

MARKET ST



LIVE WORK GROW

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LIVE WORK GROW

Market Street brings original insights and clarity to the evaluation and revitalization of the places where people live, work, and grow. Through honest and informed assessments, *Market Street* can equip you with the tools to create meaningful change. Our solutions successfully merge our experience and expertise with the economic and social realities of our clients. *Market Street's* community clients are successful at creating stronger programs, increasing operational budgets, and creating new quality jobs that improve the quality of life in their communities.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Phase I: Competitive Snapshot and Stakeholder Input

The *Competitive Snapshot* provided Vestavia Hills with a thorough examination of its competitive advantages and existing challenges. The City was benchmarked against three quality peer communities (Germantown, TN; Matthews, NC; and Peachtree City, GA), the State of Alabama, and the United States. Quantitative data from a variety of sources was married with qualitative input received on the ground from those who know Vestavia Hills best. Through a combination of focus groups, individual interviews, and an online community survey, *Market Street* has drawn on input from the entire community.

Phase II: Target Business Review

The *Target Business Review* built on the information gathered during Phase I and presented a short list of target business sectors on which the City can focus its efforts. The *Target Business Review* considered the City's opportunities within the context of regional targets developed for the Birmingham metropolitan area as a component of the Blueprint Birmingham process.

Phase III: Vision Plan

This *Vision Plan* represents the culmination of all quantitative and qualitative research through the development of action items geared toward addressing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities for visionary growth. The *Vision Plan* will serve as a roadmap for achieving the community's consensus vision for a preferred future.

Phase IV: Implementation Plan

One of *Market Street's* core beliefs is that when the strategic planning process is complete, the real work begins. Timely and effective implementation is critical to the ultimate success of Vestavia Hills' *Vision Plan*. The *Implementation Plan* will examine implementation partners, organizational structures, budgets, and staffing, while also providing performance metrics to measure the City's success in implementing the *Vision Plan*. The *Implementation Plan* will enable local leaders to secure early implementation victories and continue to build momentum for overall activation of the *Vision Plan*.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Market Street Services would like to acknowledge the Steering Committee that shepherded the development of this *Vision Plan* for Vestavia Hills. Their dedication of time and effort has led to the creation of a *Vision Plan* that will enable the community to create a more prosperous future.

The members of the Steering Committee are:

Mr. David Carrington, Jefferson County Commissioner, District 5
Ms. Martha Cook, Incoming President, Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce
Dr. Stephen Craft, Dean of the Michael E. Stevens College of Business, University of Montevallo
Dr. Thomas DeCarlo, Ben S. Weil Endowed Chair of Industrial Distribution, UAB School of Business
Mr. Raymond Gottlieb, Founder and President, Metropolitan Properties **(Steering Committee Co-Chair)**
Mr. Paul Graham, Chief Administrative Officer, Trinity Medical Center
Mr. Terry Green, Owner of Diplomat Deli & Spirits, Lower 31 Business District
Mr. John Henley, State Farm Insurance, Columbia Crossings Business District
Ms. Terri Jackson, Owner of The Nesting Place, Cahaba Heights Business District
Mr. Lyle Larson, Chair, Vestavia Hills Planning and Zoning Commission
Ms. Karol Leggett, Owner of Kidz Closet, Upper 31 Business District
Ms. Kim Mangham-Barelare, Business Development Committee (Chair), Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce
Mr. Robin Morgan, Developer, Rocky Ridge Business District
Mr. K.C. Pang, Instructor, UAB School of Business
Mr. George Pierce, Vestavia Hills City Council
Mr. Steve Preston, VP of External Affairs, Brookwood Medical Center
Ms. Mary Lee Rice, President, Vestavia Hills City Council **(Steering Committee Co-Chair)**
Mr. James Robinson, Manager of National Accounts, Alagasco
Mr. Jim Sharp, Owner of Sharp Cleaners, Upper 31 Business District
Mr. Paul Sumner, President, Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce **(Steering Committee Co-Chair)**
Ms. Robin Tubbs, Regional Property Manager, Excel Trust, Inc.
Mr. Ted vonCannon, Former President, Birmingham Metropolitan Development Board (1987-2009)
Mr. David Walker, President, Vestavia Hills Board of Education
Mr. Brian Wolfe, Director of Development, Corporate Realty Development
Mr. Alberto “Butch” Zaragoza, Mayor, City of Vestavia Hills

ESTABLISHING A VISION FOR VESTAVIA HILLS

The City of Vestavia Hills last established a comprehensive vision for the community in the development of its Comprehensive Plan in 2003. The vision statement outlined in the Comprehensive Plan is as follows:

“The City of Vestavia Hills, Alabama is committed to preserving and enhancing the strong sense of place that derives from its unique location, surroundings, neighborhoods, business districts and schools.”



This vision statement, and the accompanying goals and objectives that were outlined in the 2003 Comprehensive Plan provide critical guidance regarding the City’s preferred future. Likewise, related planning initiatives such as the Cahaba Heights Community Plan and the Board of Education’s Strategic Plan, are critical tools that further define the strategic initiatives that will help the City achieve its preferred future. As it emerges from the “Great Recession” and transitions to a new form of government, Vestavia Hills needs a renewed *Vision Plan* that acknowledges recent successes, addresses new challenges, and is more proactive in its approach to community and economic development.

Beginning in May, 2011, *Market Street Services* began collecting widespread input from residents and businesses in Vestavia Hills regarding their vision of a preferred future for the City. More than 100 individuals participated in interviews and focus groups, and nearly 1,000 residents responded to an online community survey in which they were asked to share their vision for the City. Throughout the course of this visioning process, the *Vision Plan* Steering Committee provided additional input and guidance in synthesizing this information into a consensus vision statement for the City. The following vision statement reflects that consensus and provides the structure for the *Vision Plan* that follows:

Our Vision

“The City of Vestavia Hills will be a fiscally-prosperous and sustainable community, supported by proactive economic development programs and policies. Together, we will strive to maintain a charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly community that is unified and proud of its superior education system, walkable neighborhoods, and thriving, mixed-use business districts.”

VISION PLAN

The *Vision Plan* that follows is designed to provide local leaders with the guidance that is necessary to help the community achieve its vision for the future. Best practice programs from around the country are referenced when relevant to a specific recommendation. Descriptions of best practices are included in an appendix at the end of this document.

The structure of the *Vision Plan* is derived from the vision statement itself, with six key phrases describing desired community attributes serving as the “goal areas” of this *Vision Plan*. These six key phrases are:

...proactive economic development programs and policies...

...charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly...

...unified and proud...

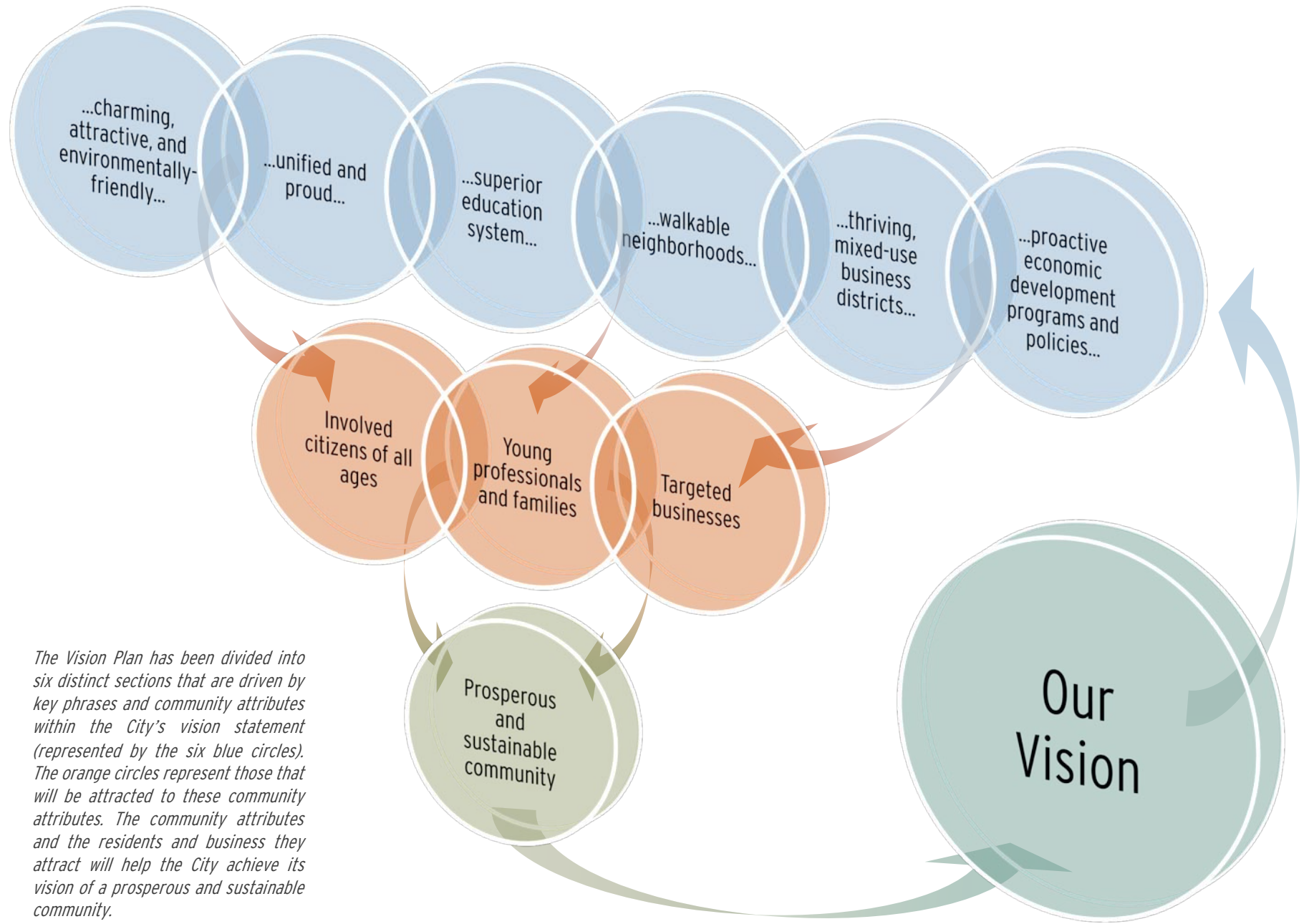
...superior education system...

...walkable neighborhoods...

...thriving, mixed-use business districts...

Our Vision

“The City of Vestavia Hills will be a fiscally-prosperous and sustainable community, supported by *proactive economic development programs and policies*. Together, we will strive to maintain a *charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly community* that is *unified and proud* of its *superior education system*, *walkable neighborhoods*, and *thriving, mixed-use business districts*.”



The Vision Plan has been divided into six distinct sections that are driven by key phrases and community attributes within the City's vision statement (represented by the six blue circles). The orange circles represent those that will be attracted to these community attributes. The community attributes and the residents and business they attract will help the City achieve its vision of a prosperous and sustainable community.

Throughout this visioning process, the Steering Committee has been informed of the quantitative findings and qualitative input gathered during the research phase. With this knowledge, the Steering Committee conducted a visioning exercise in which they identified key words and phrases that defined the community's preferred vision of the future. The most common themes mentioned more than once that emerged from this exercise are listed below with their frequency of mention included in parentheses.

walkable (4)

proactive economic development and revitalization (4)

maintenance of a high-quality education system (3)

improved business districts (3)

attractive and aesthetically-pleasing (3)

environmentally-friendly and supportive of green initiatives (3)

attractive to all ages (3)

mixed-use development (2)

supportive of small business (2)

diverse housing options (2)

charming (2)



...proactive economic development programs and policies...

Our Vision

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Recommendations:

- ✓ Strengthen relationships with the Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA) to maximize the impact of and return on the City's collaborative economic development programs.
- ✓ Work with neighboring communities and regional partners to schedule and host an "Over the Mountain" inbound familiarization trip for leaders from the Alabama Development Office (ADO), the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA).
- ✓ Inventory all available properties within the City and create a searchable, online database.
- ✓ Develop a virtual Business Assistance Center (BAC).
- ✓ Evaluate opportunities to expand and formalize a collaborative "Business Assistance Tuesdays" program.
- ✓ Issue a "Value Vestavia" challenge to all local businesses to identify local supplier alternatives and switch from one external (outside the City) supplier to one internal (inside the City) supplier.
- ✓ Revise the City's existing Economic Development Incentive Policy such that it provides a broader range of targeted incentives and specific eligibility criteria for each incentive.
- ✓ Support the development of a collaborative, regional business retention and expansion (BRE) program.
- ✓ Develop a new brand identity for Vestavia Hills that is informed by the City's vision.
- ✓ Compile regional economic development marketing collateral and develop new, local collateral that is consistent with the City's new brand identity.
- ✓ Create a new economic development webpage that is consistent with the City's new brand identity and effectively communicates necessary information to external audiences.

Strengthen relationships with the Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA) to maximize the impact of and return on the City's collaborative economic development programs.

The City of Vestavia Hills and the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce currently serve as the primary facilitators of economic development on behalf of the community. In order to most effectively utilize all of the resources that are available to the City and receive the greatest return on its investment in economic development programs, the City and the Chamber will need to have strong relationships with key staff at the BBA and other partners such as the Alabama Development Office, the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, the Jefferson County Office of Community and Economic Development, and Alabama Power.

Relevant leadership from the City and the Chamber should reach out to the BBA at the conclusion of this visioning process to share the results of this planning process with a particular focus on communicating the ways in which the visioning process was intended to promote synergy with regional efforts. Emphasis should be placed on target business sectors for the City that align with regional targets, as well as strategic recommendations in this Vision Plan that are in harmony with and support various elements of Blueprint Birmingham. In fact, improved relationships between the BBA and local governments were specifically mentioned as a priority action in Blueprint Birmingham (Action 11.3).

Initial meetings should focus on the outcomes of this visioning process, with additional meetings scheduled as necessary to discuss ways to best coordinate other core economic development programs and practices as referenced throughout the Vision Plan. This includes but is not limited to prospect management protocols, collaborative development of existing business survey instruments, and protocols related to information-sharing from existing business site visits and surveys. The City and Chamber should also identify private-sector leaders to service on existing BBA councils and committees while identifying local leaders that can help initiate efforts to start new councils and committees that were recommended within Blueprint Birmingham. This includes but is not limited to the Health Care Cluster Council (Action 8.2 of Blueprint Birmingham) and the Birmingham Regional Enterprise Council (Action 9.1 of Blueprint Birmingham).

Work with neighboring communities and regional partners to schedule and host an "Over the Mountain" inbound familiarization trip for leaders from the Alabama Development Office (ADO), the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA).

In addition to targeted outreach to the BBA, the City and the Chamber should leverage the unique connection that they possess to the Alabama Development Office, led by newly-appointed Director Greg Canfield, former President of the Vestavia Hills City Council and the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce. The City and Chamber should work with neighboring communities, the BBA, and the Jefferson County Office of Community and Economic Development to develop a day-long inbound familiarization trip hosting staff from the ADO and EDPA to expose these key state-level partners to the assets and resources that are available in Vestavia Hills and other "Over the Mountain" communities. This event could potentially include a public rollout of the Vestavia Hills *Vision Plan*, as well as guided tours of specific areas of town that are targeted for development and redevelopment.

Inventory all available properties within the City and create a searchable, online database.

The City should work with the Chamber of Commerce, developers, property owners, and real estate agents to inventory available properties of all types (office, retail, flex, land, etc.) and site-specific characteristics. This inventory should leverage pre-existing databases, including but not limited to the City's fire inspection database, and attempt to create a single, regularly-updated directory of available property in Vestavia Hills. The inventory should be published online and featured prominently on the recommended new economic development website, with links to this database featured prominently on the City's and Chamber's websites, as well as the websites of other local, regional, and state economic development partners, including the BBA. The City should reach out to the Geography Department at Samford University to gauge their interest in potentially creating a project for students within the Geography Department to geocode the database so that property- and site-specific information can be accessed via web-based GIS tools.

In addition to the marketing function of the database, it should be used internally by City staff as well as relevant local and regional planning and development partners to identify specific redevelopment opportunities that can serve as catalysts for the revitalization of one the City's numerous business districts. High priority redevelopment opportunities should be prominently featured in marketing efforts to the development community, with the potential to host a "Developer's Day" that showcases such opportunities and communicates the types of incentives that a certain redevelopment project may be eligible for based on the City's Incentives Policy.

Develop a virtual Business Assistance Center (BAC).

More than 500 small business owners and business executives responded to the *Vision Plan* online survey, with nearly two-thirds indicating that they did not know enough about available resources and forms of small business assistance in the region to evaluate them. Of those who were familiar with regional services, only 36 percent rated them as "good" or "very good." The region's Small Business Development Center (SBDC), formerly located at UAB, closed its doors in 2008, dealing a significant blow to the scale and scope of small business services in the region. A new virtual Business Assistance Center (BAC) should be developed and hosted by the Chamber to best connect small businesses with a wide variety of resources and information, including but not limited to:

- ✓ links to the City's code of ordinances, design standards, etc.
- ✓ a directory of all forms and documents related to business licensing and permitting, as well as FAQs
- ✓ web-based forms to request or schedule an appointment with various city departments, Chamber staff, Birmingham SCORE mentors, and Birmingham business Resource Center (BBRC) staff, and/or schedule an appointment on Business Assistance Fridays (recommended new program)
- ✓ an inventory with links to relevant federal and state resources for small business
- ✓ a calendar of events related to small business networking opportunities and educational workshops offered by the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce, the BBA, the BBRC, and others
- ✓ focused information specific to the needs of startups in the city's target business sectors

Evaluate opportunities to expand and formalize a collaborative "Business Assistance Tuesdays" program.

While some small business assistance programs can be expensive and time-consuming from a staff perspective, there are high value services that local governments can provide at a relatively minimal cost. One such service is a business assistance program that provides hands-on assistance to small business owners and entrepreneurs at a designated time each week and/or month. The City of Vestavia Hills currently hosts weekly, cross-departmental meetings that allow businesses and permit applicants to meet with staff and address any concerns they may have in a collaborative format. The City should consider expanding this initiative to a formal "Business Assistance Tuesdays" program that leverages relevant partners in the community (including the Chamber of Commerce, the Birmingham SCORE chapter, the BBRC, and others) as necessary and available.

Consistent with the existing initiatives, one of the program's core functions should be the provision of "one-stop" permit review, allowing applicants to review their applications and any departmental requests with the relevant City staff members. Requests for appointments would be submitted in advance by existing or prospective business owners, either by phone, email, or via an online form on the City's website, along with information about their needs and questions. This will help ensure that city staff can invite and schedule any other partners such as Chamber, SCORE, or BBRC staffs that are available to join the meeting if relevant and necessary.

Issue a "Value Vestavia" challenge to all local businesses to switch from one external supplier (located outside the City) to one internal supplier (located inside the City).

"Buy local" campaigns are a very common, low cost program that many chambers of commerce initiate within their communities. These campaigns typically target consumers, encouraging them to patronize local retailers and restaurants. While such campaigns have occurred and continue to be marketed in Vestavia Hills, the "Value Vestavia" challenge should instead target local businesses, challenging them to identify at least one product or service that they currently purchase from a supplier outside of the City and switch to a local supplier. Although there is limited manufacturing and wholesale trade activity located in Vestavia Hills, there are clearly numerous local suppliers of professional services that could be utilized as local alternatives. These opportunities run the gamut from tax preparation services to landscaping/grounds maintenance and from legal services to catering.

The Chamber of Commerce membership database and other business directories, including business licenses, should be used to create a comprehensive, searchable database of all businesses in the region. The database should be categorized by type of service or product offering. Participants in the challenge could be given a decal, sticker, or small sign that they can display on their door, window, or in their office acknowledging that "We've Accepted the Challenge. Our Business Values Vestavia." An aggressive marketing campaign should be developed to promote the challenge, encourage participation, and communicate potential economic impact. Chamber staff and city officials should be available to help local businesses identify supplier alternatives and collect information from participating establishments regarding the estimated level of annual expenditure that is redirected within the city limits as a result of accepting the challenge. An estimate of total economic impact from the Value Vestavia challenge should be estimated roughly one year from the date that the challenge is issued.

Revise the City's existing Economic Development Incentive Policy such that it provides a broader range of targeted incentives and specific eligibility criteria for each incentive.

*"We need to create incentives for the **right** businesses..."*

-Online survey respondent

"I'd love to see tax breaks to make LEED building more attractive to both retail and homebuilders. The fantastic library proves that the know-how is there, so we need to make it a more accessible option."

-Online survey respondent

The City's existing Economic Development Incentive Policy, revised and adopted on September 12th, 2011, is a positive step towards providing competitive incentives for a variety of projects within the city limits but falls short in a number of areas. The policy mentions a few specific types of incentives that the City may consider offering, but does not formally outline the incentives that it is will make available. Similarly, the policy does not outline specific eligibility criteria for various incentives, but rather, provides a short list of community objectives that will be considered during the evaluation process as well as two general criteria for potential retail and commercial projects. The policy is advantageous to the City in that it allows for tremendous flexibility and a case-by-case evaluation. However, the current policy also places the City at a disadvantage as existing businesses and prospective new businesses do not have any clear information regarding which types of incentives, if any, they might be eligible for within the City of Vestavia Hills. Along these lines, regional and state partners such as the BBA and the ADO that often take the lead in prospect management have few guidelines regarding what kinds of local incentives a prospect may be eligible for in Vestavia Hills. Drafting a policy that provides more specific and clear eligibility guidelines for a well-defined set of incentives will be an important next step for the City's economic development policy.

The City should study best practice incentive policies from around the state and country and evaluate a variety of incentives that are commonly offered at the local level. The City should allow for the existing policy to be effective for one year, balancing the urgency to provide more specific criteria with sufficient time to review its effectiveness as written. Revisions should be made based on the findings of an initial review with local, regional, and state economic development partners. Eligibility requirements for incentives should be established to identify qualifying businesses (both new businesses and expanding, existing businesses). Such requirements are commonly based on job creation figures, investment levels, the type of business sector (defined by NAICS codes), and/or wage levels, among other criteria.

The City should attempt to align its incentives and eligibility requirements with its target business sectors when relevant. For example, retail rent subsidies and the recommended façade grants could be offered for qualifying retail establishments in targeted business districts (Retail Target). Small professional service establishments could be eligible for loans from a newly-established revolving loan fund (Professional and Technical Services Target). Site development assistance, infrastructure extension, and expedited permitting could be targeted to high-value projects (Corporate and Regional Headquarters Target). Other incentives should also be considered to help encourage development that aligns with community goals. This includes but is not limited to green building practices. Direct grants and density bonuses are examples of other incentives that are often available to projects meeting certain green building standards.

BEST PRACTICE: SAN MARCOS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES POLICY (SAN MARCOS, TX)

Support the development of a collaborative, regional business retention and expansion (BRE) program.

BACKGROUND: BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION (BRE)

Business retention and expansion (often referred to simply as “BRE”) is a collection of programs and services that economic development entities implement to help elevate the competitiveness of existing businesses, support expansion plans, alleviate burdens and barriers to competitiveness, and prevent them from relocating elsewhere. Numerous studies have shown that existing businesses within a community are responsible for between 60 and 80 percent of all new job creation. While ribbon-cutting ceremonies and corporate relocations often make headlines, existing businesses are typically fueling economic growth at a much higher pace than relocations. BRE programs attempt to identify ways in which the public, private, and non-profit sectors can help support business expansions and mitigate closures or reductions in employment. Communities that lack comprehensive and effective BRE programs are often too late; they will find that they could have helped an employer stay in business or remain competitive at its current location after the business has already decided to close or relocate.

BRE programs typically include a series of outreach efforts including but limited to site visits and interviews with executive leadership, telephone interviews, web-based surveys, and mail surveys. These visits and surveys are typically carried out by trained economic development practitioners. The method of outreach is typically tied to attributes of a firm such as revenues, number of employees, business sector, years in business, and other factors.

Site visits, interviews, and survey questionnaires typically seek to identify business and tax climate concerns; labor or training needs; regulatory concerns; financial needs; issues with permits, licenses, and local ordinances; physical infrastructure needs; and other points of concern. The feedback received from firms often helps to inform necessary changes to local regulations, legislative priorities, future infrastructure investments, and other strategic actions. Site visits, interviews, and survey questionnaires also seek to track a number of key attributes of firms in the community in order to develop and inform an “early warning system.” Such a system is used to identify firms that may be at at-risk of contraction or closure.

The degree to which local government staff typically engages with existing businesses through formal outreach varies tremendously. Many local governments simply do not have the financial resources to support such efforts while others find that chambers of commerce are more effective and efficient at BRE outreach given the inherent level of trust that the business community typically has in chambers of commerce. Still, some local governments are actively engaged in BRE outreach to better understand the needs, challenges, and risk factors facing employers in their community. In Greater Birmingham, staff capacity is currently expanding at the Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA) to support the development of a professionally-staffed regional existing business outreach program (Action 8.1 of Blueprint Birmingham). In accordance with Blueprint Birmingham recommendations, the BBA has recently hired a new Vice President of Business Retention and Expansion.

During initial meetings with representatives from the BBA, the City’s key public and private leadership, including the Chamber of Commerce, should work with BBA staff to evaluate the scale and scope of existing and planned outreach efforts within the region and the City. This assessment should examine a number of items including:

- ✓ Specific businesses within the City that have been engaged in previous or ongoing outreach efforts
- ✓ The frequency of contact with existing businesses
- ✓ The type of outreach employed (phone, survey, on-site visits, etc.)
- ✓ Status of pre-existing business contact databases

Once existing efforts have been evaluated, the City and the Chamber should work with the BBA and other relevant partners such as Alabama Power and the Jefferson County Office of Community and Economic Development to identify the best ways in which the City can support the establishment of a collaborative and effective regional business retention and expansion (BRE) program. As a component of this process, the City and Chamber should establish an agreement with the BBA to ensure that:

- ✓ Chamber leadership accompanies BBA staff on site visits to large employers, potentially joined by relevant City staff
- ✓ City and Chamber leadership meets with BBA staff in-person at least one each year to review input gathered from local and regional businesses via surveys and site visits, discuss their concerns, and identify any necessary policy responses
- ✓ City and Chamber leadership is available to meet in-person or via conference call to address any immediate concerns requiring expedient response from local government departments

In addition to the surveys and site visits that are led by the BBA and supported by the City and Chamber, the Chamber should consider developing quarterly “Business Issue Forums” whereby local businesses are invited to discuss common concerns related to a specific theme or issue. For example, transportation infrastructure, small business support services, state-level policy, local ordinances are examples of potential subjects that could be examined in these forums. Relevant BBA staff would be invited to attend and participate in these forums, ensuring that Vestavia Hills’ business owner have opportunities to broadly express concerns about issues of local and regional importance.

This comprehensive and collaborative effort will further strengthen the relationship between Vestavia Hills and the BBA while reinforcing that the City intends to be a regional leader in advancing proactive economic development programs and policies that are in support of a larger regional initiative.

This important initiative serves to:

- ✓ Mitigate reductions in force or business closures before they happen
- ✓ Increase understanding of barriers to expansion facing existing businesses and adjust government policies and procedures as necessary
- ✓ Improve private sector trust in and communication with local government
- ✓ Facilitate “growth from within”

Develop a new brand identity for Vestavia Hills that is informed by the City's vision.

“It would be nice to see (Vestavia Hills) have its own brand identity that doesn’t feel stale...something more vibrant and progressive.”

-Online survey respondent

The City’s current brand identity as displayed on its website is represented by the city seal and a tagline “A better place to live.” Color palettes and fonts used on the City’s website and throughout publications such as the Vestavia Hills Community News are inconsistent and there is no visible harmony with the brand identity of the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce or other community partners including the Board of Education.

Prior to developing a new economic development website and supportive marketing collateral, the City should hire a respected marketing and branding firm to develop a new community identity for the City that is based on the community’s new vision. This effort should include the development of a new logo, a preferred representation of the city seal, a new tagline, a well-defined color palette, a series of fonts, and other graphical elements that can help convey the City’s attractive attributes and community vision to both internal and external audiences. The City should then work with the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce to develop a complementary brand identity that supports economic development marketing efforts and contains specific messaging and graphical elements that are relevant to the existing and prospective business community.

Compile regional economic development marketing collateral and develop new, local collateral that is consistent with the City's new brand identity.

While most corporate site sectors, site selection consultants, and prospective firms will seek information about a community from its website and its partners’ websites, communities are often required to provide a rapid response to requests for information (RFIs) from prospective firms. In many cases, a state economic development entity - such as the ADO - is the first point of contact for a prospective business. As the search continues for specific sites, prospects are directed to regional (such as the BBA) and local (such as the Jefferson County Community and Economic Development Office) entities. Local governments are often engaged later in the process, but occasionally, they are a first point of contact and are frequently relied upon to provide community-specific information to state or regional entities responding to RFIs.

The City and Chamber should work with the BBA, ADO, EDPA, Alabama Power, and the full spectrum of state and regional partners in economic development to build a portfolio of marketing materials that can be posted online at the recommended new economic development website. This includes new collateral being developed by the BBA in accordance with Action 10.3 of Blueprint Birmingham. The City should then develop a few community-specific pieces of collateral that provide relevant information such as resident demographics, socioeconomic characteristics, K-12 education, labor market conditions, and business sector composition. This information should be posted in downloadable formats (PDF) that can be easily-printed by the City and its partners as necessary.

BEST PRACTICE: MARTINSVILLE-HENRY COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (MARTINSVILLE, VA)
BEST PRACTICE: RALEIGH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (RALEIGH, NC)

Create a new economic development webpage that is consistent with the City's new brand identity and effectively communicates necessary information to external audiences.

According to the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), roughly 80 percent of initial screenings for corporate relocations are now done via the internet. Corporate site selectors and consultants need to quickly and easily obtain current, reliable, and detailed information about a community. Accordingly, a community's economic development website should be highly informative, visually appealing, easy to navigate, and targeted at specific audiences. At present, the City's only targeted information for economic development, site selection, and prospective business audiences is limited to single webpage that is not featured prominently within the City's website. The page is currently insufficient; what limited information is available is outdated. The Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce website provides additional, complementary information covering community demographics, the City's business districts, and contact information for key resources. However, both websites do not provide the full spectrum of information that is expected by corporate site selectors, consultants, and other external audiences interested in development opportunities in Vestavia Hills. Simply put, Vestavia Hills needs to project a more positive and informative image to the outside world. The City should work with the Chamber of Commerce to develop an enhanced economic development webpage that is consistent with the recommended economic development brand identity, prominently positioned in the top-level navigation of the Chamber of Commerce's website, and prominently linked to on the City's website economic development webpage. Regional economic development partners should also be encouraged to include links to the new webpage. A compelling webpage will include the following features:

- ✓ Information in both digital (web-based) and downloadable (PDF) formats covering:
 - Economic trends
 - Demographic profiles
 - Workforce and higher education information
 - K-12 information and statistics
 - Key business costs
 - Tax profiles
 - Utility rate information
 - Information covering all available local and state economic development incentives
 - Retail surplus and leakage information
 - Physical and infrastructural assets
 - Quality of life features and assets
- ✓ Information on the region's and the City's target clusters
- ✓ Interactive tools such as searchable business directories and interactive site/property search portals
- ✓ Links to relevant partners in the community, economic, and workforce development fields
- ✓ Information covering, and links to, the recommended virtual Business Assistance Center (BAC)
- ✓ Links to all relevant local and regional strategic plans

BEST PRACTICE: CITY OF ARLINGTON, TEXAS

BEST PRACTICE: GREATER RICHMOND PARTNERSHIP, INC. (RICHMOND, VIRGINIA)

BEST PRACTICE: SIOUX FALLS DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION (SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA)



...charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly...

Our Vision

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Recommendations:

- ✓ Develop a façade grant program to improve aesthetic character throughout the City.
- ✓ Develop a collaborative neighborhood beautification program in partnership with neighborhood and homeowner associations.
- ✓ Consider expanding the Keep Vestavia Clean Committee to include "greening" initiatives.
- ✓ Create a mobile smartphone application that enhances the City's "Action Center."
- ✓ Challenge all households to "Go Green by 2015," making at least one voluntary investment in energy-efficiency by 2015.
- ✓ Establish a matching grant program for green investments made by business and property owners.
- ✓ Develop a green business certification for local businesses.
- ✓ Continually seek new ways to exhibit leadership in conservation efforts and sustainability initiatives.
- ✓ Evaluate the viability of developing a commercial recycling program.
- ✓ Establish an "Art for Adoption" program that encourages private sponsorship of public art projects.

Develop a façade grant program to improve aesthetic character throughout the City.

“If we want to compete with Mountain Brook and Homewood then we have to improve the overall appearance of our city.”

-Online survey respondent

Public input reflected a desire for coherent and integrated design standards, especially in relation to retail destinations. Façade improvement can not only elevate the attractiveness and value of the property undergoing improvements, but also surrounding properties. Incentivizing retail establishments and local businesses to adopt aesthetics in line with the community vision will enhance the shopping experience for local and nonlocal residents, while helping to establish greater pride in the built environment and develop a higher quality sense of place. A targeted façade grant program would enable business owners the ability to recoup expenses for updating their storefronts. Eligible projects could include masonry repairs, repair or installation of windows, signs and graphics, awnings, exterior lighting, and repainting, among other improvements. The City would be responsible for setting design guidelines, project criteria, timelines for project completion, and grant amounts. Such investments have the ability to catalyze tangible change within a short period of time. The City should set aside funds to support a pilot program, with a limited number of matching grants reaching a maximum award of \$2,500. After one year, the program’s utilization should be evaluated, along with its effectiveness in catalyzing aesthetic improvement and increasing the attractiveness of the City’s business districts.

Develop a collaborative neighborhood beautification grant program in partnership with neighborhood and homeowner associations.

Residents live foremost in their neighborhoods and the City’s residents are undoubtedly proud of their neighborhoods. The community is also passionate about community service, with many input participants expressing a desire for more opportunities to get involved in their community. A volunteer-supported neighborhood beautification program could leverage this interest in community service and pride in neighborhoods to create improved gateways to residential areas, greater aesthetic harmony between residential areas and adjacent business districts, and enhanced public spaces. A neighborhood beautification grant program would reward neighborhood and homeowners’ associations for working together to identify and raise money for local projects that improve a specific public or shared space. Projects can include landscape architecture for passive parks, planting shade trees, perennial or annual flowers, installing community benches or picnic tables, and maintaining medians. Typically, such programs will grant funds via a 1:1 matching formula, based on the money raised by the local association. The City should strive to publicize neighborhood accomplishments.

Beautification grant programs encourage more than aesthetics. Local neighborhood associations should be encouraged to reach out and form partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and other, surrounding neighborhood associations to discuss the type of image that they wish to project in hopes of creating a more uniform “look and feel.” The collaborative nature needed to submit a strong application for the program can support important dialogue between residents and the business community. “Vestavia Clean and Green” (see next recommendation) could support this initiative and help facilitate the aforementioned dialogue.

BEST PRACTICE: TULSA BEAUTIFICATION FOUNDATION, MATCHING GRANT PROGRAM (TULSA, OK)

Consider expanding the Keep Vestavia Clean Committee to include "greening" initiatives.

Founded in 2007, the Keep Vestavia Clean Committee has been an important resource in the fight to keep litter out of Vestavia Hills. Recognizing that clean-up is only a part of keeping Vestavia Hills a beautiful community, the City should consider expanding the scope of the committee to include greening, which includes planting and conserving trees. Protecting the urban canopy and landscape would complement the current efforts of clean-up, and may result in wider public participation.

An expanded scope of the Keep Vestavia Clean Committee could include organizing volunteer plantings, coordinating educational opportunities for students and adults, the creation of a tree adoption program, and the coordination of the recommended neighborhood beautification program. Early partnerships could include the many gardening clubs listed on the City website. The committee could reflect this change by becoming the Keep Vestavia Clean and Green Committee, or simply "Vestavia Clean and Green." The City should also evaluate the potential benefit of combining Keep Vestavia Clean Committee with the City's Beautification Board. The City has also considered the concept of developing a "sustainability committee." Alternatively, potential exists to create a new organization that captures the missions of Keep Vestavia Clean, the Beautification Board while extending this new organization's mission to encompass other sustainability initiatives recommended in this section of the Vision Plan. Ultimately, there should be a single coordinating entity for such efforts throughout the City.

BEST PRACTICE: TREES ATLANTA (ATLANTA, GA)

Create a mobile smartphone application that enhances the City's "Action Center."

The City's website currently contains a web-based form - the "Action Center" - whereby residents can submit information on a variety of concerns, from road conditions to drainage issues to neighbor complaints. This is certainly an admirable first-step in providing residents with an accessible method to report concerns to local government.

The proliferation of smart devices represents a new opportunity for interfaces between residents and local governments. Mobile, web-based services have been described as a key component in expanding "e-democracy," a term that refers to a growing trend of using online tools to foster public participation and strengthen public service delivery. Mobile websites and mobile applications ("apps") can be effective vehicles for real time communication between residents and City departments. The City should consider developing and launching an Action Center "app" that can be downloaded onto mobile smartphones. Such an app would allow users to relay real time information about a variety of concerns, from property damage/graffiti removal, dangerous potholes, downed trees and other non-emergency issues. Smartphones are a great platform as they contain both GPS and camera technology. Similar applications allow users to submit not only a written description of the problem, but also the specific coordinates and a photograph.

BEST PRACTICE: CITIZENS CONNECT APPLICATION (BOSTON, MA)

Challenge all households to "Go Green by 2015," making at least one voluntary investment in energy-efficiency by 2015.

Public input respondents felt that the future of Vestavia Hills should be synonymous with environmental stewardship. The public investment in the Vestavia Hills Library in the Forest is a clear indication that Vestavia Hills can be a sustainable and environmentally-friendly community, and that such initiatives are broadly supported by the community's residents.

In order to effect real change, the City should consider challenging homeowners to make energy-efficient investments, with a goal of 100 percent of Vestavia Hills households making at least one such investment by 2015. In order to help homeowners, the City should work with Alabama Power and other partners to identify and publicize qualified energy-efficient appliances, weatherization improvements, and other investments. Improvements can be as affordable as switching from incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs). The City of Denton, Texas publishes a 12-page booklet with environmental terminology and simple steps to become more sustainable. The City should consider a similar publication to help spur local involvement. To encourage participation, the City should consider developing a website where homeowners can register their purchases (with an option to remain anonymous). This website could also include GIS mapping, and could be used to facilitate a healthy competition between neighborhoods.

Establish a matching grant program for green investments made by business and property owners.

According to the U.S. Green Business Council, green buildings have higher occupancy rates and command higher average rents than the market average. As a component of its efforts to improve its office and commercial environments and increase participation in sustainability initiatives, the City should consider establishing a matching grant program for green investments and upgrades made by business and property owners. As many firms are looking to reduce carbon footprints and become environmentally-friendly, a grant program can ensure that green investments do not go unfunded while increasing the attractiveness of properties in the City to firms that seek energy-efficient space. If Vestavia Hills can be seen as a leader in green office space and sustainable development, it will be able to distinguish itself from its neighbors and better compete for environmentally-conscious firms. The City should study model programs from around the country, develop program guidelines and eligibility criteria, and publicize the program to property owners.

Develop a green business certification for local businesses.

Research shows that consumers react favorably to firms that have reputations for being green, and all things equal, would pay more for green products. However, without some sort of signal, it may be hard for consumers to reward green investments and sustainable businesses. The City should consider establishing a green business certification program, in order to recognize those businesses that incorporate sustainability initiatives into their business model and operations. Further, a certification program can spur businesses that may have not considered the benefits of sustainable practices, to pursue green investments. In order to avoid creating a specialized diagnostic tool, it is recommended the City and Chamber of Commerce work with a sustainable development nonprofit organization. Many Chambers of Commerce have partnered with the Institute for Sustainable Development's Green Plus program, which provides business-specific sustainability diagnostics, provides a personalized "how-to" guide to become more sustainable, links businesses through networks and mentorships, and recognizes green accomplishments through certification. Born out of the Research Triangle in North Carolina, the Institute is recognized as a leader in the field of green certification, and is backed by partners such as the American Chamber of Commerce Executives and Duke University.

BEST PRACTICE: INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, GREEN PLUS CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
BEST PRACTICE: ST. LOUIS GREEN BUSINESS CHALLENGE (ST. LOUIS, MO)

Continually seek new ways to exhibit leadership in conservation efforts and sustainability initiatives.

In support of the community's vision, the City should demonstrate to existing and potential new residents and businesses that government is continually seeking to identify new ways to conserve energy and create more environmentally-friendly facilities. The City has conducted energy and water audits in recent years and has evaluated the cost-effectiveness of transitioning certain City vehicles to flex-fuel and/or electric vehicles. The City should continue to conduct such audits on existing facilities and publicize the results. Upgrades to existing facilities should be made if savings are significant. Partners for efficiency audits could include the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) and Alabama Power. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs administers the Local Government Energy Loan Program, which provides zero-interest loans up to \$350,000 for energy efficiency improvements, energy audits, and retrofits of buildings. Alabama Power also offers special energy-saving programs that could help the City with demand-side management.

The City of Vestavia Hills has already gained positive press in recent years with the opening of Alabama's first E-85 ethanol and B20 biofuels station on Highway 31. Neighboring Hoover has received national attention for its flex-fuel fleet, has developed its own biodiesel recycling facility and program, wood waste conversion program, and is currently working to develop an algae-to-energy plant at the Inverness Wastewater Treatment Plant. The City of Vestavia Hills could reach out to its neighbor to determine if collaborative efforts are possible and mutually-beneficial. One such effort could be the expansion of Hoover's vegetable oil and wood waste conversion programs to include Vestavia Hills residents and businesses in exchange for shared access to alternative fuels supporting GM flex-fuel vehicles.

Evaluate the viability of developing a commercial recycling program.

The City currently contracts with Allied Waste Services for household recycling services. However, businesses interested in recycling do not have any "curbside" service and must haul their recyclables to a nearby recycling center. The City should reach out to representatives at Allied Waste Services to evaluate the cost associated with developing a commercial recycling program. Many communities and their providers on contracted recycling services develop customized, collaborative programs with individual establishments, while others develop eligibility criteria for program participation. Eligibility is typically tied to the amount of recyclable waste generated in a specified period. Occasionally, neighboring businesses within a specific development (retail or office) join together to ensure that when combined their business are eligible for recycling pickup. Some programs charge small fees to cover the cost of initial site visits by recycling service representatives who help business understand their waste, recycling potential, and program limitations.

Establish an "Art for Adoption" program that encourages private sponsorship of public art projects.

Public art can be an integral component in place-making, as it stimulates community interaction, distinguishes one community from another, and elevates the current aesthetic. Public art can appear in just about any form. Everyday objects such as public benches, bike racks, and garbage cans can be transformed into aesthetically pleasing artwork. Many cities have worked with businesses and local artists to put up identical sculptures, but painted differently, throughout the city. Others have supported the proliferation of murals in their downtowns, while some have simply supported the construction of unique sculptures in public spaces.

Public input respondents made it clear that the current "look and feel" of certain areas, including US-31, fail to reflect aesthetic values held by the community. The City should look to develop a program that encourages private businesses and individuals to sponsor public art projects. Such projects could be targeted at the gateways to the City, including lower US-31. The City could issue requests for proposals (RFPs) for local artists and sculptors from Vestavia Hills and the surrounding Greater Birmingham region to submit proposals, including cost estimates and preliminary renderings/sketches, for public art projects. Artists and sculptors should be informed that their work will be featured prominently throughout the City along with name recognition, encouraging them to submit affordable cost estimates for their work. Submissions should be publicized on the City's website in connection with a campaign to solicit private (business and resident) sponsors for specific projects. Once a sponsor is identified, the City should work with the artist and sponsor to evaluate a variety of locations that the City has pre-identified as desirable areas for public art.

The City could look to partner with the Vestavia Hills Art Association, art classes at Vestavia Hills High School, and other local and regional art associations to encourage submissions and market the initiative. Such collaboration would certainly spur widespread interest. Sponsors should be honored in a variety of ways, including plaques by the artwork, recognition in community newsletters, and on print and web-based marketing collateral/webpages promoting the initiative.



...unified and proud...

Our Vision

*“The City of Vestavia Hills will be a fiscally-prosperous and sustainable community, supported by proactive economic development programs and policies. Together, we will strive to maintain a charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly community that is **unified and proud** of its superior education system, walkable neighborhoods, and thriving, mixed-use business districts.”*

Recommendations:

- ✓ Expand local volunteer opportunities and coordinating capacity.
- ✓ Develop annual, community-wide service projects that seek to energize and mobilize the City's residents and businesses behind a common goal.
- ✓ Issue a community-wide giving challenge to support specific *Vision Plan* components.
- ✓ Develop and market new events that support community gathering.
- ✓ Showcase the appeal of Vestavia Hills to young professionals and families by partnering with regional young professional organizations to host events within the City.
- ✓ Launch an annual half-marathon as a component of the “Run for the Hills” race series with a course that connects each of the three primary areas of City - Liberty Park, Cahaba Heights, and "Vestavia Proper."
- ✓ Build a community garden at McCallum Park.

Expand local volunteer opportunities and coordinating capacity.

The physical separation of “Vestavia Proper”, Cahaba Heights, and Liberty Park is a feature of Vestavia Hills that has divided residents. Some public respondents said that residents tend to primarily identify with their section of the City, rather than with the City itself. A few respondents even noted that this separation was the greatest challenge facing the City. In order to unite behind a new vision, the City must pursue unifying actions that tie the community together.

Civic involvement through volunteering is a great way to bring people together, especially those who may not encounter each other in their daily activities, for a common cause. The City should work to support local volunteer opportunities and coordinating capacity in order to build a Vestavia Hills-centric awareness. Vestavia Hills has many organizations that focus on civic engagement and giving back to the community. The City should work with its various service-driven organizations to establish a clearinghouse for volunteer activities in Vestavia Hills, including a centralized web-based inventory of volunteer opportunities. One Vestavia, through its Volunteer Vestavia Hills initiative, connects local volunteers to organizations, causes, and individuals in need of help and could potentially take the lead as this new clearinghouse. New efforts to develop an interactive database of volunteer opportunities and volunteer teams could result in renewed interest and ease of participation. Other service organization partners include but are not limited to Vestavia Hills Young Professionals, Vestavia Hills Civitan, and Leadership Vestavia Hills, among many others. The ultimate goal is to provide structure and coordination between such entities to identify operational and organizing efficiencies in support of other volunteer-led actions within the *Vision Plan*.

Develop annual, community-wide service projects that seek to energize and mobilize the City's residents and businesses behind a common goal.

“Once a person lives in and gets involved in this community, it is apparent that it is perfect for families...”

-Online survey respondent

An annual City-sponsored volunteer event can catalyze civic involvement, especially for those who may not be able to get involved on a more frequent basis. The City utilize a web-based system to solicit ideas for annual projects and establish a voting window whereby residents and business can vote on which project they think is most valuable. A service such as MindMixer – an online “town hall” for sharing and voting on community ideas – could be a great forum for spurring community buy-in and participation. Other online tools for gathering ideas and voting include IdeaScale and UserVoice. Residents and businesses should also be directed to a web-based form where they can sign up and commit to the project. Community voting and sign-up forms should be centralized on the recommended new volunteer clearinghouse website (see previous recommendation). Efforts should be made to schedule the annual project on a weekend to maximize participation of residents of all ages.

The goal of the annual service event should include getting residents to volunteer in areas of the City outside their neighborhood of residence. A variation could include identifying three or four service projects, one located in various sections of the City, with volunteers committed to projects outside their area of residence.

Issue a community-wide giving challenge - "Invest inVestavia" - to support specific *Vision Plan* components.

The City should consider leveraging past successes with public giving campaigns to help fund the implementation of specific *Vision Plan* components. Transparency and community-ownership of the campaign is crucial. Using an online platform to solicit, advertise, and track community donations is recommended. The City should evaluate different mechanisms for such a public campaign. However, integration with social media is certainly recommended, as applications such as Facebook and Twitter can be excellent platforms for raising donations. Birmingham-based BBVA Compass currently supports a service called SmartyPig that helps individuals save money for certain goals, tracks progress, and allows the saver to solicit funds from others via social media. The City should consider reaching out to BBVA Compass and SmartyPig to customize the platform for community-giving. The giving campaign could be branded as "Invest inVestavia." A discretionary fund allowing monies to be applied to any initiative could be developed, along with targeted funds to support specific recommendations such as a community garden fund, sidewalks fund, festivals fund, etc.

Develop and market new events that support community gathering.

"(We) need more community events that bring people together. There is no sense of community."

-Online survey respondent

Vestavia Hills is well known for the month-long Dogwood Festival and the I Love America Summer Celebration Series is currently in its 30th year. However, many public input respondents said that more events and festivals would be welcome additions. Such events would also allow the business community more sponsorship opportunities. Public input respondents suggested new events could also include picnics, "date nights" for adults (fundraisers and general gatherings at local restaurants), cultural and diversity celebrations, pop-up outdoor dining events, a cooking contest, a homecoming parade, a "We Love Vestavia Hills" day, and holiday events. Further, respondents indicated that events should be better publicized across the community. The City should support development of multi-faceted marketing campaigns for big events. Such campaigns could include Facebook and Twitter messages, updates to the City events calendar, sending flyers to businesses to print and post, engaging local blogs such as CommunicateVestaviaHills.org, and online news sources such as *Over the Mountain Journal*.

Potential new events include:

- ✓ **Tour of Vestavia Hills:** the City could host a cycling event that toured the three parts of the City.
- ✓ **Over the Mountain Music Festival:** the City could sponsor a music festival trading on the cachet of 'Over the Mountain.' Communities such as Mountain Brook and Homewood could be co-sponsors.
- ✓ **Screen on the Green:** the City could sponsor a weekly series of free movies in a designated public space
- ✓ **Vestavia Hills Blazin' Hot Wing Ding Festival:** put forth by the Vestavia Hills Leadership class of 2010-2011, the City should support the implementation of the festival.
- ✓ **Vestavia Block Party:** each neighborhood could designate a street that could be blocked off to through traffic and encourage residents to celebrate their neighborhood. No event permits would be required.

Launch an annual half-marathon as a component of the "Run for the Hills" race series with a course that connects each of the three primary areas of City - Liberty Park, Cahaba Heights, and "Vestavia Proper."

Currently, Vestavia Hills lacks a large-scale unifying event that celebrates both the entire city and the distinct districts that constitute it. The City has a few events and festivals that but these are largely siloed in a single location in a certain part of the City. Residents expressed a desire throughout the stakeholder input process to find a way to debunk the illusion that Liberty Park, Cahaba Heights, and "Vestavia Proper" (also known as "Old Vestavia") are separated by such vast distances that there is no possible way to craft a unified identity.

Road races have become major community events in recent years, and can range in scale from local 5K benefit races to internationally competitive marathons. Often, the races are a vehicle for holding a much broader festival or event that connects with runners and non-runners alike. The City currently hosts the annual Rotary-sponsored "Run for the Hills" race series including a 5K, 10K, and 1-mile fun run. However, the race routes are concentrated in "Vestavia Proper." The running of a foot race through its dispersed zones could be the symbolic gesture of connectedness that underpins a broader (perhaps weekend-long) community celebration. The expanded "Run for the Hills" race series could be funded by corporate sponsors and race entry fees and staffed by volunteers. Each of the three zones could be incented to participate through zone-based competitions for: greatest number of registered runners; greatest number of corporate sponsors, and greatest number of volunteers. Residents may also enjoy other additions such a "dog run" or a cycling event.

Showcase the appeal of Vestavia Hills to young professionals and families by partnering with regional young professional organizations to host events within the City.

Many public input respondents said that Vestavia Hills may be challenged to attract and retain young professionals (YPs). Further, it is clear that this demographic is an important piece of the vision plan and they should not be left out of strategic efforts. In order to elevate the appeal of Vestavia Hills to young professionals, the City should leverage the existing young professionals as ambassadors of the City to other young professionals in the region.

The Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce Young Professionals Committee engages young professionals in networking, service, and mentorship. The City should support this organization as a key component in the effort to attract and retain young talent. A focused effort to connect this Committee and young professionals in Vestavia Hills with YP Birmingham and the YP Roundtable (affiliated with the BBA) could open up opportunities for increased exposure. The Committee should work with regional YP organizations to strengthen relationships and co-host young professional events in Vestavia Hills. This includes but is not limited to social events, business networking events, political/issue forums, and other types of gatherings. This initiative is supportive of Action 3.2 in Blueprint Birmingham, which recommends a variety of methods to better engage young professionals in support of positive regional change.

BEST PRACTICE: FUEL MILWAUKEE (MILWAUKEE, WI)

Build a community garden at McCallum Park.

The active interest in gardening and planting is evident in Vestavia Hills through the many gardening clubs and the masterful work of the Vestavia Hills Men's Garden Club on display at US-31 and Shades Crest Road. Expanding the reach of gardening knowledge and the viability of urban agriculture should be an initiative supported by the City. Community gardens can be effective means of getting citizens together as well as spurring educational initiatives, especially within schools.

The City should consider setting up a Community Garden in McCallum Park. The proximity of the park to Vestavia Hills High School would make it a natural educational asset. Workshops and classes could include water conservation in the garden, seasonal gardening, and other botany and biology lessons. The Community Garden would not require much City maintenance, as a volunteer board would be responsible for administering the distribution of plots and general upkeep. Resident gardeners would be responsible for planting and caring for their plots. Guidelines for expectations and weekly involvement could be included, to make sure residents are active partners in the garden. If McCallum Park is determined to be a sub-optimal location, an effort should be made to identify alternative locations in partnership with neighborhood associations, businesses, and gardening clubs.

BEST PRACTICE: HARVEST FARM COMMUNITY GARDEN (SUWANEE, GA)



...superior education system...

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Recommendations:

- ✓ Expand opportunities for resident, business, and student input in the development of priorities for the Board of Education’s next Strategic Plan.
- ✓ Conduct a capacity assessment and develop a capital improvement plan to ensure that facilities can adequately accommodate any future growth in enrollments.
- ✓ Seek alternative funding solutions to support the expansion of fine arts curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities.
- ✓ Develop a summer internship program that challenges local businesses to establish paid and unpaid summer internship opportunities for rising seniors with the goal of connecting all interested and qualified rising seniors with a summer internship.
- ✓ Exhibit regional leadership by assisting the Birmingham Business Alliance in the development of the Birmingham Regional Education Partnership.
- ✓ Develop a student business incubator to provide high school students with opportunities to start and manage their own business.

Consider expanding opportunities for community input in the development of priorities for the Board of Education's next Strategic Plan.

The Vestavia Hills Board of Education's current five-year strategic plan runs from 2007 - 2012. In past efforts, the Board has admirably reached out to a broad group of educators, administrators, parents, and community leaders to provide guidance in the form of a Strategic Planning Team. In addition to this Strategic Planning Team, the Board leveraged input from volunteer teams that have helped create initial lists of actions to be considered by the Strategic Planning Team. As the Board begins preparations for a new planning cycle running from 2013 - 2018, it may be necessary to identify new methods to solicit resident and business input regarding the school system's priorities in the years ahead.

The Board should evaluate past strategic planning processes, identifying successful elements of the process that should be preserved while searching for ways to improve the process and gather even greater input from the community. The Board's primary focus should be the maintenance of existing, successful methods for soliciting community input. If the Board determines that additional community outreach would be beneficial, it could consider deploying web-based surveys that target distinct audiences, including but not necessarily limited to parents, business owners, current students, and recent graduates. These survey results could be used by the aforementioned volunteer teams to gain a basic understanding of the perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges facing the school system, providing them with a common starting point and resource for developing initial recommendations. Web-based tools could also be used to gather community feedback on draft recommendations, allowing the entire community to have an opportunity to shape the future of the school system. In addition to resident input, the City should also reach out to the Birmingham Business Alliance (BBA) to seek regional input and align the Board's Strategic Plan with regional education and talent development objectives.

Conduct a Capacity Assessment and develop a Capital Improvement Plan to ensure that facilities can adequately accommodate any future growth in enrollments.

Multiple input participants expressed concerns that future population growth could lead to overcrowding, particularly at Vestavia Hills High School. School capacity was the most frequently mentioned concern regarding the school system by online survey respondents. In order for the Board of Education to adequately plan for potential growth and make adjustment to faculty and facility capacity as necessary, it will need access to reliable demographic forecasts.

The Board of Education should conduct a Capacity Assessment to ensure that it possess a comprehensive understanding of projected population growth and potential demographic changes, as well as their impact on capacity at the City's schools. If additional physical capacity is determined to be necessary within the next ten years, the Board should consider adequate measures to develop such capacity as a component of a Capital Improvement Plan.

Seek alternative funding solutions to support the expansion of fine arts curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities.

Feedback included in the Board of Education's 2009 Strategic Plan Update identified a number of potential challenges associated with the provision of fine arts curriculum throughout the school system. Fine arts teachers were reported to have full schedules and large student loads, and most schools lacked additional space to accommodate new teachers should funding be available. In addition there are concerns that state academic requirements currently limit the amount of instruction that can be devoted to participation in the fine arts. The Board's current strategic plan addressed these challenges by altering class schedules within middle school while also expanding the number of field trips related to fine arts. If consistent with community input gathered during the strategic planning process, the Board should consider a variety of options to support fine arts expansion within the next Strategic Plan. Potential solutions and funding mechanisms include but are not limited to:

- ✓ The development of partnerships with area colleges and universities to leverage college students, including but not limited to students at the UAB School of Education, Samford University School of Education and Professional Studies, and the Montevallo College of Education, as instructors and supervisors of after-school fine arts clubs.
- ✓ Utilize the recommended "Invest InVestavia" challenge and new community fundraising technology to raise funds for the support of various fine arts programs.
- ✓ Publicize the Partners in Education program and create new ways to recognize the Partners as a component of an initiative to identify new Partners interested in supporting fine arts programs.
- ✓ Pursue grant opportunities at the federal and state level to support new programs.

Develop a summer internship program that challenges local businesses to establish paid and unpaid summer internship opportunities for rising seniors with the goal of connecting all interested and qualified rising seniors with a summer internship.

While high school students have a variety of plans during the summer entering their senior year, this is often the age when many teenagers begin looking for their first job. Similarly, many students are beginning to form strong interests in certain studies and have already begun to consider certain career paths that their higher education pursuits and/or alternative post-graduate plans can support. The Board of Education could work with the City and the Chamber of Commerce to develop a comprehensive outreach program that challenges the local business community to develop paid and unpaid summer internship and employment opportunities for rising high school seniors. As a component of the program, students could develop "résumés" that include a mission statement, specific interests, and relevant skills that could provide useful to an employer. Potential employers could also be invited to and encouraged to participate in an internship fair that allows rising seniors to meet with potential employers, share their interests, and begin establishing contacts. The program could be supported by a website that includes a portal where employers can upload internship opportunities and students can upload their

“résumés.” Ultimately, the goal of the program is to provide all interested students with a meaningful experience that helps them further explore potential career paths.

Exhibit regional leadership by assisting the Birmingham Business Alliance in the development of the Birmingham Regional Education Partnership.

“Cooperation – Hoover, Vestavia, Mountain Brook, Homewood, Trussville, Gardendale, etc. – none can stand on their own and they have to work together. The opportunities and problems of the communities do not respect their borders.”

-Online survey respondent

Throughout the Blueprint Birmingham strategic planning process, residents, businesses, and educators frequently expressed frustration with the relative lack of regional collaboration on a wide variety of issues, including public education. As a result, it was recommended that the BBA facilitate the establishment of a Birmingham Regional Education Partnership to discuss strategies to improve cohesion, communication, coordination, and program development among the region’s public school districts. The Partnership would maintain a database of best practice program from around the region and the nation, develop educational assessments and reports on issues impacting school performance, and host an annual Birmingham Regional Education Summit to help facilitate collaborative solutions. The initial planning associated with creating the Partnership was a first year priority in 2011.

This is yet another example where the City of Vestavia Hills can serve as a regional leader, take proactive steps in helping advance an initiative of importance to the larger region, and complement a regional perspective in strategic planning. Key community leadership from the City, the school system, and the business community should meet with the Director of Workforce Development at the BBA to inform them of the Board of Education’s upcoming strategic planning cycle, the outcomes of this visioning process, and to express an interest in helping to launch the Birmingham Regional Education Partnership. The City should identify one or two individuals that are interested in and qualified to lead such a regional effort, while also offering to host the first annual Birmingham Regional Education Summit.

Develop a student business incubator to support entrepreneurship education and provide high school students with opportunities to start and manage their own business.

Student business incubators are becoming increasingly popular in two-year and four-year colleges and universities as higher education institutions seek to better integrate entrepreneurship education and provide students with opportunities to gain first-hand experience in all facets of starting, growing, and maintaining a business. However, their existence within high schools is relatively limited but occasionally found within charter schools that focus on leadership and entrepreneurship and have considerably greater flexibility in terms of curriculum and instruction. The development of a student business incubator as a component of a broader entrepreneurship education curriculum would be a bold move for one of the state’s - and nation’s - leading school systems. The Board should evaluate a model with two core components, education and incubation, whereby entrepreneurship education is continually integrated into classrooms during the school year and the student business incubator operates as a paid summer program.

The City and the Board of Education should evaluate a variety of instructional tools to integrate entrepreneurship education into curriculum at Vestavia Hills High School, including but not limited to the National Federation of Independent Business Entrepreneur-in-the-Classroom curriculum and the Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education's National Content Standards.

The City and the Board should consider reaching out to business schools at area colleges and universities to evaluate their interest in a variety of partnerships to support the establishment and maintenance of student business incubator. Potential opportunities include but are not limited to:

- ✓ In-kind contribution of classroom or office space to serve as the physical location of the "student incubator" during summer hours
- ✓ Leveraging college and university professors as guest speakers and lecturers on the principles of small business management, and as reviewers of student business plans
- ✓ Connecting college and university students with high school students as instructors, teaching assistants, and/or mentors

In addition to outreach to higher education institutions, outreach to local business owners could gauge their interest and willingness to support a variety of other partnership opportunities, including but not limited to:

- ✓ Serving as corporate sponsors of the summer incubation program
- ✓ Reviewing student business plans and providing feedback
- ✓ Serving as mentors and instructors during the summer incubation program

Other partnership opportunities exist with organizations such as the Innovation Depot, the Birmingham Business Alliance, the Birmingham SCORE chapter, and other regional providers of small business assistance that could potentially provide resource and financial support for the program in a variety of ways.



...walkable neighborhoods...

Our Vision

*“The City of Vestavia Hills will be a fiscally-prosperous and sustainable community, supported by proactive economic development programs and policies. Together, we will strive to maintain a charming, attractive, and environmentally-friendly community that is unified and proud of its superior education system, **walkable neighborhoods**, and thriving, mixed-use business districts.”*

Recommendations:

- ✓ Aggressively implement the Regional Walkway Master Plan and launch a complementary “Vestavia by Foot” campaign.
- ✓ Make the Vestavia Hills Sidewalk Master Plan more accessible to the public.
- ✓ Adopt a Complete Streets Policy.
- ✓ Identify parcels desirable for passive, neighborhood parks and develop a strategy for land acquisition and new park development.
- ✓ Initiate the development and programming of Activity District Planning Sessions.
- ✓ Educate residents about various housing types, and densities, and their impact on community character, school capacity, and other issues of concern to residents.
- ✓ Pursue designation as a World Health Organization (WHO) “Age-Friendly City.”

Aggressively implement the Regional Walkway Master Plan and launch a complementary “Vestavia by Foot” campaign.

The City has already committed significant resources to improving and expanding its pedestrian environment. In conjunction with the last Comprehensive Plan update in 2003, the City developed a Regional Walkway Master Plan that identified and ranked priority sidewalks and greenways to be either reinforced or built. The final plan envisioned a network of sidewalks and trails connecting the major activity zones, business districts, and natural resources throughout the City. Each of the three distinct zones within the City - “Vestavia Proper” (or “Old Vestavia”), Cahaba Heights, and Liberty Park - was to be served by self-contained pedestrian networks as well as regional trails between.

With much of the planning legwork already done, the City should focus its efforts on seeing the plan’s recommendations realized. This could be accomplished by formally launching a capital and marketing campaign called “Vestavia by Foot.” This campaign would serve as the fundraising mechanism for development and maintenance of pedestrian infrastructure and the marketing entity for the City’s assets. Even in a constrained fiscal environment, there are potential partnering opportunities in the City and region to see this vision fulfilled. Potential partnering organizations include: Keep Vestavia Clean (recommended “Keep Vestavia Clean and Green”), Boy Scouts, Rotary, Cahaba River Society, Lakeshore Foundation, Vestavia Hills City Schools Foundation, Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, Jefferson County, and the Vestavia Hills Beautification Board.

Developments since the creation of the original Regional Walkway Master plan further support a renewed focus on better connecting the region with walking trails. The Vestavia Hills Library in the Forest on Hwy. 31 and the Boulder Canyon Nature Trail that connects it to Vestavia Hills Elementary Central are substantial new investments in the urban fabric of the City. A renewed effort to build components of the Master Plan could help activate other key assets in the City. Particularly valuable opportunities include extending the Boulder Canyon Nature Trail from its terminus at Vestavia Hills Elementary Central to Vestavia Hills High School and McCallum Park and connecting Cahaba Heights to Liberty Park with a nature trail along the Cahaba River.

Realizing the Regional Walkway Master Plan will require a variety of strategic assets:

- ✓ Branding: Creating a visible identity for the effort.
- ✓ Signage and wayfinding: Developing and installing a comprehensive set of visual cues and markers to direct pedestrians and highlight distinct districts and routes throughout the City.
- ✓ Outdoor exercise equipment: Installing fixed exercise equipment in appropriate locations to encourage healthy activities.
- ✓ Pocket parks: Developing passive recreational areas along sidewalks and trails.

Make the Vestavia Hills Sidewalk Master Plan more accessible to the public.

Many residents of Vestavia Hills are likely unaware that the City has clear vision and action plan for adding sidewalk infrastructure throughout the City. The City's website indicates that residents have two methods for becoming aware of sidewalk developments: 1) receiving a notice in the mail two weeks prior to the beginning of construction in their area, or 2) visiting City Hall to view the hard copy. There is no digital version posted to the City's website. Many input participants were unaware that the document exists. To make the document more accessible to the public, the City should:

- ✓ Create a dedicated page on its website for strategic planning documents.
- ✓ Post a viewable and downloadable version of the Sidewalk Master Plan document alongside other key planning documents like the Comprehensive Plan and the Cahaba Heights Community Plan.
- ✓ Maintain an online, interactive map of sidewalk construction progress to show where sidewalks are planned, under construction, and completed. Include pictures and text to add context.
- ✓ Ensure that the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham posts a digital copy of the plan on their Community Planning webpage.

Adopt a Complete Streets Policy.

While it is admirable that the City has a Sidewalk Master Plan on record, it is woefully underserved by any non-automobile infrastructure, including transit, bicycle, and pedestrian. It is fiscally and politically implausible to undertake complete distinct planning and construction efforts for each possible mode of travel in the City.

A primary medium for local transportation planning in Vestavia Hills is the City's Master Plan. The policies, priorities, and projects of the Plan's transportation section are what guide investment decisions and are integrated into the Regional Planning Commission's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). Many municipalities have embraced an approach to transportation planning known as "complete streets," which has been promulgated by the National Complete Streets Coalition. The movement for complete streets is driven by the notion that streets are a vital part of the everyday experience for everyone - walkers, bicyclists, drivers, bus riders, wheelchair-bound persons, elderly people, and young people - and that streets should be designed and operated for the benefit of all. Complete Streets are rights-of-way in which travelers of all modes are comfortable and safe. As part of the City's next comprehensive planning cycle, it should adopt a Complete Streets policy for all new and retrofit roadwork in the City. Because there are multiple agencies and ownerships involved across the City's streetscapes, an effort should be made to make the policy's application as broad as possible. Specific actions should include:

- ✓ Inserting a Complete Streets subsection in the Transportation section of the Master Plan.
- ✓ Codifying Complete Streets requirements into the City's subdivision regulations.
- ✓ Working with the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham to update the Transportation Improvement Program project list to reflect Complete Streets approaches.

Identify parcels desirable for passive, neighborhood parks and develop a strategy for land acquisition and new park development.

“We need more walkable parks instead of destination parks that you have to drive to...”

-Online survey respondent

Residents strongly indicated a need for additional small, passive parks throughout Vestavia Hills. Recognizing that the City has an enviable supply of programmed, athletic ball fields in its public parks and educational properties, residents suggested that the City focus future green space development efforts on creating natural, informal park spaces. Parks are valuable pieces of the urban fabric, as they increase nearby property values, serve as a “third place” in which residents can socialize, and can provide valuable environmental services such as filtering runoff, storing water, and improving air quality. They also contribute to a sense of place that creates positive identification and neighborhood pride in residents.

Vestavia Hills should lead the charge in a renewed effort to provide passive park spaces in high-value locations. The first steps in developing these assets are to:

Build an inventory of potential park sites from existing plans and property records. The Cahaba Heights Community Plan proposes several locations for new park development. The Vestavia Hills Master Plan is less specific, but nonetheless charges leaders to develop new park spaces throughout the City. Parcel-level inventory will need to be built by leveraging the geographic information systems (GIS) capacity at the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, using property tax records and land suitability analysis.

Develop a long-term mechanism for park development. While passive parks are not necessarily expensive to construct - they can range in form from untended “urban wilds” to heavily landscaped gardens - they do require land and some construction and maintenance. Some mechanisms for park development include:

- ✓ Targeted land acquisition: The City could simply selectively acquire parcels as necessary and available with support from a long-term plan to include allocations of funds in future budgets when fiscal conditions improve.
- ✓ Use an independent foundation for the development of new parks. This could be accomplished by expanding the scope of the recommended “Vestavia Clean and Green” or launching a new organization charged with overseeing the planning, fundraising, and development of new parks in the City.
- ✓ Draft a referendum for an additional tax to raise capital for new park space. Oversee the planning and development of new parks from within the Vestavia Hills Parks and Recreation Department. With combined state and local sales tax of nine percent in the City, this option could meet resistance.
- ✓ Provide free land to neighborhood associations and let them be responsible for planning and development of parks that reflect their own wishes.

Solicit resident feedback on desired park attributes. Residents know what features their neighborhoods are missing and will be the best possible resource for planning new parks. In some areas, residents may desire to see a new dog park; in others, a nature trail or water feature.

Create a Vestavia Hills Green Space Plan. The City's Master Plan and the Cahaba Heights Community Plan offer little guidance as to the City's comprehensive vision for green space. Many successful communities recognize how great an effect green space has on quality of life and competitiveness, and create detailed green space plans. Vestavia Hills should build off of its parcel inventory and resident feedback to craft a visionary and aggressive strategy for providing its residents great exposure to the outdoors.

Initiate the development and programming of Activity District Planning Sessions.

As a city lacking a singular downtown district, Vestavia Hills will have to proactively create the walkable environments that its residents have expressed a desire to see. While the City's Master Plan includes a Future Land Use map and accompanying Future Growth Concept map that indicate where these areas of mixed-use density should exist, there is no proactive mechanism for carrying the concepts further. Communities have supported more density, multiple transportation modes, and a mix of uses in a variety of ways, such as establishing grant programs that incentivize the development of site-specific master plans or convening design charrettes (planning sessions) for strategic sites. Vestavia Hills, for example, organized a Highway 31 South Charrette in 2003. Any person or group should be eligible to participate in developing the vision for the City's activity centers and involved themselves in planning activities. Community-generated concepts can be ratified as part of the zoning code or development guidelines.

The City of Vestavia Hills should establish a series of Activity District Planning Sessions to facilitate the planning and design of development concepts for areas identified in as existing or desired activity in the City. Activity Districts should include the recommended transit oriented development (TOD) zones along Highway 31, the Cahaba Heights community, Rocky Ridge, Columbiana Road, and Cahaba River Road/Acton Road. The program should be initiated and overseen by the Planning and Zoning Commission, which is the City's planning authority. Sessions should be planned well in advanced and heavily publicized. Each one should focus on a single activity district, with the intent of envisioning bold design concepts for each one. The City would engage a local planning and design firm to facilitate each of the sessions and coordinate the final work product. Planning session materials can then be leveraged for future land use planning and to inform developers of projects that the community has identified as high-value.

Having such a program in place accomplishes multiple desirable outcomes: it engages a broader constituency in the creative process of place-making; it outsources the cost and time requirements of planning; and it communicates to real estate developers that the City is pro-development. It also helps Vestavia Hills communicate its aspirations for new and distinct activity centers as solidified in key planning documents, which are often obscure and inaccessible to the general public.

Educate residents about various housing types, and densities, and their impact on community character, school capacity, and other issues of concern to residents.

Input participants suggested that historical opposition to “high density” or “multi-family” development in the City is rooted in the fear that the accompanying increase in population will affect the ability of local schools to continue providing their students the same quality they have become known for throughout the state. While reservations about drastic population spikes are understandable, these concerns in Vestavia Hills are overblown given the range of development alternatives available. Many multi-family development types and price points do not attract households with children. For instance, condos and townhomes do not necessarily appeal to families that need more space, but they do appeal to young, professional workers, “empty nesters,” and retirees. These are the populations Vestavia Hills must appeal to in order to allow the economic diversification so badly needed.

As the Community Vision Plan is rolled out to the broader community, the desire of the City’s residents for “walkable” and “mixed use” spaces is sure to garner some attention, and perhaps some negative backlash. To help residents understand the effects of various housing types and price points on student population, Vestavia Hills must proactively educate its residents. This should be accomplished through digital materials and public forums. With the help of local developers and planning professionals, the City should publicize and host on its website a fact sheet about the issue. It should also allow for a public interface between concerned residents and knowledgeable developers so that questions may be sufficiently answered and issues further clarified.

Pursue designation as a World Health Organization (WHO) "Age-Friendly City."

Many community input participants expressed concerns that Vestavia Hills was not a highly attractive location for retirees, with many indicating that they intended to leave Vestavia Hills after their children finished high school. Much of this concern was tied to perceptions that property taxes are exorbitant but other concerns were also mentioned, including but not limited to a lack of senior-living environments, appealing amenities and services for seniors, and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. The World Health Organization (WHO) launched an initiative in the new millennium to build a global network of age-friendly cities, acknowledging that the global population over the age of 60 will double between 2005 and 2025, with many living in communities that have not been designed with their needs in mind. The City should work with the Vestavia Hills Senior Citizen Association to study the WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide, develop a plan to fulfill key objectives of the initiative, and apply for membership in the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities.



...thriving, mixed-use business districts...

Our Vision

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Recommendations:

- ✓ Implement the recommendations of the forthcoming US 31 Corridor Development Plan.
- ✓ Consider developing a citywide form-based zoning code.
- ✓ Continue to implement the Cahaba Heights Community Plan.
- ✓ Launch a neighborhood engagement pilot program in Cahaba Heights and adapt to other neighborhoods if successful, viable, and appropriate.
- ✓ Evaluate a variety of funding mechanisms to support targeted redevelopment.
- ✓ Consider hiring a retail analytics firm to conduct a retail matching and consumer profiling.
- ✓ Position Patchwork Farms and other high-value undeveloped land for its highest and best uses.

Implement the recommendations of the forthcoming US 31 Corridor Development Plan.

“The appearance of Highway 31 does not reflect our community favorably.”

“The Highway 31 corridor is looking worse... We need a plan desperately and the City leadership needs to take action.”

-Online survey respondents

In conjunction with the Vision Plan process, the City of Vestavia Hills is undertaking a corridor development study of U.S. Highway 31, conducted by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham. These two initiatives are complementary, with each supporting and informing the findings of the other. Broadly speaking, the visioning process is intended to define a comprehensive vision for the entire city, accompanied by the actions necessary to fulfill that vision, while the Highway 31 study is intended to reveal how that vision translates spatially within the context of Highway 31. The Highway 31 study will include valuable information about the City's inventory of commercial space, prime redevelopment opportunities, and key strategies to optimize existing assets.

The interconnectedness of the two processes is underscored by the tremendous level of input received from the community during this visioning process with regards to Highway 31. While this Vision Plan intentionally defers to the recommendations that will be outlined in the Highway 31 Corridor Development Study, the following desired attributes for Highway 31 garnered broad consensus among community input participants and should be integral concepts in the Highway 31 study:

Improve the “gateway to Vestavia Hills” at Lower 31 and I-65: The City's Comprehensive Plan recognizes multiple gateways and nodes along the Highway 31 spine. Residents were particularly attuned to the reality that, for many travelers, lower Highway 31 at I-65 is the entryway into the community and the first impression. There was a broad desire to see underutilized parcels brought to higher performance, vacant properties occupied, and the look and feel to be substantially upgraded. The City should focus redevelopment actions recommended throughout this report in this and other high-impact areas in the City.

Increase pedestrian-friendliness and improve walkability: As noted in the previous section, “walkability” has emerged as a key them for residents of Vestavia Hills. With neither density nor a substantial mix of uses, Highway 31 is in need of new development or heavy redevelopment in key locations to attain a walkable environment. The City should focus its redevelopment efforts in the three zones - lower, mid, and upper Highway 31 - identified as potential transit oriented development sites in the City's Comprehensive Plan.

Overcome floodplain challenges in Lower 31: The City's topography produces runoff that occasionally floods the lower portion of U.S. Highway 31, stunting growth and frightening away new investment dollars. If substantial redevelopment is to occur, the City will have to mitigate the investment risk in some way or make substantial investments of its own. Some progress has been made by clearing clogged culverts, but the perception remains that the area is prone to flooding.

Unify design aesthetics: The patchwork development pattern and perceived inconsistency in regulating signage has made many residents feel that the City lacks an attractive and recognizable design aesthetic along Highway 31. The strip-style suburban development also creates an impersonal, auto-centric feel to the corridor. The City should uniformly apply its Sign Code Ordinance and Landscape Guidelines throughout the corridor, and consider investing in a new signage and wayfinding system to provide a common design language.

Support infrastructure improvements: Maintaining right-of-way infrastructure - much less improving it - is a constant challenge facing local governments. Yet, survey respondents want to see new infrastructure improvements along Highway 31 commensurate with its status as a community gateway. One proven method for improving critical infrastructure is the creation of self-taxing business districts - known as Community Improvement Districts (CIDs) or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) - to fund additional work. These organizations are formed by a super-majority vote amongst business owners in a delineated geography. Once formed, they have the authority to tax all businesses within the district for the betterment of the local environment. Eligible expenditures include public safety, landscaping and beautification, infrastructure improvements, and others. Vestavia Hills should consider developing either a CID to encapsulate all of U.S. Highway 31's reach in Vestavia Hills - from top to bottom - or a series of CIDs in congruence with the Comprehensive Plan's recommendations for transit oriented development nodes.

Reuse or sale of city maintenance property: The City of Vestavia Hills owns a substantial parcel across from the new Library in the Forest on Highway 31, and currently uses the site as a fleet maintenance facility for City vehicles. This prime location makes the parcel ripe with redevelopment potential. Residents recognized the potential for higher use of this site and suggested that a new use be found or that it be sold to a developer.

Identify high-value parcels that are primed for redevelopment and incent owners to either develop or sell: The City should inventory its stock of redevelopable parcels and determine the highest-value targets for incentives. Short of purchasing property outright, the City could provide favorable tax incentives or expedite permitting to entice owners to further develop their land or consider alternate uses.

Consider relocating City Hall and utilizing new facilities as an anchor for mixed-use development: While not necessarily a consensus concept, multiple input participants suggested that the City Hall property be sold for private development and that it be moved to anchor a new civic complex. Some suggested Cahaba Heights was an appropriate location for the City's government complex, given its geographic centrality in the City and its somewhat more urban, walkable environment. Others wanted to see the fleet maintenance property on Highway 31 repurposed as the new government complex. With proximity to Wald Park, schools, and the new library, building a new complex on this site could reinforce an existing activity center.

Consider developing a citywide form-based zoning code.

The form-based code has become a transformative regulatory tool in recent years, replacing a land use-based zoning ordinance with one primarily designed to realize a preferred urban form. Different zones within a given jurisdiction will require varying building and public space forms. As such, a typical form-based code is composed of both a comprehensive, jurisdiction-wide plan or map and distinct standards for buildings and public spaces by zone. They are considered preferable by many because they are more legible for developers and provide a quick reference point when the appropriateness of certain development components is under consideration.

The City recently revamped its zoning code to help support more mixed-use and higher density development, but no property was actually rezoned in the process. In advance of its next comprehensive planning cycle, the City of Vestavia Hills should strongly consider a complete overhaul of its zoning ordinance, replacing its land use-based code with a form-based code. Doing so would address one of the greatest complaints about the City voiced by its

residents – many of its most visible districts seem haphazardly planned and lacking in design congruity or uniformity. The new code should reference the significant work already done in the Comprehensive Plan and Cahaba Heights Community Plan to identify the types of development appropriate for each of the City’s zones. Typically, form-based codes are most useful when a denser, walkable urban fabric is the desired development result. However, most form based codes are based on the “transect” concept, which recognizes that distinct zones of habitation require distinct built forms. In zones where more density is not appropriate (i.e. the City’s historic single-family neighborhoods), the code recognizes and supports existing patterns. In zones where more density is desired, the code describes the lot, street, and building forms that support the desired result.

The authoritative template for form-based codes is The SmartCode, originally published in 2003 by Duany Plater-Zyberk, a world-renowned design and planning firm. The SmartCode, as well as other form-based codes, is available through the firm’s website.

Continue to implement the Cahaba Heights Community Plan.

The Cahaba Heights Community Plan is full of visionary ideas for making it and the entire City of Vestavia Hills more competitive and attractive. Its Steering Committee recognized the opportunity to help Cahaba Heights capitalize on its existing assets while creating the framework for improving the entire City. New regulatory and financial tools were recommended to help bring about the desired vision for the community. A few of the key recommendations that particularly support the development of strong business districts are referenced here and should be aggressively pursued. These include:

Updating the Vestavia Hills zoning regulations:

- ✓ Ensure that the zoning ordinance allows for horizontal and vertical mixing of residential, commercial, and institutional uses in appropriate locations throughout the City.
- ✓ Require sidewalks to be installed in commercial centers and surrounding areas.
- ✓ Provide height or density incentives to developers to incent the provision of public amenities.

Updating Vestavia Hills subdivision regulations:

- ✓ Subdivisions within 0.5 mile of commercial centers should have high street connectivity and sidewalks.

Gateways and signage:

- ✓ Consider developing a wayfinding and signage program for commercial centers, including the usage of district banners. Partner organizations could include the City’s Beautification Board, Leadership Vestavia Hills, the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce, and others.

Community Facilities:

- ✓ Creating a virtual library to serve Cahaba Heights

Funding mechanisms:

- ✓ Consider establishing tax increment financing districts in the City and utilize the tool in Cahaba Heights to fund public investments in its commercial centers.

Launch a neighborhood engagement pilot program in Cahaba Heights and adapt to other neighborhoods if successful, viable, and appropriate.

The vibrancy of a downtown area is also heavily influenced by the level of engagement and patronage that comes from residents living within or near the downtown area. Regardless of location, residents often invest considerable time and resources in the development and maintenance of their neighborhood as a reflection of the pride they have in their community. Cahaba Heights is the only area in the City with many traditional downtown features, including a grid structure and walkable clusters of businesses. The City should partner with the Chamber of Commerce, homeowners associations, and all Cahaba Heights merchants to engage households in residential areas surrounding the core business district in Cahaba Heights in a pride and patronage development effort. The City and Chamber should consider a wide variety of incentives to help elevate the connection between residents and businesses surrounding the small urban center. After piloting the program in Cahaba Heights, it could be adapted to Rocky Ridge and other neighborhoods as appropriate and viable. Options include:

- ✓ The development of specific “neighborhood appreciation” events hosted by Cahaba Heights businesses.
- ✓ The development of special promotions available to residents within a specified radius of Cahaba Heights’ core.
- ✓ The extension of unofficial downtown boundaries to include more residential area, reflected by additional signage.
- ✓ The development of volunteer opportunities that build community pride including but not limited to litter collection, tree and flower planting, and other beautification efforts.

Ultimately, households in residential neighborhoods directly surrounding Cahaba’s core should feel that they are in fact part of it. Programs should be designed to help instill a mentality that its businesses are a part of their neighborhood community, and that their neighborhood community is a key part of Cahaba Heights.

Evaluate a variety of funding mechanisms to support targeted redevelopment.

For the City of Vestavia Hills to initiate transformative redevelopment projects within its boundaries, it will have to expand its arsenal of economic development financing mechanisms. Multiple actions referenced throughout this Vision Plan may require some degree of public intervention or involvement to help kick start development and redevelopment. This includes targeted redevelopment opportunities along Highway 31, the development of new government and school facilities, and specific public sector development initiatives such as the creation of more passive, neighborhood parks. Vestavia Hills is currently underutilizing the development mechanisms available to it, and should evaluate available tools for specific economic development projects. The US 31 Corridor Development Study will identify relevant funding mechanisms to support targeted redevelopment efforts along the corridor, potentially including the establishment of an improvement district. In Alabama, cities are authorized to develop and administer a variety of improvement districts, including Alabama Improvement Districts, Special Improvement Districts, Capital Cooperative Districts, Business Improvement Districts, and Tax Increment Districts.

Another aggressive move that the City could make would be the formation of a development authority. Many of the development strategies discussed throughout this report are often carried forward by development authorities. There is an abundance of funding mechanisms that are accessible through these entities, most notably the provision of tax-exempt bond financing. The establishment of a development authority or of any of the aforementioned improvement districts should be appropriately incorporated into the City's formal Economic Development Incentive Policy.

Another strategy that has proven effective in catalyzing redevelopment and revitalization in communities across the country is for government authorizes to obtain and "bank" (hold) land and then redistribute this land for desirable public and/or private-sector projects. In many cases, land banking is performed specifically to reduce blight, with a focus on the acquisition of tax-delinquent properties. This is the case for the recently created Alabama Land Bank Authority. However, land banks are used for a variety of other purposes and such an authority in Vestavia Hills could be used to acquire tax-delinquent properties, blighted and abandoned property, or residential properties that have been damaged by natural disasters. One of the greatest challenges with land banking for municipal governments and authorities is that banked properties are often those in the greatest need of rehabilitation and are thus less attractive to developers. As a result, banked land is often offered at below market cost to investors as a development incentive. The City should evaluate the need to establish a formal mechanism to acquire distressed properties, as well as the legal parameters surrounding land banking in the State of Alabama. If the City determines that the pursuit of a local land bank authority is not necessary due to a limited number of distressed and delinquent properties, including state-acquired properties, then the City should develop a long-term plan for acquiring high-value at market price if they are cost-efficient opportunities to fulfill certain recommendations of this *Vision Plan*, including but not limited to new City facilities, schools, and passive parks.

Consider hiring a retail analytics firm to conduct a retail matching and consumer profiling.

High retail turnover was a consistently cited problem in the Vestavia Hills economy. Residents found that restaurants and local shops struggle to remain in the community for long. Some communities are supporting the retail environment by having a thorough retail market analysis performed for their community. By providing local retailers with deep information into their retail audience and buying preferences, they are more able to make better purchasing and inventory decisions and are more likely to succeed. Potential components of a comprehensive retail analysis include:

- ✓ Leakage and surplus report: provides information on which retail sectors are losing expenditures to other communities and which are both serving the local market and drawing buyers from outside the community.
- ✓ Consumer propensity reports (consumer profiling): catalogues in very fine detail the community's spending habits, including preferences for more than 5,000 specific brands and products.
- ✓ Retail matching: provides the community with lists of specific retailers to pursue given the expenditure dynamics analyzed in the leakage and surplus and consumer propensity reports.

The City has already received an abbreviated retail leakage and surplus analysis as a component of this visioning process' *Target Business Review*. The City of Vestavia Hills and the Vestavia Hills Chamber of Commerce should consider partnering with area property owners and retailers to purchase these services from a reputable retail

analytics firm like Buxton, Inc. The consumer propensity reports would then be made available to all Vestavia Hills retailers. In order to defray costs, local retailers could be charged a small fee to access the reports. Alternatively, the Chamber could make the information available to its member businesses as part of their annual dues. Retail matching services would be used by the City and property owners to identify best-fit tenants for vacant retail properties and redevelopment opportunities. The City should also reach out to higher education institutions throughout the region to determine if their faculty and staff have the research capabilities to provide comparable services to a specialized retail analytics and consulting firm.

Position Patchwork Farms and other high-value undeveloped land for its highest and best uses.

The national recession and suspension of financing contributed to the dissolution of the original plan for a large-scale mixed use development on the Patchwork Farms site off of Cahaba River Road. While the City has been able to make use of the property recently as a dumping area for tornado-related debris, it essentially continues to sit dormant. It is the single greatest development asset held by the City today, and leaders should continue to move aggressively toward fulfilling its highest and best use. It provides a canvas for realizing some of the transformational goals and targets developed during the course of this process, and could take Vestavia Hills to the next level of economic development. While the market seems to show little appetite for the large-scale mixed-use project of a few years ago, demand remains for livable environments served by multiple amenities within walking distance.

Vestavia Hills should re-imagine the development concept for the Patchwork Farms site in light of the findings of this process and the expressed desire of input respondents to see more walkable environments within the City. The new concept should be broken into two components, each occupying one side of the dividing road, Highway 29. One side should be planned for a major corporate headquarters operation, and the other for a smaller-scale mixed-use development, with live, work, and live-work units provided along with a few small restaurants and shops. Anchor space could still be provided for a national fitness chain within this portion of the development. The City and Chamber of Commerce should actively market the corporate headquarters portion to site selectors and targeted corporations, and should consider incentivizing deals by offering the land for free. The City should inform economic development staff at the Birmingham Business Alliance, the Alabama Development Authority, and other local, regional, and state economic development partners that it has a highly-desirable piece of property that is available at little or no cost as a development incentive for a desirable headquarters location, or other large scale, high-wage opportunities that align with the City's target business sectors. Planning for a mixed-use development on the other half would communicate to company executives that the City is serious about creating the kind of environments preferred by young and professional workers today.

The City should also work with residents, businesses, the development community, and the Regional Planning Commission to establish a clear vision for undeveloped land in and around Liberty Park that focuses on the highest and best uses. This vision should be supported by recommended revisions to the City's zoning code and informed by the recommended activity district planning sessions.

CONCLUSION

Ever since Governor George Ward decided that a high perch on Shades Mountain was the perfect location for a replica of Italy's Temple of Sybil, the area that would become the City of Vestavia Hills has made its mark in Greater Birmingham. Its formal incorporation in 1950 established the City's profile as a prosperous residential community, and its development over the subsequent decades reinforced this identity. Today, Vestavia Hills is a premier residential destination for families in Greater Birmingham. The City's public schools have developed as the focal point of the community's collective efforts. Those efforts have paid off in the form of an outstanding school district that draws families into the City from all over the region. Strategic annexations have expanded its boundaries and diversified its residential and commercial offerings.

Yet, the City's geographic and residential growth has outpaced its commercial development, with retail centers aging and struggling to compete with offerings in surrounding communities. As they fall subject to vacancies and an aura of disrepair, some residents have become concerned about the message being communicated about their City. Also, annexation has created a community with three distinct personalities and differentiated development needs. The Great Recession and its wake have only exacerbated economic concerns in the City, restricting access to capital, raising unemployment, and straining municipal finances.

These concerns have residents and leaders wondering what will drive Vestavia Hills' prosperity in the coming years. As the City transitions its governance structure to a council-manager regime, there will be new opportunities – and increased capacity – for community and economic development. In the context of this transition, and recognizing the need to be proactive, the City of Vestavia Hills and its partners in the public, private and non-profit sectors have begun the work of establishing a new vision for the community's preferred future.

This *Vision Plan* is only the “end of the beginning” of realizing this preferred future. The hard work begins once strategies in theory become actions in practice. The community has found its vision; now it must embrace it and move forward with implementation. If this vision is embraced and this *Plan* is trusted as a roadmap, the community can begin writing another chapter in its already rich history.

Successful communities know that community and economic development is a marathon, not a sprint. And while this *Vision Plan* will require a continued commitment from the City and its public, private, and non-profit partners, it cannot be done all at once. Effective implementation will take years, but these are important investments that can improve the prospects of many generations to come and ensure that tomorrow's residents benefit from the vision of today's leaders.

APPENDIX: BEST PRACTICES

The following best practices are referenced throughout the *Vision Plan* when relevant to a specific recommendation.

Matching Grants for Community Beautification

Best Practice: Tulsa Beautification Foundation Matching Grant Program (Tulsa, OK)

Begun in 2009, the Tulsa Beautification Foundation Matching Grant Program aids neighborhood and homeowners' associations with funding beautification programs. The program provides a dollar-for-dollar match to locally-raised funds. The program is intended to incentivize local groups to raise money, engage in partnerships with businesses, and encourage a culture of local volunteerism.

In order to be eligible a project must 1) improve or beautify a neighborhood or public space; 2) involve neighborhood and community residents; 3) have long-standing and sustainable benefits; 4) have a plan before work begins; and 5) provide a maintenance plan for upkeep of the project. Further, in addition to locally-raised money, the program allows for 35 percent of the match to be volunteer hours, which are valued at \$16.19 per hour. The program requires projects to be completed within a 90 day timeline.

One of the grants in 2010 was made to the Shadow Ridge Homeowners Association (SHRA). The SHRA received \$2,800 to beautify the entrance to their neighborhood, which included new tree, lighting, and a Memorial Tree to honor neighborhood residents who had passed away.

<http://www.cityoftulsa.org/community-programs/neighborhoods/neighborhood-beautification-grant.aspx>

Mobile Applications for Citizen Reporting/Concerns

Best Practice: Citizens Connect "App" (Boston, MA)

In October 2009, the Boston, MA unveiled a mobile app called Citizens Connect. The app is a web-based extension of the City's 311 service. The free app encourages residents to report problems such as potholes, graffiti, broken lights, damaged street signs, and missed trash pick-ups. Available on both Android and iPhones, the app has been downloaded thousands of times and is in its second iteration (2.0).

In order to report a problem, the app takes a user through a three-step process: 1) user takes a picture of the problem; 2) user adds a caption; 3) user submits the problem. The GPS in the phone automatically includes the coordinates of the problem and transmits the complaint (with a map) directly to the appropriate city department. Once submitted, the user receives a case number through which he or

she can track progress. The user receives case updates until the problem is resolved. Updates about existing projects and newly submitted projects are publicly provided in real time via Twitter and a streaming website.

<https://mayors24.cityofboston.gov:4443/>;
<http://www.cityofboston.gov/doi/apps/citizensconnect.asp>

Community Greening

Best Practice: Trees Atlanta (Atlanta, GA)

Trees Atlanta was founded in 1985, through the collaboration of three civic organizations, including the Atlanta Parks Commissioner. Trees Atlanta is a driving force in protecting and advocating for conservation, preservation, and enhancing of Atlanta's trees and urban landscape. Since 1985, Trees Atlanta has planted and distributed more than 81,000 trees, cared for more than 100,000 trees, and coordinated thousands of volunteers. Weekly communications reach 5,000 volunteers.

Trees Atlanta currently offers a range of programs that address preservation of trees and the urban landscape. In addition to education, Trees Atlanta partners with neighborhood groups to identify areas for new plantings. The neighborhood group is an active partner as they must develop a maintenance plan for the plantings. Other programs include working to green the Atlanta BeltLine, preserve existing urban forest areas, contracting with professional tree planters, and creating model arboretums to inspire neighborhood planters.

<http://www.treesatlanta.org/>

Green Business Certification Program

Best Practice: Institute for Sustainable Development - Green Plus Program

Founded in 2007, the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) is a collaborative effort of academic, business, and philanthropic leaders in the North Carolina Research Triangle. Recognizing that many large corporations were making sustainable investments and benefitting from cost savings and improved reputations, the ISD sought to make sustainability more accessible to small businesses. Small businesses were targeted as most Americans work for employers with less than 50 employees and small businesses often don't have the time, knowledge, or resources to make meaningful sustainable investments.

The Green Plus program was founded to address small business sustainability issues and provide a comprehensive roadmap to making "green" investments, while maintaining financial stability. Green Plus is a two-year certification, education, networking, and education process. Small businesses begin the program with a

diagnostic exam that assesses sustainability from three perspectives: People (employee and community relations), Planet (energy, transportation, water management, waste reduction and green purchasing), and Performance (business practices). The diagnostic exam informs customized feedback and ISD works with companies to create a sustainability plan. Once the sustainability plan has been implemented, the company can resubmit the diagnostic exam and begin the certification process. The Green Plus program requires documentation of practices, performs random site visits, and performs reviews, prior to certification. The ISD also audits at least 20 percent of Certified Green Plus companies.

In addition to the certification process, Green Plus members get access to networking and education resources. Such tools include referrals, business mentorships, best practices, webinars, business exposure, and access to the North American Green Plus Directory.

Green Plus is extensively delivered through Chambers of Commerce. In 2010, the cost to Chamber members to join Green plus was \$350 and the cost to non-chamber members was \$550. Organizations with two or fewer employees paid \$150 to join the program. To date, ISD has worked with 17 chambers in 11 states that represent over 60,000 businesses.

The Institute for Sustainable Development has ongoing relationships with American Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), Duke University, University of North Carolina, North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the Fenwick Foundation, and others.

<http://www.gogreenplus.org/>

Green Business Certification Program **Best Practice: St. Louis Green Business Challenge (St. Louis, MO)**

In 2010, the St. Louis Regional Chamber & Growth Association (RCGA) sponsored the first St. Louis Green Challenge. With a focus on creating “green savings, green opportunities, and green talent” the competition attracted 58 companies who competed to conserve water, reduce waste, improve indoor air quality, conserve electricity, and provide clean transportation options. The RCGA partnered with the Missouri Botanical Garden’s EarthWays Center, which served as a resource advisor to all participants.

The competition was kicked off with each business filling out a scorecard that assessed the sustainable aspects of the business. The firms then had several months to work with the EarthWays center to identify and implement new areas for sustainable initiatives. At the end of the competition, firms filled out the same scorecards used for their baseline assessment, and points were tabulated for each

firm. Participants and winners were honored at an awards ceremony. The popularity of the challenge is evident as participation has grown to 79 companies.

<http://stlouisgreenchallenge.com/home.html>

http://stlouisgreenchallenge.com/images/Totalscorecard_2011.pdf

Community Gardens

Best Practice: Harvest Community Farm (Suwanee, GA)

In April 2010, the City of Suwanee opened the largest organic community garden in the state of Georgia. Harvest Farm Community Garden is comprised of 76 plots, each of which is tended using organic methods. The City is the sponsor of the garden, but it is run by volunteers. Gardeners must agree to upkeep and maintenance expectations and commit a certain amount of annual hours. The garden also hosts a number of educational programs. Gardeners must pay a small fee, depending on plot size, but the City waives 25 percent of the fee for residents.

The impetus for the garden began with a graduate student contacting the City to do a senior project to complete a degree in landscape architecture. The project revealed that the land (previously a family farm) was ideal for the garden. A local metal fabricator donated a \$15,000 water cistern to recycle rainwater. The garden also has space for raising chickens and is surrounded by a public park. A Phase II expansion is planned, which will include room for raising goats and rabbits, adding additional plots, and adding handicapped-accessible plots.

Young Professionals Organizations

Best Practice: FUEL Milwaukee, formerly Young Professionals of Milwaukee (Milwaukee, WI)

In 2001, Young Professionals of Milwaukee (YPM) was launched by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce as a response to the region's inability to attract and retain young professionals. Since 2001, the organization has grown to almost 6,000 members and has rebranded itself FUEL Milwaukee.

The success of the organization rests on its ability to execute programs in support of its mission. The original mission of YPM was to get members "jazzed" about Milwaukee by showcasing the "coolest people, places and urban developments," to grow a diverse network, to connect member to the "hottest issues, developments, and the people and organizations making things happen," and to contribute members' voices to help shape Greater Milwaukee. The organization aimed at getting young professionals in front of important people while getting their members to the best places in Milwaukee. The organization was a showcase for the most YP-friendly amenities of the region.

FUEL Milwaukee now supports both individual members and employer members. Providing programs such as VIP-networking, community service, best practice dissemination, social outings, and specialized work with employers to retain talent in the region, FUEL Milwaukee is a thriving organization.

<http://www.fuelmilwaukee.org/>

Economic Development Incentive Policy Best Practice: City of San Marcos, Texas

The City of San Marcos, Texas is located along Interstate 35 between the highly successful and competitive communities of San Antonio and Austin. In order to compete for the rapid influx of jobs to the state of Texas, the City of San Marcos has developed a comprehensive incentive policy to better position itself alongside the fast-growing and relatively development-friendly communities of Austin and San Antonio. The City's incentive policy includes a wide variety of financial and non-financial incentives, including but not limited to:

- ✓ Permit and development impact fee waivers
- ✓ Fast-track permitting
- ✓ Freeport exemption
- ✓ Property tax abatements
- ✓ Tax-increment financing
- ✓ Sales tax rebates
- ✓ Revolving loan fund
- ✓ Reinvestment zones

A full list of incentives as well as detailed descriptions of each program and associated eligibility criteria can be found here:

http://www.ecodevsanmarcos.org/pdf/SM_Incentive_Policy_2008.pdf

Economic Development Website Best Practice: City of Arlington, Texas (Arlington, TX)

The City of Arlington, Texas has developed a best practice economic development website that effectively communicates the City's economic development objectives to prospective businesses as well as residents. The City's economic development website provides an overview of the City's economic development strategy, Champion Arlington. The website has specific pages dedicated to each of the City's various incentive programs, as well as detailed demographic and economic information on the community presented in the form of downloadable "annual growth reports." The City also maintains its own site search website – Arlington iSites – that is enabled with a geographic information system (GIS) to help prospects and site location consultants browse available sites and properties.

<http://www.arlingtontx.gov/business/>

Economic Development Website

Best Practice: Greater Richmond Partnership, Inc. (Richmond, VA)

Originally launched in 1994, the Greater Richmond Partnership overhauled its website in 2003 earning it a national award in website design from the International Economic Development Council (IEDC). In addition to providing high quality, up-to-date information on the local workforce, available buildings and sites, and cost of doing business, the website has some unique features that attempt to connect a variety of users to Greater Richmond. Some of these features include:

- An online photo tour provides users with a “sense of place” by showcasing Greater Richmond’s neighborhoods.
- A “Companion” Partnership website written in Chinese to leverage international development opportunities (www.we-usa.com).
- A specific portal for women- and minority-owned businesses that connects entrepreneurs to financial resources, government contracting opportunities, and technical assistance providers.
- A featured video called “Speaking of Richmond” which highlights specific areas of competitiveness for the region.
- Custom Report Generator allowing users to build customized reports with detailed data and information about the region.

<http://www.grpva.com>

Economic Development Website

Best Practice: Sioux Falls Development Foundation (Sioux Falls, SD)

The Sioux Falls Development Foundation maintains a wealth of information on its website. The Foundation has created community profiles for the Sioux Falls metropolitan area as well as individual profiles for 15 distinct communities in the region. The website also access includes access to a variety of publications including the Foundation’s bi-monthly newsletter, site location studies, business directories, and many other publications. The website includes detailed information on available incentives and individual buildings and sites. Overall, the website has a tremendous amount of information for a community of its size and is very user-friendly for site selection representatives that need immediate access to specific information.

<http://www.siouxfallsdevelopment.com/>

**Economic Development Marketing Collateral
Best Practice: Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corporation (Martinsville, VA)**

The Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corporation has developed an attractive one-page “Community Profile” that is the organization’s primary piece of marketing collateral. It is well-designed yet features an immense amount of information, including but not limited to demographics, employment composition, top employers, climate, a regional map, local tax rates, information on educational institutions, and key facts covering cost of living, unionization, and developable land. All of this information is contained within a single, double-sided sheet that can be provided to external audiences with a brief yet highly informative marketing piece.

http://www.yesmartinsville.com/content/file/mhc_community_profile_may2010.pdf

**Economic Development Marketing Collateral
Best Practice: Raleigh Economic Development (Raleigh, NC)**

Raleigh Economic Development (RED) is a partnership between the City of Raleigh and the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce. RED operates unique websites for each of its various target clusters. Each of these websites is customized with information specific to stakeholders in each cluster and in some instances is accompanied by downloadable brochures and information packets. Content varies between the brochures for each cluster yet all have tremendously high publication and design quality. Content includes profiles of key cluster companies and innovators, critical resources and educational assets, relevant data, background information on key initiatives, and important contact information.

http://www.raleigh4u.com/files/CRED_EV_Brochure.pdf
<http://www.raleigh-wake.org/files/games/triple-threat.pdf>