



# Building a Bright Future: How Semmes is Leveraging EDA Strategies as a Young City

Caroline Carter • Communications Intern • ALM

The city of Semmes, incorporated in May 2011, is one of Alabama’s youngest municipalities and has grown its population to approximately 5,000 residents. However, the city serves a much broader area in Mobile County, earning a reputation as a hub for its surrounding communities. Known for its plentiful nurseries, rich history and vibrant community events, Semmes has quickly become a community that is drawing attention for its steady growth, expanding amenities and efforts to create a prosperous destination for citizens and businesses alike.

Mayor Brandon Van Hook, elected in 2020, brings a business-minded and community-focused approach to leadership. As the owner of the popular Hickory Pit Too restaurant and a former chamber of commerce leader, Van Hook has leveraged his experience to prioritize infrastructure, public safety and economic development. His leadership has guided the city through a period of rapid growth, positioning Semmes as a model of thoughtful planning and investment.

The Alabama League of Municipalities (ALM) launched the Economic Development Academy (EDA) in 2021 to educate municipal officials on the essential phases of economic development and their role in fostering growth within their communities. Developed in partnership with the Alabama Community College System and guided by an advisory council of industry leaders, the academy connects municipal officials with peers and experts to prepare cities and towns for sustainable progress.

Semmes joined the EDA in 2023 with a clear purpose: to strengthen its economic sustainability and attract business investments. Recognizing the importance of aligning city goals with proven best practices, the city’s leadership saw the EDA as an opportunity to learn from experts and refine their growth strategies.

The city’s EDA team included Mayor Van Hook, Mayor Pro-Tempore Helen Joyce, Councilmember Jason Herring, Communications Director Liz Lovelady, Semmes Chamber of Commerce President Lisa Owen and Semmes Chamber of Commerce past president, Sharon Murrill. Together, they emphasized teamwork and collaboration to ensure that insights gained from the program would lead to meaningful action for the city.

Semmes entered the program with the goal of identifying weaknesses, developing actionable plans and fostering sustainable growth. They met four times throughout the year to complete assignments and develop actionable strategies. As part of EDA, each municipality is required to implement a community project and report on its outcomes, with participants recognized during ALM’s annual graduation ceremony in the fall.

Through its participation in the EDA, Semmes began with a detailed community economic vitality survey that identified several areas for improvement. This analysis provided the foundation for targeted initiatives to address these challenges.

As Lovelady explained, “The EDA helped us fine-tune our vision for the city and get progress in motion. The classes gave us the outlook we needed to evaluate and find our areas needing improvement. Just attending the classes gave us the progressive push we needed to go after our needs.”

The program also highlighted the importance of branding and maintaining a strong digital presence. From updating the city’s website to leveraging



*The Semmes EDA team celebrates the city's designation as an EDA Certified Community.*

media engagement, the team learned strategies to enhance outreach and attract businesses and residents. The website is now more user-friendly and updated regularly with news and developments for the Semmes community to follow.

Lovelady noted, “We look to ensure it [a project] fits with the economic goals, that we can sustain it through resources already in place, how competitive it will be in our area, and what type of impact it will have on the community.”

Semmes has achieved significant progress in economic development through its participation in EDA, highlighted by a legislative annexation that brought 40 established businesses into the city limits, boosting revenue and strengthening the local economy. This effort included the successful recruitment of a major grocery chain and Wawa convenience store, further strengthening the city’s economic base.

The legislative annexation bill, led by Mayor Van Hook and sponsored by state Sen. Jack Williams, was presented to both the Senate and the House of Representatives. After passing both chambers, it was signed into law by Gov. Kay Ivey, taking effect on October 1, 2024. This annexation brought businesses such as an animal hospital, Hibbett Sports and Auto Zone into the corporate limits of Semmes, contributing an estimated \$750,000 in additional annual revenue. This milestone marks a significant step forward for the city’s economic vitality and growth.

Infrastructure improvements have also been a focus. The city constructed several new parks, including a dog park, pickleball courts and a splash pad, which have enhanced recreational opportunities for residents. Additionally, the community center underwent a revitalization, creating an updated space for events and activities. These investments reflect Semmes’ commitment to improving the quality of life for its residents.

To meet the demands of its growing population, Semmes has expanded its housing options with the addition of apartment complexes,

*Right: Exciting growth is happening in Semmes! From thriving plant nurseries to the addition of four new pickleball courts to the creation of the Legacy Trail Apartments, offering senior living, the city continues to expand and enhance community life.*

# semmes

make life beautiful





subdivisions, and 147 townhomes, boosting both residential availability and economic vitality. These developments are projected to be completed by the summer of 2026. Among them, the Admiral Landing subdivision is strategically located across from a Publix, currently under construction, and adjacent to a new storage facility. It is also conveniently located near the recently opened Legacy Trail senior apartment community.

Semmes has prioritized public safety in recent years, transitioning from reliance on the Mobile County Sheriff's Office for policing to establishing its own department. The city hired its first police chief, Todd Freind, in June 2021, and by 2023, the department was fully staffed with 16 officers serving the growing community.

Public safety improvements extended beyond law enforcement. The city of Semmes received \$200,000 from the Mobile County Commission's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to support its new Public Safety Complex, which houses both the fire and police departments. The funds were used to purchase critical items, including an emergency generator and training equipment for police officers and firefighters. Additional upgrades funded by ARPA included drainage work, a concrete apron for a training area, a sliding gate with fencing and awnings for both sides of the building.

Semmes currently operates three fire stations, providing fire protection and emergency services across the community. To meet the demands of rapid growth, construction began in January 2024 on a fourth station, a \$4.3 million project in the Schillinger Road area. The new facility is expected to enhance response times and provide additional resources as the city continues to expand.

The expanded public safety services and infrastructure improve the city's ability to support residents and businesses, helping to attract new development and accommodate the growing city.

For Semmes, the EDA provided the tools to identify weaknesses, develop strategies and implement solutions that have enhanced its economic sustainability. The program fostered collaboration among city leaders and offered practical insights into long-term planning, ultimately helping the city grow responsibly while maintaining its charm.

Lovelady's advice encapsulates the program's spirit: "Outline your city's attributes, challenges and goals. Know what you want and put in the work."

Semmes' progress serves as an example of what can be achieved when leadership focuses on clear goals and thoughtful planning. While every community's journey is unique, the lessons from Semmes' experience underscore the importance of preparation, teamwork and commitment to building a future that benefits the quality of life for all. ■



Left to right: Photos of Semmes Communications Director Liz Lovelady, the highly anticipated Publix grand opening and the new Semmes K-9 Korner Dog Park.