



ACE Spotlight: Q&A with Saraland Mayor Howard Rubenstein

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The Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program is excited to follow up with the city of Saraland and Mayor Howard Rubenstein, a past League president, to see how the program impacted the community and how it has grown in the past decade since receiving the ACE designation. ★

The ACE program, established in 2002, offers select small cities, with populations ranging from 2,000 to 18,000, assistance with resources and tools to help them promote long-term growth and prosperity. Through a comprehensive, three-phase approach, ACE uses the collective expertise of its partner organizations – ranging from state agencies and associations to banks, utilities, universities and others – to foster unique community development programs. In 2022, ACE became an official program of the Alabama League of Municipalities.

The city of Saraland first applied to the program in 2013 and earned the ACE status in 2015. Saraland, located in Mobile County, was incorporated in 1957 and has now surpassed 17,000 residents. Saraland is best known for its highly ranked city school system, which has excelled both scholastically and athletically. It was the first municipality in Mobile County or Baldwin County to split off from a county school system in 2006. The mayor attributes the city's growth to having a well-respected school system along with being a family-friendly, low-crime community.

In addition to being an ACE Community, the city has earned the honor of being designated a Certified Municipality, ★ which means the mayor and the entire council have completed at least the basic Certified Municipal Official level of ALM's CMO program.

Mayor Rubenstein, a native of Chicago, shares more about himself and Saraland's ACE experience in the answers below.

How long have you been mayor, and what did you do before?

I served two terms as councilmember (1996 and 2000). In 2004, I was elected as Saraland's first council president and was chosen again in 2008. In 2010, when our former mayor, Ken Williams, passed away unexpectedly, I became mayor. I was reelected in 2012, 2016 and 2020. I had practiced family medicine as a physician here since 1985 and recently



Located adjacent to the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, scenic boating, canoeing, fishing and other watersports opportunities abound in Saraland.



Pictured left to right: Councilmember Joe McDonald, Councilmember Veronica Hudson, Mayor Howard Rubenstein, Councilmember Natalie Moye, Councilmember Newton Cromer and Councilmember Wayne Biggs.



retired from private practice. Prior to serving as an elected municipal official, I served as president of both the Saraland Area Chamber of Commerce and the Saraland Lions Club. I also founded a medical explorer post for the scouts in Saraland and volunteered for 38 years as team physician for Satsuma High School and subsequently Saraland High School.



What role did you play as mayor in helping Saraland to become an ACE community?

I worked closely with city and business leaders to achieve our ACE designation. I was a graduate of the inaugural class of Leadership Saraland and held a leadership role on the community advisory committee that did our comprehensive plan.

How has the ACE program impacted your city?

Saraland is very proud to be the first municipality in Mobile County to receive the ACE designation and is still the only municipality in Mobile County to hold this distinction.

What does the ACE distinction mean to you?

The ACE designation identifies our municipality as one of the outstanding communities in Alabama to live, work and play. This has helped with the marked growth and development of our city.



How important was it to create a strategic plan through the ACE program?

It was crucial to develop a strategic plan to help identify and achieve goals for our community. Planning is essential to have a community grow and mature in a positive manner.

What are you doing to keep the public engaged and informed about the strategic plan and/or ACE?

We are currently doing a formal update of our comprehensive plan. We have held several community meetings to gather input and suggestions from residents. We are also doing a city traffic study to address concerns that have been raised regarding the city’s ability to handle growth and development.



The splash pad at Town Center Park opened on April 1, 2025.



Youth sports and activities are key quality of life services the city aims to provide its youngest residents.

What are some things that the city is doing to keep Saraland growing?

The city has had annexations and is optimizing resident services; supporting and improving public safety; adding and maintaining infrastructure; adding quality of life features; attracting new businesses; and supporting our outstanding city school system.



What advice do you have for cities interested in participating in the program?

Get your entire city council and administration excited and engaged about starting the process. Be realistic about what you can accomplish. Understand the process and the requirements for designation. Set a timetable to meet ACE requirements. Partner with community organizations to achieve goals.

Do you have some examples of changes or projects that have occurred since participating in ACE?

We have revised and updated our comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance and are currently conducting a comprehensive traffic study. We have also added a women's leadership program and have added several features to Town Center Park including a splashpad, playground and an adult fitness campaign court. We are also very excited about the construction of our new sportsplex, The Land, which sits on 100 acres, will have over 78,000 square feet of indoor space; five multi-purpose fields (football, soccer, field hockey and lacrosse); eight baseball/softball diamonds; nature trails and more.

How did ACE help you establish new partners and community contacts?

We engaged with the Saraland Area Chamber of Commerce and city school leadership to work with the city. We also held and participated in additional networking opportunities and community events.



*Top: Saraland High School has appeared in the AHSAA 6A football championship the last three years and won their first title in 2022.
Bottom: The Land is a premier sports, recreation and events complex offering a wide range of community amenities, which will include eight softball and baseball fields.*



Can you describe the process on how Saraland was able to build a National Fitness Campaign court?

Saraland partnered with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama to build our adult fitness facility at Town Center Park. Shared resources were used to build the facility and offer this to our residents. Blue Cross helped with marketing this resource, and it has been very well used by our community.

Saraland has expressed interest in participating in the newly established Healthy Alabama Communities program. Can you list what you hope to gain for your community by participating, and where you are in that process?

Councilmember Veronica Hudson, who is spearheading this initiative for Saraland, answered this question.

As a passionate advocate for community health and wellness, I am very interested in participating in this initiative to help improve the overall well-being of our residents. Since we are already an ACE community, we will build upon that as we start our initiative toward a Healthy Community.

By engaging in this program, I hope to achieve the following for our community:

- **Increase Access to Health Education** – provide resources and programs that promote preventive care, nutrition and chronic disease management.
- **Improve Physical Activity** – encourage active lifestyles through improved infrastructure, such as walking trails, community fitness programs and recreational opportunities.
- **Support Maternal & Infant Health** – strengthen breastfeeding education and maternal support systems to ensure healthier outcomes for mothers and babies.
- **Promote Smoke-Free & Healthy Environments** – expand efforts to create healthier public spaces by reducing tobacco exposure and supporting clean air initiatives.
- **Foster Community Engagement** – encourage collaboration among local government, businesses, schools and health care providers to implement sustainable health improvements.

As a former president of ALM, what advice do you have for elected officials when it comes to participating in ALM events/activities and leading their community in general?

The League provides many essential and valuable services for its member municipalities. Advocacy, legal guidance, education and networking are just some of the many benefits of working with the League. I strongly encourage all municipal elected officials to participate in the many League activities as well as volunteer with League committees and projects.

Leadership has many facets. Compassion, understanding, professionalism, consensus building, the ability to compromise, humor, learning and teaching are all essential traits for municipal leaders. In the last 28 years, I have had the honor to meet and work with very dedicated and talented elected municipal officials from all across Alabama. I pray the generations that follow will continue to serve their cities and towns with distinction and honor. ■

The city of Saraland is one of 23 communities in the state to be awarded a National Fitness Campaign fitness court in partnership with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama.

