

# ACTION

## From the Editor

Even in good economic times small communities are often struggling to succeed — this problem is magnified in the current economic climate. There is no magic bullet that will cure their problems, but steps can be taken to greatly improve their situation. One of the key **strategies for small town success** is to build upon what you have, not just focusing on what works for Alabama's larger cities.

"Action" is a quarterly publication of the Economic and Community Development Institute, a partnership of Alabama Cooperative Extension System and Auburn University. The mission of ECDI is to improve the quality of life of all Alabama citizens by promoting continuous improvement of economic and community development policy and practice through communication, education, research and community assistance. ECDI seeks to play a leading role in revitalizing Alabama communities, especially in the state's rural areas. ECDI intends to strengthen community capacity to engage local challenges, take advantage of opportunities and build on available assets. "Action" is one tool we use to link Auburn's and ACES' resources to community groups.

**Strategies for small town success** is the focus of this fall 2009 issue of ECDI in Action. Joe Sumners, director of ECDI, is the author for this segment of the newsletter. Walter Harris, county Extension coordinator in Madison County; Matt Hartsell, county Extension coordinator in Bibb County; and Shnovia Maxwell, regional Extension agent, are the authors of two articles in the What's Happening in Alabama segment.

The next issue of "Action," winter 2010, will highlight the **local economic analysis**. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-4709, or e-mail chesnjt@auburn.edu.

**J. Thomas Chesnutt, Editor**  
Extension and Tourism Specialist, ECDI

## Strategies for Small Town Success

Leaders in struggling rural communities and small towns often pin their hopes for economic prosperity on the recruitment of a large manufacturing plant to save their town. In Alabama, our success in attracting large automotive plants such as Mercedes-Benz, Honda and Hyundai has fueled a lust for industrial recruitment. Many small towns are sure that their big break is just around the corner, if only they can come up with the right financial incentives and recruitment strategy.

An unfortunate consequence of relying on strategies that focus exclusively on industrial recruitment is that many communities undervalue the other determinants of a strong local economy. Business retention and expansion, small business and entrepreneurial development, and tourism and retiree attraction, for example, receive short shrift compared to industrial recruitment. More significantly, local leaders pay too little attention to building community and civic infrastructure. Put another way, many small towns over-emphasize marketing and sales (industrial recruiting) without adequate attention to product development (improving the quality of life in the community). But prosperous small town economies are built upon the foundation of strong communities.

Successful development strategies in small towns will typically include the following elements: (1) Developing strong and diverse community leadership that is inclusive, collaborative and connected; (2) Identifying local assets and creating and carrying out a strategic plan based upon these assets; and (3) Creating strategic partnerships among community stakeholders and with neighboring jurisdictions.

## Community Leadership

**Create leadership that is inclusive, collaborative and connected.** Successful communities all over the United States understand the importance of an expansive view of community leadership. The traditional notion of the community leader — often a mayor or other powerful position-holder — as chief community problem-solver has given way to a new, more dynamic model of the community leader as catalyst, connector and consensus-builder.

Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, in summarizing the findings of the Foundation's research on community politics, writes:

What stands out in the high-achieving community is not so much the characteristics of the leaders as their number... The high-achieving community had ten times more people providing leadership than communities of comparable size. This [high-achieving] community is "leaderful;" that is, nearly everyone provides some measure of initiative. And its leaders function not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation.

This new leadership model recognizes that leadership is not confined to a few elected officials and business leaders. Rather, successful leadership requires mobilizing the knowledge, talents and perspectives of every segment of the community. Successful communities tend to be full of leaders.

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## Community Assessment and Planning

### Identify all community assets and create a plan to take strategic advantage.

There is an old saying that goes, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.” Citizen leaders and stakeholders in high-achieving communities know where they are going. They understand that an era of rapid social, cultural and technological change requires a proactive approach to addressing current and future problems. They engage in a strategic planning process to identify what makes their place special and to decide how to cultivate and promote their unique assets (e.g., a river, a lake, a mountain, a unique history) The result of this process is a strategic plan that identifies community priorities and outlines specific strategies to make best use of available assets and to address local challenges. It becomes a road map for the future and a benchmark for community progress.

The benefits of strategic planning are not limited to the final product. In fact, one of the most beneficial aspects of strategic planning is the process itself. A successful strategic planning process brings together a diverse group of stakeholders who address basic questions for the community: “Where are we now?” “Where do we want to go?” and “How do we get there?” There are few other occasions when representatives from throughout the community come together for an extended period of time to discuss shared hopes, dreams, knowledge, perspectives, ideas and concerns. Broad-based strategic planning is a megacrossroad and one of the best tools available for building and strengthening community connections.

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## Local and Regional Partnerships

**Connect local stakeholders and join forces with neighbors.** The process must not end with the creation of a strategic plan. If so, it would resemble most other community planning efforts. The result would be a plan that looks good on paper, but ends up collecting dust on a shelf. To prevent this, the community should create an entity responsible for seeing that the major objectives in the plan are actually implemented. This group, which should include representatives from government,

business, education and faith-based institutions, should meet regularly to monitor the community’s progress on the plan and make needed modifications to ensure that the plan remains relevant to community priorities and needs.

The value of the group is not just that it checks items off the list of community objectives. It can serve as an important community crossroad where key community stakeholders have the opportunity to think, work and act together. Most communities have many excellent people, programs and projects. All communities have at least some institutional assets — city government, churches, schools, civic clubs, and chambers of commerce. But far too often, individuals and organizations work independently, rather than in concert with one another. The truly high-achieving communities are those that create crossroads where leaders from all of these community organizations and institutions can come together to accomplish shared community objectives.

**Joining with other jurisdictions to maximize limited resources.** Because small towns and rural areas are sparsely populated, they lack a critical mass of taxpayers, leadership, financial capacity, infrastructure and skilled labor. So if small towns are to survive, they must join forces and work together. Small towns must learn to see their neighboring community as a competitor only for the Friday night football game.

While a holistic strategy for economic development is needed, attracting new businesses clearly should be one part of the overall approach. However, small towns rarely possess adequate resources to be effective in the increasingly competitive arena of economic development. Hiring a professional economic developer is an impossible dream for most small communities. That is, unless they decide to partner with their neighbors.

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## Conclusion

Small towns, and larger jurisdictions for that matter, are best served by a holistic approach to economic development. Industrial development may be an appropriate strategy, especially if done in partnership with regional neighbors. However, it should not be the only strategy. To be successful, small towns need to cultivate strong and diverse community leadership that is inclusive, collaborative and connected. They need to identify their unique assets, create and implement a strategic plan and

establish strategic partnerships among community stakeholders and with other jurisdictions. They need to be proactive in creating community and regional crossroads — organizations, or structures, where leaders can connect on a regular basis to assess, plan and work together.

If small towns aggressively pursue these strategies, they have excellent potential for success. Many city-dwellers long for what people in small towns already have and often take for granted: a slower pace of life, friendly people who know their neighbors, attractive open spaces and beautiful scenery, quaint shops, historic homes and buildings, parades, festivals, and streets that are safe and free of traffic congestion. Many of our small towns still possess a sense of authenticity and charm that cannot be replicated in bigger cities.

These inherent quality-of-life advantages, enhanced by community leadership, planning and partnerships, ultimately make the community more attractive to both existing and potential residents and employers. In other words, investments in product development make the community much easier to market and sell. The irony is that strategies emphasizing community development ultimately make small towns much more attractive in the competition for those large manufacturing plants they covet.

(**Note:** an expanded version of this article appears in the book “Building the Local Economy: Cases in Economic Development” edited by Douglass J. Watson and John Morris (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia, 2008.)

**Joe Summers, Director**  
Economic and Community Development Institute





## What's Happening in Alabama

### Workplace Spanish for Teachers and School Administrators in Madison County

The need to improve communication with Hispanic students and parents in the K-12 school system is a growing concern not only in the Madison County, Alabama area, but also statewide and nationally. The Madison County Extension office and the University of Alabama in Huntsville Division of Continuing Education is providing training to area K-12 educators to help them communicate more effectively on a basic level with Spanish-speaking students and their parents. It is also an ideal program for the growing number of English as a Second Language educators.

The program is designed to quickly bring participants up to speed on knowing relevant terms and phrases for daily class activities, speaking with parents and handling problems or emergencies. There is no grammar to learn, no rules to memorize and no prior Spanish experience is necessary.

The first offering of the program was during the fall 2008. It was open to all K-12 educators regardless of school affiliation. The program was well received by 11 participants; therefore, another session was requested and grant funds were solicited by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and Ann Marie Batista of Huntsville City Schools. They were successful in receiving \$4,900 to help offset the costs of the program for the winter 2009 session. A class such as this is so

needed that most of the educators paid the \$360 for the course from their own personal funds. The Extension office and Batista continue to look for funding so teachers do not have to use their own funds to pay for this class. Educators received continuing education units for completing at least 80 percent of the course work.

**Walter B. Harris**  
County Extension Coordinator, Madison County  
Alabama Cooperative Extension System

### Inaugural FAWN/Earth Day in Bibb County "Awesome"

The highlights of FAWN/Earth Day for Bibb County fifth- and sixth-graders on Friday, April 24 in Centreville, according to Angela Russel, were that "we got to shoot laser guns, touch snakes and learn about tree bark." Daje White noted, "It was very special to see the people who are trying to make our world a better place." CaAnna Dukes of Centreville Middle School summed it up by exclaiming, "This was probably the most awesome Earth Day ever!" Nothing could have sounded better to FAWN/Earth Day organizer and Centreville Middle School science teacher Beth Downs.

About a year ago, Downs was less than certain about the future of Earth Day. As the final Earth Day at Brent Elementary wound down, she knew that Bibb County Schools were about to be physically reorganized in a major way, and she was not sure how Earth Day would play out at the Centreville campus to which she and her students were moving.

Near the end of Earth Day in 2008, someone approached Downs and told her about a similar program, held entirely outdoors, called Forestry Awareness Week Now (FAWN) that had been successful in Tuscaloosa, Pickens and Marengo counties. Downs was asked, "Why don't you just call your program Earth Day/FAWN next year and move it outside to Cahaba River Historical Park in Centreville?"

Downs liked the idea, and a Forestry Planning Committee was formed immediately from a variety of public and private partners to begin planning the event. An event date of Friday, April 24, 2009 was set. The only potential snafu was bad weather, which would have forced the event to be moved to May 8.

Fortunately, the end result was perfect weather on April 24. More than 600 fifth- and sixth-graders from Centreville Middle School, West Blocton Middle School and Randolph Elementary School learned about the recreational, economic, environmental and educational benefits of forests, nature and rivers.

There were even two stations on Bibb County history, with Rev. Bob Praytor sharing north Bibb history with West Blocton and Randolph students, and Vickie Clemmons discussing south Bibb history with Centreville Middle School students. "Things worked out beautifully, and Matt Hartzell and Vicki Sievering with the Bibb County Extension office had a lot to do with that," Downs said. "We could not have asked for better weather, and the students, parents and presenters really enjoyed themselves. We're looking forward to doing this again in 2010," Downs added.

Twenty-three presenters were on hand from a variety of businesses, organizations, and state and federal agencies. In addition to the history presentations, there were sessions

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Alabama  
Communities  
in Transition

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"Action" is published once each quarter by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. We would like you to share success stories in your community for inclusion in future issues of "Action." Send to: J. Thomas Chesnutt, 218 Extension Hall, Auburn University, Alabama 36849.

Visit the ECDI home page at  
<http://www.auburn.edu/outreach/ecdi/>.

on tree identification, soils, fish and wildlife identification, snakes, wood products, Rick LeCroy's Hovercraft rescue boat, Sands of the World and Renew Our Rivers cleanups.

Earth Day/FAWN sponsors included the Alabama Forestry Commission, United States Forest Service, Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, Bibb County Public Schools District, Scott Davis Chip Company, 1<sup>st</sup> United Security Bank, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Cahaba River Historical Park owner Cecil Crews and Wendy's.



**Matt Hartzell**

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Alabama Cooperative Extension System

**Shnovia Maxwell**

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## Important Upcoming Events

**Alabama Community Leadership  
Network (ACLN) Conference – Auburn,  
October 6–7.**

**Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism  
Conference – Sheffield, October 26–28.**

Visit the ECDI home page at [www.auburn.edu/outreach/ecdi/](http://www.auburn.edu/outreach/ecdi/)

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