

BUSINESS ADVOCATE

The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama and Regions Bank partnered to create a unified space for Tuscaloosa's job creators, developers, and seekers.

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A SHARED VISION



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TUSCALOOSA PROJECT IS CREATING A MODEL FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

For the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, the old adage that “a rising tide lifts all boats” is more than a locally-themed moniker – it’s a holistic vision.

That motto has been successfully put into practice in Tuscaloosa, as evidenced by one transformational recent project that could serve as a blueprint for local chambers across the nation.

It all started with a 2018 benchmarking trip to Lexington, KY, by Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama team members. This kind of trip had paid off for the Chamber before in tangible ways, with Chamber members gleaned best practices and applying lessons from other communities to Tuscaloosa.

However, the fateful visit to Lexington was special. Chamber members returned to West Alabama with more than ideas and tips; they had a dream.

Jim Page, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, explained where the spark came from: Commerce Lexington, which was formed with the merger of the Greater Lexington Chamber of Commerce, Lexington United, and the Lexington Partnership for Workforce Development.

With the local business, economic development, and workforce development champions all housed under one roof, Commerce Lexington seeks to provide an unparalleled level of continuity and collaboration in the area’s job creation and



community growth efforts. Yet, the concept does not stop there. Additional community partners are also housed onsite at Commerce Lexington, including representation from the University of Kentucky and the City of Lexington.

goal at a breakfast of Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama investors.

One glaring hurdle was staring the Chamber in the face, however: their existing space in downtown Tuscaloosa was already full of Chamber staff alone. Fitting the ideal community partners under one roof would take

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A FORWARD-THINKING VISION...”***

The result? A one-stop shop for prospective economic development recruits, existing industry, and jobseekers alike.

Page immediately thought that a similar model focused on workforce and community development could work in Tuscaloosa. He then brought that very concept back with him and outlined it as a future

a lot of space, which is at quite a premium in the booming college town.

Fortunately, fate seemed to be at play.

Elizabeth Winter, Tuscaloosa market executive for Regions Bank, was serving as treasurer on the Chamber’s board of directors at the time. Immediately after the breakfast in which Page presented the idea, Winter pulled him aside with a potential solution.

Regions was in the process of transitioning



into a new, state-of-the-art downtown banking facility; the move would put their longtime anchor location on 9th Street in Tuscaloosa up for sale.

The 42,000-square-foot facility would be perfect for the Chamber's proposed West Alabama Center for Workforce and Community Development, Page thought.

And Regions ultimately agreed.

Despite higher bidders and a bid under the market value, the Chamber's proposal was selected by Regions because of the Birmingham-based company's commitment to the Tuscaloosa community and their support of the shared vision represented in the West Alabama Center for Workforce and Community Development.

"This is about the power of community partnerships; when we work together for the common good, we can help Tuscaloosa County and West Alabama reach new heights in terms of business development and job creation," Winter said.

After being slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Chamber completed the purchase, Phase I of its renovation project, and in May 2021 held a grand-opening of the West Alabama Center for Workforce and Community Development at 2222 9th St.

"Regions saw the value in our goal of creating a center for workforce development, job creation, and opportunities

for collaboration among like-minded organizations, and helped make this game-changing facility possible," Page said. "This would not have happened without Regions Bank and them having a forward-thinking vision and being pro-actively engaged in the community."

Page also credits Chamber leaders and members with their staunch support of the project that made a vision a reality.

Now, the Chamber is joined in the facility by West Alabama Works and Camgian Microsystems, as well as several community and workforce development-related nonprofit partners: Habitat for Humanity of Tuscaloosa, Junior Achievement of Tuscaloosa County, the Junior League of Tuscaloosa, the Dannon Project, and United Cerebral Palsy of West Alabama.

While the West Alabama Center for Workforce and Community Development was born out of an idea inspired by Commerce Lexington, the Tuscaloosa version in both concept and execution is one-of-a-kind nationwide for its emphasis on workforce synergies.

Page concluded that he has already fielded several calls from parties across the country interested in the project and how other American communities could form their own adaptations. **BA**

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The Center for Workforce and Community Development had its grand opening in May 2021. With several workforce and community development related entities under one roof, the Center fosters collaboration that benefits all of West Alabama.

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Left: The conference room at the West Alabama Center for Workforce and Community Development honors Regions Bank for making the facility possible.

Right: Located in the heart of Tuscaloosa, the Center is easily accessible to local businesses and residents.



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