

Envision 2020
Update article for July-August 2005

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The Envision process has revealed almost as many questions as answers about improving our economic well-being and quality of life in the River Region, but the seven major regional issues that have emerged at the top of the list are: public education; tourism; regional transportation systems and planning; infrastructure (water, sewer, roads, etc.) healthcare delivery; youth crime, drugs and teen pregnancy; and loss of high tech jobs.

Regional transportation emerged as the clearly most urgent need: travel does not stop at county and city lines and planning must take place twenty to thirty years in advance. Additionally working relationships must be continuously nurtured and strengthened in order to plan effectively and address immediate transportation and roads needs.

Furthermore, two other questions directly related to both economic development and quality of life that emerged at the Envision Board's spring retreat are:

1. Why should the community, especially the business community, have a significant interest in healthcare?
2. How long is the River Region going to put off realizing the potential of the arts and better promotion our diverse cultural resources as a means to enhance the quality of life, spur economic development and attract new industries?

First, healthcare, as a category of industry, is one of the largest single components of the local economy, employing several thousands in the five counties, many who have unique life-saving skills. However, as the population ages, healthcare professionals are becoming scarcer, and central Alabama is in fierce competition with more prosperous regions in the US to attract them and to keep the ones we have.

Additionally, business leaders deal constantly with employee healthcare, which is expensive and becoming more so. Absenteeism due to poor health or illness creates large financial losses, directly affecting every business's bottom line.

When industry evaluates potential community capacities in anticipation of relocation, infrastructure and transportation are obvious critical components. But, so too are quality of life and workforce issues, and quality accessible healthcare is *the* critical element for a sustainable quality of life. A community unable to demonstrate the ability to create and support a quality healthcare infrastructure and a quality public education system is suspect at best, and generally handicapped in attempts to recruit industry. Conversely, much like an effective education system, a vital healthcare community can overcome other community deficiencies. Likewise, their absence can have devastating consequences in recruiting and retaining industry.

Entities and individuals associated with the medical community can and should be among the most productive partners in the region for economic development. Which employer has more at stake? What employer is more inextricably tied to the local and regional market?

Another issue at the heart of quality of life is the arts. The River Region comes up short, certainly not in arts and cultural resources, but in how we regard, market, coordinate and maintain them. No other region of this size in the US can boast a theater like ASF and a museum like the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. Space does not permit listing the several hundred arts and cultural resources in the region, but many residing here have no idea of their existence.

Like healthcare, the arts are an essential tool for economic development; they are part of the entire package used to sell the region to prospective industries and enhance the quality of life of residents of the region. The Culture and Arts Task Force identified several feasible approaches to finding sustainable vehicles for strengthening our region's arts and culture resources: possibly through the region's chambers of commerce, or the current Business Committee for the Arts or by creating a regional advisory board. In regard to cultural appreciation, Maxwell and Gunter are tremendous untapped resources for better understanding and enjoying a vast array of the world's cultures in our own "back yard".

As we look at the economic future an important bottom line question remains: are the arts and cultural assets of the River Region going to remain a "best kept secret" or are these resources going to become a center-piece for national interest and a model for the new creative economy?

Healthcare - Major River Region Issue

It has become clear in the Envision process that there is no lack of resources in the River Region. We have villages, towns, lakes, rivers and a capital city. We have varied topography, diverse cultures and world history. We have a stable economy and the most modern automotive manufacturing plant in the world.

What we need to further develop, however, are our relationships with each other. That is our greatest challenge – not unique to the River Region. Just look at the newspaper or television. However, this is where we are planted and are trying to bloom, and time and again the need for trusting working relationships has been identified as the greatest challenge to realizing our full potential. In fact, the Envision process is constantly working in that arena

Nonetheless, there are several hundred in the region, who focused on common goals and much has been achieved, the highlights of which are below. Now in the third year of implementation of the Envision plan, we have much to celebrate.

We have created the **River Region Principals' Leadership Academy**, spurring the State Department of Education to create another, which along with ours will be state models for public school principal leadership training. The first areas of focus are on using data to implement real classroom change and on giving school leaders the skills to create sustainable positive atmosphere's within their schools.

Envision counties were the model for a \$1.5 million grant to **Alabama for Steps to a Healthier US** and our portion is \$967,000. Target populations are those at risk for diabetes, asthma, obesity, minority populations, rural residents; and school aged children. County-level coalitions will begin meeting this fall.

The Tourism Task Force created a **Regional Attraction map** of 65 regional entites and attractions that is available at tourism and visitor centers. The Economic Development Task Force identified tourism as *the* vital regional industry.

Kid One Transport, which provides rides to healthcare for children and pregnant women in need of transportation, has come to the River Region through the Envision process and a second van was unveiled at a May 18 press conference.

Smarth Growth Education is becoming part of the modus operandi in the region through the Envision process and the impact is being felt already. Two communities in the region are working to establish the Smart Code as an overlay to current building codes. We must ask ourselves how we can make decisions about the future about what, where and how to build and improve our communities. With the rapid changes brought by Hyundai, decision makers and citizens need to be educated together to take full advantage of opportunities for productive communication, planning and federal monies. **The first fall Smart Growth breakfast will be Tuesday, September 13 at 7:30 a.m. at Jones School of Law - see attached press release for details on nationally recognized speaker.**

Working with leaders in Macon County for several months beginning last fall, culminated in **Leadership Macon County** being established in April 2005. This program will be similar to leadership programs in Montgomery, Autauga and Elmore counties and is the basis of citizens understanding the needs and opportunities in Macon County.

The Task Force for Linking Business with Education Through Mentoring and Tutoring enlisted Montgomery's *Partners In Education* office to adopt the goal, and they are working with school superintendents **in Autauga, Elmore, Lowndes and Macon counties and the Tallassee City Schools to implement PIE across the region.**

Crime, Drugs and Public Safety Task Force joined the Volunteer and Information Center and **"2-1-1 Connects" with regional law enforcement officers and dispatchers** to be trained in social, health and human services available in order that officers can provide vital information to the public "at the scene".

How to get involved in Envision 2020

1. Call 269-0224 to sign up for a task force or arrange for a speaker.
2. Visit our website at www.envision2020.org.
3. Attend the Smart Growth breakfast on September 13 at 7:30 a.m.
4. Use the Envision Plan to guide activities and planning in all organizations.
5. Pick up a copy of the Envision 2020 Regional Tourism map and become a home-state tourist. It will be fun and educational!