

Envision 2020
March 2004
Lynn Beshear, Executive Director

By all counts the River Region's first regional growth conference on February 27 was an overwhelming success. Over 325 residents from the Envision 2020 counties and beyond attended to learn from and be inspired by experts from across the South about land use and development, historic preservation, environmental issues, rural and funding issues, as well as the impact of community design on our health.

Ed McMahon, Vice President and Director of Land Use Programs for The Conservation Fund, was the keynote speaker. Everyone was spellbound for an hour and a half as he showed slide after slide demonstrating the good, the bad and the very ugly in community design in the US today. It was clear cities and towns have lost their unique characters, and thousands of shopping venues are completely indistinguishable from any other. Big box retailers and treeless neighborhoods have dominated cities for decades. But wait. There is good news!

Hundreds of communities are flourishing around town centers, much like we see in downtown Tallasee and Prattville or old Cloverdale in Montgomery. City councils are passing ordinances that set definite standards for design, building height, mixed use and historic preservation. Mr. McMahon called it going back to the future!

Further, when communities convey their high standards, franchise and chain businesses respond with two-story buildings that can be adapted easily when vacated and that blend into the community's style of architecture. For example, a large chain drug store in Lake Placid, New York is built in the Adirondack style, and another in Washington, D.C. is housed in a restored historic building.

In Bethesda, Maryland a large chain bookstore has far more customers in its walkable neighborhood location than in its strip shopping center location. The only way to get to the one in the shopping center is by car on a busy 4-lane "strip". But, the neighborhood store can be reached by walking, biking, bus or car. Its design invites lingering and window-shopping in adjacent stores. So, rather than being an eyesore, it is an attractive magnet for the entire shopping area.

Mr. McMahon stated that eliminating signage clutter is an important action that will reap immediate benefit by improving the visible environment. Poorly planned and oversized signs are ugly and ineffective due to visual overload. On the other hand, according to our speaker, planning signs, as an architectural feature, is a sure win: we get necessary information and directions and we have an attractive design feature. Likewise communities reduce the degradation of one of our country's greatest economic assets, its scenic landscape.

On the residential side of the equation, who knew that only 30% of residents whose property is on a golf course actually play golf? The draw is a large, green and protected “back yard” that is maintained by someone else. Clearly, not everyone has the means to live on a golf course, but developers across the country are building more affordable developments with common green spaces and highly-desired water features, and they are doing it with less infrastructure cost, thus passing savings to home-buyers.

So what is the benefit of a conference if there is no new behavior as a result? None.

The good news is there has been a great response: citizens are now informed and eager to let their voices be heard, as are elected officials who have the power to make changes. Additionally, local developers, homebuilders and others in related businesses now know what the possibilities are and some responded immediately by incorporating new design ideas in current projects. Business can make money and we can have attractive communities – these two goals are not mutually exclusive, as some have feared.

As we go forward with the explosive growth anticipated in the River Region, it is important for us to ask ourselves, “What is the legacy we wish to leave?” It is also important to know that 80% of all buildings in the US today have been built since World War II, driving us to ask, “Are we building anything anyone in the future will want to preserve?” Winston Churchill hit the nail on the head when he said, “We shape our buildings and afterwards, our buildings shape us.” Growth happens; we must plan for it!

Tourism – Major Economic Development Force of the River Region

Tourism is a \$6.5 billion business in Alabama, and the River Region has a wealth of attractions that appeal to visitors interested in world history, culture, and natural resources. These facts led the Envision 2020 Tourism and Economic Development Task Forces to join forces and focus on tourism as the logical starting point for regional cooperation related to economic development.

On March 22 the Tourism and Economic Development task forces released central Alabama’s first regional tourism map, which promotes 65 sites across Autauga, Elmore, Lowndes, Macon and Montgomery counties. The design for the regional map was generously donated to Envision 2020 as part of LWT Communication’s annual Create-A-Thon. Task Force members identified historic, entertainment, recreational, cultural and civil rights attractions in the region, and designers at LWT produced the map that entailed more than 90 hours of their time and creative expertise being donated to the Envision process. Walker Printing also kindly donated 5,000 of the 20,000 copies in this initial printing.

Maps are available at the chambers of commerce in Montgomery, Autauga, Elmore and Macon counties and at the sheriff’s office in Lowndes County. Each county has a Key Contact, who is responsible for map distribution in the county. Below is a list of Key Contacts to call for further information:

Autauga County - Prattville Chamber of Commerce - Young Gray	365-7392
Elmore County - Wetumpka Chamber of Commerce - Jan Wood	567-4811
Lowndes County - Sheriff's Office - Sheriff Vaughner	548-2597
Macon County - Tuskegee Chamber of Commerce - Henrietta Anderson	727-6619
Montgomery - Montgomery Visitor Center - Jina Clark	261-1100

In Other Action:

Health; Wellness; Healthcare Delivery Task Force: According to *The Birmingham News*, 340,000 children in Alabama are overweight and in danger of facing serious health problems. The issue isn't about blame. It is about a preventable disease that has reached an all-time high in both children and adults in our country. This knowledge led the **Education Subgroup of the Health and Wellness Task Force** to focus on the issue of childhood obesity in the River Region. A program developed by the Alabama Department of Public Health Nutrition and Physical Activity Unit that encourages healthy choices for food and exercise is the basis for a program that the group plans to pilot in a Tallasee school by Fall 2004.

Human Relations Task Force members are working on specific projects related to the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Bus Boycott.

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!