



EDA Inspires Mega-Municipal Collaboration in Etowah County

Gadsden, Rainbow City and Southside Share EDA Experiences

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The Alabama League of Municipalities' Economic Development Academy has finished its second class. We are so proud to have had 37 municipalities go through the program in the first two years. EDA was developed to provide our members with an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the phases of economic development. We are pleased to select Gadsden, Rainbow City and Southside for this edition's EDA spotlight. These three cities are located in northeastern Alabama in Etowah County. It is the smallest county by total square miles, but it is in the top 15 by population. Gadsden and Rainbow City were a part of the first EDA graduating class in 2022, while Southside is a member of the second class.

Gadsden, the county seat, was founded in 1846, and has 34,000 citizens. The city is known for its industrial background and is home to Noccalula Falls Park. Mayor Craig Ford, a native of Gadsden, took office last November and is a member of the League's Board of Directors. He previously served in the Alabama House of Representatives for 18 years and was a major in the Alabama National Guard. He actually took office after Gadsden participated in EDA, but he has relied heavily on the feedback of his colleagues that did, which include current and present city officials and leaders at Gadsden State Community College (GSCC).

Rainbow City was established in 1950 and has grown to more than 10,000 residents. It sits on the banks of Henry Neely Lake along the Coosa River and neighbors Gadsden. Mayor Joe Taylor has served in this role for three years and was previously a professional firefighter, general contractor and served in the 20th Special Forces Group. He said his city applied for EDA to help gain a better understanding of the various aspects of economic development to craft their first master plan. Rainbow City was one of the 2022



Southside officials - Councilmember Joseph Hutchins, Mayor Dana Snyder and Councilmember Genny Ball



Greg Cochran, David Hooks, Gadsden State President Kathy Murphy, Councilmember Deverick Williams, Councilmember Kent Back, Councilmember Ken Kirkland, ACCS Chancellor Jimmy Baker



Greg Cochran, Councilmember Anita Bedwell, Mayor Joe Taylor, Councilmember Jeff Prince, Councilmember Clark Hopper, ACCS Chancellor Jimmy Baker

The Northeast Alabama Regional (NEAR) Megasite is located in Etowah County. It is 1,100 acres.



class members that extended their learning by attending the second-year trainings.

Mayor Taylor shared, “This was an eye-opening experience for each of us. It should be a required curriculum moving forward.”

Southside is located just across the Coosa River from Rainbow City in the foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains. It was formed in 1957 and has a population of approximately 9,400. Mayor Dana Snyder, a native of Southside, is also in her first term after previously serving on the city council from 2016-2020 and as a paralegal in public and private firms in Gadsden. She wants to move the city forward for future generations to enjoy and said EDA has given them that roadmap.

“By applying to the EDA and being proactive pursuing economic growth, we are focusing on the needs and quality of life in our city,” she said. “We have a large amount of untapped market potential, but we are in a great position with the highest median household income and the highest population growth in the region.”

Two of the main EDA requirements include completing a community economic vitality survey and implementing an approved project. Gadsden’s survey revealed their city is the core economic driver of their five-county region. As part of their project, they created an incubation coworking space at The Venue 2 with the Gadsden-Etowah County Industrial Development Authority, also known as IDA, and GSCC. They also identified health care deliverables for workforce development. They anticipate their new cancer treatment facility, Alabama Cancer Care, will open by the end of the year. This \$6.5 million investment is being built

on the site of an old National Guard armory. Mayor Ford has a major goal of rerouting a portion of U.S. Highway 411 to open up the city’s riverfront on the west side of the Coosa River, creating opportunities for commercial development, entertainment and recreation.

Rainbow City said the survey showed them how critical it is to plan for infrastructure needs along with forecasting housing. They also learned how they can leverage their two public schools and a K-12 private school for community growth. Their plan consists of three catalyst projects: a riverfront development, recreation center and city centre. They are currently constructing a 45,000-square-foot recreation center, which will consist of multi-sport courts and walking tracks for all ages. Once completed, they will have the only competitive swimming pool in the county, allowing their growing schools to create swim teams at all levels.



Gadsden Mayor Craig Ford hosts a press conference announcing Gadsden's selection for Ultra Safe Nuclear Corporation's new facility.

Additionally, they have purchased 125-acres for their city centre and are recruiting developers for it. Lastly, Rainbow City was chosen for the Northeast Alabama Challenger Center. It is being constructed to provide 5th-12th graders, in the region, access to hands-on experience and space-themed learning missions. It is expected to open in 2025 and will support the local workforce pipeline.

Southside's survey revealed their exponential growth and is helping them to concentrate on keeping young people engaged and providing them with the necessary jobs to keep them there. Mayor Snyder said EDA gave them the guidance to make their master plan, Southside Next, a comprehensive vision for the future. They have already taken steps to implement a few items, such as sidewalks, a city center park area and gateway signage. Ultimately, she wants to enhance their downtown area and make it a walkable, bikeable city center. Southside is one step closer to making that a reality after recently being awarded a Transportation Alternatives Program grant, from the Alabama Department of Transportation, to connect their high school to the football field, city hall and their community center/library. While participating in the EDA, they have seen new economic development, along state Highway 77, that includes the opening of a new coffee shop named Volt, Elite Healthcare and the expansion of Southside Hardware.

Some of you may recall the state's 1,100-acre Northeast Alabama Regional (NEAR) Megasite is located in Etowah County. Rainbow City has a Memorandum of Understanding to annex the site, so it can provide utilities and other municipal services like fire and police to tenants. Its location provides easy access to two international airports, local commercial air service, interstate access and a rail system that runs to the port of Mobile.

These three mayors are a part of a strong Etowah County Mayors Association and have great working relationships. The Etowah County Commission and several cities have recently

committed to funding their local industrial development authority to centralize their business recruitment efforts. Several municipalities are also financially supporting the Northeast Alabama Challenger Center and the \$24 million Advanced Manufacturing and Workforce Skills Training Center at GSCC. Furthermore, Rainbow City and the commission share in the expense of a water and sewer cooperative plan and have dedicated millions in American Rescue Plan Act monies to the NEAR Megasite to support water and sewer infrastructure.

"The cooperation with the commission and other cities has never been so great here in Etowah County," Mayor Snyder shared. "Connection with and supporting the plans of adjacent jurisdictions and the surrounding region is very important."

Since Southside and Rainbow City are adjoined by a river, they have a common goal of building another bridge that will be for northbound traffic. They believe this will open up commerce and will be safer for school buses passing between the two cities' shared schools: middle schoolers go to Rainbow Middle School and high schoolers go to Southside High School. These two cities also have a recycling service together.

In addition, Mayor Ford credits two success stories to partnerships developed through the EDA program. Gadsden landed Ultra Safe Nuclear Corporation's \$232 million microreactor production facility in June, creating 250 jobs. He also shared that the city recently was able to save two dozen jobs when local leaders found a way to fund a new home for the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services' Gadsden office, which has to relocate to accommodate for the space used to create the workforce center at GSCC.

As you have read, Etowah County has several impressive projects taking shape, and we are excited to continue seeing Gadsden, Rainbow City and Southside put their EDA skills to work. ■

Southside and Rainbow City sit on opposite sides of the Coosa River.

