

By Lori M. Quiller, Director of Public Relations

# projects THAT WORK



The Association's Excellence in County Government Awards recognize programs that Alabama's county commissions have implemented that go "above-and-beyond" required programs in every day use.

These specialized programs must be implemented by the county commission itself, not an agency or board of the commission.

The key to these programs is *innovation*.

From economic development programs designed to enhance rural living, to unique ways of passing tax referendums for education, to acquiring abandoned state parks and converting them into beautiful county-owned family hot spots, to revitalizing coastal wetlands ravished over time by hurricane damage...the ideas for programs that eventually become Excellence in County Government Award winners are limited only by the imagination of those committed to the betterment of the lives of their county residents.

**Calhoun and  
Cleburne Counties  
received ACCA's  
2009 Excellence  
in County  
Government  
Awards for  
outstanding  
programs they  
are now using.  
Could these  
programs work  
for your county?**

To be fair, the Association split the award in 2000 to reflect Alabama's population boom, and the urban and rural categories were born. The urban category was created for counties with populations of more than 50,000, and the rural category was created for counties with populations under 50,000.

This year, Calhoun County received the award for the urban category and Cleburne County received the award for the rural category. Each county has received multiple awards for their progressive county commission-run programs.

## **HOW CALHOUN COUNTY IS SAVING ENERGY AND PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT**

The officials with the Calhoun County Commission are doing much, much more than just changing light bulbs and recycling office paper in an attempt at saving money on their supplies and their power bills

# Feature Story

each month. And, the Calhoun County Commission has two ENERGY STARS®, two of only 10 buildings in Alabama and of only 41 courthouses in the U.S., to show for the hard work, dedication and commitment to their cause of protecting the environment and ultimately saving their taxpayers money.

Several years ago, the commissioners wanted to make a change, a serious change in the way their business was conducted. The commission itself already ran like a well-oiled machine, but there was something else that needed to be added to the mix...or actually, taken away from it.

Like most of Alabama's counties, Calhoun is growing very quickly. Even with the systematic shutdown of Ft. McClellan, the county and its largest populated areas have continued to grow over the years. But, the county has remained a corner of the state teeming with small-town charm everywhere one looks.

The county commission felt a deep responsibility to find a way to preserve their small-town feel, which quickly grew into an overwhelming responsibility to educate themselves on the environmental issues not only facing their county, but facing other counties across the country.

Now, Calhoun County is one of the leading counties in the country on environmental issues, experimenting with numerous tactics for saving energy in their buildings, as well as a growing

biodiesel production facility in one of their highway department buildings.

**Commissioner Robert Downing**, who is often referred to quite respectfully by his commission colleagues as the "resident tree hugger," initially spearheaded a



*Calhoun County has two of Alabama's 10 ENERGY STAR® buildings.*

campaign many years ago when he served on the National Association of Counties' Environment, Energy and Land Use Steering Committee.

"Through the NACo Environment, Energy and Land Use Steering Committee, we got the Environmental Protection Agency to write a program for courthouses," Downing explained. "Calhoun started that, and we are extremely proud to continue to be a leader here. There are somewhere around 500 million sq. ft. of county buildings across the nation that we knew we could

help make energy efficient through the ENERGY STAR® rating system."

Being ENERGY STAR®-certified means much more than having a brass plaque displayed prominently on your award-winning building. The program is a rigorous one in which the facility must perform in the top 25 percent of the courthouses and office buildings in the country.

On a scale of 1 to 100, a building that earns a rating of 75 or higher through the national energy rating system is eligible to apply for the ENERGY STAR® label.

Even though the process for becoming certified is a rigorous one, Downing said that there was no dissention among his fellow commissioners when he approached them about the program. In fact, the decision to move forward was not only unanimous, but the outpouring of support from the entire county family has been enormous.

"Our commission has always been very forward-thinking with everything we've brought to them in this respect," Downing said. "People assume the grant process is too hard, and they don't want to go through with it. But, once you learn how to do it, the method of it, the hard part is over. The benefits are just too great. We estimated our energy savings with this project to be at 40 percent, so what was there for us to lose?"

In fact, those savings have been multiplying since the county won

*Continued on page 18...*

# Feature Story

*“Projects that Work,” continued from page 17...*

the grant in 2005 in what Downing calls a “reinvestment plan.”

“We estimated about \$50,000 in energy savings a year out of our two courthouse buildings that we can put toward more energy-saving projects,” Downing said. “We are in a revolution. There are products and specialists out there for officials or residents to take advantage of, things you may not think about now. It is everyone’s responsibility to save taxpayers’ money, and this is a good way to do it. As county officials we have an obligation to be good stewards of taxpayers’ dollars and good stewards of our environment.”

And, what’s more impressive than the commitment by the county to reaching these goals? The fact that there were no public funds used in the process.

“All of this was done through a block grant with the Department of Energy,” explained **Gloria Floyd**, commission paralegal and grant manager. “We held weekly meetings with key managers to get everything we needed to put the grant together, and it all became very technical. The planning was the most difficult part, but it was all worth the effort. Everyone was on track, and we all knew what we were doing. With this type of grant, you can’t afford to allow anything to fall through the cracks. This was a lot of money, and we needed that structure to know what was coming next. After we got the award letter, there was a system to draw down the money, another system for reporting, and so on.”

Because of the federal money involved and the number of jobs created by the use of that money, transparency was incredibly important, said **Jeff Clendenning**, project engineer and bridge inspector.

“We had to have our projects organized when we submitted the grant,” Clendenning said. “Our

projects are set up so that we can now pick-and-choose from any of them. We’ll turn the savings over and use that money for other projects.”

Clendenning not only serves on the ENERGY STAR® courthouse project as a consultant, but as part of the highway department, he has a key role in an ongoing effort in Calhoun County’s production of clean fuel under the supervision of **County Engineer Brian Rosenbalm, CEA**.

In continuing their success with the ENERGY STAR® program at the courthouse facilities, when it came time to build a new highway department complex, there was no question that energy efficiency would be at the forefront of the design.

However, posing a unique safety situation constantly on the minds of the highway department, as well as the county commissioners, was the ongoing activity at the Anniston Army Depot to reduce the chemical weapons being stored in the county.

With safety, environmental protection and conservation in mind, the commission and highway personnel approached the U.S. Green Building Council and its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

The LEED program is a certification system measuring different aspects of building performance, such as energy savings, water efficiency, carbon dioxide emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, stewardship of resources, and sensitivity to environmental impact.

Today, Calhoun County’s Highway Complex is one of Alabama’s 95 LEED-certified buildings.

For the county’s bottom line, a LEED-certified building means that the building is operating costs are lower and the value of the building has increased. Less waste is sent to the county’s landfill

“ **We are in a revolution. As county officials, we have an obligation to be good stewards of taxpayers’ dollars and good stewards of our environment.** ”

# Feature Story

and less water is being used by the employees. The office environment is safer and healthier for the employees due to the reduced carbon footprint of the structure by greenhouse gas emissions. And, it proves the building's owner has a commitment to the preservation of not only being environmentally responsible, but also in the case of government...fiscally responsible with taxpayer's dollars.

With the decision to rebuild its highway complex to be LEED certified, Calhoun County would again be setting a major standard in environmental protection for other Alabama counties to look to for ideas for their own use.

The site of the new complex is located on a portion of the old Ft. McClellan Military Reservation, which had been previously undeveloped yet owned by the Calhoun County Commission. Reclaiming this parcel of land was important to the engineers.

"This is the culmination of a decade of planning and preparation by former Calhoun County Engineer Charles Markert," Rosenbalm said.

The highway department complex houses four buildings, built with recycled materials, an eye toward energy conservation with such gadgets as

light sensors that turn on lights as employees enter the room and turn them off five minutes upon leaving. The complex also features large open areas for natural vegetation to grow.

One of these buildings houses a unique project that the county engineering staff implemented as a joint effort with the Anniston Water Works Board.

The county's biodiesel program began as a way to cut fuels costs with the county's vehicles that used traditional diesel fuel. As the cost of diesel fuel continued to rise, the engineering staff began to wonder if alternative fuel would work for them, as well as fit into their LEED program of environmental stewardship.

Not only is it working for the county highway department, but the Anniston Water Works Board has come in as a partner to help keep the used vegetable oil from local restaurants in the county vehicles instead of the local water system.

"We are pleased to have the assistance of Anniston Water Works. Their involvement has accelerated our used cooking oil collection, and we look forward to their continued involvement as we strive to see more of our county vehicles operate on biodiesel," Clendenning said.



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Believe it or not, the entire process for converting used vegetable oil into biodiesel fuel only takes about eight hours. And, that's not eight hours of manned work time, either. The process does not require an employee to constantly monitor dials and levels of the machine, only to periodically check the progress and add specific chemicals at necessary times.

When used, there's no choking cloud of black smoke. Instead, you may find yourself craving a hamburger to go with the wafting scent of French fries in the air.

*Continued on page 20...*



# Feature Story

“Projects that Work,” continued from page 19...

“Actually, several employees have noted the lack of fumes especially operating inside an enclosed area, such as our shop,” Clendenning stated.

The Calhoun County Highway Department has already produced more than 800 gallons of the biodiesel, but Rosenbalm is waiting for the 1,000 gallon milestone before he celebrates.

“For every 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel we produce, we reduce Calhoun County’s carbon footprint by nearly 10,000 kg. That’s the equivalent of traveling in an average car for 160 miles. We consider this as a good starting point,” Rosenbalm said.

To learn more about the 2010 ENERGY STAR® program and how your county could possibly qualify for grant funding, log on to [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov).

## PARTNERING FOR PREPAREDNESS: DESIGNING EFFECTIVE MULTI-COUNTY PROJECT TEAMS

Living in Alabama, the screeching sound of a severe weather alert siren is something never to get used to.

The high-pitched wail that pierces the dark, cloudy skies often heralds driving rain, hail, and then often unimaginable horror. If you’re lucky, the electronic scream is signaling a watch and not a warning. But, that’s not always the case.

In the springtime, as outdoor weather sirens are triggered more often than any other time of the year, the wailing tends to become more like white noise blending into the background, more of a nuisance to pets than a warning of dangerous weather around the bend.

And, then there are those cases in which residents don’t live within earshot of these stand-alone



*Calhoun County Engineer Brian Rosenbalm, CEA, and Project Engineer Jeff Clendenning demonstrate the equipment necessary for turning used vegetable oil into biodiesel fuel.*

outdoor weather sirens. When emergent weather is bearing down on an area in a county, and the county’s weather alert system is triggered, what happens when the residents in the more rural sectors of the county cannot hear the sirens?

That was the challenge the Cleburne County Commission decided to undertake beginning in the summer of 2008 with its Emergency Alert Radio Project.

The goal? To arm every home, dorm room, business and other establishment with a personal emergency alert radio in Calhoun, Clay, Cleburne, Etowah, St. Clair and Talladega Counties, and to do it at zero cost to the residents and business owners.

The project came about as the federal government was beginning to phase out special warning equipment used by homeowners and businesses as safety steps in the event of a chemical event at the Anniston Army Depot.

“In about 1998 or so, the area received tone-alert radios that went into the immediate response zone, which was about 8 miles of where the weapons were stored,” explained **Cleburne County Executive Officer and EMA Director Steve Swafford**. “If there was any kind of event where there was the release of a chemical vapor cloud, the alert box would go off. Eight miles may not sound like a large area for this type of event, but these boxes were given to people in that area to give them time to react quickly and evacuate. The outlying areas didn’t have these boxes unless they were considered specialized units that would have to be evacuated, such as schools, hospitals and so on, or special populations that needed additional attention, such as the elderly. It came to a point where the equipment had outlasted its usable lifespan and the feds were going to have to replace the equipment.”

*Continued on page 22...*

# Feature Story

*“Projects that Work,” continued from page 20...*

As the most dangerous chemicals at the depot began to be eliminated, the government began to shrink the radius of the immediate warning area, and the special warning equipment would no longer be needed in the outlying areas. This elimination of equipment would leave an obvious hole in personal warning systems – a discrepancy that the Cleburne County Commission decided to fix.

“We didn’t do this as a promotion for ourselves, our county, or the other counties,” Swafford said.

“There was no question of the benefits to this project. We had an opportunity to significantly reduce the risk to our population and do a great service to the public. Now that most of all the nerve agents and more dangerous agents at the depot are gone, the serious risk element has dropped dramatically. But, there is still an element of risk. So, we came up with these commercial emergency alert radios from Midland® and expanded our market base tremendously with the five surrounding counties at much less cost than the feds were facing.”

The first hurdle Swafford and his team faced was funding. To be able to put more than 100,000 emergency alert radios in six counties could have proved to be a very costly venture until the Federal Emergency Management Agency offered a solution.

“We put an extensive program together, and we approached FEMA with it,” Swafford said. “The chemical component in our area made the situation unique, and we probably couldn’t have been able to reach as many people if it hadn’t have been for that component. It made every bit of this possible for us.

“One of our arguments to FEMA officials was that the world has changed dramatically since the 1990s. We’ve had Oklahoma City, 9-11, hurricanes, tornadoes...and there have been millions of federal dollars that have gone into protection on the

national level, but not on the individual level. We haven’t reached out to our individual populations to help them be able to protect themselves. We haven’t had to because they had the equipment here in place that was subsidized by the federal government. But, these boxes are going to be decommissioned in a few years because the money is going away. These new alert radios operate differently, and they don’t need to be subsidized,” Swafford said.

At first, Swafford admitted that FEMA was skeptical and concerned that even though the team wanted to achieve the goal of an alert radio for every person, every business, in six counties, the organization was even more concerned as to how it would be possible to accomplish such a lofty goal. So, it was determined that FEMA would only fund 80 percent of the total request.

“There were some bumps and bruises along the way,” Swafford laughed. “But, we learned from our mistakes and kept going.”

Meticulous organization would be key. The Cleburne County Commission asked Swafford to serve as project manager, and he quickly mobilized three teams to oversee different stages of the program: public information and education, technical specifications and project oversight.

The public information and education committee was responsible for informing, promoting and encouraging participation in the program by the citizens in the six counties. Because the program required citizens to contact the committee to receive an alert radio, a massive public information and education campaign was necessary. These members included: **Talladega County EMA Public Information Officer Steve Dover, Alabama National Guard Member James Grogan, Calhoun County EMA Public Information Officer Shay Cook and Gadsden-Etowah County EMA Public Information Officer Natalie Barton.**



# Feature Story



*Cleburne County CEO and EMA Director Steve Swafford and County Commission Probate Judge Ryan Robertson said they are still in the process of distributing some of the Midland® alert radios.*

The technical specifications committee was responsible for finding the perfect emergency alert radio that was cost-effective and user-friendly. With so many types of alert radios on the market, narrowing down the field proved

us if a resident could or could not afford one of these alert radios. Everyone got one – regardless of financial situation or location in regards to the depot...*everyone.*”

In fact, FEMA’s concerns were eased when the flood of requests for the emergency alert radios began to pour in to the county offices from area citizens, so much so that the team went back to FEMA to show the progress of the rollout and received additional funding for 100 percent of the alert radios.

With the plan now 100 percent funded, the team dug in even harder to cover more ground.

“For Alabama, we feel our project is a shining example of multi-county cooperation leading to success by drawing on the skills of a large group of people to achieve a common goal,” Swafford said. “For FEMA, they are using this program as a successful case study. We feel pretty good about that.”

complicated. These members included: **Talladega County EMA Member Kevin Jenkins, Calhoun County EMA Member Candice Cofer, AEMA Officer Job Hargrove and Alabama National Guard Member Bert Collison.**

Finally, the project oversight committee served in an advisory capacity to make sure that the project stayed on track and on budget. This committee consisted of: **Calhoun County EMA Director Dan Long, Talladega County EMA Director Nelson Bates, AEMA Preparedness Division Chief Charles Williams and Clay County EMA Director Theresa Daugherty.**

“FEMA’s big question to us wasn’t how *badly* did we want to do this, but how *could* we do this?” Swafford admitted. “They were very skeptical of how were going to put one of these units into every household, school, business, dorm room, nursing home, apartment, every structure in six counties. It didn’t matter to



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