

# ALABAMA COMMUNITIES OF EXCELLENCE ASSESSMENT REPORT

## GENEVA, ALABAMA

OCTOBER 2015

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Founded in 1872 near the site of trading post at the junction of Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers, Geneva is rural community located in southwest Alabama. With a population of approximately 4,450, Geneva is the county seat of Geneva County as well as the county’s largest town. Over the past several decades, the community has had a relatively stable population, in part to serving as the center of government and commerce for the county. The community enjoys an excellent quality of life, quality amenities, small town ambience, and scenic beauty.

### ACE Team Assessment Process

Geneva was one of six Alabama communities selected to participate in the 2015 Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. Phase I, of the three phase process of ACE, consists of a visit by the ACE team to conduct a community assessment. The Geneva ACE visit began on October 21, 2015 with an informal review of the community by the assessment team members followed by a meeting between the team and several community leaders, including Mayor Philip Carter, the ACE Local Coordinator Lisa Johnson, other elected officials, and stakeholders. After the meeting, the team went on a windshield tour of the city lead by the Mayor which included public facilities, parks, neighborhoods, downtown, and commercial developments. That evening following the community tour, the assessment team was invited to dinner with a local contingency of leaders.

The next morning a two-part community assessment meeting was held at the First United Methodist Church. The assessment meeting began with an overview of the ACE program and assessment team members followed up an activity with participants on the assets and opportunities for Geneva. Following the group activity, the community leaders and participants dispersed to small group discussions lead by individual assessment team members on the eight ACE study areas.

### The Geneva ACE Team

Brandon Bias	Community Development	Goodwyn, Mills and Cawood, Inc.
Tracy Delaney	Planning	Delaney Consultant Services, Inc.
Dennis Evans	Leadership Development	Alabama Cooperative Extension Service
Caleb Goodwyn	Economic Development	PowerSouth Energy Cooperative
Richard Osborne	Community Development	USDA – Rural Development
Dale Quinney	Healthcare	Alabama Rural Health Association
Brian Rushing	Tourism/Visual Assessment	UA Center for Economic Development
Mary Shell	Historic Preservation	Alabama Historical Commission
Tommie Syx	Education	UA Entrepreneurship Institute
Jonathan Tulos	Economic Development	PowerSouth Energy Cooperative

The following presents a summary of the ACE team’s observations and initial recommendations for the City of Geneva, generally using this subject area framework.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

### Observations:

- Access to the community is difficult with only one bridge over each the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers.
- The community has a stable housing market with little turnover and a low foreclosure rate.
- Properties with poor maintenance and upkeep are mostly related to absentee and family ownership issues.
- The City's code enforcement has been improving on monitoring property conditions.
- The Samson Housing Authority has three public housing developments spread throughout in Geneva.
- There are several non-profit agencies operating in region, with none operating strictly in service to Geneva. Most regional non-profits operate from Dothan, but service Geneva.
- There is a family resource center located in Hartford to help link non-profit service providers to those in need.
- The City is served by a volunteer fire department but has a full time rescue squad.
- The City has difficulty keeping well trained police officers and staying competitive in the region with salaries and benefits.
- Geneva has done an excellent job leveraging ADECA CDBG grants for improving storm water infrastructure.
- The City has several good parks. Fowler Park is the only facility with a children's playground.
- Fowler Park is a tremendous resource for the City and hosts multiple community-wide events during the year.
- Several buildings and storefronts in downtown are vacant.
- Community is very clean with very little litter or unmanaged lots apparent on tour.
- Street signage and wayfinding needs to be improved.
- Commercial strip along Highway 52 from the north is mix of new and older properties. Need improvements in curb cuts and landscaping to improve appearance and make connections between properties off the main highway.
- Plans for the rails-to-trails project is excellent opportunity for community and to develop more recreational tourism programs.
- Landscaping along roadway to Fowler Park is very nice gateway to that amenity.
- The community does not have a farmer's market.

### Recommendations:

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Identify local organizations to partner with regional non-profits to service Geneva.
  - A possible example could be one church each year partnering with Habitat for Humanity to build/renovate a house in Geneva.
- Pursue more opportunities through the USDA for loans and grants.
  - Housing Rehab Program – low income loan or grant for homeowners
- Consider future pocket park opportunities on empty/abandoned lots for children's playgrounds.
- Continue to pursue CDBG grant opportunities to improve storm water infrastructure.
- Consider centralized non-profit center in or near downtown that several regional non-profits could use on a rotating basis.

- Updating street signage and incorporating into a community-wide wayfinding system would improve visitor experience.
- Temporary signage along Highway 52 in commercial area needs to be managed to improve appearance.
- Work with state trails commission and other partners to continue rail-to-trail project.
- Consider a location in Fowler Park for a Farmer’s Market.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### Observations:

- The City of Geneva lacks a privately owned industrial park or available sites and buildings marketed for industrial prospects.
- There are three available building listed on the EDPA database.
  - Clinton Mills, Inc. – 52,274 sq. ft. building on 12 acres with 26 ft. ceilings and 5 truck docks.
  - GCC Distribution Warehouse – 260,396 sq. ft. building expandable to 500,000 sq. ft with 17-22 ft. ceilings and 19 truck docks.
  - Rockford Imports – 31,000 sq. ft. building on 4 acres with 20 ft. ceilings.
- Geneva is a bedroom community that has a strong established retail sector.
- While the City lacks an interstate system, an existing network of state highways provides good transportation infrastructure for commerce and commuters.

### Recommendations:

- The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following: Work to identify available property for an industrial park.
- Develop a community preparedness plan where utility information relevant to economic development activities is identifies and collected. This would include the location and capacity for existing water lines, sewer lines, gas lines and electricity.
- Geneva has a solid existing industry base. Make sure the City is aware of existing industry needs and is responsive when possible. A formal business & industry visitation program would provide opportunities to stay aware/address their needs and to show appreciation and give recognition.
- Assess whether there are any existing industrial sites and/or building that can be marketed. If so, they should contact the EDPA to have those sites/buildings listed on the EDPA property database.
- Jonathan Tullos, Executive Director, Wiregrass Economic Development Corporation is a valuable resource and can be of assistance in discussing economic development initiatives/strategies. Jonathan can be reached at 334-393-4769 or via email at jtullos@wiregrassedc.com.

## HEALTH ASSESSMENT

### Observations:

- Access to health care involves the following four major components:
  - The presence of local health care providers and facilities
  - The ability to get to these providers and facilities
  - The ability to pay for health care service

- The ability to understand personal needs for health care and to properly perform required health care activities
- The City of Geneva is very fortunate, compared to most rural communities, to have local health care providers and facilities that meet or exceed most of the City's needs.
- Geneva has an excellent 67-bed hospital, the Wiregrass Medical Center, which serves well in attracting providers and other health related facilities that tend to be located in close proximity to a hospital. Continuous emergency department services are available since Alabama requires all licensed hospitals to offer this service.
- Pharmacy service in the City is considered very good.
- While Geneva County is currently classified by the Health Resources and Services Administration as having a shortage of primary care physicians, the presence of a hospital in the City of Geneva has attracted the services of 14 physicians to the City and no local shortage is being seen. Nearly all of the physicians practicing within the City of Geneva are family practice physicians. One is a surgeon at the local hospital.
- The Southeast Alabama Rural Health Associates, Inc. of Troy, a Federally Qualified Health Center corporation, has a clinic in the City of Geneva to provide quality health care for those with lower incomes. Adequate health care services for the indigent and low income population is critical in this city where 29.9 percent of the population is under the federal poverty level and 56.7 percent are under 200 percent of this level. This clinic also serves the large migrant and seasonal farm worker population in the area.
- The Wiregrass Medical Center is futuristic in the provision of services. Tele-stroke service is available at this facility through a cooperative effort with the Southeast Alabama Medical Center in Dothan. There is a very receptive attitude at the local hospital to expanding telemedicine services, especially when adequate reimbursement becomes a reality in Alabama.
- The following health care services are locally available: an independent ambulance service, an outpatient mental health clinic, a geriatric-psychiatric unit in the hospital, a public health clinic, a senior service center, a 7-station dialysis clinic, two assisted living facilities with 16 beds in each, a 96-bed nursing home, hospital-based therapy services, and a home health agency.
- The City of Geneva has the services of one dentist.
- There is a strong focus in the City on wellness. The city's green spaces, walking trails, and exercise programs are outstanding.
- There is a plan in place for handling catastrophic events.
- Data indicates that the City of Geneva has an older population. Statewide, 13.8 percent of the population is aged 65 years or more. This percentage is 20.3 for the population in the City of Geneva. Data also indicates that educational attainment is lower among residents of the City of Geneva. Statewide, 5.4 percent of all residents aged 25 years or more have less than a 9th grade education. This is 10.7 percent among City of Geneva residents. Those with less than a high school education are 16.3 percent statewide and 25.3 percent in the City of Geneva.

### **Recommendations:**

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- The local hospital does not provide obstetrical services. This is far from a local issue. Alabama currently has 39 of its 67 counties without a hospital providing obstetrical services. This is a reimbursement issue with few viable solutions. The Bibb Medical Center in Centreville recently reinstated obstetrical services. This was done by enhancing financial efficiency in other areas of hospital service to where the loss of providing obstetrical services could be absorbed. It also involved diversifying hospital services.

- Many rural hospitals are incorporating rural health clinics and the financial benefits that these can offer. Local hospital officials are currently considering this option.
- The lone dentist providing service in the City of Geneva does not provide service to the low-income or Medicaid population. This is a statewide access to care concern.
- Adequate mental health care is a statewide access to care need, especially the provision of psychiatric services in rural areas. Most mental health clinics in more rural areas provide very limited services from a psychiatrist. One possible solution to this need is the emergence of tele-psychiatry.
- There is a smoke-free policy, but this is limited to choice and may need to be re-visited. It is estimated that 33 percent of all Geneva County adults use tobacco. This tends to indicate a strong possibility for primary and secondary tobacco usage health concerns.
- There may be a need for providing more specialty care locally through special clinics. Hospital officials indicated that they are studying this possibility.
- There appears to be a need for prescription drug assistance.
- Ways to assist those who are not health care literate are being studied and developed. One strong proposal is the training of navigators in churches, senior centers, and other such sources to assist those who are known to have health literacy needs.

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION**

### **Observations:**

- Downtown Geneva and surrounding residential areas have potential to be listed as historic districts on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Some housing near the levy is distressed and needs attention.
- Site of Van Heusen shirt factory provides great opportunity for new use and development in downtown core.
- Downtown sidewalks have been updated.
- Historic concrete silo along railroad corridor is very unique resource that could be repurposed for use supporting trail users and community.
- Citizen Park is nice reuse of vacant downtown space.

### **Recommendations:**

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Geneva is only county in Alabama without a National Register listing, and Alabama Historical Commission wants to help the city obtain district or individual listing for one or more of the great properties in the community.
- Conduct a historic resource survey of downtown commercial and residential areas to determine feasible National Register district boundaries.
- Consider establishing a local preservation commission to meet Certified Local Government (CLG) standards. CLG program is administered by Alabama Historical Commission and participating cities can receive matching grants to list properties on National Register.
- Consider joining Alabama Main Street network to have access to training on economic restructuring in historic downtown district.

## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

### Observations:

- The Assessment Survey revealed a strong perception that city leaders tend to work together well towards community goals.
- The community clearly is proud of two of its major public building blocks, being 1) the City of Geneva School System, and 2) The Wiregrass Medical Center. These bright spots along with the major industry employers help frame a reference towards the future, and not the past.
- Local churches, black and white, are active in promoting the community's general welfare as well as encouraging economic growth.
- Race relations in the city appeared to be positive. Regarding the community meeting in conjunction with the ACE Assessment Visit there was clear evidence of the major minority (African American) group's participation in the meeting. African Americans are also strongly represented on the City Council.
- There appears to have never been an adult community leadership program for the City of Geneva or for the County of Geneva. Some years ago there was a Wiregrass Leadership Program which included Geneva City and County.
- Regarding a youth community leadership program there is the Warren Beck Youth Leadership Program operating currently.
- There has been a director designated for the community leadership program.

### Recommendations:

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Work toward a long term strategic plan for the City of Geneva.
- The city should move forward with developing a realistic plan for starting an adult community leadership program. The long term goal could be the leadership program matures to become a broader county-wide leadership program that not only involves the several municipalities but also rural areas of the county.
- It is suggested that the new leadership program starts in September each year, comprise a 9-day program in total and taken over the traditional 9 months of the school year, and graduate a class in May of each year.
- It is recommended that the community leadership program have a class each year of at least 12-15 participants and that the class be predominantly emerging leaders but also should include a contingent of older persons who are excited about community service. The city may want to consider working with surrounding communities to develop a countywide leadership program.
- It is recommended that a viable curriculum for the leadership program be developed, not only looking at critical aspects of the community (including field trips), but also including ongoing opportunities for leadership skills training and development.
- It is recommended that the Warren Beck Youth Leadership Program be researched more to see how it might complement a new City of Geneva adult community leadership program, and also provide a natural next step for graduates of that youth program.
- Building up the Chamber of Commerce and what it offers the city needs to be explored fully.

## EDUCATION

### Observations:

- The City of Geneva is served by Geneva High School, Geneva Middle School, and Mulkey Elementary School. There are no private schools. City schools will allow fee-based attendance based on guidelines.
- New superintendent has strong community support
- Facilities are aging, but well maintained
- The high school does not have a career tech center, but Geneva representatives are working with state officials to explore potential for construction of a career tech center.
- Geneva High School offers students dual enrollment opportunities with three community colleges.
- The graduation rate is consistently in the mid 90% range.
- Schools are actively partnered with the City of Geneva and receive annual funding from the local budget.
- Geneva City Schools receive tremendous community support and schools play an important role in the community's social scene.
- Education leaders are committed to working collaboratively with business and community leaders
- The school system implements a comprehensive standard for assessment with quality school standards.
- Teachers are highly qualified.
- School system maintains an active website with mission clearly defined and resources readily available.
- Geneva High School offers a large variety of clubs and organizations, including leadership programs and Rotary rotations for juniors and seniors.

### Recommendations:

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Continue exploring options for a career tech center which can align with efforts toward creating job opportunities.
- Continued focus on increasing student opportunities in the arts.

## TOURISM / VISUAL ASSESSMENT

### Observations:

- Current tourist attractions include Fowler Park and associated amenities of Choctawhatchee River access, Constitution Oak, and the levee trail; adjacent privately-owned public golf course is an area destination as well.
- Festival on the Rivers is the major event that draws visitors to Geneva each spring.
- Primary means of promoting tourism is the city's website at <http://www.cityofgeneva.com>.
- No intercept surveys have been conducted of area visitors.
- There is currently no physical tourism information center or general city information center.
- There is currently no wayfinding system to orient visitors to public services, commercial areas, or points of interest.
- There are currently 17 restaurants in town.
- There is currently one (very well-kept) hotel that is locally owned and has 27 rooms.
- Significant potential recreational tourism assets are the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers and the 45-mile long inactive rail corridor that stretches from Geneva to Andalusia.
- Streetscape enhancements (sidewalks, street lighting, and pavement markings) are currently being implemented along South Water Street and East Water Avenue.
- Sidewalks downtown are fair and currently under improvement. However, many residential areas of the city do not have sidewalks and the western commercial area completely lacks sidewalks.
- Public parking appears to be adequate for current demand.
- A majority of polled citizens feel that retail business districts and streets and public areas are attractive and well maintained.
- A majority of citizens polled feel that the downtown area is not attractive and vibrant.
- There is a courtyard park in the downtown, but some citizens complain of it being closed much of the time.
- There are currently no street-based accommodations for cycling, such as share-the-road signs or bike lanes.
- There is currently no direct bicycle-pedestrian infrastructure that connects the downtown area to the levee trail and Fowler Park beyond.

### Recommendations:

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Pursue development of the Wiregrass Trail, which will establish Geneva as the eastern trailhead of what could be the longest rail-trail in Alabama.
- Partner with Geneva County government, Alabama State Lands, local businesses, charitable foundations, and other partners to pursue planning and development of formal canoe trails along the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers.
- Develop and operate (internally or in partnership with a private contractor) a full-service RV park (sewage hook-ups and 50-amp electrical service) within or adjacent to Fowler Park, which will provide an opportunity to tap into the RV tourism market and create a greater market for downtown shops, restaurants, and other businesses.
- Develop a city-wide sidewalk and complete streets plan that better connects people to important destination areas via walking or bicycle.

- Expand bicycle-pedestrian linkages between the downtown area and residential areas as well as to the levee trail and Fowler Park.
- Implement bicycle-friendly street design (bike lanes and share-the-road pavement markings and signs) that will make bicycle use easier and safer for citizens and visitors.
- Expand streetscape enhancements to encompass all of downtown commercial district.
- Plan and implement a wayfinding signage system that directs people from arterial roads into the downtown area, to area attractions and points of interest, as well as to public restrooms.
- Create a visitor brochure that provides information about area attractions that can be placed in restaurants, at the hotel, and other locations.
- Create a “welcome center” at City hall, or other suitable downtown location where visitors can get information about the area. This center can be staffed by volunteers, and can at minimum occupy a corner of the City Hall foyer.
- Work with an existing or newly-created garden club who can work cooperatively with the city to maintain flower beds / hanging baskets in the downtown area.
- Consider making courtyard park accessible to public during daylight hours.

## COMMUNITY PLANNING

### Observations:

- Geneva is located at the confluence of the Pea and Choctawhatchee Rivers, with the majority of the city’s development lying between the Pea River and Double Bridges Creek, which is a major tributary to the Choctawhatchee River.
- While the rivers are aesthetic and recreational assets to the city, their location presents some topographical challenges to development due to flooding and drainage issues. Some issues have been resolved with US Corps of Engineers improvements to an extensive levee that wraps around the eastern and southern parts of the city.
- Although no interstates or federal highways provide regional access to Geneva, four state highways -- AL 27, AL 52, AL 85 and AL 196 – serve the area.
- Circulation in and around Geneva is sometimes confusing.
- As listed on the City of Geneva website, there exists both a planning commission and a board of adjustments; however, both boards meet only “as needed”, instead of monthly for the planning commission, as required by the Code of Alabama, Section 11-52-4.
- The City of Geneva does not have a current or workable comprehensive plan.
- The City of Geneva is enforcing a zoning ordinance that was created and adopted in 1956. Although it has been amended several times, the Geneva zoning ordinance is woefully outdated and inadequate causing more stumbling blocks than property protection.
- Local officials and citizens appear to be very concerned over the lack of a more current and workable zoning ordinance. While there is also concern over the lack of a comprehensive plan, the level of concern is not as great as it is for an updated zoning ordinance.
- The Geneva Historical Society and Downtown Redevelopment Committee worked with the Auburn University Urban Studio to develop an illustrative plan for the Downtown Geneva area. The concepts and strategies of the downtown plan have been adopted by the Geneva City Council and are readily available for review on the City’s website.
- As the county seat of Geneva County, the City of Geneva is the commercial and governmental hub of the county.

- In general, city infrastructure and services appear to be in good condition and adequate to meet the needs of Geneva citizens. Additionally, assessment survey responses indicate that citizens generally have a positive attitude about the city and city services, as shown below. The most significant observation is the lack of a widely shared vision and plan for the future.
  - Strong civic and neighborhood organizations – 50% Agree / 50% Disagree
  - Communication across racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries – 53% Agree / 47% Disagree
  - Widely shared vision and plan for the future – 37% Agree / 63% Disagree
  - Broad citizen support for economic and community growth – 64% Agree / 36% Disagree
  - Good place to live, work, and raise children – 80% Agree / 20% Disagree
  - Well-maintained and attractive retail business districts – 72% Agree / 28% Disagree

### **Recommendations:**

The ACE Team suggests that the City consider the following:

- Initiate a long-range comprehensive planning process that includes both the physical and programmatic development of the city. Planning process should focus on citywide participation with increased efforts to target youth participation.
- Through a citywide planning effort, work to increase the participation and visibility of the Geneva Chamber of Commerce in long-range growth plans.
- Continue working to make both publicly- and privately-funded aesthetic improvements to the downtown area to further increase retail investment in the area.
- Utilize topographical challenges for recreational amenities at every opportunity.
- Address gateways, corridor improvements, and wayfinding in a comprehensive planning process to visually clarify major circulation routes and lead visitors to attractions and retail areas.
- Increase visibility and promotion of Geneva’s unique features, attractions and resources.
- Improve and increase the dissemination of information:
  - About and during the comprehensive planning process
  - About local attractions to increase tourism
- Include visual clues to the river attractions – open the city to the rivers – in physical development plans.
- Consider development of a river amphitheater as a local entertainment venue.
- Investigate the need/solution for additional rental housing opportunities in comprehensive planning process.
- Focus on provision of youth activities and opportunities to increase retention of younger citizens.
- Overhaul the city’s zoning ordinance to be in compliance with proposed comprehensive plan.
- Review Geneva’s subdivision regulations to ensure that they promote the desired quality of development.
- Maximize recreational opportunities for tourism development.
- Continue downtown area improvement strategies to further build an active and attractive central business district:
  - Recruitment of new businesses
  - Streetscape improvements
  - Directional signage at both pedestrian and vehicular scale
  - Façade improvements/restoration
  - Downtown retail marketing

- Strengthen downtown development organization and coordinate with chamber of commerce
- Create strong and distinct linkage at pedestrian and vehicular scale between downtown and river-oriented recreation/tourism.