

New workforce development center EARTH breaks ground on old Avondale Mills property

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SYLACAUGA — SYLACAUGA, Ala. — The future plans for the worksite which used to be home to the textile plant Avondale Mills, a former staple of the Sylacauga community, was unearthed Thursday afternoon, Jan. 19.



Ground was broken for the East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub (EARTH) on the location where Avondale Mills once stood at 31 Central Ave.

EARTH is described as an “economic development solution that includes incubation and innovation of rural ideas while focusing on knowledge-based skills and education, technology, growth, and entrepreneurship across the lifespan.”

“The East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub promises to incubate creative business ideas around rural concepts,” said Coosa Valley Medical Center CEO Glenn Sisk. “Think about the many rural benefits we have here in Sylacauga and Talladega County. From water and timber, and marble, there are business ideas that are yet to be developed that EARTH will be able to incubate, develop, and set on a path to success.”

The EARTH campus will be expansive, focusing on incubation and preparing East Alabama’s workforce for on-demand jobs in K-12 education, agriculture, hospitality training, healthcare, and IT.

The hope for EARTH is that it replaces and, one day, potentially supplants what used to sit at its location and be a driving force in Sylacauga, Avondale Mills.

“Fortunately, when I first took over 20 years ago in this office,” said U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, “we still had a pretty healthy textile presence throughout East Alabama. As many of you know, I grew up in a textile family. [Soon after I came into office], the textile industry was fighting for survival. It was not just here. It was all over the rural South.”

“As you know, that era is gone,” Rogers solemnly continued. “We have to embrace the future. This community is very innovative and very determined when they want to do something, particularly Margaret [Morton].”

As the Executive Director of the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement (SAFE), Margaret Morton has been giving back however she can to Sylacauga and East Alabama for decades. Morton will continue to do so through EARTH which will house SAFE staff offices.

EARTH will also include an interpretive center, public and private meeting spaces, classrooms for adults and children, incubation offices for local businesses, co-working

space, flex spaces and cooking/catering kitchens with plans in the future for additions such as an early learning center, education quad with Talladega County Schools, IT hub, transportation hub, retail spaces, community garden, and an amphitheater.

In its prime, the Avondale Mills site employed over 3,000 people in Sylacauga.

Morton asked for the large number in attendance to raise their hands if they worked at Avondale Mills, knew someone who worked there, lived in the Mill Village, or “benefited from the vibrance of the economic impact” of the textile plant.

Almost everyone present raised a hand.

“Our celebration today is the beginning, and what begins today will benefit our region and our economic health and well-being for generations to come.” Morton added. “EARTH can and will be a model for rural Alabama and a model for the nation.”

EARTH’s mission is to provide East Alabama an efficient and effective workforce development system that is responsive to current needs of individuals and businesses while also looking forward to future economic development initiatives.