

# Florala Discovers Unity in Community ACE Designation



Lori Johns • Communications Director • ALM

The Alabama League of Municipalities is excited to showcase Florala in this edition of our quarterly magazine for our spotlight on Alabama Communities of Excellence. The ACE program was established in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) organization with the mission of offering Alabama’s smaller communities, ranging in population

from 2,000 to 18,000 people, technical resources and tools to help them promote growth and prosperity by focusing on their distinctive assets and resources. Florala was accepted into the ACE program in 2019 and received their official ACE designation in 2022. Florala’s ACE Local Committee consists of Mayor

Terry Holley, Councilmember Gayle Cooper Robbins, City Clerk Gina Hendriks and ACE Local Coordinator Samantha McDaniel.

Floralal was incorporated in 1901 in Covington County. It has been known as the “Gateway to the Gulf Coast” for decades, as many beachgoers travel through Florala, via US 331 and AL 55, to get to their destinations in the Florida Panhandle. Florala is also home to the largest natural lake in Alabama; Lake Jackson is 500 acres and is their biggest tourist magnet. The city experiences tremendous “daycation” crowds year-round for those looking to enjoy a variety of outdoor amenities like fishing, swimming, walking and cycling paths, camping and water activities. Lake Jackson is the scene for several annual bass tournaments, speedboat races and military training maneuvers. The lake was originally called McDade’s Pond before it was changed to Lake Jackson in honor of Gen. Andrew Jackson who once camped in the area with an army of 1,200 soldiers in 1818 during the Seminole War.

Floralal also has an intriguing historic district, which features both residential and commercial buildings including a remarkable collection of Victorian-era architecture that dates from the beginnings of the town’s development along Fifth Street. Citizens are actively working on documentation necessary to nominate Florala’s city cemetery, Greenwood Cemetery, for designation on the National Register of Historic Places.

The city also has two major yearly festivals, Cancer Freeze and the annual



Designated an official

# Alabama Community of Excellence

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Helping Smaller Communities Plan, Grow and Prosper



Masonic Celebration, which has taken place for 153 years and is the oldest consecutive Masonic Day celebration in the world. These festivals bring thousands of visitors to the community and are a boost to the local economy as well as a way to strengthen community pride. Many citizens from local churches, civic, and nonprofit organizations volunteer and support these festivals and community events every chance they can.

During the country-wide economic downturn in the 1980s and following years, Florala lost its once vibrant textile and wood product industries. As these local industries collapsed, jobs and incomes were lost and the population declined. Consequently, this decreased school enrollment, led to a hospital closure and caused local businesses to struggle to survive.

“We applied to the ACE program because we believed it would provide quality, technical assistance to market and enhance our unique features such as tourist traffic, a natural lake and a historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places to promote growth and prosperity once again for our community,” McDaniel,



*Florala's Lake Jackson offers visitors a range of outdoor activities from fishing to cycling.*



★ a proud native of Florala, said. “The ACE program seemed to be a perfect answer to obtaining professional guidance to promote economic growth and tourism.”

During phase one of the ACE program, a team of ACE professionals - none of whom had ever been to Florala before – visited the town, took a short tour and met with community stakeholders. Weeks later, Florala’s ACE Local Committee received an assessment report from the team captain and ACE professionals clearly identifying their positives and negatives alike, along with suggestions to improve both. The team of ACE professionals introduced the local committee to a variety of individuals who served as resources to assist in economic development, education and workforce development, health care, historic preservation, leadership and more. The team held community meetings regarding workforce and education strategies and connected the local committee with professional assistance for marketing and branding, landscape planning and tourism development.

McDaniel said they have continued to strengthen the partnerships established with their team as well as local and regional partnerships. She specifically pointed out that one very important contact and resource for them has been the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission who assisted them in obtaining a grant for comprehensive plan development and helped secure a consultant for the plan, which is currently under development.

Florala had a strategic plan in place prior to participating in the ACE program. It is updated annually; however, through the ACE program, they developed a short-term action plan and are working on a long-term comprehensive plan, which is a requirement of ACE communities. Their action plan serves as a guide to measure progress in achieving the goals and objectives of the strategic plan and is valuable to position their city for growth and expansion during “the rural migration” they are currently experiencing.

“People are moving to rural areas such as ours in ever-increasing numbers, desiring the slower pace and strong sense of community – Florala has that,” McDaniel exclaimed! “A comprehensive plan will provide the roadmap for present and future administrations deciding how best to accommodate growth and expansion of Florala’s infrastructure and overall landscape.”

Florala’s population is just over 1,900 citizens, making it one of the smallest ACE communities in the state. McDaniel said, “We are extremely proud the city of Florala achieved the designation as an ACE community, meeting the same criteria as larger ACE communities, which possess more local professional and financial resources and supporters. It has been ‘all hands on deck’ for Florala, but all hands have shown up, time and time again, to take advantage of the professional and technical assistance offered. We can see the results.”

# Florala Alabama

Some of those results are being created by local citizens taking part in Florala’s newly established LEAD Florala leadership program. The 2023 leadership class is in the process of implementing their project called The Little Free Pantry. The pantry serves both individuals and families in need as well as community givers. Zero-barrier access allows local families with food insecurity to take needed items while also inspiring the surrounding community to donate to the pantry. It fulfills a need, whether a need for food or a need to give.

Two other projects resulting from the leadership program are in the planning stages. The Florala Downtown Development Board has also made aesthetic improvements to the downtown area and is coordinating with the Tri-Cities Chamber of Commerce to enhance downtown buildings with paint adhering to Florala’s historic color palette. Another benefit of ACE has been the revitalization of the community boards, authorities and committees to better monitor the success of the strategic and action plans.

Achieving the honor of becoming an ACE community is typically a two-to-four-year commitment of not only the municipality’s local committee but of the citizens too, leaders and businesses. McDaniel said, “The ACE distinction means we rediscovered the ‘unity’ in community. Extraordinary community members are working to achieve great things for our community regarding quality of life, economic development, development of future leaders through our leadership program and comprehensive planning.”

McDaniel admits she volunteered to be the ACE local coordinator without a full understanding of the commitment, but from the looks of it, Florala is in good hands with the 2022 Outstanding ACE Local Coordinator leading their town’s efforts. Keep shining, Florala!

Any municipality interested in learning more about the ACE program should visit [www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org](http://www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org) or reach out to our Education and ACE Program Coordinator Mary Jackson at [mjackson@almonline.org](mailto:mjackson@almonline.org). ■

**For more information  
about the ACE program,  
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