



Envision Coastal Alabama: More than a Decade of Promoting Regionalism

Twelve years ago, a group of community and business leaders came together in support of a simple idea: More can be accomplished when people work hand-in-hand.

The result was Envision Coastal Alabama, a visioning process and partnership that brings the two counties together as one and serves as the foundation for regional planning efforts to unify and strengthen the future of coastal Alabama.

Envision set out to launch a dialogue between regional grassroots interests, governmental entities, community stakeholders and elected officials. Since then, through the help of hundreds of volunteers and leadership of four E-teams – equity, economy, environment and education – Envision has created a public forum allowing area partners to openly address the region's community and economic development future.

Public and private sector entities now work together to develop solutions to many of the community's most pressing regional development issues. The results speak for themselves. Here are just a few of Envision's many milestones and the successes made possible over the past decade through its grassroots muscle and support:

- Metro Mobile Recycling Center opened on Government Street;
- Amendment One economic development package approved, providing for a \$100 million expansion of the State Docks;
- Amendment One school referendum approved, providing increased funding for Mobile County School System;
- Regional transit coordination between Mobile's Wave and Baldwin County's BRATS systems;
- Development of affordable housing led by the nonprofit organization DASH for the Gulf Coast; and
- Discussions, workshops and conferences on smart growth, transit and other various regional development issues.

This year, Envision leadership will focus on renewing relationships with community volunteers and partners. "As a volunteer, community-based organization, Envision's strength has always grown from our group of supporters," said **Shayla Jones Beaco**, director of Envision and local affairs at the Mobile Area Chamber. "From a logistics standpoint, communication between everyone can be a challenge, though. We're going to work to make sure we communicate thoroughly and regularly with all our partners and supporters."

Envision Coastal Alabama in Good Hands

They enter at a time of nationwide economic uncertainty and distress, but 2009 Envision Coastal Alabama co-chairs **Mike Hofto** and **Donna Watts** also believe it's a time of opportunity for Mobile and Baldwin counties to move forward.

Hofto and Watts were installed in their new roles during Envision's annual meeting last September, taking over for 2008 co-chairs **Phil Norris** and **Ron Martin**.

Hofto is the chief financial officer of **Leavell Investment Management Inc.** and has been involved in Envision for five years, serving as Economy E-team co-chair and on the advisory board. He's a member of **Leadership Alabama Class XVII**, a former **Mobile Area Chamber** board member and the incoming president of the **Mobile Area Education Foundation**.

"I believe quality of life issues can best be addressed by approaching them from a regional perspective – in our situation, by residents and public officials of Mobile and Baldwin counties working together where appropriate to make our region a better place to live, the old one-plus-one-equals-three principle," Hofto said. "The process of getting folks from both counties talking together, and dreaming together, is a very healthy process."

Watts, the president and chief executive officer of the **South Baldwin Chamber and Foundation** in **Foley**, is a Baldwin County native who has been involved in chamber work since 1986. She was part of the initial **Envision Mobile-Baldwin** meetings and has been a long-time advisory board member.

"Having grown up in **Stapleton**, with my father working at **Brookley Field** until it closed, I have always felt Mobile was a natural neighbor of Baldwin County," Watts said. "We have so many overlapping issues; it just makes sense for us to work collectively to address them. We are so much stronger together. We have great diversity and in that diversity lies strength. We can have a much more powerful voice on political levels when we agree and speak with a united voice."



Donna Watts, president of **South Baldwin Chamber of Commerce**, and **Mike Hofto**, chief financial officer with **Leavell Investment Management**, are serving as co-chairs for **Envision Coastal Alabama** in 2009. Watts is co-chair for **Baldwin County**, and Hofto is co-chair representing **Mobile County**.

Both Hofto and Watts see the economy as the most pressing challenge facing southwest Alabama, much like the rest of the country.

"I think public education funding is probably the largest and scariest problem," Hofto said. "Mobile's progress in recent years is due in no small part to improvement in our public schools, and we need to keep that momentum moving forward. That will be a huge challenge given looming proration."

Other long-range challenges facing the community are still there, as well, Watts added – "growth, attracting good-paying jobs, a balanced housing market, providing a quality education that will allow our children to be competitive in the workplace, protection of our environment and maintaining the quality of life we all want for our region."

Hofto believes Envision's

E-teams structure – economy, education, environment and equity – is well positioned to spark progress.

"The real work is done in the four E-teams," he said. "I'd like each team to feel at the end of the year that they made some progress within their respective area and that we've advanced the Envision concept. Donna and I would also like to see additional opportunities for interested volunteers to have hands-on involvement."

An early major focus this year, Watts said, will be transportation. "It certainly affects our efforts with issues of quality of life, economic development, equity and environmental preservation," she said. "As with many needs, someone must be sounding the bell, attracting the attention of those whose responsibility it is to make the decisions that bring resources to meet the needs of our residents."

Watts added that communication and focus will be pivotal to Envision's progress toward its goals over the coming months.

"I hope we can communicate effectively the goals and objectives of ECA to residents in Mobile and Baldwin counties," she said. "I want all who have the desire to participate to understand how they can connect with his important effort. We cannot do everything, but we can do a few things really well and ultimately make a difference in our region."

Keeping Kids in School: Education Drop-out Summit a Success

About 600 community leaders and others interested in improving education gathered at the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center on Feb. 3 for the Mobile Area Education Foundation's drop-out prevention summit.

Bob Wise, president of the Washington D.C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education, served as keynote speaker for the summit, the result of a collaborative effort between the city of Mobile, the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) and the Mobile County Public School System to develop strategies to decrease the drop-out rate, increase academic standards and reform local schools.

"The summit was not only informative, but people left there mobilized, ready for action," said Jeremiah Newell, MAEF director of student engagement and project coordinator for the initiative The Research Alliance for Multiple Pathways for Mobile's Youth (RAMP).

Mobile was one of seven cities nationwide — and the only one in Alabama — to receive grant money from the U.S. Department of Labor for the program. The idea behind it is that because there are multiple factors contributing to the drop-out rate, there must be multiple pathways toward addressing it.

While the goals of discouraging drop-outs and beefing-up curriculum may seem to be at odds with each other, Newell said they actually work hand-in-hand.

"What research tells us is that when you raise standards and you raise expectations for young people, while providing the support to meet those standards and expectations, they thrive and succeed," he said.

The summit featured presentations by educators and community leaders from New York City, Philadelphia and Washington D.C., who shared strategies working in those cities. Focus groups then shared ideas and discussed what needed to be done to implement some of the ideas posed in the summit.

Rhonda Neal Waltman, an MAEF consultant who also co-chairs Envision Coastal Alabama's education committee, said the opportunity to talk about solutions was vital to the summit's success. "It's not our style to wring our hands about a problem," she said of Mobilians, "but to fix it."

Dr. Lucretia Murphy of the See Forever Foundation in Washington D.C., an organization working with alternative charter schools, opened the summit with a presentation entitled, "Mobile — A Star Among Titans." Murphy, who previously worked with Boston-based Jobs For The Future and helped Mobile officials secure the grant for RAMP, said Mobile's level of commitment is impressive.

"I think the degree to which they've been able to involve the business sector is really significant," she said. "It's been a challenge

for a number of communities to get that level of in-depth and complete support from the community. The other thing that's significant is to be able to maintain that level of commitment through the transfer of school system superintendents."

A RAMP taskforce compiled data for the initiative by following more than 4,500 Mobile County public school students from the sixth through 12th grades, looking for early indicators of which students were most likely to drop out. Their findings were presented at the summit and will serve as a starting point for developing strategies to combat the problem.

Absences, out-of-school suspensions and failure of core classes were found to be early indicators of dropping out of school. Eighty percent of non-graduates in the study were found to have missed more than eight days, have two or more out-of-school suspensions, or failed two or more core classes in the sixth and ninth grades. Few students fit into all three categories, however.

"Most students will have just one," Newell said of the indicators. "There isn't just one indicator you can fix and say that's going to fix our drop-out rate."

Also among the taskforce's findings were that race is not a significant indicator for drop-outs, and that high school students that are held back or fall behind in their work — "over-aged and under-credited" students — are far more likely to not graduate. Nearly 74 percent of the students identified as over-aged and under-credited in the study did not graduate. And while race may not be an indicator for drop-out rates, 40 percent of the students in the study identified as over-aged and under-credited were black males.

What's more, early indicators can be statistically significant as early the sixth grade, as nearly 59 percent of the students tracked by the taskforce who failed at least one core class in the sixth grade ultimately failed to graduate. Middle-school performance was even more significant, as nearly 70 percent of students in the study who went into ninth grade a year late ended up dropping out.

Newell said the next step for the different groups of people attending the summit — business and industrial leaders, faith-based and community-based groups, educators, juvenile justice professionals, parents and elected officials — is to use this data to develop priorities for the initiative and strategies for what each of them can do to implement it.

MAEF is developing a community-wide blueprint to serve as a guide for moving forward, as well as a tool for luring grant money and other funding to fuel the initiative. Newell said the blueprint is expected to be completed later this spring

and should provide the community with a battle plan to combat the drop-out rate.

"Coordinating the effort and securing the additional funding are going to be the two main challenges," Newell said. "We

want to have immediate action because we're talking about real kids, but in the long run, we want it to be as impactful as possible, and the only way to do that is to plan together and communicate together."

When Do Students Drop Out?

| Top 3 Dropout Grade Levels | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Grade Level | Percent of Total | Number of Students |
| 9 th | 25.4% | 511 |
| 11 th | 17.0% | 342 |
| 10 th | 15.2% | 305 |

| Top 3 Ages of Dropouts | | |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Age | Percent of Total | Number of Students |
| 18 | 21.3% | 429 |
| 17 | 16.8% | 339 |
| 19 | 16.5% | 333 |

Drop out rates increased by 29% for students in the 6th grade failing at least one core class.

Source: Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama on Mobile County Public School System.

Early Indicators Middle and High School Students

80.1% of Non-Graduates have at least one red indicator — (1040/1299)



Yellow Light:

- Days Absent: 4-7 days (annually)
- Out of School Suspensions: 1
- Number of Core Class* Failures: 1 in 6th, 1 in 9th

Red Light:

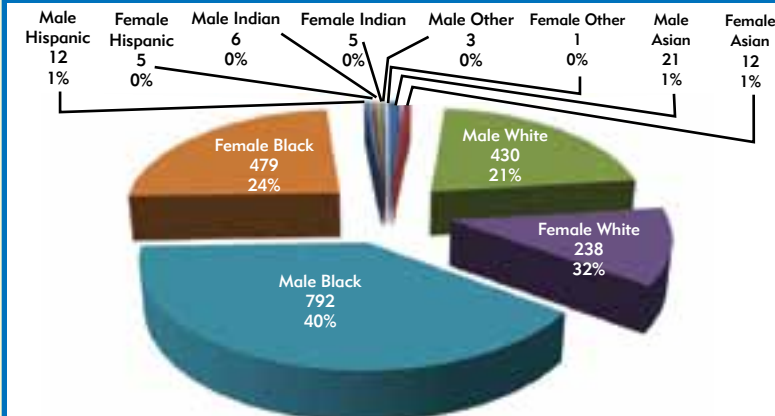
- Days Absent: 8-17 days (annually)
- Out of School Suspensions: 2
- Number of Core Class* Failures: 2 in 6th, 2 in 9th

* Core Classes are math, science, reading, language arts, and social studies classes.

80% of student drop outs show early warning signs beginning in middle school.

Source: Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama on Mobile County Public School System.

Over-Age and Under Credited By Race



40% of students identified as over-aged and under-credited were black males.

Source: Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama on Mobile County Public School System.

Baldwin Housing Alliance Appoints New Executive Director

There's a new face at the Baldwin Housing Alliance. **Harrison Black**, the organization's new chief executive officer, brings a career of working with housing and residential services to the barely year-old housing alliance. Originally from Mobile, he says he's pleased to be back on the Gulf Coast.



develop an affordable housing plan for the Baldwin County Commission. One of its recommendations was the development of a housing alliance that would develop, implement and monitor long- and short term affordable housing plans. Efforts continued with the development of action teams to begin the work of

the agency, and the alliance was officially organized in January of last year, hiring its first chief executive officer in October.

“What’s unique about the alliance is our broader-than-most mission – we work to help low- and middle-income clients,” said Black. “Most housing organizations focus only on the low-income sectors. We also work hard not to duplicate services in the area. Instead, we are a resource for our clients and refer them where they need to go for help.”

“There is definitely a need in Baldwin County for affordable housing, especially near the labor pool,” said Black. “And our goal is to ensure everyone has access to it.”

The alliance works to educate and provide access to affordable, safe, quality housing for Baldwin County using governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic and private sectors.

HUD, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, defines affordable housing as having to spend no more than 30 percent of your income on housing, including a rent or mortgage payment and utilities.

Black can be reached at 251-947-2445 or harrison@baldwinhousing.org.

The Baldwin Housing Alliance began in late 2005 as the Baldwin County Affordable Housing Taskforce. Its mission was to

Envision Co-sponsors VITA Training

Envision Coastal Alabama and Mobile Community Action provided tax preparer training in January for volunteers assisting low- to moderate-income wage earners in filing this year's tax returns as part of the volunteer income tax assistance (VITA) program. More than 30 people attended the event.



This year's VITA campaign aims to inform residents about earned income tax credit, which provides eligible families with a tax refund as well as free tax preparation, tax credit education and general financial service counseling. Other community partners supporting these efforts include Internal Revenue Service, Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., The Community Foundation of South Alabama, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, Goodwill Easter Seals and Boat People S.O.S.

become an even stronger resource for their clients,” said **Shirley Sessions**, Envision Equity Team co-chair and vice president of community affairs for Regions Bank. “There are plenty of opportunities for low- and moderate-income wage earners to get tax relief, but people simply don't know about them. So many funds get left on the table. In light of such a hard economy, these efforts couldn't have come at a better time.”

“The training workshop provided a great platform for nonprofit organizations and those who will be VITA volunteers to

Event presenters included Peggy Kaufman, senior individual tax payer assistant with the IRS, and Gwendolyn Darty, program development coordinator Mobile Community Action Inc.



2009 Envision Co-Chairs

Mobile County
Envision Co-Chair
Mike Hofto
Leavell Investment Management
251-433-3709
mhofto@leavellinvestments.com

Baldwin County
Envision Co-Chair
Donna Watts
South Baldwin Chamber of Commerce
251-943-3291
donna@southbaldwinchamber.com

Mobile County
Economy Co-Chair
Steve Walker
Alabama Motorsports Park
251-431-9882
swalker@thewalkercompany.net

Baldwin County
Economy Co-Chair
Ray Moore
Hutchinson Moore & Rauch LLC
251-626-2626
rbm@hmrengineers.com

Mobile County
Education Co-Chair
Rhonda Neal-Waltman
Neal-Waltman & Associates
waltmaninc@bellsouth.net
251-454-2709

Baldwin County
Education Co-Chair
Jim Kellen
Southwest Alabama Workforce
Development Council - Region 9
jwkellen@gmail.com
251-445-2090

Mobile County
Environment Co-Chair
George Crozier
Dauphin Island Sea Lab
251-861-2141
gcrozier@disl.org

Baldwin County
Environment Co-Chair
Bethany Kraft
Alabama Coastal Foundation
251-379-8679
bkraft@joinacf.org

Mobile County
Equity Co-Chair
Shirley Sessions
Regions Bank
251-434-3162
shirley.sessions@regions.com

Baldwin County
Equity Co-Chair
Chris Miller
South Alabama Regional
Planning Commission
251-433-6541
cmiller@sarpcc.org

Mobile County
Envision Staff
Shayla Jones Beaco
Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce
251-431-8628
sbeaco@mobilechamber.com

Baldwin County
Envision Staff
Karen Glover
Baldwin County Economic
Development Alliance
251-947-5721
kglover@baldwineda.com



P.O. Box 2187
Mobile, AL 36652-2187

Want to share Envision's latest news?
This report can be found at
www.envisioncoastalalabama.org

PRSRT STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Mobile, AL
Permit #346

SAVE THE DATE

Low-Impact Development Workshop Set for April 23

The Alabama Coastal Foundation (ACF), a nonprofit conservation organization and Envision partner, in conjunction with the Mobile and Baldwin county commissions, will host a low-impact development (LID) workshop for south Alabama developers, planners, elected officials, engineers and other interested professionals on April 23 at the Five Rivers Delta Center on the Causeway. The goal of the workshop is to teach attendees how to apply LID principles to construction practices as a cost-effective way to control stormwater runoff, sedimentation and erosion.

Watershed research over the last decade indicates impervious surfaces have a profound and often irreversible impact on water quality. When impervious cover in upstream watersheds exceeds 10 percent, water quality declines sharply. The strong influence of impervious cover on aquatic systems presents a major challenge to communities, especially those in bay/coastal regions.

"More and more communities are tackling these tough issues by applying LID principles to site design and construction," said **Bethany Kraft**, executive director of ACF. "These principles provide a framework to create both environmentally sensitive and economically viable development."

The full-day workshop will be facilitated by nationally renowned LID experts **Jay Michaels**, with Emmons & Oliver Resources Inc., an environmental and engineering

consulting firm out of Minnesota, and **Jay Riggs**, with the Minnesota Soil and Conservation District. Prior to the workshop on the evening of April 22, Envision is sponsoring an ACF session for elected officials to learn about LID and how it can be addressed through local actions.

For more information or to register for the workshop, contact **Kraft** at 990-6002 or bkraft@joinacf.org.

FAST FACTS:

What: Alabama Coastal Foundation Low-Impact Development Workshop

When: Thursday, April 23

Time: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Where: Five Rivers Delta Resource Center on the Causeway, Spanish Fort

Cost: Free

Contact: Bethany Kraft at 990-6002 or bkraft@joinacf.org

Upcoming Job Fairs

The Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance is teaming with the Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce, North Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, South Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and the Alabama Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce to host the Baldwin County Job Fair on April 9 in Robertsdale at the Baldwin County Coliseum.

A variety of employers from the county will be present, including manufacturers and service employers, and those representing real estate, communications and banks. All participants will be hiring for full-time, part-time or seasonal workers. Attendees can take advantage of career counseling, seminars, and small business agencies assisting job seekers will be on hand to offer advice and counseling.

"Given this challenging economy and that unemployment rates in Baldwin County are on the rise, we expect a large turnout of job seekers," said **Karen Glover**, operations manager with the Baldwin County Economic Development Alliance.

The South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC) and the city of Mobile are also hosting a job fair on April 24 at the Mobile Civic Center.

The 11th annual Business Expo/Jobs Fair saw more than 5,000 job seekers last year speak with over 120 participating businesses, and SARPC expects interest to be even greater this year, according to **Jenny White**, title here, with SARPC.

"We're attributing heightened interest in the event to the need for businesses to reach out to each other as well as new employees."

FAST FACTS:

What: Baldwin County Job Fair

When: Thursday, April 9

Time: 10:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Where: Baldwin County Coliseum, behind Robertsdale High School on Fairgrounds Road, Robertsdale

Cost: Free

Contact: Karen Glover at 947-2445 or kglover@baldwineda.com or visit <http://www.baldwineda.com/files/Job-Fair/jobfair.htm>

FAST FACTS:

What: Business Expo/Job Fair

When: Friday, April 24

Time: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Where: Mobile Civic Center

Cost: Free

Contact: South Alabama Regional Planning Commission at 652-0585 or 433-6541