

The Small Town Design Initiative – Fifth Year Architecture Studio

Auburn University Center for Architecture & Urban Studies
Small Town Design Initiative Program
Birmingham, AL
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Cheryl Morgan, AIA
Professor & Director
Auburn University
Center for Architecture & Urban Studies
1731 First Avenue North, Third Floor
Birmingham, AL 35203

205 323 3592
205 323 8385 (f)

morgace@auburn.edu

Introduction

Auburn's Urban Studio created The Small Town Design Initiative in 1999 to bring planning and design services to the communities of Alabama. As the state's land grant institution we are charged with teaching, research AND outreach. This program provides a working methodology for teaching students the principles of assets-based planning while delivering a much-needed professional service to the small towns and rural areas of the state.

The Studio has worked with over 40 small towns and communities in the last six years. Some towns have as few as 400 people, but the average population is 1200 – 4800. These towns have the same needs for strategic decision-making as much larger communities, but, by-and-large, do not have the capacity or resources to have or hire professional planning services. They are seeking guidance and good tools for creating high quality of life and sustainable prosperity for their citizens.

Our assets-based approach focuses on the distinct and authentic characteristics of each community and stresses the value of building a plan on “what’s good” rather than on linear problem solving. Through on-the-ground research, town hall meetings and study of successful alternatives the studio proposes an illustrative plan designed to be a roadmap of concepts for the community. The results are published in a 22”x 34” full color poster that can be exhibited throughout the community – city hall, the schools, churches, shops, post office – and can, unlike reports that are filed away, become a reminder of the town’s goals and aspirations. The poster is distributed to every

household and becomes a tool for consensus building, recruiting, promoting and for seeking out and leveraging partnerships and resources.

Our process emphasizes new paradigms for thinking about the value of a community's assets – particularly scenic and natural beauty, cultural and historic sites and “small town” – as economic engines. Alabama's traditional economies – agriculture, forest products, and textile manufacturing – are rapidly changing, or being out-sourced, and many communities are either being left behind or bull-dozed over leaving blight or the anonymity of highway strip commercial and undistinguished cul-de-sac subdivisions. Leaders in these communities want the best for their citizens but are often looking for the replacement to their lost smoke stack industry rather than focusing on the attributes of their town that could be leveraged for an economic development that is tied to place and consequently much more difficult to out-source. In particular, in Alabama, our location, characteristic of exceptional flora, fauna and geography, abundance of good small towns and low cost-of-living position us to attract young families, retirees, recreational, eco- and cultural tourists. Even a revitalized downtown – with its 100-300 jobs – could be seen as a stronger work force opportunity than some of the small industries typically being recruited. These concepts, along with all of the smart growth principles, are the basis for our work and the resulting illustrative plan proposal for each community.

These plans become amendments to the community's comprehensive plan or the basis for a revised comp plan, new zoning and land use regulations as well as a new set of promotional and recruiting agendas. We often recommend that a town create a community development corporation (CDC) that can be entrepreneurial and pro-active in the pursuit of the goals and projects outlined in the plan. CDC's can leverage resources in ways often not available to a municipality and can take on projects that transcend election cycles. This capacity building tool can also coordinate the efforts of volunteer citizen action committees that forward a variety of initiatives. The Main Street program is an excellent model for these CDC's and in particular we recommend the principles of Main Street as a strong model. In some communities, however, there are projects – greenways, recreation, trails, etc. – that would not logically fall under a Main Street program and/or there is not the historic stock necessary for a Main Street so a CDC is often necessary and important.

Many of our projects are done as part of our teaching curriculum in the Urban Studio. Others are completed in a charrette model that depends on a volunteer professional team or are done with the help of paid consultants who work under the Studio director, Professor Cheryl Morgan. We charge a fee for our work. We found early on that work done as a free service was not valued. We also believe that the town's ability to raise the small fee that we charge is an indicator of their commitment to the purpose of the work and of their ability to advance – long term – the concepts, goals and projects of the master plan. Communities have raised the funds – \$10,000 to \$12,000 – in a variety of ways. Some have written grants to our State Council for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts or the Alabama Historical Commission. Others have sought the help of their state or national congressional delegation. The Appalachian Regional Commission has also funded many of our plans through their E-Flex grant program. The most successful

communities have solicited funds from each of their community stakeholders in denominations appropriate to their membership. This partnership between the town, merchants, businesses and civic organizations signals future funding organizations/foundations that the plan and its projects are built on consensus and a unified vision. It gives those considering investment in the community confidence that their resources will be leveraged for effective advancement of the community.

Smart growth and collaboration in the architecture studio

A typical semester plan of work is outlined below. “Assets and Opportunities” from two communities – Cordova and Gordo – follow and serve as an indicator of how smart growth principles are engaged and evolve in our proposals. (Numeric indicators of the principles are included in the “Assets and Opportunities” section below).

Both communities are located near major regional employment and market centers and serve as bedroom communities. They are also both experiencing growth because of their locations. While the interest and development in their communities is exciting, both towns realize that there is a real potential to also lose their sense of “small-town” and the quality of life that has historically been part of their community. Smart Growth principles are seen throughout these bulleted “directives.” For example in Cordova the idea of “mixed land uses” is suggested by encouraging emerging neighborhoods to include retail centers, recreation, schools and churches. In Gordo the downtown is seen as a place not only for traditional businesses, government and worship, but also for artists’ live work and meeting facilities for writers’ workshops and promotion. In addition there is the recommendation for a 4-H livestock arena and show facility that can bring regional involvement, focus on the community’s rural heritage and stimulate downtown vitality.

Compact building design is encouraged throughout – whether that is downtown, in new neighborhoods or infill development. Both communities must protect their gateways, agrarian and scenic settings to ensure protection of “place” and compact development is a key component of this protection. Compactness is also recommended to encourage walkable downtowns, neighborhoods and connectivity throughout the community. In communities of the size we work in walkability extends beyond just neighborhoods. It is not unusual to find that everything in the town is within a 20-minute walking radius.

Because of the small size of our communities a variety of transportation choices is usually not feasible – except to suggest that walking and biking can provide ways to reduce the need for parking, can reduce congestion and can promote wellness. Bikeways, trails and sidewalks are always part of the plan. In Gordo, a community already highly dependent on jobs outside of town, we also highly recommended that the town take a leadership role in advancing regional transportation options like commuter buses. Regional engagement is critical in all our proposals.

Our town hall meetings are a foundation of our work and the distribution of posters to every household means that the plan is known throughout the town.

The only smart growth principle that is not explicitly or implicitly included in our work is number 9 – make development decisions predictable, fair and cost-effective. Our promotion of sustainable and energy efficient development (see Gordo's final bullet) speaks to long-term cost effectiveness but we have not had specific recommendations on the development process. We do generally recommend a revision to the community's comp plan that will include new land use, zoning and development regulations.

The fifth year architecture students who participate in this work elect to come to the Urban Studio for one year. During the fall term they engage in 2-3 community-based projects. One of these projects is a master plan for a small town or community in Alabama. In the spring term, each student chooses a project from the proposed plan and advances it as a comprehensive architectural studio project. They continue to work with the principles and concepts of the master plan and test the development of projects that have been proposed for the projects' potential to serve as catalysts for the town. The master-planning project is 8-12 weeks. The poster is completed during the spring term by Urban Studio staff.

**Typical Fall Term
Auburn Urban Studio
Small Town Design Initiative Program**

Week One Orientation to Birmingham and to the work of the Urban Studio

Week Two Community-based architecture project

This project gives students a chance to demonstrate their abilities and is typically a project that is done as a service to a local non-profit or charity. In the fall of 2003 we did design studies for a pavilion for a botanical garden; in the fall of 2004 we did site planning and design studies for a new facility for Alabama Youth Homes - a faith-based organization that provides homes for teenagers at risk.

Week Three Introduction of Assets-Based Design

Students preview videos like: Ed McMahon's Conservation Fund presentation on design alternatives, the AIA's *Back from the Brink*, and our own video recordings of lectures made by smart growth and new urbanists leaders like Andres Duany and Victor Dover. They also review the Urban Studio's body of work and other case studies particularly in the southeast. We tour local new urbanist towns like DPZ's Mt Laurel and read and report on the following books:

The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs, The Image of the City, Lynch; How Cities Work, Marshall; American Urban Architecture, Logan, Design of Cities, Bacon, The Urban Design Handbook, UDA, Excellence in City Design, The Mayors' Institute; Design with Nature, McHarg, Saving America's Countryside, Watson; Planning to Stay, Morris & Brown, Save Our Land Save Our Towns, Hylton; The Regional City, Calthorpe; The New Urbanism, Katz; Towns and Town-Making Principles, Duany; Suburban Nation, Duany; and Rural by Design, Arendt.

Week Four Preparation of Base Maps for the Small Town Design Initiative (STDI) included are: maps and plans generated from aerial photos, tax maps, FEMA maps, Sanborn Maps, and USGS maps. The community is asked to provide maps showing city/county owned property, historic maps and photographs, and a history of the community.

Week Five Site Visit and Town Hall Meeting – Information Gathering

This hour-long meeting explains our work, our process and the value of good planning/smart growth. It also solicits information from the citizens and leaders of the community. The meeting is facilitated by Professor Morgan and is framed by the following questions:

- What are the Picture-Postcards of your town?
- What are the Gateways to your community; to your downtown? How do you know when you're home or tell someone how they've arrived in your town (besides the city

limits or welcome sign.) *These questions focus on the physical attributes of the landscape, countryside or significant architectural features.*

- Significant historic events of the community; famous sons and daughters. What are the legacies of previous generations?
- What are your assets? *Includes both physical and institutional assets as well as people and concepts like friendliness, safety and civic pride or entrepreneurial spirit.*
- What are the things in your community that are not up to your standards? That do not make you proud to call this town home?
- Wish list – What would contribute to the quality of life in your community? What would you like to see in your town? What would bring your children back here to raise their children?

The meeting focuses on the positive and citizens are encouraged not to use the meeting as a way to complain or talk about things that need to be fixed. They are told that if they suggest – for instance – that the “traffic light on main needs a left turn lane” we will record that traffic patterns need to be studied; or if they insist on telling us about an overgrown lot or an absentee landlord’s negligence we will record the need for an incentive program to encourage cleanups or a community pride-building workday.

Students also use this visit to the community to photograph the town, record information that is needed for finalizing base maps, and in visiting local businesses and establishments of note.

During the balance of this week base information is finalized, observations are shared and recorded, and the outlining of basic goals for the master plan are put forward.

Week Six Analysis and Preliminary Concept Proposals

During this week or ten day period students are asked, in teams, to:

- graphically analyze the existing conditions of the town (roughly the city limits) and the downtown;
- graphically document the community’s location in the region with notations of important cities and attributes within an hour driving radius; and to outline the initial assets and opportunities of the town.
- Individually they are each asked to do a preliminary scheme that addresses the issues they deem most pressing. Within this initial concept they are asked to locate:
 - important anchors and destinations (existing or proposed,)
 - to study the need for a change of movement patterns and connectivity – both vehicular and pedestrian, and
 - to think about potential areas of residential development.
- Each plan shows 5, 10 and 20 minute walking radius information and is
- color coded to show use and existing versus proposed.

These initial plans are then presented to the entire class in an afternoon pinup. Evaluation of each scheme follows the assets approach we are instilling in the community as a method of building pride and self-esteem: that is, *we start by looking for the best things*

in each scheme. We then talk about the things that could be improved and the things that could be advanced to make a better scheme.

This exercise provides a way to explore many alternatives quickly – no scheme is expected to solve all the issues at hand or capture all the opportunities;

- and it provides an excellent forum for expounding on the principles of design that our assets-based approach espouses.
- It is “learning by doing!” and everyone has something in their first ideas that can contribute to the final proposal.

Week Seven Preliminary Plan Development

During this week the students, working in teams, consolidate the ideas that were identified in the preliminary studies. There are generally one or two strong directions that come out of the first schemes and these are advanced, tested and critiqued. During this phase some of the students work on concept plan development, some begin to research building types that were identified as needed in the community (library, senior center, recreation center, etc.) and/or follow up on information needed from the community and some are working to generate downtown base elevation drawings. This work is presented at week’s end and a plan of work is outlined to prepare for the second town hall meeting.

Week Eight Preparation for Town Hall Meeting

Students typically prepare the following plans in a large-scale format that can be taken to the community for review and feedback.

- Regional Location Diagram
 - Assets and Opportunities – in a bullet format
 - Analysis of Existing Conditions Diagrams – entire community and downtown
 - Concepts Diagram – illustrating the principles and concepts of the preliminary proposal
 - Illustrative Plan of the overall community showing possible realizations of the proposed concepts;
 - Illustrative Plan of the Downtown
 - Sample Before/After elevations in the downtown
 - Connections Diagram showing potential walking trails, bikeways and greenways that can link destinations throughout the community – neighborhoods to schools, parks, recreation and downtown.
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- Dry runs of presentation to the community !!!!! By doing practice presentations, the students gain confidence, identify the key ideas that must be introduced and test the time needed to communicate those ideas.

Week Nine Town Hall Meeting – Preliminary Concepts Presentation

Students make the presentation of their proposals to the citizens of the community and solicit feedback and observations.

- What resonates for the community;
- what doesn’t seem appropriate;

- what opportunities now come to light that the community would not have thought of before?

In most communities the meeting space is small and the original drawings are used as the presentation format; if the presentation is in a larger venue – a school gym or church hall – the presentation is made from digital photographs of the work and done by power point. After the presentation and group Q&A, the citizens are invited to come up and have a close look at the drawings and engage in one-on-one dialogue with the students.

A de-briefing is done in class the next day and each student is asked to offer their observations, insights and new thoughts about changes in direction or adjustments to the preliminary concepts. In most cases the town hall meeting solicits new opportunities and more good material to work with; in some cases we have unearthed a “sacred cow” that was not obvious to us but beloved or well known by locals and adjustments are made accordingly.

Week Ten-Twelve Refinement of the Master Plan

Students continue to work in teams. The overall concepts and plan are adjusted and refined to reflect input from the community. Components of the larger scheme are assigned to different students or student teams: for instance one student may now focus on a proposed recreation area; another may work on the development of a proposed civic complex; others on housing; and others on the development of downtown revitalization of storefronts, signage, graphics and lighting. Major proposed building components are assigned as conceptual design studies to test the fit of building program and site. This architectural study tests the proposal and the appropriate location of this destination in the larger master plan.

A phasing plan is proposed and documented in a series of overlay drawings that relate to the evolution of the master plan projects over time and illustrate both public and private projects. An action plan is proposed to include near-term, mid-term and long-term work in the community. Near-term projects almost always include: a community pride program for cleanup and spruce-up in the downtown and gateways; a program of new and improved signage and; a way-finding investigation. Many small town downtowns are hard to find and there is no way to know if they are half mile or ten miles off the main highway.

Week Thirteen Final development of drawings and presentation material

Drawings are done by hand on tracing paper and then xeroxed and colored for the final presentation. Drawings of this type imply that even the final proposal is a “road map” for strategic (smart) development; not a mandate. The concepts of the plan are the critical points. Our illustrations are *one* way of realizing those concepts. It also implies that nothing can be directly “built” from these drawings. They are the preliminary to commissioned work that will be determined by the action plan of the community. This drawing methodology is also quite evocative. Communities are inspired by “seeing” what their town might look like if the plan were advanced.

Rehearsals for final town hall meeting. Dry-run of presentations.

Week Fourteen Final Town Hall Meeting
Students present the master plan proposal and are aided in responding to questions by Professor Morgan. Citizens are invited to review the drawings and engage with the students one-on-one after the presentation.

Week Fifteen Final documentation
Students touchup drawings; correct labeling where appropriate; and document the final response from the community. Digital scans are made of the drawings. Original drawings are returned to the community. The scans are used for development of the poster the following term.

Follow-up When the poster is drafted it is forwarded to the mayor or committee that coordinated our work. They are asked to proof the poster for spelling, acknowledgements, labeling, etc. The final poster is delivered to the community and is distributed to every household. This is often done via the churches, schools and civic organizations or distribution is taken on by the utility board, the local boy scouts or another service organization. Often a town hall meeting is held to announce the distribution of the posters.

The Urban Studio continues to be an ambassador for the Communities we have worked with. We are often asked to write recommendations for grant proposals, refer the community to appropriate design professionals and follow up with the community as new opportunities present themselves.

Results As you might expect with planning work, those communities with “can do” attitudes have accomplished the most in advancing their master plans. The towns with strong “public will” and strong public-private partnerships get things done. Those communities that have found good mechanism for capacity building whether that is through a non-profit like Main Street, a CDC and/or an effective and deep network of volunteers have the most to show for themselves. These communities have also learned to exercise the “P’s” of success: Planning, Persistence, Partnering, Patience and Persistence.

In planning, the six years of our work is a short time for seeing results. Those communities that we worked with in the late 90’s and early 2000’s have accomplished the most. Valley, AL is our most successful community. They have exceptional accomplishments – the most recent being the purchase of an abandoned mill with almost no community concern regarding the cost incurred by the town. They attribute this enthusiasm to the long-standing concept that acquiring the mill was “part of the plan!” and that the community had been prepared for the value and logic of the purchase.

Another community, Brighton, AL, has just embarked on a revised plan – 5 years out with the help of a professional planning firm. Our work helped them to get the attention and resources of their county commissioner, several housing developers and economic investment specialists. Our plan was the catalyst for securing interest, resources and for moving forward with a professionally developed plan that reflects the most current opportunities of this community.

Lessons Learned

Most of the communities we have worked with have come to us for help – often waiting more than a year because of the high demand we have received. We have had some communities that have been selected for work because they had specific needs that were identified by a funding organization or because of larger regional issues. In general, this work, where we came to them rather than they coming to us, has been less well received and regarded. The work is often seen as merely “an interesting academic” exercise.

Capacity is the most pressing issue in the communities we work with. Because of their size they have part-time mayors and a limited city staff – often only a city clerk and receptionist. Creating and sustaining capacity to forward projects demands much of a community and when results aren’t immediate it is easy to become discouraged. There are a number of organizations in Alabama that realize this need and are working to join forces with communities that have adopted a plan to help them build capacity. One of the most noteworthy is ACE – Alabama Communities of Excellence.

Our partners throughout our work have been:

- The Center for Regional Planning & Design – Birmingham, AL
- University of Alabama – Center for Economic Development
- Alabama Historical Commission
- The State’s Regional Planning Commissions
- Alabama State Council for the Arts
- DesignAlabama
- YourTownAlabama
- ACE – Alabama Communities of Excellence
- Alabama Power Company

From an educator’s perspective the primary lesson learned is the need for students to “reinvest” what they’ve learned. They need to have an opportunity to work in a second town or community in order to reapply the principles, models and learning experienced in the first community. We have worked to develop semester models that include two communities. This system works best when all of the students work on each town through the preliminary concept proposal phase, then the class is divided into two groups and a smaller group of students advance and develop the work of each community. This methodology also allows one project to be developed linearly – as in the outline above – and one town to be done in the “charrette” format. Students can then experience both of these traditional patterns of community design. Charrettes are particularly effective for towns that are a long way away from our studio base in Birmingham. When two towns

are done in one semester the students all go to the town hall meetings for each project and students are actively involved in the critiques of each others work.

We have had incredible interest and demand for our work. We are typically “backlogged” 3 to 5 towns. Communities are regularly waiting for up to a year to work with the Studio. They find out about the STDI through our partners – like those listed above; through publications like DesignAlabama’s quarterly Journal that regularly features our projects; and from mayors and civic leaders who attend statewide meetings. The studio is also asked to make presentations of our work at the state’s League of Municipalities, the annual meetings of the regional planning commissions, and the state Historical Commission.

We were also founding members of YourTownAlabama a statewide workshop for citizen leaders that is modeled on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s YourTown program. We have had 13 workshops in the last six years – attracting almost 500 leaders from over 100 towns and communities across the state. They are introduced to assets-based planning and go home with a new awareness of the value of planning and design. Many towns seek us out after attending a YourTown workshop. (The national YourTown program supports regional locations across the country.)

Our model can be easily applied in a variety of venues. We have used the same basic concepts and scheduling in neighborhoods as well as small towns. Many neighborhoods in Birmingham have populations, issues and opportunities similar to our small towns. By using a local neighborhood travel time and complications are reduced.

Faculty interested in introducing this model into their courses have several methods of locating towns or neighborhoods interested in having help.

- Most city planning offices, regional planning offices and county commissions are overloaded and/or over extended. They may have communities or towns waiting for assistance and would welcome the involvement of a studio.
- Studios can also consider contacting local professional offices that have been approached by communities seeking their services. They may know of towns that want help but cannot afford the services of the traditional planning firm. By taking on projects in communities that are not able to pay the fees of a large firm there is no sense of competition with local offices. Ultimately projects often come out of our work that come back to planning, landscape and design firms and the STDI is now seen as a cultivator of new work and an exercise where communities (that might not have otherwise) come to see the value of good planning and design.
- Make presentations and solicitations for work to state wide meetings of the League of Municipalities, university sponsored economic development workshops, etc.
- Partner with your university’s economic development center/institute, outreach office and/or development office. They will know of communities seeking out

- help – perhaps in capacity building, health care, or education. But these communities almost always also need an overall plan.
- Find out the names of mayors who have attended state or regional presentations on smart growth, planning, economic development or other conferences where there is a clear focus on learning “how” to create a better quality of life for their constituency. They already know they need a plan but may not know you can help them.

We believe that communities need to seek out your help and pay – something – for the services. But, our early fees were very small – almost a token – to show a buy-in from the community. At first these were only the direct expenses. It is easy for a community to understand the need to partner to this extent.

It is also easy to identify communities or neighborhoods that could benefit from a good plan and/or that offer excellent learning potential for a class project. If you know – or other leaders point out – communities that can benefit from your involvement identify the community leadership and meet with them to see if there is interest in working together. If there is strong leadership and interest it will be easy to move forward effectively.

We have yet to find a community that did not have great things to learn from. Part of the design process – the investigation, exploration – is in uncovering the assets that communities don’t even know they have. Valley – the town that just bought the abandoned mill – did not, unbelievably - think of their 14 miles of Chattahoochee riverfront as an asset. It was the historic power source for the mills, a source of flooding and a place to “get in trouble” fishing or swimming as a child. It was their “back door.” When we pointed out the recreational, tourism and ecological assets of the river – the potential for the river to become an economic engine for the community – they were astonished. Other examples have been less dramatic, but equally exciting. This has also made EACH town a great learning opportunity.

Finally, we have learned that we need to build our teams to engage with the opportunities that we discover in each community. We regularly seek out either advice or direct participation from many experts but particularly those in landscape architecture, watershed management, economic development and tourism. Our location in Birmingham (two hours from the main campus) means that these experts/advisors are often with other (local) universities or are practicing professionals who volunteer their time. Our ideal studio would include students from architecture, planning, and landscape architecture with involvement from students in public policy and economic development.

Sample work in two communities:

Assets and Opportunities (principles referenced below)

Smart growth principles:

1. Mix land uses.
2. Take advantage of compact building design.
3. Create housing opportunities and choices for a range of household types, family sizes, and incomes.
4. Create walkable neighborhoods.
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
7. Reinvest in and strengthen existing communities and achieve more balanced regional development.
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective.
10. Encourage citizen and stakeholder participation in development decisions

Cordova, Alabama

[\[Link to final poster for Cordova\]](#)

1. Capitalize on Cordova's Exceptional Location:
 - Capture the opportunities created by two new interchanges along Corridor "X" within 2 miles of the downtown
 - Capture the opportunities afforded by being on the Mulberry Branch of the Black Warrior River
 - Capture the opportunities created by your proximity to Birmingham and Jasper
2. Celebrate Cordova's Rich History: #5
 - Create venue's in the downtown to present your railroad history, the story of Indian Head Mills, the mines and your important families
 - Seek National Register status for the Historic downtown core - create a downtown historic district with guidelines and incentives for historic preservation and restoration
3. Build on the Authentic Small Town Character of Downtown Cordova and Make Downtown a Destination: #1, #5, #7
 - Rehabilitate and restore your historic downtown core and recruit new specialty retail to the downtown
 - Restore the Tallulah Hotel and recruit a destination restaurant to anchor this important corner of your Main Street
 - Create a stronger civic presence in the downtown by planning for the construction of a new city hall and civic square
 - Simplify vehicular circulation in the downtown by extending Main Street south to the corner of Green and First Street at Long Methodist
 - Plan for expanded retail/commercial along the new Main Street

- Create destination activities in the downtown for a variety of users and age groups
 - include a community center, library, day care,
 - youth/rec center and museum/welcome center
 - Make downtown pedestrian friendly
 - Link the commercial downtown to the recreational/openspace
 - opportunities on the Indian Head Mill Site
 - Create lodging and restaurant opportunities in the downtown - such as bed and breakfasts, small hotels and specialty restaurants
4. Support Cordova's Strong Sense of Community: #7
- Capitalize on community spirit, enthusiasm and volunteers by creating action communities to write grants, seek out partners and advance master plan proposals
 - Create good places for the community to come together outside of school, sports and church activities - these should include a youth center, community/senior center, parks and the revitalized downtown
 - Create venues to celebrate the musical and artistic interests and talents of the community
5. Capitalize on the potential of your location on the Mulberry Branch of the Black Warrior, Cane Creek and their tributaries: #5
- Create good, safe and appropriate access to your waterfronts
 - Develop good & appropriate recreational opportunities for your citizens in the flood planes along these waterways
 - Seek housing opportunities that take advantage of the proximity to the river and river related recreation
 - Promote and recruit recreational and water related activities as economic engines for Cordova
6. Capitalize on the opportunities that will come with the two new interchanges on Corridor "X": #1, #5, #6
- Extend the city limits of Cordova to include the new interchanges, adjacent properties and properties along the main access routes
 - between downtown and the interchanges
 - Develop distinctive retail centers at each interchange - centers that distinguish themselves from typical/anonymous strip center interchanges by being "village centers" with street parking, sidewalks
 - and storefront retail/commercial
 - Determine appropriate retail/commercial at the interchange - businesses that will not unduly compete with the downtown
 - Create good signage and way-finding at the interchanges to entice travellers into the downtown - less than five minutes away !
 - Capture the opportunities for new housing and new office/distribution business near the southern interchange - this development can be particularly attractive because of the ease of access to Birmingham and Jasper

7. Develop new housing opportunities and improve existing neighborhoods: #2, #3, #4

- Seek out opportunities for new in-fill housing close to the downtown and in the context of existing infrastructure
- Promote the historic mill village housing by creating a program to encourage preservation and restoration - provide guidelines and financial incentives
- Develop new housing that captures the opportunities of the interstate proximity and the riverfront
- Encourage new housing development to be compact, walkable, environmentally friendly, and with a strong sense of neighborhood - to include a “village center,” churches, small parks and potentially an elementary school to serve the growing population
- Encourage new housing development to have a variety of house sizes and types to encourage neighborhoods that are diverse
 - socially and economically

8. Create good walking linkages throughout the community: #4

- Create a walkable environment in all neighborhoods by adding side walks, good lighting and appropriate stop signs along good walking routes - walking is an excellent wellness strategy
- Encourage walking to neighborhood recreation and the downtown
- Use walking trails along the creeks and river to develop interpretive opportunities

9. Celebrate the mountainous geography that distinguishes Cordova and defines the boundaries of the core downtown and historic residential areas: #5, #6

- Discourage development that alters the sense geography - particularly avoid building on steep slopes and building that requires flattening tops of mountains or ridges

10. Identify and protect the gateways into Cordova #5, #6

- Of particular importance are the entries to the north and south crossing Cane Creek and the Mulberry - their beauty is important to the identity of Cordova - zone to discourage/prevent strip development at these gateways
- Create distinctive new entries at the Interstate by zoning to avoid strip development
- Protect the gateway at First Street and New Parrish Cordova Road:
 - zone to prevent strip development
 - create good entry signage
 - use new trees and lighting to enhance this gateway
 - redevelop along the southern end of First Street to create an attractive residential entry

Gordo, Alabama

Assets and Opportunities (principles referenced below)

1. Capitalize on Gordo's excellent location #5, #6, #7
 - Capture the potential as a bedroom community serving the Tuscaloosa region
 - Capture the opportunities associated with nearby recreation areas, abundance of rich hunting and fishing areas, and local natural beauty
 - Seek out appropriate light industry and assembly related to poultry, Mercedes, and local recreational businesses

2. Celebrate Gordo's Strong Small Town Character and History #5
 - Promote Gordo's sense of community, small town friendliness and pride of place
 - Create a Welcome Center in the downtown
 - Protect and preserve your small town character as you grow and develop
 - Recruit families, businesses and visitors seeking out the attributes of "small town"
 - Promote and strengthen/invest in your strong schools
 - Promote your agrarian heritage and traditions - including "Mule Day," the Chicken Festival, and Veterans' Parade
 - Promote possibilities for increasing the sense of your agrarian history with a new livestock arena and 4H area, by - creating a farmers' market downtown

3. Revitalize Downtown #1, #5
 - Make downtown a destination for your citizens and visitors alike
 - Create a new library, community center, park and recreation center to provide activities that attract your citizens - of all ages - to the downtown day-to-day
 - Preserve and protect your core historic downtown buildings and character to create a distinctive place for niche businesses
 - Create guidelines and incentive programs for restoration, facade improvements and new signage
 - Create a strong plan for supporting your existing businesses and for increased retail/commercial capacity in the downtown
 - Create guidelines for new construction in the downtown that respects the scale, massing and texture of your historic buildings
 - Recruit new niche and synergistic businesses to the downtown
 - Promote and market the downtown
 - Make downtown safe, easy to use and pedestrian friendly

4. Strengthen and/or Protect the Gateways to your Community and Downtown #6
 - Make good impressions - make Gordo distinct and memorable

- Make Highway 82 a parkway rather than a “strip” with plantings, good signage and improved intersections: consider reducing direct points of access (When the by-pass is in place the entire highway can be transformed !)
 - Protect the agrarian character of the entry from the north along Highway 159
 - Improve the gateway at Main and Highway 82 - make downtown easy to find
 - Improve the gateway at Highway 82 and old Highway 82 from Reform
5. Create Good New Housing and Neighborhoods #2, #3, #4, #5, #6
 - Plan for new housing growth that will increase as roadways between Gordo and Tuscaloosa are completed
 - Encourage housing development that preserves the agrarian character that defines this part of Alabama and Gordo
 - Develop neighborhoods with a variety of housing sizes and price ranges to encourage diversity, a mix of ages, occupations and aspirations as well as the ability to stay in one neighborhood from starter house to retirement
 - Encourage neighborhoods rather than isolated cul-de-sac subdivisions
 - Discourage (or prohibit) single outlet developments - they increase traffic congestion, problems for fire and police, and limit a sense of commitment to the larger community
 - Connect all new developments with roads, sidewalks and bikeways
 - Carefully consider extensions of the city limits to include new neighborhoods - but always encourage new development first within the existing infrastructure and within existing police and fire protection areas
 6. Plan for growth, development and improvement in your strong schools
 - Preserve the relationship between your schools and the downtown - this is the historic home of your schools and schools add vitality to a downtown
 - Plan for a new elementary school - preferably near the downtown
 - Use the move of the elementary school to allow growth, redevelopment and new construction - in phases - at the high school
 - Plan for new elementary schools that may be needed as new families move to the community - focus on small schools in walking distance of the children who live nearby
 7. Promote Gordo as a good place to retire
 - Create good housing - in context with the downtown and in emerging new neighborhoods - that is targeted to families who are down sizing and seeking out homes with less size, yard and maintenance (these houses are also great for young families !)
 - Provide good social and recreational activities and programs for retirees
 - Provide good local medical access; build a strong relationship with medical providers in the Tuscaloosa area
 - Get retirees involved in the community by seeking out their commitment to tutoring programs, festivals, the local welcome center/museum and as a strong customer base for downtown eateries, coffee shops and businesses

8. Build on the strength of your great festivals #5
 - Continue to distinguish yourself with outstanding and traditional festivals like Mule Day, Chicken Festival, Veterans' Day Parade and Band Festival in the downtown
 - Seek out ways to expand this tradition with more regular activities that encourage people to come together in the downtown - this might include new festivals or events related to your artisans, writers and the 4H and youth (as population grows there is a larger base of volunteers to facilitate this possibility)

9. Create good public parks and a strong system of pedestrian connections #4
 - Create a good public park and civic park in the downtown
 - Refurbish your existing athletic park
 - Connect your neighborhoods, schools, parks and downtown with a system of sidewalks, greenways, bikeways and trails

10. Build strong support for the arts and local artists and artisans #5
 - Capture the potential of local artist Ma 'Cille
 - Capture the potential of local creative talent - provide opportunities to show case local talent in the downtown - create good places to work and sell in the downtown
 - Develop and promote a strong relationship between the community and university related programs at UA, MUW, Shelton, Bevill, etc.
 - Promote workshops and events related to the arts, writers and musicians - draw attendees from across the region and US
 - Create a good venue for workshops and retreats

11. Reinforce the strong system of support and development for projects of interest to the community
 - Build on the strength of your local sense of commitment to community
 - Build on the strength of the local Chamber
 - Consider the creation of a Community Development Corporation or similar non-profit to advance projects that will serve the best interest of Gordo and her citizens
 - Encourage strong public/private partnerships
 - Promote strong partnerships across the region for the development of shared services and facilities, mutual support of tourism and business development

12. Promote the by-pass #6
 - Work to carefully locate the by-pass in a corridor with the least impact on the environment, existing neighborhoods and sense of place
 - Extend the city limits to include the by-pass to control development along the by-pass - its value to the community is the transfer of heavy truck traffic out of downtown and off of Highway 82 - new development should be limited to key

intersections and then under strict guidelines - businesses that do not serve thru traffic should be downtown or on Highway 82

- Create guidelines for development along the by-pass
- Limit services to areas where you choose to encourage development - preserve the beauty of the countryside between intersections where development is allowed
- Redevelop Highway 82 when truck traffic is moved to the by-pass - make it a front door and vital/integral services area for the community rather than an anonymous strip

13. Build for a Sustainable Future #8, #9

- Promote new construction - retail/commercial, civic and residential - that is of the highest quality, energy efficient and consistent with the principles of sustainability
- Begin involvement in programs of transportation alternatives across the region