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Encouraging Regional Cooperation: Progress Made and The Role of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham in the Effort

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Summary

Prior to the 2017 launch of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham's *Together We Prosper* initiative, mention of "regional cooperation" was often greeted with suspicion by local political leaders.

To many, cooperation was a code word for consolidation: the merger of governments and school systems under one authority. Cooperation meant giving up control, surrendering in a competition over scarce resources.

Fast forward to 2023, and regional cooperation is extolled as a virtue. Significant progress has occurred on multiple fronts, with further developments in the works.

The Community Foundation cannot and would not claim full credit for this shift in attitudes. The passage of time, changing circumstances, and a new generation of political and public agency leaders have established new levels of trust and engagement.

However, the Foundation's contribution to the change is undeniable. While some of that work has been public and widely known, much of it has been behind the scenes.

The Foundation and its donors have made critical investments to advance cooperative work, but just as valuable has been the Foundation's patient and persistent efforts to cultivate relationships among mayors, city councilors, and other regional leaders, encouraging cooperative approaches and creative solutions. Major accomplishments include:

- **Ending city-to-city business poaching:** Through the Good Neighbor Pledge, initiated in 2019, Jefferson County municipalities ended an economic incentive bidding war over relocating local businesses. By 2021, the entire membership of the Jefferson County Mayors Association had adopted the pledge. In the two decades prior to the agreement, it is estimated that cities had given out over \$200 million in incentives that netted no new jobs for the region.
- **Launching a Regional Park System:** Built on a proposal and outreach made possible by the Community Foundation, the new Jefferson County Greenways Commission will now care for three regional parks, a cooperative initiative

between Jefferson County, the State, multiple cities, and additional governmental and nonprofit partners. The Community Foundation funding also helped secure a total commitment of more than \$3 million to launch Jefferson County's first regional park system.

- **Winning and Launching a Mental Health Crisis Care Center:** A mental health diversion center opened in 2023 now provides an alternative to jails and emergency rooms for individuals in mental health crisis. The competitive effort to win the facility involved virtually all the county's elected officials, made possible by an improved commitment to cooperation. The Foundation pledged \$50,000 and lent staff support to help secure the facility, and through its Mental Health Initiative Director has continued to provide input on the operation. The center has already taken in patients in crisis from multiple jurisdictions, and that has decreased jail populations.
- **Innovations in Public Transit:** The Community Foundation brought together the City of Birmingham and Via Transportation, one of the country's leading providers of on-demand microtransit, providing \$552,000 in grants in 2019 to pilot the service. Following success and expansion, as of 2023, The Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority is pairing bus rapid transit with on-demand micro-transit, gradually replacing a big-bus fixed-route system with a more nimble responsive mobility solution.
- **Saving on Solid Waste and Recycling:** A coalition of cities formed a solid waste authority, which is providing more efficient and cost-effective garbage and recycling services, projected to avoid more than \$1 million in cost annually for each of the member cities.

While there has been notable progress, the years since 2017 have also demonstrated the difficulties of cooperation. Other major initiatives have been launched but will still need consensus building to achieve.

- **E911:** Jefferson County is the only county in the state with more than two Emergency Communications Districts, with 14. While there has been progress toward consolidation, the fragmentation costs money and can slow emergency response.
- **Municipal Jails:** Jefferson County has far more municipal jails per capita than most counties in Alabama or the U.S. The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office has proposed building a new jail that could allow cities, including Birmingham, to

get out of the jail business. However, determining how to operate or pay for a consolidated jail is complicated.

- **Governmental Financial Management:** Comparative financial data is essential for managing government. The Jefferson County Treasurer's Office has improved its data collection system for providing that, but more improvement and timely participation from cities is needed. That's proven difficult to achieve.
- **Violence Reduction Initiative (VRI):** Sponsored by the Community Foundation, VRI brought new research-based approaches to reducing violence. The approach was multifaceted and involved cooperation across multiple governments and agencies. Data on every shooting was collected and analyzed at regular meetings of the Birmingham Police, the Sheriff's Office, the FBI, ATF, and the U.S. and District Attorney Offices, allowing for information exchange and joint action. However, leadership changes at multiple agencies ended the collaboration.

Cooperation may now be seen as a positive, but existing entities are oriented toward operating for their own benefit. Partners must be convinced and want to see a dollars and cents analysis before getting involved in a venture.

Advancing any initiative requires multiple governments' agreement, which, in turn, requires the agreement of many players beyond mayors or agency heads. No elected official represents the entire county, and it's no one's day job to work toward regional collaboration.

The Community Foundation has been a primary convenor and investor in efforts to foster collaboration and policy innovation. Other regional organizations have been partners in the effort. And there are promising signs that some of those organizations are orienting themselves to increase their engagement. For example, new leadership at the Birmingham Business Alliance is increasing its attention to regional solutions. This marks a new phase of the regional cooperation initiative, an opportunity for recalibration and new partnerships.

Background

The report that follows describes in more depth a variety of initiatives that have advanced regional cooperation over the past seven years. The report also describes the hindrances and obstacles some of those initiatives still face.

In 2016, the Community Foundation launched what would become the *Together We Prosper* initiative by convening a strategic advisory committee to guide research into the Birmingham area's fragmented system of government. That committee established basic research questions: Does governmental fragmentation harm the Birmingham area's prosperity, and if so, what have other cities done to avoid or counter fragmentation?

The resulting report, authored by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, found that, unlike its rapidly-growing Sunbelt neighbors, Birmingham developed on the model of industrial cities in the north: a core city surrounded by industrial and residential suburbs. Since the 1960s, cities organized on that model have seen new housing, population, and wealth shift to surrounding municipalities and adjacent counties.

Unlike fellow Sunbelt cities like Charlotte and Nashville, which were able to capture suburban growth and maintain a unified community of interest, Birmingham's population has dropped from 340,000 in 1960 to under 200,000 today. Long the largest city in Alabama, Birmingham now ranks behind Huntsville, Montgomery, and Mobile in population.

As an interconnected economic community, the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Area still dwarfs those other metros. However, even as a metropolitan area, Birmingham's growth is slow. The fragmented pattern of municipal organization Birmingham shares with its Rust Belt neighbors is consistently correlated with slow population and employment growth, not just for the central city but for the entire surrounding metropolitan area.

While other factors may be at work shaping the common fortunes of this group of cities, governmental fragmentation exacts a toll on the effective, efficient, and equitable functioning of government.

- In a fragmented community, services and administrative overhead are duplicated many times over.
- Regional decision-making is diffused. No one is in charge. It is difficult to hold anyone accountable.
- Resources are divided. It takes multiple parties to pull off big things, and economic resources and economic disadvantages tend to become concentrated in the various jurisdictions.

The tendency toward fragmented growth is a constant feature of urban development. Cities that have been able to stay ahead of or counter fragmentation have employed four main approaches,

- **Political Consolidation:** Merging the central city and the core county into one government, a feat that is rare and hard to achieve. The last major city to succeed at consolidation was Louisville in 2000.
- **Functional Consolidation:** Designating with the city or the county to provide certain services to cover the entire county, for example, law enforcement, economic development, public transit, health and building code enforcement, or the operation of regional parks. Business leaders in Charlotte favored this approach, which cuts down on duplication and increases efficiency.
- **Modernize and Empower County Government:** Establish a county with an executive and a legislative branch and give it the power and resources to provide countywide services, like economic development or stewardship of large-acreage parks. Pittsburgh pursued this approach.
- **Regional Cooperation:** the formation of regional associations or authorities that coordinate policy or carry out a function or service for a coalition of jurisdictions. Denver's political and business leadership employed this approach.

The resulting research report was published in 2017. With the release, the Community Foundation launched a yearlong effort to share the findings and convene conversations around a way forward for the Birmingham region. Beyond newspaper, television, and radio coverage, forty-five presentations were made to elected officials and civic and leadership groups, reaching over 2,000 people in person.

Many of those events featured interactive sessions where audience members could express their preferences among the various approaches.

Reactions varied. Although neither the report nor the presentations advocated for any particular approach, some elected officials still suspected a preconceived agenda for political consolidation at work.

On the other end of the spectrum, some members of the general public hadn't realized that the 35 cities in Jefferson County were separate and autonomous. While there was broad support for increasing regional unity and finding solutions to shared challenges, most participants doubted there would be support for consolidating Birmingham's city government with the county government.

The approach that seemed to enjoy the most support was Denver's. Denver's approach was the least intrusive in that it did not seek to merge or restructure current governments. Instead, it offered to align interests and bring coalitions together around joint ventures.

The Jefferson County Mayors Association

A primary feature of Denver's model was their Metro Mayors Caucus, which brings together the mayors of 39 metro Denver municipalities every other month. The Caucus contracts with a Denver nonprofit for staff support to manage communications and provide research support. That allows the Caucus to maintain topically-driven meeting agendas, sustaining interest and participation for member governments.

Jefferson County had an existing association of mayors, but attendance at those monthly meetings had dropped off over time. The gatherings were more about networking than policy discussions and problem-solving.

However, roughly coinciding with the report's release and public discussion about the potential for greater cooperation, a new generation of mayors had been elected. In some cases, their campaigns included discussions of regionalism, and most of those elected had expressed openness to regional cooperation. The new mayors

included Birmingham mayor Randall Woodfin, which presented an opportunity to reset relations between the central city and the suburbs.

Working with the Mayor's Association executive director, the Community Foundation helped reenergize [the Association](#). The regional cooperation research was presented, but the Foundation also made clear that it was offering support rather than attempting to set the mayors' agenda.

In October of 2018, the Foundation helped arrange and facilitate the Association's "Deep Dive," an extended and facilitated session in which the mayors identified top issues they could work together on. These Deep Dives have since become an annual event for the Mayor's Association, one that the Association now conducts itself without the support of the Community Foundation.

The section that follows describes major initiatives that have emerged from the Mayors Association. The Community Foundation has been involved in the initiatives to varying degrees. The engagement with the Mayor's Association has yielded significant benefits.

However, some of the initial benefit has dissipated. Several mayors, including the mayor of the largest cities, Birmingham and Hoover, attend less frequently. The Mayors Association needs to reexamine its mode of operation to encourage sustained engagement and meaningful action among the mayors.

The Community Foundation has adjusted its level of engagement over time and should continue to recalibrate its relationship. The Mayors Association can be a valuable partner. The Community Foundation had to overcome suspicion on the part of the mayors that the Foundation staff was engaging with the mayors to advance an agenda. Eventually, the mayors realized that the Foundation was only there to help the mayors choose an agenda of meaningful work that the mayors could collectively or in partnership address.

Now that the Mayors Association is functioning independently, the Community Foundation could aid the Mayors Association by bringing issues, research, and solutions to the mayors. Bringing clear, specific, targeted proposals for their consideration would provide the mayors with substance to their collaborative work.

Good Neighbor Pledge

In their first Deep Dive, the mayors agreed to forge an agreement to prevent cities from using tax-payer-funded incentives to lure businesses from one municipality to another.

This has been a long-running issue of civic concern. When a business was considering moving from one jurisdiction to another, cities often competed to offer the most generous incentives to retain or lure the business. Beyond costing tax dollars, the moves weren't necessarily creating new jobs for the region, and the contests undermined trust and caused hard feelings between leaders.

A solution to the situation, a Code of Ethics agreement pioneered by the Denver Metro, was identified in the Community Foundation's research report. During the Mayors Association's first deep dive, the mayors identified the crafting of a similar agreement for Jefferson County cities as a top priority.

The development of the Good Neighbor Pledge serves as a template for the complex but successful effort required to execute regional cooperation in a fragmented region.

After the concept was identified, the cause needed a champion. In the case of the pledge, Mountain Brook Mayor Stewart Welch and Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin were appointed as co-chairs of the effort. The Woodfin administration lent staff support to draft the agreement. The Community Foundation was heavily involved in the drafting process, providing prototype agreements from Denver and several other cities and regions-- Cuyahoga County, OH; Dayton, OH; Milwaukee, WI; Northeast Indiana; and San Diego, CA. City of Birmingham staff collaborated with the Community Foundation to craft the language to meet the local conditions.

Provided with a draft agreement, it was up to Welch and Woodfin to actively persuade their fellow mayors to join in. By April 2019, 23 of the 35 mayors in Jefferson County signed on to the Good Neighbor Pledge. The signing ceremony was covered by the news media, and it was hailed as a positive step for the region.

By 2021, the entire association adopted the Good Neighbor Pledge. The Pledge not only ended bidding wars over existing businesses but also increased trust between the mayors.

E-911 Consolidation

At that same 2018 deep dive, the mayors set a goal of increasing cooperation in 911 services. Through that ongoing effort, municipal governments have already consolidated some emergency districts and have laid the technological groundwork for bringing additional jurisdictions together, saving money, and improving the effectiveness of emergency response.

Jefferson County has 12 independent 911 call centers, plus two municipalities that contract with the Shelby County 911 Center. No other county in Alabama has more than two Emergency Communications Districts. Each of those centers receives a share of telecommunication taxes based on population. Functioning independently, each of those districts has to buy its own high-tech equipment for receiving calls and dispatching emergency services. Coming out of the 2018 Deep Dive, Hoover Mayor Frank Brocato, a former fire chief, agreed to chair the mayor's effort to move toward a more consolidated system. Working with emergency personnel, several steps toward consolidation have already occurred.

In 2018, seven additional municipalities joined Jefferson County 911, which now serves the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department and a total of 36 fire departments, including city departments and fire districts serving unincorporated areas.

In 2020, the two largest 911 centers, Birmingham and Jefferson County, launched a 'virtual consolidation,' connecting their computer-aided dispatch (CAD) systems. Calls and information can pass seamlessly between the two centers depending on where the incident occurs or as the situation changes in real time.

The Jefferson County Center in Center Point and the Birmingham system based in Birmingham City Hall can now serve as backups for one another. If one center goes down, the other center can pick up the entire volume of calls. Hoover and Homewood have converted to the same CAD technology and will be able to seamlessly connect with Birmingham and Jefferson County. Meanwhile, Vestavia and

Mountain Brook have already stopped operating independent 911 centers and are contracting with Shelby County's 911 Center to handle their calls.

The next step would be to build a unified center where Jefferson County, Birmingham, Hoover, Homewood, and other jurisdictions, including Mountain Brook and Vestavia, could co-locate, contract, or consolidate. Co-location would save money by decreasing duplicative spending on technology. It also would further improve targeted emergency response. Calls from cell towers aren't reliably routed by jurisdiction. Under the current system, calls often have to be transferred between call centers so that emergency response can be dispatched from the right jurisdiction. Emergencies can also occur between or move from one jurisdiction to another, particularly on the region's main travel arteries, often requiring coordination and joint response.

Calls taken at a centralized center would be answered and dispatched by a co-located team serving multiple agencies. A joint center would also be home to the Jefferson County Emergency Management Agency (EMA), built and hardened to operate in any condition. Though expensive to build, the center, it is argued, would save operational costs and duplicative capital investments independent districts now have to make each time technology is updated. Staffing is a problem throughout the public safety sector, and a consolidated center with a large pool of employees would provide more flexibility in coverage.

Despite progress, the attempt to consolidate 911 services provides an example of the challenges of regional cooperation. Elected officials are elected to care for their jurisdiction, not design a better system for all. Sustained leadership would be required to drive toward a solution. Money would be needed to develop a cost analysis and preliminary architectural work needed for a concrete proposal. And once that proposal is developed, a sustained push would be needed to bring partners together to identify the resources to build a new center.

Legislation has been drafted to create a Jefferson County Office of Emergency Services, a legal structure that would bring the EMA, 911, and other cooperating entities together to pursue a consolidated emergency operations center.

2020 Census

In the 2020 deep dive, mayors identified the importance of getting a complete and accurate count of the population in the 2020 Census.

Congressional representation and federal funding are calculated based on population counts, making it essential to encourage a complete count. Based on slow population growth relative to other states, Alabama was projected to lose a seat in Congress. Undercounting the population could have cost the state more than \$1 billion in federal support over the course of a decade.

Gardendale Mayor Stan Hogeland served as chair of the effort to boost the count. The Community Foundation was already involved, a key partner in a statewide coalition working to boost the Census count. The Foundation devoted staff to work with the coalition and provided office space, training, and support to the full-time coordinator of the effort.

The Community Foundation arranged for the coalition to present to the Mayors Association, sharing strategies and tools to boost Census participation through outreach activities. In 2019 and early 2020, coalition representatives fanned out to speak to civic groups and Chambers of Commerce. They also targeted hard-to-reach populations, including residents of the Black Belt counties and the Hispanic community. After the outbreak of Covid-19, organizing and outreach pivoted to online presentations and targeted media.

In the final analysis, Alabama's rate of self-response, the method through which people are most likely to get counted, increased by a percentage point to 63.5%. Jefferson County's self-response rate increased to 65.6%, up from 64.8% in 2010. Shelby County's rate jumped from 77.8% compared to 70.9 percent in 2010. St. Clair and Blount Counties also saw jumps.

In the official count, Alabama grew faster than estimates had predicted and kept all seven congressional seats. By virtue of that higher population count, Alabama kept its seven seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The state and local communities will also benefit from more federal dollars since many programs make distributions based on population counts.

Cooperation around Solid Waste and Recycling

Another achievement in regional cooperation has been cooperation around solid waste disposal and recycling, an initiative expected to save area cities millions of dollars annually.

Traditionally, each municipality contracted, through a competitive bidding process, with its own waste hauler and recycling provider or handled all or part of the service with municipal employees.

As the cost of the services rose, municipalities like Vestavia Hills and Hoover began designing alternative processes and exploring other options. City Councilors involved in the JeffCo Councilors Coalition began sharing information between cities about these innovations and generating interest in forming a cooperative solid waste authority.

The 2021 Mayors Association Deep Dive brought the brewing changes in solid waste and recycling to the attention of other mayors. An initial core group of cities formed the Cahaba Solid Waste Authority, and by June 2021, several additional cities joined. The new authority negotiated favorable terms with a provider, Amwaste, based on the combined purchasing power of several suburban cities.

Trussville, Mountain Brook, Vestavia, Hoover, and Homewood are members of the authority and have transitioned to using the Amwaste to provide solid waste pick up and recycling. Fultondale is also using the service. Making this even more of a regional cooperation effort, two cities outside of Jefferson County, Pelham and Clanton, have also joined the solid waste authority.

The Amwaste service is provided in partnership with RePower South (RPS). It offers a one day a week of mixed stream pick up: garbage and recycling that is transported to a sorting facility in Montgomery. Sorting recyclable material out of the waste stream makes the process easier on households and increases the percentage of materials recycled. Other waste stream components are also converted to energy pellets, which can supplement other fuels in energy production, leaving a much smaller amount to send to landfills.

Each of the participating cities predicted significant savings from the new service. Homewood, the most recent convert, estimated that the new system would cost \$1.5 million less than alternatives. Vestavia estimated \$2 million in avoided costs.

Metro Jail

The Mayors have also identified cooperation around a unified metro jail as a community need. However, there needs to be a consensus around how to pay for it or how it should function.

At the request of and in cooperation with the Mayor's Association, the Community Foundation commissioned a study to catalog current jail capacity, needs, and potential solutions.

The [study](#), authored by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, found widespread support for a central facility or facilities that would allow municipalities to close city jails. Under Sheriff Mark Pettway, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office is advocating for a new central jail large enough to replace the current jail downtown, a facility large enough to house municipal prisoners from cities that want to participate.

However, the complexity of a joint arrangement and the cost of a new facility have thus far thwarted significant progress on the initiative.

Jefferson County is a national outlier and arguably has more jails per capita than any major county in the U.S. Thanks to changing criminal justice practices, the headcount in municipal jails has plunged, and cities are left with costly, underutilized jails that, in many cases are expensive to operate. Jails are a significant source of municipal liability and a risk for employees and prisoners. The trend nationally has been toward closing and consolidating jail facilities, most often leaving one jail per county: a facility that can offer 24-hour trained and focused supervision rather than supervision by multi-tasking police personnel.

Getting to a unified solution is complex in Jefferson County because of the number of municipalities and parties that would need to agree on the terms for a new jail.

Even incremental steps are thwarted by obstacles that are the product of the convoluted nature of local government. For instance, Jefferson County Sheriff's Office deputies have their own pension system. Birmingham City employees have a separate system. Most municipalities participate in the Retirement Systems of Alabama. Any attempt to combine workforces or shift employees from one to another encounters that barrier.

Pressure is building to find a solution. Municipal jails in Birmingham and Bessemer are old and need significant investment to stay open. Birmingham wants to close its jail and send its municipal prisoners to the Jefferson County Jail downtown. The Sheriff's Office has negotiated with the city to take those prisoners but has yet to receive support from the Jefferson County Commission, which ultimately pays for the jail.

One obstacle to agreement around a new consolidated facility is that no concrete plan or cost estimate has been produced to propose to potential partners, a common stumbling block for cooperative projects.

In the spring of 2023, the Community Foundation approved a \$75,000 grant application from the Sheriff's Office to support design work as a first step toward securing support and funding on a \$200-\$250 million project. Having such a design in hand will advance the conversation. However, much distance remains between the numerous parties involved regarding how a new jail would be paid for and operated.

Crisis Care Center

Another significant milestone in regional cooperation was achieved by opening the Region II [Crisis Care Center](#). Jefferson County won the facility after a coordinated and unified regional campaign in support of the proposal, which the Community Foundation helped energize. The Crisis Care Center begins to address a problem that mayors and law enforcement leaders have long recognized: individuals experiencing mental health crises often end up in the custody of local jails, an ineffective, expensive, and dangerous place for dealing with such individuals.

In 2020, the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Gov. Kay Ivey selected Huntsville, Mobile, and Montgomery to share an \$18 million appropriation to open

mental health crisis centers in their cities. A proposal from the Birmingham-based Jefferson Blount St. Clair (JBS) Mental Health Authority was not chosen in the initial round.

In 2021, a second competition was launched, but the JBS proposal faced competition in the Central Alabama region from a Tuscaloosa-based consortium. The Community Foundation, as a show of support, authorized a \$50,000 grant for the proposed facility and helped spark a full-court press for support. The Sheriff's Office helped rally support. The Mayor's Association gathered the signatures of 25 mayors in a letter of support. The local legislative delegation, led by Senator Jabo Waggoner, pressed vigorously for the award. The win brought \$7 million from the state to help open the new facility and provide mental health outreach and training throughout Central Alabama.

The Community Foundation's Mental Health Initiative director was asked to serve on the steering committee that launched the facility and remains on the board now that the center is operational.

Now operating, the center has received and is treating patients brought to them by the various jurisdictions. These patients, who are admitted for a short stay, stabilized, and released, would otherwise have gone to jail.

In conjunction with the center, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department is training agencies throughout the region on de-escalation and other techniques for dealing with individuals in crisis.

JeffCo Councilors Coalition

Mayors don't run cities alone. They implement policies and priorities established by city councils. So, communication across community lines between members of the 35 city councils in Jefferson County is also important in establishing shared approaches across a fragmented municipal landscape.

After seeing success in reenergizing the Mayor's Association, Steve Ammons, then a Jefferson County Commissioner, provided a grant to enable the Community

Foundation to provide similar support to an existing but fledging association of city councilors. Following a similar involvement model as it did with the Jefferson County Mayors Association, the Community Foundation helped councilors organize, energize, and expand an existing regional coalition of city councilors, the [JeffCo Councilors Coalition](#) (JC3). Through the work, JC3 established a more formal structure, drafted a vision statement, and elected officers. The Community Foundation helped improve communication and outreach and facilitated a Deep Dive to identify issues of common concern. The Community Foundation continues to provide the bookkeeping and administrative support for the JC3.

Participants in JC3 expressed appreciation for the different but complimentary role JC3 plays compared to the Mayors Association. City council members, since they are not directly and solely responsible for the execution of government action, may feel freer to express opinions and advance policy through discussion. Councilors have greater leeway to form alliances and affinity groups simply because more people are involved.

The JC3 now has members representing 17 different municipalities and has established relationships with city council representatives from Shelby County as well.

In JC3 discussions, two subjects have emerged as consensus priorities for cooperation: transportation and trails and greenspace.

Regarding trails, the councilors are working across municipal lines to identify and execute projects that connect to existing or planned corridors in neighboring cities. Such projects enhance the value of the investment to both cities.

The councilors have also rallied support around the formation of the Jefferson County Greenways Commission, a public partnership to operate and maintain large acreage greenspaces in Jefferson County. The three parks, Red Mountain Park, Ruffner Mountain, and Turkey Creek, are regional attractions but have never had a stable source of public support until the formation of this partnership between Jefferson County, the State of Alabama, and cities. The Councilors have also rallied support around the Red Rock Trail system, a bike and pedestrian trail system connecting the separate communities.

Regarding transportation, the councilors have delved into the question of public transit in Jefferson County and discussed improvements to the traditional system, which has a history of dysfunction.

This spring, the councilors approved a resolution calling for the state to fund the Public Transportation Trust Fund, an alternative state funding source for public transportation. The Alabama Constitution earmarks gasoline taxes for road building, and because of that, Alabama is one of the few states that provides no state-level support for public transportation.

The Public Transportation Trust Fund could receive non-gas tax money and thus be available to support public transportation. JC3 has also spurred cross-jurisdictional support for new approaches to public transportation, aiming for a system that will better serve the variety of communities the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority serves.

Transportation

Working toward a transit system that would better serve the public has been an area of focus for the Community Foundation for several years. The Foundation's persistent, patient, and unsung work has set the stage for what could be dramatic innovations in public mobility in the region.

For decades, the primary provider of public transportation in the Birmingham Region has been hamstrung and hidebound. Unlike transportation systems in most urban areas around the country, the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority (BJCTA) doesn't receive state funding and is entirely reliant on local and federal funding. Birmingham is the biggest funder and the core of the system, but the system also depends on client cities to pay for bus routes that run through their cities.

Thus, the system has many masters to please and has had trouble providing service levels at a cost that satisfies multiple customers. Beyond that, the transit system has traditionally invested in large buses, which often appear far from full as they move along their routes.

The bus fleet has been notorious for breaking down and long waits. BJCTA has long employed a hub and spoke system, with all lines feeding into the downtown Birmingham hub station, where transfers to other lines are available. While this may work for some, it creates a highly inefficient path to desired destinations for many.

With the advent of ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft, innovative thinkers in public transit began experimenting with how that kind of system might complement traditional public transit.

The Community Foundation was aware of the inadequacies of the traditional system in Birmingham and the hardships it created, particularly for low-income, disabled, and elderly residents. In 2019, aware of the experimentation with on-demand public transportation around the country, the Community Foundation, Birmingham City Councilman Darrell O'Quinn, and representatives from the city administration contacted Via, one of the country's leaders on-demand transit. The Community Foundation's Catalyst fund donors agreed to provide \$550,000 to launch Birmingham On-Demand in partnership with the City. The pilot program covered an eight-mile zone, including downtown and west-side neighborhoods. Point-to-point rides within the zone cost just \$1.50 and are requested by smartphone app.

Appreciating the model's success, the City took over funding the service in 2020. That expenditure was one of the few spending increases for the city in a budget year in which a \$63 million revenue shortfall. In 2022, the BJCTA got involved, investing in Via to expand and complement its bus service. Also, in 2022, an eastern zone was established, providing point-to-point on-demand service rides from Woodlawn to Roebuck. In 2023, the BJCTA, which initially resisted starting the on-demand service, seeing it as a threat, has taken over as the local partner. Hours for Birmingham On-Demand have been extended, and ridership now exceeds 10,000 rides a month.

BJCTA has shut down some low-ridership bus lines while providing riders with an on-demand alternative. The authority is working toward integrating its fare and trip management system with VIA, the buses, and the bus rapid transit system (BRT).

By shutting down low ridership lines, buses that ran those lines can be shifted to central artery lines, increasing frequency and reliability on those routes. With on-demand rides from their homes to those central arteries, riders can more efficiently

and reliably get to where they want to go. According to recent statistics, On-Demand ridership has reached 10,000 per month.

Charlotte Shaw, BJTCA CEO since 2021, said she and her board are open to innovation and new ideas and recognize one size doesn't fit all. Shaw sees the BJCTA evolving from a bus system to a mobility solution. Buses are expensive, and drivers are in short supply. Technology presents competition but also opens up new opportunities. Shaw is exploring providing shuttle service between the airport, residences, and hotels and is exploring additional bus rapid transit lines complemented by On-Demand service.

Throughout the process, the Community Foundation has stayed involved as a communication and creative partner. From 2019 through to the present, the Community Foundation has a standing phone call with Via every two weeks. The Community Foundation also continues to be a conduit for coordination between the city, the BJCTA, and Via. Shaw credits the Foundation for helping lay the groundwork for innovations in place and to come.

A New Park System for Jefferson County

In another significant regional cooperation achievement of 2023, Jefferson County now has a new public partnership for supporting regional greenspaces, one that will provide a new infusion of dollars and park management expertise, with the potential for sustainable maintenance and operation going forward.

Officially signed into existence in July, the Jefferson County Greenways Commission (JCGC) will operate and maintain Ruffner Mountain, Red Mountain Park, and Turkey Creek Nature Preserve. Initial funding for the JCGC has been provided by a partnership between Jefferson County, the State of Alabama, the City of Birmingham, the Jefferson County Health Department, other municipalities, and community partners, including the Community Foundation.

As Jefferson County was organized in its fragmented pattern of municipalities, the creation of public parks was left to cities. Missing from that landscape were large acreage regional greenspaces, attractions that have been increasingly recognized as essential quality-of-life community assets.

Ruffner Mountain was established in the 1970s but has always been run on a shoestring by a nonprofit with modest support and City of Birmingham. Despite managing state and county-owned lands and receiving visitors from throughout the region, Ruffner didn't receive state or county financial support. Over the decades, the park grew in size through new lands given by Jefferson County and the state's Forever Wild program. Still, no additional public support was provided while visitation grew.

Between 2000 and 2012, through the work of the Freshwater Land Trust, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve and Red Mountain Park were brought into existence. The Community Foundation led a fund-raising effort that helped create Red Mountain, make improvements at Ruffner, and establish Railroad Park, a \$15 million fund-raising campaign known as the Three Parks Initiative.

While the philanthropic community continued to support the parks, there wasn't a regional government partner to provide basic operational support for these attractions, despite the fact they are used by people from all over the county and the region. Without a stable source of basic public funding, the parks were all on the brink of closure by 2020.

The parks remained open thanks to creative management and, with help from the City of Birmingham, Homewood, Irondale, Pinson, and the State of Alabama, secured by the local legislative delegation. Throughout the crisis, the parks' leadership began cooperating to find a long-term solution.

The Community Foundation paid for a yearlong investigation and planning process and the development of a communication plan that led directly to the successful pitch for creating the Jefferson County Greenways Commission. The JCGC will provide professional operations and land management at the three parks with a single superintendent overseeing the operation. Shared equipment, staff, administration, and expertise will reduce costs, increase the level of service, and improve the condition of the parks.

The Jefferson County Commission, which had been the missing regional partner needed to provide stable funding, agreed to devote \$2 million from the American Rescue Plan Act if other partners would provide matching funds. The goal was to

secure a total of \$3.6 million over three years, the estimated cost of operations and maintenance at the three properties.

The Community Foundation led the way, pledging \$600,000 to the initiative. This investment helped draw contributions from the Jefferson County Department of Health, The State of Alabama, Alabama Power Foundation, and EBSCO Industries. A total of \$3.95 million was secured for the Greenways Commission, exceeding the goal. In addition, the Jefferson County Commission added a regular appropriation of \$350,000 to their 2024 budget, signaling a long-term commitment as a partner in supporting the Greenways Commission.

In the meantime, the cooperative arrangement on the public side has drawn additional investment in the 501c3 nonprofits that have been managing the parks. The Ruffner Mountain Nature Coalition and the Red Mountain Park Foundation are currently operating under a joint administration that provides the same efficiencies of shared staff on the nonprofit side that the JCGC will provide. Supporting cities have renewed their commitments to the three parks, totaling over \$1 million, and philanthropic supporters have pledged over \$500,000.

This cooperation around regional greenspace has come at an opportune moment. Green space and outdoor recreation have become recognized as vital in quality of life, talent attraction, and economic development.

The Community Foundation has been investing in greenspace development in each county in its footprint. The Foundation also plays a role in convening local advocates across the region. The partners have begun conversations about the value of cross-promotion. At the same time, through the Innovate Alabama initiative, Gov. Kay Ivey and the State Legislature have identified Outdoor Recreation as a pillar of its plan to improve assets that help attract and retain businesses and talent,

A new Outdoor Recreation Council has developed a series of recommendations for new investment in promoting and developing natural assets and outdoor recreation. Closer to home, new leadership at the Birmingham Business Alliance and the Jefferson County Convention and Visitors Bureau has been involved in discussions about how to support the operation, development, and promotion of regional outdoor recreation attractions.

Green Infrastructure

Rivers, creeks, and weather don't respect municipal boundaries. With development continuing and climate-change-induced surges in rain increasing, the natural systems that absorb and carry away rain are under strain. That leads to increased flooding and damage to property and public infrastructure.

The Community Foundation has supported measures to address the problem. It is currently funding an initiative to help collaborating municipalities tap into large new funding sources being made available to promote what is known as green infrastructure.

Flooding from 2021 heightened awareness among cities about how much excess volume is entering our rivers and how vulnerable our floodplain developments and infrastructure are.

The Community Foundation provided part of the funding for a pilot project demonstrating green infrastructure's benefits. Meadowlawn Park (Vestavia) consists of land acquired through floodplain buyouts. The new park project was engineered to restore streams and wetlands to capture water and slow rainwater runoff.

The project was one of the featured examples at a recent training and networking event organized by the Cahaba River Society, the Alabama Stormwater Association, and Auburn Water Resources Center. Communities that share a watershed were grouped to discuss cooperation and how they could jointly tackle issues along their shared rivers and streams.

The Community Foundation-funded Urban Rivers Restoration Partnership is a joint project of the Nature Conservancy and the Cahaba River Society. The Partnership also presented these concepts to the JeffCo Councilors Coalition. That, in turn, has generated opportunities for municipalities to work together on coping with flooding along Shades Creek. Homewood, Mountain Brook, and Irondale are now actively pursuing projects to mitigate problems in the Shades Creek watershed.

Meanwhile, Hoover is looking for opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure in

its current comprehensive planning effort for parks, greenways, and open space protection.

In the past, Hoover has prioritized suburban growth and retail development, but the current process includes a central theme of protecting and capitalizing on the Cahaba River as a way to enhance quality-of-life benefits and outdoor recreation. Hoover invited the Cahaba River Society to serve on the steering committee of the planning effort that brings together city leadership, economic development staff, and developers.

Prospects Going Forward

In furthering the work of cooperation, additional champions are needed. In metro areas that have successfully addressed problems of fragmentation, those efforts required sustained leadership from key constituencies. In each city, a different combination of players from different sectors – political, civic and nonprofit, higher education, and business – have provided leadership.

In the nonprofit and civic sector in Central Alabama, The Community Foundation has played a vital role as a champion for cooperation and an investor in cooperative initiatives.

Political leaders have played their roles. Advances have been made. At the same time, though, the very nature of our governance creates barriers to any particular leader stepping up and championing cooperation. Leaders are elected to represent their own community or district.

In each city identified in the Together We Prosper initiative, the business community was an essential partner in advancing cooperation. In all four comparison cities, the business community saw value in improving the structure and efficiency of government as a partner in the growth of their respective regions.

Major players in the business community have been engaged in cooperative efforts, and the Community Foundation convened and supported that work. In 2014, the leadership of the Community Foundation and the Economic Development

Partnership brought together the Mayor of Birmingham, the president of UAB, and CEOs of the Birmingham Business Alliance, Regions Bank, McWane, Inc., and Alabama Power in hopes of improving communication, coordination, and cooperation.

Those conversations led to the commissioning of research on local economic and workforce conditions, culminating in [Building \(it\) Together](#), a comprehensive report that the Community Foundation helped fund. The report documented assets and challenges in Birmingham's workforce and economy and identified approaches that might be employed to address weaknesses. The report found that only a quarter of the local workforce had the education and training to be considered highly skilled. To compete, the report concluded, Birmingham needed to better align education offerings with opportunities in high-growth sectors of the economy.

The findings in the report have catalyzed the establishment, growth, and development of multiple initiatives aimed at connecting individuals, particularly from underserved communities, with valuable education and training relevant to in-demand careers.

The business community has been less engaged in encouraging governmental collaboration. That may change with new leadership at the Birmingham Business Alliance.

This spring, the BBA hired Steve Ammons as its new CEO. Ammons has a business background but has served in government for the past several years, most recently as Jefferson County Commissioner.

Ammons has made regional cooperation a central theme in his short time in office. As a county commissioner, Ammons was a leader in improving E911 and emergency services coordination and cooperation, promoting regional support for parks, and supporting the development of the JeffCo Councilors Coalition.

Reengaging business leadership could provide a new jolt of momentum for cooperative innovations. It could provide the business case for solutions that are difficult politically.

Conclusion

Cooperation has always been challenging in Greater Birmingham. Birmingham evolved out of a collection of often competitive company towns. Even after a major consolidation in the early 20th century, the region continued to sprout independent cities and suburbs.

Throughout the 20th century, multiple efforts to consolidate cities failed even though other Southern cities succeeded. A habit of defensiveness and suspicion has prevailed. Any attempt at cooperation encounters structural barriers that slow progress toward joint solutions. Because we are not united under a common political body, we are not forced to come to a common approach through the democratic process. Instead, joint effort can only be made through voluntary cooperation.

The Community Foundation's efforts to engage and build trust in Greater Birmingham have not led to a revolution, but trust and communication have improved through its persistent effort. A series of successes has demonstrated the rewards of working together.

At the same time, sustaining progress will take effort. Leaders around the area are willing to embrace joint solutions but need help identifying opportunities and solutions that provide documentable benefits for their citizens. The Community Foundation has pursued this strategy in several sectors, and that work is beginning to pay off.