

MINUTES
CLEAR Plan 2030 Consortium
EARPDC 3rd Floor Office
June 12th, 2012
9:00 am

Members Present:

Jennifer Maddox (Community Foundation of Northeast Alabama)
Deborah Lindley (Coosa Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council)
William Meehan (Jacksonville State University)
Curtis Simpson (United Way of East Central Alabama)
Margaret Morton (SAFE & Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers)
Meinrad Tabengwa (Gadsden/Etowah Metropolitan Planning Organization)
Jack Plunk (Calhoun Area Metropolitan Planning Organization)
Jesse Cleveland (Community Action Agency of Talladega, Clay, Randolph, Calhoun, & Cleburne Counties)
Ashley Kerr (Collaborative Solutions, Inc.)
Charles Merkel (East Alabama Mayors Association)
Jim Freind (Alabama Power)

Observers:

Penny Cuff (Partners for Livable Communities)
Robert McNulty (Partners for Livable Communities)
Johnnie Aycock (Partners for Livable Communities)

Staff Present:

Bill Curtis (EARPDC, Executive Director)
Randy Frost (EARPDC, Director of Aging)
Dawn Landholm (EARPDC, Principle Planner)
Robin Caler (EARPDC, Principle Planner)
Ashley Myers (EARPDC, Regional Planner)
Michael Brewer (EARPDC, Principal GIS Analyst)

Mr. Frost called the meeting to order. The first business action was to approve the April 3rd meeting minutes. Mayor Merkel motioned to approve the minutes as written, with Mr. Cleveland seconding, the motion carried 11-0.

Ms. Myers presented a quick update on the CLEAR Plan 2030 website. A proof image of the site was presented. Dr. Meehan asked if each LRT will have a section on the website and Ms. Myers said each LRT will have a tab, where information will be kept. Also, it isn't live yet, but hopefully the web address will be something like clearplan2030.org.

Mr. Brewer provided a demonstration of the Community Analyst software that the Planning Commission has three licenses. It is an online, easy-to-use GIS (geographic information systems) software program that will be used in the project. Three demonstration videos were played and

Mr. Brewer discussed the merits of the program. ESRI, who makes the program, is continually buying databases to add to the program.

Ms. Kerr asked if there is a database for substandard housing data? Mr. Brewer said we would have to check into that.

Mr. Frost said we can do ad-hock analysis of locations that LRTs and the Consortium would like run. Ms. Caler and Mr. Brewer will be the people to utilize Community Analyst, so if a specific scenario is wanted, please contact Ms. Caler.

Ms. Maddox asked if the demonstration could be done at each of the LRT meetings. Ms. Myers said yes, we could do that.

Mr. Frost then introduced Mr. McNulty, Ms. Cuff, and Mr. Aycock from the Partners For Livable Communities.

Mr. McNulty explained that the Partners is a thirty-five year old non-profit group that only works locally and spoke regarding the group's experience. Mr. Aycock said he worked with the Partners when he worked at the Tuscaloosa Chamber of Commerce and has since begun working with the Partners as a local contact. Mr. McNulty stated they were at the meeting to learn from the Consortium and to hear expectations and thoughts.

Mr. Frost said the Consortium needs to tell the Partners their priorities, wish lists, what a success and/or failure would look like.

Mr. McNulty said the Partners have worked with the aging population a great deal, but it is only a small part of this larger puzzle.

Mayor Merkel asked what is the best way to maximize this grant, the only one of its kind in the State? How hard is it to gather 10-counties together? Mr. McNulty said in the past projects they have worked on they included private and public partnerships to get buy-in from the region. The Partners have worked in northern Michigan with five different counties, in Chattanooga which is doing a project with three states and nine counties and have worked in rural New Mexico, so they have some experience working with large areas and can draw from the laboratories of experience. Creating a regional sense of identity, of interrelatedness is important, so there is a value to working together. Hopefully, using culture, which Mr. Aycock used so successfully in Tuscaloosa, can tie together the diverse areas.

Mr. Aycock said they are excited to work with ten counties and hold at least two public meetings in each of the ten counties. Identifying each county's interests, but yet gathering it together to find the common threads to tie the region together. Competiveness and economic development is what he looks at to tie the region together. A question to ask—is the region competitive?

Mr. McNulty asked if there is a personality for the ten counties? A value? A brand? Through the planning process the Partners will be able to facilitate the personality/brand.

Mr. Aycock asked what does East Alabama look like? As he drove into the area yesterday, he looked at it with new eyes. There are some things right away that could be improved, billboards that are advertising things we don't want and maintenance that needs to be done. He said there are resources here that have probably never been tapped. Can anyone describe East Alabama? How do you market it? Partners can be of assistance to bring it out of citizens and leadership to galvanize that. Geographic location is great, with several automotive manufactures near here, how can we take cultural assets and turn into an advantage to make economically viable? How do we mobilize civic engagement?

Mayor Merkel mentioned Mount Cheaha and the beautiful natural surroundings, but admitted the manmade things aren't as appealing as they could be.

Ms. Landholm said the region could be so beautiful if there was no litter and man's impact was limited.

Mr. Aycock said the first impression truly does make a difference. He said he is still not happy with the gateways coming into Tuscaloosa.

Mayor Merkel said litter might be out of our control—it may be a State problem. Mr. McNulty said it could be a part of the horizon of what can be done in 3-5 years and then what the next generation can do.

Ms. Cuff asked about the litter problem. Ms. Landholm stated a lot of it is the matter of building civic pride.

Ms. Morton said the area is like a secret and very beautiful in rural areas that most people don't know about. People outside of the region; don't know about the beauty, there are a lot of resources in the region and a lot of things to be proud of.

Mr. Cleveland said that the region doesn't speak from the same page; each area promotes their individual area/county. We promote what we think the most of without any consideration to my neighbor next door. Need to think of how to work together and flow from one community to the other. People don't think about connectivity. Maybe the Mayors group could help with the connectivity. Each area is protecting their own interests, when it is good for all economically to work together.

Mr. McNulty said in Orlando, seven counties pool all of their economic development money into one agency to work in the region and have come up with a common marketing plan.

Ms. Kerr said there is a general disengagement with authority and elected officials. It is very hard to get people to interact and need to address it in order to develop civic pride. Also there are state barriers dealing with funding.

Ms. Landholm said the mission from HUD is to engage the traditionally marginalized communities and to get them involved with the LRTs somehow.

Mr. McNulty said Partners will do their best to do it.

Ms. Landholm stated it is key to get input from the disengaged groups and maybe do this by having several low hanging fruit projects while completing the CLEAR Plan, so people can see results.

Mr. McNulty asked if the media has been brought into the process yet? Ms. Landholm said not yet, we were getting the project organized first before going to them. Mr. Aycock said the way the media is positioned is critical. We need to ask how livability affects me and my family. Put the information in newspapers, including the weeklies, so people can begin to understand what it means. We need to talk about the values of it, not the process in the media. Values of living in East Alabama, the qualities, how can we make this a more livable place for you and your family?

Ms. Kerr asked if the group could get some training on values based messaging because it is a different way of talking to people? Mr. Aycock said yes and the language needs to be in the terms of an average citizen, trying to get them to imagine what could be better.

Mr. Tabengwa said when dealing with the media, he suggests avoiding making a press release, but instead to talk with individuals, so they understand the project and where it is going and where you are coming from.

Ms. Morton stated maybe we should do more of a focus group approach, bring in the people we want to message to and have them figure out the message for you. This is a way to make people feel like they are a part of the solution. Then go to the community level and ask them “what is livability?”

Mr. McNulty said we need to create a civic agenda for the region that will carry through even if the administration changes.

Ms. Landholm said we can't forget about local radio, local tv, websites and social media.

Mr. Aycock asked about the kick-off event in January? Mr. Frost said it was the initial meeting of the consortium, but there hasn't been any public, community event. Ms. Landholm said we have discussed it at the Board meetings, but as far as a public events go, there has not been a community event.

Mr. McNulty asked if there is a regional arts group to help come up with a brand or to help with social media? Ms. Maddox stated there are arts organizations, but not a regional one and not one group for each county.

Mr. Curtis said there is a study underway right now by the University of Alabama working with seven of the counties on tourism.

Ms. Morton stated there are chambers of commerce working together in certain areas including tourism and defining connections. Dr. Meehan said there is a film initiative group. Mayor Merkel said there is a State Historic Office and Amanda Hill is the contact person there. He suggested getting in contact with museums and historic preservation groups to come up with a concept for the Region.

Mr. Frost stated we need some standardized questions to ask from the Partners, so there is continuity across the region and the LRTs.

Mr. Aycock asked if there have been issues due to the project being slow to develop? Mr. Frost stated that it was more of an internal thing, not a public issue.

Mr. McNulty asked if there are any examples for change, aspirations of what the Region could be? Dr. Meehan said the North Carolina research triangle and Ms. Landholm said EARPDC internally likes to model after the Ashville area.

Mr. Aycock said when he was doing a project similar to this one in Tuscaloosa they followed the model of Huntsville and selected the top 10 most livable communities for peer communities to compete with. Then guest speakers from each of the peer communities could be brought in. You might want to look to comparable areas. Ms. Landholm state the Ashville Regional Commission, “Land of Sky”, is a peer community for the East Alabama region.

Dr. Meehan said ten years ago, Anniston was one of the worst areas in the United States to live, but parts of the issue are gone and several of the issues have changed. There is a great deal of pride of what we have done in the last ten years. The Chambers of Commerce would have a roster of the accomplishments.

Ms. Cuff asked for non-profit, educational strategies, reports on what they are looking at the key issues and goals for the future? Mr. Aycock said there must be an alignment of goals and working together. Need to look at non-profit, non-governmental agencies, especially education, to see if there are strategies in place.

Mr. Cleveland asked when will we know we will be successful? Maybe we should start at the end to get to the beginning and figure out the goals. What are we really looking at, is there a threshold?

Mr. Frost said when we have a vision and an identity for the region with some semblance with at least going down the right road to achieve our vision is when we will be successful. Mr. Cleveland said that is what he likes about Ms. Morton's work plan, is that you can tell what you have done and see a percentage of things that we have accomplished.

Ms. Landholm said the first threshold of success is when we get people excited about what we are doing.

Ms. Morton said this is asset building and we must integrate values together to build off each other. Everything is integrated, based on what we are good at and the resources and values we have.

Ms. Maddox said we need a commonality of perception. There have been a great deal of issues, job losses, difficulty, tornadoes, tragedy, but she has encountered an optimistic hope and that people love living here and people know it can be better. We need to look into that to think about what can be done with our region—that kind of optimistic hope.

Ms. Landholm said meetings shouldn't be held on Wednesday because of church or Thursday or Friday during high school football season.

Mr. McNulty said we can use churches to mobilize congregations to help define values that need to be reinforced. Ms. Maddox said each church has different policies regarding use. Dr. Meehan said the Catholic Church could help serve the underserved Hispanic population.

Ms. Cuff asked about the regional assets? Dr. Meehan said it is very American, patriotic value system, hard work, faith, family, friends, working together to solve problems, great deal of pride in the community, do it ourselves attitudes, wouldn't say xenophobic. And it is a great location and is beautiful.

Ms. Maddox said at least around the Calhoun County area, people are used to change, new people, new ideas, and developing new relationships, which is unique. There are also pockets where new people aren't welcome, but not all over.

Mr. McNulty asked if retirees are moving into the area? Mayor Merkel said we are trying to be a retirement area with bike trails and water opportunities. Ms. Morton mentioned the historic textile trail that ends in the region. Finally, there is the end of the Appalachian foothills and all of the opportunities associated with it.

Mr. Frost said he was sorry, but the meeting needed to be wrapped up in interest of keeping the meeting to two hours. Ms. Myers asked for open discussion and announcements. The next meeting date was chosen for July 17th at 9 am at the EARPDC 3rd floor conference room.

Meeting adjourned.