

**Envision 2020 Update  
July 2003**

**Envision 2020  
Central Alabama's River Region  
Working Together Working Wonders**

**Lynn Beshear, Executive Director**

Silent phones are never a problem in the Envision office. We hear from a wide variety of callers about all sorts of ideas for the future of this region.

Recently a particularly significant call came from concerned Prattville citizen and community activist, Bob Lee. Bob knew of the tremendous success in Montgomery of the Partners in Education (PIE) program and wished to assemble a group in Prattville to implement it there. Hannah Williams, director of PIE in Montgomery, met a few days later with Bob Lee, Marla Akridge of the Prattville Chamber, who fortuitously has five years experience with a similar program in Tennessee, Leigh Gray from the Autauga County School system, and Davis Brock, Technology Coordinator for the Elmore County School system.

That meeting was a big step in the Envision plan's implementation process: this meeting was initiated and led by citizens and professionals, not Envision 2020 staff. The conclusion was to ask Envision 2020 to roll out the Linking Business with Education Through Mentoring and Tutoring Task Force. And there is more great news: Hannah Williams enthusiastically agreed to chair it and take her expertise across the region! At the July 23 Envision Board meeting the strategy was endorsed and anyone wishing to be involved should call the Envision office.

Other task forces slated by the Board for rollout this fall are: Crime, Drugs and Public Safety; Citizen Involvement/Government Leadership; and Neighborhoods.

**In Other Action**

The Financing Public Services Task Force conducted the initial series of Crucial Community Conversations in April and May in public schools across Montgomery County. Despite end-of-the-year activities, several hundred adults and youth participated to learn results of research conducted by the task force and to share ideas about teaching, learning and funding for K-12 education. The Crucial Community Conversations are ongoing with businesses, civic groups and church groups and anyone desiring one should call Caroline Montgomery at 264-6223.

The Financing Public Services Task Force's focus has been based on work by the hundreds in the River Region who created the Envision 2020 plan and stated that their number one priority was: "A region committed to creating a stable, equitable local and state tax structure, which will raise per pupil expenditures for K-12 public schools to the national average and insure excellence in teaching and learning, and will provide for quality public services. This will be done by providing an appropriate tax structure, such as, but not limited to raising property taxes and decreasing sales taxes."

The stated anticipated payoff to the region by implementing the goal was: “A better quality of life through better public education, an educated work force to bring higher paying jobs; lower crime rates; better healthcare, benefiting everyone in the five-county region.”

Interestingly, participants in this spring’s Crucial Community Conversations shared strong opinions on the importance of education, which parallel the above statements.

It is believed educated citizens will be more concerned about their community’s well being, earn more money, have less crime, attract high tech industry, have higher standards of living, create stronger families, and create equal opportunity.

All participants believed basic skills are critical to student achievement in addition to computer and tech career skills. Other ideas were to teach skills in communication, human relations, critical thinking, the arts, appreciation of cultural diversity, responsibility and team building. The consensus was that while some of those skills are being taught well currently, it is uneven across the system and region, and children come to school with wide disparities of preparation and support from their homes, which are believed to be critical for success in life.

In comparing student achievement, both nationally and internationally, meeting participants concluded River Region students are greatly below average. Comparisons of scores and data showed less achievement regionally in poorer schools. However, it is significant that research also revealed systems that target investment in teacher and principal training in schools such as Maryvale in Baldwin County and Central Park in Birmingham have higher student achievement.

In discussions about money, two individuals were opposed to increasing funding, while all others believed citizens should provide more money for schools. There were concerns about quality of teachers and school administrators, accountability for spending, school safety and behavior problems. Participants learned that we could educate 3 students for the cost of housing a single prisoner for a year. They also learned that two-thirds of Alabama’s prisoners did not graduate from high school. The overall consensus was that property tax was the best way to fund education equitably and with stability.

To generate more trust of the schools, participants want true accountability, better behavior by students and more parental responsibility and involvement, communication about the positive things in our schools, more teaching time and less administrative time, and involvement by elected officials and business leaders.

One participant summed it up by asking: do we really care about public education? That is a question each of us must answer.

### **Upcoming Events**

1. Planning and Zoning Task Force is planning a regional growth conference.
2. These four task forces will roll out this fall:
  - Linking Business with Education Through Mentoring and Tutoring
  - Crime, Drugs and Public Safety
  - Citizen Involvement/Government Leadership
  - Neighborhoods.

### **How to get involved:**

1. Go to the Website at [www.envision2020.org](http://www.envision2020.org) to view the entire plan.
2. Call 269-0224 to sign up for a task force or request a speaker.
3. Use the Envision Plan in all organizations as a guide in activities and planning.
4. Call Caroline Montgomery to schedule a Crucial Community Conversation
5. For more information on education go to the A+ website at [aplusala.org](http://aplusala.org)