



## HIGHWAY 84 EAST CORRIDOR STUDY

**Background:** Highway 84 East is a key transportation corridor impacting all segments of Dothan. The Corridor bisects the City, serving to accommodate east-west travel across the metropolitan area. The historic Downtown Commercial District, the campus of Southeast Alabama Medical Center (SAMC) and the Campus of the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine (ACOM) are anchor institutions and established activity centers that will serve as key drivers in the development of a comprehensive corridor plan.

**Project Objective:** The primary project objective is to provide the City of Dothan with a corridor development plan that reflects the needs and wants of local citizens and businesses toward the realization of a livable, vibrant and financially sustainable urban corridor. The project scope proposes to develop physical, economic, and social cohesion among and between the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine, Southeast Alabama Medical Center, and Downtown Dothan. The project will advance the City of Dothan's preparedness and capabilities for implementation of leading edge development principles, policies, and practices. The desired outcome of the project is realization of a renaissance in the built environment and place-making interventions that result in attracting and sustaining new populations to Dothan's re-emerging city core.

**Prime for Development:** The proposed project boundaries begin downtown, at the intersection of Highway 84 East and Oats Street moving easterly to Cowarts Road, then northeasterly along Cowarts Road and terminating at Drew Road, which is the easterly extent of the ACOM campus (see attached Proposed Corridor Map). Significant opportunities and challenges exist for the City of Dothan within the project boundary. There are multiple opportunities for both development of open land as well as redevelopment of existing properties which are not serving a best and highest purpose. The Corridor Plan will define a high potential urban design and development strategy with outcomes that can change the character and direction of Dothan's future development.

**Traditional and Mixed-Use Neighborhood Development:** The ACOM campus is largely surrounded by undeveloped land including large tracts of woodlands and farmlands. Development interest will likely increase as the ACOM and SAMC campuses continue to grow and develop. The City of Dothan has a prime opportunity to control both the quality and character of development in that area through the inclusion of an overlay district with specific regulations for neighborhood development. This provides an opportunity for incorporation of Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) policies in certain areas and Mixed-Use Development policies in other areas. The combined impact of such a plan has the potential for creating a highly desirable community within the City. A lucrative residential target market exists in those who work at the ACOM and SAMC campuses, as well as those who work in the Historic Downtown Commercial and Government District.

**Knitting Together Downtown Dothan and Medical Centers:** A key objective for the plan is the obvious need to better connect Downtown Dothan with the campuses of Southeast Alabama Medical Center (SAMC) and ACOM. Good urban design and leading edge transportation infrastructure accommodating pedestrian and bicycle modes of movement are key elements in promoting that objective. Like it or not, increasingly larger segments of citizen populations are rejecting the suburbia lifestyle and the predominance of the automobile as the only method of transportation. Even here in Dothan, brave people are increasingly asserting their right to the roadway for bicycle movement. This mode of transportation is growing in preference among the “Generation X” segment who are the future of this City.

This highlights a great opportunity in the City’s planning strategy; that of creating a connected community that will feed needed development, activity, and city center residential housing opportunities for those who desire a city center lifestyle. Well planned and designed development extending from Dothan’s downtown toward the medical college, and vice versa, will set the stage for adding downtown residential options that appeal to young professionals and empty nesters. Demand for downtown lifestyles is growing. “The younger generation, as well as some older generation, the empty nesters, are moving back into the city because they want more of that city community lifestyle.”, (David Fleming, REV Birmingham, Business Alabama, June, 2015). In 2003, Birmingham had approximately 1,200 downtown residents (source: Operation New Birmingham, 2003). Careful planning and development strategies have created the opportunity for a current downtown population estimated at over 9,500 with approximately 1,000 additional units under development (A Return to Downtown Birmingham, NY Times, Aug. 6, 2015). While Birmingham and Dothan represent different scales, the trends and desires of various population segments are believed to be relatively constant. Dothan has significant opportunity for City Center and mixed use housing development with appeal to medical professionals and others as a component of the Highway 84 East Corridor Plan.

**A Noteworthy Example-** demonstrating citizen desire and support for a greater urban experience in the City of Dothan was captured by the Dothan Eagle on July 25, 2017 titled: *Bird and Bean serves a little history with your coffee* “Not even open a full two weeks, the new coffee house in downtown Dothan has seen a surprising response from local coffee lovers. So much so, they keep running out of milk. And, there’s already a Friday coffee group dubbing themselves the “Bird & Bean Boys.” I’m shocked that we’ve done this well,” Keyton said. “I expected it would go over, but I expected it would take a while. “Customers have

*kept the coffee shop hopping since it opened, Keyton said. Even on social media, the response has surpassed anything they experienced with Naomi & Olive. It has taken Keyton two years to amass 1,300 followers for Naomi & Olive on Instagram. Bird & Bean reached 1,000 followers in just three days.” (Dothan Eagle, 7-25-17)*

This article demonstrates the local population’s hunger for urban lifestyle amenities as suburbanites are patronizing the new business which is providing the coffee house experience commonly found in vibrant downtown communities across the nation. Dothan should take this example seriously and pursue actions to capitalize on its implications regarding the demand for a more fully developed and populated downtown environment. It is also noteworthy that medical sector populations desire and somewhat generate urban lifestyle communities. This suggests a formula for the future success of downtown revitalization and development in Dothan.

**The New Economic Development and Corridor Planning:** Many companies from Fortune 500 titans to lean startups to independent manufacturers are moving to places that offer great quality of life for their employees. As Smart Growth America detailed in its 2015 report *Core Values: Why American Companies Are Moving Downtown*, these companies want vibrant neighborhoods with affordable housing options, restaurants, nightlife, and other amenities in walking distance, and a range of transportation options for their employees, among other things. This trend is already playing out in small cities and towns like Greenville, SC. (source: *Amazing Place*, SmartGrowthAmerica.org, June, 2016).

Cities much smaller than Dothan are capitalizing on the demand for downtown housing. For example, the City of Thomasville, Georgia, population, 18,612 (2015) developed a premier downtown housing option known as the Mitchell House. In 2009, the former 4 story hotel was converted into a mix of 30 two bedroom condominiums on floors 2-4, with retail on the ground floor. Presently there are only four units on the market for resale, at prices ranging from \$211,000 to \$334,000. This project has contributed to the vibrancy and continued success of Thomasville’s downtown retail environment which today supports approximately 125 “main street” businesses.

Through the Highway 84 East corridor Plan, Dothan has a tremendous opportunity to develop and apply a customized version of the above referenced new economic development strategy. The current status of the general project area is a place that is unappealing and unattractive and largely void of residential housing options. Careful development of vision, plan, design, and development policies can transform that condition. Through the incorporation of smart growth strategies, zoning, complete streets, green streets, and other leading edge development practices, Dothan can create a corridor of great places where people and companies will want to locate and live.

**National Recognition for Dothan’s Highway 84 East Planning Project:** In an effort to offset the amount of City investment required to fund the planning project, the City sought and was awarded a highly competitive grant through *Transportation 4 America*. In a national press release on 7-20-17, Transportation for America applauded Dothan’s forward vision for the Hwy 84 East Corridor and announced the selection of Dothan’s proposal along with proposals from Los Angeles and Indianapolis. Of 130 applications received for the grant, Dothan’s ranked as the #1

application in the competition. In addition to the \$50,000.00 funding which will be applied to the proposed project, Dothan will gain benefits provided through pro-bono technical assistance from an elite group of US cities that form the “*Cultural Consortium*”. The City of Dothan will join that group following completion of the Hwy 84 East Planning Project. It is also highly significant to note that funding for this grant was made available to Transportation 4 America by the Kresge Foundation. Direct exposure for the City of Dothan to the Kresge foundation provides tremendous opportunity for potential future funding’s from Kresge and other major national philanthropical foundations who typically invest *only* in communities and causes with which they are familiar. Those who support the plan believe Dothan has an opportunity to capitalize on a new form of economic development through the intervention of leading edge concepts for growth, development, revitalization, and with transportation infrastructure alterations that have the collective power to make Dothan a more desirable and “livable” place.

**Consultant Selection:** Design Workshop was selected to address the Hwy 84 East Corridor Project by a panel of evaluators that included City Leaders, City Department Directors, and key stakeholders. Evaluation criteria included: proven expertise in urban planning and design, transportation planning including complete streets, green streets, and bicycle-pedestrian access, market analysis, development of overlay districts, neighborhood plans, architectural standards, and strategic financial strategies for implementation. Each firm interviewed for the project holds national and international prominence for design expertise and impact of their work toward building better cities and communities. Design Workshop emerged from the interviews as the team of experts with the best approach and understanding for addressing Dothan’s project. On April 18, 2017, the President and CEO of Design Workshop, Kurt Culbertson, returned to Dothan for a presentation and discussion of the proposed Hwy 84 East project with City Commissioners and others during a special work session.

**Downtown Master Plan Update:** The Highway 84 East Corridor Plan, as scoped, will address a number of downtown master planning issues providing a valuable base of visions, ideas, concepts, analysis of existing conditions, and market feasibility that will greatly advance the development of a new and relevant downtown plan. This is particularly timely in light of major pending developments including the Howell School project, the Porter Hardware Museum and Visitors Center project, and renewed hope for revitalization and redevelopment of the former Coca-Cola site. The collective impact of simultaneous redevelopment at those three sites could serve as the long awaited catalyst and stimulus for aggressive new development and population growth within the downtown district.

**Medical Hub City:** The Hwy 84 East Corridor Plan grew from an initial concept to develop a strong connection between ACOM and SAMC utilizing the principles of bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure and the creation of an overlay district. By connecting the medical campuses to the nearby downtown, a progressive identity for the City of Dothan emerges. Most people form impressions of a city based upon the condition of its downtown and the landmarks that have survived there over time. Although improved, years of neglect for downtown Dothan resulted in a less than desirable condition. Conversely, and within walking distance, Dothan has a world class medical campus and a growing medical college campus. By connecting Dothan’s medical community to

the downtown, the City makes a strong statement of progressive vision for the subject corridor as the new identity and take-away impression for Dothan.

No longer can the City afford to allow its place-based assets to float as islands or vignettes in a display. The City must capitalize upon the opportunity offered by the Hwy 84 East project scope and connect the dots along a four-mile segment of the corridor revealing a new identity for Dothan as a progressive medical hub city.

**Stormwater Management:** Stormwater problems are the result of adding hardscape to support welcomed growth and development without incorporating the proper planning and management techniques to handle the runoff. Design Workshop will bring leading edge recommendations and techniques to the table that incorporate cost efficient, environmentally sound, and proven methods for managing stormwater. The scope includes a cost benefit analysis for incorporating “GreenStormwater” techniques over the typical hard engineered pipe and concrete systems that are not capable of handling increased flows due to additional development over time. Implementation of such systems brings praise from both ADEM and EPA Region 4, who also have financial assistance opportunities to aid in implementation.