



EDA Spotlight: Irondale Charts Future Growth with Economic Development Blueprint

Caroline Carter • Communications Intern • ALM

Located just east of Birmingham in Jefferson County, Irondale is a city built on industry, strengthened by community and shaped by change. First incorporated in 1887, the community began as a modest railroad and mining town anchored by the Cahaba Iron Works, later known as the Irondale Furnace. From its early days of pig iron production

to its role in Alabama's rail economy, Irondale's story is steeped in Alabama's history. With a current population of more than 3,000, the city is writing a new chapter focused on intentional growth, strategic planning and honoring its uniqueness.

As Irondale continues to grow, city leaders are focusing on the future, one that keeps pace with development while protecting the city's character. That goal led Irondale to participate in the Alabama League of Municipalities' Economic Development Academy (EDA), a program launched in 2021 to help local officials better understand the tools and processes behind long-term economic growth.

Developed in partnership with the Alabama Community College System, the academy provides training, peer engagement and guidance from economic development experts. Participants work as a team, attend in-person sessions and complete a community-focused capstone project.

Irondale participated in the program in 2022, and their team included Mayor James Stewart Jr., Councilman Aaron Sims, Councilwoman Cindy Cuellar and Paul Saucier. For Stewart, the program was an opportunity to build a stronger foundation for decision-making and development.

"Our love for Irondale's traditions, deeply rooted in our community, drove our decision to apply to EDA," he said. "We were eager to revitalize our economic development strategy while staying true to our heartfelt community vision."



The City of Irondale

This is a rendering of Irondale's new municipal complex. Construction will begin in late 2025.



Each city in the program begins by conducting a community economic vitality survey. In Irondale, the results confirmed some long-standing strengths while revealing key improvement areas. Residents expressed a desire for more sit-down restaurants, greater retail variety and improved signage throughout the city. They also emphasized the importance of green spaces, community events and maintaining the city's small-town feel.

"The survey was eye-opening and deeply moving," Stewart said. "The disconnect between our current offerings and community aspirations was heartbreaking but gave us a clear direction for growth."

That direction took shape in the form of Blueprint Irondale, the city's capstone project and comprehensive plan. Built with significant community input, the plan outlines long-term priorities related to transportation, housing, utilities, land use and public spaces. Designed to guide growth for the next 15 to 25 years, it now serves as a reference point for city planning, policy and investment.

"We poured our hearts into creating a master plan for the city called 'Blueprint Irondale,'" Stewart said. "This comprehensive vision document now serves as our guiding tool for all planning decisions in the city."

The plan focuses especially on enhancing what the city calls its "Charm Factors," the features that make Irondale attractive and distinct. These include parks, cultural events, aesthetics, recreation opportunities and a strong sense of place.

"It makes my heart sing when I see how this blueprint has unified our approach to growth and given us a clear direction for the future," Stewart said. "The community's enthusiastic response to this master plan has ignited excitement beyond our wildest dreams."

Since completing the academy, Irondale has hosted around 200 community events to strengthen



Top: Irondale's Citizen Engagement Institute's seventh class graduated on Nov. 7, 2024.

Second from top: The mural painted on Irondale's City Hall says it all!

Third from top: Irondale empowers the next generation with their Young Entrepreneurs Day Program.

Bottom: Citizens enjoy Irondale's Jazz Fest at Beacon Park.

engagement and unite people. Events range from farmers' markets to festivals and are designed to reflect what residents value most.

"These events have dramatically increased community engagement and helped us address our 'Charm Factor' needs," Stewart said. "Seeing families connect at these events brings tears of joy to my eyes as we build the Irondale we all envision."

The program has also helped city leaders adopt a more strategic business recruitment and retention approach.

"EDA has positively impacted our decision-making process by providing us with the tools to help us strategically make decisions," he said. "The program transformed us from being reactive to boldly proactive, equipping us with data-driven approaches while never losing sight of the human element."

The results speak for themselves. Irondale has seen a 20% increase in new businesses and a 15% increase in retention since adopting its new approach.

Additionally, leaders use the plan to evaluate future projects. They assess whether proposals align with the city's goals, can be supported with existing resources and offer meaningful impact.

The city is now finalizing a broader economic development strategy that builds on the momentum from Blueprint Irondale. It will address specific community needs identified in the survey and provide a targeted approach for business growth, quality-of-life improvements and long-term sustainability.

These EDA-led strategies laid the groundwork for Irondale's recent momentum. In 2025, the city adopted its largest-ever municipal budget at \$37 million, aimed at supporting new capital projects including a ballpark, municipal complex and library. Private development has also surged, with a recently completed shopping center attracting more than 45,000 weekly visitors and generating over \$1 million in revenue during its first year. Additional mixed-use construction is underway along Crestwood Boulevard, which is expected to bring dozens of new businesses to the area.

When asked what advice he would give to other cities interested in EDA, Stewart emphasized the value of collaboration, honesty and participation.

"Come with an open heart and be ready for transformation," he said. "Leave preconceptions at the door and prepare to be vulnerable about your community's challenges. The program demands time and emotional investment, but the returns are immeasurable."

Irondale's experience through the Economic Development Academy reflects what can happen when leaders commit to clear goals, strategic planning and public involvement. With its foundation rooted in history and its focus set on the future, Irondale is building more than growth. It is building trust, connection and a shared sense of purpose. ■



Left: Mayor Stewart and community leaders proudly cut the ribbon on the Publix at Cahaba Crossing in November 2023, making it their first grocery store opening in 16 years. Right: Irondale's brand new destination dog park, Tails by the Rails at Ellard Park, officially opened for pups and people to enjoy in October 2024.