

EDA Spotlight: Q&A with Luverne Councilmember Kathryn Smyth on Economic Development Academy Experience

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Four years ago, the Alabama League of Municipalities, in partnership with the Alabama Community College System, launched the Economic Development Academy (EDA) to educate and engage municipal officials on the essential elements and phases of economic development while highlighting their vital role in economic initiatives and projects within their communities. The EDA engages elected officials from participating cities and towns with municipal peers from their region to prepare their communities for growth. Up to seven people can participate per community including mayors, councilmembers, city administrators, city clerks, economic developers, business leaders and more.

Using a collaborative municipal team approach, participants convene four times throughout the year to complete assignments and develop strategies to enhance their economic development efforts. Ultimately, each municipality selected is required to implement a community project and to report on its progress. The League has had a total of 45 communities to graduate from the program.

This quarter, we are excited to spotlight the city of Luverne for their participation in the second EDA class in 2023. The city of Luverne was established in 1889. It has approximately 2,800 residents and serves as the county seat of Crenshaw County in south Alabama. Councilmember Kathryn Smyth has served on the city council for nine years and says that Luverne is known for being the “Friendliest City in the South,” having a Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company plant and being the home of Sister Schubert’s homemade rolls.

In addition to Councilmember Smyth, the Luverne EDA committee consisted of Robyn Snellgrove, Crenshaw County economic and industrial development director; Betty Dawson, councilmember; Samantha Bagwell, banker; and Stallion Sasser, county commissioner. Councilmember Smyth shared that it was helpful to have a cross section of EDA committee members to take the knowledge they learned in the class back to their respective bases while also helping them to better understand each other’s perspectives.

Let us take a deeper look into her EDA experience through a series of questions and answers.

How does your current/previous job impact your decision making as a municipal leader?

Prior to serving on the council, I was a victims advocate with the district attorney’s office and executive director of the Safe Harbor Butler County Children’s Advocacy Center for 20 years for the 2nd Judicial Circuit, covering Crenshaw, Butler and Lowndes counties. My previous career continues to help me connect with the needs of children and families in many ways. I am still called to provide support and resources, which I am happy to do. I currently serve as a rural workforce coordinator with Southeast Alabama Works, which provides opportunities with business and industry, job training, certifications and monitoring local workforce needs. One of my favorite aspects of this job is to work with area



high school students on soft skills, professional development, interview and resume building and etiquette. Preparing them for the workforce is our highest priority.

Why did you and your colleagues apply to EDA?

We applied in order to gain a broader understanding of economic development and how it can benefit smaller cities. We needed to learn about incentives and what businesses are looking for when searching for a new location.

What did your community economic vitality survey reveal?

The survey was worth its weight in gold for us! Our charm factors were easily stated but reviewed as assets in a fresh way. The most interesting information came from the data on commuting patterns into and out of our municipality. It was very eye opening. It also renewed our attention to retail needs such as recruiting a menswear store, a shoe store, a full service drug store and a dry cleaners. Our number one priority is to maintain our rural hospital, which thankfully we are holding on to for the time being.

What did your approved project/program consist of?

It primarily focused on updating wayfinding signage that weather and time may have damaged. We have designed entry and exit signs to replace the aging signage that we currently have, and we have grant funding in place for payment.

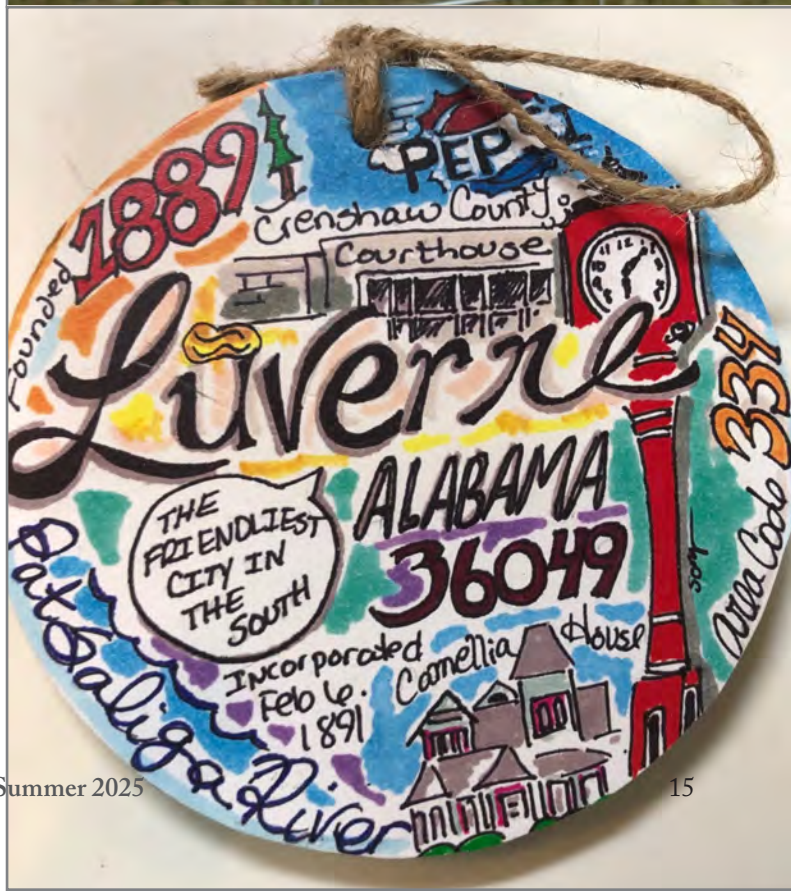
How has EDA impacted your decision-making process for the city when it comes to recruiting new businesses and retaining old ones?

We are more educated in common practices and how to make us more marketable to interested business and industry, start-up entrepreneurs and retail prospects. We understand that we need to be shovel ready for newly interested investors. We are able to plan better by asking ourselves is our infrastructure adequate; do we have the workforce capacity; and do we have an appropriate site immediately available to meet their needs. Finding the YES to these questions is our goal!

Top: Councilmember Kathryn Smyth loves to show visitors their "Welcome to Luverne" mural. She is pictured here with her friend Vicki Vaughan Collins from San Diego, CA.

Middle: Sister Schubert's is a staple in this Wiregrass community.

Bottom: Luverne's art scene often pays homage to their unique history.





Clockwise from top left:

Luverne High School cheerleaders participate in the annual Christmas parade.

Repurposed car tags are one of many unique finds one can discover at ReImagined, a shop along U.S. Highway 331.

The city added Boo in the Lu signage to their Halloween festivities last year.

City workers work hard each season to decorate their community for events like Treats on Us.

Crenshaw Christian Academy cheerleaders perform in the heart of downtown Luverne.

The Friendliest City Festival brings together citizens in Luverne each fall at Douglass Park.



Do you have some examples of changes or projects that have occurred since participating in EDA?

Our joint efforts, especially thanks to the leadership and experience of our economic development director, helped retain our more than 100-year-old Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company plant with a relocation and expansion. The new 75,000-square-foot facility almost doubles the old one and has 13 more loading docks. This year's move allows us to retain 79 jobs and create 10 more.

Additionally, we have continued to focus on downtown revitalization efforts and reviewing planning commission requirements. We have added festival lights and benches to Douglass Park, our downtown park, and are increasing electrical capacity for seasonal events. We are making improvements and upgrades to Turner

Park by way of updating our tennis court, adding pickleball courts and improving the surface of the basketball court. We are also adding a splash pad there this summer as part of our increased focus on quality of life in our city.

Furthermore, we have several infrastructure projects being completed with new water, sewer and gas lines and then new paving on several roads.

Lastly, we are currently seeking funding for our comprehensive plan in order to complete our commitment to the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program.



What did you enjoy the most about the EDA?

I enjoyed the resources that were shared and the small group setting with other small cities our size. It was helpful to hear each other's success stories and tried and failed experiences.

What were some of the main skills that you learned or topics that you were able to get help with?

We focused on the need to be shovel ready instead of a slow response for interested business and industry. We benefitted from stories of other presenters that shared what they looked for – cities that showed pride and effort in their upkeep of streets and parks among other things. The workforce sessions stressed the importance of having a ready-to-work population that had strong soft skills and certifications in areas of local industry needs.

What advice do you have for cities that are interested in applying?

We would highly recommend cities of any size, but especially smaller rural towns to apply. There are statewide resources offered through this program that are not available just anywhere.

What are your city's future plans when it comes to economic development?

We will use our experience to retain the industries that we have here, to serve their needs in the best way possible and to encourage new businesses to bring quality jobs to our area.

Did EDA meet or exceed your expectations?

I cannot stress enough how well Bryan Parker and Neal Wade recruited us and walked us through the process. They have been invaluable still to this day for guidance and direction. ■

**For more information
about the EDA program,
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