

Thomasville, AL

A Regional Model for Rural Success



By Carrie A. Banks • Communications Director • ALM

Editor's note: The Alabama League of Municipalities launched Live Locally Alabama in January 2018 – a grassroots campaign to encourage civic engagement, instill community pride and highlight the crucial role municipal government plays in the daily lives of Alabama's citizens. As part of this campaign, we will include a Live Locally Alabama feature in each issue of the Journal highlighting important community topics and quality of life issues that will help municipal officials and employees improve their cities and towns for the people they serve. For additional information on this campaign, visit livelocallyalabama.org.

Located 100 miles from the nearest urban center in one of Alabama's poorest regions, Thomasville is shifting the narrative for a multi-county area within the Black Belt through collaboration, forward-thinking and steadfastly refusing to accept the status quo.

"We've always tried to create a mindset that it's cool to be rural," said longtime Thomasville Mayor Sheldon Day. "What do people in big cities do on the weekends? They want to get out of the city. So why not now, especially with technology, *live* in a rural area and go to a big city when

you absolutely have to? In less than two hours you can be anywhere, but you can *live* in a low crime area with good schools and the arts – a well-rounded community."

With a population approaching 5,000, this Clarke County municipality absolutely believes in itself – and has been actively building on its inherent resources for the past two decades, effectively generating quality of life services and experiences that resonate well beyond its city limits.

And it all started with Mississippi ...

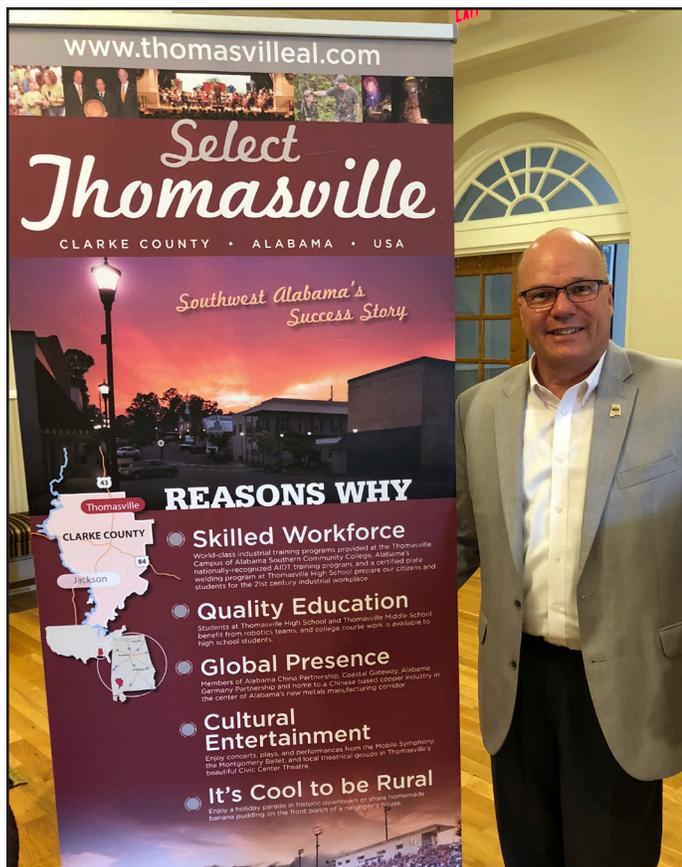
Learn from successful models – and keep learning.

"When I got in office in 1996, I asked everybody where's the best model for rural development," said Day, who is a Thomasville native. "And everybody told me Tupelo, Mississippi. I went and spent three days at the Community Development Foundation (CDF) in Tupelo, met Vaughn Grisham and we began a relationship that involved brainstorming about what we could do here in Thomasville."

Day's experience in Tupelo and his relationship with Dr. Grisham, emeritus director of the McLean Institute at the University of Mississippi where he has taught for the past 40+ years as well as authored several books, proved to be invaluable. Dr. Grisham has helped establish leadership programs in more than 300 counties and has done community development work in more than 30 states. His research focuses on studying small, poor communities that have transformed themselves into the best economic models in the country. His community development leadership training explores how these ordinary communities have achieved extraordinary results. In his 1999 case study, *Hand in Hand: Community and Economic Development in Tupelo*, he identifies several guiding principles:

- Local people must address local problems.
- Each person should be treated as a resource. So the community development process begins with the development of people.

continued on page 14



Thomasville Mayor Sheldon Day

- The goal of community development is to help people help themselves.
- Meet the needs of the whole community by starting with its poorest members, not just as targets for top-down efforts but as full partners in helping design those efforts.
- Leadership is a prime ingredient, but community development cannot be achieved without organizations and structure.
- Community development must be done both locally and regionally if the full benefits are to be achieved.
- Never turn the community development process over to any agency that does not involve the people of the community.
- Expenditures for community development are an investment – not a subsidy – and will return gains to the investors. So people with money have both the responsibility and an interest in investing in the development of their own community.

“I looked at what they were doing in Tupelo at that time,” Day said. “They’d built this new job training center, which was a collaborative effort between the city schools and the community college, where they were basically sending high school students to get college credit and to prepare them for the workforce right out of high school or very quickly out of high school because they had such a need for additional workforce. I brought that idea back. Our high school and the college are a tenth of a mile apart – they’re neighbors – so we collaborated with the K-12 system and the two-year college system, trying to get everybody to work together and do more. We started with welding and then went into pre-nursing then pre-engineering and now we have IT and we’re doing all types of course work and collaborative efforts between the high school and the college. In the past 11 years, we’ve graduated 200 welders out of our high school – we have an

actual college-based instructor at our high school five days a week teaching welding and college courses on our high school campus. We were one of the first high schools in the state to offer legitimate dual enrollment.”

Success is built on relationships and identifying resources. And saying ‘thank you’.

“I have a saying – the only way to get back on your feet is to get off your fanny,” Day said. “And it’s true. We can’t sit here and wait for the state to fix our problems or wait for the federal government to fix our problems because what we’d be waiting on is ‘well, when we get that grant, we can do this or when they come down here to help us we’ll start moving forward.’ The key to success in rural Alabama is about relationships, working together and *not* accepting the status quo.”

To that end, Day began cultivating resources through active participation in statewide programs such as the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE), which helps communities ranging in populations from 2,000 to 18,000 to identify and maximize their attributes to strengthen long-term economic success, and by developing relationships from the Governor’s office to the State House to Alabama’s Congressional Delegation.

“I think every community that’s eligible should go through the ACE program,” Day said. “However, don’t just go through it and stick it on the shelf. I think rural communities, for the most part, have been beat down psychologically. We’ve found this in the Black Belt. They continue to lower the expectation for their community in the hopes that they get *something* done. In Thomasville, we’re working on dozens of projects – it’s like fishing. The only way to catch fish is to keep fishing. Some days they’re biting



The Thomasville Civic Center and City Hall is housed in a completely renovated early 20th century high school building and features a 500-seat professional theater.



The Thomasville Civic Center's 500-seat theater, which features community theater productions and music concerts, is a huge draw, not only for local residents but for the surrounding counties.

and some days they're not. But when they're not biting you can't just close up and go home. I felt like a bumper car when I first got in office. I started looking at where we were and what was our purpose and where we were going – what was our vision. And Sen. (Richard) Shelby actually gave me some advice – he said I'll help you, but I want to know what everybody else is doing – I want to see your plan. The way you garner respect and increase their interest in helping you with projects is you've got to show them you're willing to do what it takes to make the project a success – to make something happen successfully. Once you get one project done and they buy in, the next time you ask for help, you've built the reputation for getting things done and it's a little easier. Also, I don't ask for something every time. Instead I go and say thank you. That's one of the keys. I put those who help us in the forefront. I tell people we wouldn't have been able to get the project done with the help of Sen. Shelby or the Governor or whoever was involved. We've got people who will storm to the wall for us because they know we're working nonstop. When I start a big project, I understand it's going to take me three years just to get the plans done, figure out how we're going to fund it and how we're going to get those pieces in place – that's when I can start taking it to others for help and to begin stacking grant sources to provide some of the funding.”

It starts with *community*.

“You have to have a vision,” Day said. “You really have to look at your assets. Community involvement is a key piece. To really be successful, in order to get grant money or to get people from the state and federal government to really notice what you're doing, you've got to actually be *doing* something! You've got to try to do it and then you can prove to them you're serious and you can show them – here's my

gap; here's where I need your help. Thomasville has been successful in *doing*. If we had waited for the state to renovate our Civic Center, we'd have never gotten any help. Instead, we formed an Arts Council and started working towards a solid plan.”

And from there, something truly incredible happened – the city was able to purchase and renovate an early 20th Century high school building into a beautifully transformed space that houses not only City Hall but a very active Civic Center with a 500-seat theater and professional stage where community theater performances and music concerts are held throughout the year to sold-out audiences.

“When we first started dreaming of having this facility, I knew the only way the community was going to buy into it was if we *showed* the community we had a need for a theater,” Day said. “So, the Arts Council started producing shows and doing things at the high school, which has a cafeteria – basically a cafeteria with a stage at the end of it – and folks begin to understand we really needed a theater. We got people engaged from the very beginning; then we passed a lodgings tax and an increase in our business license fees to fund our facility. We did not have one person come out in opposition. We created the dream, showed them what it was going to look like and now we have this incredible facility.”

The theater has been a hub not only for Thomasville residents but for the surrounding counties. Karen Dean, who was born and raised in Thomasville and whose mother was the city's librarian, returned “home” to be closer to her family after graduating from the Alabama School of Fine Arts and then college. She is the Civic Center Director as well as the Artistic Director for the Arts Council. “When we started, we thought we'd have a little community theater group and



The Thomasville Public Library offers a career-readiness program to help job seekers with resumes, applications and computer access. This program, which served more than 50,000 visitors from throughout the region last year, has been so successful that plans are underway to relocate the library to a significantly larger facility in Thomasville's historic downtown.

maybe in 20 years we'd have a theater," she said. "It took us five. We usually have eight to 11 counties involved in each production. The Arts Council has reached out to Camden and Sweet Water and other communities to collaborate. We have been blessed. Big dreams can grow in small places."

The theater has now been active for nearly 14 years and is about to produce its 16th show. The Arts Council has also started an honor band program for the surrounding area with participants from eight counties and high schools.

According to Mayor Day, well over 1,000 folks attend each theater production because they're held for three or four nights. "Our draw area is huge because we are pretty much 100 miles from anybody," he said. "We've kind of become the epicenter. We work closely with the folks in Monroeville as well as Demopolis and other cities; we're not trying to just do our own thing. We're collaborating with other communities – which is what we're supposed to do. We've had the Mobile Symphony here numerous times. We've had the Montgomery Ballet do "The Nutcracker". We also have an art room where we teach painting and other art classes. We've got culture in the country!"

In addition to theater productions, concerts and art programs, Thomasville has made a concerted effort to develop a ready workforce, beginning with what started out as a career-readiness help desk in the Thomasville Public Library and has now become an invaluable resource for job seekers and those needing help with applications or access to a computer, WiFi and a printer. Library staff also provide guidance on creating resumes, filling out job applications and finding continuing education opportunities. This program,

which served more than 50,000 visitors last year, has been so popular the City plans to relocate the library into a larger, two-story building within its historic downtown – a move that will quadruple the library's existing space and allow the creation of a dedicated career-readiness department with more than 30 computers.

"Thomasville is kind of an island to itself prosperity wise in the Black Belt but we realize so goes Thomasville, so goes the Black Belt – our economy is based on all those people who come from the Black Belt to shop here and do business here so it's our duty and, in my opinion, our obligation to be a partner with those folks to do all we can to help Wilcox, Marengo and the surrounding counties," Day said.

In the past 12 years, Thomasville has grown from one industrial park to five with more than \$700 million in capital investment and 1,000 new jobs and is on the cusp of an additional \$200 million investment and 300 jobs. Day understands that while Thomasville is a city of 5,000, the entire trade area is more than 70,000; therefore, identifying and showcasing the strengths of the region means collaborating with numerous stakeholders and thinking beyond one's own borders.

"We've done that with the arts; we've done that with job creation," he said. "We recruited Golden Dragon (a modern copper tubing application center with the capacity to produce more than 100 million pounds of copper per year). It's in Wilcox County. Five years ago, before Golden Dragon started production, Wilcox County was at 28.8 percent unemployment; today they're at 8.6. That's still more than twice the national

continued on page 32



The Thomasville Regional Medical Center, currently under construction, will be a 35-acre, state-of-the-art complex with a \$40 million, 29-bed hospital and room to grow.

average but it's the first time Wilcox County has been in single digits in *forever* and this past June was the first time – officially – they weren't the highest unemployment county in the state. These are manufacturing jobs and they are stable."

Know your strengths, plan forward and think beyond your municipal borders.

Day sums up regional rural success with a favorite Teddy Roosevelt quote: *Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.*

"If you're not on an interstate, you're wasting your time going after industry that typically locates on an interstate," he said. "In Thomasville's case, our asset is the railroad. Virtually every project we go after, industrial-wise, is a vital user of railroad. There's only about 15 percent of the projects that are looking at Alabama to locate that need access to rail; however, there's only about 15 to 20 percent of the communities in the state that have access to rail. So we are on the short list of communities that have the resources and industrial parks already in place for an industry that needs access to rail – and we planned all that as we went forward. Planning and looking at all your resources is essential – but looking past your city limits and past your county line is also crucial."

For instance, if an industry asks if Thomasville has a port, Day immediately says yes – the Port of Mobile as well as the port on the Tombigbee River located in the City of Jackson 30 miles away. "You have to consider all the resources within a 40, 50 – even a 100-mile radius and make that part of your sales pitch," he said. "You've got to know where your best infrastructure is, how accessible it is, what are the limitations – compile your data and be prepared. It's also important to talk with your Congressional Delegation about projects because they have ideas about working with other agencies, such as EDA, to make things happen. Do all your homework ahead of time because sometimes you may only have a 24-hour window to answer the questions that will lead to the next step. Work closely with your Chamber – whether it's the county Chamber or local Chamber. Bring *all* your resources to the table, such as Alabama Power, PowerSouth and others. You need to have good relationships with these entities because when an industry is looking to locate, they've got to have infrastructure. Everyone must sing from the same songbook. Our Industrial Board, our Chamber of Commerce, our City – we're all on the same page all the time."

Day emphasizes collaboration above all else. "Unfortunately, in the Black Belt, there's less collaboration than other regions because communities are so starved for *a* project – any project – they're scared someone might steal it, so they don't work together," he said. "You also have some municipalities where the relationship between the mayor and council is toxic. It can't just be a one-person show; it must be a team effort – and you've also got to be willing to let other people lead. Yes, we

need the state and federal government to come to the table, but we can't wait on them to do it – *we* have to get started first, creating the dream, creating the vision. And you can't do that if you don't work together."

Success begets success, but you must work for it.

Day said Thomasville worked diligently to increase its technology threshold – no small feat in Alabama's Black Belt and an effort that did not happen quickly. Collaboration and determination were key. "I worked closely with AT&T and their regional governmental affairs director for years regarding the future development of Thomasville and the need for additional broadband and the need to enhance those services in our industrial parks to accommodate industries that were moving into our area," he said. "So, starting about five years ago, we worked really hard with AT&T to bring major fiber into our area. Last year they finished that effort. Now all five of our industrial parks are certified "Fiber Ready". They all received their certification at the same time in 2017."

With the expansion of high-speed data access, another crucial element to community and regional quality of life is about to become a reality: a state-of-the-art medical park. The Thomasville Regional Medical Center is a 35-acre complex with a \$40 million, 29-bed hospital currently under construction and the potential for additional medical businesses. "We're about to be, in my opinion, the regional provider for healthcare with our new medical facility," Day said. "It's going to change the dynamic."

Be a model and a mentor for others.

"We've got to teach people to dream again – especially in rural areas," Day said. "Rural areas have a deep inferiority complex because they've been told for so long that people won't go there or you can't do something because you're rural."

To that end, Day is doing his part by hosting officials and leaders from throughout Alabama and beyond to share Thomasville's story, as well as his enthusiasm for rural living. "We've had dozens of communities from all over the South – Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee – visit to look at what we're doing," he said. He also encourages others to read Dr. Grisham's *Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities – Transforming Towns and Growing People*, published by the Kettering Foundation (2010). "If you just read that one book," he said, "you realize that, for the most part, our destiny is in our own hands. At the end of the day, if we're doing a good job communicating with the citizens – and the missions of the Chamber and the City and others overlap – and if we have a collaborative relationship with civic groups and nonprofits, the schools and our stakeholders, things *will* happen."

Thomasville's model is a 22-year journey that continues to evolve – and proof that regional rural success is attainable. ■