



# Envision Sustainability Forum: Connecting the E's

ECONOMY



EDUCATION



ENVIRONMENT



EQUITY



**E**conomy, Education, Environment and Equity – these are the building blocks upon which Envision Coastal Alabama was founded, each relying on the other for regional success. Guided by this overarching framework, individuals of varied backgrounds, expertise, interests and passions gathered in February to consider how coastal Alabama can continue to work together.

More than 80 community stakeholders from both sides of Mobile Bay attended the annual Envision regional planning session. As a group, they explored the concept of sustainability as they identified projects and/or campaigns Envision volunteers could realistically accomplish over the next year. The forum led community leaders and volunteers in

collaborative and creative discussions, identifying root causes to regional problems and potential opportunities to impact long-term community change.

During the half-day meeting, community leaders and strategy partners from Baldwin and Mobile counties considered connections and links between Envision's E-teams – Economy, Education, Environment and Equity. Divided into four work groups, each team identified three or four concrete ideas, prioritizing them for Envision's 2011 action plan.

The event was co-sponsored by Envision, the Alabama Coastal Foundation, Partners for Environmental Progress and the Mobile League of Women Voters. Bethany Kraft, Alabama Coastal Foundation executive director and former Envision environment team chair was the facilitator.

The following highlights each team's findings and prioritizes the four critical areas Envision volunteers will tackle during the year.

### Top Four Critical Areas:

1. Create an education campaign utilizing existing resources and to provide ways to positively impact air quality.
2. Improve communication with elected/appointed officials to create broader citizen understanding, trust, participation, responsibility and commitment in resolving critical community issues.

3. Establish an education subcommittee to regularly meet with stakeholders and become better informed on current regional educational successes.
4. Strengthen family well-being and community cohesion to promote a safe and healthy living environment.

Throughout the year, Envision volunteers will meet to develop and implement projects relating to each priority issue. To join any of these teams, contact Shayla Jones Beaco at 431-8628 or [sbeaco@mobilechamber.com](mailto:sbeaco@mobilechamber.com).

# Get Involved with Envision Coastal Alabama

By **Dr. Phillip E. Norris**



Norris

Envision Coastal Alabama is leading our region in building a cooperative environment, strong economy and an enhanced quality of life through visioning and goal setting. This organization is one of many global initiatives focused on developing social capital to strengthen the region.

Envision brings individuals from public, private and nonprofit sectors in our coastal counties together to create a vision of what we want our area to be, develop a strategic plan to get there, resolve conflicts that can be roadblocks to a quality future, and build consensus to move the vision along.

When we look closely at the economic development projects of the past five years from ThyssenKrupp to Airbus to Ecoverly LLC, we see the output of the philosophy of Envision – to build a strong region through cooperation. This is also the case in the development of the Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council and regional transportation options including bus service from the Eastern Shore to downtown Mobile.

Envision Coastal Alabama needs visionary volunteers who believe in collaboration, voluntary agreement among citizen stakeholders and building trust between communities. We need to build the same kind of regional leadership that created the Research Triangle in North Carolina and Silicon Valley in California. More than just high-technology of manufacturing centers, regional visionaries

have also developed regional eco-tourism in Florida and visual and performing arts regions like Charleston and Savannah.

The future we want will not happen without a regional and cooperative vision for Baldwin and Mobile counties. It will not happen unless individuals join together to vision, plan, resolve conflicts and move forward together. Get involved with Envision Coastal Alabama and be part of the process of building a better tomorrow.

*Dr. Phillip Norris is a former Envision Coastal Alabama co-chair for Baldwin County and former director of the University of South Alabama's Baldwin County campus. He can be reached at pnorris@usouthal.edu.*

If you are interested in volunteering with Envision, visit [www.envisioncoastalalabama.org](http://www.envisioncoastalalabama.org) and click on "Get Involved." For more information contact Amanda Selph, Baldwin County coordinator, at 947-5721, [aselph@baldwineda.com](mailto:aselph@baldwineda.com), or Shayla Jones Beaco, Mobile County director, at 431-8628, [sbeaco@mobilechamber.com](mailto:sbeaco@mobilechamber.com).

## Buddy Up for Reading

One mentor, plus one child, plus one book, equals a chance for success in school. That's the formula used by Envision strategy partner Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF). Its Reading Buddies program, designed to improve literacy rates in Mobile County Public Schools, was rolled out as a pilot program in 12 elementary schools last fall. It relies on community volunteers to offer one-on-one reading support for students in first through third grades.

"Studies show children learn to read through the third grade, and from fourth grade on they are reading to learn," said **Mary Ann Napper**, MAEF's partnership involvement director. "Students who don't learn to read by fourth grade are less likely to graduate from high school."

MAEF patterned the initiative after similar programs around the country, including those in the Atlanta area. School principals identify those students believed to be at-risk for poor reading skills and Reading Buddies spend one hour weekly,

during school hours, listening to their assigned buddy read books.

Volunteers undergo one hour of training by MAEF and must submit to a background check before working in area schools. According to Napper, the program is as much about mentoring as it is about literacy. "These are children who often have a lot of disappointment in their lives, and so many of them need a caring adult," she said.

The program is currently ongoing at Brazier, Dickson, Dixon, Dodge, Hall, Hamilton, Hollinger's Island, Meadowlake, Morningside, Old Shell Road, Semmes and John Will Elementary schools. **Mark Berte**, MAEF's community engagement director, said the organization plans to expand to all Mobile County elementary schools beginning with the next school year, but first must recruit and train more volunteers this summer. He is hopeful members of the business community and civic organizations will step up and fill the need. Berte says MAEF offers onsite



Volunteers are needed in the public schools to build reading skills. Pictured here: Mobile Area Chamber Regional Affairs Director Patty Howell reads with Jaylin Hawkins at Old Shell Road Elementary School. Howell is part of Reading Buddies, a program of the Mobile Area Education Foundation, and spends an hour a week during her lunch hour to help Jaylin become a stonger reader.

training to companies with several interested individuals, and locates volunteers in schools closest to their workplace.

To volunteer or for more information visit [www.maef.net](http://www.maef.net) or contact Napper at 470-5204 or [mnapper@maef.net](mailto:mnapper@maef.net).

# Co-Chairs Share Regional Vision

It could be fitting for Envision Coastal Alabama co-chairs Shirley Sessions and Ray Moore to quote Charles Dickens' opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The best of times because Sessions and Moore say they are positive coastal Alabama is uniquely positioned for success, despite what some see as the worst of times – a double hit from the oil spill and a sluggish national and state economy.

The pair enters a two-year term as Envision's leaders, taking over from Donna Watts and Mike Hofto, whose terms expired in 2010. Capable leaders, both Sessions and Moore are no strangers to the hard work it takes to continue

Envision's forward momentum.

Sessions, formerly Envision's Equity team co-chair, is Regions Bank vice president/community affairs manager for south Alabama and northwest Florida.

Most recently Envision's Economy team co-chair, Moore is a professional land surveyor and vice president of Hutchinson, Moore & Rauch LLC in charge of the firm's Mobile office.

From their work in both the business and nonprofit sectors, Moore and Sessions see the recent influx of jobs to the area by companies such as Austal, ThyssenKrupp and Airbus positioning the region for growth. "I am optimistic Mobile and Baldwin counties will not follow the national norm," Sessions said. She and Moore agree growth must be supported by improving schools, increasing technical

job training and providing affordable housing – Envision priorities for their term.

"People are moving here," said Moore. "We need to think about getting our kids educated and for those who aren't college oriented, we need to start talking about teaching trades and skills."

Moore said he believes the biggest challenge facing Envision continues to be convincing political and community leaders to think regionally about issues facing south Alabama. "Let's bring our collective ideas into a group and let's work on the bigger picture," he said.

The co-chairs concur work can't be done without recruiting new volunteers to Envision – something they plan to promote during their leadership term.



Ray Moore and Shirley Sessions

## Envision Coastal Alabama 2011 Team Chairs

Envision co-chairs and team chairs are selected for two-year terms from Baldwin and Mobile counties to lead each of the program's four E-teams – Economy, Education, Environment and Equity. As active leaders in both counties, these

individuals volunteer their time, professional expertise and individual passions to strengthen the overall quality of life in coastal Alabama.

The following are Envision's 2011 team chairs.

### Education

The education team works to collaboratively align efforts that strengthen education so every child is prepared to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace and global economy.



**Terry Burkle**  
Education Team Chair, Baldwin County

Burkle is vice president of the South Baldwin Chamber Foundation, a nonprofit organization supporting education enrichment and leadership development in south Baldwin County schools.



**Amanda Carr Outlaw**  
Education Team Chair, Mobile County

Outlaw is an urban regional extension agent with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

### Economy

The economy team works to sustain strong economic development growth with a competitive workforce by marketing available resources in coastal Alabama.



**Donna Givens**  
Economy Team Chair, Baldwin County

Givens is senior governmental and community services administrator for the Baldwin Electric Membership Corp.



**Frederick Rendfrey**  
Economy Team Chair, Mobile County

Rendfrey is Downtown Mobile Alliance's director of economic development.

### Environment

The environment team encourages decision makers to examine and act upon key issues and problems from the perspective of sustainability to balance the social, economic and environmental needs of present and future generations.



**Dr. Thomas J. Ward Jr.**  
Environment Team Chair, Baldwin County

Ward is a professor of history at Spring Hill College and serves on the board of directors for the Alabama Coastal Foundation.



**Jennifer Denson**  
Environment Team Chair, Mobile County

Denson is executive director for Partners for Environmental Progress (PEP), a nonprofit organization of business owners seeking to create a better environment.

### Equity

The equity team works to promote partnerships and collaboration between community service agencies in both Mobile and Baldwin counties to bring greater awareness to available community resources designed to positively impact the lives of individuals from all walks of life.



**Brooks Chew**  
Equity Team Chair, Mobile County

Chew is constituent services representative and service academy liaison for the office of U.S. Congressman Jo Bonner.



**Rebecca D. Byrne**  
Equity Team Chair, Baldwin County

Byrne is United Way of Baldwin County's executive director.



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## Orange Beach and Smart Coast Step Up for Safe Streets



Calling it one of the few carry-over sports from childhood, 79-year-old **Wayne Cockrell** logs 100 to 150 miles a week on his bicycle. The retired physician and Orange Beach resident rides for recreation as well as active transportation, that is, trips to the library or grocery store. At Cockrell's urging, the city of Orange Beach, with guidance from Envision Coastal Alabama strategy partner Smart Coast – a nonprofit group promoting a healthy coastal region – is making strides toward becoming more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly.

Last fall, city planners met with Walkable Communities Inc. Founder and Executive Director **Dan Burden**, an internationally recognized authority on bicycle and pedestrian facilities and programs. Burden suggested ideas such as roundabouts, bike lanes, sidewalks and medians to make city streets safer. In January, officials convened a citizen advisory committee of business owners, developers and residents to build community support for a master bike and pedestrian plan.

"We have an ideal place," said Cockrell. "We already have a great start with roads that have wide shoulders and the city fathers had a good idea when they put a bike path through the state park,"

he said, referring to the nationally recognized Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail, 10 miles of paved trail and an extensive network of sidewalks.

According to **Griffin Powell**, the Orange Beach engineering and environmental services planner heading up the process, demand for safer streets is high. A cycling enthusiast who often rides to work, Powell said tourists and winter visitors frequently arrive with bikes in tow. And he noted, "In the summer we have many service industry workers whose main mode of transportation is biking and walking."

Once a master plan is in place, Griffin said the Orange Beach group hopes to become south Alabama's first Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC), a national designation by the League of American

Bicyclists for communities actively supporting bicycling. Currently, the city of Auburn carries Alabama's only BFC designation.

Smart Coast co-founder **Charlene Lee** said a master bike and pedestrian plan, along with a BFC designation, will provide a wider community awareness of bicycling and walking, bringing the potential for improved quality of life for families, higher property values, business growth and increased tourism. "Ultimately, we hope this will be a model for other coastal cities that want to provide connectivity and safety for people seeking an active transportation choice."