Making all downtown or main areas visually appealing encourages traffic and conversations that are positive.

The APA also states that, in some degree, every public art project is an interactive process involving artists, architects, design professionals, community residents, civic leaders, politicians, approval agencies and contributing teams. The APA noted: “The challenge of this communal process is to enhance rather than limit the artist’s involvement.”

Beginning Phases are Challenging

It has been my experience as an artist that the beginning phases of a project are the most challenging. During the initial meeting, it’s crucial to collect everyone’s contact information as well as the design scope and overall goals for the project. I always enter these meetings with an open mind. The part that I’ve found most rewarding is being able to jump into the heads of individuals I’ve just met and ask questions that help me construct ideas for the project at the drop of a hat. My process of providing sketches and sample boards not only helps others visualize the project, but aids in promoting and supporting the project in the surrounding communities.

One of my favorite styles of public art is murals. And through designing and completing hundreds of murals, I’ve developed several crucial steps regarding this type of public art. On your first visit to a potential mural site, it’s important to take lots of photos of the target wall and its surroundings.

Assess the condition of the walls and their ability to support a mural. Here, I judge if the ground in front is easily accessible, level or uneven, and if utilities are convenient. This step is also when I calculate the amount of wall prep that will be needed.



Located in Fayette, “Tiger Territory” is the latest in a series of municipal murals by Missy Miles. Featured on a building facing the main entrance to the high school, this mural was funded through a Fayette Community Foundation grant applied for by the Fayette Community Development Corporation.



Check the surroundings. Height and obstructions need to be considered for safety. Consider the type of lift or amount of scaffolding required. Look for any power lines that may be in the way.

Note which direction the wall faces. If the wall is in direct sun all day, the mural may require extra coats to help prevent fading. I've found that reds and yellows can be prone to fading.

If the target wall is close to an intersection, I determine if traffic will need redirecting. And I decide then if special measures should be taken to avoid exhaust fumes.

Questions, Considerations and Pricing

Once you've done a thorough site inspection, you need to follow up on legal angles. Who owns the wall? Does the group behind the project have permission to use the site? Legal contract agreements may be needed to allow the project to proceed. These agreements are usually for a 10-year span and will need to be reviewed if the property changes hands. Revisions may also be needed after the first agreement times out.

All these questions and considerations need to be addressed so that artists can accurately quote a price for the project while keeping safety precautions in mind.

The next step is pricing. Most mural artists price their work differently. Some price by the square foot and the amount of detail required. I like to keep my pricing easy to follow – as well as fair and honest – so I break it down by the following: design fee, materials cost/labor for wall prep, materials/labor for laying out and executing the design, equipment rental or set-up cost and travel.

I also like to use resources in the community and buy local materials whenever possible. I prefer high-end exterior Latex paint, such as Benjamin Moore Aura or Sherman Williams Resilience. I have found that both products perform beautifully if a proper primer has been used.

Now begins another difficult part of the process. The waiting game. It's normal for months to pass from the time the project was approved until the execution of the design can begin. The time lapse may be due to grant approvals, scheduling, availability of materials and weather. I spend a lot of time watching weather forecasts to determine workdays.

Altered States and Hot Topics

Also of note, for the past two years, we have all done our best to adjust to an ever-changing world. We have seen many individuals and communities suffer great loss on many fronts. As Americans and as residents of rural Alabama, we have come together and shown great resilience.

While we experienced lockdowns and spent more time with family, I feel confident that art was probably happening in your life in some way. Art gives meanings to our lives and helps us understand our world. It is an essential part of our culture and allows us to have a deeper understanding of our emotions.

And during these trying times, I have witnessed organizations like Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association (AMLA) and Main Street Alabama (MSA) become huge parts of the successful recovery efforts in the municipalities we love. I've also had the honor of working with both non-profit organizations and have seen the differences they make for individuals and businesses alike.

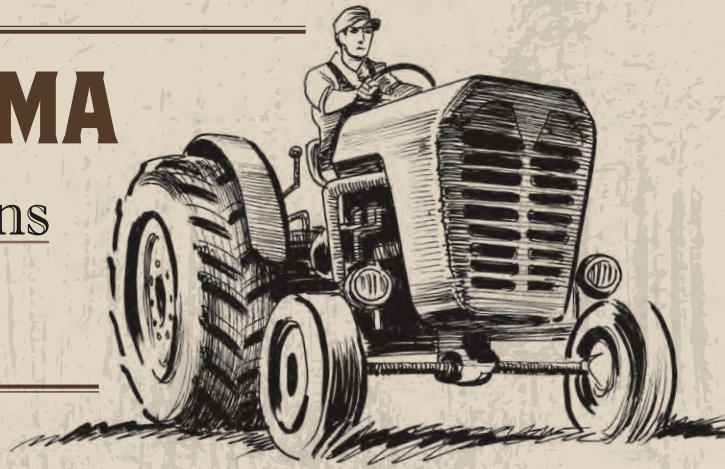
While AMLA provides many levels of marketing and promotion for tourism in North Alabama, MSA is a statewide organization focused on bringing jobs, dollars and people back to Alabama's historic communities. Economic development is at the heart of MSA's efforts to revitalize downtowns and neighborhoods across the state. I am truly inspired by the dynamic individuals involved with both these organizations who give their all for our great state.

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LEXINGTON, ALABAMA

Proving that small towns have BIG PULL

Sandra Killen Burroughs • Mayor • Town of Lexington



Traveling north on State Highway 101 about halfway between Athens and Florence, nestled in the corner of Northwest Alabama, you will roll right into Lexington, Alabama, home of Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient Don Michael. This is also the home of Lexington Motor Sports Park where the Annual Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull is held every year on the second weekend of August – an event that brings *thousands* of visitors into my hometown of 743 people. A little known (but very important) fact about this event is that *GQ Magazine* once listed the Lexington Tractor Pull to be one the top places to find a man.

Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull

Thinking back on the history of the Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull, the first thing that comes to mind is: WOW! What a community!! Way back before cable television, the internet, cell phones and even microwave ovens, a group of hard working, dedicated and determined friends got together with a single idea – creating an event that would help fund their volunteer fire department and rescue squad. One of the participants had recently attended a tractor pull in a neighboring state and brought the idea to the group for discussion. Together they crafted a big plan to make this unique event happen in little Lexington. That was 1978 and the Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull ran for 20 straight years until 2008 when the event took a 10-year hiatus, starting back up in 2019.

Once again, a group of hard working, dedicated and determined friends and members of the Lexington Volunteer Fire Department approached me, now the mayor of my hometown, with the new plan to revive the event and make it bigger and better than ever before.

At first, I told them no because I wasn't convinced we'd have the necessary funding, volunteers and capacity to ensure a successful event of this magnitude. But they proved me totally wrong. They first approached me in 2017 with the idea and then they came back in 2018 with an actual physical plan of how they would make the event a true success. That is when I agreed. I could see the look in their eyes – they truly had the right mindset; they had a plan; and we hit the ground running to have a tractor pull in August 2019. This is the part of the story where I reflect on a quote from Colin Powell: "A dream does not become a reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work." And that's exactly what we did.

As with all first-time events (or, in this case, first time in a decade), preparation was extremely tedious and at times overwhelming. We had to revisit all the sponsors from previous years and decide who would be a fit for this event now 10 years later. Some of the original sponsors were no longer in business and, while there were many new potential sponsors, we had limited



personnel to reach out and make the ask. Plus, we needed updated printed collateral to approach them all. We had some vendors who knew the history of the event; however, being out of the scene for 10 years made selling a potential sponsor on a package without proven attendance numbers and advertising reach was challenging – a leap of faith on their part. Fortunately, we had many vendors who took a chance on us and we wanted nothing more than to prove they had made the right decision to support us.

Just like most events, there is a break-even point that keeps lingering in your head. We knew we had to account for prize money as well as operational expenses, which could be high. With each new sponsorship package, we would run the numbers and decide where we wanted to be by the same time the next week. Once we covered the prize money, we felt much better and the conversation about the math changed to: “if we have 500 people each night, we should break even on concessions.”

For more than eight months, our volunteer group showed up night after night, day after day and weekend after weekend to work on the track, the concession stands, all the lighting, electrical, speakers, fencing, parking for the pullers and big hauling rigs, signage, advertising, ticketing and internet access. It was *a lot*, but what makes Lexington such a special place is that we had contacts for all these necessities. If someone in the group could not do the work, there would be someone we knew who could tackle that area.

When the Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull first began, it was a one-night event. Years later, it morphed into to a two-night event. So, when we started back up in 2019, we went with two nights. Our first night was a typical hot and balmy August evening. Gates opened at 5:00 p.m. with pulling scheduled for 7:00 p.m. The crowd started trickling in very slowly and then at 6:00 p.m., a big black rain cloud formed and hovered ominously over the track. We watched both the radar and the sky – all while continuing to prepare for the pull like there was no weather issue whatsoever. We were told it was raining two miles north and one mile south of our site but not one raindrop fell on us that night. Instead, that big black cloud changed directions and went north of us – a blessing I thanked God for all night long. By 7:00 p.m, the crowd was rolling in faster than the clouds, and by the time the first pull charged down the track, we had nearly 3,000 people watching live.

The second night was even bigger and better. We had over 5,000 attendees and no rain clouds. Spectators came to support our cause and experience a great motor sports competition event. That year alone, we collected \$179,000 to support our volunteer fire and rescue department. As soon as the second night was over, we began planning for the next year.

Unfortunately, 2020 was up for question with the Covid-19 outbreak hitting just four months prior. However, after much consideration, we decided we wanted to hold the event, so I reached out to State of Alabama leadership for approval. After speaking with Lt. Governor Will Ainsworth, Attorney General Steve Marshall and then ultimately getting the approval of Governor Kay Ivey, we forged ahead – with great success. Because the pull was outdoors, people felt it was safer to attend than an indoor event, and, once again, the crowd rolled in to support our efforts. And they showed up again in 2021 where we faced those same issues with Covid-19 but grossed over \$109,000. We plan to make our 2022 event the best one yet with more give-away items and additional pulling teams in the competition.

What is a Tractor Pull?

For those of you not fortunate enough to grow up around the powerful motor-sports competition known as Tractor Pulling, it’s much better understood by watching it take place, but I’ll give explaining it



a shot. The object is to pull a heavy sled loaded with weights down a track that is 30 feet wide and 320 feet long to determine who has the biggest and strongest tractor or truck along with the most skilled driver. The competition gets pretty intense since this is a competitive pulling circuit where points are calculated all year long for an overall winner at the end of the season. The score is kept and whoever pulls the sled the longest distance wins. It's not a race of speed but one of *power*, which is measured by thousandths of an inch from the beginning of the track until where the tractor or truck stops forward progress. Should there be a tie, the competitors would then have a “pull-off” to determine who wins.

While pulling a sled with weights sounds a little mundane, you must keep in mind that the weights inside that sled are mechanically winched forward as the sled progresses along the course so pulling this ever-increasing load eventually causes the vehicle to lose forward momentum and torque.

Because tractor pulling is a motorsport that relies on horsepower, the engines of the tractors and trucks must be altered from their original versions. The classification of the vehicle is determined by the horsepower and design of the tractor or truck. To make the competition a level playing field, like size motors and configurations compete against each other. Here is the interesting part: some of the tractor engines might include drag racing automotive type jet turbines or even aircraft configurations! The trucks that compete are two-wheel drive, four-wheel drive and semi-trucks.

There are various pulling circuits both locally and nationally along with all different levels from Lucas Oil to Grand National and everywhere between.

Whether you are a veteran motor-sports enthusiast or a first-time spectator, attending the Lexington Truck & Tractor Pull is certainly a sight to experience. The thrill of the sport comes from the magnitude of the massive power, the extremely loud roar of the engines, the black smoke rolling to the crowd screaming for their favorite make – from Dodge, Chevy or Ford to John Deere, Allis-Chalmers, New Holland or International Harvester and many more! This fast-paced annual two-night event with all its delicious concession-stand food is also a great place to people watch.



Your faith must be greater than your fear.

Reflecting on our tractor pull, Lexington began hosting this event in 1978 and ran it until rain forced us to cancel in 2008. After taking a 10-year hiatus, we began again with prep starting in 2018. Just like the original group of inspired Lexington residents who founded the tractor pull 40-plus years ago, we took a leap of faith to renew this former crowd pleaser – not knowing if it would be a success or flop. Apprehension goes hand in hand with a new venture and, as a small town, financial liabilities increase the pressure to make an event a success. The best advice I ever received was from a former coach from high school who said to succeed in any project, you have got to have the right mindset as well as the right people to help – those who have that same desire to succeed as you. So, my advice to you is this: Gather a strong team. Begin with an ending in mind. Have a budget and stick to it. And, as Steve Harvey says, your faith has to be greater than your fear. ■



Sandra was born and raised in Lexington, Alabama, and still resides there today. She is a graduate of the University of North Alabama with a double major in Management and Marketing and a member of the UNA Alumni Association. Sandra has been in the tourism and hospitality industry since 1995 and has extended experience in conference and convention meeting planning as well as hotel sales and hotel management with Marriott, Hilton and Intercontinental Hotels. She worked with Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association for 11 years as membership director and legislative liaison and is currently the Executive Director of the Alabama Music Hall of Fame where she is responsible for the preservation and celebration of Alabama's musicians as well as the state's impressive musical heritage. She was elected mayor of her hometown in 2016 and reelected in 2020. Sandra is a member of the NACOLG Budget and Personnel Committee along with the Board of Directors of Southeast Tourism Society in Atlanta Georgia. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Alabama League of Municipalities.

Murals are in the spotlight by these organizations as well as several others. AMLA and the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED) have both released Alabama Mural Trail Apps. And with murals being such a “hot topic” nowadays, it’s perfect timing.

AMLA released the North Alabama Mural Trail in September 2021 (www.northalabama.org/trails/mural-trail). UACED launched the Alabama Mural Trail in partnership with the Ala-Tom RC&D Council, the AMLA and the Alabama Tourism Department. This statewide trail aims to encourage locals and tourists alike to explore someplace new. Murals are beneficial for communities of all sizes because they attract tourists who spend their dollars locally as well as provide points of interest to potential new residents and investors looking for a dynamic place to live and work. Visit www.alabamamuraltrail.org to find a mural near you. Also, the Facebook page “Murals of Alabama,” is continually highlighting remarkable murals in Alabama’s communities.

Hard Topics

There are also some “hard topics” regarding public art that are worth mentioning.

The first is an artist’s depiction of something that may be controversial. All art is subjective and public art is a gallery without doors or a clear message about its purpose. Controversial topics seem to invite scrutiny on all fronts, not just from the community where they’re located. You should also expect examination and comments from the public visiting the art in person as well as from online sources. I am not mentioning this to discourage an idea for a public art installation. I just caution you to keep in mind that if you do wish to present a controversial topic, it should be well thought-out and promoted with a clear narrative that the community is willing to stand behind. A mural in Indianapolis, Indiana, can serve as an example. The mural was beside a restaurant and the huge image depicted two rabbits mating with one smoking a cigar. Neighbors of the restaurant did not find the mural appropriate for children, nor did it reflect the character of the area. The mural was covered up by the owner about 40 hours after being painted. What is interesting is the same artist was then commissioned in Florida and Texas to paint similar versions of the original mural. Controversy by one mural turned heads and increased conversations – and the rabbits multiplied and garnered news coverage that crossed into three states. Regardless of whether you believe that’s a positive or negative outcome, I strongly recommend that those planning a public art exhibit not take the subject of controversy lightly.

The second hard topic concerns maintenance. The initial excitement of a completed project is exhilarating. Many hoops have been jumped through, announcements made and positive feedback surrounding the project portrays a huge success. But when the artist’s focus changes to the next project, the maintenance on the completed project should not be ignored. It is very important to address this, and a maintenance plan needs to be formed – preferably before the project even begins. You should ask the artist what the mural will look like in five years and in a decade. Discuss any special cleaning requirements, the specific materials used and note color codes for future reference. When the project needs refreshing, what are the estimated costs? It would be helpful to a community to allocate a budget plan for these types of future expenditures. It’s also important to note that there are grant possibilities that could help with the cost of refreshing an existing mural.

The last topic is one that hits close to home and one I recently experienced firsthand: the unexpected cover-up. My first mural project was completed in 2008 in a northwest Alabama community. This mural wall was the first step on my 14-year journey as a mural artist. Conceived as a solution to a problem wall in the downtown area, it provided a trompe-l’oeil (“deceive the eye”) perspective of three brick arches with beautiful flower gardens within each arch to create a pleasing backdrop for the city’s water fountain feature. At that time, a legal contract was signed and permission was granted by the building’s owner to use the wall for the mural for 10 years. It’s important to note that the owner was onboard from the beginning and included in all of the design revisions. Unfortunately, changes in the city government’s leadership led to an oversight of the contact agreement, which expired. Also, during the same time, communication was lost with the building owner. All plans for refreshing the mural became moot points when the owner decided to cover it up. Without an updated contract, there was no accountability for the



This Miles mural was specifically commissioned by the building's owner to welcome people to Fayette's downtown historic district. The sketches had to be approved by the city's Historical Committee and the Community Development Corporation funded the project.

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SELMA NEWBERN GREENSBORO

GEE'S BEND CAMDEN

KAY JACOBY

FORMER COMMUNITY ARTS PROGRAM MANAGER
ALABAMA STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

Arts and Intrigue in Alabama's Black Belt

Living in Montgomery puts me in a central location to explore the state, so I do.

When I recently left my job with the Alabama State Council on the Arts to pursue my own artistic endeavors, it afforded me time to continue my exploration of Alabama and – in particular – the Black Belt, which had piqued my interest while at the Council. It occurred to me one day that within a hundred-mile radius there are points of interest that are *internationally* recognized. I started thinking that these places, seen through artists' eyes, are just as interesting and exotic as we think of European villages as being (just not as old). Also, through the years I noticed that the South, in general, is viewed as intriguing, romantic, and definitely unique. So, come along and I'll introduce you to some of the people and places that embody these perceptions. They're all day trips from Montgomery, however, if you really want an in-depth experience, you can make your headquarters in Selma for a couple of nights and position yourself in the center of the action. Selma, the Queen City of the Black Belt, is in the middle of it all. So, let's go ...

SELMA Selma, oh Selma. I think Selma was my first experience of realizing there is so much more to a town than the history books show regarding the Civil War and Civil Rights. While they are both important things to learn about and not forget, Selma (pop. 17,791) is all that AND more.

I view Selma as somewhat of a "Scarlet Letter Town" because its worst day in history is what draws thousands of people from all over the world there annually. I like to refer to a quote by Bryan Stevenson, Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery: "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." It's ironic, but true. When people travel to Selma to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, visit historic Brown's Chapel and experience the Selma Interpretive Center run by the National Park Service (you read that correctly – the same agency that runs Yellowstone Park) because they are important *internationally* recognized landmarks, I also want them to meet **Charlie Lucas, aka "The Tin Man,"** a self-taught artist whose work is recognized internationally. His sculpture and paintings have been exhibited throughout the country and beyond, including the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American Art. There are 13 of his works in the permanent collection of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and if you go to his Wikipedia entry it says "his list of exhibitions and permanent collections is too long to navigate." You can meet the artist himself in his studio at 9 Lauderdale Street. He's as charming as he is talented, and you'll be wowed by this enormous space filled with his unique creations available to purchase.

Around the corner is **Gallery 905**, a retail space dedicated to showcasing arts and crafts by regional artists and is an off-shoot of **Arts Revive**, a membership-based non-profit that is an excellent example of using art as the cornerstone in a community. Their building, which sits on the banks of the Alabama River, is a testament to the power of architectural revitalization. Visit www.artsrevive.com to learn more about their program.

Within walking distance is historic **St. Paul's Episcopal Church** (c. 1875) home to two Tiffany-stained glass windows designed by Selma native, **Clara Weaver Parrish**, an acclaimed artist who worked for the Louis Comfort Tiffany Studio in New York. She also designed two windows in Selma's First Baptist Church, in several other churches around the state and at St. Michael's Episcopal in New York City. She was instrumental in the Women's Art Club of New York in the 1890s and her work is in museums around the country, including Birmingham and Montgomery. Her paintings can be seen locally in Selma at **Sturdivant Hall**, a Greek Revival mansion (c. 1856) with formal gardens open to the public. It is one of the few houses that survived the Civil War and Wilson's Raiders who burned down much of the town in the Battle of Selma.



Charlie Lucas in his studio.
Photo by Kay Jacoby.

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loss of the mural. Having the mural covered was heartbreaking not only for me but for many others in the community. I believe the lesson here is, when dealing with public art, always make a plan that prevents agreements and contracts from expiring.

Public Art Makes A Difference

In closing, I have an exciting job that allows me to facilitate visual imagery for many communities that have remarkable stories to tell. It is a high honor to be able to use my passion and talent for art and design to make a difference in places I love. It's extremely rewarding to take problem walls and transform them into focal points or create backdrops to existing features. I'm proud to have more than 30 of my murals included on the Alabama Mural Trail. My aim is to produce quality murals that reflect the heart and history of the rural communities that commission me, and my work has taken me to more than 100 walls in seven counties in Northwest Alabama – Fayette, Franklin, Jefferson, Lamar, Marion, Walker and Winston. I have painted tributes to Revolutionary War heroes on brick walls to honor town namesakes and, in the process, made friendships that have made me a better person. I have painted calming blocks of color on a wall in a parking lot to refresh the minds of Home Health Care Nurses as they walk to their cars – a small way to show appreciation, but perhaps a big way to help them transition from job to home.

Many times, soon after my murals were completed, I have seen adjacent properties refresh their paint or replace torn awnings. Improvements to one building seem to start a positive chain reaction. Public art makes a difference. ■



Missy Miles is a Northwest Alabama artist who lives in Hamilton and is best known for her large mural paintings. Missy's passion for design and creativity led her to a Bachelor of Science degree in Interior Design from Bauder College in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, in 1992. Her first projects included roles with Alene Workman, ASID, in Hollywood, Florida, and Kathleen Evers, ASID, in Nashville, Tennessee, at Opry Land Hotel. She held many positions with Lowe's Home Center and as its district trainer for installed sales, she helped open more than 70 stores in the Midwest. Born in Camden, Alabama, her love of rural culture has remained part of her DNA. In 2000, upon her return to Alabama, Missy excelled in furniture design, quilting, canning, gourd art, painting and murals. Her prolific creations in gourd art led her to her crowning achievement as three-time "Alabama Gourd Queen" through the Alabama Gourd Society. Connecting art to community is Missy's passion. She can be reached via missy@milesofmurals.net.

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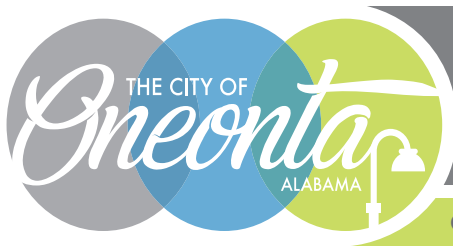


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A Social Media Sensation and Much More

Carrie Banks • Communications Director • ALM

Tucked into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in eastern Blount County, Oneonta is a thriving example of how hometown ingenuity, intentional planning, focused leadership and Southern hospitality not only enhances the quality of life for its citizens but attracts visitors year-round.

With a population of just under 7,000, Oneonta – named for its sister city in New York which derives its name from a Mohawk word meaning “rocks sticking out” or “open rocks” – was incorporated in 1891 and became the county seat in 1897. Originally settled for its abundance of iron ore, this charming community located in the heart of Murphree’s Valley is now known for its scenic surroundings, access to outdoor activities, vibrant pedestrian spaces, family-friendly festivals ... and viral TikTok videos.

Mayor Richard Phillips, who at 38 became the city’s youngest mayor when he was elected in 2020 following a full term on the City Council, is one of Oneonta’s most visible ambassadors. Literally. Last year, he began promoting his hometown via spontaneous TikTok videos under a **cityofoneonta** account that proclaims: **Oneonta, Alabama. We’re fun.** Clearly, others – many others – think so as well. The account has nearly 120,000 followers and views of the mayor’s videos range from 2,600 to 9.3 million. Yes, a community of 7,000 has reached *millions* thanks to short, lighthearted TikToks that cost the municipality nothing except a bit of creative energy and a willingness to show its less serious side. Thanks to the mayor’s ingenuity, Oneonta now has a unique, international presence – and he is well on his way to becoming a social media influencer, not only for his community but for municipal government.

GOING VIRAL

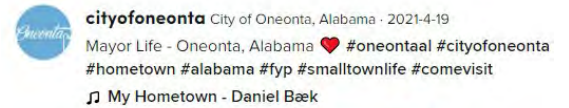
“Oneonta TikTok has been so much fun,” Phillips said. “What I thought would be a lighthearted way to personalize City Hall to locals exploded and has now reached millions and millions of viewers worldwide! I’ve been at events, including League events, and people will say to me – ‘you’re the TikTok mayor’. My niece attends the University of Alabama and someone in her sorority was following the Oneonta videos. It just goes to show that social media isn’t going anywhere and that, if used appropriately, what an impact it can have.”

Phillips said that because people often associate City Hall with paying fines, getting permits or “a bunch of red tape,” he wanted to show that City Hall is a building with “regular folks” just doing their jobs. “We laugh, cry and make tough decisions, but that doesn’t mean we can’t take a break to follow a trend and post a fun video,” he said. “We make sure it never detracts from anyone’s job responsibilities and we, of course, never spend any public funds.”

Additionally, his TikTok videos have been directly responsible for bringing visitors to the city. “I’ve actually had people come to my office and want a picture with me after they’ve traveled to Oneonta because of our social media,” said Phillips. “To date, the farthest someone has traveled just to see Oneonta because of our TikToks is Richmond, Virginia. A few months ago, it was Rome, Georgia!”

When he first took office as a councilmember in 2016, Oneonta had almost zero social media presence. Now the community is very active – and visible – not only via TikTok, but through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. “Social media platforms are no longer just about sharing vacation photos,” Phillips said. “All major brands have a presence on social media. At the end of the day, Oneonta is a brand. We are selling ourselves to visitors, retailers, businesses and tourists. It only makes sense to share news, updates and announcements via these mostly free platforms. It’s also the easiest and quickest way to get information out to the public. Whether it’s an event or severe weather updates, social media is a necessity.”

The mayor said that, as a matter of application, the city’s social media posts are informative, impartial and regular. “It’s the best way to gather a following and show people they can rely on your pages and posts for information.”





Phillips, who was raised in the community, graduated from Oneonta High School in 2000, earned his BFA in graphic design from Auburn and then spent six years working in New York City before returning “home” to attend law school. “My intention was to go directly to law school,” he said. “But as it happened, I was offered a design job in Manhattan and I thought, ‘what the heck?’. New York was one of the most incredible experiences of my life, but I soon realized that I did not see myself living the rest of my life there. As much as I was the kid who said I will never go back to my hometown, life is funny about teaching you lessons. I realized the very things I once loathed about small town America were the very things I needed.”

So, in 2011, Phillips returned to Oneonta, was accepted to law school and found that, even though he was facing a complete life change, it was easy to reacclimate to a hometown lifestyle. “Once back home, I was constantly noticing ways that we could change for the better without sacrificing the charm we all love,” he said. “My mind was racing with ideas and before long I decided to try my hand at municipal office. In 2016, I ran for the City Council and was elected.”

He’s not slowed down since.

BRANDING MATTERS

Even though he’s now an attorney by profession, as mayor, Phillips has taken an aggressive approach to not only brand and promote his community but to further expand community quality of life by cultivating and enhancing critical municipal tools including a dynamic website featuring community video tours, city service information and city government overviews (cityofoneonta.us); a new city logo that he designed (on page 25 in the heading); an Oneonta city app; and a deep dive into developing a comprehensive plan to take Oneonta well into the future.

“Like it or not, municipalities are a brand,” he said. “And just like at the supermarket, you buy the brand you know and trust. As a city, we have to establish ourselves as a brand people and businesses want to buy into. It starts with a strong identity – branding, logo, color scheme, website – and a thorough social media presence. Not only do all these platforms serve as a means of communication, but they make an impact. A professionally branded community makes a longer lasting impression than one that is not. It also offers the opportunity for a city to sell branded merchandise, such as hats, shirts and stickers, which end up serving as walking advertisements. Of course, it’s up to each city to handle its business as it deems fit, but it’s a mistake to think logo design and identity branding isn’t necessary. I *know* our rebranding has boosted our image; generated great amounts of interest; and served as a foundation for us to grow our community development footprint.”

The mayor also intends to soon begin formulating a marketing plan unique to Oneonta to promote not only longtime, popular city events such as the Covered Bridge Festival and June Fling, but to attract people locally, regionally and beyond to attend new events and to spend time in Oneonta’s bustling, pedestrian friendly downtown.

THRIVING DOWNTOWN

Oneonta’s downtown district runs from “Tin Town”, the community’s original block known for its tin awnings – which the current-day storefronts have endeavored to keep – to the large Wallace State Community College campus building at the opposite end that opened in 2016. While several mom-and-pop businesses in this now flourishing area have been in existence many years, the concerted efforts of the city over the past decade are what brought the district back to life.

Oneonta is a designated Alabama Community of Excellence, a program designed to provide technical assistance to select municipalities with populations of 2,000 to 18,000 to strengthen long-term economic success (alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org), and is also considering becoming part of the Main Street Alabama program (mainstreetalabama.org), which focuses on bringing jobs, commerce and people back to Alabama’s historic communities. Additionally, it has two strong community partners – the Blount-Oneonta Chamber of Commerce (blountoneontachamber.org) and the Oneonta Business Association (oneontabusinessassociation.com) – that provide invaluable resources and support. According to the mayor, the downtown district is now thriving with less than five vacancies out of approximately 75 retail spaces. However, while it takes committed partners working on multiple issues to create a healthy business district, the gamechanger for Oneonta’s downtown came in 2012 when the city went “wet” by voting to sell alcoholic beverages within the municipality.



Photo by Scott Baker, scottbakerphotography.com.

“When I was in high school, downtown was dead as a doornail,” Phillips said. “There was very little retail and only one restaurant. I think prior to us being wet, we weren’t seen as progressive. But once we went wet, there was a lot more growth because we designated the entire downtown area as an entertainment district.” Phillips emphasized this decision was especially impactful because Oneonta’s festivals and most of their major events are in the downtown area. In addition, city leaders are now highly focused on pedestrianization and are also in the planning process to build an amphitheater in one of the open downtown lots. So by designating the area an entertainment district – and offering special events such as their popular “Sips and Strolls” – both the restaurants and shops have a reason to stay open longer.

Phillips said the downtown business district has done a 180 – “a lot of which started through the vision of a former city manager as well as officials in office with foresight who realized that, with a community our size, we had to embrace our downtown. It’s part of our identity and we didn’t want it to get lost.”



Mayor Richard Phillips designed the city’s logo (p. 25) and his Oneonta TikTok videos have gone viral. Photo by Scott Baker, scottbakerphotography.com.

PLANNING AND SMART GROWTH

In addition to its downtown, Oneonta is focused on intentional growth for its entire five-mile footprint. “We want to be progressive without losing our identity,” Phillips said. “It’s about smart growth – if you’re not growing, you’re dying so we have to wrap our head around the fact that we’ve got to grow and we’ve got to embrace modernization in the 21st century but that doesn’t mean that you have to lose what makes your community special. I think we’ve done a really good job of putting that quilt together – through all these different people and groups that have worked so hard to make Oneonta the quaint little town that it is but responds to the generation that wants modernization and amenities, so we marry them both.”

Oneonta is a member of the Blount County Economic Development Council and is working closely with this organization to improve its industrial park, which is across from the High School. “We are currently undergoing a major expansion and renovation of that park because we have several hundred acres that aren’t developed,” Phillips said. “The approach in the past has been, as businesses come, we’ll prep the site, but now we’re taking an opposite tact to go ahead and get them ready for use.” This is being done by exploring grants through the federal infrastructure bill as well as through a portion of the \$1.5 million in ARPA funding the city received. Oneonta also actively seeks funding through state agencies and was recently awarded an \$800,000 ALDOT grant to pave a network of sidewalks.

Another significant project spearheaded by Phillips is developing a community-wide comprehensive plan to manage growth, anticipate future infrastructure needs and guide municipal budgeting. “Oneonta is applying for a grant with the help of the Regional Planning Commission to pay for an extensive comprehensive plan,”

Covered Bridge Festival

The Blount-Oneonta Chamber of Commerce started the Covered Bridge Festival as a way to celebrate the region's three historic covered bridges and to showcase everything that makes Blount County such a great place to live, work, and play. As many as 10,000 people attend this festival that's held the second Saturday in October and includes arts and crafts, a pancake breakfast, car show, entertainment, 5K run, quilt show, river walk and much more. There is also a children's activity area.

www.blountoneontachamber.org

June Fling

The Oneonta Business Association sponsors the Spring Fling in early June featuring craft and food vendors, antique car and truck shows, children's activities, entertainment, and numerous downtown business sales. Launched in 2002, this festival is a free event that was designed to help drive traffic to downtown Oneonta and attracts 2,000 to 5,000 attendees each year.

www.oneontabusinessassociation.com

he said. "No thriving community with the intention to continue to thrive and embrace smart growth is without a comprehensive plan. You can't not have one."

Phillips said a comprehensive plan will point the way forward. "As a community we aren't a child anymore, but we aren't a full grown adult. Oneonta is in the awkward growing phase. We'll grow out of it and into ourselves; we just have to be patient and do it right."

EXCITING FUTURE

Mayor Phillips is excited about the future of his community. "I have lived in different places and traveled to even more, and I have yet to find another like Oneonta," he said. "We've gone from tackling one project every few years to juggling several at one time. We have seen an increase in community pride that has extended to resident's private property. Folks are cleaning up, making renovations and embracing the aesthetic of our quaint city. We are a simple, Southern town thriving in the 21st century and embracing new, constructive ways to grow. It's a great place to call home. Y'all come visit!" ■

Carrie Banks is originally from rural, southeastern North Carolina where her mother owned and operated the True Value Hardware in her hometown. She received her BA in Journalism from East Carolina University and her MA in PR and Advertising from The University of Alabama. Since 1997 she has served as the Communications Director for the Alabama League of Municipalities where she oversees the communications/marketing and strategic planning efforts for ALM and its affiliate organizations. She has taught Fundamentals of Speech as an adjunct instructor for Troy University, Montgomery and has served on several statewide boards and committees, including the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Alabama Communities of Excellence and the Alabama Bicentennial Advisory Committee. She has a deep appreciation for small towns and the rural South.

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PUBLIC ART

An Economic Driver in Main Street Alabama Communities

Athens

Scottsboro

Monroeville

Fort Payne

Trisha Black • Marketing and Communications Manager • Main Street Alabama

Alabama is experiencing a public art resurgence in communities of all sizes. With art and cultural experiences drawing tourists, these communities are benefiting from the economic impact as tourists stay longer to shop and dine – generating more tax revenue and attracting more investment in the community. In Main Street districts, public art initiatives are often led by volunteers and funded largely by the private sector. These installations create unique spaces for the public to enjoy in a different way; to honor history; and to celebrate local talent.

Athens Main Street – “Athens Amplified”

Athens Main Street, led by Executive Director Tere Richardson, recognized the potential of utilizing a privately owned alley beside the Main Street office to connect an underutilized public parking lot to the downtown district. Richardson pulled together a volunteer committee and, in less than a year, Merchants Alley was complete. This large project totaling over \$200,000 (including \$75,000 of in-kind donations) was 93% privately funded.

Early on the committee wanted the alley to be inclusive and filled with vibrancy. They landed on the “Athens Amplified” theme to focus on the musical heritage of the community. As you enter the alley, you’re greeted by a gateway arch adorned with musical notes that were lifted out of the song “Stars Fell on Alabama.” The donor recognition piece is also a work of art, created by metal artist Micah Gregg, that mimics the staff of a guitar with picks featuring the donors’ names. There’s a large scaled mural by Decatur native Adam Stephenson to the left that pays homage to the Old Time Fiddler’s Convention held annually at Athens State University. Next are doors that, when opened, unveil a work of art created by students from the Alabama Center of the Arts. There’s also a mural board by spray-paint artist ARCY that was created in less than 8 hours as the public watched featuring Brittany Howard, a Grammy award winning singer/songwriter from Athens. Brittany even showed up to surprise spectators as the artist was wrapping the piece and signed the mural. Other works of art are selfie spots selected from Limestone County student submissions.

“It is such a gratifying feeling to see people of all ages visiting and enjoying the alley,” Richardson said. “The squeals of delight from the children as they discover the art behind the doors are music to my ears.”

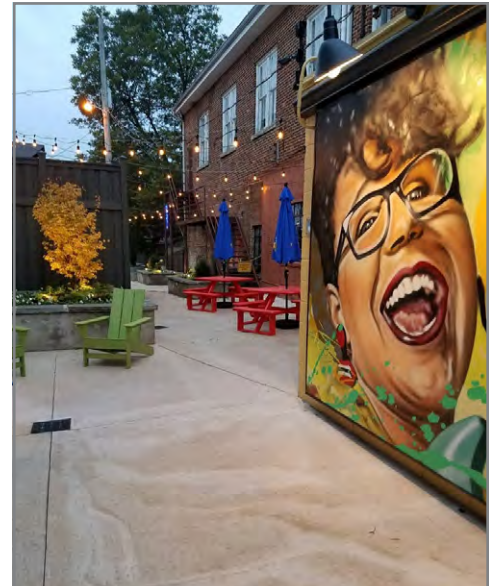
Merchants Alley was recently awarded the Alabama Mountain, Rivers, and Valleys RC&D Project of the Year. Athens Main Street will also be programming the alley with a music series later this year.

“This spring we will kick off the Merchants Alley Happy Hour Music series,” Richardson said. “Each Friday, beginning April 1st through August 1st, we will feature local musicians. The alley will be a perfect place to begin your weekend downtown.”

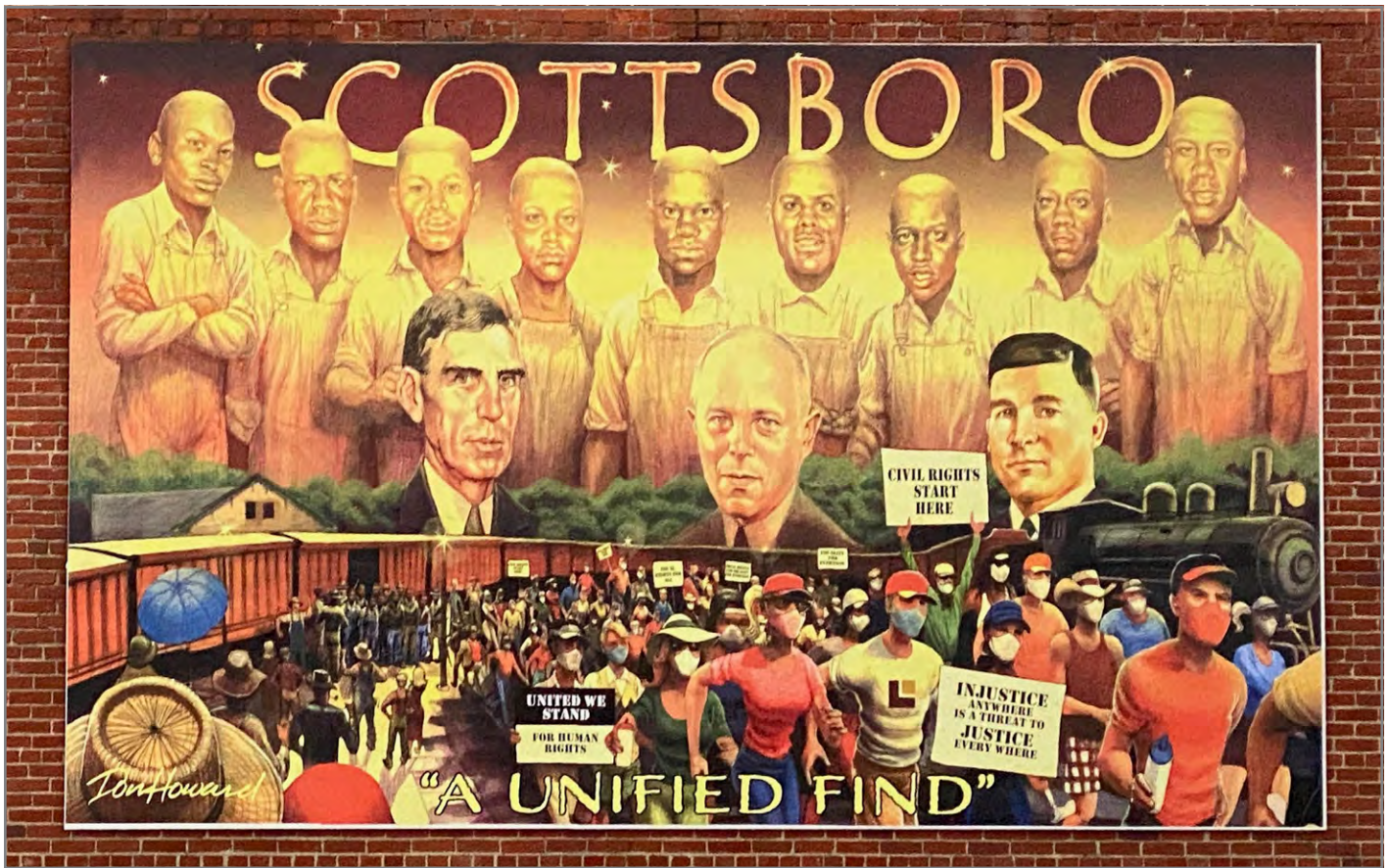
Main Street Scottsboro – Honoring Difficult History

In Scottsboro, recent projects have focused on history, including one about a period most don’t want to talk about. Katie Kirkland, Main Street Scottsboro’s Executive Director, said the project wanted to touch all aspects of their community and felt it was important to feature the Scottsboro Boys in some way as the 90th anniversary of the incident was approaching in 2021. Subsequently, a Prayer March was held in June 2020 that started at the museum and ended at the courthouse in honor of the nine young men wrongly accused of raping two women on a train in 1931.

With that showing of community support, it was evident that it was time to dedicate a memorial downtown. Kirkland



Merchants Alley before



reached out to Sheila Washington, then chairperson of the Scottsboro Boys Museum, to collaborate on the project. Don Howard, the first African American cartoonist to be hired at Disney and who lives in the Huntsville area, was commissioned to create a mural design.

The final design features the Scottsboro Boys, Sheriff Matt Wann, Judge James Horton and Labor Defense Attorney Samuel Leibowitz. Sheriff Wann stood outside the jail door in Scottsboro to hold off the lynch mob of more than 100 men who wanted to take the boys when they first arrived. He put himself in harm’s way to protect them. Judge Horton was courageous in that he was the one who set aside the verdict and death sentence of Haywood Patterson, one of the nine. Samuel Leibowitz declined payment to represent the boys and was completely selfless in defending them, especially in a situation where everyone wanted them convicted. Also depicted on the mural is the angry mob that met the train back in 1931 that then turns into the group in the 2020 prayer walk.

At the dedication Howard said: “What happened to the Scottsboro Boys is one of the pivotal stories in the history of racial injustice in the United States. This mural encapsulates the power of public art to confront the traumas of the past and generate new dialogues, respectfully and meaningfully, regarding racial inequality and violence, which is so prevalent today.”

The original drawing was printed on a 20’ x 12’ vinyl that is hung on Peachtree Street and was funded by Main Street Scottsboro. Sadly, Sheila Washington passed away before the dedication.

In addition to the mural, Main Street Scottsboro also created the Scottsboro Photo Trail. Forty historical photos are printed on metal signs and are placed throughout the downtown district. Kirkland said tourists are often seen walking the entire square and enjoying the glimpses back in time. “Downtown Scottsboro is filled with history,” she said. “Our goal with these projects has been to highlight our history and teach residents and visitors about Scottsboro, hoping that they’ll learn something new. By embracing and learning from the history of our town, we hope that our downtown melds into a place where the past meets present and is somewhere that residents and visitors of all ages can enjoy.”

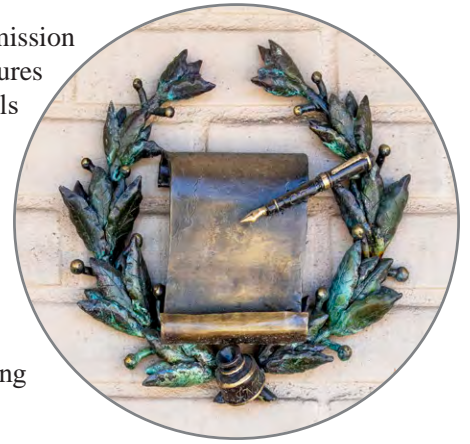
Monroeville Main Street – Downtown Art Trails

Monroeville Main Street Executive Director Anne Marie Bryan said they wanted to encourage visitors to get out of their cars and walk the district. The smART Moves Mural Trail does just that. With a one-way street circling the square, art installations are placed in a way that they cannot be viewed traveling in the direction of the street. The Trail, a collaborative project between Monroeville Main Street and the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, was funded with an AL ProHealth grant

through the Monroe County Extension office. This allowed the organizations to commission local artists with a \$500 stipend for small scale murals and selfie spots. The trail features 15 small selfie-style murals in downtown Monroeville with an additional 11 murals throughout Monroe County.

Another downtown art trail is the Literary Capital Sculpture Trail that consists of 14 bronze miniature sculptures inspired by the 10 writers credited with making Monroeville/ Monroe County the Literary Capital of Alabama – one to represent the Pulitzer Prize won by three Monroeville writers as well as sculptures for Harper Lee, Truman Capote and Cynthia Tucker. The sculptures are also strategically placed near a storefront to entice tourists to visit one of the many retail options in downtown Monroeville.

Bryan said she sees tourists all times of the day exploring the downtown and enjoying the sculptures and murals.



Fort Payne Main Street – A Different Spin on Public Art

Fort Payne has taken a different spin on public art by immortalizing a fictional character and turning a tree into a work of art. A covered walkway had the potential to drive foot traffic from a parking lot to Main Street but was under-utilized because it

was dark and uninviting. To address the issue, Fort Payne Main Street placed a donated chandelier and the city installed string lights. Soon after, the Main Street program decided the placement of art would increase the use of the walkway even more. An obvious choice was to feature the work of Fort Payne native James Dean, creator and illustrator of Pete the Cat. Dean provided the artwork that is now hanging in the “Pete the Cat Alley.” Tables were donated in 2017 and it is now not only a walkway, but a place to linger longer in the district. Fort Payne also hosts a Pete the Cat Day. During the event, businesses attract foot traffic by hosting activities and offering a blue cat discount. There’s also Storytime and an opportunity to purchase original artwork that can be signed by Dean.



Fort Payne Main Street Board Member and Design Chair, Mary Reed, came up with another creative idea – to have a “Chandelier Tree” in the

district. The community stepped up and donated chandeliers that now adorn the tree and are lit year-round. For very little cost, this has become a draw for locals as well as visitors.

Conclusion

Public art doesn’t have to have a hefty price to make a big impact for the local economy while also creating spaces for residents to create memories. And public art continually impacts tourism – encouraging tourists to stay longer and spend more in the community. ■



Trisha Black joined the Main Street Alabama staff as the Field Services Specialist in February 2016 after working as a local Main Street Director for over seven years in Athens, AL. In 2020, she transitioned into the role of Marketing and Communications Manager. During Black’s tenure, Spirit of Athens became a state-designated and nationally accredited Main Street program. Along with dedicated volunteers, Black was the driving force behind several projects emulated both state-wide and nationally including the Athens Saturday Market, a state-certified farmers market, the Athens Grease Festival, an annual community event and fundraiser, and High Cotton Arts, a shared working space for up to 10 artists. Black received the 2014 Main Street Alabama Leadership Award, recognizing her for frequently sharing her knowledge of the Four Point Approach with both communities interested in downtown revitalization and other Main Street programs. In 2020, she earned her Main Street America Revitalization Professional certification from the National Main Street Center. She is a 1993 graduate of Troy University with a bachelor’s degree in political science and journalism.

COMMUNITY MURALS TRANSFORMING RURAL ALABAMA

Erin Hackenmueller • Research Associate • University of Alabama Center for Economic Development

To find the spirit of a place, look to its walls. Communities around the world have turned to murals to beautify their walls, to show off their spirit and to bring neighborhoods to life. Murals build a sense of community, drive economic impact and bring people together by overcoming divisions. Murals are beneficial for communities of all sizes but remain an untapped resource in many rural areas.

“People want to live, work and play in dynamic places,” said Candace Johnson Beers, director of tourism and community development at The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. “But dynamic places don’t create themselves. More and more we are seeing successful revitalization efforts when communities focus on placemaking.”

Placemaking brings a community together to plan, design and manage public spaces to focus on a shared future. The National Endowment for the Arts explains that “placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.” Simply put, placemaking makes a community a better place to be for everyone.

Murals act as a form of placemaking by changing the perception of a community. They add a sense of sociability, make the street life interactive and offer a sense of safety. A plethora of research and case studies suggest that public art like murals can make people feel safer and prevent crime by changing the perception of the neighborhood. Murals can transform a community into a place that people don’t want to leave.

Murals are more than just a beautification asset; they also can be a strong economic development tool. They impact tourism and foot traffic as well as make a community a more attractive place to live and work. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that arts and cultural economic activity account for \$919.7 billion of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) and account for 2.5% of Alabama’s GDP.



When COVID-19 forced people to change travel plans and stay closer to home, the tourism industry took a hit. As restrictions lift, Forbes predicts the return of the Great American Road Trip. As visitors pass through a town, a beautiful vibrant mural on the side of the road could encourage them to pause and spend time in a charming rural town rather than passing through without stopping. And as new variants emerge, an outdoor mural on a street is not subject to social distancing restrictions.

“When the world feels divisive, murals bring people together,” said Johnson Beers. “Murals can cross social boundaries, economic boundaries, physical abilities and even language barriers.”

Murals can instill a sense of civic pride in members of a community as well as radiate a sense of belonging to people traveling through the community. Art might appeal to anyone, regardless of age, race, class or culture. A public opinion poll by Americans for the Arts found that 7 in 10 Americans believe the arts unify their communities.

An example of how murals are bringing communities together is Can’d Aid’s Revolution of Joy (ROJ) by artist Trés Taylor.



Freedom Riders, Anniston, Calhoun County, Artist Joseph Giri.

In a visual digital age, a beautiful and vibrant community is becoming increasingly important. “I’ve gone places to see a mural,” said Audrey Maxwell, the tourism director at the Calhoun Chamber of Commerce. She suggests that when creating a mural, highlight something that makes your community unique. “That’s what people want to see when they travel; they want to see something interesting and unique.”

Anniston, which falls under Maxwell’s region, is home to the Freedom Riders National Monument. The monument features a mural of the Freedom Riders bus – which Maxwell noted is the largest draw of the monument and brought in several visitors a day before COVID-19.

When COVID-19 forced people to change travel plans and stay closer to home, the tourism industry took a hit. As restrictions lift, Forbes predicts the return of the Great American Road Trip. As visitors pass through a town, a beautiful vibrant mural on the side of the road could encourage them to pause and spend time in a charming rural town rather than passing through without stopping. And as new variants emerge, an outdoor mural on a street is not subject to social distancing restrictions.

He is making his way through Alabama’s Black Belt designing murals for communities to come together and paint. It is as easy as a paint-by-numbers for the people in the community. His goal is to paint at least 20 murals from the Mississippi border to the Georgia border across Highway 14 to inspire people to extend their time touring the Black Belt.

“We designed the project to be for the community by the community and merely artist directed,” said Helene Taylor, Trés’ manager and wife, when asked about her time spent at the walls. She described scenes of participants from three weeks to 84 years old painting, dancing and laughing. “What we didn’t design on paper is the magic that happens on the wall as people come to together to make something beautiful. It’s when our souls connect. The participants leave with pride. I leave with heart-bursting joy. Joy isn’t measurable, but ear to ear grins are a true indicator.”

Something as simple as color on a wall can strike inspiration, bring joy and unite people. There are many types of murals that can let creativity run freely.

A recognition mural can highlight important aspects of the community like history or local heroes. These types of murals will resonate with members of the community.

Gateway murals feature the name of a city, neighborhood or place. These frequently appeal to passersby and might encourage people to stop on a road trip to document their location and spend some time or money in a community.

Some murals are simply art—these are the murals that inspire and evoke feelings. They could be abstract, realistic or even feature a phrase. They could appeal to anyone regardless of their personal background.

Interactive murals are a subset of art murals. They allow people to interact with the mural—perhaps they are standing in front of a set of angel wings that look like they’re sprouting from their back, or they hold their arm up to make it look like they’re grabbing an umbrella.

Planning, Preparation, Installation, Marketing and Upkeep

Developing a mural can sound intimidating for a community with limited resources. However, the art world is a passionate one, and there are many resources for leaders looking to beautify their community. There are four important phases of a mural project (adapted loosely from the City of Nelson, BC, Canada): 1. Planning, 2. Preparation, 3. Installation, 4. Marketing & Upkeep.

In the planning phase of the mural project, define the scope of the project. Highlight the benefits of a mural to key stakeholders. If stakeholders want to make their community a better place to live, the project will be met with less resistance. Select a small group of people to work on the vision and to be a part of the planning process. When too many people get involved, it is easy for the vision to spiral leaving the resulting mural a confusing mixture of scenes. Give the artist a few ideas for inspiration, but then let the artist do the job since he or she is the expert.

Communities may invest anywhere from a couple of thousand dollars to tens of thousands of dollars, and their investment can pay off. When looking for funding, start with the people or organizations that would benefit the most from the value the mural would bring to the community. There are also many grants to apply for.

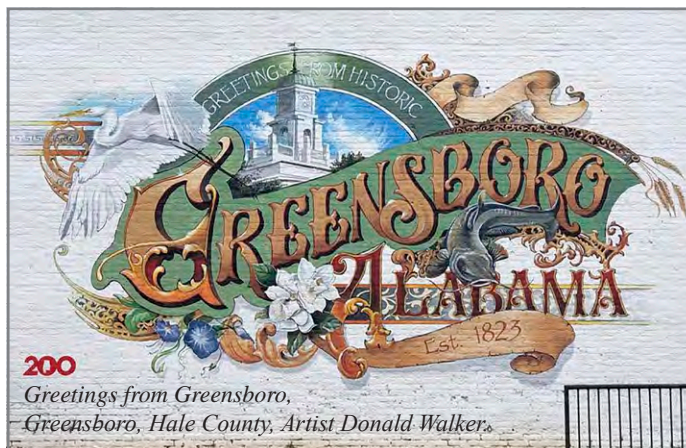
Community Mural Grant by Greetings Tour donates time, labor and supplies to work with organizations on designing and installing a custom public art postcard mural in an iconic large letter style. This grant is open to individual legal residents, businesses or organizations. (greetingstour.com/grant)



Cullman in the 1880s, Cullman, Cullman County, Artist Jack Tupper.

Gateway Grant by the Alabama Power Foundation funds projects that help maintain civic pride and enhance economic development opportunities and community aesthetics by encouraging physical improvements in a neighborhood. The grant description focuses on traditional signage, but mural projects have been funded in the past. The grant is open to municipalities. (powerofgood.com/grant/gateway-grants/)

Our Town Grant by the National Endowment for the Arts is a placemaking program that supports projects that integrate arts, culture and design activities into efforts that strengthen communities. Applicants must reflect a partnership between a





One Tribe, One Day, Decatur, Morgan County, Artist Michael McPheeters.

nonprofit and a local government entity, one of which must be a cultural (arts or design) organization. (arts.gov/grants/our-town/program-description)

Cross-Sector Impacts Grants by South Arts fund projects that utilize the arts as a tool to address an issue in the community. Projects should establish or advance relationships across at least two different sectors, one being in the arts. Applicants should be nonprofit agencies with a partnering organization. Partners cannot be a federal agency or pre-k –12 schools. (southarts.org/community-organization-grants/cross-sector-impact-grants#guidelines)

Sometimes an artist can help find sources of funding. ROJ was funded by Can’d Aid’s TUNES program, which works to provide access and cultivate a love of music, arts and culture in underserved communities. Can’d Aid provides the materials, while artist Trés Taylor donates his time. Similarly, John Christian of Go Georgia Arts works with rural communities to create murals in the southeast. He helps find and secure funding, then does the installation himself. Christian has installed dozens of murals in Georgia and a handful in Alabama.

Next, the preparation phase of a mural project is focused on organizing and gathering materials. Make sure key planners are aware of and stick to the timeline. This is a great stage to start rallying the community. Show them the mural design or allow them to vote between two sketches at a town hall meeting.

The installation phase is when the mural is put on the wall. Before getting started, take “before” pictures of the wall so the mural can act as a successful case study. Continue to engage with key stakeholders and the community. This is an exciting phase because the previous work finally comes together into something everyone can see.

The marketing and upkeep phase is the time to take pride in all the hard work with a public launch. Take those awesome “after” pictures and promote, promote, promote. Add the mural to city or regional tourism websites, speak with the press and share on social media. Be sure to submit the new mural to the Alabama Mural Trail, a statewide trail spearheaded by the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development encouraging folks to explore off the beaten path. Learn more at www.alabamamuraltrail.org.

It is important to keep records of any paint colors and type as well as artist information in case of any maintenance needs. Be sure to inspect the mural regularly so maintenance can occur on an as-needed basis.

Adding a mural invests in the community’s neighborhoods, economy and well-being of its people. Murals can have big impacts while still being an easy target for rural communities to capitalize on. Communities that are interested in creating a mural but still have questions, or are looking to be connected to resources, can reach out to the Center for Economic Development at uced@ua.edu. ■



Erin Hackenmueller is a research associate at The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. She is responsible for all things branding and communications as well as research for various grant-funded projects. Erin completed her B.S. in Public Relations and Sociology at Bradley University and in Peoria, IL, and her M.A. in Advertising and Public Relations at The University of Alabama.

Discover Public Art on the Alabama Mural Trail

Erin Hackenmueller • Research Associate • UA Center for Economic Development

The spirit of Alabama can be found in its rolling hills, on its white sandy beaches and, most recently, on its walls. The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development has launched the Alabama Mural Trail, which aims to capture this spirit for locals and tourists alike to explore the state through routes off the beaten path.

The Center for Economic Development, in partnership with the Ala-Tom RC&D Council, the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association and the Alabama Tourism Department, is spearheading this statewide mural trail to provide the state of Alabama with a sense of community, to drive economic impact and to bring people together.

The trail offers a diverse set of murals in both urban and rural areas around the state. When exploring the trail, travelers might find depictions of everything from a historical display of the civil rights movement to a scene from “To Kill a Mockingbird” to a set of angel wings.

“There are so many unique murals around the state that show off Alabama’s history, culture and arts,” said Candace Johnson Beers, director of tourism and community development at the Center for Economic Development. “Alabama is home to some wonderful small communities, and we wanted to make sure they are featured just as much as our larger ones.”

Murals can reinvent public spaces and have long-term positive effects on communities. This is done through placemaking, an approach to planning and design that involves the community and creates a space that promotes people’s health and happiness. The Alabama Mural Trail promotes placemaking through murals by encouraging public spaces that capitalize on a community’s assets, inspiration and potential.

“Public art attracts tourists, potential new residents and business investors who all spend their dollars locally, which translates to significant economic advantages,” said Johnson Beers. “We’re hoping that this trail inspires city leaders to invest in murals in their communities. We’ve seen how much

just a little color on a wall can transform a community.”

The center worked with Public Art Archive, an online and mobile database of completed public artworks, to launch an interactive map for the trail. There, visitors can find a comprehensive list of murals separated by county and represented by images of the murals taken by Alabama photographer John Dersham, who has a history of celebrating every corner of the state through beautiful images.

Does your community have a mural that should be included?

The team is working to incorporate all 67 of Alabama’s counties on the trail. At the time this article was written, nine counties have yet to be placed on the trail due to no submissions, incomplete submissions or submissions that failed to meet the requirements (i.e. mural must be accessible 24 hours a day). The team is looking for submissions in Bibb, Chambers, Cherokee, Choctaw, Dale, Geneva, Henry, Lowndes and Talladega counties. Submit a new mural at www.uaced.ua.edu/mural. Criteria for being included on the official trail:

- Mural must be publicly accessible 24 hours a day.
- Provide a physical address for the mural.
- Mural must be able to be photographed with a selfie/person standing in front of the mural (no skyline/rooftop murals).
- Mural must have a high-resolution photograph (72 ppi).
- Must place Alabama Mural Trail sticker in the bottom corner of the mural.
- Must be in good condition and easily visible (not too faded or grown over).
- UACED will make the final decision as to which murals will be included in the trail. Additions to the trail will be made through multiple phases. Priority is given to areas less traveled and murals that are unique and diverse in type. Examples of types of murals include, but are not limited to: rustic/antique, colorful/pop-art, murals featuring people, murals featuring phrases.

The trail is being updated regularly and can be found at www.alabamamuraltrail.org. If a traveler finds a mural with the Alabama Mural Trail marker in the corner, they can snap a picture in front of the mural, tag @alabamatourist on Facebook and Instagram and use #SweetHomeMurals. ■

Editor's note: see page 34 for Erin's bio.



AL-MS-TN Rural Tourism Conference Scheduled for October in Eufaula!

Erin Hackenmueller • Research Associate • University of Alabama Center for Economic Development

Step into downtown Sweetwater, TN, and it looks like you're stepping onto the site of a Hallmark movie. Downtown Sweetwater is filled with charming storefronts in well-kept historic buildings and friendly locals that welcome you to Sweetwater as you walk by.

Sweetwater is the type of small town that many strive to be. It's the type of town that draws in visitors and makes them feel so at home that they might never want to leave. It was also the site of the 2021 Alabama-Mississippi-Tennessee Rural Tourism Conference.

Sweetwater was not magically a small-town escape; lots of thoughtful planning went into making the town what it is today. That includes many of the insights that attendees can learn at the AL-MS-TN Rural Tourism Conference. Tourism is a vital part of a community's economic development, but frequently tourism conferences cater towards those with big budgets. The AL-MS-TN Rural Tourism Conference focuses on bolstering tourism in smaller communities with smaller budgets and, arguably, more creativity.

The conference offers incredible networking opportunities and dynamic speakers that present innovative ideas and relevant information that attendees will find useful in facing the unique challenges of promoting rural tourism with limited budgets. The conference is always held in affordable rural areas, and there are scholarships and awards available to help cover the cost of registration.

This year, the conference covered things like communicating in a crisis, being a resilient community by finding creative ways to deal with the pandemic, working with small budgets, and enhancing marketing efforts for target audiences. Here are three takeaways I learned from the 2021 AL-MS-TN Rural Tourism Conference:

If marketing is focused solely on the most popular destinations, money might be wasted. Marketing should be focused on filling in holes. If a community is already selling out tickets for a certain destination, clearly people know about it. While a community would not want to completely nix that budget, it is important to look for other destinations or assets to identify some other opportunities for growth.

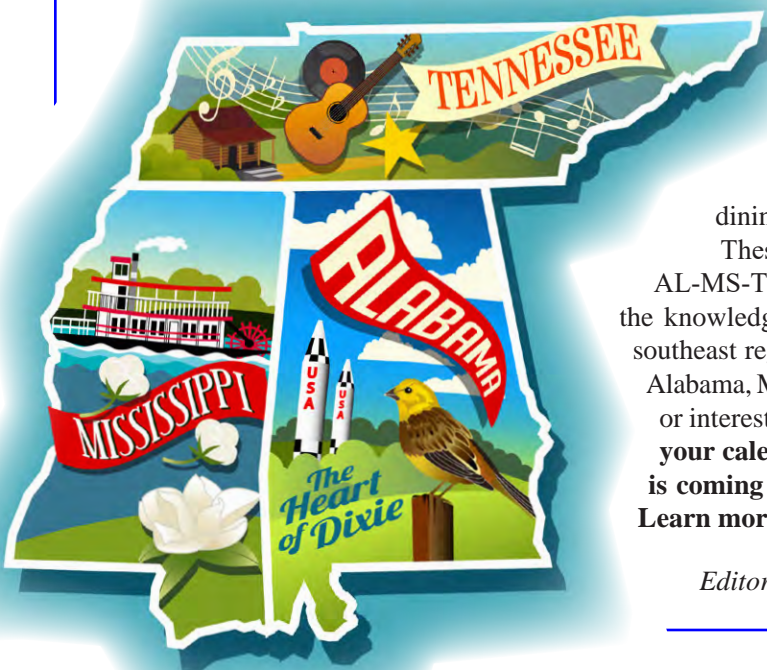
Know when to speak up and when to stay quiet in a crisis. Tourists are forgetful; don't remind them. When someone lives through an emergency, like flooding, it is easy to feel like *everyone* is living that emergency. Don't tell tourists "we're ringing out our mats for you" after flooding. Those tourists already forgot they saw your community on the news and now were just reminded. People outside a community do not need to be reminded about the drama or crises within a community.

Erase county lines. Benefit from others around you. It is easy to think of destinations and assets as belonging to one specific community. In reality, that's just not how a tourist's brain works when planning. They look for the

best things to do within a radius of wherever they are comfortable driving, especially in rural areas. That often means they cross municipality and county lines. If a neighboring county has a booming destination, chances are that destination will impact all of the counties that touch it. The same concept can be applied to municipalities. By working together to fill the holes that a tourist might need (lodging, recreation, dining), economic growth can be brought to the entire region.

These are just three of the wonderful insights to learn at the AL-MS-TN Rural Tourism Conference. Attendees will benefit from the knowledge they gain and the connections they make around the southeast region. This annual conference is hosted alternately among Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee, however, anyone associated with or interested in the rural tourism industry is invited to attend. **Mark your calendars for October 24-26, because the 2022 conference is coming back to our neck of the woods in Eufaula, Alabama! Learn more at www.almstnruraltourism.com.** ■

Editor's note: see page 34 for Erin's bio.



BREWTON: SMALL CITY ON THE CUSP OF BIG THINGS

Jennifer Kornegay • Freelance Writer and Editor

When you hear “Brewton, Alabama,” there’s a good chance your next thought is blueberries. For more than three decades, this small south Alabama town (population just over 5,200 and the seat of Escambia County) has drawn approximately 25,000 people to its annual blueberry festival each summer; its importance is evident in the clusters of plump, frosted indigo fruit on the sign welcoming folks into town. But if Connie Baggett, Brewton’s director of program management, has her way, the next time you hear Brewton, Alabama, you’re just as likely to think live music, extreme sports, outdoor exploration, Christmas extravaganzas, beautiful blooms and more.

Thanks to the city’s recent emphasis on citywide beautification and on creating and promoting a wide array of events to engage and delight residents and visitors alike, the festival Brewton was once most known for is now sharing the spotlight. There’s the Murder Creek Mud Run, which draws people from as far as Oregon to test themselves on a rough and rigorous trail run through woods and across the creek that shares the event’s deadly name. In the fall, Porch Fest sees residential streets closed to traffic and bands belting out tunes from the deep porches of various historic houses, including the former homes of the city’s founding families. In March, there’s kite flying in one of the city’s multiple green spaces. An autumn rodeo ropes in big crowds. Every December, CeleBrewton blankets the city in holiday magic. And a big ole blueberry drops on December 31 to ring in the new year. On any random weekend, there are geocaching groups on the hunt, ukulele jams, disc golf tournaments, crawfish cookoffs and more. “The city calendar stays pretty full, year-round,” Baggett said. “And many of the events are free.”



Photo by CM Graves Photography.



Brewton is alive with blooms all over the city, but there’s a particularly large concentration of petals lining its charming downtown streets. Photo by CM Graves Photography.

Come On Over

They’re valuable though, all part of an effort to pull visitors – including vacationers headed to Alabama beaches just 60 miles south – off interstate 65 and then the 18 miles into Brewton. And for folks headed to Florida beaches, where Brewton is actually on their route, tempting them to do more than drive through is the objective. The overarching goal is to get them to shop in its stores, eat in area restaurants, play in its parks, fill up at one of its gas stations and maybe even spend a night or two, perhaps at The Holley House B&B, in a circa 1906 building that once served as the city’s hospital.

A complementary initiative is a current push to bring more EV (electric vehicle) charging stations to town. “We’ve already got two here, at a hotel and at one of our car dealerships, but we’ve applied for grant funding to add more,” Baggett said. The plan is to put as many as four in public access areas.

Getting them to town is step one. City leaders like Mayor Yank Lovelace, Baggett and Steve Layton, the city’s public



Timber has always played a major role in Brewton's economy, and this mural celebrates the city's lumber legacy. Photo by Steve Layton.

the state turned this part of the main drag's parking spots into a turn lane in the 1980s. It also indicates the city's innovative spirit isn't a brand-new trend.

Murder Creek and Burnt Corn Creek, running clean and swift alongside Brewton's borders and converging just south of the city, entice paddlers in the summer and early fall. Two of the city's primary parks provide easy access to them: O'Bannon Park fronts Burnt Corn Creek and a stretch of sandy beach that invites swimmers. There's also a trail running along the bank enjoyed by hikers, and there are onsite canoe and kayak rentals available. A foot bridge connects this space to Jennings Park, a more manicured area on the edge of downtown with a paved track that's hemmed on one side by the creek.

E.O. Wilson Nature Adventure Park, named in honor of the famous naturalist who lived in Brewton for a time, is the wildest of the city's parks, where Mother Nature is given freer rein. Visitors to its sandy paths (either via foot or on horseback, a popular option) can identify the surrounding trees and plant life with their smart phone, thanks to scannable QR codes on signage. This park also has boardwalks leading up to a pitcher plant bog packed with several species of this fascinating flora.

And much of the city has been adorned with additional green, growing embellishments: in beds, pots and hanging baskets, Brewton's storefronts, roadsides, bridges, railings, lamp posts and more are festooned with fresh, seasonal flowers all year long – efforts that have earned Brewton awards from the nationwide America In Bloom program.

After time in the fresh air works up appetites, there's plenty of fried catfish, barbecue, ice cream, soul food and even 40 different takes on bread pudding at a bright purple cottage called Sugar Willie's to satisfy them. The city is taking proactive steps to encourage more local development through interest-free loans to small businesses. So far, this has led to a ladies boutique and a new downtown restaurant. "We want more ice cream shops and delis and more antique stores," Lovelace said.

Promoting the idyllic small-town life to tourists via bountiful events and baskets of blossoms is working. Using cell phone data, the city has been able to document an increase in visitors. Many are regional, on their way down to the beach, but they've also gotten hits from people from across the country. "The chamber of commerce estimates we host more than 75,000 people annually at various events and public park visits," Baggett said. Additionally, she notes that a rise in sales tax revenues also points to more people who don't live in Brewton coming to and spending money in the city.

Brewton's Beginnings

There's plenty happening in Brewton today, but the city's past tells a good story too, one of community unity and support that has gotten the city where it is and remains an important element of how it's moving forward. Incorporated in 1885, Brewton boomed with a rising demand for timber. Acres of longleaf pine in the area fed the need for lumber, and the two creeks provided efficient transport for the sawmills that sprung up to process it. Downtown began to develop, and the timber industry remained strong in the city. Even when some of the sawmills closed at the turn of the century, as more lumber production moved north, the mills that stayed grew bigger, creating lumber barons and making Brewton the second wealthiest city per capita in America in 1910.

The infrastructure underpinning the lumber industry included foundries, which at one point, employed hundreds. At the same time, the merchant and professional class was growing requiring a hospital and later, bringing a community college to the city. In the 1940s, the land gave Brewton a gift again: oil. "Black gold" was struck on several parcels of land formerly famous for timber. In the late 1960s, a huge vein was tapped, one that kept flowing for decades. More wells went in all around Brewton up until the early 2000s.

lands and economic development manager, know to keep these visitors around long enough to make a real impact, the city must have more to offer. And, in addition to the almost non-stop list of events, it does.

The city's quaint downtown features independent restaurants, shops and in several spots, old brick is enlivened with colorful murals just begging for social-media-worthy pictures to be taken. Right now, its vacancy rate is about 50 percent, but that's down from 70-percent empty not long ago, and according to Baggett, almost every open space is actively being looked at by a potential buyer or renter. There's also a unique section that's "reversed," where a line of businesses now have their entrances at the back of their buildings, facing a parking lot. The move was a necessity when

Paper mills came in the 1950s; Georgia Pacific is still in town and invested half a billion in its Brewton operations last year. Another major employer, the T.R. Miller sawmill, is still open, making it the longest running family-owned sawmill in operation in the country. “Brewton has always benefitted from natural resources,” Lovelace said.

A portion of the money that flowed from the land has been, in a way, returned to it. “A lot of our wealthy citizens, back in the 1920s and 1930s, put all their timber land, which we now know was also rich with oil, into trusts for tax reasons,” Lovelace said. “And many of those trusts were set up to benefit their community, to build schools, to support arts and more.” Those trusts made positive contributions to Brewton for decades; one still hasn’t run dry. “When you read interviews done with those pioneering families here, you see how often they speak about reinvesting their money here, being generous to build it up,” Lovelace said. “They were very proud of this place and did a lot for it.”

Pushing Progress Ahead

While wood product companies still anchor Brewton’s economy, today, the tech industry is spurring additional growth with companies like Frontier Technologies, which builds wind turbines, providing good-paying jobs. One economic development win stands out: the arrival of Provalus in 2018, an IT company that provides technology and other business support services to clients all over the world. The company currently employs 200 and that number should rise to 300 in the coming months, according to the mayor. The company put its \$6.5 million operations center in the heart of downtown, using several existing structures for its offices, but it also did new construction. Jim Byard, Jr. of Byard Associates has recently been collaborating with the city and stressed how unique this is. “It’s really unheard of in a small, rural community in Alabama, and maybe anywhere in the region,” he said. The city did its part, taking down some empty buildings adjacent to Provalus and turning their lots into a small park. “They loved that,” Lovelace said.

The mayor elaborated on what a tech company that size choosing Brewton does to lift prospects. “It provides jobs for some locals but also brings some younger people here,” he said. “And as more jobs come, we then compete with larger cities to get the workforce we need. How do we attract them? Make life fun and interesting here, with more restaurants, events, great parks and diverse recreational opportunities.”



Famed naturalist E.O. Wilson lived in Brewton for a time, and today, one of the city’s multiple parks is named in his honor. It’s got woodland trails to explore, plus a pitcher plant bog. Photo by CM Graves Photography.



One of the primary green spaces in Brewton’s healthy park portfolio, Jennings Park offers paved paths for strolling and hosts each summer’s Blueberry Festival. Photo by CM Graves Photography.

And that does more than bring new citizens. It enhances Brewton’s appeal to tourists and is allowing the city to deepen that stream of revenue. “The Blueberry Festival was already bringing a lot of people to town, but we knew we could do more,” Baggett said. “The Christmas parade [part of CeleBrewton] brings 10,000 people, many from outside Brewton.” The city has heavily leveraged social media to promote Brewton’s events; the Brewton Reborn Facebook page has a big audience even outside city limits, due, at least in some part, to quality photos and video clips (some shot with drones) that show off the city and tell its story.

But Lovelace notes that akin to Brewton’s beginnings, it’s the city’s people making the real difference now; the present generation is puffed with hometown pride, and they’re dedicated to improving their city for the betterment of all. It starts at city hall with Lovelace himself, who routinely stresses his commitment to Brewton’s bright future. Proof is in the team he’s assembled in Baggett, who’s a

former newspaper reporter, and Layton, an avid outdoorsman who often puts his video skills honed on the production of a hunting television show to bear on Brewton's behalf. "We're investing in the right people to do this work," Lovelace said. "Connie and Steve have great backgrounds for this."

It doesn't stop with the higher-ups. The city is putting employees on its payroll through programs like Leadership Alabama and similar training. They're sending them out to other cities to see what they're up to, hoping to switch on idea lightbulbs over heads in every department. "We've increased wages for city employees too," Lovelace said. It's money well spent. "Our city folks are engaged and feel ownership of their work. A guy on one of our city work crews emailed me on a Thursday night with a new way he'd come across for picking up litter. That's not a guy punching in and out of his 9 to 5 job; that's a guy caring about what he does."

This "we can make Brewton better" attitude has spilled over into everyday folks, too – people like Lisa Thomas-McMillian, whose "pay what you can" lunch spot, Drexell & Honeybees, has garnered national media attention for its good deeds and Lisa's equally good Southern dishes.

And the shared mentality pushes teamwork to a new level in Brewton, with the city and Chamber of Commerce continually working hand-in-hand on projects. The mayor speaks highly of past mayors and other community leaders, bringing his thoughts back to the city's founding families. "That long-term commitment they made is still here in all of us, all kinds of business leaders, past mayor, mayors of nearby towns, regular residents and newcomers too," he says.

Baggett pointed to the way folks come to each other's aid. "There's just a community spirit here, an all-hands-on-deck kind of cooperation," she said. "I think it comes from our history of flooding." Many times, since Brewton came to be, one or both creeks, swollen with rain, have washed above their banks; some buildings still bear visible flood lines. "When the water rises, everyone in the city heads down to the businesses that we know will flood and get what we can to higher ground," she said. "It's just something that happens. You don't have to ask for help. It just comes."

There's a theme of connection flowing through the city: connecting the parks; connecting people to the places they need and want to be (the mayor has added more sidewalks to make increasing walkability in town a priority); connecting different generations and different walks of life by gathering them together at community events. Layton believes even short-term visitors pick up on it in a way that makes them want to stay longer or come back. "People driving through from wherever and seeing our murals, all our blooming plants, the streetscapes, and then stopping for an ice cream cone, they notice a difference," he said. "We don't look like a typical small town, but we feel different too." Then, when they hear about one of the city's plethora of events, they remember that.

Layton might be right. Byard is an "outsider" who's sensed something special in Brewton. "There's just a spark there," he said. "It's hard to measure or quantify, but it's there. They never say, 'We can't do X because we're just little ole Brewton.' They say, 'Ok, let's take that idea, scale it to our size and make it fit our needs. You don't see that 'can-do' and 'will-do' drive, plus the ingenuity, in a lot of communities these days.'"

And Baggett promises more is on the way. "We are on the cusp of very big things," she said. ■



Offering incentives like no-interest loans, the City of Brewton is working hard to fill every vacant space downtown. Photo by CM Graves Photography.



Jennifer Stewart Kornegay is a freelance writer and editor in Montgomery, Alabama. Her work has been featured in and on Garden & Gun, The Bitter Southerner, Conde Nast Traveler, Southern Living, Good Grit, The Local Palate, thekitchn.com, Alabama Living, The Montgomery Business Journal and more.



Using Natural and Cultural Assets to Generate Economic Development

Matt Leavell • Director of Design • UA Center for Economic Development

Alabama's communities are looking for efficient and effective ways to improve their economic performance. With limited resources and a diminishing focus on rural and smaller communities, tourism is an underestimated and underutilized economic development tool that can expand their toolkit in many instances without needing significant investment. Effective tourism development supplements industrial and business recruitment by introducing potential employers and employees to the high quality-of-life that exists in small towns and presents a welcoming opportunity to people or companies unfamiliar with Alabama. As tourism is increasingly focused on cultural and natural attractions found in rural areas and small towns, it can become a self-sustaining industry that provides additional revenue to communities and diversifies local economies to stabilize against market changes. Modern tourism development is also more than marketing and promotion. It develops projects and programs that improve local quality-of-life by enhancing the unique characteristics of a place through a focus on cultural and natural heritage to support and diversify economic development opportunities.

When Alabama communities take on tourism development projects, Sustainable Tourism is a framework that provides the most reliable economic returns while also retaining the character that makes their town or place unique. It uses a values-based approach that focuses the project on nature, culture and community to harness the power of tourism for uplifting or restoring the local area economy. Sustainable Tourism projects are based in locations endowed with an abundance of natural or cultural resources. These projects include an intentional approach that protects existing cultures and communities so that the destination endures for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations.

Sustainable Tourism is an effective tool for Alabama's economic development when it takes advantage of our natural and cultural endowments. During the pandemic, outdoor destinations saw an explosion of use as people looked for safe and enjoyable destinations that allowed them to satisfy their desire to be around other people in natural outdoor settings. Alabama's State Parks saw a 32% increase of visitors during the fiscal year ending in September 2020¹. As the world continues to recover from the pandemic, state parks and similar places focused on Sustainable Tourism are expected to continue receiving those increased numbers. Communities that have these types of assets and utilize a sustainable tourism framework for their recreational economy will realize significant economic benefit.

Alabama's Endowments and Assets

Alabama has been gifted with a wide variety of rich natural and cultural endowments such as beaches, forests, wildlife, waterfalls, rivers, streams, main streets, festivals, fairs and rodeos. These raw characteristics are not a secret to residents of the small towns and communities that dominate the Alabama landscape. In a recent report on improving the Innovation Economy in Alabama, the Hoover Institute indicated that these endowments are one of the keys to improving Alabama's economy².



Mobile Blueway paddling. Photo by Hersick & Webster Creative Partners.

However, the authors are clear that endowments alone are not enough when it comes to economic development. They must be converted into assets for communities to realize economic benefits.

There are many examples of how endowments can be converted into assets. The rivers of Alabama are some of the most beautiful places in the world to spend a day canoeing or fishing. However, without businesses and amenities, that river is simply an endowment. Outfitters, boat launches and fishing piers are needed to capture revenue from visitors and turn it into a community asset. Small towns have Main Street districts that reflect the culture of rural Alabama but also need businesses that provide revenue for locals and taxes for government services. Folk artists create art that is desired by collectors from around the world. In order to sell that art, they create unique physical and digital storefronts that translate a cultural endowment into an economic asset. These things are not necessarily difficult, but they require purposeful planning, design and implementation.

Sustainable Tourism

Many people associate “sustainability” only with the environment and conservation or advocacy projects. Sustainable Tourism returns to the original intent of “sustainability.” It focuses on providing a community with the ability to support itself and provide for future generations. Sustainable Tourism includes all aspects of tourism so that the definition of “sustainability” is expanded to include facilities, economics, culture and nature. These types of projects support an economy that is self-sufficient and more independent from external forces because the local community directly benefits from its activities.

Sustainable Tourism is a specific type of tourism that builds on the inherent advantages of Alabama’s endowments while also protecting them for future generations. It encompasses three pillars that collectively guide the development and operations of projects:

1. Environmentally friendly operations and facilities
2. Provide direct and tangible social and economic benefits to the local people
3. Support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage



These three pillars are present in every successful Sustainable Tourism project to maximize the positive impact on the community. *Environmentally friendly operations and facilities* protect the local environment as a significant rationale for the location being a destination. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill is perhaps the best, albeit unfortunate, example of the close relationship between the environment and the tourism economy. During the summer following that tragedy, Alabama’s beaches in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach saw a 25 percent decrease in taxable rentals. As Mayor Robert Craft of Gulf Shores stated: “We learned from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill that our community’s economy and quality of life are closely tied to the environment.”³ The Gulf State Park Enhancement Project (mygulfstatepark.com) was developed by

the University of Alabama’s Center for Economic Development (www.uaced.ua.edu) on behalf of the State of Alabama with the stated goal of being an international benchmark for environmental and economic sustainability demonstrating best practices for outdoor recreation, education and hospitable accommodations. The Lodge, Learning Campus and Interpretive Center developed as part of that project have achieved the most rigorous environmental standards in the world. As a result of those certifications, they are operating at a lower cost than comparable buildings, conserving natural resources, contributing more dollars to the local economy and surviving storms such as Hurricane Sally in 2020.

A Sustainable Tourism project *provides direct and tangible social and economic benefits to local people* through a variety of mechanisms that are generally developed in partnership with local organizations or groups. Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center (blackbelttreasures.com) in Camden has the stated mission to “foster, develop and promote economic development initiatives aimed at creating jobs and increasing the income of local residents through the marketing of arts, crafts, literature, food products and other items unique to Alabama’s Black Belt and to cultivate and provide arts education in the region.” Their programs include business development and job training programs such as ArtsCultivate that train artists on how to develop and maintain businesses that support their creative works and efforts.

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Southwest Alabama Ambassador Program Promotes Rural Tourism Throughout Black Belt

Candace Johnson Beers • Community and Tourism Development Director • UA Center for Economic Development

“A picture is worth a thousand words” and the Southwest Alabama tourism region would dare to claim it’s worth even more to visitors. From dining on fried dill pickles and lodging in beautiful bed and breakfasts along a scenic river to historic sites and great outdoor activities, Southwest Alabama has much to offer. The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED) launched a program to show that to the world. We all trust a third-party endorsement more than a paid advertisement; we trust friends more than experts; we just needed to give our friends a platform to share Alabama with the world.

Ambassadors Use Social Media to Promote Tourism

Using a grant from the Ala-Tom RC&D Council, UACED launched the Southwest Alabama Ambassador program in Selma this past November. Inspired by a successful program in north Alabama, the program’s ambassadors promote tourism using social media in Alabama’s Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Washington and Wilcox counties. The goal for the ambassador program is to find people who are passionate about this region of Alabama and are posting their adventures on social media. We want to highlight their amazing talent on social media to further promote the nine-county region. “Ala-Tom RC&D is proud to be a part of such a wonderful program,” said Marie Lowder, Executive Director for Ala-Tom RC&D. “We love our rural areas and support tourism throughout the Black Belt. Ambassadors are given a unique opportunity to find hidden gems, to learn something old and something new, all while sharing it with the world.”

A Southwest Alabama Ambassador is someone passionate about Alabama’s Black Belt and that shares photos, videos and stories about the region on social media. Ambassadors explore destinations off the beaten path, seek adventure that feeds the soul, capture the beauty of southwest Alabama and share their story with the rest of us. Their stories encourage others to go out and explore southwest Alabama for themselves.

Rather than focusing on follower count, ambassadors were selected based on how passionate they are about Southwest Alabama and how well they represent this beautiful region. During this pilot program, the ambassadors share at least three photos and a video every month and report the engagement activity from those posts back to UACED.

We live in a digital world where, to many, anything worth doing can be found online. People travel to places when they hear firsthand from their friends and family how amazing a destination is. These ambassadors were chosen because they were already promoting the region in a positive way, and by developing this partnership, the cross-promotion will advance the region even more.

By promoting the region via social media, UACED hopes to reach a wider demographic and encourage tourists to bring in outside dollars to visit southwest Alabama. The Center promoted the ambassadors on one of their existing tourism outreach platforms and wanted to expand their reach to encourage visitation to the Black Belt region and the state of Alabama.

“The Southwest Alabama Ambassador program has been a mutually beneficial way to grow our tourism account’s audience as well as our ambassador’s profiles,” said Erin Hackenmueller, one of UACED’s program managers for the project. “In the first 90 days of the program, our Instagram saw nearly a 20 percent growth in followers.”

As much as this program has benefited the region, the ambassadors also reaped rewards for their work. Each ambassador received a branded t-shirt to be worn when travelling and creating content. They also received promotional items that assisted the ambassadors in elevating their digital content such as a pop socket, pop socket mount, and a selfie light. UACED included items encouraging the ambassadors to get out explore like a water bottle and a cooler. Each Ambassador is featured on the regional tourism website landing page at www.alabamafrontporches.org, on UACED’s social media platforms and are encouraged to use the title Southwest Alabama Ambassador on their social accounts and websites.

Most ambassadors have reported increases in followers and have noticed a huge increase in their non-follower reach. One ambassador reported reaching over 600% more non-followers in the first 90 days of the program. Another reported that a video she created for the program received 3,000 views in a record amount of time.

“Being a Southwest Alabama Tourism Ambassador has been a very rewarding experience,” said Kristin Law, an ambassador from Wilcox County. “It has given me the opportunity to network with and grow closer to other tourism partners and enthusiasts, while sharing and educating tourists about the sights, sounds, tastes and people that make this amazing region of Alabama so unique and special. As a team, we have shared our time, talents and treasures freely with each other, while growing our skills and knowledge. Together, we can find ways to bring awareness and economic change to our rural region through tourism, utilizing its natural resources and community assets.”

Diverse Content and Sustainability

To ensure a diverse range of content spread across the tourism spectrum, UACED assigned each ambassador a monthly

category. These categories include local food, attractions, festivals and annual events, outdoor adventures, placemaking, local shopping, lodging and agritourism.

Sustainability is crucial for any project that UACED takes on, and the center tries to find ways to bring previous projects into new ones. Several years ago, the center partnered with Alabama Black Belt Adventures (ALBBA) on a tourism campaign “Flavors of the Black Belt.” The campaign highlights sites to visit, food to eat and local products for visitors to take back home with them. ALBBA partnered with the ambassador program to provide locally made products for the ambassadors to enjoy and review as they travel throughout the region and to find new events and destinations to explore and promote. The ambassadors took videos of unboxings; used locally sourced food products in their family meal prep; and tagged local businesses that sell the items they were provided.

“The Southwest Alabama Ambassador Program established by UACED is a perfect vehicle for promoting travel through Alabama’s Black Belt region,” said Pam Swanner, Director of Alabama Black Belt Adventures Association. “As part of the young professionals’ tasks, our Flavors of the Black Belt Trail, which features locally made small batch, hand-crafted food items, added an element of fun to this generations’ self-proclaimed status as foodies.”

The Flavors of the Black Belt has nine different themed trails and a shopping checklist that highlights each trail’s delectable creations to sample and take home.

UACED Assists in Showcasing Assets

This region is the heart of the Black Belt. With so much history and culture, there is a lot to do in southwest Alabama. We are so excited that our ambassadors are sharing it with the world. For decades, UACED has been working with the Southwest Alabama region and other Alabama communities to assist them in showcasing their assets. With tourism playing a prominent part in the state’s overall economy, the center’s Tourism Development Program brings together the many cultural, heritage, rural, public lands and arts constituencies under the economic development umbrella to unify efforts to promote natural, cultural and heritage tourism.

UACED helped to create opportunities for increased visitation and tourism through marketing efforts, partnering between counties and communities, and the development of regional ads, themed rack cards and touring trails. This project provided tourism resources and marketing materials to partners in the southwest region. With continued development in organization and planning, the extensive selection of historical, cultural and natural resources available in the region will build a sustainable economic initiative that will attract travelers and build economic expansion and support for the region. Keep up with the ambassadors by following @alabamatourist on Instagram and Facebook FB: @frontporches and checking out #VisitSouthwestAlabama. To learn more about the region visit www.alabamasfrontporches.org.

Starting Your Own Ambassador Program

The criteria UACED used to select ambassadors: participants must have a public Instagram account (and be willing to make certain posts on Facebook public); must live, work or regularly travel in one of the nine counties in the Southwest Alabama region; must be passionate about traveling and promoting their community and region. There was no follower count minimum. A training session was held to onboard all the ambassadors including topics of how to use the hashtags, how to take an engaging photo and video, definition of a tourist (someone who travels at least 50 miles one way to engage in the subject matter), how to report engagement activities to UACED and much more. A Facebook group and a GroupMe was created for ease of communication and to foster conversation among the ambassadors. We always find it is better to overcommunicate in the beginning to make sure everyone is on the same playing field and can refer to written documents as issues come up.

The most appealing thing about an ambassador program is that you can make it as elaborate (also read expensive) or as simple (low to zero budget) as you want. This is a great way for any community to improve upon a social media presence, but also to add a few dedicated people to assist in marketing your community any way you see fit. Just be selective in choosing the correct people who have talent in what you are looking for. ■



Candace joined the staff of The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development in 2012 and currently serves as Tourism and Community Development Director where she assists communities in reaching their goals through strategic planning with emphasis on retail development, hospitality, public relations, social media, website design and creative marketing while serving as a liaison to organizations that can assist these communities through various outlets. Candace has a B.A. in Communication from Auburn University Montgomery and has previously served as Tourism Director for Selma and Dallas County where she began a marketing campaign to improve the outreach of Selma Tourism, culminating in the premiere edition visitor’s guide, redesign of the tourism website, hospitality guide for the area and creation of regional trails. She can be reached via candace.c.johnson@ua.edu.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Alabama joined the national movement to develop a system of parks within our state that would serve the public and enhance our quality of life. Since then, the Alabama State Parks have followed its mission to “acquire and preserve natural areas, develop, furnish, operate and maintain recreational facilities, and to extend the public’s knowledge of the state’s natural environment.” The park system now has 21 state parks throughout Alabama encompassing more than 48,000 acres, most in rural areas near small towns but each offering something special and unique to guests.

Roland Cooper State Park, Camden

Just outside Camden in Wilcox County is Roland Cooper State Park located on the shores of the William “Bill” Dannelly Reservoir, also known as Miller’s Ferry. Established on land leased from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, it was originally named Bridgeport State Park and then changed in the 1970s to honor William Roland Cooper, a politician from Camden who served in the Alabama Senate.

Today, Roland Cooper is a popular destination for campers, hikers and vacation goers. The park offers a variety of overnight accommodations including five furnished, two-bedroom cabins and 47 improved campsites with picnic tables, grills and utilities. Tent camping is available on 13 primitive sites as well.

Fishing has always been a major attraction at the park and now anglers have an easy way to access the Alabama River.

In June 2021, a new pier, designed to be the park’s first handicap-accessible dock, was dedicated. This project was funded through a partnership between the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Department of Environmental Management and the Federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program.

In addition, park visitors have plenty of shopping and dining options within a short drive to Camden, Selma or Greenville. Another point of interest in the area is Gee’s Bend, which was featured in the Emmy Award winning Alabama Public Television documentary, *The Quilt Makers of Gee’s Bend*.



Blue Springs State Park, Clio

Blue Springs State Park is located six miles east of Clio in southeast Barbour County. At 103 acres, Blue Springs is one of Alabama’s smaller state parks; however, that doesn’t stop it from having nearly 40,000 visitors each year. The state purchased the land in 1963 from landowner J. D. McLaughlin and its main attraction is a natural crystal-clear underground spring that pumps 3,600 gallons of water per hour into a pair of concrete-ringed pools surrounded by broad grassy slopes where swimmers and picnickers can enjoy the sun and water. With a year-round water temperature of 68 degrees, swimmers always have a refreshing way to cool off on steamy summer days.

While the pools are the main attraction, the camping is excellent as well. Forty-seven modern campsites, seven of which have sewer hook-up, are each outfitted with a picnic table and grill, and campfires are allowed. Visitors can tent camp in the modern and primitive areas.

When it's time for lunch, bring a picnic or visit Hagler's Barbeque across the street from the park office. The park has several pavilions with picnic tables or visitors can simply spread a blanket in the park's many green spaces and enjoy.



Blue Springs is an excellent overnight option when traveling to this area of Alabama. The Wiregrass region hosts many festivals in late summer and fall. Other attractions include the National Peanut Festival in Dothan, Ozark's Claybank Jamboree Arts & Crafts Festival and the Brundidge Peanut Butter Festival.

Lakepoint State Park, Eufaula

Picturesque Lakepoint State Park is located on the banks of the 45,000-acre Lake Eufaula, also known as "The Bass Capital of the World." The state purchased the property in 1968 and it adjoins the Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge. The park offers a variety of amenities including 101 hotel rooms, a lodge and conference center, 29 cabins, 10 lakeside cottages and a campground

with 192 improved campsites. In June 2021, Lakepoint opened Alabama's newest community archery park available year-round during normal park hours for recreational shooting, competitive tournaments and outdoor educational programming. The most

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recent attraction at the park is the new Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Course, which is designed to be a diverse experience featuring various skill levels from beginner to advanced. From dirt embankments to rock sections, the course is family-friendly and provides adventure as well. There are also two separate skills areas to prepare drivers for the course – an advanced and a novice area.

After enjoying all the park has to offer, many guests make the short drive into downtown Eufaula to shop in the local stores, see the historic homes and enjoy a meal at the Cajun Corner Restaurant. Alabama’s Wiregrass Birding Trail in nearby Dothan is also a popular destination.

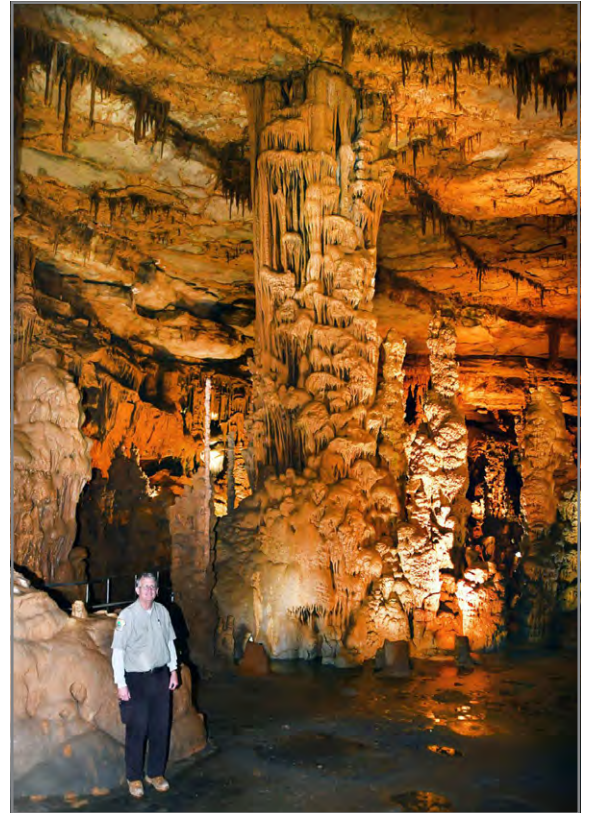
Cathedral Caverns State Park, Woodville

Originally called Bat Cave, Cathedral Caverns was opened to the public by Jacob Gurley in the 1950s and later renamed because of its cathedral-like appearance. Purchased by the state in 1987, it was opened as a State Park in the summer of 2000. The first feature most people notice about Cathedral Caverns is its massive entrance. The huge opening measures 126 feet wide and 25 feet high, a possible world record for commercial caves. However, the grand entrance is only the beginning. Inside the caverns are some of the most beautiful formations Mother Nature has ever created, including “Goliath” – one of the largest stalagmites in the world measuring 45 feet tall and 243 feet in circumference. Cathedral Caverns features many amazing sites: a “caveman” perched atop a flowstone wall, a “frozen” waterfall, a large stalagmite forest and a most improbable stone formation – a stalagmite that is 27 feet tall and 3 inches wide!

The park recently added a new campground and now offers 25 full-service campsites with power, water and sewer connections, 11 basic campsites and five primitive campsites. A bathhouse is available and located near the campsites. A back country campsite is available for those planning to backpack and hike in. There are also two large picnic pavilions available near the Welcome Center.

The newest feature at Cathedral Caverns is the four cabins available (one being ADA accessible) for overnight accommodations. Guests will be pleased with the floorplan and interior design of the cabins. Modeled after the “Tiny Cabin” concept, these cabins are sure to be a favorite for vacationers. The cabins are close to the caverns, the gift shop and the trails.

Cathedral Caverns is located almost equal distance from Woodville and Grant and it’s a short drive to several great north Alabama attractions, including Lake Guntersville, Buck’s Pocket State Park, Scottsboro and the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville.



Plan Your Park Visit!

During a recent visit to one of Alabama’s state parks, Governor Kay Ivey noted their significance. “Outdoor recreation opportunities are abundant in our State Parks system,” she said.

The State Park system works diligently to provide places throughout Alabama for people to experience the outdoors and enjoy the natural wonder Alabama has to offer. In 2021, Alabama State Parks hosted more than 5.2 million guests and had an economic impact of more than \$375 million. If you haven’t visited a state park lately, make your plans now – www.alapark.com is an excellent place to start. Your next adventure is closer than you think! ■



Jerry Weisenfeld is the Advertising and Marketing Manager for Alabama State Parks. In this role, he promotes the parks as vacation and recreation destinations for guests throughout the Southeast. Jerry has more than 25 years of marketing experience and specializes in evaluating current marketing situations, creating strategic marketing plans and tracking marketing activities to measure success. He has a marketing degree from Auburn University and an MBA from the University of Alabama, Birmingham. Jerry and his wife, Denise, enjoy hiking the many trails found in Alabama, Georgia and the Carolinas.

When providing *support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage*, Sustainable Tourism projects highlight the connection between nature and culture that is predominant in Alabama. The Alabama Indigenous Mound Trail (alabamamoundtrail.org) highlights one of the densest collections of ancient Native American monumental architecture in all of North America. Increased awareness and visitation to these sites (that are open to the public) introduces a lesser-known part of Alabama’s heritage to a wider population with the goal of protecting them for future generations.

Economic Development

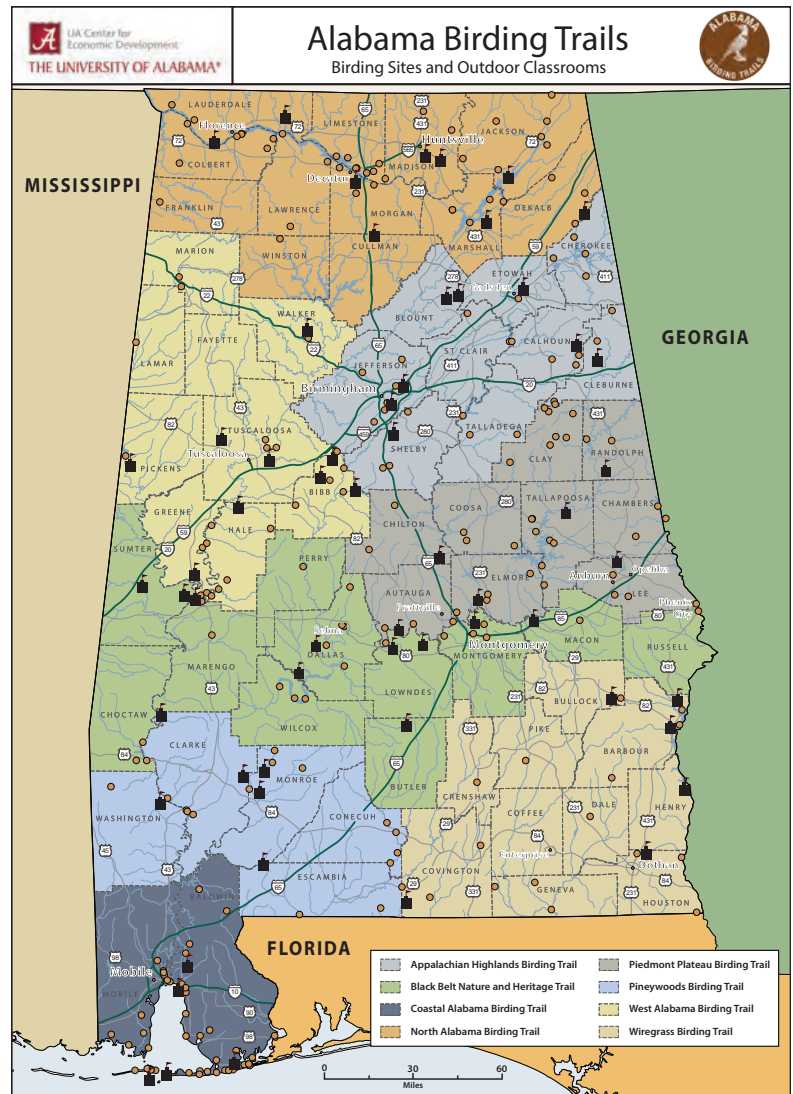
Economic Development can broadly be defined as “the creation of wealth from which community benefits are realized ... a concerted effort on the part of the responsible governing body in a city or county to influence the direction of private sector investment toward opportunities that can lead to sustained economic growth.”⁴ Within Alabama, that definition is refined for tourism projects to focus on four key components: infrastructure, promotion, quality-of-life and long-term support.

Economic Development creates an *infrastructure* for businesses, organizations and communities as they solve real-world problems. Tourism needs infrastructure just like any other industry. Destinations need to be developed to receive visitors and be of a high enough quality that they encourage positive experiences and stories. Places like the Southern Terminus of the Pinhoti Trail at Flagg Mountain in Weogufka State Forest (alabamatrailsfoundation.org/project-update/flagg-mountain-site-use-plan) are being redeveloped so that a visitor’s journey is rewarded with a high-quality experience celebrating a piece of Alabama’s historical infrastructure.

Economic Development *markets and promotes* the value of those solutions. While working with the Coastal Alabama Partnership (coastalalabama.org) to develop ecotourism projects in Mobile and Baldwin counties, Costas Christ of Beyond Green Travel (beyondgreentravel.com) notes that value should not be simply defined by an increase in number of visitors: “Having more tourists does not always translate into better tourism or more economic growth. Tourism’s success should be measured by its impact to improve the economic and social wellbeing of local communities; benefit cultural heritage and history; and directly support the protection of nature.”⁵

Economic Development improves vitality and *quality-of-life* through programs for communities. These things matter for industry and business recruitment. Many site selectors and economic developers include a metric called “Livability” when considering sites for locating their companies. Livability scores capture the value of a community’s amenities and character. They provide a metric for evaluating those things that are important for employees when looking for a place to live. It includes the quality of parks, trails, programs, facilities, walkability and other community developments. The Mobile County Blueway Project (mobilecountyblueway.com) recognizes the importance of Livability scores to its development as an economic asset for the county.

Economic Development provides *long-term support* that develops independent economic sustainability. The Alabama Birding Trails (alabamabirdingtrails.com) have been contributing to Alabama’s economic vitality since the beginnings of the project in 2010. Since then, it has grown into a statewide collection of 270 birding sites across eight trails connecting 65 counties. It encourages visitors from around the world to find the more than 430 bird species found in Alabama. Expenditures during those



visits capture Alabama's share of the \$14B spent nationally on birdwatching trips.⁶ This contribution to Alabama's economy is a result of prolonged and sustained efforts by a wide variety of state, regional and local partners.

How Municipal Leaders Can Develop Sustainable Tourism Projects

Sustainable Tourism projects provide a competitive advantage for economic development projects through product differentiation, operational efficiency and workforce development. They improve quality-of-life, which is a critical component of modern economic development. They also develop resiliency through long-term thinking that protects the economic asset developed over multiple years with significant investment. As with most projects, there are multiple ways to approach Sustainable Tourism. While a formulaic approach will not work, there are key components necessary to develop successful Sustainable Tourism projects:

- Begin with a clear understanding of the three pillars of Sustainable Tourism and incorporate them into the project concept. Careful planning and thought should be given to the key values upon which sustainable tourism rests: Nature, Culture and Community. These fundamental values should be integrated tightly into the project program and design so that they are not removed or ignored during the complex development process. Integration also ensures that the project will benefit economically and protect the very thing that visitors seek to experience and learn.
- Find partners that are familiar with Sustainable Tourism and have demonstrated an ability to hold aligned values through project implementation. Experience matters when approaching an unfamiliar project type.
- Be familiar with the terminology and language. The Sustainable Tourism market understands when projects are authentically focused on the three pillars mentioned above along with the three core values noted. Incorrect use of terms such as ecotourism, nature tourism, heritage tourism and sustainability will undercut your project intentions.
- Develop metrics of success that go beyond an increased number of tourists. Consider measuring things that reflect the values of Sustainable Tourism. They might include number of local businesses created, new jobs, acres of land preserved, wildlife protected, stories of returning family members and partnerships with national organizations.

In addition to improving economics, Sustainable Tourism projects generally have the added factor of being enjoyable to developing and attracting positive attention to a community. Consider ways that Sustainable Tourism can benefit your community while complementing existing economies or creating new ones. Alabama has a small but mighty collection of Sustainable Tourism projects both implemented and in the works. Connecting to that network will simplify your economic development responsibility and have long-lasting positive impacts to your community. ■

End Notes

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⁶US Fish & Wildlife Service. (n.d.). (rep.). *Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis Addendum to the 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*.



As a licensed architect and urban planner with the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, Matt applies design thinking strategies across a wide variety of projects throughout Alabama. Matt was the Director of Design and Planning for the Gulf State Park Enhancement Project, a \$143 million effort to redevelop Gulf State Park into an international benchmark for economic and environmental sustainability that demonstrates best practices for outdoor recreation, education and hospitality. This six-year multi-stakeholder project included a 350-room hotel, an Interpretive Center seeking Living Building certification, a Learning Campus, dune restoration and a 28-mile trail network. He is one of the founding members of the Cahaba Blueway and the board chair for YourTown Alabama, a leadership workshop dedicated to inspiring and educating leaders about the ability of design and planning to assist them in improving their communities.

Other artistic stops include the **5&Dime** (201 Broad Street), the old Woolworth's that local art activist and Selma promoter, **A.C. Reeves**, has converted into a gathering spot and event space downstairs with the hip Woolworth Lofts upstairs (available thru www.airbnb.com where you can find other Selma lodging options as well). Visiting www.tourselma.com will take you to A.C.'s self-guided tours – or for a real treat, have A.C. take you on an in-person tour herself! Another sweet spot is the enchanted **Bridge Tender's House**, the little yellow house perched on the very edge of the river. Built in 1884 for the Washington Street Swing Bridge as the bridge tender's residence, it is now the studio of Selma artist, **Anne Strand** – www.annestrandart.com. Although it's not open to the public, Anne is usually there during Selma's monthly **First Saturdays**, which are worth checking out. There's a magical AirBnB on the lower level of the house providing the best sunrises and sunsets on the river imaginable. Or book a room (or at least enjoy a meal or a cocktail) at the newly refurbished **St. James Hotel**, on Water Avenue right in front of the Bridge Tender's House. The original structure is pre-Civil War (1837) and is another landmark that survived the war. While you're in the neighborhood, you should check out the **Old Depot Museum** – you just have to see it to believe it. The space is chock-full of so much memorabilia it will make your head spin. As you're walking along Water Avenue, you can't miss two murals created by **Trés Taylor** and the people of Selma as part of his "Revolution of Joy" project. Trés' goal is to create community murals throughout the Black Belt.



*Sturdivant Hall.
Photo by Kay Jacoby.*

Thus far, he has completed them in Camden, Marion and Greensboro. He and his wife, Helene, recently left Birmingham, bought an 1872 grand dame house, and have transformed what was already an architectural marvel into their residence filled with their own international art collection, including much of Trés' work: www.TresTaylor.com. **Byrdland**, as they've named it, is only open by appointment, but if you get the chance, go. They're in the heart of Old Town where many other regal houses either proudly stand or long to be loved. Visit Selma. There's more than you realize – especially when seen through an artistic lens.

NEWBERN & GREENSBORO

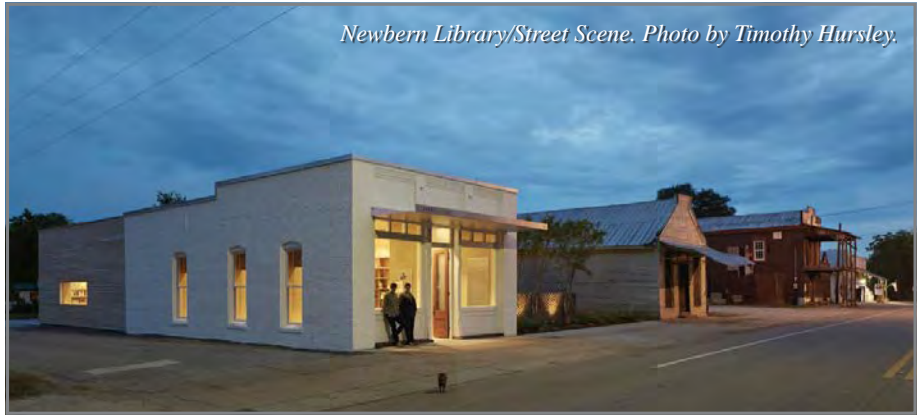
Another favorite trip is to Newbern and Greensboro (they're only nine miles apart, so it's easy to visit both). From Montgomery, Newbern (pop. 169) is a little over 1.5 hours. Coming from Selma (which you pass through) it's only about 45 minutes and you can swing by and visit **Laura Spencer** at her "soap making house" in **Marion Junction** (www.simplymakingit.com) to stock up on all kinds of soaps, lotions and potions – courtesy of the goats on Spencer Farms. If you're traveling on a Thursday or Friday between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. (that's the only time they're open), you can stop off at **Wayside Bakery** – a quick detour (212 County Road 10) just before you get to Newbern. This small family-owned business has an offering of delicious baked goods you won't be able to resist. The aroma you experience once you step inside is worth the stop. They also sell homemade frozen entrees, which reminds me that on these trips you should bring a cooler because you'll probably find some perishable items along the way to take home with you.



*Newbern Mercantile.
Photo by Kay Jacoby.*

From there, visit **Auburn University School of Architecture's Rural Studio** (www.ruralstudio.org) in **Newbern**. Founded in 1993 by Auburn professors "**Sambo**" **Mockbee** (1944-2001) and **D.K. Ruth** (1944-2009) as an off-campus design-build

program to educate Auburn University students in the importance of sustainable, healthful rural living with good design and an affordable price, it continues to garner international acclaim. The current director, **Andrew Freear** (along with a dedicated staff) oversees the projects that approximately 50 second-year through fifth-year architecture students design and build themselves. To date, the award-winning program has completed more than 200 projects and educated more than 1200 students in the Black Belt. You can set up



Newbern Library/Street Scene. Photo by Timothy Hursley.

an official tour to see some of their completed projects, learn more about the program and see some students in action. At the very least, stop by the **Newbern Library**, right on the main road (Co. Rd. 61), and see how they creatively turned a 1906 bank building (the vault is still there) into a welcoming library and community gathering space, complete with reading nooks, large window seats and, of course, WiFi. If you're hungry, walk a few doors down to the **Newbern Mercantile**, a 1926 general store-turned-restaurant, featuring daily specials and tasty burgers you can always count on (open Tues.-Fri. 8-5 and Sat. 8-3). Before you leave Newbern, find the Green Warehouse (it's right behind and to the left of the library). Do an online search of "**Green Warehouse Newbern**" to see the significance of it and Hale County artist, **William Christenberry**, who was known for his photography, painting and sculpture. His work can be found in major museums throughout the country and, although he lived in Washington, D.C. he made annual pilgrimages to his native Hale County for inspiration.

And on to Greensboro (pop. 2,218), the county seat of Hale County, "Catfish Capital of Alabama," and 10 minutes away. Though tiny in population, it's big in creativity *and* activity. It's the birthplace of Birmingham-Southern College and was the center for photographer **Walker Evans's** and writer **James Agee's** exploration of the effects of the Great Depression in the book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941. Recently, there has been an influx of young creatives moving to the area. Creatives such as textile artist, **Aaron Head** (www.aaronsandershead.com) along with his partner, musician **Tim Higgins** (www.timhigginsmusic.com) who purchased a rambling Victorian home on Main Street and moved from Nashville to Greensboro, where the living is easier (and cheaper) and they can each focus on their artistic endeavors (when they're not focusing on rehabbing

their rambling Victorian house). Their studio on Main Street is where Aaron creates his textile art using natural dyes, leads workshops and sells his work and other artists' work. They're making plans for the first ever Black Belt Biennial—a spin-off from their newly formed nonprofit, **Black Belt Workshop** (www.blackbeltworkshop.org).

Another rising star is **Sarah Cole** of **Abadir's** (www.abadirspastry.com). Like Aaron and Tim, Sarah is an Alabama native who returned "home" from Pittsburgh and is blowing people away with her exotic creations via pop-up shops – "traveling eateries" – in Greensboro, Selma, Tuscaloosa and Birmingham featuring Egyptian dishes and pastries inspired by her mother. Her innovative recipes combine locally sourced ingredients along with a Middle Eastern influence resulting in a loyal following of her unique creations. Her love of food goes beyond the kitchen, since she started a nonprofit, **Black Belt Food Project**, to build a more inclusive community through food-based opportunities for those living in the Black Belt. Sarah and her partner, **Robert Fitzpatrick**, also bought a Victorian house and Robert has a woodworking shop – all on Main Street.

Around the corner stands, **The Oaks**, an 1845 Greek Revival mansion, purchased in 2016 by **Ian Crawford**, a young University of Alabama interior design instructor, who now commutes 45 minutes to Tuscaloosa. He compares his home to a laboratory where he can share his love of history, interior design, and entertaining with his classes, tours and friends. Contact him for a special lunch and/or tour and you'll see why he has a reputation for elevating every experience to a



Aaron Head with indigo dyed textiles. Photo by Grace Boot.

new level. (icrawford.people.ua.edu/) Meanwhile, back on Main Street, you can have a photo op in front of another one of Trés Taylor’s “Revolution of Joy” murals and also check out the **Historic Greensboro Opera House**, built in 1903 and refurbished as a special events venue in the early 2000s with the help of the **Alabama State Council on the Arts**.

Also located in Greensboro is the office of **Alabama Audubon’s Black Belt Birding Initiative**, working to bring economic and environmental bird-based eco-tourism through field trips, partnerships and special events. One such special event is **The Black Belt Birding Festival**. This Alabama Audubon Society event sold out in 2021, so if birding is one of your interests, sign up and show up. (www.alaudubon.org)

Before heading home, you might enjoy stopping by **The Stable** (on Main Street, of course) which bills itself as a “Southern Coffee Pub, Restaurant, and Bar” meaning you can satisfy a multitude of cravings. Their website, www.thestablecoffee.com, tells how they came into being ... which brings me to an important point – Creative Placemaking – building community by intersecting individual stories and experiences to create a place people want to visit and sometimes even settle down and create a new life. The people and places above are a great example of successful Creative Placemaking. The first step is making a place that people want to at least visit. If the visit is pleasant enough, they might just relocate!

GEE’S BEND & CAMDEN

One specific place people are often curious about and want to visit – no doubt because of the national attention it’s received through the years – is **Gee’s Bend**, also known as Boykin, an unincorporated community of just over 200 located directly across the river from Camden and home of the internationally famous Gee’s Bend Quilters. Gee’s Bend is about an hour and 45 minutes from Montgomery or about 50 minutes from Selma. There have been so many books, documentaries and even U.S. postage stamps reflecting the quilts produced in this tiny, rural hamlet on the Alabama River that sometimes people think it’s going to be *more than* a tiny, rural hamlet on the Alabama River! But that’s what it is. It’s the people who make it an extremely special place. There are several books and online articles to read about the history of the Gee’s Bend quilters, but be prepared to go down a rabbit hole because it’s quite a story, including the **Gee’s Bend Freedom Quilting Bee**, which played a big role in the Civil Rights Movement (www.soulsgrowndeep.org). A new non-profit has been formed as Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy (www.freedomquilting.com) to preserve the heritage, restore the original building (which has been empty since the 1990s), and develop the 15 acres around it with a hands-on museum, lodging and space for workshops to visitors who make this pilgrimage.

You can begin your trek with an early morning stop at the **Orrville Farmer’s Market**, located just 20 minutes outside of Selma on Co. Road 22 for some breakfast (and I mean a FULL breakfast). Florida transplants, **Judy and Erwin McKinney**, have curated an impressive general store they’ve elevated to a destination place featuring many specialty food items and gifts while also providing a pleasant rest stop. They’re open 6:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and also serve lunch. As you approach Orrville, you’ll pass signs for **Old Cahawba**, the state capital from 1819-1826, which is now Alabama’s “oldest ghost town” and definitely worth a visit, but maybe not on this trip because of time limitations. (www.cahawba.com). One important thing to note is the car ferry schedule between Gee’s Bend and Camden (www.geesbendferry.com) and to be mindful of the time. It goes both ways, of course, should you decide to visit Camden first, but you don’t want to miss the ferry because it saves a lot of time and is a fun part of the experience.

I recommend a plan that includes meeting the Gee’s Bend quilters sometime after 10 a.m. when **Mary Ann and China Pettway** usually arrive at **The Collective** (located at 14570 Co. Road 29 in Boykin) for a meet-n-greet, for visitors to shop and ask questions about their work. Afterwards, you can catch the noon ferry over to Camden. Note: The Collective has quilts that sell for close to \$20,000, although they also have smaller, more affordable items. When documentaries have been made about you, and your work is in major institutions such as the National Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the notoriety brings top dollar. That being said, I always encourage a donation if you’re not buying anything because these ladies are gifting visitors their time and they, of course, don’t sell \$20,000 quilts daily.

You can also stop by the **Boykin Nutritional Center** located at the ferry landing and visit several other quilters before you



board the ferry to Camden, which is a 20-minute trip on the Alabama River. If you have a group, you might enjoy lunch at **Gaines Ridge Dinner Club**, an 1820s Greek Revival home-turned-restaurant. They're only open by appointment for lunch and their dinner hours are Thursday through Saturday from 5:30 to 9:00 p.m., but if you're staying in Selma or somewhere else nearby this is an option. Otherwise, head straight into Camden to **Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center** (BBTCAC - www.blackbelttreasures.com) in the heart of town and get advice from **Sulynn Creswell** and **Kristin Law**, who can advise you on all things Camden.

BBTCAC is a nonprofit organization founded in 2005 with the objective to stimulate the economy in the region, create an income stream for artists and provide arts education opportunities in the community and within the school systems. It was developed as an outgrowth of a tourism initiative launched by the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, Ala-Tom RC&D and the UA Center for Economic Development. Today they're a success story representing over 300 Black Belt artists. Their physical space and outreach has grown exponentially since its inception and the concept has been modeled in other parts of the country. You can't go to Camden and not visit Black Belt Treasures! Chances are they'll walk you over to the **Camden Shoe Shoppe Museum** and introduce you to Betty Anderson,

the curator, who was a young foot soldier in the march from Montgomery to Selma. She has assembled an eclectic assortment of period clothing, furniture, artwork and shoe repair equipment dating back to the late 1800s because her father operated the longest running African American-run business in the Black Belt, The Camden Shoe Shoppe. Next up you can move from the old to the new at **The Pecan on Broad** (www.pecanonbroad.com). The name is derived from the building itself – the repurposed Williams Pecan Building – and has quickly become a destination place for lunch (open Wednesday through Friday from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.). It's also known for all kinds of delicious artisan baked goods and decorative items – all set in a charming atmosphere. It's owned by two Mobile transplants, **Chris Bailey** and **Ryan Dunagan**, who fell in love with small town life, bought an 1840s plantation in Camden in 2018, and opened a business (or two) in 2019. Once again, individuals with a vision, settling into a community and creatively making it a place people want to visit or even relocate.



Photo by
Kristin Law.

Closing Thoughts

All the wonderful places in this article are just tiny dots on a map to many people; however, to the person who is curious and amazed at the beauty of the land, the architecture, the impressive creativity *and the people*, those dots become gems. To bring out the shine of your own “diamond in the rough” where you live, it takes vision, enthusiasm, work, love, and – let's face it – money. But without the vision, enthusiasm, work, and love for a place, all the money in the world won't make it somewhere you would want to live or visit. As the late Sambo Mockbee, co-founder of the Rural Studio in Newbern said: **“PROCEED AND BE BOLD.”** He did. Others are. You can, too! ■



An artist and arts enthusiast, Kay Jacoby spent several years as the Community Arts Program Manager for the Alabama State Council on the Arts where she traveled around the state for site visits to meet the people she'd been communicating with about grants and to see their art programs in action. It was here that her curiosity and appreciation was renewed for small towns. She had grown up in a small town, Ozark, but left in the late '70s to attend the University of Alabama, moved to Birmingham soon after graduation and relocated to Montgomery with her husband in 2006. When she left her job with the Arts Council in 2021 to pursue her own artistic endeavors, she participated in the Southwest Alabama Ambassadors program for the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development and Tourism where she was able to explore curated tourism, particularly in the Black Belt. Of course, her favorite way to improve a community is through art, which is what she was promoting through the Arts Council. Because it's hard to deny the bridge-building effect a festival, afterschool arts program, a concert on

the square or building an arts center has on a town, Kay will always seek out the creative outlets in a town she visits, no matter the size, because there are always artists among us. To embrace the arts is to embrace living! For more about the Southwest Alabama Ambassador program, visit www.uaced.ua.edu/swaa. For more on the Arts Council, visit www.arts.alabama.gov.

- 3. Tourism supports local jobs.** Visitors to your town help support existing jobs in your community. Cooks and waiters, gas station and convenience store attendants, retail store clerks and cashiers and other positions are all supported by purchases made by tourists.
- 4. Tourism dollars are considered “new” money.** Think of when you travel, whether for vacation, business or just a weekend drive, what purchases do you make along the way? These purchases may include gas, food (restaurants and convenience stores), retail (clothing, recreation supplies, keepsakes and souvenirs) and amusement (golf greens fees, boat launch fees, museum/attraction admissions, movie theaters, bowling alleys and skating rinks). All these activities create “new” money for a community because there is little to no burden on the community.
- 5. Tourism provides “burden free” additional tax revenue.** Services that are required for permanent residents are not needed for tourists. Cities and towns do not have to build or maintain schools for tourists. In short, someone comes to town, spends their money and departs, leaving behind their money and a positive economic impact on the community. Most, if not all, purchases made in your community by tourists are taxed. This is added tax revenue your local government can use to maintain services and expand service/facilities to improve the quality of life for your residents. The additional “burden free” tax revenue can help build a playground or park, put in a tennis (or pickleball!) court, help fund additional law enforcement personnel, open a library or support any number of quality-of-life projects.
- 6. Tourism is more than a money generator.** There are many benefits to a tourism project in a rural community in addition to generating revenue. It can serve as a unifying project to help develop community spirit. Depending on the type of tourism project you undertake, museums, special/events, reenactments and historic trails can help ensure the continuation of your local heritage. Tourism can also help create a town identity. Your town may not reach “world famous” status but it may become known throughout the surrounding counties, region or even statewide because of the buzz generated through your tourism project.

I want a project but where do I begin?

Starting a tourism project may seem like a daunting task, but just like with any endeavor, the first thing to do is put the initial plan on paper. This will be a broad plan so do not get caught up in the details as there will be opportunities to fine-tune it later. Having a written plan has four main benefits:

1. Everyone who is involved or who will become involved as the project develops will have a clear understanding of what is being done and why. There is no chance for the story to change, grow or expand if told through the grapevine. It helps avoid confusion when you are knee-deep in the swamp.
2. As the tourism project develops so do the seemingly never-ending details. A written plan helps clear the head and keeps your team focused. It helps prepare for the unexpected.
3. Murphy’s Law will show up. A written plan can help eliminate the unexpected and can be adapted to address the unexpected.
4. Along the way you will need to (and should) make reports to the community, civic leaders and government officials on how your tourism project is progressing. A written plan can help you do that and keep the community involved.

Developing a Purpose and Obtainable Goals

After deciding tourism is a good economic development approach for your community, the next important step is establishing a purpose for the project. Stimulating overall economic growth is pretty much a given, even though it is a very general statement. Dive in a little deeper and develop a statement with a bit more focus so you will know when you have fulfilled your purpose. Try to keep two things in mind: 1) what are we trying to do and 2) how will we know when we have done it? Here are some examples to help stimulate your thoughts:

Purpose: To create a tourism project to attract visitors to our community and, thereby, through visitor spending, stimulate the economic growth of our community and improve the quality of life for our residents.

Purpose: To create an annual special event that will generate funds to help build a new playground at Founders Park.

Purpose: To create a tourism project that will help preserve our local heritage for future generations with a particular focus on attracting school field trips to the site on a year-round basis.

Once the purpose is established, develop obtainable goals to work towards. Goals are broad aims that provide the framework for more specific action plans. You can have as many goals as you would like but usually having no more than 10 goals keeps the project manageable. Examples of general goals that should be included on each tourism project are:

Goal: Ensure the safety and security of all workers and visitors and provide easy access to your tourism project.

Goal: Ensure your tourism project meets all related laws and regulations.

Goal: Ensure your tourism project is properly promoted, both in traditional media outlets and social media outlets.

Goal: Garner community support for the tourism project.

Goal: Ensure workers and volunteers are informed on courteous treatment of guests and knowledgeable about emergency procedures, the tourism project itself and local information (where to eat, where to stay, what else is there to do, etc.).

Goal: Seek sources for both financial and manpower support for your tourism project (i.e., donations, grants, volunteers, civic organization sponsorships, etc.).

Additional goals specific to the type of tourism project will be needed and will depend on the type of project. Fishing tournament goals are different than goals for a music festival and goals for building a museum are different than goals for creating a nature trail. Your goals will serve as your roadmap to achieving your purpose.

SMART

In 1961, *Management Review* featured an article written by George T. Doran titled “There’s a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management’s Goals and Objectives”. His concept is still in use today and may help in setting your tourism project’s specific goals. Here is what the acronym stands for:

Specific – target a specific area for improvement.

Measurable – quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress.

Assignable – specify who will do it.

Realistic – state what results can realistically be achieved given available resources.

Time-related – specify when the result(s) can be achieved.

Once the goals are determined, each will have an action plan. Components of an action plan include a well-defined description of the goal to be achieved; tasks that need to be carried out to reach the goal; names of individuals or teams who will be in charge of carrying out each task; a deadline for each task to be completed; resources needed to complete the tasks; and measures to evaluate progress. There is no limit to the number of action plans. It can include as many as needed to achieve your goal.

Example Goal #1: Garner Community Support for the Tourism Project

Example Action Plan #1A: Naming Contest

- A naming contest will be held for our tourism project and is open to all residents of our community.
- Naming contest committee will decide where to send entries, how winner will be decided, what prizes will be awarded, how to secure prizes and will present findings to the board by March 15.
- Contest will begin April 1 with an entry deadline of May 31.
- Naming contest committee will plan an announcement event/press conference for early June.
- Naming contest committee will work with the promotion committee to ensure timely public announcements on the progress of the contest and event related dates.

Example Action Plan #1B: Town Posters

- Poster committee will find a volunteer to design a poster to inform the community about the tourism project.
- Design should take into consideration the cost of printing the final product, one color or two-color design is preferred, with no bleed. Poster should be no larger than 11x17 for economic reasons.
- Design should take into consideration the theme of the tourism project and provide important information including date of event, location, ticket costs and where to buy, website and social media information.
- Design should be completed no later than June 15 and presented to the tourism project committee for approval. After approval, poster committee will find a local printer who will volunteer to print 250 posters, with printing to be completed by July 1.
- Poster committee will then visit local and nearby businesses, government offices, schools, etc. and ask for permission to display the posters in their facility. This should be completed no later than July 15.

One last note: be sure to match your team members’ abilities to your action plan. Each individual has a specific knowledge and skill base. Pairing them with the matching action plan will help ensure accurate and timely completion.

It Only Takes a Spark

You want to launch a tourism project but your head is spinning because you don’t know how to decide what it will be. Here are some ways to help with the decision-making process, followed by some unique real-life examples to help “spark” an idea.

Which comes first, the purpose or the idea? If you already have in mind a “need” to fulfill, then your purpose comes before the idea. For example, if you want to create a tourism project to help improve the reading skills of your youth, then your tourism

project idea may be hosting a storytelling festival or conducting an annual book sale by writers from your state or offering a book reading contest for students in conjunction with a public fair. A local museum in need of funding is another example of the purpose coming before the idea. The idea for the tourism project may be to create a Founders Day-type festival with activities centered around that time period, such as a best beard contest, apple bobbing, tether ball tournament or offering a series of public seminars on old time skills such as canning, quilting, blacksmithing, etc.

If you don't have a particular need your tourism project should help fulfill, then the purpose is to help stimulate the economy of the community. The easiest way to determine the best idea on how to stimulate the economy is to use a simplified version of Ben Franklin's decision-making method. Divide a paper into two columns. In one column, list your assets. In the other, list your negatives.

By comparing the pros and cons, the Ben Franklin method will help in narrowing down the idea for your tourism project. For example, if you have nice roads and nice architecture in a designated area, you may consider a driving tour, walking tour or even a bike trail. Or, if there is a good recreation lake or river nearby but you do not have a lot of people that could volunteer to organize and host a fishing tournament, you could consider creating a canoe trail with designated entry and exit locations in or near your community.

Consider Cultural Heritage Tourism

Cultural heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing specialty markets in the tourism industry today. The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States defines cultural heritage tourism as "traveling to experience the places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past."

In simple terms, cultural heritage tourism is a way for travelers to experience the charm of a local community and its traditions, folklore, spaces and values. Popular cultural and heritage activities include visiting historic sites, attending historical re-enactments, visiting art museums/galleries, attending an arts and crafts fair or festival, attending a professional dance performance, visiting state or national parks and exploring urban neighborhoods.

Developing tourism in a rural community is possible and may require a little more ingenuity. Carefully consider what makes your community unique. Does your town have any traditions that locals enjoy? Visit the local archives and learn about the history of the town and why it was founded. Sometimes capitalizing on small things can produce significant results. This tactic will preserve the town's heritage while bringing real economic benefits to the community.

Still no idea? Dream up your own.

Rather than create something from scratch, look at other communities and their successes. Often innovative ideas arise by learning from others and may be as simple as tweaking certain aspects to work for your situation. Here are some additional examples to help spark your imagination:

Cullman, Alabama, was founded in 1873 by John Gottfried Cullmann (the town eventually lost an "n"), a German who came to America after the Civil War and picked out the area's rolling hills as a spot for immigrant settlers. The city, with a population of 14,000, had its first Oktoberfest in 1981. The celebration has grown from a two-day affair to a full eight days of festivities. The first Oktoberfest netted approximately 150 attendees, while recent events packed downtown with more than 25,000 throughout the week.

A list of assets might include:

- Adjacent to a good recreation lake.
- Unique architecture of buildings.
- Local resident who is passionate about toy trains.
- City was founded by a prospector looking for silver.
- Unique bakeries.
- Founding families were from Scotland.
- Active civic organization that likes helping.
- Pretty, natural setting.
- Long history of farm families.
- Civil War battle happened nearby.
- Biggest employer makes jeans.
- Talented local artist.
- Good parks and recreation department.
- Lots of peach farms nearby.
- Good roads, easy to get around, scenic drives.

A list of negatives might include:

- No hotels or campgrounds.
- Limited number of people to serve as volunteers.
- Not much money for project.
- Not located near a big city.
- Only have a couple of parks to hold an event.
- Most residents are elderly.
- No internet access.
- Roads are not in good condition.
- No local police department.

In 1992, a town in Finland (population 3,384) launched the “Wife Carrying World Championship.” The prize is awarded based on the wife’s weight in beer.

The village of Brockworth in England (population of 7,387) hosts a Cheese Rolling contest each May. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the event attracted 4,000 people to the hillside event.

Remember when Naugahyde was the popular brand of artificial leather? Back in the 1980s, the town of Double Springs, Alabama, (population 1,083) held an annual Naugahyde Run through Bankhead National Forest.

Helen, Georgia, with a population of only 2,883, is the state’s third most visited city. Why? In the 1970s, town businesses and community leaders saw the industrial economy dwindling. Located in the northeast mountains of Georgia, town leaders thought the community looked like a Bavarian town in the Alps. Playing off this, they launched their own version of Oktoberfest. More than 50 years later the event is still going strong. Other examples in Alabama:

Lexington Fire and Rescue Squad Annual Tractor Pull • Lexington, Alabama (pop. 743)

2019 Attendance Friday night 2,875 people

2019 Attendance Saturday night 5,987 people

Total money collected \$79,000

(COVID Year)

2020 Attendance Friday night 1,425

2020 Attendance Saturday night 4,728

2020 Total Money Collected from all sales \$93,000

(Admission tickets, a limited concession stand, 50/50 Raffle Ticket sales and t-shirts)

Cherokee Kayak Trail • Cherokee, Alabama (pop. 970)

The trail launched in June 2018 and an announcement of the trail’s opening on the Town of Cherokee’s Facebook page spawned 13,000 responses.

Cemetery Stroll • Athens, Alabama

Residents of Athens dress in period outfits representing people named on headstones and tell their local story of the time period as participants walk past. The event is always sold out.

North Alabama Scenic Motorcycle Routes

The trail capitalizes on a current trend with no overhead and very low marketing costs associated with the promotion.

Funding Resources for Your Tourism Project

The following is a list of organizations that offer grant opportunities for tourism-related projects.

- **Alabama Association of RC&D Councils** - www.alabamarc.org/grant-application/. In order to qualify for a grant, project must cover at least three of their council regions and have a minimum request of \$3,000.
- **Alabama Department of Archives & History** - www.archives.alabama.gov/officials/grants.html.
- **Alabama Historical Commission** - www.ahc.alabama.gov/Resources/grants21.aspx. Grants are awarded to public or non-profit entities that own and operate historic sites in Alabama, reflect an education-based mission, concentrate on educational programming and reflect the geographical diversity of the state.
- **Alabama Humanities Foundation** - www.alabamahumanities.org/grants/. AHA awards grants to support public humanities programming in communities across Alabama, helping promote the appreciation and understanding of history, literature, civics and culture.
- **Alabama State Council on the Arts** - www.arts.state.al.us/. An organization is eligible to apply for funding support of arts activities taking place in Alabama, if the organization is legally domiciled in Alabama and is either a non-profit organization with a determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service or a public and/or private educational institution, a school board, or a local or county governmental agency.

- **Alabama Tourism Department** - www.tourism.alabama.gov/forms/matching-grants/. The Community Grants Program provides assistance to municipal and nonprofit Alabama organizations promoting travel and vacation business to Alabama on a reimbursement basis.
- **Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area** - www.msnha.una.edu/community-grants-program/. The mission of MSNHA is to promote cultural tourism by education, preservation and conservation of the heritage and culture of the six counties within the designated area. The Community Grants Program awards range from \$1,000 to \$7,500.
- **Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation** - www.mggoodrichfoundation.org/apply-for-a-grant/. Since 2009, the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation has been providing grants to nonprofit organizations in the Birmingham community, the Black Belt and the state as a whole to support a variety of programs. From education to the environment, from the cultural arts to neighborhood revitalization, the Foundation has distributed over \$26,000,000 in grants to 221 organizations.
- **Malone Family Foundation** - www.themalonefamilyfoundation.org/. The Foundation supports initiatives that improve the quality of education, the motivation and the self-esteem of students from pre-kindergarten through higher education and has an especially strong interest in supporting innovative endeavors that lead to a better-educated population and a higher standard of living.
- **Walmart Community Grant Program** - <https://walmart.org/what-we-do/strengthening-communities/local-giving>
- **Dollar General Literacy Foundation Grants** - www.dgliteracy.org/grant-programs. The Dollar General Literacy Foundation provides grant funding to support literacy and education initiatives serving individuals of all ages. The Foundation funds nonprofit organizations, schools and libraries within a 15-mile radius of Dollar General stores in the states in which they operate.
- **Alabama Opportunity Zones** - www.adeca.alabama.gov/opportunityzones/. The Opportunity Zones program is an alternative economic development program established by Congress in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 to foster private-sector investments in low-income rural and urban areas. The areas eligible for submission as Opportunity Zones are low-income census tracts with a poverty rate of at least 20 percent and a median family income of less than 80 percent of the statewide or area median income. The program provides a federal tax incentive for investors to use their unrealized capital gains into Opportunity Funds dedicated for investing in the designated Opportunity Zones. The Governor's Office, with the help of ADECA, identified and selected the 158 Opportunity Zones from the qualifying tracts. There is at least one Opportunity Zone in each of the state's 67 counties.



Tami Reist is the President and CEO of the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association. Her duties include planning, implementing, directing, and evaluating all promotional programs as well as overall development of the tourism and travel industry within the 16 northernmost counties of the State of Alabama. The region currently generates more than \$2.5 billion in travel expenditures on an annual basis. She is a graduate of Calhoun Community College and a graduate of the Southeast Tourism Society Marketing College, where she earned the Travel Marketing Professional (TMP) certification. Reist's career in the tourism and travel industry spans more than three decades. Previous employment includes Project Manager and General Manager of Courtyard by Marriott in Decatur, AL.; Regional Manager for Hampton Inn and Country Inn and Suites by Carlson in Decatur and Florence, AL.; and General Manager and Project Coordinator of the Amberley Suite Hotel in Decatur, AL. During this time, she was responsible for overseeing the construction, start-up, and operation of several hotel properties in Decatur, Florence and Huntsville, AL. From 2006 to 2013, she was the President/CEO of the Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau where she was responsible for marketing Decatur and Morgan County as a tourist destination and convention site to generate and increase lodging tax revenue for the city and county. Under her leadership, the CVB received the "Shining Example" award from the Southeast Tourism Society in 2009 and the 2008 "Tourism Organization of the Year" award from the Alabama Tourism Department. Reist assumed the role of President and CEO of the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association in January 2013.

Outdoor Recreation: An Important Economic Development Opportunity for Alabama Cities and Towns

Brian Rushing • Director of Economic Development Initiatives • UA Center for Economic Development

We all know that “Alabama the Beautiful” is a slogan our state comes by honestly. With more miles of navigable waterways than any other state, unique and beautiful natural landscapes and some of the greatest biological diversity in all of North America, Alabama has a natural appeal that is undeniable.

It is true that we have wonderful state parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, land trust preserves and other places where Alabamians and visitors to our state can enjoy outdoor activities. However, Alabama’s outdoor recreation economy remains notably underdeveloped, and we are not yet widely recognized nationally as an outdoor recreation destination. The good news is that with our abundant natural resources, year-round mild temperatures and culture of hospitality, we have tremendous potential to better develop Alabama’s outdoor recreation offerings and play host to tourists. Cities and towns have a key role to play in this development and they stand to reap its significant economic and quality of life benefits.

Outdoor Recreation Economies

So, what is the outdoor recreation economy? Essentially, it is an “ecosystem” of nature-based recreation opportunities; the participants in nature-based recreation; and the businesses that provide goods and services to those participants. The activities that outdoor recreation encompasses generally include camping, fishing, hunting, hiking, running, horseback riding, canoeing, kayaking and other paddle sports, off-road motorsports, power boating and sailing, cycling and mountain biking, as well as wildlife viewing. Outdoor recreation is popular among Americans and this popularity is growing as older people seek to stay more active and younger people prioritize unique experiences over material possessions. Whether near or far, participants in outdoor recreation tend to travel to places where they can engage in their favorite activities in new settings and experience the culture and hospitality of different communities. In doing so, they spend money at local restaurants, hotels and inns, pubs and breweries, gas stations, outdoor equipment retailers, guide and outfitter service providers and mechanics.

Places that offer a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities and that have developed businesses that effectively cater to recreation tourists are often able to develop a robust outdoor recreation economy. What is noteworthy is that places with well-developed outdoor recreation economies not only reap the benefit of tourism spending, but they effectively compete in the “quality of life marketplace” that is becoming more and more important in attracting and retaining residents.

A 2019 report (headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/recreation-counties-attract-report.pdf) published by Headwaters Economics found that, since 2010, counties in the United States that depended upon outdoor recreation as an economic driver consistently attracted more residents and generated greater income opportunity than non-recreation counties. Outdoor recreation also appears to be a factor in helping rural counties combat the loss of residents to larger metropolitan areas. During the same



*Chief Ladiga Trail, Jacksonville, AL,
Photo by Brian Rushing.*



*Elk River Blueway.
Photo by Brian Rushing.*

time period, rural counties with natural amenities and recreation economies slightly increased in population while their non-recreation counterparts lost an average of 20 people per 1,000 residents. The natural conclusion is that places with significant outdoor recreation amenities and complementary businesses not only attract tourists, but they lure people looking to relocate. Such places have growing economies with positive economic effects that extend well beyond those of direct spending by outdoor recreation participants.

A report released in November 2021 to the Alabama Innovation Commission by Stanford University’s Hoover Institution (hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/alabama_webreadypdf_rev.pdf) indicates that this phenomenon is particularly important for highly skilled technology workers, whom Alabama is now seeking to attract. The report contends that younger innovation and technology professionals today are keenly interested in living in places with good quality of life and they value opportunities for outdoor recreation. The report says that Alabama is “exceptionally endowed with a vast array of natural assets” that remain underdeveloped for outdoor recreation. In fact, as a percentage of annual Gross Domestic Product, Alabama’s outdoor recreation economy is smaller than that of our neighboring states. As Alabama looks to grow its technology and innovation economy, the report stresses that one of the things our state’s leaders should do is invest in better developing our natural resources for recreational use and support the creation and expansion of businesses that serve outdoor recreation tourists. By doing so, we stand not only to establish Alabama as an outdoor recreation destination, but we will also be effective in recruiting the 21st Century workers we need.

Trails and Rivers

Even if a city, county or state does not yet have a truly well-developed outdoor recreation economy, recreation tourism destinations often generate significant returns on investment and positive impacts on local business. The Chief Ladiga Trail is Alabama’s longest rail-trail, stretching for 32.5 miles and connecting the cities of Weaver, Jacksonville and Piedmont before it crosses into Georgia and becomes the Silver Comet Trail. A 2015 Jacksonville State University study found that the trail has an annual total economic impact of about \$1,500,000. When compared with the \$2,000,000 project capital cost and \$50,000 per year in internal operating costs, the Chief Ladiga Trail essentially pays for itself again and again every 16 months.

Located between Columbus, Georgia, and Phenix City, Alabama, the RushSouth Whitewater Park along the Chattahoochee River provides another great example of the potential economic returns from outdoor recreation investment. Public and private partners invested \$23,000,000 in removing two decommissioned mill dams on the river and engineering whitewater paddling features along a 2.5-mile course. In 2013, the City of Columbus inaugurated the “world’s largest urban whitewater park.” Today it attracts an estimated 150,000 whitewater rafters each year, generating a total annual local economic impact of approximately \$42,000,000.

Another example of the positive effect of outdoor recreation development on local business is Elkmont, Alabama. A town in Limestone County with a population of 540, Elkmont’s commercial core was largely vacant in the 1990s. At that time a local resident, Richard Martin, saw an opportunity to redevelop the town’s inactive railroad corridor as a multi-use trail. Richard and his public and private partners created Alabama’s first rail-trail, which today stretches for 10.2 miles and is a popular destination for horseback riders, mountain bikers and hikers. Soon after the rail-trail opened, Limestone County designated the Noah Bike Trail as an official backroad cycling route that traverses through the county’s bucolic landscape. The county also created a formal paddling trail along the Elk River. Due in large part to Elkmont serving as the hub for these nearby outdoor attractions, its downtown now features a restaurant, two antique stores, an outdoor

apparel and gear shop and a gourmet goat cheese producer. Storefronts that were once empty are now full.

Developing Outdoor Recreation Tourist Destinations

Many Alabama communities are interested in understanding how they can get started in developing outdoor recreation tourism destinations in their area. A natural starting point is for an interested individual or organization to form a small working group or steering committee of like-minded people to begin cataloguing available physical and organizational assets and to define overarching goals. Assets may include undeveloped natural resources such as a river, springs or wetlands, an inactive rail corridor, a unique plant community, scenic views, etc.;

existing recreational, historic/cultural and/or other tourism locations; existing hospitality providers such as hotels and restaurants; potential public and private partners that could provide in-kind products, services or even funding assistance to the project; and the operational capacity of organizations that may be involved in the development and/or operation of the facility.

Goals define what a community wants to achieve through the project. In addition to creating a marketable tourism destination, a community may seek to provide facilities that are universally accessible, better serve neighborhoods with health disparities and/or providing opportunities that meet regional outdoor recreation needs or fill recognized service gaps. (Once published, the 2021 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan will be an important source of information on how to meet regional outdoor recreational needs and fill existing service gaps.)

Once a steering committee identifies available assets and develops a set of goals, it often solicits the services of a planner or landscape architect who can take the evaluation to the next level. This consultant can help identify one or more development options that have the potential to be marketable to recreational tourists and then estimate the capital costs and operational needs of each. They can facilitate the capture of public comment, which is critical for any project seeking to serve public needs. This input (often occurring several times during a planning process) helps shape the list of development options and helps identify priorities and phasing for projects that would be built out over time. The consultant can also work with the steering committee to compare capital cost estimates and operating requirements to the available funding sources, partner resources and existing organizational operating capacity to refine a list of opportunities that are feasible for the community. Out of this process, the consultant can produce a conceptual plan that the steering committee can then use to secure additional funding for individual project master planning, design and construction. Branding and the creation of public information and marketing resources is an additional planning process that will be necessary to attract visitors to the destination. In some cases, it will also be important to organize public programming and events to enhance public use of the site.



*Horse Pens Forty.
Photo by Waddy H. Stryker.*



Centerville Riverwalk. Photo by Brian Rushing.

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Partnerships Help Ensure Success

Key to the success of planning and developing impactful outdoor recreation tourism destinations is creating partnerships among local governments, the business community, private

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YourTown Alabama: Community Development Training for Small and Rural Town Leaders



Your Town Alabama is an annual workshop that provides small town and rural community leaders with critical tools for organizing, recruiting and strategically developing community and economic development projects while retaining the things that make a small or rural town special. Hundreds have been through the workshop since its inception in 1998.

Workshops are held at Camp McDowell next to the Bankhead National Forest in Winston County and are 2.5 days of thinking creatively, trying new things, listening to good ideas, being heard, laughing and meeting interesting people from all of Alabama. They are led by preservationists, planners, graphic designers, architects, engineers, historians and other professionals and expose community decision makers to asset-based planning techniques that focus on identifying 'what is right' within

a community and building on those unique community assets

Participants learn how to work with a wide range of personalities and overcome barriers that prevent communities from seeing real economic development. They also learn how to use writing, drawing and conversation to effectively shepherd big ideas through the complicated and strenuous process of project development.

YourTown Alabama inspires and educates Alabamians to use asset-based design for setting and achieving community goals.

The 2022 WORKSHOP is MAY 4-6!

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foundations and other organizations. Due to the regional scope of many high-impact recreation tourism projects, these partnerships may involve a geography covering several cities or counties. Partnerships are important because they help ensure the success of a project. They enable each organization to leverage their resources to achieve a much greater good than if they were working independently. Projects with multiple partners are attractive to funders who are looking to support initiatives with strong local backing. Partnerships can also ensure that a project will survive the inevitable administrative changes that happen in local government. Establishing and sustaining partnerships can sometimes be a challenge, but they enhance the quality and long-term sustainability of a project.

Patience

Another key to success is patience. Many larger-scale outdoor recreation projects take several years from initial concept to implementation. Assembling the partners, conducting the necessary planning and design, securing federal funding and local match, building the infrastructure and facilities and effectively marketing the destination are processes that take time and effort. However, if a project has dedicated local leadership that persists along the way, the economic and quality of life benefits that result will make all partners proud that they stayed the course. With Alabama's communities working together in these efforts, we may ultimately realize our potential to be among America's leading states for outdoor recreation tourism. ■



With a background in conservation planning and management, business administration, real estate, partnership building and fundraising, Brian focuses much of his work at UA's Center for Economic Development on facilitating outdoor recreation planning and development initiatives with local governments, state and federal agencies and private partners. He provides both project leadership and technical assistance to advance these initiatives. Through these efforts, Brian is helping Alabama communities take better advantage of the growing recreation and nature-based tourism markets while improving quality of life for their citizens. A native of Alabama, Brian holds a B.S. from the University of the South in Natural Resources, an M.S. from Louisiana State University in Environmental Planning and Management and an M.B.A. from The University of Alabama.

The Alabama Firefighters' Personnel Standards and Education Commission/Alabama State Fire College may employ off-duty municipal firefighters and paramedics during their "off time" as educational adjunct fire instructors for the Commission's "open enrollment" training classes to teach educational training classes to other firefighters and paramedics, including his or her own coworkers who may also be enrolled in such classes. This employment does not violate section 11-43-12 of the Code of Alabama. AGO 2011-019.

Violation of Section 11-43-12 is deemed a misdemeanor and constitutes grounds for impeachment. A violation of Section 41-16-60 also constitutes a misdemeanor punishable by fine not exceeding \$500 or imprisonment not exceeding 12 months. Removal from office is mandatory.

Exceptions for Class 7 and 8 Municipalities

Where there is a rule, there are usually exceptions born out of necessity. Section 11-43-12.1, Code of Alabama 1975, provides exceptions for Class 7 and 8 municipalities (under 12,000 population according to the 1970 federal decennial census). Notwithstanding any statute or law to the contrary, any Class 7 or 8 municipality may legally purchase from any of its elected officials or employees any personal service or personal property, provided the elected official or employee is the only domiciled vendor of the personal service or personal property within the municipality. The cost or value of such personal property or service shall in no event exceed \$3,000. The elected official or employee, who proposes to sell to the municipality, shall not participate in the decision-making process determining the purchase but shall make any disclosure required by the state ethics commission. The governing body of such municipality shall determine and find that the elected official is the sole vendor domiciled in the municipality and that the selling price of such service or property is lower than could be obtained from a vendor domiciled outside the municipality. In making such determination, consideration may be given to the quality of service or property proposed to be supplied, conformity with specifications, purposes for which required, terms of delivery, transportation charges and the date of delivery. The office of the Attorney General has determined that a Class 8 municipality may contract, under the provisions of Section 11-43-12.1, with a wood-waste recycling business partially owned by a council member if the provisions set out in the statute are followed. AGO 2003-014.

This law also allows any Class 7 or 8 municipality to legally purchase from any of its elected officials any personal service or personal property under competitive bid law procedures. This authority is not restricted to situations

where the elected official or employee is the sole vendor within the municipality. The elected official or employee, if he or she proposes to bid, shall not participate in the decision-making process determining the need for or the purchase of such personal property or personal service or in the determination of the successful bidder. The governing body shall affirmatively find that the elected official or employee is the lowest responsible bidder as required by the state law. It shall be the duty of the municipality to file a copy of any contract awarded to any of its elected officials or employees with the state ethics commission. All awards shall be as a result of original bid taking. In the event an elected official or employee offers to sell or submit a bid to the municipality, he or she shall make full disclosure of his or her ownership or the extent of ownership in the business organization with which he or she is associated, under oath, to the municipality.

The Competitive Bid Law

Section 41-16-60, Code of Alabama 1975, states that no member of the municipal governing body or of a municipal board shall be financially interested or have any personal beneficial interest, either directly or indirectly, in the purchase of or contract for any personal property or contractual services. This section is part of the competitive bid law applicable to municipal purchases of personal property or contractual services. The Attorney General has determined that a member of a municipal utility board who is the sole owner of a business may not sell trucks to the utility board, with or without bids. AGO 1999-098. Section 41-16-60, Code of Alabama 1975, precludes a member of the Water Works and Sewer Board from having any personal or financial beneficial interest, directly or indirectly, in a contract for the provision of services to the Board. Whether a direct or indirect benefit actually exists is a question of fact for the Board to determine. AGO 2007-078.

Other Exceptions

Although Sections 11-43-12 and 41-16-60 have been used as authority for prohibiting numerous activities, the courts and the Attorney General have ruled that certain exceptions, other than Section 11-43-12.1, do exist. For instance, a municipal official's son is not prohibited from bidding on a municipal contract because of kinship as long as the father has no financial interest in the son's business. AGO to Hon. James C. Wood, September 10, 1975. A person whose spouse serves as a municipal judge may serve on the municipal council provided he recuses himself from voting on issues dealing with his wife's position as judge. AGO to Hon. James H. Sims, July 8, 1975. A councilmember may serve as a volunteer firefighter for the municipality provided he receives no compensation for his services other than reimbursement for expenses incurred in the performance of

his municipal duties. AGO to Hon. Paul Shipes, February 8, 1974. An incorporated water board may purchase insurance from an insurance agency owned by the municipal attorney. *Mobile v. Cochran, supra*. A municipal official may rent TV sets to patients in a municipal hospital. AGO to Hon. Oscar Peden, June 11, 1971.

These sections prohibit a municipal official or employee from doing business with the municipality, even if the contract is made on a competitive bid basis. However, the Attorney General has ruled that these sections do not prohibit a municipality from doing business with incorporated firms which have municipal officers or employees as shareholders or corporate officers. 128 Q. Rep. Att. Gen. 30. A municipality may not, however, do business with the incorporated firm if the firm is a **family-held** corporation or if the municipal official is a majority shareholder in the corporation. *See*, AGO to Hon. Frankie J. Kucera, April 6, 1976; AGO to Hon. Wayne Harrison, December 6, 1973; AGO to Hon. Herbert G. Hughes, August 9, 1968; and AGO to Hon. Andrew J. Gentry, Jr., March 8, 1974.

These sections do not prohibit a municipal official from bidding on real property being sold by the municipality, 129 Q. Rep. Att. Gen. 48, nor does it prohibit a corporation which employs a municipal official from selling automobiles to the municipality which the official serves. AGO to Hon. Robert S. Milner, April 4, 1975.

A municipality may do business with a bank where the mayor of the city serves on the bank's board of directors and is a minority stockholder, provided, however, that the mayor does not vote on matters relating to the bank that are brought before the city council. AGO 1993-168 and AGO 2005-047.

Other Restrictions

No officer or employee of a municipality, personally or through any other person, shall deal or traffic in any manner whatsoever in any warrant, claim or liability against the municipality. Violation constitutes a misdemeanor and grounds for impeachment. Section 11-43-14, Code of Alabama 1975.

A councilmember or mayor is prohibited from voting on questions which come before the council in which he or she or his or her employer or employee has a special financial interest, either at the time of voting or at the time of his or her election. Section 11-43-54, Code of Alabama 1975. The Attorney General has ruled that this section requires a councilmember whose spouse is employed as a teacher in the city's school system to refrain from voting on all matters pertaining to compensation, tenure and benefits of his or her spouse. AGO 1989-084 and AO NO. 1992-87. However, the Attorney General has ruled that a mayor whose spouse is

employed by the city school system may vote on school board appointments or on appropriations to the school system if the vote of the council ends in a tie. AO NO. 1992-83. Section 36-25-5(a), Code of Alabama 1975, permits a councilmember, whose spouse is employed in a private capacity by a person who is a current member of the city board of education, to vote on the appointment of a new board member. AO NO. 1991-51.

An official may not vote on a one-cent sales tax that would benefit a city board of education which employs him or her. AO NO. 1994-33. Councilmembers who are employed by a board of education cannot vote on a proposed sales tax increase for school system capital outlays. AGO 1991-041. A councilmember may not vote on a budget which would benefit his or her spouse, nor vote on a disciplinary matter, if the vote might affect his or her spouse financially. AO NO. 1992-98.

No member of a municipal council may be appointed to any municipal office which has been created or the emoluments of which have been increased during the term for which he or she was elected. He or she may not be interested, directly or indirectly, in any contract, job, work, material or the proceeds thereof or services to be performed for the municipality, except as provided by law. Section 11-43-53, Code of Alabama 1975.

Chapter 10 of Title 13A, Code of Alabama 1975, as amended, sets out a number of offenses against public administration, such as obstructing governmental operations, refusal to permit inspection, failure to file a required report, tampering with governmental records, bribery of public officials, failure to disclose conflict of interests, trading in public office, misuse of confidential information and perjury. Municipal officials should become familiar with these statutes.

The Alabama Ethics Law

And finally, it is important for municipal officials to always keep in mind the Alabama Ethics Law, found in Chapter 25 of Title 36, Code of Alabama 1975. For a more detailed discussion of the Alabama Ethics Law, see the article titled "The Alabama Ethics Law" in the Selected Readings for the Municipal Official (2020 ed.)

Conclusion

Being aware of conflicts between one's private interests and their role as a public official should always be in the forefront of a municipal official's mind. As this article points out, there can be legal consequences for failing to do so. And even though there are some legal exceptions to some potential conflicts of interest, it never hurts to remember the age-old adage that "just because you can doesn't mean you should." ■



2022 Convention Quick Guide

Bryant Conference Center • Tuscaloosa • May 11-14
www.almonline.org

All information subject to change.

CMO credits can be earned. See convention app for complete details. *

Wednesday, May 11

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Registration: Bryant Conference Center

OPENING SESSION: Gov. Kay Ivey

President's Address

Municipal Service Awards

ACE and DesignAlabama Graduates

4:15 p.m. - 5:15 p.m.

General Session: Brittany Wagner: Do You Have a Pencil?

Academic athletic counselor, author and breakout star of the Netflix documentary series *Last Chance U*

6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.

City of Tuscaloosa Welcome Reception: Tuscaloosa River Market

Entertainment: Just a Few Cats

Thursday, May 12

7:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
8:00 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.
9:15 a.m. - 10:15 a.m.
10:30 a.m. - Noon
Noon - 2:00 p.m.

Registration: Bryant Conference Center

General Session: Coach Nick Saban, University of Alabama

AMIC Annual Business Meeting

Annual Business Session

Tailgate Party at The Zone, Bryant-Denny Stadium

(shuttles will be provided)

Roundtable Discussions by Population (break service included)

Municipal Marketplace Showcase and Reception: Hank Crisp Indoor Facility

2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

Friday, May 13

8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
8:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.
11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.

CITY SHIRT DAY: Wear your city shirt today with pride!

Registration: Bryant Conference Center

Municipal Marketplace Breakfast: Hank Crisp Indoor Facility

General Session: Ask Your Attorney

Lunch on your own: food trucks will be outside the Conference Center and shuttles available to downtown

2:00 p.m. - 3:15 p.m.

Concurrent Sessions: Short-term Rentals: What Are We Missing?; Opportunity Alabama; How to Have Constructive Conversations with Citizens

3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Concurrent Sessions: Law Enforcement Hot Topics; Grant Writing 101; Broadband Initiatives

6:30 p.m. - Until

President's Reception: Bryant Conference Center

Entertainment: Party on the Moon

Municipal Clerks: The Alabama Association of Municipal Clerks and Administrators will meet Thursday, May 12, from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. at the Hotel Capstone, Governor's Room.

Download our FREE convention app! *

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