

# Gov. Ivey visits Sylacauga, calls training hub a resource for 'rural Alabama'

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**SYLACAUGA** — Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey and state Superintendent of Education Dr. Eric Mackey visited B.B. Comer Memorial High School on Friday morning to support and congratulate the stakeholders in the East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub, which will eventually occupy the property that was once home to Avondale Mills.

Announced late last month, the EARTH project is designed to secure the route to prosperity not only for residents of Sylacauga and Talladega County, but also as a model for the state and for rural areas across the nation, Ivey said. Phase one on the project will also involve the clean-up of a truly massive eyesore.

That clean-up and assessment phase will be funded with a \$1.75 million award from the state's recent Public School and College Authority Bond Issue. County Schools Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey pointed out in July that the county is the only K-12 school system to be awarded during this round of bond funding.

The center will eventually provide students with training in the areas employers need, including "agriculture, hospitality, healthcare and information sciences," according to the governor. It will be a resource "not only to those who call this area home, but for the rest of rural Alabama as well. Education is paramount, This facility comes about because of partnerships between the state, the county school board, private industry, parents and community partners. There is no doubt there will be an incredible outcome."

Mackey added the governor had gone through a lot of proposals for education funding, and added that projects in Sylacauga and Talladega County immediately caught her eye.

“We would love to have been able to fund them all, but we had to find which ones were the best,” he said. “This one came to the top of the pile. Dr. Lacey and I have known each other for a long time, and I know her to be innovative and forward thinking. Programs like this are what you would expect to see in some place like Charlotte or Austin or New York, but not necessarily in Fayetteville or Munford or Lincoln.”

Mackey also praised the “marriage of town and country. Comer has a great history, and they could have been content to rest on their laurels, but they never have. ... They have given us a great image in a dark time. Tomorrow the sun will rise, and I thank you for letting me be a part of it.”

Rep. Ben Robbins thanked Ivey, Mackey and former state Finance Director Kelly Butler, saying “words can’t describe” the importance of the project going forward.

“We are righting the ship of our economy and setting a course for tomorrow,” he said, characterizing the impact of the project as “a transformational change for rural Alabama, from Chambers County to St. Clair County.” It will not only make area students better, more skilled employees, but it will also give them the opportunity to grow businesses of their own.

The center will help “abolish division and competition,” he said. “We can all speak with one voice, pulling us up by our bootstraps. This is a first step for us, but it’s a major step. ... It allows us to go forward toward a brighter tomorrow, with a unified vision. And it all flows from that hub.”

Sylacauga City Schools Superintendent Dr. Michelle Eller, SAFE Executive Director Margaret Morton, Sylacauga SGA President Lacey Wood and B.B. Comer High drum major Nicholas McDaniel also spoke. The last two largely addressed the legacy of Avondale Mills and what it had meant to the community over the years.

“It was more than a building, it was the backbone of the community,” Wood said. “It was a launchpad for success.”

McDaniel said the project would bring the old mill property “full circle.”

The plant opened in 1913 and employed tens of thousands of people over the years. At one point, one fifth of all of the cotton produced in Sylacauga passed through Avondale. What is now B.B. Comer High began life as a school for the children of mill workers, with one teacher.

The plant closed in 2006, and a lightning strike in 2011 burned most of it to the ground.

The county school board bought about 30 acres of the property in 2017.

According to the plan published in July, 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.