

Sylacauga breaks ground on East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub

By Chris Norwood, Daily Home Senior Staff Writer, cnorwood@dailyhome.com Jan 20, 2023

It's finally here.

Thursday morning, a host of local, county, state and federal dignitaries and folks from virtually every walk of life came out to the old Avondale Mills site in Sylacauga to close out one era and welcome in a new one.

The Talladega County Board of Education owns 30 acres of the old property and, with the help of state and federal government and a host of investors, it will soon be home to the East Alabama Rural Innovation and Training Hub (EARTH), a facility unlike any other in the southeastern United States.

Avondale Mills, which was the industrial heart of Sylacauga for most of the twentieth century, ceased operations in 2006, and a large portion of the property burned in 2011. Still more of the remaining structures had been stripped of bricks and heart-of-pine timbers, leaving the site resembling a war zone. The county school board bought most of the property in 2018, and an announcement featuring Gov. Kay Ivey was made regarding the EARTH project in 2021.

County Schools Superintendent Dr. Suzanne Lacey encouraged people to look around at what they saw Thursday, then come back in “three to five months and look again, see how much the cleanup has changed things.

“Then come back in another five years or so, see what it holds then. The county board saw an opportunity to merge education and workforce development,” she said.

Board members, Lacey said, “had a vision of what this property could be, and what it would mean to Talladega County and to central Alabama as a whole.”

Investor and Coosa Valley Medical Center executive director Glenn Sisk said that most of the people present Thursday could remember exactly where they were or what they were doing when they got the news that Avondale was about to close.

“That was 1,110 jobs gone, overnight,” he said. “We knew we were going to have to fight and claw our way back. And we knew we didn’t want to have to depend on just one large employer anymore, we wanted to try and find fifty to seventy 100-employee employers. In the years since, many talented people have worked to ensure that tragic events like Avondale closing don’t happen again. Retail sales are the highest they’ve ever been here, but we still have a labor crisis, not just here in Sylacauga but nationally.”

EARTH would not only provide job training for people throughout the region, he said, but would be “an incubator for business ideas in a rural setting. It will allow us to take better advantage of the water, timber and marble resources we have here now, as well as for industries that don’t exist yet. This place, that looks like a war zone now, will be where people from throughout the region will come to learn a trade or expand the skills they already have, as well as create more new jobs...And it will ensure that the entire state, the entire southeast, will see Sylacauga as a place to do business.”

He also singled out former Sylacauga City Schools Superintendent Joe Morton for helping the process along at every step.

Margaret Morton, executive director of the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement, pointed out that Avondale had been founded some 125 years ago by former Governor Braxton Bragg Comer, and “while Avondale doesn’t exist anymore, this site does.”

Thanks to the initial partners, the initial funding for the project came through from Gov. Kay Ivey’s Public School and College Authority would allow “us to celebrate a new beginning and a new future. We can clean up the site and and watch something new rise from the rubble.”

Congressman Mike Rogers helped secure federal funding to advance the project, and also spoke Thursday.

Rogers said he grew up in a textile community himself, “where everyone depended on the mill in one way or another, and we all had to fight for survival after they started closing. It happened all over the rural South. But that era is gone now, and we have to look to the future. And that’s not necessarily one big employer, but a lot of smaller employers in a diverse economy.”

“In 10 years,” Rogers added, I’m hoping to attend a dinner here where we will be honoring employees of businesses who came here because of this facility. But for your initiative, you grabbing the future by the coat, this would not be coming here.”