

ACE Spotlight: Millbrook's Recreational Investments Score Major Economic Opportunities for Region

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Since incorporating 48 years ago, the city of Millbrook has grown from a small, suburban community into the largest city in Elmore County, with a population quickly approaching 18,000. It is located just 10 miles north of the capital city, making it attractive to those who want a little less hustle and bustle and more family-oriented, quality of life services. That is evident by the continuous growth in residential developments supported by those that are just starting their families to those looking to retire. Being close to Maxwell Air Force Base and the main offices of most state agencies contributes to a large presence of military and public servant families in the area. Today, the city of Millbrook is intent on maintaining its welcoming, charismatic appeal while investing in opportunities that will have generational impacts in its community and the entire region.

The Alabama League of Municipalities has had its eye on Millbrook's recent endeavors and is excited to delve into the magic happening behind the scenes as this magazine edition's Alabama Communities of Excellence feature story.

Millbrook was selected to participate in the ACE program in May 2005 and earned the designation of an Alabama Community of Excellence on April 23, 2007. Ann Harper, director of economic development for the city, has served as the ACE local coordinator since 2018. She said that her predecessor Carol Thompson was instrumental in securing Millbrook's designation as an ACE community along with Mayor Al Kelley, a native of Millbrook, who has served the city for 28 years.

ACE was created in 2002 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.

Harper said, "Millbrook continues to take a proactive approach to keeping the ACE program relevant and impactful, ensuring that our citizens stay informed, engaged and actively participating in the city's development."

Councilman Michael Gay and Ann Harper show off the 17 Springs Fieldhouse.



Through the ACE three-phased approach, which consists of assessing a community's strengths and weaknesses, developing a strategic plan and implementing it, Millbrook has been successful in enhancing its economic development and quality of life efforts.

Using Outdoor Recreation as an Economic Catalyst

Outdoor recreation has long been a major focus of the community, which has six municipal parks and a municipal owned 18-hole golf course. The local Grandview Family YMCA offers unique amenities such as 190 acres of picnic areas, walking trails, a playground, athletic fields and its very own lake! Millbrook is also home to the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF), Alabama's oldest and largest nonprofit outdoor conservation organization, which operates the Alabama Nature Center. This facility includes an indoor conservation education center known as the NaturePlex and five miles of boardwalks and trails. ★

All of this is much more than many communities of this size can offer, but there is still more! The city's flagship economic driver, a \$100-million investment, is its recent creation of the 17 Springs multi-sport complex, which sits on a sprawling 200-acre site. The idea for 17 Springs, which is named after a historic art festival hosted decades ago in the Millbrook community on the Grandview YMCA property, was started in 2017 when the city of Millbrook, Grandview Family YMCA, Elmore County Board of Education, Elmore County Economic Development Authority and the Elmore County Commission started brainstorming conversations on how they could form a public-private partnership to pull together the resources to develop a project that could serve multiple purposes including recreational, entertainment and retail opportunities.

After meeting with other cities that built sport complexes, city leaders made it a goal to have enough courts and fields to host all levels of championship tournaments while also having event space to host conferences, trade shows, concerts and banquets. 17 Springs is being built in three phases. The first two phases were completed in August of 2023 and February of 2025. The property features 12 pickleball courts, 12 tennis courts, five multi-purpose turf fields designed for soccer and football, a 5,500-seat stadium with a competition track, six turf diamond fields and an 86,000-square-foot indoor venue called The Fieldhouse. The Fieldhouse features a 42,000-square-foot event space that can be transformed into four basketball courts, eight volleyball courts or 12 wrestling mats. It also has three conference rooms, a concession area, locker rooms and more. The facility even has the ability to livestream any of their events on any field or court through the service MuscoVision, so parents, family, friends and recruiters can watch athletic events in real time from anywhere.



*Photo credit:
Elmore County Commission*



Soccer is one of the many sports youth and adults are able to play at 17 Springs.

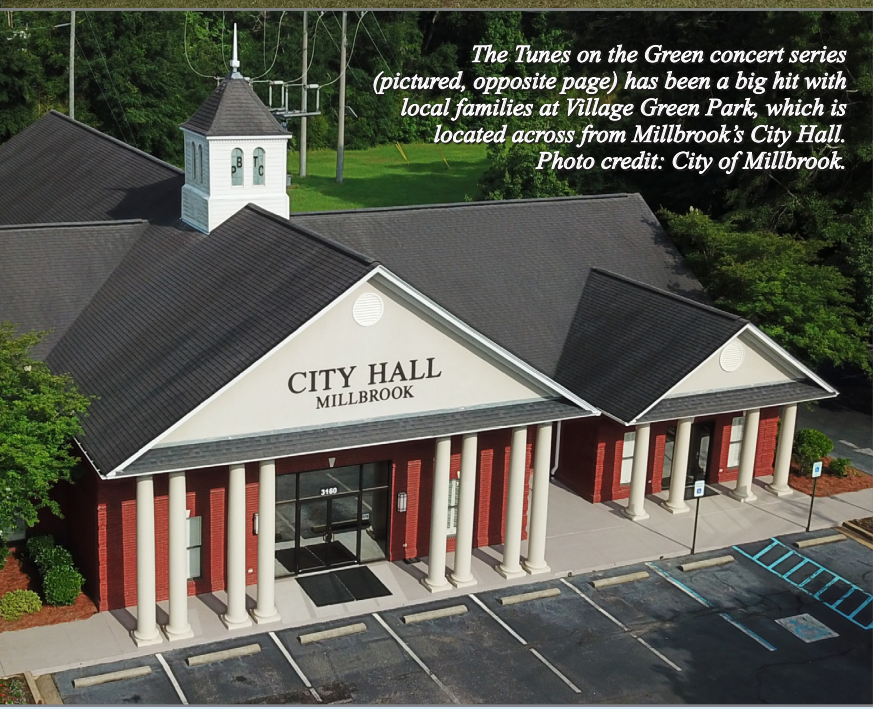


Phase three of construction is underway on The Marketplace at 17 Springs. See the orange areas for reference.

Carol Barksdale painted this welcoming mural on the side of an automotive business in Millbrook in 2023. Photo credit: Stephanie Williams Photography



The Tunes on the Green concert series (pictured, opposite page) has been a big hit with local families at Village Green Park, which is located across from Millbrook's City Hall. Photo credit: City of Millbrook.



Currently, phase three of construction is underway on The Marketplace at 17 Springs, the adjacent development that sits in front of the 17 Springs sports complex on State Highway 14. This commercial area offers pad-ready sites for sale and will offer a mix of dining, lodging, entertainment and health care opportunities. City officials have already announced that Baumhower's Victory Grille and a Southern Orthopedic Surgeons clinic will locate in The Marketplace, and they expect more announcements soon.

"ACE helped unite city and corporate leaders, business owners and economic developers around major projects like the 17 Springs project, which would not be possible without this collaboration and cooperation," Harper said. "That public-private partnership was only possible because of the groundwork laid through ACE's collaboration model."

Taking on a project this massive requires strong oversight. Instead of selecting a contract managing firm to run the 17 Springs operation, they chose to let local leaders step up to the plate and utilize the YMCA of Greater Montgomery, the parent organization to the Grandview Family YMCA, to manage the day-to-day operations. Justin Jones, who has served on the city council for 10 years, is 17 Springs' operations director. He is one of a team of three full-time workers that operate the facility on a daily basis. Through 17 Springs' public-private partnership they have the ability to bring in approximately 30 local YMCA staff members for big events.

"Part of our role here is to ensure that the complex is being utilized to its full potential by bringing in a variety of events to our complex and city. By bringing events here to 17 Springs, not only do we flourish but so does Elmore County, the city of Millbrook and our local business owners around the area," Councilman Jones said. "With the backing of the YMCA as one of the partners in the establishment of 17 Springs, we have access to a very large group of employees that have a heart for the community and for serving others."

Establishing a Family-Friendly Downtown

While the 17 Springs project is the economic catalyst for building up the Highway 14 corridor that runs through the highest trafficked area of the city, the downtown area is being developed with local entrepreneurship and residents in mind.

Council President Michael Gay was elected to office in 2013 and serves on the ALM Board of Directors. He explained, "17 Springs was the first

step for Millbrook to do our greater vision of building a downtown. While the 17 Springs project is about business, downtown is going to be about us where we can come together as a family and as a community and have fun and enjoy our town together.”



Although incorporated in 1977, Millbrook’s past dates back to being a part of the Creek Indian town of Coosawda. Originally called Edgewood, Millbrook was renamed in honor of the gristmill on the brook that flows through it. The area often served as a nearby summer retreat for wealthy Montgomery families. Its allure has attracted several notable state leaders to call it home including three governors: William Wyatt Bibb, who was appointed the first territorial governor of Alabama; Thomas Bibb, William’s brother who was the second governor of Alabama; and Benjamin Fitzpatrick, who was the eleventh governor of the state.

Following the completion of I-65 in the 1970s, Millbrook has capitalized on being conveniently located off of three interstate exits. Its main street is comprised of a four-lane highway that connects the southern segment, along Alabama River Parkway, and the northern segment, along Highway 14, with the downtown district.

“We don’t have the traditional downtown that some older cities have,” Harper shared. “We took the heart of the city, which is what we’re calling our downtown, and we’re crafting it really from the ground up.”

The city has partnered with Downtown Strategies, Place Associates and the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission to identify and develop strategies for placemaking and creating economic opportunities in the main street area particularly around the Village Green Park, which is located across the street from the city hall. The city has also engaged DT Design Studio to provide design services for the downtown in the way of infrastructure improvements that will help support commercial development, parking areas, open space, walking paths, outdoor gathering areas and recreational amenities. They are hopeful this will allow them to host new events to attract visitors, increase walkability and enhance the downtown experience.

So far, they opened a new senior center in 2022; they repurposed an old home into a community arts facility called The Art Mill in 2023; they launched a program to create murals throughout the city; and they have added a new community festival (MayFest) and an outdoor concert series at the Village Green Park during the spring and fall. Lastly, this year, they recruited a Big Mike’s Steakhouse to locate downtown. It is expected to open in late October and create 35 full-time and part-time jobs.

“It’s a great blessing for our downtown area to have Big Mike’s Steakhouse open here in Millbrook, and it’s going to be a great financial benefit. Not only a financial benefit, but just a benefit for this part of town,” Mayor Kelley said. “We’ve been looking for that catalyst project to launch the downtown area, and Big Mike’s Steakhouse is it.”

Strengthening Local Partnerships for Future Growth

In addition to the downtown and 17 Springs initiatives, the city continues to encourage retail and hotel development projects in other areas of the city by cultivating a business-friendly environment and identifying partnership and collaborative opportunities. The city also periodically updates its strategic plan and uses its ACE designation as part of the team’s economic recruitment process.

“From an economic development perspective, going through a strategic planning process validates that we are a ‘business-ready’ and a ‘capable’ community,” Harper said. “The fact that Millbrook has an ACE status may make us more attractive to potential businesses, investors and developers.”



Likewise, she believes having the ACE status improves her community's position when applying for state or federal grants for infrastructure and development needs.

The city of Millbrook has worked hard to increase its retail footprint. In July of 2024, it opened a Publix grocery store that employs approximately 135 people. This retail development also has additional retail space that includes a Korean barbecue restaurant, nail salon, hair salon and two outparcels, one of which has been developed into a 7-Brew Coffee Shop. Just a half mile away, another retail shopping strip has been completed and is now accepting tenants. The city's planning and zoning department has been bombarded with questions and requests for site plan reviews in recent months indicating that there is a lot more on the horizon to come for Millbrook.

City officials attribute much of their success to their broader mission of enhancing Millbrook's quality of life and economic vitality through strategic partnerships and community engagement. The city has embarked on a new and stronger collaborative relationship with the Millbrook Area Chamber of Commerce and other groups in the River Region.

Harper explained, "It is important to connect with surrounding communities when developing plans because they may be able to help with the project, particularly if it's beneficial to them as well or there is reciprocity."

For example, the city of Millbrook is one of five participants that collectively make up the newly formed West Elmore Sewer Group (WESG). The other participants are the town of Elmore, the town of Deatsville, Elmore Water and Sewer Authority and the Elmore County Commission. Formalized in 2022, the WESG creates a mechanism to expand access to sanitary sewer service in western Elmore County and helps free up treatment capacity at the Millbrook Wastewater Treatment Plant by constructing a Unified Sewer Line (USL) that connects to the Wetumpka Water and Sewer Board's sewage treatment facility. Each participant will have access to the USL once completed by the end of 2026. This project will help support future economic growth in the city.

"As projects are implemented, the city continues to engage the public by providing updates on the status of projects and seeking community input on ongoing initiatives," Harper said. "This commitment to transparency and involvement helps maintain public support and ensures that development aligns with the community's evolving needs."

All these efforts demonstrate Millbrook's commitment to growth by investing in infrastructure, attracting businesses, enhancing quality of life and fostering a collaborative environment. We will be rooting for the city of Millbrook and wish them great success in the years ahead! ■



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Millbrook city officials and company representatives broke ground on the new Publix site in August 2023. Photo credit: Stephanie Williams Photography



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