

# Conservation on the Ground – Your Town Workshops Offer Real Hope to Real Communities in Alabama



Over 50 participants completed the Your Town, Alabama, Designing Our Future workshop held at Camp McDowell near Nauvoo, Alabama, June 15-17, 2005. They attended interactive presentations and worked with a team to plan a hypothetical town. After attending this intensive three-day workshop, many participants have returned to their communities to emphasize the importance of planning to long-term economic viability.

With presentations by Tim Torma, EPA in Washington; Brian Rushing, Black Warrior Land Trust; Martha Cato, City Clerk and change maker for Valley, Alabama; Randy Shoults, Alabama State Council on the Arts, and a host of others, the civic and community leaders found plenty of technical advice, inspiration, and hands-on training.

Your Town, Alabama is a direct response to the uncertain future of Alabama's small towns—a future increasingly threatened by large scale changes in our economy, population shifts, the impact of telecommunications and mass merchandising, and changes in land policy. In the face of these forces, communities have found themselves struggling to maintain their vitality and even their sense of identity. Whether the threat is sudden growth or stagnation, planning and design decisions can often make the difference between survival and decay, between healthy prosperity and decline.

The Your Town, Alabama workshop format is an intensive engagement of citizen leaders and professionals and focuses on these critical planning and design decisions. The workshop is highly participatory, with lectures, case-study presentations and interactive group problem solving, including working on realistic issues in a hypothetical small town.

A testimonial from Judy Graham, a workshop participant, praises the benefits of the program. “Our town, Grove Hill, Alabama, could have been the example in the case study, with a few modifications. We have a by-pass; and, it has not been a great thing. But, workshops like last week are going to help us turn those negatives into positives.”

One of the turn-around efforts for Grove Hill is the Arts Council. Ms. Graham says, “The Grove Hill Arts Council has been officially sanctioned by the Town Council. As one of our premier events, we have Sonny Brewer coming to Grove Hill to conduct a book signing and discussion of his book.”



*Rocking chairs on a porch at Camp McDowell provides a great setting for Your Town, Alabama participants to begin developing plans for their respective municipalities.*

Mr. Brewer is the owner of Over the Transom bookstore in Fairhope, Alabama, and author of ***The Poet of Tolstoy Park***. ***The Poet of Tolstoy Park*** is the story of an old man who, when told by his doctor in 1923 that he had just one year to live, kicked off his shoes and traveled by train from Idaho to Alabama to live for a time in a round house he built by hand in the piney woods on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay. Instead of waiting around to die, Henry Stuart chose to bend his back and labor each day constructing his strange little house, and in so doing built for himself a new life without angles. ***The Poet of Tolstoy Park*** presents one man who found a good way to live and gained a good way to die. Twenty-three years later!

Ms. Graham says, “Of particular interest, Sonny already has a movie deal underway. It’s a great thing—Alabama author, Alabama location, Alabama landmark, Alabama movie!” And, because Ms. Graham has taken a pro-active approach to improve her community, residents of the small, rural town of Grove Hill, Alabama, and the surrounding communities, have the opportunity to meet and greet this author. Planned events such as these bring vitality to a community.

Ms. Graham is just one of over 400 civic leaders in almost 100 municipalities around the state who is enthusiastic about the training that Your Town, Alabama provides. Alabama’s first Your Town workshop was held in June of 1998 as a direct result of the efforts of an ad-hoc steering committee convened by Paul Kennedy, Coordinator of the Cawaco Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts’ Your Town program. The Your Town, Alabama workshop offers real hope to real communities. People who care about their community’s appearance have learned the value of planning through these workshops. The Cawaco RC&D Council and other partners are to be commended for contributing to this positive impact on rural Alabama communities.

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