



Infrastructure, Incentives and Intent: How Ozark is Building a Stronger Future

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In the heart of Ozark, a Wiregrass community known for its patriotism and deep ties to Army Aviation, economic development is more than a strategy. It is a shared commitment to ensuring a strong future. Incorporated in 1870 and now home to 14,147 residents, Ozark has long balanced its proud heritage with a progressive mindset. In recent years, that mindset has taken on a new focus through participation in the Alabama League of Municipalities' Economic Development Academy (EDA).

Ozark's involvement in EDA began with an important goal: understanding the process. Holle Smith, president of the Ozark-Dale County Economic Development Corporation, was in her role for less than a year when the opportunity came. Coming from a background as a local small business owner, she brought firsthand knowledge of what it means to have a business perspective and cater to the specific needs of the economic market. She recognized that economic development at the municipal level requires a different lens — one that combines policy, infrastructure, incentives and rigorous planning.

"I was new to economic development and still learning," Smith said. "I wanted my council members to understand their role in the economic development process and the importance of that."

Ozark was part of the inaugural EDA class in 2021. The team included former mayor Mark Blankenship, Councilman Les Perault, Councilman Winston Jackson, former Councilwoman Leah Harlow, former Councilman Stanley Enfinger and Smith. Working through data analysis, strategic exercises and project planning together strengthened their dynamic in meaningful ways.

By gathering in sessions across the state, often carpooling to community colleges hosting the training, the group built more than knowledge. They built experience and shared understanding of economic development mechanics. According to Smith, that shared experience translated into a council that was both supportive and informed, approving every economic development project and incentive presented during their term.

Each participating community begins the academy process with a community economic vitality survey. For Ozark, the results confirmed several strengths: strong unity in leadership, a great location, available industrial assets and a deep

The city of Ozark hosts several annual festivals, most notably the Ozark Crawdad and Music Festival in April and the Claybank Jamboree Arts & Crafts Festival in October.



sense of community pride. At the same time, the survey revealed challenges. Population decline was a concern, along with workforce recruitment and retention, housing availability and the need to better market community assets.

Rather than view these findings as setbacks, city leaders treated them as a roadmap.

“Our project consisted of a goal to address housing, workforce and charm factors,” Smith said.

Since completing the academy, coordination between city leadership and economic development partners has strengthened significantly. Communication with existing industries has become more proactive, with an emphasis on identifying needs preemptively. Ozark now focuses on businesses that align with workforce strengths, infrastructure capacity and long-term economic goals.

The results are real. In 2022, Ozark announced that Ecore International would locate in the community, bringing 84 jobs and a \$28 million investment. In addition, Ozark secured Growing Alabama funds for three site development projects, completed multiple industrial expansions and passed retail incentives that attracted national brands such as Taco Bell and Dunham’s Sporting Goods.

Infrastructure readiness has also become a priority. Improvements at the Ozark Municipal Airport industrial site and other municipal industrial properties are designed to make the city more competitive. These enhancements send a clear message: Ozark will be ready.

Strategic planning is now a part of discussions about infrastructure, incentives and land use. Councilman Les Perault noted that hearing directly from EDA experts proved especially valuable.

“It reinforced the importance of preparation, infrastructure readiness, and strategic planning long before a prospect ever makes contact,” he said.

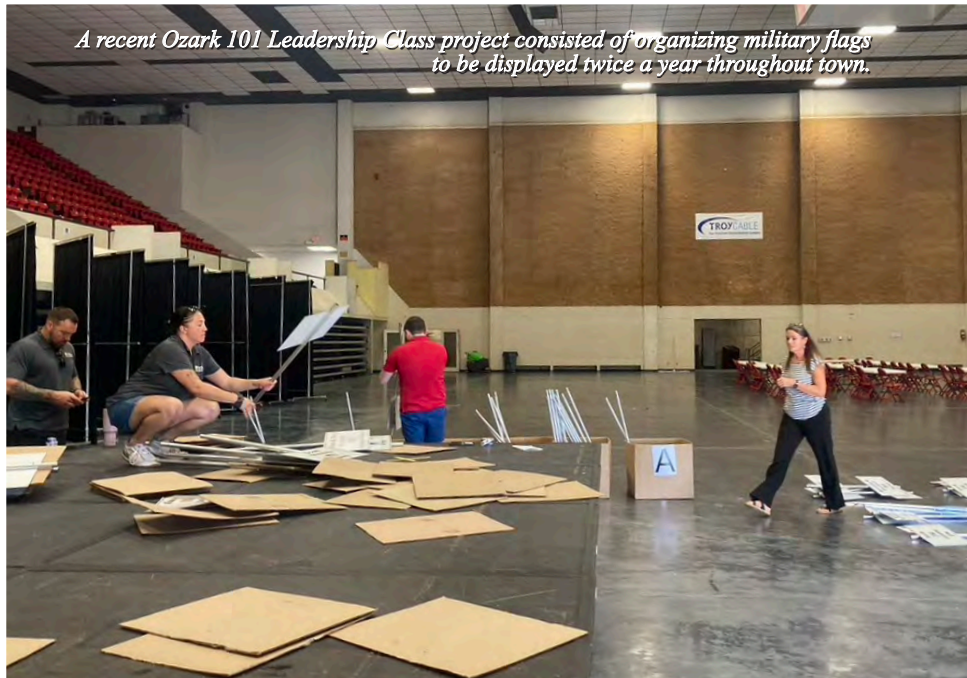
Perault said that one of the most meaningful aspects of the program was the opportunity to collaborate with other communities facing similar challenges.



Ozark is recognized as the home of Army aviation.



The city of Ozark added a new 10,000-square-foot corporate hangar to the regional airport in 2024.



A recent Ozark 101 Leadership Class project consisted of organizing military flags to be displayed twice a year throughout town.

The peer learning environment allowed Ozark’s team to compare strategies, exchange ideas and examine its own practices with a fresh perspective.

Ozark participated in the Alabama Communities of Excellence program simultaneously with EDA and graduated in November 2024. Smith serves as the city’s ACE coordinator and sees the programs as complementary. While ACE emphasizes structured planning, benchmarking and long-term assessment, EDA focuses specifically on economic development competitiveness and mechanics. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of how policy, planning and economic strategy intersect.

The city’s engagement with broader municipal training has also shaped leadership capacity. Participation in the League’s Certified Municipal Official (CMO) program strengthened understanding of budgeting, legal authority and governance — all critical topics when discussing incentives or infrastructure investment.

Looking ahead, Ozark’s economic development vision is located along one of its most visible assets: Highway 231. City leaders recognize the corridor’s potential to drive commercial expansion, retail growth and job creation. The goal, however, is not growth for growth’s sake.

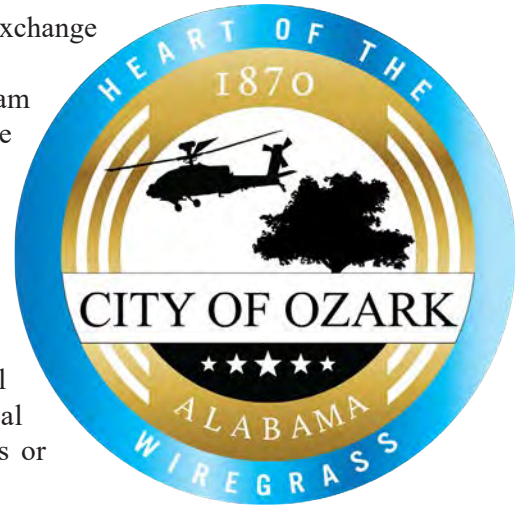
“Our economic development strategy is centered on efficient management, informed decision-making and a clear long-term vision for Ozark,” Mayor Charles Ward said. “We are carefully assessing our strengths and opportunities, addressing challenges and aligning our resources to build a strong, viable community that can serve as a model for others.”

For Smith, the path forward includes continuing to nurture relationships with existing businesses while preparing sites so the community is ready when opportunities arise.

When asked what advice she would offer to other cities considering EDA, Smith emphasized participation and openness.

“I would advise the local economic developer to attend with their council,” she said. She also encourages communities to approach the program with honesty.

From its incorporation in 1870 to its present-day focus on strategic growth, Ozark’s story continues to evolve. It is an ongoing process; one built on preparation, unity and vision. ■



SetaTech USA celebrated the opening of its new plant at the Ozark Technology Center with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in March 2024.