

Alabama Communities of Excellence Assessment Report

Oneonta, Alabama

November 2013

With a population of approximately 7,000, Oneonta is the county seat of Blount County as well as the county's largest city. The community is beloved by its residents who tout it for its quality of life, small town ambience, scenic beauty, and proximity to larger cities such as Birmingham and Gadsden. Oneonta's relative lack of industrial development history has meant that it has not experienced the job losses over the past several decades that have hit other small towns so hard. However, many of Oneonta's young people elect to move away to other towns and cities where there are more job opportunities and more "things to do." Those who stay do so because they love the community and want to raise a family here, but they most often have to commute to Birmingham for gainful employment. Oneonta's citizens and leaders recognize that the town has significant assets that with sound planning and cooperation, offer tremendous opportunities for Oneonta to become an even better place to live, work, learn, and play.

Oneonta has several assets that give it unique potential to excel as an Alabama Community of Excellence. These include outstanding public schools, the Blount County Economic Development Council, the St. Vincent's Blount community hospital, an industrial park with access from AL Hwy. 75, community athletic facilities, an historic downtown (that is already revitalizing), a cadre of young community leaders who are dedicated to moving Oneonta forward, and significant historical and natural resources that can be a draw for tourism.

The Oneonta ACE Team Consists of:

Brian Rushing, The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development

Marshall Farmer, Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham

Nancy Robertson, Top of Alabama Regional Council of Government

Jake Chambers, USDA – Rural Development

Vince Perez, Alabama Department of Commerce

Tommie Syx, The University of Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute

Carolyn Bern, Alabama Department of Public Health, Office of Primary Care & Rural Health

Stacye Hathorn, Alabama Historical Commission

Mike Easterwood, Economic and Community Development Institute, Auburn University

ACE Team Visit Process

Oneonta was one of six Alabama cities selected to participate in the 2015 Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. Phase I of ACE consists of a visit by the ACE team to conduct a community assessment and prepare an assessment report for the community. The Oneonta ACE team conducted its assessment visit in a single day on October 1, 2015. After a pre-assessment team meeting in the morning, the ACE team met informally with Mayor Ross Norris and City Manager, Ed Lowe, who is serving as the ACE local coordinator. After lunch, Mayor Norris and Mr. Lowe conducted a guided community tour for the ACE team, which was followed by a 1.5 hour-long meeting with local topic experts to discuss Oneonta's key assets and challenges. At 4:00 pm, we held a community engagement meeting that was attended by over 50 members of the community. In this meeting, we presented an overview of the ACE program and process, the city topic experts made brief presentations on economic development, community health, city infrastructure and services,

and education, and we also reviewed the results of the Community Self-Assessment Surveys. ACE team members then met with community members in breakout discussions to talk about the assessment subject areas. These groups were as follows:

1. Leadership Development (Mike Easterwood)
2. Planning (Marshall Farmer)
3. Economic Development (Nancy Robertson, Jake Chambers, & Vince Perez)
4. Education & Workforce Development (Tommie Syx)
5. Healthcare, Public Safety and Emergency Services (Carolyn Bern)
6. Tourism, Aesthetics, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (Brian Rushing and Stacye Hathorn)

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

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Observations

- Oneonta operates an adult leadership development program called "Leadership Blount County" through the Blount County-Oneonta Chamber of Commerce. The program started in 2004 and is open to all residents in Blount County.
- The adult leadership program purposely seeks to have small classes (under 20 participants) in order to maximize opportunities for group interaction and discussion. Also, a larger class could not be managed given the current Chamber staff level.
- Participants in the class begin the program in October and complete their training in June. One class session is offered each month (9 total class days). Class topics include: class introduction and orientation, local government and the court system (2 sessions), public safety, education, health care and social services, tourism and quality of life, state legislative day, and economic development.
- Local subject matter experts and officials provide training. One class session is devoted to a trip to Montgomery, AL where participants meet with their legislative delegation and visit the state Archives.
- Most class participants are sponsored by local business or industry organizations.
- Based on observation and follow-up comments, about 50% of class graduates take on leadership responsibilities in the community.
- Written evaluations from adult program participants conducted at the last session have been very positive.
- Consideration is being given to establishing a youth leadership program for Oneonta. A trial program was conducted during the summer of 2015. This program featured 12 students from the local school system (from grades 7 through 12). Although the program was open to boys and girls, all 12 participants were young ladies. Plans are to conduct an expanded program for the summer of 2016. The Chamber of Commerce, the Oneonta Foundation, and the Blount County Education Foundation will sponsor the expanded program for Educational Resources (OFFER). This program will aim to have up to 30 young participants for training sessions. Training will be either one-day a week or a single full week of training. Sessions will be at Oneonta school facilities.

Recommendations

- Consider asking leadership program participants to volunteer to serve on city boards as vacancies occur. City officials have noted difficulty in filling such positions and this service would be a great way for program graduates to demonstrate their leadership skills.
- Emphasize group interaction for every program session. Encourage participants to ask questions and offer comments and make sure presenters are open to group interaction.
- Have each leadership class select a project that the group can complete following graduation. The project should be one that benefits Oneonta and can be completed by the group. Assistance from other community organizations is fine, but the leadership group should be the primary project team. The Oneonta strategic plan will be a great source of project ideas.
- Identify and utilize people in the community that can serve as coaches or mentors for leadership program graduates. These individuals would be available to meet with graduates and discuss leadership opportunities in Oneonta and counsel the graduate on leadership development as the graduates go forward in his or her working life.
- Invite a leadership class graduate who had demonstrated successful leadership in the community to make a brief presentation to a group that is in training. Ask the successful graduate to discuss a project or activity they headed up and how the leadership program helped them in the project or activity.
- In addition to the final overall program evaluation, evaluate each program session for content and potential impact or usefulness for program participants.
- Consider raising leadership program tuition to cover actual costs associated with the program. The current tuition is \$250 per person and this amount does not cover program costs. The average tuition for leadership programs in similar sized Alabama communities is about \$350.
- Consider devoting at least one hour of each training session to a special topic that could help the group develop its leadership skills or help the group carry out a project. Possible topics might include strategic planning basics, grant writing and fund raising, and personal leadership assessment.
- Consider making the first leadership training session a retreat-type event designed to overview the purpose of the training program, build a strong sense of group cohesion, and motivate participants to be fully engaged in the training process.
- Consider devoting at least a portion of one training session to a partnership event with a neighboring leadership program (from an adjoining county or nearby city). The session could feature a discussion of possible partnership projects or cooperative activities that the two groups could work on as a team.

PLANNING

Observations

- Oneonta does not have a strategic plan or comprehensive land use plan.
- Oneonta's downtown core lies near the middle of Murphree Valley, with residential areas extending outwards towards Red and Straight Mountains. Commercial areas extend radially along Alabama Highway 75 and US 231. More residential areas flow outward from these

arterials.

- Downtown Oneonta is compact and easily accessible. Sidewalks provide good access to stores and public buildings in the downtown area. However, they do not extend into the residential areas.
- There is currently no way finding system to orient visitors to public services, commercial areas, or points of interest.
- There are currently no street-based accommodations for cycling, such as share-the-road signs or bike lanes.
- The City of Oneonta's major educational investment is a wise acquisition of land adjacent to downtown, on which a campus of Wallace State Community College will be built. This investment will keep public uses in the public area, and will enhance an active Oneonta.
- The City of Oneonta does have a planning commission that makes decisions on zoning issues that arise in the city. However, it does not have a current comprehensive plan. The latest comprehensive plan was prepared in 1976. Both residents and stakeholders expressed the need for the city to adopt a widely shared vision so all sectors of the city can be "on the same page."
- Downtown is relatively vibrant, with relatively few vacant storefronts. The new downtown college campus should improve opportunities for new and expanded businesses.

Recommendations

- Oneonta should engage with the planning process and develop a strategic plan to establish a vision, goals, and objectives that will guide the future of Oneonta.
- A comprehensive plan should follow the strategic plan, and should provide the community with specific steps to achieve the goals set out in the strategic plan. It should make an in-depth assessment of the city's housing, commercial, and industrial, recreational, and workforce needs, and recommend actions to meet those needs. This plan should also examine the city's zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, and building codes to ensure they are up-to-date with the plan's goals and with applicable standards.
- The comprehensive plan should also include a way-finding element. This element should examine the connectedness of the city's neighborhoods with all the various assets within the city. And an overall wayfinding system should be developed to facilitate easy navigation around the city for both residents and visitors.
- Discuss potential of developing a city-wide sidewalk system and complete streets plan that better connects people to important destination areas via walking and bicycling.
- Public participation should be an overriding goal within the planning process, and the city should strive to ensure that all communities participate. The city should also invite young people to participate in the process.
- The city should strive to extend their good relationships with state agencies such as ALDOT and ADECA to enhance the city's access to funding resources provided by those agencies.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Observations

- The community has an active development authority, the Blount County Economic Development Council (BCEDC).

- The BCEDC has formed strong relationships with state and local officials and seeks to forge relationships with other economic development officials.
 - BCEDC enjoys 100% participation from local elected leaders.
- The BCEDC has financial resources available to promote the city to industrial prospects.
- The BCEDC maintains a current inventory of available industrial park buildings and sites with state-level recruiting agencies.
- The BCEDC has recently begun a program to help retain and expand local business investment.
- The Blount County – Oneonta Chamber of Commerce (BCOCC) regularly visits business stakeholders.
- The BCOCC recognizes local businesses at least annually.
- The BCOCC employs a paid full-time executive and part-time employee.
- The BCOCC actively promotes retail and commercial development activities.
- The BCOCC sponsors courses for development of local business owners.
 - Small business education for existing and start-up businesses is provided in partnership with Jacksonville State University.
 - The Chamber of Commerce offers a leadership camp for aspiring entrepreneurs.
- With the majority of the working age population commuting to nearby population centers for employment, there is a substantial capable and productive workforce available.
- The community has partnered in vocational and technical education with Auburn University and Wallace State Community College.
- The community requires a higher level of service than currently offered by the local Internet service provider.

Recommendations

- Develop a business retention and recruitment strategy that meets local employment needs as part of Oneonta’s strategic planning process. Consider the following:
 - Survey employers to compile an accurate inventory and profile (including wages and benefits) of existing jobs in Oneonta.
 - Survey Oneonta citizens who work elsewhere to determine what jobs (including wages and benefits) they are commuting to.
 - Survey of existing employers’ anticipated future demand for labor
- Further promote entrepreneurship of local citizenry as well as outside investment.
- In partnership with the BCEDC, consider identifying, acquiring, and developing new land for industrial recruitment as advised by the business recruitment strategy; new property should be located as close to utilities and logistical corridors as possible.
- Evaluate the possibility of assisting the local Internet service provider to invest in infrastructure upgrades needed to support modern industry and retail.
 - Engaging with the Governor’s Office of Broadband Development may be helpful in identifying opportunities to enhance high-speed Internet access.

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Observations

- K-12 schools, all of which are situated on one 84-acre site, serve the City of Oneonta. The Blount County Career Technical Center provides courses including, welding, health science, horticulture, and drafting. There are no private schools. 22% of students enrolled in Oneonta's public schools live out-of-district and pay fees to attend.
- Plans are underway for a Wallace State Community College campus to open in January, 2018 in the downtown area.
- Students are offered dual enrollment classes through Snead State in Boaz.
- Schools receive limited funding from the City of Oneonta.
- The Oneonta Foundation for Educational Resources was formed in 2001 to raise private funds to enhance education through field trips, advanced classes, technology, author visits, and special events.
- School system maintains an active website with its mission clearly defined and resource information readily available.
- Oneonta is actively engaged in college and career planning opportunities for students.
- Oneonta High School has a 97% graduation rate.
- Schools and community work together to provide student opportunities for participating in leadership programs.
- The school system implements a comprehensive standard for assessment according to quality school standards and uses results to guide continuous improvement.
- Oneonta schools are committed to the best of technology, but home Internet access is an issue for some students.
- Oneonta community and school leaders are committed to working together to address leadership and workforce development.

Recommendations

- Compiling a report summarizing employers' future demand for labor will be helpful in anticipating workforce development needs.
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- There is an expressed desire by public school representatives in Oneonta that the City of Oneonta should consider an increased funding line in its local budget.
- Investigate opportunities to enhance student opportunities with arts.
- Explore working cooperatively with the local Internet service provider to upgrade and expand local high-speed Internet infrastructure to make learning through technology feasible in the classroom and at home.

HEALTHCARE, PUBLIC SAFETY, & EMERGENCY SERVICES

Observations

- Oneonta offers a broad array of health care providers including a community mental health center, a critical access hospital (CAH) affiliated with St Vincent's Health System, a

federally qualified health center offering low-cost dental and primary care services, a hospital affiliated rural health clinic, a public health department, long-term care and nursing home, assisted living facility, senior center, dental and primary care, pharmacies, and EMS services.

- The critical access hospital, St Vincent's Blount, also offers dialysis services, pain management, transitional care program, and tele-health and tele-stroke services.
- The Hope House, a faith based non-profit, addresses homelessness and substance abuse issues. In addition, the Hope House houses the Blount County Family Services Mall, bringing together governmental and non-governmental services to underserved families.
- The Blount County Children's Center focuses on child abuse and neglect.
- Oneonta's full-time fire department houses EMS services. Response times are between 5 to 15 minutes, with 80% of calls involving some type of medical emergency.
- There is a 24-hour fully staffed emergency room operating out of the hospital. The hospital does not offer delivery services; pregnant women must access delivery services in Birmingham. At this point in time, EMS does not respond to calls with mothers in the midst of delivering their babies.
- The community was split over the choices of primary care services. Many citizens expressed a need for an urgent care facility.
- The lack of broadband and high speed Internet services does impact emergency communications and dispatching in some areas of Oneonta and Blount County. This could be a dangerous situation in case of a citywide emergency such as a tornado.
- Members of the Hispanic community that were represented at the health care workgroup session estimated that the current Oneonta Hispanic population represented approximately 10% to 15% of the total population. It was unclear if barriers to health care exist for this population, but workgroup members did feel there were communication challenges presented by the different dialects represented in the Hispanic population.
- The community mental health center is unable to keep pace with the needs of the community. An illustration of this access issue focused on postpartum depression in women who cannot access mental health services in a timely manner. Waiting for weeks or months for an appointment with a mental health professional is not an option for women suffering postpartum depression.
- Seniors who are isolated and lonely are using EMS to fill the void. Repeated calls to EMS from depressed and isolated elderly citizens are presenting a challenge. Even though there is a senior center in the community, it was viewed by some seniors in the community as the "country club" crowd.

Recommendations

- Working cooperatively with the local Internet service provider to improve high-speed access will support the effort to keep local healthcare and emergency services operating efficiently.
- The faith-based community could consider alternative ways of better serving the social needs of isolated elderly citizens.
- Access to timely mental health services may need to be explored. The hospital may want to consider group-counseling opportunities utilizing licensed clinical social workers. Best practice models for community counseling opportunities are being offered by other critical access hospitals. Mental health services via tele-health are another option for expanding mental health services.

- Access to health care and issues impacting the Hispanic community need to be explored further. The lack of representation of this growing community demographic does not give a complete picture of the health care access issues.
- A study addressing the need for an urgent care clinic in Oneonta may be beneficial since many citizens expressed the need for this type of clinic.

TOURISM, AESTHETICS, & RECREATION

Observations

- Oneonta provides information about area attractions within the city and throughout the area through its website's "Visitors" section.
- The Blount County-Oneonta Chamber of Commerce organizes the Covered Bridge Festival, which is the major annual event that brings people to Oneonta.
- Nearby recreational assets such as Palisades Park, Horse Pens 40, Locust Fork River, and beautiful mountainous topography together represent a tremendous opportunity for recreational development and developing an outdoor recreation tourism industry in Oneonta.
- Downtown streetscape enhancements that include sidewalk and lighting improvements have been made primarily along 1st Avenue East in the commercial heart of downtown.
- There is an active Beautification Board of Oneonta.
- Oneonta has two hotels: Days Inn and the Covered Bridge Inn
- There are two public golf courses in the city: Heritage Golf and Limestone Springs Golf.
- There are two parks within the city: Woodland Park (family playground) and the Oneonta Recreational Park, which houses athletic fields, an aquatic center, McDaniel Gym, and an activity center in the old L & N Depot.
- There is an expressed citizen need for more soccer fields and more basketball courts.

Recommendations

- Consider increasing the visibility of unique city and area attractions on the city's website, in social media, and by placing promotional literature in hotel lobbies.
- Consider creating a visitor information kiosk or welcome center in Downtown or at City Hall.
- Explore the possibility of making Oneonta a world-class paddling, mountain biking, rock climbing, and hiking destination hub by initiating early conversations with the Blount County Commission, Alabama State Lands, and local businesses, foundations, and other partners to evaluate opportunities. Development of a mountain biking "park" could involve a partnership with the International Mountain Bicycle Association and local mountain biking organizations.
- Evaluate feasibility of expanding streetscape enhancements to encompass all of downtown commercial district.
- Consider working with the Blount County Arts Council and local artists to create permanent public art installations in downtown that will celebrate Oneonta's uniqueness as a community and create interest for visitors.
- Evaluate the possibility of expanding facilities for soccer and basketball.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Observations

- Oneonta is in the process of setting up a local preservation commission.
- There are four resources in the Oneonta area listed on the National Register of Historic Places: Horton Mill Covered Bridge, Swann Covered Bridge, Easley Covered Bridge and the archaeological site of Nectar Covered Bridge.
- Oneonta has eight resources on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage:
 - Blount County Activity Building, c 1940 108 3rd Avenue East
 - Copeland-Ellis House c. 1914, 204 4th Avenue West
 - Crump-Oliver Farm, Route 1 Oneonta
 - Denton-Hendrix House c, 1917 110 2nd Avenue East
 - Murphee Log Cabin c 1819, Palisades Park
 - Easley Covered Bridge c. 1927
 - Oneonta Community House c. 1934, 112 Jack Fendley Drive
 - Oneonta Federal Building c.1937-38, 210 2nd Avenue East
- Crump Cave was investigated by Frank Burns in 1892 and recorded in a report to the Smithsonian Institute. It was a Middle Woodland era, Copena burial cave dating somewhere between 200BC and 500AD. Crump Cave was also used as a saltpeter mine during the Civil War.
- Although the above resources are formally recorded, Oneonta has many more historic resources worthy of listing, preserving, and interpreting for visitors. Much of the historic downtown retains its character and there is a potential residential historic district adjacent to the downtown.
- Charlie B's is a historic restaurant where the community has gathered for more than 50 years and should be considered for listing in the Alabama Register.
- The Champion Mines represent a potential industrial archaeological district.
- These meager suggestions only scratch the surface. Oneonta has incredible historic resources that speak to the city's character and a substance. A city that embraces and showcases its history is not just another anonymous sequence of fast food restaurants on the highway. It's a place that invites the world to stop a while and get to know you.

Recommendations

- Consider including archaeology in the local preservation ordinance.
- Consider utilizing a local preservation commission to ensure historic character of the city is maintained.
- Consider conducting a historical survey of residential and commercial areas.
- Consider incorporating historical interpretive signs into the wayfinding plan for Oneonta.
- Consider the Main Street program for historic downtown.
<http://www.mainstreetalabama.org/>
- Listing commercial historic properties on the National Register makes them eligible for both State and Federal tax credits for rehabilitation.
- Contact AHC for information on the Certified Local Government program.