

# HERITAGE

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“We’ll get an inventory of potential sites. In January, we’ll be having a charette with Cheryl and her students at Riverdale Mill. It’s important for us to receive feedback from the community on what you would like the mill to be.”

One of the most important benefits of a Brownfields study, Grogan said, is the information it can provide for public health. If there are health risks posed by former industrial sites, the Brownfields program can determine that and can remove that risk with a cleanup effort.

In her presentation, Cheryl Morgan got off on the right foot by paying the city a nice compliment. “Valley is a poster child for the kind of work I do,” she said. “Whenever people ask me where they can find people who believe ‘We can do it!’ I tell them Valley.”

That comment brought a round of applause.

She said that two principal factors were always involved in a community’s success story: (1) a sense of strong pride in the community and (2) that belief of “We can do it!”

She pointed to a quote

from Bear Bryant – “It’s not the will to win but the will to prepare to win that matters.”

“Valley understands that, and you are planning to succeed,” she said. “When I go to various places around the state I like to talk about encouraging people to plan, to be prepared and to capture opportunities when they come.”

With Kia coming to West Point, great opportunities abound for Valley and other local communities.

Morgan said her role of being a teacher and planner often put her in a role of being a cheerleader for the state of Alabama and that she was fine with that. She said there was a negative mindset with the state being on the bottom of everything. “There are so many good things about Alabama. It’s a beautiful state,” she said. “There are lots of possibilities with small towns.”

She said that 43 such communities are now with the Alabama Small Town Design Initiative. “Valley is the first town we worked with with the methodology we now use,” she said.

The first step in this, said Morgan, is to ask people

what they like about their town. These responses are usually such things as scenic beauty, a river, lovely old homes and churches, nearby farms, a courthouse, a city hall or a school and so on. “We look at the positive principle,” Morgan said. “If you look for what doesn’t work you’ll find it. It’s better to look for what does work.”

In her power point presentation, Morgan displayed a photo of a sign which read, “Brilliant, Home of Larry Pollard, Alabama’s 2001 Checkers Champion.”

“Everybody has something to celebrate,” she said. “You have so much in Valley. You have your mill villages, the state’s first kindergarten system, mill buildings, lots of churches and schools. It’s a special place, and everything’s connected.”

She then displayed a photo of a McDonald’s and a Wal-Mart SuperCenter.

“Where are you?” she asked. “If you were airlifted in and were asked where you were would you know? You could be at any number of cities in Alabama or anywhere in the U.S. for that matter.”

“Does Wal-Mart of McDonald’s have a sense of place?” Growth and development is inevitable. It’s not necessarily bad, but it needs to be managed.”

She showed another picture of the Salem Church near Fredericksburg, Va. It’s a Civil War landmark for its role in the May 3, 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville. When viewed up close there’s no question the historic building has been well taken care of by the National Park Service. But when viewed from a distance, there’s no question that it has lost its sense of place due to suburban sprawl.

The same goes for historic homes in Montgomery’s Old Town section and in Lost Mountain, Ga., where Morgan grew up.

In Morgan’s youth, Lost Mountain was home to much natural beauty and a general store where everywhere went for sweet potatoes and gossip. The store has been kept as a landmark, but it’s not the same. The growth of metro Atlanta has turned the surroundings into strip developments and a commercial jungle.

Morgan makes the case

that growth doesn’t have to be this way.

She presented some photos of the right way to do it. In making the case that a residential development doesn’t have to be like Lost Meadows, a suburban Birmingham development that even advertises what was done there, she showed an aerial view of a similar area for new housing. The new homes were built in harmony with the setting. With few trees removed, it looks pretty much the same from the air.

“We’re chewing up our greenfields,” she said. “When you do that, it’s difficult to get it back. Developments can be made without sacrificing countryside, trees and meadows.”

Morgan said that it has been recently proven that when it comes to real estate, “Money does grow on trees. People want houses with tree canopies nearby.”

In illustrating how one community had done a good job in promoting itself at its gateway, Morgan showed a close up photo of a large sign proclaiming “Sylacauga.” Many people see it as they drive along US 280.

When looked at from a distance, though, the view is cluttered with many other signs.

“A gateway is all about celebrating your town,” Morgan said. “Most people had rather stop for some good country cooking five minutes away in the downtown area, but we are a risk adverse culture and that’s why McDonald’s succeeds. You think that country cooking is 25 miles away, and you know that McDonald’s is close and predictable. You know that it’s open, what the food is like and that the restrooms will be clean.”

Morgan said she longed for the day when every car on the road had GPS navigation. Motorists would look to that for information about where to stop. There would then be no need for unsightly billboards.

The country cooking places are better for the local economy. Studies have shown that up to 80 percent of the revenue generated in such a locally-owned business stays in that town. In the case of a franchise such as McDonald’s the lion’s share leaves the community for a home office.