

The Alabama

MUNICIPAL

Official publication of the Alabama League of Municipalities

Journal



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About ALM:

The Alabama League of Municipalities is a nonpartisan membership association of over 450 incorporated cities and towns. Since 1935, the League has worked to strengthen municipal government through advocacy, training and the advancement of effective local leadership. As the recognized voice of Alabama's cities and towns, ALM's member municipalities benefit from a variety of member programs, services and activities that are impossible to accomplish alone.



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The Alabama MUNICIPAL Journal

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On the Cover:

The Alabama League of Municipalities hosted more than 200 Alabama municipal leaders at the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C. on March 16-18! This year's theme for the conference was – We The Cities: Local Governments Deliver. As we prepare for our nation's 250th birthday, we are reminded that civics is at the heart of everything we do and must be taken seriously. Learn more on page 28.



A Message from the Editor

Lori Jhons • Communications Director

Over the past year of celebrating our 90th anniversary, I have enjoyed researching and promoting our treasured history, seeing our members show up to events with great enthusiasm, and working with our extremely talented and dedicated team to pull together high-quality events and publications for your benefit. We really have a lot to be proud of at the League, and I am so honored to help lead those strategic efforts and communications.

I am excited to announce we are increasing our video production output even more by launching our monthly video series, “Municipal Matters,” filmed in our studio. The goal is to educate municipal leaders on a variety of topics including League services and programs, grant opportunities, legal and legislative updates, state and federal initiatives and more. We hope you will find each episode valuable. Be sure to send us your feedback or suggestions for future shows. *Scan the QR code to visit our YouTube page.*

The communications team is also working with leadership to ramp up our efforts to continue promoting our quality-of-life campaign, Live Locally Alabama. Our goal for this initiative remains to encourage civic engagement, instill community pride and highlight the crucial role municipal government plays in the daily lives of Alabama’s citizens. Thank you to those that tuned into our first quarterly webinar; we plan to continue hosting these throughout the year to educate all our municipalities on how to best utilize the many resources we have created such as press releases, talking points, graphics, videos and flyers. *Scan the QR codes to learn more about the campaign and to watch the first webinar.*

Additionally, I want to encourage our members and the public to celebrate **Municipal Government Week during May 10-16, 2026**. This is a prime opportunity for cities and towns to incorporate the LLA campaign assets into plans to spotlight your community, municipal leadership and staff, new projects and initiatives!

ALM YouTube Channel



Live Locally Alabama



Live Locally Alabama Webinar



The more you communicate with your citizens and legislators about the things you go through every day to enhance your communities, the better it will be for all our communities.

Lastly, I am very pleased to share that we will record an episode of Alabama Public Television's show, "Capitol Journal," with host Todd Stacy during our convention! We look forward to seeing you there! Please reach out to me if I can ever be helpful to you at ljhons@almonline.org. ■

Sincerely,
Lori Davis Jhons



The Local Officials'
GUIDE
to MUNICIPAL
GOVERNMENT

Welcome Newly Elected Municipal Officials!

Congratulations on entering municipal public service! Your question of "what can I do to help my city or town be the best it can be?" has been answered by a vote of confidence from your neighbors and a seat at the table.

The next question for you on this journey is a little harder to answer – now what? The Alabama League of Municipalities has been answering that question since 1935. The League comes in to help show you the path forward. Formed as an advocate in the Alabama Legislature, ALM has expanded to include indispensable educational opportunities for new and incumbent municipal officials to navigate their time in office. As a new official in a member municipality, you now have access to all the resources, education and training that the League has to offer. **The latest helpful publication from the League is *The Local Officials' Guide to Municipal Government*. Scan the QR code for a digital copy.**



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Executive Director's Spring Report

Gregory D. Cochran • Executive Director



By the time you receive this issue, we will have already accomplished the first quarter of 2026. We have achieved so many of our goals through providing intentional training and programming for our municipal officials, and, yet, we have many more opportunities remaining on the calendar for the year. The annual ALM Advocacy Day saw another record attendance; over 300 officials engaged in this event and sent a strong message to state policymakers of our members' dedication in fostering partnerships to build vibrant communities across Alabama. To top it off – we were thrilled to have Sen. Katie Britt surprise us with a visit where she discussed her priorities to put Alabama and America first!

Our team continues to host several CMO regional training workshops across the state, utilizing the facilities of our partners at the Alabama Community College System. Our teams in the member services and legal departments have done a phenomenal job of curating the most demanded topics from our members to ensure we are meeting our goals in providing these resources in a timely and meaningful platform. I want to remind our members that we have many of these topics available through our online training platform for those who are unable to attend an in-person workshop. These topics



are available to our members 24/7 for easy access. In fact, to date, we have had over 450 online courses completed, while also having over 1,400 officials attend our in-person training courses since last year's August elections.

We are busy preparing for the 2026 ALM Convention in Montgomery, April 28 - May 1, and are seeing steady increases in attendance. We are excited to have Kevin Elko and Matt Lehrman share motivational and leadership strategies; several concurrent sessions on intentional topics and our annual business session to elect our officers. For those that are graduates of our Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) or Economic Development Academy (EDA) programs, we are hosting a luncheon to discuss our newest software program to assist our communities in identifying economic and community growth opportunities. You can find all of this and more on our website, www.almonline.org.

Furthermore, throughout the 2026 legislative session, our advocacy team battled serious bills which would have impacted your business license authority, your sales tax authority and local governance. It is disappointing that many business leaders and state policymakers sometimes do not understand how crucial it is to have these resources at the local level, which allow you to build vibrant communities.

The advocacy team continues to do an incredible job of working with state policymakers and our municipal officials to protect your authorities. We will continue to share our concerns and narratives with state policymakers, business leaders and civic groups, of how taxes and business licensing authorities must be managed at the local level by municipal officials to best serve their community. A one-size-fits-all approach does not equate to good governance with 466 unique municipalities across Alabama.

In closing, I want to share my appreciation to you, our members and strategic partners, for your investment and time in ALM. Without your support, we would not be able to provide intentional resources and tools back to you. Your engagement in the CMO program, convention, advocacy, MWCF, AMIC, AMFund and MIS empowers us to be our best. Your investment allows us to recruit and retain the best talent and provide them with the resources to be successful in representing your interests. Thank you!

Peace be with you,
Gregory D. Cochran, CAE
Executive Director



Leadership Perspective

Mayor Sherry Sullivan • Fairhope • ALM President



As my term as president of the Alabama League of Municipalities comes to a close, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve alongside so many dedicated public servants. This past year has gone by so fast; it has been a year of collaboration and relationship building. Together, we have strengthened our communities, supported each other through challenges and elections, and implemented initiatives that will benefit towns and cities across the state for years to come. I must add that I may have also learned a few dance moves along the way with Mayor Rusty Jessup by my side! Serving in this role has solidified my belief that local government is the best government.

Over the past year, we have:

- Implemented mandatory training for municipals officials
- Strengthened our advocacy team and efforts in Montgomery
- Built new partnerships aimed at improving our cities and towns
- Continued to unify the voices of municipalities of all sizes

These accomplishments reflect the efforts of many including the League leadership and staff, the Alabama League of Municipalities' board members and countless local leaders who work tirelessly for their communities. I want to extend my appreciation to the Alabama League of Municipalities for its unwavering support and commitment to municipal government. The League works alongside us every day to protect the authorities we have in local government and empowers each of us to lead with confidence and serve with purpose. I also want to thank all the other municipal officials that I now call



friends. Thank you for your friendship, collaboration and picking up the phone when I call. Your dedication and love of your community inspires me every day.

Of course, behind many busy leaders is the quiet support system back at home. I am no different. Without the support of the city council, the employees, Gayle Fogarty and my family, I would not have been able to take on this role. When a leader steps away from their daily responsibilities to serve other organizations, it is often their support system who carries the additional duties. Thank you to my support system for allowing me to serve and taking care of home. Although my term as president is ending, my commitment to the League and its mission remains strong. I look forward to supporting our new leadership and continuing to work together to strengthen every town and city in Alabama. Our communities and voices are stronger together. Thank you for allowing me the privilege to serve. ■



Leadership Perspective

Mayor Rusty Jessup • Riverside • ALM Vice President



Wow - what a year we are having!

Our Alabama League of Municipalities is on fire, setting new records in attendance, engagement and training. This is what happens when dedicated leaders across our state roll up their sleeves and get to work. **We are Alabama – strong, committed and moving forward together.** Keep pouring your hearts into your cities and towns. What you do matters. What you do is shaping the future. What you do is making a real difference; so, keep the faith. Keep the confidence. Keep sharpening your skills, and keep encouraging your community to **Live Locally Alabama!** Your leadership is making our entire state a better place to live, work and do business.

Can you believe it is already April? One quarter of the year has flown by, and, yet, it feels like we are just getting warmed up. Our president, Mayor Sherry Sullivan, has led with grace, grit and vision. Her insights, skill and knowledge have been a big part of our success this year. Please join me in celebrating her outstanding year of service.

Our Advocacy Day was a tremendous success with record-breaking attendance, and now, with the state legislative session finally winding down, we can all take a breath before gearing up again next year. We should all be thankful and grateful to our League staff for their hard work and dedication to make this all work. Please let them know how much you appreciate their commitment to your success.

Now, as this good ol' southern springtime settles in, I hope you are ready - because we have some fun and exciting events on the horizon.



Coming Soon:

- **The Big One: ALM Convention and Expo - Montgomery / April 28 - May 1**

This is the event you absolutely do not want to miss. Think of it as your “pat on the back” for a year of hard work and accomplishment. Expect powerful speakers, top-notch training, great entertainment and plenty of fellowship with leaders who share your passion.

- **CMO Regional Training**

- Muscle Shoals - May 21
- Birmingham - June 21
- Fairhope - July 16

Each session is another opportunity to grow, connect and strengthen the community you serve, while earning CMO certifications. I cannot wait to see you at these events and celebrate the incredible work you are doing across the great state of Alabama! ■

Look Before You Leap: Conflicts of Interest and the Municipal Official

In a letter to promote city fire safety, Benjamin Franklin famously said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” This time-tested belief that dealing with a problem early is easier than repairing the damage later is applicable in almost every facet of life. It is especially pertinent in navigating potential conflicts of interest issues for municipal elected officials.

A conflict of interest arises when an individual’s personal interests — such as relationships, financial gain or other considerations — interfere with his or her ability to act in the best interests of another party. The admonition that “no man can serve two masters” is applied by Alabama law to prevent public officers from doing public business with themselves. The primary focus of municipal officials and municipal employees is in the interest of the public. Recognizing and managing conflicts of interest is essential to maintaining proper standards, ensuring transparent, fair decision making, and preserving public trust.

Alabama law provides principal guidance to help prevent conflicts of interest. This article will highlight some fundamental rules to make you aware of a few rules to help you find “an ounce of prevention” for this important issue, and it serves as an appetizer to a more comprehensive analysis in the League’s Selected Readings article “Conflicting Offices and Interests”.



The Law Specific to Municipal Officials: A Fundamental Rule

Several statutes prohibit municipal officers and employees from having specific dealings with a municipality. The most prominent is found in Section 11-43-12, Code of Alabama 1975. It provides, in part, as follows:

“No alderman or officer or employee of the municipality shall be directly or indirectly interested in any work, business, or contract, the expense, price, or consideration of which is paid from the treasury, nor shall any member of the council, or officer of the municipality be surety for any person having a contract, work, or

business with such municipality, for the performance of which a surety may be required.”

This law says municipal elected officials, municipal officers and municipal employees cannot have a direct or indirect interest in any work, business or contract paid with municipal funds.

As with most laws, the devil is always in the details and the specific facts of any given situation. There are numerous opinions of the attorney general that have been issued interpreting Section 11-43-12 against factual questions presented. The attorney general has determined that this section prohibits a town from purchasing land from its mayor. AGO 1981-0239. A municipality may, however, condemn the property of a municipal officer or employee provided that the officer or employee refrains from the decision-making process regarding the condemnation. AGO 1996-0231.

A municipality may purchase property owned by the mayor’s mother when the mother is not a member of the mayor’s household, not financially dependent on the mayor and the mayor does not participate in either the discussion or the vote. AGO 1997-0140. A city may enter into an agreement, which involves the mayor’s son as a real estate broker, provided the mayor does not reside in the same household as his son, is not financially dependent on his son and does not participate in the discussion or vote on whether to enter into the agreement. AGO 2005-0181.

The section also prohibits a company, in which a councilmember owns a majority of the stock, from selling materials to an independent contractor who is working on a city project if such materials will be used in the city project. AGO 1981-0258. A councilmember who is a landlord may not participate in a community block grant program in the municipality for which he or she serves. AGO 1996-0323.

A violation of Section 11-43-12 is a misdemeanor and constitutes grounds for impeachment. A violation of Section 41-16-60 also constitutes a misdemeanor punishable by fine not exceeding \$500 or imprisonment not exceeding 12 months. Removal from office is mandatory.

As you can see, it is important for municipal elected officials to refrain from being a part of the decision-making

process and voting on potential conflicts of interest issues. If questions about a potential conflict arises, it is important to get the answer before participating in discussions and voting. Your municipal attorney and the League’s legal department can help you.

Section 11-43-12.1: The Exception for Class 7 and 8 Municipalities

Where there is a rule, there are usually exceptions born out of necessity. Section 11-43-12.1, Code of Alabama 1975, provides exceptions for Class 7 and 8 municipalities (under 12,000 population according to the 1970 federal decennial census).

Pursuant to Section 11-43-12.1, any Class 7 or 8 municipality may legally purchase from its elected officials or employees any personal service or personal property if the elected official or employee is the only domiciled vendor of the personal service or personal property within the municipality. Domicile is a person’s fixed, permanent and principal home.

Once the first step is taken, Section 11-43-12.1 places a few more requirements to apply. The cost or value of such personal property or service cannot exceed \$3,000. The elected official or employee, who proposes to sell to the municipality, shall not participate in the decision-making process of determining the purchase but shall make any disclosure required by the state ethics commission. The governing body of such municipality must determine and find that the elected official is the sole vendor domiciled in the municipality and that the selling price of such service or property is lower than what could be obtained from a vendor domiciled outside the municipality. In making such a determination, the council can consider the quality of service or property proposed to be supplied, conformity with specifications, purposes for which required, terms of delivery, transportation charges and the date of delivery.

This law also allows any Class 7 or 8 municipality to legally purchase from any of its elected officials any personal service or personal property under competitive bid law procedures. This authority is not restricted to situations where the elected official or employee is the sole vendor within the municipality. The elected official or employee, if he or she proposes to bid, shall not participate in the decision-making process determining the need for or the purchase of such personal property or personal service or in the determination of the successful bidder.

The council must affirmatively find that the elected official or employee is the lowest responsible bidder as required by state law. The municipality must also file a copy of any contract awarded to any of its elected officials or employees with the Alabama Ethics Commission. All awards must be the result of original bid taking. In the event an elected official or employee offers to sell or submit a bid to the municipality, he or she shall make full disclosure of his or her ownership or the extent of ownership in the business organization with which he or she is associated, under oath, to the municipality.

The Competitive Bid Law: Another Fundamental Rule

Section 41-16-60, Code of Alabama 1975, is part of Alabama’s Competitive Bid Law applicable to municipal purchasing of property and contractual services. Prior to its amendment by Act 2011-583, this section stated that no member of the municipal governing body or of a municipal board shall be financially interested or have any personal beneficial interest, either directly or indirectly, in the purchase of or contract for any personal property or contractual services.

The attorney general has determined that a member of a



municipal utility board who is the sole owner of a business may not sell trucks to the utility board, with or without bids. AGO 1999-0098. Section 41-16-60, Code of Alabama 1975, precludes a member of the Water Works and Sewer Board from having any personal or financial beneficial interest, directly or indirectly, in a contract for the provision of services to the board. Whether a direct or indirect benefit actually exists is a

question of fact for the board to determine. AGO 2007-0078. These opinions were based on the prohibitions of Section 41-16-60 before amended by Act 2011-583 which permits city and county boards of education members and officers to have a financial interest or personal beneficial interest in contracts under certain conditions.

Section 41-16-60 of the Code, as amended, states as follows:

“Members and officers of the city and county boards of education, the district boards of education of independent school districts, may be financially interested in or have any personal beneficial interest, either directly or indirectly, in the purchase of or contract for any personal property or contractual service under either of the following conditions:

- (1) The contract or agreement under which the financial interest arises was created prior to the election or appointment of the individual to the position he or she holds.
- (2) The individual holding the position does not participate in, by discussion or by vote, the decision-making process which creates the financial or personal beneficial interest.”

The attorney general, relying on the amended version of Section 41-16-60 of the Code, determined that a member of a city or county board of education may contract with the board of education for personal property or personal services if: (1) the contemplated contract was in existence before a person was elected or appointed to the board or (2) the individual does not participate in the deliberation or vote on the proposed contract. AGO 2012-0017 and 2012-0018. These opinions also noted that Section 41-16-60 is not applicable to contracts subject to the Public Works Law. Furthermore, members of city and county boards of education may be subject to the Alabama Ethics Law and should submit these questions directly to the Alabama Ethics Commission.

Other Statutory Restrictions

There are a few other prohibitory statutes to be mindful of. Section 11-43-54, Code of Alabama 1975, prohibits a mayor or councilmember from voting on questions which come before the council in which he or she or his or her employer or employee has a special financial interest, either at the time of voting or at the time of his or her election. In applying this section, the attorney general has ruled that a council member whose spouse is employed by a city school system may participate in the governmental process by which money is appropriated to the school system unless he has a special financial interest at the time of voting.

Section 11-43-53, Code of Alabama 1975, prohibits a

member of a municipal council from appointment to any municipal office which has been created or the emoluments of which have been increased during the term for which he or she was elected. He or she may not be interested, directly or indirectly, in any contract, job, work, material or the proceeds thereof or services to be performed for the municipality, except as provided by law.

In addressing criminal laws, Chapter 10 of Title 13A, Code of Alabama 1975, sets out a number of offenses against public administration, such as obstructing governmental operations, refusal to permit inspection, failure to file a required report, tampering with governmental records, bribery of public officials, failure to disclose conflict of interests, trading in public office, misuse of confidential information and perjury. Municipal officials should become familiar with these statutes.

The Alabama Ethics Law:

It is important for municipal officials to always keep in mind the Alabama Ethics Law, found in Chapter 25 of Title 36, Code of Alabama 1975. The fundamental purpose of the Alabama Ethics Law is to deter public officials and public employees from using his or her official position or office to obtain a personal gain to himself or herself or a family member of the public official. Section 36-25-5(a), Code of Alabama 1975. Additionally, no member of any county or municipal agency, board, or commission may vote or participate in any matter in which the member or family member of the member has any financial gain or interest. Section 36-25-9(c), Code of Alabama 1975.

The Alabama Ethics Law is enforced by the Alabama Ethics Commission, so you are strongly encouraged to contact them at 334-242-2997, if you have any Alabama Ethics Law questions. Every governmental agency head must, within 10 days, file a report with the Alabama Ethics Commission on any matters that come to his or her attention, in his or her official capacity, which constitutes a violation of the ethics law.

Conclusion

Being aware of conflicts between one’s private interests and their role as a public official should always be in the forefront of a municipal official’s mind. As this article points out, there can be legal consequences for failing to do so. Although there are some legal exceptions to some potential conflicts of interest, it never hurts to remember Benjamin Franklin’s age-old adage that “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” The League’s legal department can be reached at 334-262-2566 and is always available to assist you on this, or any other topic, involving your role as a municipal official. ■

ADA Compliance and Accessibility on Municipal Websites



In 28 C.F.R. Part 35, Subpart H, federal law requires all public entities, including municipalities, must ensure that any web content and mobile apps that they publish are “readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities.” 28 C.F.R. § 35.200(a). (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/24/2024-07758/nondiscrimination-on-the-basis-of-disability-accessibility-of-web-information-and-services-of-state>)



Requirements

The new rule requires that state and local governments follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Version 2.1 up to Level AA. The Justice Department selected Level AA as appropriate for state and local governments because it “contains other criteria that provide more comprehensive web accessibility, and yet (is) still achievable for most web developers.”

Some examples of Level AA accessibility requirements include providing captions for audio and video media, alternative descriptive text for images, and resizable text. You can review the Web Accessibility Initiative’s quick reference on How to Meet WCAG here: https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG22/quickref/?currentsidebar=%23col_customize&versions=2.1



These requirements will also apply to social media profiles that belong to municipalities. In many cases, local governments will be able to take advantage of features already available on social media platforms in order to comply with many of the requirements.

Deadlines for Municipalities to Comply

- Municipalities with populations of less than 50,000 people must comply with these new requirements by **April 26, 2027**.
- Municipalities with populations of 50,000 people or more must comply with these new requirements by **April 24, 2026**.

Exceptions

Web pages are not required to comply with WCAG Level AA Guidelines if they are:

- Archived web content which:
 - Was created before the municipality’s compliance deadline,
 - Is retained for reference, research, or recordkeeping only,
 - Is not altered or updated after the date it was archived, and
 - Is clearly identified as archival.
- Documents that are available before the municipality’s compliance deadline.
 - However, if citizens use a document to apply for, gain access to, or participate in the municipality’s services, programs, or activities, then it must comply with the ADA requirements.
- Content posted by a third party to a municipality’s website. However, if the third party posts the content on behalf of the municipality, or as part of an agreement with the municipality, then it must comply with the ADA requirements.
- Conventional electronic documents that are:
 - About a specific individual, their property, or their account; and
 - Password-protected or otherwise secured.
- A municipality’s social media posts which were already posted before the municipality’s compliance deadline.

For more information on complying with the new ADA web accessibility requirements, consult with your municipal attorney. If your municipality is in need of a web developer, consider contacting VC3, the Alabama League of Municipalities’ IT consulting partner since 2018.



Infrastructure, Incentives and Intent: How Ozark is Building a Stronger Future

Ty Rayford • Digital Media Specialist • ALM

In the heart of Ozark, a Wiregrass community known for its patriotism and deep ties to Army Aviation, economic development is more than a strategy. It is a shared commitment to ensuring a strong future. Incorporated in 1870 and now home to 14,147 residents, Ozark has long balanced its proud heritage with a progressive mindset. In recent years, that mindset has taken on a new focus through participation in the Alabama League of Municipalities' Economic Development Academy (EDA).

Ozark's involvement in EDA began with an important goal: understanding the process. Holle Smith, president of the Ozark-Dale County Economic Development Corporation, was in her role for less than a year when the opportunity came. Coming from a background as a local small business owner, she brought firsthand knowledge of what it means to have a business perspective and cater to the specific needs of the economic market. She recognized that economic development at the municipal level requires a different lens — one that combines policy, infrastructure, incentives and rigorous planning.

"I was new to economic development and still learning," Smith said. "I wanted my council members to understand their role in the economic development process and the importance of that."

Ozark was part of the inaugural EDA class in 2021. The team included former mayor Mark Blankenship, Councilman Les Perault, Councilman Winston Jackson, former Councilwoman Leah Harlow, former Councilman Stanley Enfinger and Smith. Working through data analysis, strategic exercises and project planning together strengthened their dynamic in meaningful ways.

By gathering in sessions across the state, often carpooling to community colleges hosting the training, the group built more than knowledge. They built experience and shared understanding of economic development mechanics. According to Smith, that shared experience translated into a council that was both supportive and informed, approving every economic development project and incentive presented during their term.

Each participating community begins the academy process with a community economic vitality survey. For Ozark, the results confirmed several strengths: strong unity in leadership, a great location, available industrial assets and a deep

The city of Ozark hosts several annual festivals, most notably the Ozark Crawdad and Music Festival in April and the Claybank Jamboree Arts & Crafts Festival in October.



sense of community pride. At the same time, the survey revealed challenges. Population decline was a concern, along with workforce recruitment and retention, housing availability and the need to better market community assets.

Rather than view these findings as setbacks, city leaders treated them as a roadmap.

“Our project consisted of a goal to address housing, workforce and charm factors,” Smith said.

Since completing the academy, coordination between city leadership and economic development partners has strengthened significantly. Communication with existing industries has become more proactive, with an emphasis on identifying needs preemptively. Ozark now focuses on businesses that align with workforce strengths, infrastructure capacity and long-term economic goals.

The results are real. In 2022, Ozark announced that Ecore International would locate in the community, bringing 84 jobs and a \$28 million investment. In addition, Ozark secured Growing Alabama funds for three site development projects, completed multiple industrial expansions and passed retail incentives that attracted national brands such as Taco Bell and Dunham’s Sporting Goods.

Infrastructure readiness has also become a priority. Improvements at the Ozark Municipal Airport industrial site and other municipal industrial properties are designed to make the city more competitive. These enhancements send a clear message: Ozark will be ready.

Strategic planning is now a part of discussions about infrastructure, incentives and land use. Councilman Les Perault noted that hearing directly from EDA experts proved especially valuable.

“It reinforced the importance of preparation, infrastructure readiness, and strategic planning long before a prospect ever makes contact,” he said.

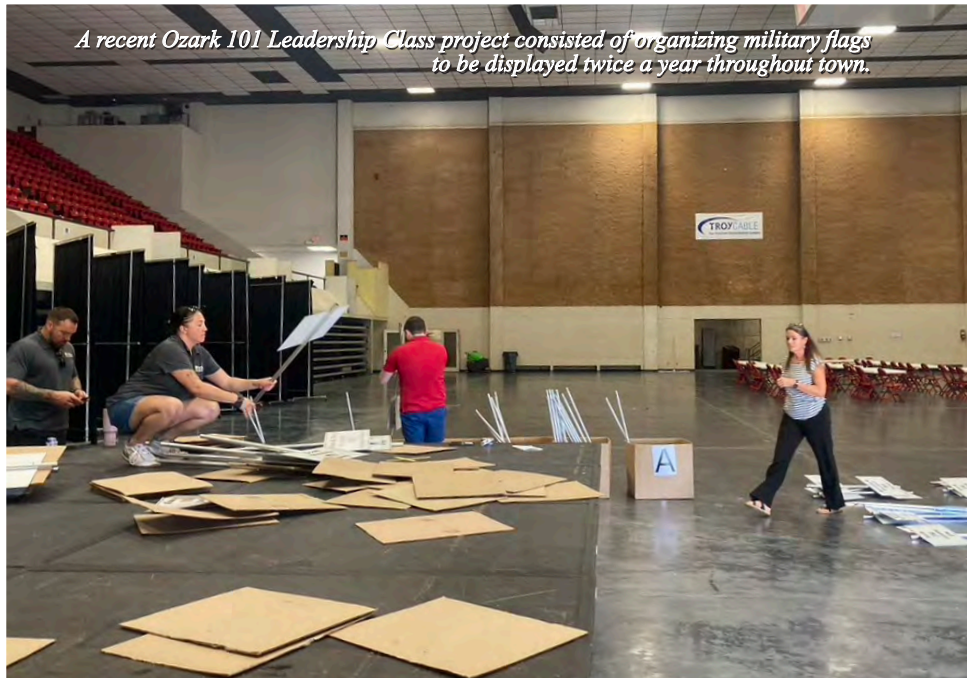
Perault said that one of the most meaningful aspects of the program was the opportunity to collaborate with other communities facing similar challenges.



Ozark is recognized as the home of Army aviation.



The city of Ozark added a new 10,000-square-foot corporate hangar to the regional airport in 2024.



A recent Ozark 101 Leadership Class project consisted of organizing military flags to be displayed twice a year throughout town.

The peer learning environment allowed Ozark’s team to compare strategies, exchange ideas and examine its own practices with a fresh perspective.

Ozark participated in the Alabama Communities of Excellence program simultaneously with EDA and graduated in November 2024. Smith serves as the city’s ACE coordinator and sees the programs as complementary. While ACE emphasizes structured planning, benchmarking and long-term assessment, EDA focuses specifically on economic development competitiveness and mechanics. Together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of how policy, planning and economic strategy intersect.

The city’s engagement with broader municipal training has also shaped leadership capacity. Participation in the League’s Certified Municipal Official (CMO) program strengthened understanding of budgeting, legal authority and governance — all critical topics when discussing incentives or infrastructure investment.

Looking ahead, Ozark’s economic development vision is located along one of its most visible assets: Highway 231. City leaders recognize the corridor’s potential to drive commercial expansion, retail growth and job creation. The goal, however, is not growth for growth’s sake.

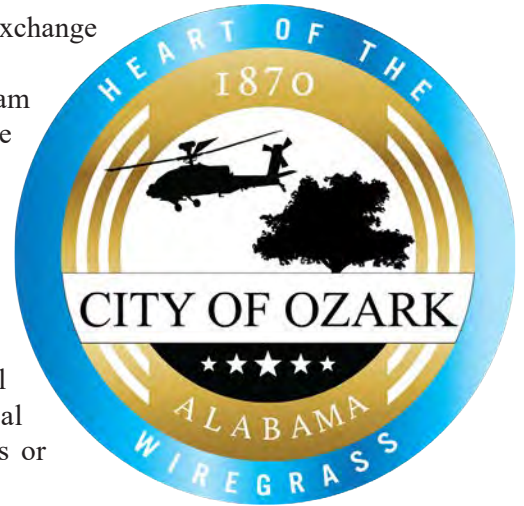
“Our economic development strategy is centered on efficient management, informed decision-making and a clear long-term vision for Ozark,” Mayor Charles Ward said. “We are carefully assessing our strengths and opportunities, addressing challenges and aligning our resources to build a strong, viable community that can serve as a model for others.”

For Smith, the path forward includes continuing to nurture relationships with existing businesses while preparing sites so the community is ready when opportunities arise.

When asked what advice she would offer to other cities considering EDA, Smith emphasized participation and openness.

“I would advise the local economic developer to attend with their council,” she said. She also encourages communities to approach the program with honesty.

From its incorporation in 1870 to its present-day focus on strategic growth, Ozark’s story continues to evolve. It is an ongoing process; one built on preparation, unity and vision. ■



SetaTech USA celebrated the opening of its new plant at the Ozark Technology Center with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in March 2024.

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Fairhope's Path to Excellence: A Coastal Community's Commitment to Strategic Growth and Lasting Quality of Life



Lori Jhons • Communications Director • ALM

Perched along the eastern shoreline of Mobile Bay, the city of Fairhope has long been recognized as one of Alabama's most picturesque and vibrant communities. With its sweeping sunsets, oak-lined streets and thriving downtown, Fairhope offers more than scenic beauty — it represents a model of thoughtful growth and community engagement. That commitment has earned the city recognition as this magazine edition's Alabama Communities of Excellence spotlight story.

A Legacy Rooted in Vision

Established in 1908 with roughly 500 residents, Fairhope began as a small but ambitious community. Its early years were shaped by Henry George's Single Tax philosophy which led to the creation of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony. By the 1930s, this colony gifted the city many of its most treasured assets, including its waterfront parks, bluff lands and iconic pier, which continue to serve as cornerstones of civic life today.

Now home to approximately 25,000 residents, Fairhope has grown steadily while maintaining its charm. The city is widely known for its natural beauty, strong arts community, locally owned businesses and a calendar full of events that draw visitors from all over the state and country year-round.

A Pathway to Excellence

Fairhope's journey with the ACE program began in August 2013, when city leadership committed to a comprehensive evaluation of municipal operations and long-term planning.

ACE was created in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to provide small communities, in the 2,000 to 18,000 population range, resources and knowledge that focus on the importance of planning, leadership development and broad-based community engagement. ACE provides community leaders with training and workshops to develop a vision and implementation strategies for their city. The program is designed to walk communities through a three-phased approach, which consists of assessing a community's strengths and weaknesses, developing a strategic plan and implementing it.

From the outset, Fairhope approached the process with intention. City staff and leadership worked across departments to gather data, assess strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Paige Crawford, the city's director of community affairs and ACE local coordinator, said the effort required both transparency and teamwork.

The city hosts its annual arts and crafts festival the third weekend in March.





The Alabama-Mississippi Sea Grant Consortium and the Gulf of America Alliance recognized Fairhope in January as Alabama's first Clean and Resilient Marina.



Mayor Sullivan and members of the Fairhope City Council showcase the community's free downtown shuttle during the holidays.

“City leadership worked collaboratively across departments to gather documentation, evaluate our strengths and areas for improvement and align our policies with ACE standards,” Crawford said. “The process required honest assessment, coordination and a shared commitment to excellence.”

Strengthening Strategy and Structure

Participation in ACE proved to be transformative for Fairhope’s internal operations.

“ACE helped formalize and sharpen our strategic focus,” Crawford said. “It strengthened internal processes, improved cross-department communication and reinforced our commitment to long-term planning rather than reactive decision-making.”

That emphasis on proactive planning has become a defining characteristic of Fairhope’s approach to governance. Through the development of a comprehensive strategic plan, the city established clear priorities, measurable goals and a roadmap for sustainable growth.

City leaders continue to revisit and update the plan to reflect evolving community needs, ensuring that progress remains aligned with residents’ expectations.


Building Trust Through Accountability

For Fairhope, the ACE designation represents more than a credential — it reflects a promise to its residents and business community.

“To me, the ACE distinction represents credibility and trust,” Crawford said. “It tells our residents and business community that Fairhope is committed to responsible growth and continuous improvement.”

That trust is reinforced through consistent public engagement. The city communicates its progress through council meetings, public updates, digital platforms and community events, ensuring residents understand not only what decisions are being made but also the reasoning behind them.

Balancing Growth and Character with Continued Progress

Although Fairhope Mayor Sherry Sullivan was not in office at the time the city completed the ACE designation process, she has served as mayor for the past six years and is currently ALM’s president. She previously worked for the city of Fairhope for almost 17 years and worked for Riviera Utilities as director of governmental affairs and economic development. 

As Fairhope and Baldwin County continue to be among the fastest growing areas of the state, Mayor Sullivan says maintaining balance remains a central priority. The city is focused on investing in infrastructure, supporting small businesses and enhancing quality-of-life amenities, all while preserving the distinctive character that sets it apart.

Tree-lined streets, walkable neighborhoods and a vibrant downtown are not just features — they are intentional



In June 2025, the city of Fairhope held a kickoff ceremony for the creation of Hatch Fairhope in the former historic K-1 Center school building.

outcomes of planning efforts shaped in part by the ACE framework.

Last August, the city completed the first phase of the Flying Creek Nature Preserve, which is a 108-acre wooded sanctuary located along Fly Creek in Fairhope. True to the city's founding vision of reserving exceptional land for public benefit, this preserve offers a peaceful escape into nature, featuring a rich forest and ecosystem. Designed to support passive recreation and environmental education,

the preserve will be developed over several phases with minimal impact to the existing native habitat. Some of the highlights of this \$4 million project includes a nature center, multi-use nature trails, outdoor classrooms, a butterfly garden and eventually a restored, seven-acre pine forest.

The city also recognizes the importance of regional collaboration. Mayor Sullivan is actively involved in the Baldwin County Mayors Association along with the League.

She said, "No matter the challenge, idea or situation, chances are someone has already faced it. These relationships give me access to a wealth of knowledge and experience that help me better serve my community."

By working with neighboring communities, Fairhope strengthens not only its own future but that of the broader region. One example of this cross-collaboration is the renovation of the historic Fairhope K-1 Center into a cutting-edge tech incubator — Hatch Fairhope. This pioneering hub is the result of a dynamic partnership between the city of Fairhope and the Baldwin Community and Economic Development Foundation. Designed to support tech-driven entrepreneurs across Fairhope and Baldwin County, Hatch Fairhope provides a vibrant platform for both early-stage startups and established businesses to grow and thrive.

"By restoring this beloved building, we are not only preserving a vital piece of Fairhope's history but also reimagining it as a center for innovation and opportunity," Mayor Sullivan said. "The Fairhope K-1 Center will once again be a place of learning — equipped with the tools, resources and collaborative environment that today's entrepreneurs need to succeed."

Both projects are being funded in whole or partially with grants from the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, Innovate Alabama, the state of Alabama and the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

A Model for Other Communities

Fairhope's experience offers valuable insights for other municipalities considering participation in the ACE program.

"Embrace the process," Crawford said. "ACE works best when city leadership is willing to take an honest look at operations and commit to continuous improvement."

That mindset has positioned Fairhope as a leader among Alabama communities — one that demonstrates how strategic planning, civic engagement and collaboration can create lasting success.

From its origins as a small coastal settlement to its current role as an ACE community, Fairhope exemplifies what is possible when a city invests in itself, not just for today, but for generations to come. In doing so, Fairhope stands as a shining example of excellence along the shores of Mobile Bay, offering a blueprint for communities across Alabama seeking to build a better future. ■



The city recently completed construction on a traffic circle where Scenic 98, Veterans Drive and Triangle Drive converge to ensure safety and efficiency for travelers.



Phase one of the Flying Creek Nature Preserve opened in Fairhope in August 2025.

Scan the QR code for more information about the ACE Program.



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Women in Government Luncheon Celebrates Trailblazers at Alabama Archives

Ty Rayford ♦ Digital Media Specialist ♦ Alabama League of Municipalities

On March 24, 2026, the Alabama League of Municipalities hosted its sixth annual Women in Government Luncheon, bringing together a distinguished group of elected officials, cabinet members, strategic partners and other accomplished women in Alabama government. Held in conjunction with Women’s History Month, the event took place at the historic Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery. The event was filled with meaningful conversation and connection, as attendees reflected on the progress women have made across all levels of public service and the determination it takes to show up every day and lead with excellence.

One of the most memorable highlights of the afternoon came after lunch when guests were treated to an exclusive, private tour of the archives. Attendees had the privilege of viewing remarkable, historical heirlooms including the personal pins, campaign memorabilia and dresses belonging to Lurleen Wallace, Alabama’s first female governor, who served from 1967 to 1968. They also saw historical documents, videos and photos of other notable women such as Agnes Baggett, who served as Alabama’s secretary of state, treasurer and auditor; Dixie Bibb Graves, the first woman to serve as a United States senator from Alabama; and Louphenia Thomas, the first African American woman elected to the Alabama Legislature. The up-close look at these rarely-seen artifacts sparked important conversation about their trailblazing legacies and the enduring impact of women who have shaped Alabama’s history.

The sixth annual luncheon served as a celebration, inspiration and reminder of how far women in government have come and left attendees empowered to continue championing their leadership for generations to come. ■





Another Attendance Record Broken at Advocacy Day ⁺

Ty Rayford • Digital Media Specialist • ALM

This January, more than 300 municipal leaders gathered for the annual ALM Advocacy Day at the Montgomery Embassy Suites Hotel! Alabama's mayors and councilmembers made it clear that they remain deeply committed to strengthening their hometowns and shaping a vibrant future for their communities. This record-breaking turnout created meaningful opportunities for engagement with state leaders and highlighted the voice of local government.

Throughout the day, municipal officials participated in productive conversations with lawmakers about a wide range of issues impacting cities and towns across Alabama. Some of these issues included retaining municipal authority, advancing public safety, encouraging economic development and addressing critical infrastructure needs. These conversations reflected the shared understanding that strong municipalities are the foundation of Alabama.

We were honored to hear from U.S. Sen. Katie Britt, House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, Sen. Steve Livingston, Rachel Riddle and Todd Stacy, each of whom shared valuable perspectives on the legislative landscape and the importance of collaboration between federal, state and local leaders.

Once again, Advocacy Day demonstrated the strength of unity. When municipal leaders come together to share ideas, voice concerns and pursue solutions, progress is both possible and inevitable. We extend our sincere appreciation to our speakers and to every mayor and councilmember who participated. Together, we will continue advocating for vibrant, resilient communities throughout Alabama. ■





Alabama Municipalities Take Advocacy Efforts to Nation's Capital City

Lori Jhons ★ Communications Director ★ ALM

The Alabama League of Municipalities hosted more than 200 Alabama municipal leaders at the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C. on March 16-18! This year's theme for the conference was – **We The Cities: Local Governments Deliver**. Local leaders are the most trusted voices in government. They deliver real results for their communities every day. Last month, Alabama's mayors and councilmembers showed up in full force, with the largest state contingent at the conference, to advocate for their communities' priorities. Some examples of issues they discussed with federal leaders include: infrastructure, public safety, economic development, workforce issues, access to quality health care, grant opportunities and maintaining municipal authority.

During our caucus meeting, our members received legislative updates from Executive Director Greg Cochran and Deputy Director Kayla Bass as well as federal policy and appropriations updates from NLC Senior Executive and Director of Federal Advocacy Irma Esparza Diggs and Britton Bronner, with Adams and Reese LLP.

This year, the League recognized U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville and Sen. Katie Britt as recipients of the 2026 Hometown Hero Award during a breakfast panel and meeting. Since taking office, Sen. Tuberville and Sen. Britt have worked with local leaders throughout Alabama to address issues that directly affect municipal governments. Most recently, their collaboration helped bring the U.S. Space Command headquarters to Huntsville as well as the U.S. Coast Guard training center and Fannie Mae headquarters to Birmingham.

ALM members also had an opportunity to meet directly with their U.S. representatives at our reception and in meetings, during NLC's Hill Day, to share what is happening in their communities and weigh in on federal legislation impacting Alabama's cities and towns. Although the weather disrupted a lot of travel plans, we want to thank U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell and Rep. Robert Aderholt for attending the congressional reception.

Furthermore, the League extends our gratitude to our reception sponsors for their support and partnership; this includes: Adams and Reese LLP, Alabama Power, City of Foley, Energy Southeast, Goodwyn Mills Cawood, Poarch Creek Indians, PowerSouth, City of Rainbow City, Southeast Gas, TVA and Volkert.

Scan the QR code to watch the recap video! ■





Reclaiming Local Value from Municipal Payment Processing

James Shepherd | Consultant | Full Stack Payments

For many municipalities, payment processing is viewed as a necessary administrative function rather than a strategic opportunity. Credit card and Automated Clearing House (ACH) payments allow residents to pay for utilities, taxes, permits, fines and other services conveniently, but the mechanics behind those transactions often receive little attention.

In most cases, the cost of accepting electronic payments is passed on to the resident. Because of this, payment processors have historically operated outside the public spotlight. What many municipal leaders are unaware of is how much margin exists within these transactions and how much value leaves local communities each year as a result.

The underlying cost to process a government payment is typically between 1% and 1.5%. Yet, residents are often charged 3% to 4% when paying by card or ACH. The difference represents net processing margin retained by large financial institutions and payment companies, many of which operate far outside the state of Alabama. In practical terms, this means that more than 2% of revenue collected electronically by municipalities may be leaving local communities entirely.

Recognizing this reality, Full Stack Payments has partnered with the Alabama League of Municipalities to offer an alternative approach. Full Stack Payments' mission is to help public sector organizations deliver modern, secure payment experiences while ensuring greater transparency and keeping more value within the communities they serve. The goal is straightforward: provide efficient payment processing while enabling municipalities to reclaim a portion of the value already being generated and reinvest it directly into their communities.



A Model Built Around Municipal Priorities

Under this program, municipalities typically maintain their existing pricing structures for residents. In most cases, residents experience no change in how they pay or what they are charged. Behind the scenes, Full Stack Payments serves as the payment processor and allocates 50% of the net processing margin back to the municipality.

Rather than allowing those funds to leave the state, participating municipalities can direct them toward priorities such as parks and recreation, public safety, capital reserves, technology upgrades or other community initiatives. The payments are already occurring. The difference is where the value ultimately lands.

This model transforms routine payment activity into a sustainable reinvestment mechanism without increasing costs, changing resident behavior or impacting appropriated funds.

Three Key Benefits for Municipalities

Municipal leaders evaluating payment systems tend to focus on reliability, ease of use and public trust. This approach is designed to strengthen all three.

1. Modern Payment Acceptance

Municipal payment needs vary widely, from utilities and taxes to parking, courts, and permitting. Many Alabama municipalities are still operating on legacy systems that lack basic features residents now expect, such as emailed invoices with payment links, mobile wallet acceptance, or modern point-of-sale hardware.

The program supports a wide range of payment environments and can integrate with many existing systems. Whether a municipality is looking to modernize its technology or simply improve what it already uses, the objective is to make payments easier, faster, and more convenient for residents.

2. Simple, Low-Disruption Onboarding

One of the most common concerns among municipal leaders is disruption. Changing a core system can feel risky, especially when staff are already stretched thin.

Implementation typically begins with a review of the municipality's current payment environment, followed by integration with existing systems or deployment of updated technology where desired. Full Stack Payments then transitions processing behind the scenes, allowing the municipality to continue operating as usual while the new model goes live. Ongoing reporting and reinvestment decisions follow on a monthly basis.

In most cases, municipalities do not need to replace their existing software or workflows. Full Stack Payments operates behind the scenes as the processor, allowing municipalities to continue using the systems they already know. For those who wish to upgrade, support is available to guide that transition.

Onboarding includes hands-on assistance to ensure continuity of service, staff confidence and a smooth experience for residents. The goal is improvement without interruption.

3. Reinvesting Local Value

Transparency is central to the model. Each month, municipalities receive clear reporting that outlines total transaction volume, associated costs and net processing margin. All processing operates within established regulatory and compliance standards, with clear separation of funds and auditable reporting to support accountability and trust. From there, municipal leaders determine where half of that margin should be reinvested.

For some communities, that may mean strengthening parks and recreation programs. For others, it may support technology upgrades, emergency reserves or long-term financial planning. The flexibility allows municipalities to align reinvestment with their unique needs and priorities.

Improving the Resident Experience

Payment processing represents one of the most frequent interactions residents have with their local government. When that experience is intuitive and efficient, it builds trust. When it is slow, confusing or outdated, frustration can grow.



Payment processing is one of the most frequent interactions residents have with their local government. A modern, simple payment experience improves convenience while reflecting positively on municipal operations.



Clear, transparent reporting gives municipalities full visibility into payment activity, costs, and reclaimed processing margin, empowering leaders to decide how funds are reinvested.



When payment processing profits are reclaimed and repurposed locally, dollars that once left the state can instead support municipal priorities and community needs.

Improving payment systems while simultaneously returning value to the community creates a meaningful opportunity. Municipalities are not being asked to do more with less. Instead, they are being offered a way to better steward resources already in motion.

Understanding the Financial Impact

Municipal leaders often ask what kind of impact this approach can realistically have. A simple estimate is to take the municipality’s annual electronic payment volume and multiply it by 1%. That figure represents a conservative approximation of funds that could be redirected annually into local priorities. For many municipalities, the result is significant enough to warrant serious consideration. As more Alabama municipalities explore this approach, the cumulative impact has the potential to strengthen local services and reinvest millions of dollars back into communities across the state.

Getting Started

Municipalities interested in exploring this approach can begin with a conversation about their current systems, needs and goals. From there, options can be evaluated collaboratively, with an emphasis on transparency, efficiency and community benefit.

More information is available at fullstackpayments.com/government or scan the top QR code. Scan the bottom QR code for a recording of our recent Payment Processing webinar. Municipal leaders may contact Timothy Dow at timothy.dow@fullstackpayments.com to schedule an initial discussion. ■

Full Stack Website



Full Stack Webinar



James Shepherd is a payments industry veteran with more than 18 years of experience as a consultant and executive. He has led and advised multiple payment processing organizations and helped found Full Stack Payments to improve the payments experience for organizations while developing innovative economic models that support operational and community improvement.



Support your Community

How does local government support your community?

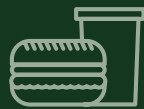
Through a variety of ways and services including public safety, recruitment of economic investment, infrastructure maintenance and sustainability, economic development, recreation, education, arts, festivals and cultural events.

How can YOU support your community?

Citizens can get involved by attending council meetings and community events; engaging in elections; building relationships with local and state leaders; volunteering; and participating in community initiatives and improvement projects.

Live locally to support Alabama!

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Eat Locally, Shop Locally

Alabama is home to countless local artisans and natural resources that support local economies. When you shop and eat locally, you promote sustainable economic growth for communities.



Live Locally, Work Locally

Employment levels have reached new highs, and Alabama companies have hit records for exports. Local leaders continue to connect with local businesses and state leaders to enhance our workforce development efforts to support high-paying manufacturing jobs, aerospace and defense opportunities, automotive industry jobs and maritime careers.



Live Locally, Learn Locally

Education is the key to opportunity. Alabama is home to the No. 1 pre-K program in the nation. Alabama also has 30 four-year colleges and universities, 26 two-year technical and junior colleges and over 140 school districts for K-12 students.



Live Locally, Play Locally

Whether you're visiting white sandy beaches, fishing, hunting, hiking, immersing yourself in the cultural arts and history scene, or attending an energetic sports game - Alabama has an abundance of activities and entertainment that are sure to provide a good time!

From Fines to Futures: How Alabama Cities Are Turning Debt Into Opportunity

Katya Mayer • Senior Regional Specialist (Southern Region) • NLC

Across Alabama, local leaders are taking a closer look at how municipal fines and fees affect residents' financial stability. In cities like Montgomery and Birmingham, officials are working to ensure these policies are fair, effective and supportive of long-term economic mobility.

Montgomery and Birmingham participated in the second cohort (2023–2025) of the National League of Cities' Cities Addressing Fines and Fees Equitably (CAFFE) initiative — a five-year national effort (2021–2025) that helped municipalities reform fines and fees while improving residents' access to financial stability services.

Rather than viewing fines and fees solely as revenue, local leaders are asking: how can these systems promote equity alongside accountability?



A Focus on Economic Stability

Fines and fees are a reality in every community. However, when unpaid tickets, court costs or administrative fees accumulate, they can create lasting financial strain for residents. Mounting debt can disrupt employment, limit transportation options and make it harder for families to stay on stable financial footing.

The CAFFE initiative helped cities examine how their systems operate in practice — from how fines are assessed to how residents receive information and resolve outstanding balances. Participating cities worked together across departments, including courts, finance and community development, to identify challenges and test practical reforms. As part of this process, cities identified harmful fines and fees, determined which residents or populations were most



The full NLC CAFFE Cohort came together in Dallas in April 2024. City teams shared progress, learned from peers and celebrated collective impact on fines and fees equity.

affected and implemented financial empowerment services to help residents pay down or fully remediate their debt.

In Montgomery and Birmingham, this work focused on making systems more transparent, improving communication, and ensuring that residents have realistic pathways to resolving their debt and meeting obligations.

Montgomery: Aligning Policy with Opportunity

In Montgomery, city leaders used the CAFFE initiative to explore how fines and fees intersect with broader economic mobility goals. The city focused on making it easier for residents to understand what they owe, how to resolve balances and how to avoid compounding penalties.

The work has centered largely on traffic-related fines. The city partnered with the Montgomery Municipal Court, the planning department, the mayor's office and community organizations, including Alabama Appleseed and the Southern Poverty Law Center, to better understand how traffic debt affects residents' daily lives.

Through this collaboration, Montgomery partnered with Auburn University on a data analysis project to identify which fines and fees most impacted residents and where reform efforts should focus. Separately, this work informed the development of Executive Order 2024-0220, Remission of Fines, Fees, & Costs for Municipal Court Convictions. Mayor Steven Reed issued the order, which forgives fines and fees for certain adjudicated convictions older than 2014 — a key CAFFE accomplishment despite challenges launching the full financial counseling component.

Montgomery's experience demonstrates how cities can maintain necessary revenue while ensuring municipal policies support, rather than hinder, residents' progress.

Birmingham: Connecting Residents to Financial Empowerment Services

In Birmingham, fines and fees reform is closely connected to the city's broader efforts to promote economic stability.

As part of the CAFFE initiative, the city examined how fines assessed for driving without a license, with a suspended license or with a revoked license affect residents. These challenges often intersect with employment and financial hardship, making them particularly important to address.

Working in partnership with the Birmingham Municipal Court and IMC Financial Consulting, Birmingham focused on



The Birmingham Municipal Court celebrated two participants regaining their driver's licenses after more than 10 years — thanks to the dedication of Smart Money Program Coordinator Terry Davis and her team.



Members of NLC's team, including Diana Goldsmith, Dennis Campa and Chanell Hasty, visited the Montgomery team in February 2024.

connecting residents facing municipal debt with financial empowerment services. These services include financial counseling, credit-building support and workforce development resources.

By coordinating across departments and with community partners, Birmingham worked to ensure that residents do not navigate municipal debt alone. Instead, the system became a gateway to broader support.

For other Alabama cities, Birmingham offers an example of how fines-and-fees reform can be integrated into broader economic mobility efforts.

Key Lessons for Alabama Cities

While each community is unique, several lessons from Montgomery and Birmingham may be helpful for other municipalities exploring this work.

- **Start with a clear picture.** Mapping how fines and fees are assessed, communicated and collected reveals not just operational gaps, but which resident populations are most impacted by inequities — a key focus of the assessments.
- **Consider ability-to-pay policies.** Flexible payment options and reasonable timelines can reduce defaults and improve compliance.
- **Improve communication.** Clear notices and plain-language explanations help residents understand their obligations and avoid additional penalties.
- **Build bridges, not barriers.** Partnerships with nonprofits and financial empowerment organizations connect residents to budgeting help, credit counseling, workforce resources and personalized repayment plans through financial counselors.
- **Work across departments.** Successful reforms often require collaboration between courts, finance, legal, police and community services.

Importantly, these steps do not require large budgets or staff. Smaller cities can start by reviewing a single category of fines or piloting new payment options before expanding reforms.

Why This Matters

Alabama municipalities balance limited resources with growing service demands. At the same time, many residents live paycheck to paycheck and may struggle to cover unexpected expenses.

When fines and fees are structured thoughtfully, they can support compliance and provide essential revenue without creating unnecessary hardship. When they are not, they can contribute to housing instability, job loss and long-term financial strain — challenges that ultimately affect the entire community.

The work underway in Montgomery and Birmingham demonstrates that local governments can take practical steps to make their systems more effective and more equitable. Their efforts are helping shape national best practices and showing how local policy can support both fiscal responsibility and community stability.

How NLC Can Support Your City

Through the Alabama League of Municipalities' partnership with the National League of Cities, local officials have access to a range of tools and resources, including:

- Research and case studies on fines and fees reform
- Peer networks and learning opportunities
- Technical assistance and guidance
- Convening with other local leaders





During the NLC team site visit, CAFFE participants discussed ideas to advance local efforts on fines and fees equity.

Cities interested in reviewing fines and fees, improving communication or connecting residents to financial empowerment services can learn from peers across the country who are engaged in similar work.

As Alabama municipalities plan for future budgets and priorities, even small policy changes or new partnerships can help residents stay financially stable while supporting essential services.

Together, Alabama cities are demonstrating that local policy can be both practical and fair — and that when residents are financially secure, the entire community is stronger.

Ready to bring solutions like these to your community? Through the National League of Cities, local leaders gain access to proven strategies, national networks and hands-on support. Direct questions to efof@nlc.org or contact membership@nlc.org to get connected and start exploring what is possible for your city. ■

BECOME A NLC MEMBER



Membership with NLC includes **exclusive access, tools, and resources** available to your entire city, town or village!

Scan the **QR Code** to complete the NLC interest form and connect with the NLC membership representative for your region

"The National League of Cities is the oldest and largest national association serving local government."



SAVE



DATE!

2026 CMO Training Calendar



THE



Make plans to join the League for training in 2026!

Visit www.almonline.org/UpcomingTraining frequently for training and updated registration information.

- ALM Convention and Expo – April 28 - May 1 | Montgomery
- CMO Regional Trainings –
 - May 21 – Muscle Shoals (Northwest Shoals CC - Shoals Campus)
 - June 25 – Birmingham (Jeff State CC - Shelby-Hoover Campus)
 - July 16 – Fairhope (Coastal Alabama CC - Fairhope Campus)
- In-State Congressional Luncheons – August (full details TBD)
- Standing Committees Meeting – Fall (full details TBD) | Montgomery
- Municipal Leadership Institute and ALM Graduation Ceremonies – October 20-22 | Mobile
- NLC City Summit – November 18-21 | Nashville, TN

Learn more about the CMO Program and how it strengthens municipalities by educating municipal leaders.

almonline.org/CMOProgram



Join an ALM Standing Committee and Be Heard!

The League has six standing committees comprised of mayors and councilmembers from each congressional district in the state. Each fall, the League's six standing committees convene in Montgomery to hear from state and federal resource advisors and to recommend any pertinent legislative considerations to the Committee on State and Federal Legislation ahead of the legislative session.

If you are a municipal official that would like to serve on one of the League's six standing committees, please email Lillian Pitman, ALM legislative policy analyst, at lpitman@almonline.org.

This is a great opportunity to get more involved with the League and advocate for issues important to cities and towns across the state!

Committee on State and Federal Legislation

Chair: Mayor Donna McKay, Wadley
Vice Chair: Mayor Richard Teal, Loxley

The League's six standing committees are:

- **Committee on Finance, Administration and Intergovernmental Relations (FAIR)**
Chair: Councilmember Crystal Smitherman, Birmingham
Vice-Chair: Mayor Stanley Allred, Millport
- **Committee on Energy, Environment and Natural Resources (EENR)**
Chair: Councilmember Willis Thompson, Muscle Shoals
Vice-Chair: Councilmember Melvin Duran, Priceville
- **Committee on Transportation, Infrastructure and Communication (TIC)**
Chair: Councilmember Don Mack, Centreville
Vice-Chair: Mayor Eddie Smith, Opelika
- **Committee on Public Safety (PS)**
Chair: Councilmember Wardine Alexander, Birmingham
Vice-Chair: Councilmember Clark Hopper, Rainbow City
- **Committee on Human Development (HD)**
Chair: Vacant
Vice-Chair: Vacant
- **Committee on Community and Economic Development (CED)**
Chair: Councilmember Newton Cromer, Saraland
Vice-Chair: Vacant



For an in-depth description of each committee, please scan the QR code.

Alabama's Economic Development Scene Is Thriving: Successful Funding Programs Are Attracting More Jobs and Investment

Alabama Department of Commerce

Economic development in Alabama is moving forward at a record pace, and that momentum is poised to continue in communities across the state.

The 2025 New and Expanding Industry Announcements Report tallied a total capital investment of \$14.6 billion last year, the highest annual total in state history and 44.6% higher than the previous record of \$10.1 billion! In addition, the report showed 9,388 new job commitments.

Growth was seen in a wide range of business sectors, including biosciences, technology, metals and advanced materials, automotive and aerospace, forestry and wood products and more.

“We are proud of our economic development teams in every corner of the state, because we know these results help to build strong and prosperous communities,” Alabama Department of Commerce Secretary Ellen McNair said. “But we are not satisfied to rest in this success, and we continue to focus on new avenues to sharpen Alabama’s competitive edge in attracting business.”

SEEDS and Growing Alabama Programs Overview

McNair cites two key funding programs aimed at doing just that, and they are contributing to major wins for local economies.

First off, the Site Evaluation and Economic Development Strategy program, known as SEEDS, is a matching grant program designed to accelerate the development of industry-ready sites.

SEEDS has helped dozens of communities with land purchases, site preparation, environmental surveys and other improvements. During the three years of the program, SEEDS and the required local match have invested \$138 million across 77 sites statewide.

Meanwhile, the Growing Alabama program provides tax credits to eligible tax payers who make contributions to approved economic development organizations. In return, donors receive a tax credit equal to the value of their contribution, creating a mutually beneficial path to advancing industrial development across the state.

A notable success story for both programs is in Prattville, where Owens Corning announced last year plans to open a state-of-the-art shingle manufacturing plant at South Industrial Park.

Amy Hilliard, Prattville’s economic development director, said the city received a SEEDS assessment grant in 2024 for the project, which allowed them to develop an updated analysis of the industrial park’s remaining locations.



Officials in the city of Fayette used funds from the groundbreaking SEEDS program to purchase property for a prime industrial site that will accelerate economic growth in the region.



Alabama's SEEDS and Growing Alabama programs are supporting the development of Heritage Industrial Park, a 200-acre site located near Dora. (Photo credit: Blanton Media)



Building products leader Owens Corning announced in 2025 its significant investment to construct a new shingle manufacturing facility in Prattville.

Their recruiters were then able to send this assessment to prospects looking at the area.

After Prattville landed the Owens Corning project, the city filed a Growing Alabama tax credit grant application to move a gas pipeline that stretched across the site. The project was awarded \$4.9 million to complete that move and also help with a portion of the rail buildout.

“The SEEDS funds prepared the site for review and the Growing Alabama funds assisted in mitigating the financial aid utility risk to make the project a reality,” Hilliard said. “Without the Growing Alabama funds particularly, we would not have been able to support the project and bring the \$325 million investment to the community with another 100 high-wage technical positions.”

Elsewhere in the state, the city of Ozark has received funds for three Growing Alabama projects, said Holle Smith, president of the Ozark-Dale County Economic Development Corporation. Each award led to improvements on land already

owned by an economic development organization, making the sites more marketable.

“Our community would not have been able to fund these projects without the assistance of the Growing Alabama program,” Smith said. “The most recently completed Growing Alabama project has resulted in a sale agreement to the neighboring industry for a \$2.37 million expansion that will add 15 jobs.”

In addition, a site owned by the city of Daleville for decades was awarded a SEEDS grant in 2024. The assessments obtained through the grant provided guidance on the best use of the property as well as how to wisely invest in the development of the site.

North Alabama communities are also benefiting from the SEEDS and Growing Alabama programs.

Tom Wisemiller, president and CEO of the Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance, said the Hamilton I-22 Industrial Park was awarded funding through SEEDS



Commerce Secretary Ellen McNair speaks at a ceremony to mark the opening of First Solar’s \$1.1 billion solar panel manufacturing facility in Lawrence County, Alabama, on Thursday, Sept. 26, 2024. (Photo credit: First Solar)



Gov. Kay Ivey in 2025 signed into law the Alabama Development Fund, a groundbreaking initiative that will provide a sustainable, long-term funding source to power Alabama's economic development efforts.

and Growing Alabama, while sites in Sulligent, Fayette and Brilliant received SEEDS grants.

“No product, no project,” he said. “Companies need sites that allow for fast-track development with limited risk, not 24-plus month timelines. We’ve had communities miss out on key manufacturing projects because their sites simply weren’t ready enough. Thanks to SEEDS and Growing Alabama, our region is now more competitive, with graded sites and building pads under construction and due diligence updated and complete.”

Wisemiller said the Growing Alabama award has positioned Hamilton to compete for advanced manufacturing, defense and aerospace prospects, while Fayette, Sulligent and Brilliant are now in the game for projects that were not within reach before.

He cited Gov. Kay Ivey’s commitment to rural Alabama through SEEDS and Growing Alabama, as well as the leadership of Secretary McNair and the Alabama Department of Commerce, as a genuine partnership to attract new investment and good jobs.

“In Northwest Alabama, we have the workforce, the best rural fiber network in the state, interstate access and forward-thinking local leadership. What was missing was market-ready product,” he said.

SEEDS is administered by the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, and more detailed information on eligibility and application requirements can be found on their website by scanning the QR code.



Gov. Kay Ivey in 2025 signed the “Powering Growth” plan to accelerate economic development. (Photo credit: Hal Yeager, Governor’s Office)

The Alabama Department of Commerce administers Growing Alabama and those program details are available in a downloadable PDF at madeinalabama.com by scanning the QR Code. Please note the following application deadlines. The deadlines to apply for the Growing Alabama program are April 3 and September 18, 2026.



In addition to helping communities prepare industrial sites, the commerce department continues to focus on promoting the state’s rural regions.

Rural Alabama Division Expands

Rural Alabama made a strong showing in the 2025 New and Expanding Industry Announcements Report, as the “targeted” rural counties combined to register a total capital investment of \$2 billion and 2,011 new job opportunities!

Commerce recently tapped two experienced economic



development professionals to lead the Rural Development Division, replacing Brenda Tuck, the department's first rural development manager who was named the new executive director of the Selma & Dallas County Economic Development Authority late last year.

The new leaders of the division are Carter Thomas, who was previously a rural development project manager, and Margaret Henderson, who most recently served as a rapid response coordinator at the Alabama Department of Workforce.

The division has been split into north and south regions, with Thomas covering the north from his base in Birmingham while the south is covered by Henderson, who is based in Montgomery.

"Carter and Margaret are well suited to lead the remarkable success story that is rural Alabama, where innovative developments and high-quality jobs are flourishing," McNair said.

Commerce also works to tap into the expertise of business leaders throughout the state. The Alabama Growth Alliance, chaired by Gov. Ivey and co-chaired by McNair, is a public-private partnership dedicated to coordinating and strengthening the state's economic development efforts.

Another valuable public-private partnership is Innovate

Alabama, which is focused on entrepreneurship, technology and innovation. The group helps connect businesses with resources to ensure innovative ideas and enterprises can thrive in every region.

Catalyst Guides Recruitment

Alabama's economic development team continues to use Catalyst to guide recruiting efforts. The next-generation, strategic economic growth plan was launched in late 2024. Catalyst goes beyond traditional recruitment tactics to elevate human capital, facilitate entrepreneurship, attract new talent and promote rural development. It also identifies eight priority industry sectors that align with Alabama's long-term economic development goals.

McNair said that last year's industry announcements show that Catalyst is hitting all of its marks.

"Catalyst remains a valuable guide in our recruiting efforts, along with our top-notch workforce and training programs, supportive community partnerships and strong pro-business climate," McNair said. "Economic development in Alabama is thriving, and we are confident that our momentum will continue, creating jobs and building a brighter future for residents across the state." ■



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Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter Appoints Lillian Pitman to Serve on Make Alabama Healthy Nutrition Study Group



We are very proud to announce Lillian Pitman, our legislative policy analyst, will be representing the Alabama League of Municipalities in the Make Alabama Healthy Nutrition Study Group. Alabama House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter recently appointed this study group to craft meaningful legislation to battle a lack of nutrition access in Alabama's communities. The study group will adapt new federal Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) guidelines, find solutions for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding cuts and work to solve Alabama's food desert crisis. Lillian will work with state representatives and key stakeholders in the medical and nutrition industries to create long-lasting policies that will strengthen Alabama's communities. If you have any interest

in sharing ideas or community perspectives, please contact Lillian at lpitman@almonline.org or (334) 386-8142.

ALM Welcomes New Receptionist and Membership Clerk



Kirstyn Blanton joined the Alabama League of Municipalities in February 2026 as a receptionist and membership clerk. With over 15 years of customer service and administrative experience, she brings a welcoming and professional approach to her role. Kirstyn is enthusiastic about applying her extensive customer service knowledge to support members and colleagues while contributing to the continued growth of ALM.

Outside of work, Kirstyn is a proud mother of two energetic daughters and a teenage stepson. She enjoys spending quality time with her family, taking beach trips and unwinding with a good book in her downtime.

RECENT DELIVERIES



Beat 8 Fire Department

- CHASSIS: International MV607
- BODY: Rosenbauer FXR Pumper
- ENGINE: Cummins L9
- HORSEPOWER: 360 HP
- PUMP: Waterous
- GPM: 1500 GPM
- TANK: 1000 Gallons

Elsanor Fire Department

- CHASSIS: International HV 607
- BODY: Rosenbauer FX Tanker
- ENGINE: Cummins L9
- HORSEPOWER: 400 HP
- PUMP: Hale
- GPM: 1500 GPM
- TANK: 3000 Gallons



Oak Ridge Fire Department

- CHASSIS: Freightliner M2 106 Plus
- BODY: Rosenbauer R-Series FX Pumper
- ENGINE: Cummins L9
- HORSEPOWER: 360 HP
- PUMP: Hale
- GPM: 1250 GPM
- TANK: 1000 Gallons

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LEARN LOCALLY:

BUILDING THE WORKFORCE THAT'S BUILDING OUR ECONOMY.



BEHIND every thriving community is a quiet force working to attract investment, strengthen the workforce, and create new opportunities. In Alabama, economic developers play that role, helping companies take root, expand their operations, and improve residents' lives. But they don't do it alone.

Two years ago, The Alabama Community College System (ACCS) launched its first economic development division, appointing Melody Whitten as its Chief Economic Development Officer. The division focuses on elevating the visibility of community colleges early in the economic development process, identifying skill gaps that could limit industry growth, and providing professional development for The ACCS and college leadership teams to ensure they are serving as impactful partners statewide.

IN ALABAMA, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS TRULY A TEAM SPORT. BY SHOWCASING THE ASSETS OF THE ALABAMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM AND OUR COLLEGES, WE STRENGTHEN THAT TEAM.

- MELODY WHITTEN, ACCS CHIEF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

In October 2024, the Alabama Department of Commerce released its CATALYST strategic plan, which outlines industry sectors for new business attraction. For The ACCS Economic Development Division that means ensuring Alabama's community colleges have training programs aligned with those sectors, creating a higher probability that businesses relocate to Alabama.

That led Whitten to collaborate with The ACCS Innovation Center to create customized, non-credit training through two new Skills for Success courses. The ACCS Economic Development team and Central Alabama Community College created a workforce profile for Project Magnolia. It demonstrated how the region could supply skilled talent for highly technical roles and

resulted in a \$325 million investment from Owens Corning Roofing.

The ACCS Dual Enrollment program also plays a part in how The ACCS is fueling the workforce as it allows students to gain credits toward their diploma and associate degree at the same time. Connecting students to in-demand jobs not only keeps graduates in Alabama but tells businesses outside the state that there is a workforce waiting for them here.

Economic developers say when K-12 systems adopt CTE programming in their schools, the window of opportunity widens to help students reach the next level.

THE INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND OUR COLLEGES ARE TURNING THAT ALIGNMENT INTO IMPACTFUL CTE FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS.

- MELODY WHITTEN, ACCS CHIEF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

There's also a professional development component to what Whitten is doing. Through The ACCS Economic Development Academy, supported by the Paths for Success Foundation, system staff and college leaders are immersed in every stage of the economic development process. Over the course of a year, participants engage with nationally recognized site selectors, learn from local and state economic developers, analyze real-world RFPs, prepare for site visits, and conduct project autopsies to better understand Alabama's competitive advantages.

There is no question that our community colleges play a vital role in driving economic development. The ACCS Economic Development Academy provides valuable insight into how our colleges can continue to align training with the needs of business and industry to keep Alabama's economy strong.



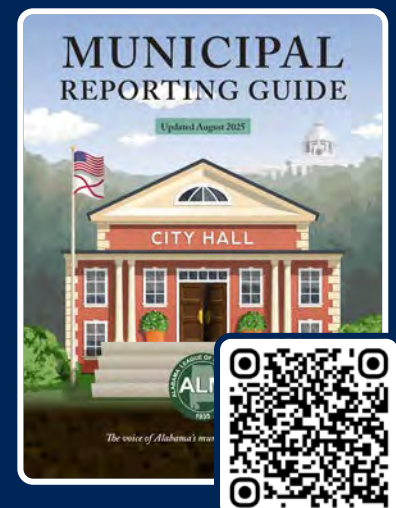
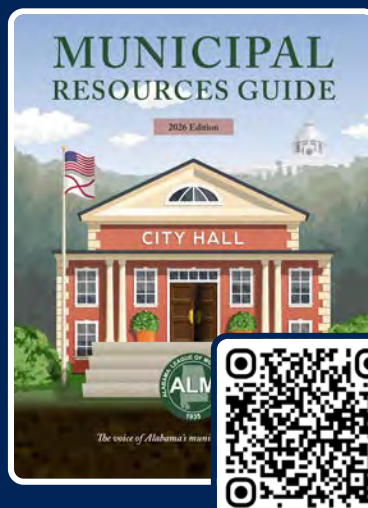
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The League team is pleased to announce our partnership with Polimorphic, AI for Cities and Town Governments. Learn how Polimorphic can automate government work and help you deliver more for your community. Find them online at www.polimorphic.com.

The Alabama League of Municipalities has recently updated our **Municipal Resources Guide** and **Municipal Reporting Guide**!

As part of our mission to support our members, the League created these one-stop guides to ensure our municipalities are aware of various state resources they can apply for and laws that require local governments to provide annual reports on specific municipal operations. While these guides do not include all the information about each grant program and law, they do provide an overview of the requirements, contact information and deadlines. Please reach out to any member of our team at (334) 262-2566, if you need any assistance.



Both guides are living documents that will be updated each year. Members, legislators and other elected officials are encouraged to share these great resources. They can be accessed online at almonline.org or by scanning the QR codes.



AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT

IMPORTANT DEADLINES

**DEC. 31
2024**

All funds must be **obligated** by **December 31, 2024**.

**DEC. 31
2026**

All funds must be **expended** by **December 31, 2026**.

**SEPT. 30
2026**

However, if funds are used for **surface transportation projects or projects eligible under Title I of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974**, the funds must be **expended** earlier, by **September 30, 2026**.

After the deadline to expend the funds, municipalities are required to return any remaining funds to the U.S. Department of the Treasury.



Scan the QR code to access more information about ARPA on the League's website. almonline.org/AmericanRescuePlan



Scan the QR code to learn more about the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program. home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds

JOIN THE TEAM, TODAY! BECOME A SPONSOR!

At ALM, we are not only dedicated to advocating for strong municipal policies, but we are committed to educating both new and veteran municipal officials about best practices in doing their jobs and giving them the resources to develop innovative ideas. We want every one of Alabama's municipal leaders to have a firm foundation, so they can better serve their communities and that is where you come in. As a strategic partner, sponsor or exhibitor, you will play a special role in supporting our mission to strengthen local leadership. Your partnership will assist us with hosting strategically crafted events and programs throughout the year. We hope that you will join us in our journey to make Alabama's communities the best places to live, work and play.



Scan the QR code to view a video message from our Deputy Director Kayla Bass about the benefits of the Sponsorship Program!



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(FREE to eligible participating members!)

www.alintercept.org

Why use Municipal Intercept Services (MIS) when you already have a debt collection service?

MIS is **NOT** a debt collection agency or service. MIS does not do what debt collection services do and debt collection services cannot offer what MIS does. MIS is a unique way to attempt to recover money owed to your municipality by "intercepting" an individual's Alabama State tax refund. Debt collection agencies CANNOT offer you this service. MIS is a legislatively sanctioned conduit with the Alabama Department of Revenue (ADOR) that enables ADOR to recover delinquent debts owed by individuals to your municipality by collecting this debt from the individual's Alabama state tax refund. This system was made possible by an Alabama legislative change enacted in 2014 through which ADOR agreed to process these debts through only two clearinghouse organizations: the Alabama League of Municipalities (ALM) for municipal entities and the Association of County Commissions of Alabama (ACCA) for county entities. In 2015, ALM formed MIS to act as the clearinghouse on behalf of its municipal entities. **NOTE:** If the debtor is not eligible for an Alabama State tax refund, no money can be collected.

Who is eligible to use the MIS system?

Only municipal entities within Alabama are eligible to use the MIS system. This includes cities, towns, certain utility boards, housing authorities and hospitals. **For more information, visit: www.alintercept.org.**

SAVE THE DATE

SUMMER SEMINARS 2026

All AMIC and MWCF members are encouraged to expand their understanding of risk management practices for public entities by attending one of our Loss Control Seminars this summer. To register for the Summer Seminars, visit www.losscontrol.org. The cost to attend is \$30 per person, and lunch will be provided.

Topics include: Workplace Ergonomics, Safety Isn't a Game, Social Media Policy and Legal Issues, Reducing Risk Behind the Wheel, Safety and Risk Management Roundtables

These training sessions have been approved for a total of four (4) credit hours in the Certified Municipal Official Program. Any municipal employee may register, but only elected officials will be awarded credit hours in the CMO Program.

Tuesday, August 25

Municipal Complex, Saraland

Wednesday, August 26

Beeland Park Community Center,
Greenville

Tuesday, September 1

City Hall, Athens

Wednesday, September 2

City Hall, Vestavia Hills



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