

Welcome to EARTH: Formal announcement of East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub

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SYLACAUGA — Numerous stakeholders got a taste of what the future holds for Talladega County on Wednesday morning at a ceremony announcing phase one of the East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub at B.B. Comer High School.

Earlier this week, Talladega County Schools Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey announced that the system had been awarded \$1.75 million from the state's Public School and College Authority Bond. The money will be used to demolish and begin the cleanup process on the 30 acres of the former Avondale Mills property that the system owns.

“This project will be the first of its kind in Alabama, and is a momentous project for our communities,” State Rep. Ben Robbins said in a prepared statement. “This hub will provide rural Alabamians the ability to develop its workforce and incubate its businesses. Not only is redeveloping the site revolutionary for the area, but the economic development opportunities are endless.”

He added, “The hub plans to partner with local businesses and communities to work with high school students and adults to provide them with specialized skills required for jobs in the area. In addition to the training center, there are plans to add a football stadium and practice center for B.B. Comer's athletes. We are developing an opportunity for rural people to grow and develop their businesses. The goal is to prepare our citizens for jobs right here at home, for the jobs of today and the jobs of tomorrow. The training component will allow us to have a strong work force that will support economic growth.”

Robbins thanked Gov. Kay Ivey (who was unable to attend), state Schools Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey and state Finance Director Kelly Butler for the award.

Lacey said Wednesday that the project, which will eventually include state of the art industrial training facilities and business incubators, was the result of “multiple conversations, planning and networking with educators, business and industry leaders and non-profits. We were all steadfast in our vision for a state of the art training hub.”

Avondale Mills, which was the industrial heart of Sylacauga for most of the twentieth century, ceased operations in 2006, and a large portion of the property burned in 2011. Still more of the remaining structures had been stripped of bricks and heart-of-pine, leaving the site resembling something out of post-apocalyptic science fiction. Nonetheless, the county school board bought 30 acres of the property in 2017, and kicked off what Lacey described as a three-year process culminating in the ceremony Wednesday.

Ryan Coleman of Difference Architecture was described as the “mastermind” behind the project, but Robbins, Coosa Valley Medical Center CEO Glenn Sisk and Margaret Morton of SAFE were also instrumental in making the project happen.

Coleman said SAFE and Morton worked to “identify shortages and build on human capital, especially when a major employer like Avondale leaves. The state also played a major role. After that, we had a series of visioning sessions, talking about how to reach our goals and how to manifest those goals in physical space.”

Madge Ellis of Alabama Power also got involved at this point, working with industrial leaders to determine what their needs were likely to be going forward, what they needed to grow, what they needed to keep them in the community.”

Coleman said the project and the partners involved evolved over time. Morton and Lacey discussed the project and came up with the idea of using the old Avondale property, which sits right next to B.B. Comer Memorial High School.

“We all took the board of education’s vision and merged it with the goals for the rural innovation center,” he said.

According to the plan he showed Wednesday, the right-hand side of the property will house a 41,000 square foot Rural Innovation Center, including classrooms, lab facilities and business incubators. There will also be green spaces and community gardens. New athletic fields for Comer will be on the facing half of the property.

Before any of that, however, it will be necessary to conduct a level two Brownfield Assessment of possible contaminants on the property. That will be followed by a design phase involving a civil engineer, demolition and soil remediation before construction gets underway.

Robbins said the new center will be “the first of its kind, offering a holistic approach to the needs our business and industries. Working with Central Alabama Community College, we can help students acquire skills and trades before they graduate. And not just for the jobs that are needed now, but for the jobs that will be needed in five or 10 years. We will have the capacity to adapt and evolve with industry, to train young people for the jobs of tomorrow.”

Lori Corley of the East Alabama Regional Planning And Development Commission said her organization was pleased to be a partner in the project, and offered grant preparation and lobbying as needed.

“We’re pleased to be a part of this,” she said.

Sylacauga City Schools Superintendent Dr. Michelle Eller said she was also grateful for the opportunity to work with Lacey, SAFE and others to “pave a pathway to greatness for all students.”

Morton spoke of the symbolic significance of the project, being built at what once “was the most prosperous site in the area. And it will be the key to prospering in the future.

Where there is now rubble and destruction, there will be a new brand not just for Sylacauga, not just for Talladega County, but for the region and the state. We begin the future of each of these communities today, determined locally.”