

Mayors gather at forum to discuss plans

By [Trevor Stokes](#)
Staff Writer

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Daniel Giles/TimesDaily

Muscle Shoals Mayor David Bradford and Florence Mayor Bobby Irons talk before the start of the mayors' forum.

Mayors of the four large Shoals cities gathered Monday at a forum to discuss their visions for the future and, in two cases, plans for the next four years of their administrations.

Florence Mayor Bobby Irons won his re-election nearly two weeks ago, while Muscle Shoals Mayor David Bradford was uncontested.

Sheffield Mayor Billy Don Anderson will face former mayor Ian Sanford while Tuscumbia Mayor Bill Shoemaker will face former police chief Wayne Burns in the election runoff Oct. 7.

Radio personality Jimmy Oliver moderated the forum, which was sponsored by The Shoals Young Professionals Association, the Shoals Chamber of Commerce and Listerhill Credit Union.

The mayors have had several recent successes in economic development and city infrastructure, but they will face significant

challenges with stalled tax revenue, increases in city operating costs and a generally weakened economy.

The mayors spoke about several current developments including streetscaping and a proposed golf course in Sheffield, widening of Avalon Avenue, streetscaping and a railroad turntable museum in Tuscumbia, transportation infrastructure and workforce development in Muscle Shoals and industrial park extensions and feasibility of a civic center in Florence.

Many of the projects in one city can have an impact in all the other cities.

Sheffield is undergoing a streetscape project of its downtown, funded through five grants that include the Alabama Department of Transportation and the Community Block Development Program.

Anderson presented the group with a color-coded conceptual map of the proposed golf course that will need to undergo a feasibility study.

Shoemaker said he was accused of resurfacing downtown Tuscumbia one week before the election.

He assured the audience the timing was based on the two contractors availability to coordinate the project.

Shoemaker also talked about the railroad turntable museum. There had been concerns that the location could have once been an American Indian site, but officials recently decided not to fully excavated the site based on historical photographs that show the location's use by the railroad industry.

In Muscle Shoals, Bradford said transportation infrastructure was crucial to the area, including completing the stalled Patton Island overpass connection and extending U.S. 43 into Tennessee to four lanes.

"We're going to have to fight to get those dollars," Bradford said.

He also said that unlike many jobs that are being outsourced, the area had landed jobs from places like Switzerland, Japan and Canada.

He and Irons said that since the area had a blue collar base, it could diversify into a white collar base and become more selective in its recruitment.

Bradford said he was interested in looking into 500 available acres at the Muscle Shoals Airport Industrial Park, the site of North American Lighting, that could receive Federal Aviation Administration grant funds.

He also spoke of the Gattman Park splash pad that recently received funding.

Though several national metrics indicate a shaky and slowing U.S. economy, Irons said, "We're in for the best year ever; we are in a better position locally than nationally."

He mentioned several wish-list projects including the opening of west Florence through College Street, a north bypass plus a feasibility study of a civic center.

"If Corinth, Miss., can have a civic center, Florence can have a civic center," he said.

Trevor Stokes can be reached at 740-5728 or trevor.stokes@TimesDaily.com.