Turning Potential Into Participation: Fayette's ACE Journey

Ty Rayford • Digital Media Specialist • ALM

The Alabama League of Municipalities is thrilled to select the city of Fayette as this magazine edition's spotlight for our Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. Fayette is a rural city with an estimated population of 4,100 residents located in the broader west Alabama region. Nearly four years after the incorporation of the city in 1821, the Alabama Legislature created Fayette County on December 20, 1824 from parts of Marion, Pickens, Tuscaloosa and Walker counties. The county was originally named Lafayette in honor of Marquis de Lafayette, a French military officer and politician.

Fayette is known for its strong sense of community, historic downtown, local arts and culture and businesses with deep roots. The city is home to Bevill State Community College's Fayette campus and Golden Eagle Syrup, which has been produced locally for generations and remains one of the products most closely associated with Fayette.

Fayette entered the Alabama Communities of Excellence program as part of the class of 2005 and received its official ACE designation in 2007. The ACE program was established in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) organization with the mission of offering Alabama's smaller communities, ranging in population from 2,000 to 18,000 people, technical resources and tools to help them promote growth and prosperity by focusing on their distinctive assets and resources. For Fayette, that framework has provided a lasting foundation for collaboration, leadership development and community-driven progress.

Floyd Rodgers Jr. began serving as Fayette's ACE coordinator 15 years after their ACE designation from 2022 to 2025 before recently being elected to serve on the Fayette City Council. He believed his responsibility as the ACE coordinator was to keep the city's designation alive and the community-development framework active. To do this, Fayette had to continue to implement the strategic plan they created and keep the citizens up to date on those plans.

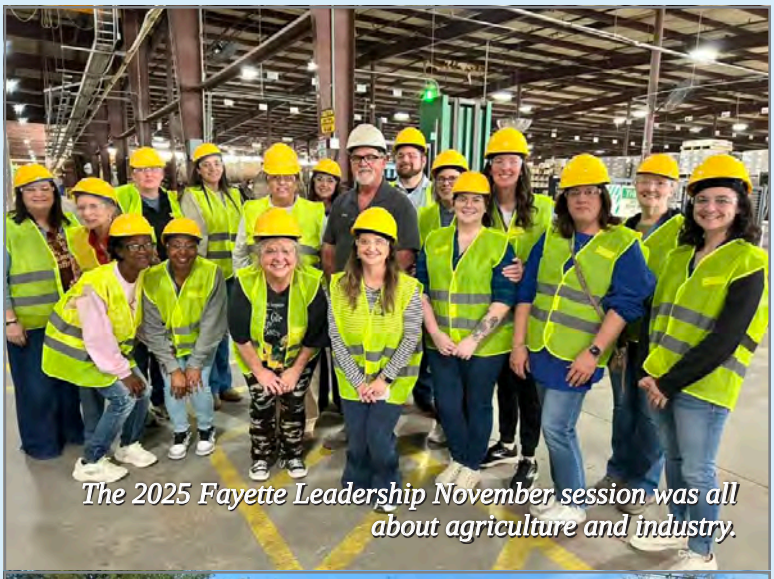


The Fayette County Courthouse showcased their patriotism for America 250.

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

The strategic plan helped identify priorities, assign responsibilities and create a timeline for progress. Even after moving into elected office, Councilman Rodgers continues to support the strategic planning, leadership development, partnerships and quality-of-life work connected to ACE.

"Before and alongside that position, I worked in community engagement, nonprofit leadership, mentoring, reentry ministry, workforce and health outreach, business and real estate development," Councilman Rodgers, a proud native of Fayette, said. "Those experiences taught me that successful community development is not only about buildings and budgets. It is also about people, trust, access, communication and giving residents a meaningful place in the process."



The 2025 Fayette Leadership November session was all about agriculture and industry.



The city of Fayette launched its's first public transportation system in 2024.

For Councilman Rodgers, the ACE distinction was both an honor and a responsibility for the city. He believes it demonstrated Fayette's capacity to develop leaders, plan and work toward long-term improvement. ACE has helped Fayette build a culture of collaboration, planning and leadership development and that foundation has enabled the city to turn shared goals into tangible improvements for residents not only in Fayette County but the broader west Alabama region as well.

Fayette has taken the approach that their original ACE planning must be treated as a living process, allowing changes to be made when necessary. Community conditions changed, leadership changed, funding opportunities changed, all because residents needed change. For that reason, leadership reviewed priorities regularly, reported what had been completed, explained what had been delayed and updated the plan with new information that required a different approach.

"The plan should guide budgets, grant applications, partnerships and public discussions — not sit on a shelf," Councilman Rodgers said. "Fayette is working to grow by strengthening some of the foundations that make a rural community attractive: infrastructure, public safety, health care access and recreation."

One of ACE's greatest impacts on Fayette is the launch of the city's first public transportation system on July 1, 2024, removing a major barrier for residents who do not drive or do not have reliable transportation. Fayette had never operated a city public transportation system, and now the Fayette transportation system provides safe, affordable and reliable transportation Monday through Friday. Councilman Rodgers said that the system's mission is to provide transportation that supports the local economy and improve quality of life, with special attention to elderly residents and people with disabilities. This is a major quality-of-life and economic development accomplishment, because transportation affects access to many essential things: employment, health care, groceries, education and community life.

Another program that was created through the ACE process is the Fayette Junior City Council, which gives youth a visible place in city government. The Fayette Junior City Council members have helped organize and support community activities such as an open-mic event, an autism awareness basketball tournament and a back-to-school fun day. They have participated in candidate and civic events, volunteered in the community and supported Magnolia Ranch, a nonprofit that develops homes for foster children. The program has allowed students to practice public speaking, teamwork, event planning, service and civic leadership in real settings.

Furthermore, Leadership Fayette, a nine-month, adult leadership program revived through ACE participation, creates informed ambassadors who can explain how local systems operate. This experience is designed to provide participants with an awareness of community needs, challenges and opportunities; builds relationships with community volunteers and leaders;

and creates opportunities to examine, practice and develop leadership skills. The program brings together people from different occupations and backgrounds, gives them direct access to decision makers and challenges them to develop their leadership skills and complete team projects.

"Each of those accomplishments addresses a different need, but all three (the revival of Leadership Fayette, the creation of the Fayette Junior City Council and the launch of Fayette's first public transportation system) reflect the ACE approach: identify a barrier, bring the right partners together, develop a plan and keep working until the idea becomes a sustainable community asset," Councilman Rodgers said.



The 2026 Fayette Junior City Council recently held their new members and officers' ceremony.

ACE also gave Fayette a reason and a structure to bring different sectors to the table. Through ACE-related work, they strengthened relationships among the city of Fayette, Fayette County, local schools, Bevill State Community College, health care organizations, state and regional agencies, utilities, public safety officials, industries, community volunteers and much more.

All of those relationships are valuable because most small cities do not have enough staff, funding or expertise to solve every problem alone. A school may have access to students, a nonprofit may have volunteers, a business may have resources, a state agency may have technical assistance, and the city may have the authority to coordinate the effort, but ACE helps those pieces connect to each other and the surrounding communities.

"Connecting with surrounding communities helps us avoid duplication, learn from successful projects, pursue regional grants, coordinate transportation and workforce strategies and speak with a stronger collective voice," Councilman Rodgers said. "Fayette's future is connected to the future of Berry, Winfield, Vernon, Tuscaloosa and communities throughout west Alabama. Regional cooperation does not weaken local identity; it increases local capacity."

Overall, Councilman Rodgers said that he has benefited from the League and the broader ACE network through training, examples from other municipalities, professional relationships and access to people with specialized knowledge in municipal government and community development. As a newly elected councilmember, continued participation in municipal training is important to him because ACE coordination and elected service require different but complementary skills.

Fayette's experience offers valuable insights for any municipality considering participation in the ACE program.

"First, do not apply only for the designation. Apply because your city is ready to listen, plan and work. Second, choose a coordinator who can build relationships and follow up," Councilman Rodgers said. "Third, build leadership development into the process. Projects matter, but people sustain projects. Finally, celebrate progress without pretending every problem is solved. Honest communication builds trust. Small wins create momentum, and momentum can produce major change."

Fayette's ACE story is one of turning potential into participation and well-thought-out leadership. All of their accomplishments exemplify what can happen when a small city refuses to think small about its people and continues its growth far beyond its beginnings. In the future, Fayette hopes to strengthen this work by publishing an easy-to-read annual ACE progress report showing completed projects, current priorities, responsible partners, funding status and the next opportunities for public involvement.

Councilman Rogers said, "Our next chapter should build on that foundation by keeping the strategic plan active, measuring progress, investing in youth and emerging leaders, improving access and inviting every part of the community to help shape Fayette's future."

With its people guiding the way, Fayette is poised to carry the promise of ACE into a future defined by a shared purpose and lasting progress. ▪