

# **CPLN 7920 -PLANNING INTERNSHIP**

City of Vestavia Hills

1032 Montgomery highway, Vestavia hills, AL 35216

**By**

**Jeffrey James**

**Dr. Rebecca Retzlaff**

## Introduction

The City of Vestavia Hills is located in the Jefferson and Shelby counties in the State of Alabama. The city has a population of about 34,033 citizens and it is one of the fifth largest cities in the State. The city of Vestavia Hills has a Mayor-council form of municipal government. The city hall is located at 1032 Montgomery Hwy, Vestavia Hills, AL- 35216. The city hall comprises of 5 departments namely the City administration department, public services, fire department, police department, municipal court, and Finance. The internship opportunity with the City of Vestavia Hills was awarded to three students from different parts of the country. The Internship was coordinated by the City Manager Mr. Jeffrey Downes and overseen by Ms. Melissa Hipp who is assistant to the City Manager.

The intern orientation was presided by the city manager with the department heads of all 5 departments present. The interns were introduced by the city manager to all the department heads. The Interns were also introduced to the Mayor, the City Council members and the citizens of the city present during the city council meeting which was held at the City hall.

The City manager allotted different projects and assignments to all interns in their designated departments and explained the assignments in detail. The projects and assignments allotted to the students were decided based on the educational background of the intern and experiences. The City Manager also explained to us in detail about the city boundaries and the new businesses in the city by taking us around in his vehicle.

Based on my background in Mechanical engineering and coursework in community planning and public administration, I was assigned projects accordingly. Projects required working together as a group and also as an individual.

- Drainage issues Investigation (Public Services Department)

Investigation of drainage issues around the city by conducting on-field visits interacting with the affected property owners, interrogating them in detail about the issue and documenting their views, explaining to them in detail about the drainage lines dedication law implemented in the city. Use of GIS tools such as storm water review, Jefferson county maps and basic GIS mapping to study the issue in detail. Learning in detail about maintenance zoning and zoning requirements for the state of Alabama for residential and commercial buildings.

- Office work- Building Safety (Fire Department)

Preparation of records and labeling of files preparing the department for an audit. Gained knowledge in different safety requirements expected by the city in renewal and obtainment of building safety permits.

- Vestavia Hills Action Center (City Administration department)

Managing issues and emergency complaints posted by the residents through the online portal of the Vestavia Hills Action center, directing the complaints to the appropriate departments notifying the appropriate staff explaining the status of the complaint.

- Website Review (City Administration)

Review of the city's website, making note of errors and modifications, giving opinionated corrections of the city's website and documentation of errors noticed.

- Event preparation and Economic development (Chamber of commerce)

Preparing the City 's Chamber of commerce for an event "I love America day" meeting with the sponsors and handing over magazines, where their advertisement had been posted. Meeting with business owners and performance of miscellaneous tasks as needed by the Chamber of Commerce (anticipated task in the coming weeks).

- Court routine business (Municipal Courts)

Preparing and documenting traffic tickets for an audit and learning about the court proceedings, working closely with the city magistrates and learning about their duties. Attending court trials and court hearings experiencing the court proceedings and trials during court hours.

### **Drainage issues Investigation (Public Services Department)**

The city of Vestavia Hills located at one of the hilly mountain regions in the state of Alabama is being prone to a large amount of rainfall in the last 6 months. The drainage lines in the city are designed in such a way that it collects the drainage from every region and then delivers it to a stream or a lake. The drainage lines in every house located in the city is being interconnected with the other so as the drainage flows from one house to another. Almost every other drainage lines in the city is connected through gravity pipes since the landscape is a slope in almost every region in the city.

Due to the huge amount of rainfall which is being experienced in the last 6 months, the City of Vestavia Hills has been experiencing a lot of complaints regarding drainage problems from residents in different parts of the city. The problems include development of sink holes due to pipe deterioration, pipe incapacitation due to excess flow of water during the event of a heavy rainfall, sediments of clay and excess sands in private lakes which increases the urge of the residents to dredge the lake more frequently, pipe blockage due to new construction which blocks the flow of water flooding the area destroying the asphalt and shrubbery.

The City faces new complaints from property owners and residents intimating them to solve the issue immediately as some of these issues pose a safety threat to the people residing in these affected properties. But the City being a public entity will not be able to fund the repair of these affected properties of residents as the private properties in the city including the drainage lines have been dedicated to the homeowners and not to the city. It would be considered an illegal act

for the city to get into the issue and spend public money on the restoration of the drainage lines of the private property owners.

To find a solution to curb this issue and explain the affected property owners about the dedication law obtained in the city and to bring to notice to the city managers about the different drainage issues in the city, as interns we were made to work closely with the city engineers who had been investigating these issues previously. We were assigned to contact a list of property owners whose properties had been affected by drainage problems.

Initially to learn more about the issue, the storm water review GIS tool was used. The storm water review is a GIS tool which shows the layout of the drain lines of the property for which the location has been entered. The storm water review also gives the specification of the pipe including the length, diameter and material used to prepare the pipe such as reinforced concrete or diethylene polymer. The storm water also denotes the direction of flow of drainage and connectivity of the lines till it's endpoint. This software was an important tool to gauge the problem as reported by home owners. Jefferson county maps was also an important software used by us to find the location of the affected property and gauge the age of the property by obtaining references including collecting data for databases of the city clerk as when the property was purchased and what major constructions or remodeling had been done on the property in the past decades. We also had the opportunity to use basic GIS software to prepare maps and reports for easy study of the properties.

On collecting all information of the affected property, the property owners were contacted and an appointment was fixed to meet with the property owner and to capture images of the affected areas for documentation. The homeowner was briefed on the dedication laws and interrogated on the issue on the time frame of the property damage and their own views and concerns. The issue was documented stressing the safety concerns associated with the affected property. The captured images were analyzed and the affected areas were highlighted and documented. Certain areas needed more technical investigations on pipe blockages. A technical team was setup equipped with pipe cameras and underground mirrors, to record in detail about the issue. The report comprising of the images and a detailed view of the issue was submitted to the city manager Mr. Jeff Downes, who in turn would discuss this issue with the city council members and the city attorney as to what possible solution could be obtained to curb this issue in a swift period, keeping in mind the safety concerns of the people residing in these properties.

The city planner and the city engineers explained in detail about the zoning laws and zoning requirements which has been obtained in the state of Alabama and about maintenance zoning which is being done throughout the city, if there was heavy storms and rainfall. They also explained about the Action center which is being used by the city to collect complaints and its importance to solve the issues, keeping in mind the emergency situations where swift actions should be taken immediately. Being done a research paper on GIS for my introduction to GIS class, I put forth my ideas in maintenance zoning and the use of drones being used in these situations, the city planner explained the feasibility of my ideas and the feasibility of the use of drones in tornado and storm affected prone areas.

Overall this project was a great exposure, knowing more about the different laws used by the city governments in terms of maintenance procedures and the importance of technology to report problems through the action center, the in-depth knowledge gained in terms of maintenance

zoning and zoning procedures, use of different GIS tools which reduces the use of manpower and resources thereby saving money and time.

### **Office work- Building Safety (Fire Department)**

The department of building safety is located in the fire department which oversees the safety permits required for building new commercial and residential buildings and renewal of permits for old buildings built in the city in the past years. On working closely with this department, I learnt about the safety standards obtained by the city in terms of issuing permits for buildings protecting them against fire and other natural calamities.

The safety officers present in the department inspect the buildings in person and confirms whether the property owner had met up the requirements proposed by the city and then issues permits. They also impose fines on properties which do not meet the requirements. As an intern, I helped the office staff in organizing permits and maintaining records. While doing this, I was briefed on the different safety permits that the department would offer commercial and residential properties and the benchmark on the safety analysis done on the property.

### **Vestavia Hills Action Center (City Administration department)**

The Action Center is a tool used by the city to report issues and concerns of citizens in the city to the best knowledge of the city officials. The Action center is an online portal available in the city's website which can be used by anyone anywhere. The Action center would provide details of the issue requesting the citizens to fill out the queries asked and therefore keeping in the loop till the issue is being resolved.

The action center is handled by every staff in every department denoting the authorized personnel when an issue concerning their department is being reported. As Interns, we were given access to the Action center, considering certain issues which have not been attended due to overloading complaints where the customer had not been notified of the completion of the resolved problem. It was part of our task to notify the concerned staff, if there was a long delay in the case of not being finished on time. The staff of the concerned department would get a notification and a note via email containing the severity of the issue to attend to the issue and take swift action at the earliest.

### **Website Review (City Administration)**

The City of Vestavia Hills has a website being managed by the city's IT department. The department has created a website which is still available [www.vhal.org](http://www.vhal.org). The website gives information about the city staff, the city council members and the Mayor. It also gives the agenda of the city council meetings and the previous video recordings of the council meetings held at the city hall. The city's website is a huge resource to the city residents on whom to contact in case of emergencies or issue with their contact information present on the city website.

As interns, we were asked to explore the website and check for any errors and our opinionated decisions on the city's website if it were to be redesigned. The administrative

department also asked us to examine the website on a citizen's point of view and note down the changes which is about to be made to the website. The website being an important medium connecting the citizens and the city through the action center and the contact details of the city staff is an important task to be made more appropriate for users using it.

### **Event preparation and Economic development (Chamber of commerce)**

The City of Vestavia hills and the Vestavia Hills chamber of commerce have a strong relationship in promoting economic development in the city. Both the city and the chamber are considered individual entities but there are many ways that they share a common brand. The role of the city manager is to bring new businesses to the city and the chamber focusses its efforts on supporting the existing businesses and works in establishing a strong relationship between its members and the community. The chamber also conducts several events which brings the community and the businesses in the city together establishing a much-needed connection

The chamber recently held an event "I love America day" this event brought in all businesses in the city at a common place and exhibited their products, where many residents of the city could participate and get to know about the businesses in their neighborhood which was followed by a movie screening. The event was a great success establishing a great relationship between the community and the local businesses. As interns our job was to give out magazines to all the sponsors who had come forward with the sponsorship for the event and explain them about the event by meeting them in person in their respective businesses.

Economic development is a project which is being anticipated by us in the coming weeks which focusses on doing research about new businesses needed for the city and ways to establish new contacts and strengthen the relationship with the existing businesses.

### **Court routine business (Municipal Courts)**

The Municipal Court is located at the City hall at Vestavia hills which hosts the justice department. As interns, we were responsible for managing traffic tickets and preparing the records for an audit. This process also involves learning about the different types of tickets obtained by the people in the city and what types of punishments would be obtained by them in case of any violations. In this department, we could learn about the various procedures obtained by the magistrates who process the ticket and record a case preparing the docket for respective cases. Working closely with the city magistrates, we learned about the judicial system and how the magistrates deal with them.

We also had the opportunity to experience the proceedings in Court during court hours and experience trial procedures done at court. This opportunity made us interact with the city prosecutor, where he explained about his role and responsibilities and this helped us get a clear view of the judicial system obtained in the city.

### **Conclusion:**

The internship opportunity with the city of Vestavia hills was a great platform for learning about the functionalities of a local government. The value and importance of serving the citizens of the community and the responsibilities that is attached to it.

The internship at the city of Vestavia Hills gave me an in-depth view about planning, zoning, GIS, administration and management. Interacting with the staff in every department answered all my doubts and cleared my views. It was also a platform to implement my skills that I have accumulated so far and implement it in this field of work. The freedom that the city has given me to implement my skills and at the same time learn and accumulate more skills in fields of management, handling responsibility and the value of serving the citizens with interest is a true blessing.

Overall, this opportunity made me connect and apply the ideas, knowledge and skills that I have learned through my coursework into the real world of work. In addition, it has expanded my practical and professional vision and assisted me to look up to the courses that I will be taking in the future, from a practical perspective.