

ACE Program Helps Small Cities Foster Growth/Leadership



Established in 2002, Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides technical assistance to select communities with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000 in an effort to strengthen long-term economic success. Through a comprehensive, three-phase approach, ACE uses the collective expertise of its 18 partner organizations – ranging from state agencies and associations to banks, utilities, universities and others – to foster community development programs.

The ACE program offers a systematic approach with the necessary technical resources and tools to help Alabama’s small cities promote growth and prosperity by focusing on their distinctive assets and resources. ACE understands the uniqueness of each community, recognizing that every city has different assets, values, concerns and priorities. The ACE Team, comprised of technical discipline experts ranging from economic and industrial development to education, healthcare, historic preservation, leadership development, planning, tourism and community development, assists each participating city with developing a vision based on its own unique sensibilities and assets. At its core, ACE principles include the active involvement by community stakeholders across a broad demographic spectrum coupled with development of local leaders and leadership capacity and an emphasis on the importance of developing and implementing short and long-term plans to further the realization of the municipality’s vision. In addition to technical assistance, an *Alabama Community of Excellence* designation is given to each city that completes the three-phase program.

Since the program’s inception, 26 cities have been designated as ACE communities. Currently, six municipalities are working towards an ACE designation: Alexander City, Elba, Fairhope, Helena, Rainsville and Saraland.

Application and Selection Process

ACE targets communities with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000. Each January, applications are mailed to the mayors of these communities which can then be completed and submitted online or by mail. Citizens from the community

may assist in completing the application; however, it must be endorsed and signed by the mayor. Applications are then reviewed by an ACE Review Committee and candidates are selected by the ACE Board of Directors based on local community commitment and capacity to support the ACE program. For complete information on the application process, visit www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.com.

Phase I

During Phase I, the ACE Team visits each community to develop a comprehensive “report card” detailing city assets and recommending possible strategies. Prior to the visit, a self-assessment survey is sent to members of the local community to gather their impressions. The Assessment Visit also includes a public, open-forum community meeting where residents receive an overview explanation of the ACE process; the results of the self-assessment survey are presented; and stakeholders are asked to share their perspectives and opinions about the community with each other and with the ACE Team.

Based on the information and impressions received during the Assessment Visit, the ACE Team prepares an Assessment Report summarizing the Team’s findings and impressions and outlining several recommendations for the municipality’s consideration. This Assessment Report is presented to the community, typically at a City Council meeting. After receiving this Assessment Report, the city is invited to move into Phase II and a Memorandum of Understanding is executed documenting the community’s desire to continue into Phase II of the program.

Phase II

With the guidance of a skilled ACE facilitator, the municipality develops a formal vision statement and strategic plan during Phase II that includes goal statements and strategies to achieve those goals, as well as action items for implementing the strategies. Although the planning horizon for a strategic plan is typically three to five years, the plan should be reviewed and updated at least annually. The ACE

Team is available to advise each participating city's Strategic Plan Committee on selecting effective strategies and locating resources needed for implementing the plan.

Establishment of a formal, active leadership development program is a key requirement for communities during Phase II of the ACE program. If the city does not have a leadership program, the ACE Team will provide consultation and assistance to establish a leadership program that meets ACE standards. Leadership development programs are the key to building a core nucleus of citizens whose awareness of current issues, knowledge of the community, leadership skill sets and experience working with one another prepare them to step forward and assume leadership roles in the community. If the participating community has an existing leadership program, an ACE leadership specialist will determine if it meets the ACE standards. If the current leadership program does not fulfill ACE requirements, the leadership specialist will make recommendations that will enable the community to enhance the existing program to satisfy ACE requirements.

During Phase II, ACE also oversees the designation or creation of a nonprofit development organization representing public and private interests that can seek funding for community development initiatives. If the city does not already have a suitable nonprofit organization in place, ACE can direct the municipality toward resources to assist in the establishment of a nonprofit development organization. There are several advantages to having an organization deemed a tax-exempt charity under IRS code section 501(c)(3). Individual and corporate donors may be more likely to support organizations that have nonprofit charity status with the IRS because their contributions can be tax deductible as charitable donations. Also, certain grants are available to nonprofit organizations that are not available to a city government.

Phase III

During Phase III, the community will work on implementing the strategic plan developed during Phase II and will begin developing a comprehensive plan. While the strategic plan is relatively short-term – usually covering a three-to-five-year period and updated at least annually – a comprehensive plan provides a long-term guide for the community to develop its infrastructure and other community facilities, promote good design principles and maximize its physical features and assets for future growth and development. The planning horizon for a comprehensive plan is typically 10 to 20 years and it is only updated every five years. The strategic plan and comprehensive plan should work together to help the community achieve its vision. To complete Phase III of the ACE program, each participating community should have in place both a planning process and a targeted implementation plan.

Before graduating from the program and receiving the *Alabama Community of Excellence* designation, the city will be able to demonstrate that it knows how to access resources to achieve its goals and is committed to moving forward. The ACE Team emphasizes public/private partnerships and funding initiatives which may be related to physical infrastructure, business development, education, health or other issues unique to the community.

ACE Designation

When a candidate community completes the three phases of the ACE program it will be declared an *Alabama Community of Excellence*. Graduating communities are recognized at the Alabama League of Municipalities' Annual Convention held each Spring. As a newly designated ACE community, the city receives a plaque commemorating its achievement and a Department of Transportation approved highway sign that can be mounted at the community's gateway. ACE communities are promoted on the ACE website (www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.com), which features information about attractions, festivals and events occurring in ACE communities. They also receive periodic notifications about various grants, networking and training opportunities. In addition, ACE occasionally offers scholarships available exclusively to ACE community representatives to attend workshops and conferences such as Your Town Alabama and the Alabama Community Leadership Network.

Recertification

In order to maintain the *Alabama Community of Excellence* designation, communities must be recertified within three to five years from their original designation. To achieve recertification, communities are required to submit semi-annual progress reports, update their strategic plan, provide annual documentation of the leadership program, have a current comprehensive plan and be able to demonstrate progress toward achieving the goals set forth in their strategic and comprehensive plans.

Conclusion

While ACE is not a subsidiary or affiliate of any national organization, it often works in collaboration and cooperation not only with its funding partner organizations but various community development service providers and organizations including the Alabama Community Leadership Network, Auburn University Urban Studio, Design Alabama and Your Town Alabama. ACE services and operations are predominately performed by unpaid volunteers who serve on the ACE Associate Council and donate their time and expertise to assist communities.

For additional information on ACE, the application process and ACE-designated communities, visit www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.com. ■