



Gardendale Maximizes New Sports Complex for Community Growth

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A few weeks ago, several team members of the Alabama League of Municipalities traveled up to the city of Gardendale to meet with Mayor Stan Hogeland for a tour of the city’s new Bill Noble Park Athletic and Recreation Complex. Upon arrival, a huge replica of the Olympic torch greeted us, and of course (me being a former college athlete) I gravitated toward it, which is the exact intent the mayor and city council had when they were designing the look. I must say, all of us who had the pleasure of seeing this place in person, were blown away, but we will come back to all the facts and figures in a moment.

We are delighted to recognize Gardendale as this quarter’s Alabama Communities of Excellence honoree! The ACE program was established in 2002, and officially became a League program last year. ACE offers free tools and resources to smaller municipalities, with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000, to ultimately leverage a community’s unique assets to promote growth and prosperity.

Gardendale was founded in 1955 and has over 16,000 residents living in this northern suburb of Birmingham.

★ If you have never visited, you might at least recall seeing the iconic, 125-foot-tall steel cross on the side of I-65 in front of Gardendale First Baptist Church. Gardendale applied for the ACE program in 2019 and attained designation in 2021.

Bill Casaday, Gardendale’s ACE local coordinator, spearheaded the city’s participation by attending ACE training workshops, Your Town Alabama’s workshop and worked closely with ACE leadership to meet the

program’s requirements. One of the main ACE requirements is establishing a strategic plan. Gardendale formed an ACE Strategic Planning Committee, consisting of elected officials, business owners, retirees, educators, a minister, parents and young professionals to develop the city’s goals. Within this group of 20 community leaders, they formed subcommittees on marketing, education, infrastructure

Mary Jackson, Kayla Bass, Gardendale Mayor Stan Hogeland, Councilmember Bryan Knox, Baker Allen and Greg Cochran stand in front of the Olympic torch replica at Bill Noble Park in Gardendale.



and economic development. Casaday said the strategic plan allowed their city to assess its strengths and weaknesses, encourage citizens’ participation, and create measurable action plans for each approved improvement.

Casaday stated, “The involvement of citizens in the assessment and goal setting process was priceless for our city because it gave us grassroots information to allow us to make our goals match the needs that we had in our city.”

The ACE process has helped with focusing on the economic development of the city, its marketing, and improving education and recreation opportunities for their youth. The biggest accomplishment, since participating in the program, has been the completion



of their new \$34 million Bill Noble Park, which has all turf fields for football, nine baseball/softball fields, 11 pickleball courts, eight tennis courts, a beach volleyball court, an event center, a putting green, two half-sized basketball courts and a state-of-the-art playground for the community to enjoy. The park has not only improved the quality of life for local families, but it has made Gardendale a destination place for families, all over the Southeast, to visit, eat and shop in their city.



Another area of impact has been enhancing the local education system. The mayor and city council have provided several million dollars through a 5-mill property tax to improve their four schools, which are a part of the Jefferson County School System. They have also made efforts to recognize the positive things happening in their schools through highlighting them on social media, websites and in a campaign with a local news station. ACE program participation even led to the creation of the Rocket Education Enrichment Foundation. The third major change has been implementing two new websites - cityofgardendale.com and mygardendale.com - for the city to share general city information and events, along with marketing it to its citizens, visitors and prospective businesses.



Gardendale's ACE Strategic Planning Committee was instrumental in the city receiving the ACE designation in 2021.

Mayor Hogeland said, “The changes we have experienced during the ACE process have been awesome and really have made a huge difference in our city’s growth over the last several years.”

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the sportsplex, I want to rewind and give you some background. Gardendale’s Municipal Park was built in the 1960s and was eventually renamed after longtime Gardendale Mayor Bill Noble, who served from 1972 to 1996. Mayor Hogeland, a

★ lifelong resident of Gardendale, has been involved with the city either as an employee or elected official for 48 years. In fact, he began his first city job at just 14-years-old with the Gardendale Parks and Recreation Department before working his way up to director.

In 2020, Mayor Hogeland decided the park and ball fields, which he played on as a child, simply had outgrown its original design and that the city needed to modernize and show an enhanced commitment to their youth and the future of the city. He, along with the city council, also wanted a park that allowed both boys and girls to play softball and baseball in the same complex for the first time. The goal was to eliminate the split of the family on game nights: having a son at one park and a daughter at another. Mayor Hogeland was very passionate about sharing the motivating factors for revamping the park; he wanted to put the citizens first, not the economic impact. After two years of planning and 15 months of construction, the new facility opened in March of 2023!

Since then, the park has hosted over 50 athletic tournaments and has become a major economic driver and marketing tool. The city has partnered with The Retail Coach recruitment firm to assist the city with locating possible new businesses in Gardendale. The city boasts an attractive new development called Magnolia Crossings, right off I-65 at the 271 exit, which has a new Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse and Chipotle. An Ulta, cosmetics store, is also being built there with more room for growth.

Mayor Hogeland said, “We are experiencing a tremendous amount of momentum in new businesses openings in our city, and our desire is to continue working on making it easier for new businesses to find a home in our city.”

Casaday advises cities interested in participating in the ACE process to get the buy-in from the mayor and city council, along with including a broad section of the community in the strategic planning phases, to make the effort a success.

“The aspect of the ACE process that we enjoyed the most was the involvement of our citizens on the different committees and their insight, and input, on what the city needed to address for improvement,” Casaday shared. “Their engagement in the ACE process was a joy to watch and be a part of because you could see the love they had for our city.”

Looking toward the future, Mayor Hogeland and Casaday said they will continue to have follow up meetings with their strategic planning committees to check the status of where they are in achieving their goals and will set up an ACE program page on their city website.

As we approach the League’s Municipal Leadership Institute, Gardendale will be among the newest Economic Development Academy graduates. The mayor told me their engagement with the retail recruitment company was a direct result from working with the EDA and realizing that the city needed to have an entity actively working for them to identify and recruit specific businesses to the city. Mayor Hogeland and several city councilmembers have not only been active with ACE and EDA, but with the League’s Certified Municipal Official program as well.

“The knowledge learned in each of these programs is like pieces of a puzzle that are different but, put together, have helped our city as we work on growth and development,” Mayor Hogeland said. ★ “It would be very beneficial for any city in Alabama to be involved in CMO, ACE and EDA processes because it gives your city such a wide range of knowledge to assist you in growing your business community and your city.”

Although Bill Noble Park has put Gardendale on the sports tourism map, Mayor Hogeland made it very clear to us that quality of life is the priority in the city of Gardendale. “Maximize usage, while protecting the rights and expectations of the local residents” is the motto they developed to ensure that the park functions as planned. I predict Gardendale will do just that. I could not convince our team to go down the big slides, but I did convince them to hop on a seesaw and merry-go-round! Mayor Hogeland, Director Casaday and all the wonderful people that operate Bill Noble Park would love for you to visit; just give them a holler, and you might even get the golf cart tour! ■

**For more information
about the ACE program,
scan this QR code.**

