Americans’ participation in civic life, or civic engagement, has declined dramatically over the past decades — yet the issues facing our communities are becoming even more complex in our increasingly globalized world. We take for granted the stability of our political system, from the local level to the national level, and we are all too willing to let someone else get involved. As Nels Lindahl stated, “. . . helping to break down the disconnect between the individual and the community is valuable to strengthening the community. Reciprocally, strengthening the community through civic engagement increases the amount of active participation within the community.”

“Action” is a quarterly publication of the Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI), a partnership of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) 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 AU’s and ACES’ resources to community groups.

Civic Engagement and Economic Development

is the focus of this Fall 2012 issue of ECDI in Action. Joe Sumners, ECDI director, is the author of this segment of the newsletter. Arturo Menefee, ECDI leadership specialist, is the author of the What’s Happening in Alabama segment, which highlights the Alabama Communities of Excellence Program.

The next issue of Action, Winter 2012, will highlight lessons in leadership. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-4709, or email chesnjt@auburn.edu.

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

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

The economy is the dominant issue in the 2012 presidential election campaign between President Barack Obama and challenger Mitt Romney. It is also generally a dominant issue in any campaign for governor, county commissioner and mayor because economic development has an immediate and direct impact on people’s lives. Jobs and corporate investment create wealth that citizens can use to purchase goods and start new businesses. Strong economies at all levels of government produce tax revenues, which allow governments to achieve their missions in education, infrastructure, citizen welfare and service delivery. At the community level, when people hear the term economic development, they tend to think first about the recruitment of industry and jobs. But bringing economic prosperity to a community requires much more than just enticing a company to open a new plant in the local industrial park. Business retention and expansion, small business and entrepreneurial development, retail and commercial development, and tourism and retiree attraction, for example, are also important components of a diverse economic development strategy.

As we consider a framework for understanding economic development, we should not overlook its most important and fundamental element, which is that prosperous local economies are built upon the foundation of strong communities. Community economic vitality is largely determined by the quantity of leaders in a community and how, individually and collectively, they talk, decide, act and interact with one another. This focus on community civic infrastructure contrasts with the prevailing view of economic development dominated by a focus on business recruitment, marketing, financial incentives and industry location announcements. While industry recruiters certainly play important roles in the economic development of their communities, so do the high school coach, the hospital administrator, the plant manager, the Sunday school teacher, the city beautification council and the citizen who organizes a town meeting.

Community Development and Cooperative Extension

For the past 6 years, I have directed the economic and community development program area for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, so it is probably no surprise that I believe that community and economic development should be a high priority for Cooperative Extension. Surveys of Alabamians always rank the economy or jobs as our state’s most important issues, along with education. So involvement in economic and community development elevates ACES’ relevance in communities throughout Alabama.

One of the most common justifications for the continuing relevance of Cooperative Extension is that it provides
research-based information. While this is an important contribution, clinging to this rationale seems somewhat precarious in the Internet era. With a click of a mouse, individuals can access the knowledge of any human being who has ever lived. ACES does not have a monopoly on information, even in areas of unquestioned expertise such as agriculture, youth development and family and consumer sciences.

I believe that the true competitive advantage for Cooperative Extension is not just our wealth of expertise, but also our ability to build and sustain relationships in every county of the state. In my more than 20 years of working in Alabama communities, one of the most common deficiencies I find in communities is disconnectedness. That is, there may be many good programs conducted by government, schools, churches, the business community and others, but generally these efforts operate independently, rather than in concert with one another. There is a tremendous need to connect fragmented community assets and initiatives and to engage citizens in working together to address community concerns. Cooperative Extension is perfectly situated to serve that role. In Alabama, we have 67 counties, with an ACES office and coordinator in each. Because county Extension coordinators (CECs) are embedded in the community as trusted resources and because they are external to local stakeholder groups, they are in a perfect position to serve as neutral, trusted facilitators and bring people together to discuss and deal with local issues. Extension as catalyst and connector is extremely relevant and meets an enormous need, especially in our most challenged communities.

Of course, this is not a new idea. Bringing people and communities together to address local needs was a fundamental purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. The purpose was to extend the university’s research into communities and to provide people with knowledge, research and expertise they could use to address local needs. In 1940, M.L. Wilson, the director of the national Cooperative Extension Service, described the organization’s central purpose as civic organizing and leadership development. According to Wilson:

“Extension workers and others who are charged with assisting in the development of programs to meet not only current needs, but also the changed needs of the world, are vitally concerned with questions of leadership . . . Their primary job is to help the community analyze its problems in the light of all available information and so to organize itself that the necessary action can be taken.”

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**Community Leadership and Engagement**

We agree with Wilson that a primary job of Extension should be community leadership and engagement. In 2006, one of my first actions as ECDI director was to convene the Alabama Rural Roundtable, a gathering of about 60 state and local leaders. The Roundtable identified three major issues that required attention to bring prosperity to rural Alabama. In order of priority, they were: 1) community leadership and citizen engagement, 2) education and workforce development and 3) communications technology. Using this input, we adjusted our strategic plan to make these our institute’s top priorities. Community leadership has become a central focus of ECDI. We hired a community leadership specialist to manage our leadership program, developed the Rural Alabama Initiative (RAI) mini-grant program, and assumed administration of the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN). We have also launched major initiatives in the areas of workforce development and broadband adoption.

RAI. RAI is an ACES-funded mini-grant program designed and administered by ECDI. The RAI grant program provides financial support to seed worthwhile rural initiatives that help boost a wide range of economic and community development initiatives. Over the past 5 years, ACES has provided more than $1,300,000 in RAI funding to support 137 projects across rural Alabama. More than 75 percent of these projects were to create or strengthen adult and youth leadership development programs.

ACLN. We are convinced that local leadership development programs can be catalysts for building stronger, more prosperous communities throughout Alabama. The ACLN, which is housed in ECDI, connects, and provides resources for adult and youth community leadership programs throughout Alabama. We see these local leadership programs as having great potential for advancing a collaborative leadership model, growing the quantity of leaders, increasing the capacity of citizen leaders to address the challenges they face, and thereby strengthening civic life and maximizing economic potential in communities throughout Alabama.

**Citizen Engagement.** Civic engagement is now integrated into all ECDI programs and activities – whether in education, research or community outreach. We have conducted many training sessions in public deliberation and civic engagement and provided technical and financial support for CECs who want to become more involved in citizen engagement. In partnership with the Southern Rural Development Center, ECDI managed the Turning the Tide on Poverty project in which ACES coordinators in Perry and Dallas counties took the lead in conducting community study circles on the issue of poverty. Four CECs recently participated in a project with the David Mathews Center for Civic Life to conduct deliberative forums in their counties. Over the next year, all 67 CECs will be conducting Connected Community Forums to discuss and address local broadband adoption issues.

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**Community Questions: Engaging Citizens to Address Community Concerns**

Over the past 2 years, I have participated in a working group that is discussing the impact of deliberative practices in communities as well as new and innovative ways to engage citizens and community leaders. The project, Citizens at Work: Engaging for Prosperous Communities, convened a group of organizations throughout the nation that provide planning, training or technical support to community innovators. In addition to ECDI, the project working group included representatives from the
Final Thoughts

Community leadership and engagement is the cornerstone for building strong and prosperous local economies. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, in summarizing the results of the foundation’s history of research in the field of civil economics, wrote:

“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.” 2

We are convinced that thriving local economies are built upon the foundation of strong communities; that strong communities require engaged citizens and diverse, connected leaders; and that ECDI and ACES can have a role in fostering and facilitating critical engagement and stakeholder connections.

Joe Sumners, Director
Economic and Community Development Institute

ACE’s Three-Phase Approach

Phase I is known as the assessment phase. During this time, a comprehensive report card detailing community assets and weaknesses is prepared and presented to the community, along with recommended strategy and actions.

During Phase II, the leadership development and strategic planning component, each community must establish a leadership development program, prepare an up-to-date strategic plan, and identify a local ACE coordinator.

Phase III is the implementation and comprehensive planning segment. Issues addressed during Phase III include comprehensive planning, commercial business development, education enhancement,

What’s Happening in Alabama

Alabama Communities of Excellence

On May 21, the cities of Arab, Childersburg, Eufaula, Foley, Hartselle, Livingston and Montevallo were each designated as an Alabama Community of Excellence after successfully completing the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program, a comprehensive three-phase approach to economic and community development for cities with populations between 2,000 and 18,000. In addition, Atmore successfully completed the ACE recertification process.

During the May General Session of the Alabama League of Municipalities Annual convention held in Birmingham, Arturo Menefee, ACE president and leadership development specialist at Auburn’s Economic & Community Development Institute, and Ken Smith, ACE partner and executive director of the Alabama League of Municipalities, presented plaques to each of the communities completing the program.

Communities with eligible populations must complete and submit an application in order to be considered for the ACE program. The two main criteria used in selecting ACE participants are the level of local commitment to the ACE program and the community’s capacity to support the ACE program. We are so proud of these communities for successfully completing all three phases of the program and Atmore’s completion of the ACE recertification. Their dedication to community development is to be commended.

(Continued on page 4)

What's Happening in Alabama

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(Continued on page 4)
infrastructure, health and human services, retiree attraction, tourism, economic development and quality of life.

To maintain the Alabama Community of Excellence designation, a community must be recertified every 3 years. The seven communities designated at the league convention will be eligible for recertification in 2015. Throughout each of these phases, ACE partners work with each community to successfully achieve their goals. The ACE program would not be possible without the funding, hard work and participation of the ACE partner organizations.

ACE partner organizations include the Alabama Association of Regional Councils, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), Alabama Development Office (ADO), Alabama Farmers Federation, Alabama Historical Commission, Alabama League of Municipalities, Alabama Power Company, Auburn University Economic & Community Development Institute, Economic Development Association of Alabama (EDAA), Goodwyn, Mills & Cawood, Regions Financial Corporation, the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development and the University of West Alabama.

Eighteen communities have previously been certified as Alabama Communities of Excellence: Atmore, Brewton, Demopolis, Evergreen, Fayette, Graysville, Guin, Gulf Shores, Guntersville, Haleyville, Headland, Heflin, Jackson, Jacksonville, Millbrook, Monroeville, Thomasville and Valley. The additional seven communities bring the total to 25 Alabama communities that have been designated as Alabama Communities of Excellence.

Upcoming Events

- Alabama Prosperity Forum course (held in Auburn):
  - Strategies for Retail Development, Dec. 6-7
- Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference, Oct. 22-24, Corinth, MS