

Montgomery Advertiser
Envision 2020 Article
October 2004

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Leaders and staff at the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce have much to crow about! And crow they did at a press conference on September 13. Out of the 11 states in the Southeast Tourism Society, the Convention and Visitor Bureau was named the 2004 CVB of the Year. William T. Hardman, President and CEO of the Southeast Tourism Society stated, "Competition was especially fierce this year, and Montgomery's CVB selection signifies an especially extraordinary achievement."

So what's the big deal? This award is yet another vehicle, in addition to Hyundai, for recognizing this area's emergence as an important economic development contender on the international scene. According to Randy George, the River Region's recognition as a truly "hot spot" for business is burgeoning. This area boasts world history, and for that reason, people from all over the world come to learn first hand about civil rights and the Civil War.

During Envision's initial public meetings in 2001, tourism emerged as a hot topic. We learned there were many in the region who wanted the many facets of our tourist industry promoted more, and the Envision goal that came out of the public meetings called for the creation of a separate tourism board or independent convention visitors' bureau. Those involved in the region's chambers of commerce and tourist industry had engaged in those discussions about how to best promote our portion of the state's \$6.5 billion a year industry. Should we create a separate entity or look at better coordinating what we have already?

The answer was to work together as a cooperative region to better utilize what we have already. In addition, the leaders at the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce and CVB in particular took it a critical step further. They had attended the public meetings and knew the passion for this issue. They hired the Randall Group from Charlotte, NC, nationally esteemed tourism analysis professionals who conducted a thorough study on tourism that was released in spring 2003.

The impact became evident this September with the Tourism Society Award. We have made significant strides in a major industry, and affirmation of this caliber serves as a valuable energizer to those directly involved, as well as bringing to the attention of outsiders the tremendous tourism assets of the entire River Region.

A well-known thinker about leadership, John Gardner, states that a sign of a healthy community is to celebrate achievements. Congratulations to the Montgomery Chamber and CVB! We all deserve to celebrate and recognize that the best is yet to come.

New Task Force Created

Envision has a new look for a task force. Under the leadership of Larry Grewelle, the passionate volunteer chair of the Montgomery Tree Committee, issues related to trees, storm water and flooding are coming to the fore, especially in the rapidly developing tri-counties. And rather than Envision staff being responsible for convening citizens, business and government, the lead is going to the Tree Committee with Envision staff as a consulting member.

The basis of this new group's work is a July 2004 comprehensive report on the state of the urban forests in Autauga, Elmore and Montgomery counties. Using satellite photos from the past and present to document changes in land cover, the report by Southern Urban Forestry Associates establishes a baseline, demonstrates trends and impacts, and puts a price on the value of trees.

Most people do not think about trees unless they are hurled into houses or destroy electrical power, but this report, along with an Urban Ecosystem Analysis, demonstrates the importance of trees to physical health, the economy, personal finances and the environment. Thanks to the leadership of the Montgomery Tree Committee, Montgomery Clean City Commission and City of Montgomery, there is excellent information from which to develop specific plans of action.

How do trees help? They have been called the "ultimate urban multi-tasker". They work 24/7 requiring relatively little care, and in exchange, save hundreds of billions of dollars by removing air pollution and controlling storm water runoff. A tragic example is the recent overwhelming flooding in Haiti, which was the result of over cutting trees. The city of Gonaives is expected to have a death toll over 2,000 largely due to flooding linked to massive deforestation.

Research shows tree-filled landscapes are safer and more sociable, reduce stress, can add 10% more to property value and speed recovery times from illness. Rural forested lands can be as much as ten degrees cooler than cities.

The report emphasizes the importance of being intentional about trees. Montgomery's tree canopy has decreased by 6% and the urban area increased by 8% since 1986. But there is good news. Currently, the city's tree environment is in good condition. However, if the trend from 1986 to 2002 continues, the tree canopy will decrease at a rate that will leave no trees by the year 2091.

What can we do? Recognize that trees succumb to old age and plant new ones in advance. Support new landscape ordinances that require large shade trees in new developments and that pay attention to current power lines. And education of elected officials, developers and citizens is at the heart of success.

It has been said that leadership is the willingness to plant trees under whose shade one will never sit. It has never been truer than now.

In Other Action:

Regional Transportation for children's healthcare is on the way. Kid One Transport, a non-profit that has provided over 73,000 trips to more than 7,100 children and expectant mothers since 1997 is expanding to the River Region. The rides are free to medical, dental, pre-natal and other healthcare related visits. Details will be publicized soon.

How to get involved

1. Call 269-0224 to sign up for a task force or arrange for a speaker.
2. Use the Envision Plan to guide activities and planning in all organizations.
3. Pick up a copy of the Envision 2020 Regional Tourism map and become a home-state tourist. It will be fun and educational!