

# ACE Spotlight: Foley Makes Big Waves in Coastal Alabama



By Lori Jhons • Communications Director • ALM

**T**he Alabama League of Municipalities is pleased to select Foley for this edition’s spotlight on our Alabama Communities of Excellence program! If you have ever driven down to Orange Beach and Gulf Shores, you have probably gone through the city of Foley, located just eight miles north of the Gulf Coast. When I think of Foley, two of the first things that come to mind are a visit to Tanger Outlets and driving past the massive amusement park at OWA. These two places certainly make it a must-see stop on any beach trip, but Foley offers a lot more ranging from its historic downtown to Graham Creek Nature Preserve, which is one of the largest municipally owned nature reserves in the state.

Foley is named after its founder, John B. Foley of Chicago. In 1902, he bought approximately 50,000 acres of land and led an effort to extend the rail line from Bay Minette to Foley. Shortly after gaining rail service, Foley was incorporated in 1915. The Foley Depot helped shape the city into an economic hub for south Baldwin County, warehousing and shipping local farm products. Despite rail service ending in the 1970s, Foley has transformed into an economic driver for the entire region, especially in the years after earning its ACE designation in 2012.

Miriam Boone, Foley’s ACE coordinator, initiated the process to become an ACE Community in 2009. Boone and Foley Mayor Ralph Hellmich, who was serving on the city council at the time, worked with other local leaders to help the city complete the requirements of the program. ACE was created in 2002 to provide resources and knowledge to small communities

across the state to focus on the importance of planning, leadership development and broad-based community engagement. ACE provided Foley’s community leaders with training and workshops to develop a vision and implementation strategies for their city.

Mayor Hellmich said Foley not only had to meet certain high standards and criteria to become an ACE community, but it is continually working toward achieving more progress to maintain its ACE status.

“When you go through the ACE process, you know where you come from and where you are as a city,” Mayor Hellmich said. “ACE provides a comprehensive list of goals that encourages us to be cognizant of multiple ideas that make a city great.”

In the years following its ACE designation, Foley has sought out and welcomed many new projects. In 2012, the city approached the Porch Band of Creek Indians about





a partnership to bring an entertainment destination venue to Baldwin County. That led to the joint venture known as OWA, which means “big water” in the Muskogee Creek language. OWA is a 520-acre family-fun theme park with 23 rides and so much more (heavy emphasis on the more)!

Since opening in 2017, OWA has added a variety of attractions, including the region’s largest indoor water park (with a convertible roof), an outdoor wave pool, a variety of dining and shopping options as well as an arcade, theater, esports center, kid camps and an event venue. Whatever you have an itch for, OWA likely has something to fit your desires. It even has its own small-town themed downtown with pedestrian-only streets along with a hotel and luxury RV park on-site. A \$50 million tropical themed, resort-style hotel is also in the planning stages and is expected to open next year.



The Tribe is the sole owner and developer of OWA, and the city retains ownership of the adjoining \$40 million Foley Sports Tourism Complex, which includes a 90,000 square-foot event center. The outdoor portion of the sports complex opened in 2016 and features 16 natural-grass, multi-purpose fields to accommodate archery, field hockey, flag football, lacrosse, soccer and ultimate (formerly known as Ultimate Frisbee). One of the sports fields is a championship field with stadium seating, a press box and lights to host television broadcasts.

The event center, located across from the outdoor fields, opened in the summer of 2017. It features six competition basketball courts, 12 volleyball courts, 12 pickleball courts and two locker rooms. It has ample space and is designed to accommodate everything from basketball and volleyball to gymnastics and tradeshows. The sports complex sees an estimated 200,000 visitors each year. The city has a goal of becoming one of the top destinations for youth sports tournaments in the country.

Furthermore, the Tanger Outlet Center, which generates a large amount of sales tax, is busier than ever. It features approximately 120 brand-name outlet stores, making it one of the largest outlet malls in the South. The city just opened a Baumhower’s Victory Grille on-site in December. It is the largest location for the brand and will bring approximately 140 jobs to the area. Based on sales, Boone estimates six million people visited the outlets last year.

While the outlets are at the center of commerce for Foley, city leadership is working on creating a more lively downtown. The Foley Downtown Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and contributes greatly to the city’s culture, history and quality of life. Last year, the Foley Railroad Museum and Model Train Exhibit greeted right at 20,000 visitors and the Holmes Medical Museum greeted over 11,000 visitors. These museums are free to the public and are operated by the city to add to the visitor experience downtown.



*The Foley Sports Tourism Complex has 16 fields to accommodate several sports, including soccer. Photo credit: Fletcher McKinney*



*The 2018 Gulf Coast Classic Volleyball Tournament at the Foley Event Center. Photo credit: Couriland William Richards*



“We have a very active main street program that has helped add businesses to this historic area in its five years of operation,” LaDonna Hinesley, Foley’s marketing director, said. “The downtown area is becoming more vibrant as the city grows around it.”

The city recently completed the last of nine phases of a more than decade long, \$3 million streetscape program that has helped enhance park trails, street lighting, sidewalks and other revitalization projects in this area. In August, the Foley Main Street District brought home three Awards of Excellence for the progress they are making; one for promotion;

one for planning and public space; and one for historic preservation, during Main Street Alabama’s tenth annual Awards of Excellence Banquet.

In recent years, more people are taking notice of these revitalization efforts and all that Foley has to offer residents – close proximity to the beach, interstates and an airport; a quality public school system; award-winning medical facilities; over 100 restaurant options; 14 parks; an active performing arts community; and an array of entertainment and leisure activities. The mayor said that since the 2000 U.S. Census, Foley has grown from a population of 8,700 to about 25,000. The Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama recently issued a report that listed Foley as the 27<sup>th</sup> most populous city in the state. Not to mention, the U.S. Census Bureau published a 2023 report that ranks the Daphne-Fairhope-Foley metro area as the 12th-fastest growing metro in the nation.

To support all of this growth, the mayor said the city is in the process of creating a new strategic plan that includes not only capital projects and budgeting but citizens’ input for further development as well. They are also updating their 2008 comprehensive plan, which will tie in with the strategic plan. In addition, the city must think regionally when developing these plans.

Mayor Hellmich said, “We are working with ALDOT [Alabama Department of Transportation] and adjacent cities to have better coordination with traffic lights and traffic flow. The city also hosts a monthly meeting with a diverse group of attendees, from Baldwin County and Mobile County, who discuss various issues that affect us all.”

After all public input and research is gathered, the mayor hopes the city can finalize its strategic plan by the summer. Among the top priorities, this plan will include four major projects that are currently in the works. The first consists of building a new \$17 million state-of-the-art public works facility to replace the current



*Foley has over 100 restaurant options.  
Photo credit: Natural Images*



*Graham Creek Nature Preserve consists of more than 660 acres. It was voted as the Best of Baldwin 2022 Public Park winner. Photo credit: Fletcher McKinney*





one, which was built in 1991. The city has outgrown it, and the new campus will give them more space to house several departments while also being more strategic in their severe weather preparedness efforts. Construction began in December. The second project involves renovating and repurposing an old National Guard armory near city hall to offer recreational athletic leagues a space to compete along with giving the city's recreation department more office spaces.

Additionally, the city is working on building a \$20 million library, which will double its current capacity. It will serve traditional purposes as well as provide a combination of activity spaces to match more modern needs. Construction will begin this year and is expected to open next year. Lastly, Foley is in the design phase of building a new aquatics center, which will replace the current city pool that was built in the 1960s. It is estimated to be completed by 2026.

For those that are interested in taking part in the ACE program, Boone shared her biggest takeaway.

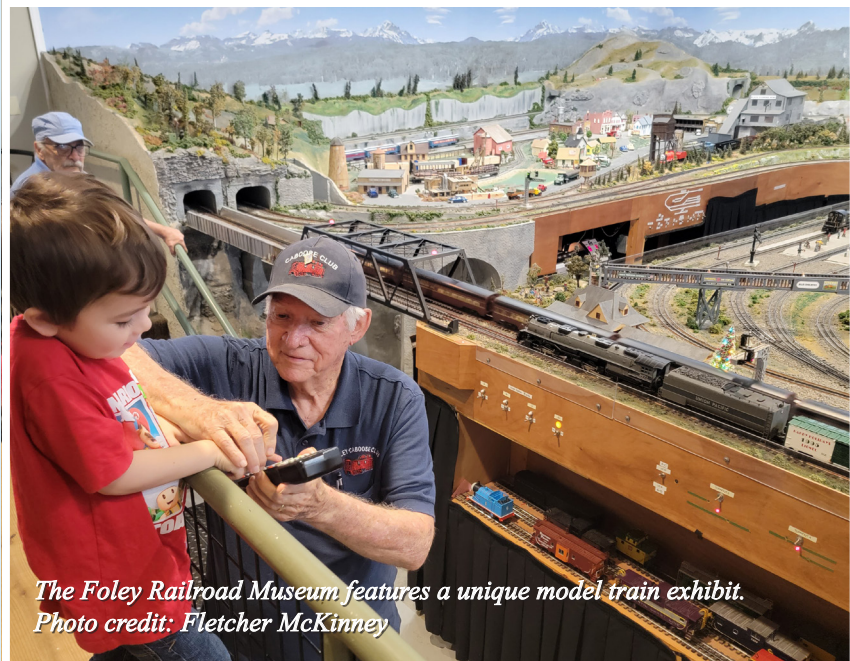
“The ACE program keeps us on a goal-oriented path forward. The staff and other coordinators are always willing to assist, provide advice or just provide a support system,” Boone said. “Being able to visit the various communities for training and meetings is most helpful in gaining insights and ideas.”

In addition to being active in ACE, Foley was one of the thirteen communities that received the 2023 Municipal Achievement Award, which means that all members of the city council and the mayor have completed at least 40 hours of municipal training in the League's Certified Municipal Official program. Mayor Hellmich also serves as the chair of the League's 2023-2024 Committee on State and Federal Legislation. Just before the start of this year, the city brought home another accolade. The National Park Service named Foley as the American World War II Heritage City for Alabama. This honor was only given to 11 communities across the United States to recognize their contributions to the war effort.

We are proud of Foley for taking part in our programs, representing our state on the highest level and making big waves along our Gulf Coast. We cannot wait to see what the next 10 years have in store for this community! ■



*Foley's Tanger Outlet Center is one of the largest outlet malls in the South. Photo credit: Fletcher McKinney*



*The Foley Railroad Museum features a unique model train exhibit. Photo credit: Fletcher McKinney*



*The clock tower at Foley's Centennial Plaza is iconic to the community and is often the backdrop for many of their annual outdoor events. Photo credit: Fletcher McKinney*