

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Imagine a Greater Montgomery

Mac has swagger that is backed up by strong performance. He has captured the imagination and confidence of our leadership with his insight and experience.



Randall L. George, CECd, President, Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce

Background

The Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce is the “go-to” organization for the River Region’s broad economic development program. Still, the Chamber was operating in a community plagued by deep-rooted racial tension and mistrust, poorly-performing public schools, and a negative image of the city perpetuated by residents and outsiders alike that were hurting future opportunities. The Chamber’s leaders knew they had to strengthen their efforts and deal with deep systemic challenges in Montgomery that were hindering its short- and long-term quality and growth prospects.

The Chamber hired *Market Street* to guide the process of moving the bar on these serious competitive issues. **Imagine a Greater Montgomery** was a new strategic planning initiative designed to bring a fresh approach to Montgomery’s economic development planning process. Since 2006, the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce has worked diligently on achieving the goals outlined in *Imagine a Greater Montgomery* which are to Champion Public Education and Build a Competitive Workforce; Strengthen the Montgomery Regional Economy; Transform Montgomery’s Image; and Embrace Diversity and Enhance Leadership Capacity.

Three years later, the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce asked *Market Street* to update its existing Strategy and examine the accomplishments of the community to date. The mid-course review set the stage for a full strategy update in 2011— **Imagine a Greater Montgomery II**. The Imagine II process started with over 50 community leaders and Imagine II steering committee members going on an inter-city visit to Austin, Texas to tour and understand the successes of the Greater Austin Chamber’s two cycles of Opportunity Austin strategic implementation (which were also facilitated by *Market Street*).

The research component of the process assessed Montgomery’s competitive position and the goals and ensuing results of the first Imagine strategy. Despite the national recession, the Montgomery region had not suffered job losses as significant the state and nation in the past decade. Career academies and magnet schools—launched as a program of Imagine I—were growing in enrollment and expanding in program offerings. Downtown development had improved the central business district’s quality of place dramatically and increased positive perceptions of the community. Montgomery was increasingly positioning itself as the epicenter of Southern U.S. auto manufacturing growth due to Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama and suppliers. Young professionals were more active in leadership and community building than ever before.



However, long-term challenges like the overall performance of public K–12 schools and the quality of the local technical college persisted. Recent cuts to state and federal budgets threatened Montgomery's large government and defense employment bases. There was an urgent need to diversify the local economy, develop revitalization efforts across the entire community, and continue the momentum of successful public education efforts, expanding these initiatives to middle schools and higher education.

Implementation Highlights

The Imagine II initiative is truly focused on taking Montgomery to a higher level of success now that tangible results from the first strategic cycle have been witnessed. Imagine II activities and wins include:

- The broadening of the scope of the Diversity Summit to address generational diversity, giving the strong young professional group (EMERGE) an active role in planning and facilitating the Summit, which has over 800 attendees annually and has sold out for the last two years.
- Career Academies in Montgomery Public Schools, with seven total career-focused programs, have proved powerful tools for students to gain in demand skill sets. Students in the Health Science Career Academy can graduate high school with a pharmacy tech certification or the necessary credits for LPN certification. Students in the IT Career Academy can get Oracle and Microsoft certifications. There are plans for two new career academies—design/architecture and agri-sciences, both linking to Auburn University.
- Montgomery now has 21 pre-K classrooms through a partnership facilitated by the Montgomery Education Foundation between Montgomery Public Schools, Office of School Readiness, Head Start, Success by Six, and the Family Guidance Center. Each partner agrees to use the state's nationally recognized First Class Pre-K standards and guidelines to positively impact future student success and graduation rates.
- The "Success Starts Here" tour, which celebrates existing local businesses making significant capital investments, took its fourth annual bus ride in 2013. Nineteen businesses were responsible for 277 new jobs and more than \$230 million in capital investments.
- In late 2012, Hyundai Motor Manufacturing added nearly 900 new jobs through a third shift at the Montgomery plant to keep pace with demand for the Sonata and Elantra models. The Elantra, made in Montgomery, was Car of the Year at the 2012 North American International Auto Show.
- A new regional medical campus for the University of Alabama School of Medicine brought residents in internal and family medicine to Montgomery starting in 2014. .
- Ongoing reinvestment efforts in downtown Montgomery, which have incorporated focused feedback from young professionals, have resulted in more than \$1.5 billion spent on downtown/riverfront development including a new \$3.1 million mixed use project in a historic building, a \$22 million project to bring the Children's Museum of Alabama and the Juliette Hampton Morgan Memorial Library together at Questplex in the heart of downtown, and the construction of bike and running trails at Lagoon Park.
- In 2014, Montgomery was named an All American City, one of ten, by the National Civic League. This following close on the heels of USA Today's naming Montgomery the country's "Best Historic City."

