

# Fairhope's Path to Excellence: A Coastal Community's Commitment to Strategic Growth and Lasting Quality of Life



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**P**erched along the eastern shoreline of Mobile Bay, the city of Fairhope has long been recognized as one of Alabama's most picturesque and vibrant communities. With its sweeping sunsets, oak-lined streets and thriving downtown, Fairhope offers more than scenic beauty — it represents a model of thoughtful growth and community engagement. That commitment has earned the city recognition as this magazine edition's Alabama Communities of Excellence spotlight story.

## A Legacy Rooted in Vision

Established in 1908 with roughly 500 residents, Fairhope began as a small but ambitious community. Its early years were shaped by Henry George's Single Tax philosophy which led to the creation of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony. By the 1930s, this colony gifted the city many of its most treasured assets, including its waterfront parks, bluff lands and iconic pier, which continue to serve as cornerstones of civic life today.

Now home to approximately 25,000 residents, Fairhope has grown steadily while maintaining its charm. The city is widely known for its natural beauty, strong arts community, locally owned businesses and a calendar full of events that draw visitors from all over the state and country year-round.

## A Pathway to Excellence

Fairhope's journey with the ACE program began in August 2013, when city leadership committed to a comprehensive evaluation of municipal operations and long-term planning.

ACE was created in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to provide small communities, in the 2,000 to 18,000 population range, resources and knowledge that focus on the importance of planning, leadership development and broad-based community engagement. ACE provides community leaders with training and workshops to develop a vision and implementation strategies for their city. The program is designed to walk communities through a three-phased approach, which consists of assessing a community's strengths and weaknesses, developing a strategic plan and implementing it.

From the outset, Fairhope approached the process with intention. City staff and leadership worked across departments to gather data, assess strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Paige Crawford, the city's director of community affairs and ACE local coordinator, said the effort required both transparency and teamwork.

*The city hosts its annual arts and crafts festival the third weekend in March.*





*The Alabama-Mississippi Sea Grant Consortium and the Gulf of America Alliance recognized Fairhope in January as Alabama's first Clean and Resilient Marina.*



*Mayor Sullivan and members of the Fairhope City Council showcase the community's free downtown shuttle during the holidays.*

“City leadership worked collaboratively across departments to gather documentation, evaluate our strengths and areas for improvement and align our policies with ACE standards,” Crawford said. “The process required honest assessment, coordination and a shared commitment to excellence.”

**Strengthening Strategy and Structure**

Participation in ACE proved to be transformative for Fairhope’s internal operations.

“ACE helped formalize and sharpen our strategic focus,” Crawford said. “It strengthened internal processes, improved cross-department communication and reinforced our commitment to long-term planning rather than reactive decision-making.”

That emphasis on proactive planning has become a defining characteristic of Fairhope’s approach to governance. Through the development of a comprehensive strategic plan, the city established clear priorities, measurable goals and a roadmap for sustainable growth.

City leaders continue to revisit and update the plan to reflect evolving community needs, ensuring that progress remains aligned with residents’ expectations.


**Building Trust Through Accountability**

For Fairhope, the ACE designation represents more than a credential — it reflects a promise to its residents and business community.

“To me, the ACE distinction represents credibility and trust,” Crawford said. “It tells our residents and business community that Fairhope is committed to responsible growth and continuous improvement.”

That trust is reinforced through consistent public engagement. The city communicates its progress through council meetings, public updates, digital platforms and community events, ensuring residents understand not only what decisions are being made but also the reasoning behind them.

**Balancing Growth and Character with Continued Progress**

Although Fairhope Mayor Sherry Sullivan was not in office at the time the city completed the ACE designation process, she has served as mayor for the past six years and is currently ALM’s president. She previously worked for the city of Fairhope for almost 17 years and worked for Riviera Utilities as director of governmental affairs and economic development. 

As Fairhope and Baldwin County continue to be among the fastest growing areas of the state, Mayor Sullivan says maintaining balance remains a central priority. The city is focused on investing in infrastructure, supporting small businesses and enhancing quality-of-life amenities, all while preserving the distinctive character that sets it apart.

Tree-lined streets, walkable neighborhoods and a vibrant downtown are not just features — they are intentional



*In June 2025, the city of Fairhope held a kickoff ceremony for the creation of Hatch Fairhope in the former historic K-1 Center school building.*

outcomes of planning efforts shaped in part by the ACE framework.

Last August, the city completed the first phase of the Flying Creek Nature Preserve, which is a 108-acre wooded sanctuary located along Fly Creek in Fairhope. True to the city's founding vision of reserving exceptional land for public benefit, this preserve offers a peaceful escape into nature, featuring a rich forest and ecosystem. Designed to support passive recreation and environmental education,



the preserve will be developed over several phases with minimal impact to the existing native habitat. Some of the highlights of this \$4 million project includes a nature center, multi-use nature trails, outdoor classrooms, a butterfly garden and eventually a restored, seven-acre pine forest.

The city also recognizes the importance of regional collaboration. Mayor Sullivan is actively involved in the Baldwin County Mayors Association along with the League.

She said, "No matter the challenge, idea or situation, chances are someone has already faced it. These relationships give me access to a wealth of knowledge and experience that help me better serve my community."

By working with neighboring communities, Fairhope strengthens not only its own future but that of the broader region. One example of this cross-collaboration is the renovation of the historic Fairhope K-1 Center into a cutting-edge tech incubator — Hatch Fairhope. This pioneering hub is the result of a dynamic partnership between the city of Fairhope and the Baldwin Community and Economic Development Foundation. Designed to support tech-driven entrepreneurs across Fairhope and Baldwin County, Hatch Fairhope provides a vibrant platform for both early-stage startups and established businesses to grow and thrive.

"By restoring this beloved building, we are not only preserving a vital piece of Fairhope's history but also reimagining it as a center for innovation and opportunity," Mayor Sullivan said. "The Fairhope K-1 Center will once again be a place of learning — equipped with the tools, resources and collaborative environment that today's entrepreneurs need to succeed."

Both projects are being funded in whole or partially with grants from the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, Innovate Alabama, the state of Alabama and the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

### A Model for Other Communities

Fairhope's experience offers valuable insights for other municipalities considering participation in the ACE program.

"Embrace the process," Crawford said. "ACE works best when city leadership is willing to take an honest look at operations and commit to continuous improvement."

That mindset has positioned Fairhope as a leader among Alabama communities — one that demonstrates how strategic planning, civic engagement and collaboration can create lasting success.

From its origins as a small coastal settlement to its current role as an ACE community, Fairhope exemplifies what is possible when a city invests in itself, not just for today, but for generations to come. In doing so, Fairhope stands as a shining example of excellence along the shores of Mobile Bay, offering a blueprint for communities across Alabama seeking to build a better future. ■



*The city recently completed construction on a traffic circle where Scenic 98, Veterans Drive and Triangle Drive converge to ensure safety and efficiency for travelers.*



*Phase one of the Flying Creek Nature Preserve opened in Fairhope in August 2025.*

Scan the QR code for more information about the ACE Program.

