

A Survey of Local Governments: How a Chief Resilience Officer Can Best Serve Alabama Communities

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Introduction

Community resilience work is happening in cities and states across the country as the intensity of storms, temperatures, and insurance rates are all increasing. This report explores what leaders in twenty-one Alabama municipalities, and one Alabama county are currently doing to make their communities more resilient, what they see as their most urgent needs, and their thoughts about ways the State of Alabama and the new Alabama Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) could best support them.

Background

Governor Kay Ivey and the Alabama legislature have taken some important steps to increase resilience to disasters both in communities and statewide. In 2023, the Governor signed Executive Order 736 creating the Alabama Resilience Council (ARC).ⁱ Composed of state agency and private sector leaders, the original council was co-chaired by the directors of the Alabama Department of Insurance and the Alabama Environmental Management Agency. The Council's initial responsibilities included providing a forum for building cooperation between state government and the private sector to address the resilience of Alabama communities and infrastructure.ⁱⁱ The Council delivered a set of recommendations to the Governor in 2024, including one to establish a Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) for Alabama to implement resilience efforts across the state.ⁱⁱⁱ Then, in January 2026, State Senator Steve Livingston and Representative Chip Brown, with the support of Governor Ivey, introduced legislation to, among other things, codify the requirement for a Chief Resilience Officer and a comprehensive, statewide resilience plan.^{iv} The bill (Senate Bill 137) passed in the Alabama Legislature and was signed into law by the Governor on April 17, 2026.^v

As the legislation was moving forward, the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) enlisted Activate-Build-Connect, Inc., to survey local governments across Alabama about their resilience priorities. The goal of the collaboration was to better understand Alabama communities' resilience needs and the types of action and engagement at the state level that could best support them. Activate-Build-Connect reached out to nearly 60 local governments to request their participation in the project, and 21 municipalities engaged in the effort in the spring of 2026. The participating local governments ranged widely in terms of population, geography, demographic makeup, economic resources, relative vulnerability to various types of disasters, and more. A full list and map of participating localities is included as an appendix to this report. Activate-Build-Connect and SELC would both like to extend their gratitude to the participating community leaders for the invaluable input they provided as part of this effort.

Although the study is not comprehensive—there are more than 450 cities and 67 counties in Alabama—it includes extensive feedback from a robust cross-section of Alabama's localities, with an emphasis on Alabama's coastal communities since they are facing some of the most significant flooding and disaster threats in the state. The research has become particularly timely now that Alabama will be creating a Chief Resilience Officer tasked with leading the development, maintenance, and implementation of statewide resilience efforts.

Key Themes

Every participating local official agreed that resilience was important to their localities. They were also clear that they would welcome assistance with improving the resilience of their communities to disasters, and that a state-level resilience lead would benefit them and their constituents. Their desire for support largely revolved around three main areas, which we discuss further below:

1. Capacity Building, Technical Expertise, and Policy Guidance;
2. Funding and Financial Support; and
3. Communication and Information Sharing Opportunities.

1. Capacity Building, Technical Assistance, and Policy Guidance

Sixty-five percent of the communities surveyed seek capacity building, technical assistance, and policy guidance. Community leaders understand the importance of building resilience for healthy and thriving economies, communities, and natural resources, but many simply lack the foundational resources to get started.

Specific ways that the survey participants said their communities need support include the development of resilience assessments and plans; understanding the term “resilience” and what it includes; technical expertise; and best-practice resources and guides for developing positions and training staff to manage resilience. These needs are discussed in detail below.

COMPREHENSIVE, COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC RESILIENCE PLANNING

A foundational element of any community’s resilience work is developing a comprehensive assessment of the community’s needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities as they relate to flooding, extreme heat, and other potential disasters. These “resilience assessments” allow community members and their local leaders and planners to discuss and build consensus around specific local vulnerabilities, the systems most needed before, during, and after a disaster, and the solutions for addressing them. Additionally, by identifying project priorities, resilience assessments enable communities to more easily prioritize their limited local funding while also better preparing them to apply for—and receive—resilience funding from outside sources.

One clear takeaway from the community survey is the lack of consistency in how different Alabama communities are assessing their resilience needs. Indeed, each community defines “resilience” differently, which helps explain the lack of consistency in resilience planning. Specifically, while 37% of respondents stated that they have a definition of “resilience,” their definitions differed widely and included various topics such as natural resources, disaster preparation and response, community leadership, the economy, housing, and infrastructure. Tina Sanchez, Director of Environmental Services for Mobile County, succinctly summed up the point: “[We] need a consistent definition of resilience and sustainability. Otherwise, it just means different things to different people.” The lack of clarity around what “resilience” includes makes it a vague concept that communities have a difficult time engaging and planning around.

This lack of clarity around “resilience” shows up in the resilience assessments that Alabama communities have undertaken. Although approximately 32% of the surveyed local governments have undertaken some version of a resilience assessment, they vary widely in their scope and focus. Here are snapshots of how a few of the communities are conducting a version of a community resilience assessment:

- The City of Mobile is currently the only city in Alabama that has conducted a full-scale resilience assessment and created a comprehensive resilience plan that meets the standards of the City Resilience Framework—a planning guide that helps cities assess their resilience, identify key areas of vulnerability, and identify ways to strengthen their resilience.^{vi}
- Alexander City has developed an “exposure estimate” it uses to engage with financial institutions for support to fund investments that will strengthen its community.
- The Town of Dauphin Island has taken advantage of BP/Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster funding to invest in studies, including the Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment and a comprehensive Stormwater Management Plan, to determine its future needs.
- The cities of Dothan and Birmingham have developed priorities associated with fixing stormwater issues across their communities so that, as funds arrive, they are ready to deploy them.
- The City of Birmingham is leading the metropolitan area’s development of a Climate Action Plan.
- Gadsden has an energy savings contract out for bid.
- Anniston and Alexander City have done energy resiliency studies as part of their comprehensive planning.

The bottom line is that nearly every community has a different definition of “resilience” and a different approach to conducting different forms and pieces of a resilience assessment.

Fortunately, the same recently adopted law that codified the requirement for a Chief Resilience Officer also included a definition of “resilience.” It defines the term as “the capacity of individuals, communities, businesses, and systems to anticipate, prepare for, adapt to, and rapidly recover from adverse events.” It is helpful for communities to now have a uniform definition, but there is still room for clarity on the types of adverse events that communities should be thinking about. This is an important area where the CRO could provide valuable guidance.

In addition, the CRO could develop clear guidance and best practices for communities when they undertake a resilience assessment. In some states (e.g., Resilient Florida Act (Section 380.093, Florida Statutes^{vii}), the state government has been fairly prescriptive about the information that should be collected in a resilience assessment, leading to more uniformity in how communities approach them. It would be very beneficial for the CRO to propose a uniform process or template for communities to use when undertaking a resilience assessment. This would help ensure that local resilience planning processes are focused on all the relevant vulnerabilities, capturing the appropriate infrastructure, geared toward applicable funding sources, and getting all the impacted stakeholders to the table.

There is another significant benefit of the CRO developing clear guidance and examples for conducting resilience assessments. Although the findings will vary from community to community, having continuity in the type of information gathered provides the state with valuable data on where a common problem or need exists among many communities, and it can then focus state resources efficiently on addressing that gap. It can also indicate to the state which municipalities may be able to provide training or leadership to other communities, which can also help maximize efficient use of resources.

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE, STANDARDS, AND BEST-PRACTICE RESOURCES FOR CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADES

Many of the municipalities noted a need for the State to provide technical expertise on creating resilient infrastructure. They want to know what types of infrastructure work best and what is fundable, especially as it relates to stormwater and drainage systems, utility resilience, transportation solutions, and disaster preparedness. Specific ways that Alabama communities want to increase resilience include optimizing water runoff, keeping roads clear, securing and reinforcing electrical lines, and pre-staging recovery equipment for immediate post-storm cleanup. They would benefit from the state sharing best practices on these items. Technical expertise is also needed for building safer, fortified, and energy-efficient residential and commercial buildings, as well as for making municipal infrastructure resilient to stormwater and flood impacts. Familiarizing more communities with best practices for these activities not only saves lives but also reduces property damage. It helps shorten the timeline between municipalities understanding the problem and implementing a solution.

An example of state government providing resilient building standards is the Strengthen Alabama Homes (SAH) program (Alabama's FORTIFIED roof program).^{viii} The FORTIFIED Home program establishes an enhanced building standard for roofs that makes them more resilient to hurricanes and tornadoes. Houses with roofs that are built or upgraded to meet the FORTIFIED standard receive a FORTIFIED designation, along with an economic incentive. The program was developed by the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, and then the Alabama Department of Insurance adopted it and made it into a funded program.

A study conducted by the Alabama Department of Insurance following Hurricane Sally demonstrated the effectiveness of roofs built to the FORTIFIED standard in withstanding strong winds.^{ix} That study underscores the economic value of developing and promoting resilient building standards at the local, state, and national levels. According to a 2025 article in *Insurance Journal*, roughly 80,000 homes across 32 states now have FORTIFIED designations, and over 53,000 of those are in Alabama."^x

DEDICATED RESILIENCE OFFICERS WITHIN INDIVIDUAL MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS TO COORDINATE WITH FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES

Although 78% of the participating local governments include resilience as a part of their staff members' jobs, only two cities have dedicated resilience staff. Further, in many localities, resilience responsibilities are spread across multiple departments, including disaster response, public works, environment, sustainability, and building inspection, to name a few. Municipalities having dedicated resilience staff would be a significant benefit to Alabama's communities.

The City of Creola's Mayor (Don Nelson) and City Clerk (Marcy Brown) explained what happened to their community during Hurricane Sally. Mayor Nelson said, "In a disaster, the community works together; all they have is each other, so the community comes out and works, too . . . It's a community effort." However, because Creola didn't have the staff needed to properly address federal requirements for reimbursement of the money the city spent on disaster recovery following the hurricane, the city was never able to recoup that funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. One significant role a state resilience officer can play is managing evolving federal government reimbursement requirements—either in a centralized fashion or through training and supporting staff in smaller cities.

The CRO has an important opportunity to support local governments by creating a framework for effective and uniform resilience teams across Alabama. In addition, the CRO could promote the establishment of local CROs and resilience offices by educating local governments on the value of creating these positions and by providing a description of the typical roles and responsibilities for them. As Fairhope Mayor Sherry Sullivan observed, "It would be great to have a model resilience officer/department [outlined] by the state to give it more credibility." Finally, the state CRO could also play the lead role in coordinating among community CROs. This could be a "league of municipalities" model, comprised of city and county CROs and the state CRO. Such a group could share best practices on how to embed resilience into local government budgets and workloads, spell out similar needs and challenges, and cross-train on solutions.

2. Funding & Financial Support

Sixty-one percent of communities surveyed responded that they need more funding for resilience work. Community leaders also have an interest in training and guidance on how to obtain state, federal, and private funds. In addition, they seek advice on prioritizing prevention and readiness resilience efforts before the next disaster arrives.

INCREASED FUNDING FOCUSED ON RESILIENCE PLANNING AND PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Many local governments voiced an interest in the state establishing and expanding state grant programs to fund resilience assessments, plans, and project implementation. Stormwater fees, which generate revenue for local stormwater and flood mitigation projects through an assessment based on property type and impervious surface, are one source of local funding for these efforts. However, many communities do not have access to such fees because their local leadership has not created an ordinance. For those that do, funding is too low to make a significant impact on larger resilience needs. Local governments also would like to see the state lobby the federal government to secure dedicated resilience and infrastructure funding for Alabama's municipalities. A new state-level Chief Resilience Officer could help lead these efforts.

GUIDE MUNICIPALITIES ON HOW TO ACCESS, NAVIGATE, AND LEVERAGE FEDERAL PROGRAMS

A common challenge the surveyed municipalities identified is navigating the complicated federal resilience funding processes. Most municipalities understood that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), through the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, requires local governments to develop a Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) to receive funding during a declared

disaster. However, most participants did not realize that, under current and past iterations of FEMA requirements, the more detailed the plan, the easier it is to secure funding post-disaster for needed upgrades that could make a community more resilient to the next disaster. This revelation received a hearty thank you from Alexander City's Mayor Mike Densmore and others because they did not realize this seemingly routine task could be made into a powerful funding tool both in times of disaster and on "blue sky" days.

The City of Fairhope has a good example of proactive leveraging of HMP funding. With each strong storm, power outages are caused in Fairhope by downed power poles and power lines, according to City of Fairhope Mayor Sullivan. The City of Fairhope included undergrounding power lines in its Hazard Mitigation Plan, ensuring FEMA funding of this project after a disaster.

The City of Mobile recently worked with the Mobile County Emergency Management Agency to improve its Hazard Mitigation Plan. Creola, Jasper, Gadsden, Dauphin Island, Birmingham, and Gulf Shores are also looking at how to upgrade their next plan to include these efforts. The state CRO could help with these efforts by sharing the value and importance of more robust HMPs and can advocate with the Alabama Emergency Management Agency to prioritize funding resilience practices.

Other funding-related needs the municipalities identified included assistance with developing effective stormwater impact fees, obtaining necessary funding for new equipment, and procuring funds for addressing blight, heirs' property, and brownfields. The State of Alabama's CRO could work through the Alabama Resilience Council to establish clear guidance for local governments on funding mitigation and adaptation measures, and they could also help identify and match communities with relevant grant opportunities and even partner with universities and others to assist with the application processes.

CLARIFY THE REGIONAL FINANCIAL RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION PROCESS

Although community leaders were generally very positive about the benefits of a state CRO, some raised questions about how the office would allocate any financial resources among different municipalities. Local governments want to ensure funding is based on needs and is available for a wide spectrum of plans and projects that include solutions germane to both larger and smaller communities. They also desire clear accountability about where funds are spent. Funding and resources should be allocated with care and transparency, and they should incorporate an element of formulaic (non-discretionary) funding based on localities' population, budget, and disaster impact. As City of Dothan Mayor Mark Saliba cautioned, "Who gets the money can mess up a really good thing."

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ESTABLISHING DISASTER RECOVERY OR "RAINY DAY" MUNICIPAL FUNDS

Community leaders also want to find a way to establish a disaster fund so they do not have to wait for FEMA to respond when a disaster strikes. With the federal government's role in disaster recovery increasingly uncertain, it is even more important for local communities and the state to create reserves ahead of a disaster. As the state CRO develops a robust work plan for building resilience across the state, this is another service the state could provide to support local

governments either through finding external resources or providing training on how to find that funding.

3. Communication & Information Sharing

In response to the question, “Do you see any downsides to funding resilience?”, the only concern localities raised was with the difficulty of getting community buy-in. Most community members struggle to prioritize disaster preparedness unless a storm is imminent or has just occurred. Mayors and city leaders know that concerns about stormwater flooding cutting off access to the nearest hospital, or an eroding shoreline creeping closer to a neighborhood, are not always top of mind for constituents facing many other day-to-day challenges. Jackson Hodges, public relations director of the City of Anniston, believes that how we communicate and the stories we tell can make a real difference in promoting disaster preparation and resilience. As he explained it, “There are cultural and historic divides that make getting messages across difficult.” The state has a meaningful role to play in broadly communicating the need for prioritizing resilience, whether that be through public discussions, information hubs, media campaigns, or other investments.

In addition, several of the community leaders who participated in the survey stated that working in a silo is the biggest enemy of a healthy and robust community. Having plans that only touch one or two departments can more deeply entrench those divides. Breaking down these silos within local government, and between local governments and the state, should be a priority for municipalities and the state of Alabama. Resilience work should cross every department in local and state government. Regular communication around what already exists, what is needed, best practices, and opportunities is essential.

Along these lines, the city of Jasper plans to integrate resilience into every aspect of the city’s strategic plan. Challenges presented by recent flash flooding, a lack of affordable housing, and a need for economic growth—and the interrelatedness of those challenges—convinced city leaders they need to weave resilience into every level and department of their government. Improved cross-sector and cross-governmental communication is key to being ready to address whatever change may be coming down the pike. As recommended by Bessemer Mayor Kenneth Gulley, a statewide resilience office “could streamline communication across agencies and help align local priorities.”

Specific resilience communication priorities local governments mentioned include streamlining communication channels across state/local agencies; aligning overlapping local priorities; creating a central knowledge-sharing hub to highlight successful municipal resilience projects across the state and country; and developing redundant emergency communication systems to support municipalities before, during, and after disasters. All of these present valuable opportunities for the CRO.

Conclusion

The City of Birmingham's Director of Resilience and Sustainability, Thomas Yuill, summarized resilience this way: "Dealing with the problems we have now versus the problems we'll be having in the future...I use the metaphor of having a little imp, sweeping it under the rug, and being surprised when it becomes a big monster. Let's not do that."

Across Alabama, localities are eager to engage in important resilience work to safeguard their communities, but they need guidance and support. The Office of Resilience has an incredible opportunity to provide much-needed technical assistance, increase access to financial assistance, and promote and amplify communication among and between local and state governments. By doing so, Alabama can pull its increasing vulnerability to storms and disasters out from under the rug and help ensure its communities, economic assets, and invaluable natural resources continue thriving for generations to come.

Appendix

- A. Participants
- B. Map
- C. Additional Notable Quotes
- D. References

A. Participants

Alexander City

Mayor Mike Densmore
Scott Hardy, Community Development
Director

City of Anniston

Jackson Hodges, Public Relations Director

City of Auburn

City of Bessemer

Mayor Kenneth Gulley
Christopher Warren, Chief of Staff

City of Birmingham

Thomas Yuill, Director, Office of Resilience
& Sustainability

City of Creola

Mayor Don Nelson
Marcy Brown, City Clerk

Town of Dauphin Island

Mayor Jeff Collier

City of Dothan

Mayor Mark Saliba

City of Fairhope

Mayor Sherry Sullivan

City of Foley

Leslie Gahagen, Sustainability & Natural
Resources Director

City of Gadsden

Tena King, Director of City Services

City of Gulf Shores

Mayor Robert Craft

City of Jasper

Tana Collins-Allred, Community &
Economic Development Director

City of Mobile

Mayor Spiro Cheriogitis

Mobile County

Tina Sanchez, Director of Environmental
Services
Matthew Jones, Deputy Environmental
Services director

City of Montgomery

Desmond Wilson, Community Development

City of Mountain Brook

Dana Hazen, Director of Planning, Building,
and Sustainability

City of Opp

Mayor Chance McCurley
Cody Anderson, City Planner

Phenix City

Mayor Eddie Lowe

City of Prichard

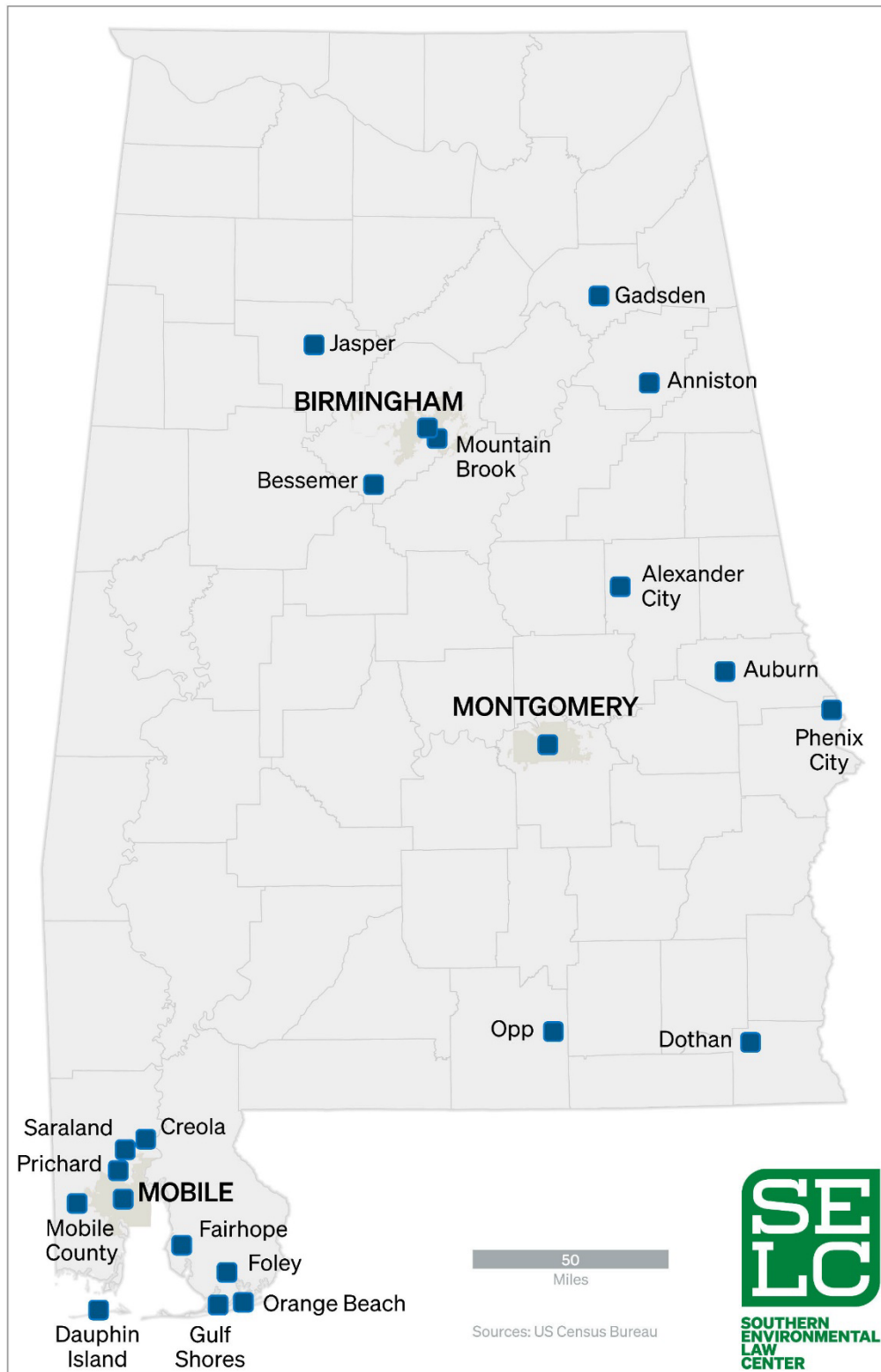
Mayor Carletta Davis

City of Saraland

Christine Purvis, Executive Assistant

B. Map

Participating Alabama Localities



C. Additional Notable Quotes

City of Alexander City

Mayor Mike Densmore

“We need better planning. We need more relationships with people who have access to resources. Thinking of the things we have in town now that we're in danger of losing because no one planned for it, five years ago, ten years ago, and certainly not twenty-three years ago.”

City of Creola

Mayor Don Nelson

Marcy Brown, City Clerk

“Regardless of how you feel, if you're a Democrat or a Republican, when you have a crisis, you need to work together. It doesn't matter what political party you're a part of. We should be united.”

Town of Dauphin Island

Mayor Jeff Collier

“The economic vitality of Dauphin Island is tied directly to resilience.”

City of Dothan

Mayor Mark Saliba

“Some consider resiliency a political term. I don't. There are those who have not sat in the chair and had to answer the problems and issues we have, which have nothing to do with handouts and political parties. It's an area of need that has to be addressed just like everything else - sewer, road infrastructure, and everything else it takes to run a city on a day-to-day basis.”

City of Foley

Leslie Gahagen, Sustainability & Natural Resources Director

Resilience is “the ability to restore operations in a city following a damaging event.”

City of Gadsden

Tena King, Director of City Services

Resilience is “Our ability to adapt and recover, (either) from a disaster or from a man-made change.”

City of Gulf Shores

Mayor Robert Craft

“Resilience is part of every budget.”

City of Jasper

Tana Collins-Allred, Community & Economic Development Director

“Resilience, in the context of my work with the city, means intentionally planning and developing initiatives in a way that positions the community to effectively respond to and recover from challenges, ensuring continuity, stability, and long-term success.”

City of Mobile

Mayor Spiro Cheriogitis

“Who doesn't want a city that's in a resilient state, a healthy natural environment and economy. I want to build resilient streets and sidewalks.”

City of Mountain Brook

Dana Hazen, Director of Planning, Building, and Sustainability

“Resilience – perseverance.”

City of Opp

Mayor Chance McCurley

“Could be a great thing to have someone who could do a study on the town, show us where our weaknesses are, then we can see something from a new perspective. That helps us. It would be very good to have.”

Phenix City**Mayor Eddie Lowe**

“When you bring people together inclusively, no matter what side of the railroad tracks you’re on, once you do that, you have a better chance of really being strong and resilient against anything.”

City of Prichard**Mayor Carletta Davis**

“You gotta bounce back.”

“If a community had the resources to rebound itself, as opposed to waiting for someone else to rebound them, it’s more likely the community will be whole on the other side. If they’re prepared, they’ve planned and have the resources to act.”

D. References

- ⁱ The Office of Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, Governor Ivey Signs Executive Order to Establish the Alabama Resilience Council, May 5, 2023 Press Release, <https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2023/05/governor-ivey-signs-executive-order-to-establish-the-alabama-resilience-council/>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ⁱⁱ Al. Exec. Order No. 736, Establishing The Alabama Resilience Council (May 5, 2023), <https://governor.alabama.gov/newsroom/2023/05/executive-order-736/>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Sanders, *Transformed by Tragedy: How Alabama Is Becoming a Model in Disaster Resilience*, The Pew Charitable Trusts (November 10, 2025), <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2025/11/10/transformed-by-tragedy-how-alabama-is-becoming-a-model-in-disaster-resilience>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ^{iv} The Alabama Legislature, <https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/bill-search?tab=1>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ^v Ala. Act #2026-607, <https://arc-sos.state.al.us/ucp/L2123348.AI1.pdf>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ^{vi} Resilient Cities Network, (November 6, 2024). *City Resilient Framework – 2024 edition*, <https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/city-resilience-framework-2024-edition/> (last visited July 23, 2026).
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- ^{viii} Strengthen Alabama Homes, www.strengthenalabamahomes.com. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ^{ix} Alabama Department of Insurance, Center for Risk and Insurance Research-University of Alabama. (2025, May 5). *Performance of IBHS FORTIFIED Home™; Construction in Hurricane Sally*. Montgomery, AL, <https://aldoi.gov/PDF/News/PerformanceIBHSFortifiedHomeConstructionHurricaneSally.pdf>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).
- ^x Angueira, G. A. (2025, May 28). Alabama Study Shows Fortified Homes Paying Off for Insurers, Homeowners. *Insurance Journal*, <https://www.insurancejournal.com/news/southeast/2025/05/28/825141.htm>. (last visited July, 21, 2026).