

The West Alabama – East Mississippi (WAEM) WIRED Initiative modeled WAEM Town from Your Town – Alabama. At the conclusion of the WIRED grant, WAEM Town transformed to Your Town – Mississippi operated by Mississippi State University.

WAEM Town Tango Takes First Step

Many small towns in West Alabama and East Mississippi face uncertain futures. Building better futures for these towns is no quick or easy chore. It takes a plan...at least that is what “Your Town Alabama” emphasizes.



“A community with a plan is more competitive,” says Cheryl Morgan, one of the principals in Your Town and director of Auburn’s Urban Studio in Birmingham, AL.

Your Town Alabama has been working with small towns for nearly 10 years. The West Alabama – East Mississippi (WAEM) Regional Initiative sought ways to help its small towns be more competitive. As a result, WAEM and Your Town partnered to bring a new program to the WAEM Region. It is called “WAEM Town.”

“WAEM Town greatly resembled Your Town,” explained Bill Crawford, director of the WAEM Regional Initiative. “But while it embodied the best of Your Town, WAEM Town also added steps from Mississippi’s Main Street Program and from initiatives by the Appalachian Regional Commission.”

To begin this new tango between West Alabama and East Mississippi, WAEM sent staff from all of its regional partners to the 2008 rendition of Your Town Alabama. WAEM staffers learned how to cultivate community spirit and participation to create common visions based on the assets of each individual town.

“I found the ‘Your Town Alabama’ training to be very inspiring and thought provoking,” said Joey Kenna, a WAEM team member from Mississippi’s East Central Community College. “If I had the opportunity to go back every year, I would definitely take advantage of it!”

Your Town Alabama is a three-day, participatory leadership retreat for citizen leaders, local political leaders, and professionals that focuses on the importance of asset-based planning and design for small towns. It is based on the national Your Town Leadership Initiative program developed by the National Endowment for the Arts.



First WAEM Town Offers Hope to Rural Communities

LOUISVILLE, MS – “This process is one of the best I’ve seen,” said long-time planning consultant John McClure. Columbus Mayor Robert Smith echoed those remarks. “Most of the time, we attend workshops where all we do is sit around listening to presenters,” said the mayor. “But this was hands on, and required teamwork, and I enjoyed it.” Mayor Smith also recommended that government officials from all levels attend future workshops.

The focus of these comments was the first WAEM Town Designing Our Future Workshop. Thirty-nine civic and community leaders from the West Alabama - East Mississippi (WAEM) region joined experts from Alabama and Mississippi to delve into practical planning and problem solving for rural communities. The highlight of the program, as noted by Mayor Smith, was the presentation of drawings, charts, goals, and vision to re-design and redevelop a hypothetical rural town; work product that resulted from the intensive hands-on work of the participants.

Highly participatory, the workshop also includes lectures, case-study presentations and interactive group problem solving. “It is a direct response to the uncertain future of Mississippi and Alabama small towns,” said workshop leader Cheryl Morgan, director of Auburn’s Urban Studio in Birmingham, AL. “It is a future increasingly threatened by large scale changes in our economy, population shifts, telecommunications and mass merchandising, and changes in land policy.” Planning and design decisions can often make the difference between survival and decay for rural communities.

“Communities do die,” said Bill Crawford, director of the WAEM Regional Initiative that sponsored the three-day workshop. He pointed to hundreds of communities that became extinct during the past 200 years in Mississippi. “Jack Shultz, author of Boom Town USA, says only one out of three rural communities may survive the 21st Century,” he said.

Designing Our Future, held at Lake Tiak O'Khata, October 22-24, 2008, targeted leaders in the WAEM Initiative region. Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, the workshop was based on a program that has been practiced by Your Town Alabama for the past ten years.



“I have learned a tremendous amount,” said Carolyn Ward of the West Point/Clay County Community Growth Alliance. “I work mostly in the [planning] office with support staff and never had a good understanding of how it all came together, so this has been instrumental for me.”

Second WAEM Town Offers Strength and Value for Communities

Community planners in action: ‘town’ groups identify the strengths and weaknesses of their community; then formulate plans to enhance assets and opportunities.

LOUISVILLE, MS – “I am going back with a renewed strength to make changes to benefit our community and our youth,” said J.J. Williamson, Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Collins, MS. One of 40 leaders representing communities throughout East Mississippi, Williamson participated in WAEM Town Designing Our Future workshop at Lake Tiak O'Khata, April 22- 24. WAEM Town is a “place building” project of the WAEM Regional Initiative.



“I appreciate the opportunity to come here and be around some of the most brilliant people I’ve met in a long time,” Williamson said.

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“I believe change comes from a vision,” stated Mark Robinson, of Reynolds and Robinson in Noxapater. “To me this route is a sure way to create a vision for our community.”

Cheryl Morgan of the Auburn School of Architecture Urban Studio gave the keynote address - “Planning to Succeed.” Jim Murrian, State Director of The Nature Conservancy, and Jack Moody, of the Mississippi Development Authority, discussed natural resources and how to preserve and capitalize on them. David Preziosi, Executive Director of the Mississippi Heritage Trust, discussed the value of cultural resources and historic preservation. Other presentations included case studies on Carthage, Mississippi by Jan Miller of the Mississippi Mainstreet Program and Marion, Alabama, by civic volunteer Judy Martin. A presentation on Economic Development was also delivered by Nisa Miranda, Director of the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development.

The workshop included a hands-on design exercise that focused on problem solving in a hypothetical town in Mississippi. Participants were divided into groups where they received key information about their town. The information included strengths and weaknesses, culture components, topographical resources, background and historical elements, and physical conditions and surroundings of the community. Each group was tasked with identifying a vision and then developing a design plan for the community. The design plan was formed by listing assets and opportunities the community should take advantage of. The key for participants was to make sure the community design plan and the vision aligned.

Vision and design are key components of place building. Group ideas were built upon the strengths, assets, and opportunities of the community. The ideas did share a similar theme of capitalizing on the natural setting of the town. One group wanted to convert the abandoned railroad into “Rails to Trails” walking and biking trails. Another group enhanced their downtown by adding more walking and strolling sections. All ideas were presented to the mayor and council members of the town.

“Everyone who attended WAEM Town is a winner,” said Ken Dupre’, WAEM Program Coordinator. “They can now bring this valuable community place building process back to their own communities.”

Many of the participants from WAEM Town will do just that. Columbus, Covington County, DeKalb, Heidelberg, Marion, Newton, and Noxapater are participating in WAEM’s place building process with a team from MainStreet Mississippi. The process involves a series of charrettes where community members provide input on how to improve their community. This is the same method participants in WAEM Town engaged in. In real time the entire process takes about three months.

“This [WAEM Town] is too good, too important, and too valuable for this not to continue,” said John McClure, planning consultant in Newton. “We need to find a way to institutionalize this program for years to come.”



The WAEM Regional Initiative was a U.S. Department of Labor demonstration of Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development. The demonstration concludes next January. Volunteering to serve as facilitators for WAEM Town were Ben Wieseman, KPS Group; Randy Wilson, Community Design Solutions; Jeff Pruitt, Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments; Patrick Scoggin, Jones County Junior College; Kelly McLaughlin, Architect from New Orleans; Holly Hawkins, Belinda Stewart Architects; Chuck Kelly, Gresham, Smith & Partners; Bruce Hanson, East Mississippi Community College; Joey Hester, North-Central Alabama Regional Council of Governments; John McClure, Engineers & Surveyors, LLC. (Reprinted from the Kemper County Messenger)

“Your Town – Mississippi” Ready to Launch

Building on the prior successes of Your Town - Alabama and WAEM Town in Mississippi, the Mississippi State Community Action Team (MSCAT) will launch Your - Town Mississippi in May.

“The mix of presentations, hands-on design work, and lots of sharing and discussing will create a dynamic learning environment loaded with practical ideas to take home and apply in your community,” said Virgil Culver, MSCAT director.

The three-day retreat will be held May 18-20 at Lake Tiak O’Khata in Louisville, Mississippi. Applications for the workshop will be accepted through April 23.

“This process... is one of the best I’ve seen in incrementally bringing folks up to speed and be engaged, and it’s got the flexibility to nurture people who are brand new to this,” said John McClure, a planning consultant and executive director of the Alliance for Downtown Meridian. Participants are encouraged to focus on community assets as they use what they’ve learned to produce designs and plans for a community. Angie Burks, Executive Director of the Newton Chamber of Commerce, said the workshop changed the way she looked at her own community.

“We have so much potential sitting here... but we see it every day and we don’t think about it.” Burks and McClure are both alumni of WAEM Town, which was developed through the WAEM Regional Initiative with support from Your Town – Alabama leaders. Your Town - Mississippi evolved from WAEM Town after MSCAT and other state organizations accepted the challenge to sustain the program beyond the WAEM Initiative.

“We’re excited about this next step for community design training in Mississippi,” said Bill Crawford, director of the WAEM Regional Initiative. “This program has had such great success in Alabama we want it available to rural town leaders all across Mississippi.”

Your Town - Mississippi is an interactive workshop that focuses on community development using basic design and planning principles. Planning professionals lead teams of participants through exercises that address common small town issues such as the impact of a proposed bypass, the identification of potential tourism opportunities, the revitalization of a struggling downtown, and other typical small town challenges.