



The Character to Lead | The Strength to Serve



Baker Allen In June of 2020, Baker Allen started working at the Alabama League of Municipalities as the director of policy and research. Since November 2024, Baker has served as the director of governmental affairs, which is responsible for federal and state legislation.

Prior to his time at the League of Municipalities, Baker served as economic policy advisor to both Gov. Robert Bentley and Gov. Kay Ivey. During his five years in the governor's office, he crafted economic development policy and legislation that frequently included broadband, environmental, opportunity zones, water and veterans' issues.

An Eagle Scout, Baker was born and attended high school in the greater Birmingham area. Prior to moving to Montgomery, he attended Hampden-Sydney College, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in mathematical economics. During his time at Hampden-Sydney, he was named the Paul Tribble Public Service Program Scholar and received the Lewis and Nell Drew Student Government Award. He is also a graduate of the IV Class of the Alabama Leadership Initiative. Baker enjoys spending time with his lovely wife, Lydia, and their daughter.

Key Note



Pete Blank After a stint as a television sportscaster, Pete began his Disney career at the Walt Disney World Resort. Over the next 13 years, he managed various areas of Disney's theme parks and resorts, where he learned what it takes to run a world-class organization. Pete was blessed to spend a majority of his time working at the Disney University. While there, he led the Traditions program, which is known worldwide as one of the premiere employee orientation programs. He also facilitated college-level courses to thousands of Disney College Interns and was a Segment Learning Manager for Walt Disney World, Disneyland Resort, and the Disney Cruise Line.

For the past 17 years, Pete has been the Training and OD Manager for the Personnel Board of Jefferson County. He is also a leadership expert and professional speaker, as he also works with organizations and associations across the U.S., helping them achieve their goals in the areas of leadership, employee engagement, and customer experience.

Pete received the prestigious "Partners in Excellence" award from Disney, which is presented to the top 3% of all employees. He also earned the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation from the National Speakers Association and the Certified Facilitator of Training (CFT) from The Center for International Credentials. His two books are [Employee Engagement: Lessons from the Mouse House](#) and [55 Ways to Add Disney Magic to](#)





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Your Organization. Both books are available on Amazon.com.



Pam McLendon Brangaccio, ICMA South Regional Director (Major Hint-Brangaccio is “Bran” flakes “Casio” Watches) Pam served as an ACM and City & County Manager within the State of Florida, beginning a long career directly from graduate school as a budget and management analyst in Lee County (Ft. Myers). Her “always coastal” management career included the east & west coasts of Florida, as well as Bay County in the panhandle.

In 2020, she became an ICMA Senior Advisor volunteer in FLA, also serving as the “volunteer” ICMA Senior Advisor National Coordinator (30 states/120 senior advisors) for three years.

Pam made a “work” transition in December 2025 to become one of five ICMA Regional Directors. Her commitment to professional management and local government has found a new outlet, working with the State Associations and ICMA members in eight southern states.

Pam, in October 2023, was represented at the 109th ICMA Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, the organization’s highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award, stating, “in honor of outstanding contributions to the management profession in the areas of leadership, mentoring, program development, teaching, demonstrated expertise, and thoughtful leadership. The award acknowledges a successful 40-year local government career, as a champion for professional local governments working to make communities better places to live and work.”

Pam is a Tampa, Fla Native, with a BA in Political Science and Anthropology, and an MPA in Public Administration from the University of South Florida (USF). She served as President of the Florida City and County Management Association (FCCMA), received numerous local and state honors, and served on numerous FCCMA and ICMA committees. She is currently serving as a Board member of FLA Women Leading Govt. and lives in St. Petersburg, FLA.





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Jessica Cowles joined the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) in May 2018 and is the organization's Ethics Director. Her role involves proactively discussing ethics issues with members, offering training, reviewing the Code of Ethics with membership, and staffing the ICMA Committee on Professional Conduct, a subcommittee of ICMA's Executive Board.

Prior to ICMA, Jessica served as the Town Manager in Berwyn Heights, Maryland, a small full-service community located near Washington, D.C., for four years. One of her accomplishments in Berwyn Heights was implementing the governing body's decision to adopt a council-manager form of government. Her first position in local government was in Maryland's capital city of Annapolis

as a legislative and policy analyst.

Jessica started her career as a staffer on Capitol Hill, then worked in government relations and management consulting for nearly 10 years before completing her MPA. She received a BA degree in Political Theory.



Gretchen DiFante, 2025-2026 ACCMA President City Manager, City of Pelham In 2017, Gretchen DiFante was appointed Pelham's first professional City Manager and the only female city manager in Alabama. A native Alabamian, she is a graduate of Vestavia Hills High School and Auburn University at Montgomery. She left Alabama for a position with McDonald's Corporation in Rochester, New York, and returned home after 27 years to lead Pelham through a time of growth and organizational transformation.

Her career spans leadership in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. She has served as Director of Customer Service for Rich Products, a \$3 billion global manufacturer; Executive Vice President at P.W. Minor & Sons; and Executive Director of Agape Counseling in Rochester. She also served ten years in the Air Force Reserve, including active duty during the Gulf War.

DiFante began her public service career as a consultant to the City of Batavia, New York, where she developed its first data-driven strategic plan. The initiative earned the International City/County Management Association's Award for Strategic Leadership and Governance. As Batavia's Assistant City Manager, she managed FEMA's Community Rating System program, earning one of the highest ratings in New York State, and was later appointed to the state's Stormwater and Floodplain Managers Association Board of Directors.

As Pelham's City Manager, DiFante oversees all city operations and a \$92 million budget. She co-founded Alabama





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Women Leading Government, which connects nearly 200 women across the state for mentorship and professional development. Under her leadership, Pelham has attracted repeat investment from developers, improved employee and citizen engagement, and significantly reduced litigation.

Her work has been recognized nationally and locally, including the League of Women in Government's Trailblazer Award (2019 finalist), Shelby County's Outstanding Public Servant (2020), and the Sam Gaston Vocational Excellence Award (2023). She currently serves as Board President of the Alabama City/County Management Association.



Jeff Downes Jeff Downes became the city manager for Vestavia Hills in July 2013 after retiring from the City of Montgomery, Alabama, where he spent the last decade of his 26-year career as an executive level leader and carried the title of deputy mayor. He possesses a wealth of experience and understanding of municipal government and is especially adept at connecting people to promote community and economic growth. He espouses New Urbanist philosophy for creating quality living spaces in urban development, and economic development is a primary focus of his efforts in Vestavia Hills.

From early in his career in Montgomery, Alabama, where he served as the city's first risk manager and later as its first deputy mayor, Jeff has kept a continuous eye for improving operations. Under his direction, the Risk Management Division began numerous innovative initiatives designed to control the costs of certain risk exposures, which included the creation of a workers' compensation management system, a fully integrated employee assistance program, a drug testing program, an international drug importation program, a self-insured liability program, and a flexible spending account program. As deputy mayor, he led a number of successful projects that earned him widespread respect among government, agencies, and the residents of Montgomery. Among his Montgomery successes was facilitating the establishment of the non-profit organization Eat South, whose mission is to support urban agriculture and healthy eating, similar to the Jones Valley Farm in Birmingham. He sought to improve aesthetics through infrastructure projects whenever possible and was an advocate for preserving historical architecture and promoting culture. An award from the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce for his work with The Alley entertainment district (2013) described him as "Courageous, Visionary, Rebellious. For vision and leadership that has forever changed the Quality of Place of the Capital of Dreams."

Upon engagement as Vestavia Hills' city manager in 2013, Jeff quickly established a dynamic of cooperation that led to movement on a number of projects that had been slow to progress. His leadership and facilitation have overcome challenging obstacles and have gained critical support for many efforts, including the Community Spaces





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Plan and preceding recreational facilities improvements, development projects in areas throughout the city's geography, and investments in infrastructure improvements. Within the City of Vestavia Hills organization, he has overseen the restructuring of several departments and strengthened the value of its vendor relationships through increased partnership and innovative programs. He has embraced technology and social media as tools to build consensus in the community and enhance City services to the public. Since relocating to Vestavia Hills in 2013, Jeff has become a sought-after member for several boards on the local, state, and national level. His current list of board memberships are as follows:

- Alabama City/County Managers Association, Immediate Past-President
- Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, Secretary
- Local Government Health Insurance Board (Alabama), Vice President
- Cahaba Solid Waste Disposal Authority, Vice President
- Vestavia Hills Miracle League, Coach of the Red Tornadoes
- The Exceptional Foundation, Board Member
- United Way of Central Alabama, 2023 Campaign Co-Chair Community Division
- States Risk Retention Group, * Chairman of the Board of Trustees

Jeff graduated with honors from Auburn University with a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration and from AUM with a Master of Public Administration. He has served in many community groups: Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Weed and Seed Program, St. Bede Child Development Center Board of Directors, Health Services Inc., Hampstead Institute, and Catholic Social Services. He is a graduate of Leadership Montgomery and Leadership Alabama. He is also proud to share that he earned the rank of Eagle Scout in his youth. Since moving to Vestavia Hills, he has joined the Vestavia Hills Sunrise Rotary Club and graduated with the Leadership Vestavia Hills Class of 2015. Jeff is married to the love of his life, Penny. Jeff and Penny, along with their children – Chad (Miracle League athlete), Sydney (nurse), Harrison (musician), and Alex (future teacher) — are long-time residents of the Liberty Park area of Vestavia Hills and are parishioners at St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church.





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Jim Hill is a graduate of Mississippi State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Economics in 1972. He later received his Juris Doctorate from the Cumberland School of Law in 1975.

Hill practiced law for 19 years and earned an AV Rating from Martindale-Hubbell. During his legal career, he served as city attorney for the cities of Leeds and Moody and held leadership roles as President and Vice President of the Alabama League of Municipalities City Attorneys Association.

In 1994, he was elected St. Clair County District Judge, where he served on the Juvenile Judges Association Legislative Committee and as the district judge representative to the Judicial Committee. In 2004, he was elected St. Clair County Circuit Judge and served on the Executive Board of the Circuit Judges Association. He also served on Governor Bob Riley's Task Force on Prison Overcrowding.

Throughout his judicial career, Hill played a key role in establishing several important community initiatives in St. Clair County, including the Day Program for Juvenile Offenders, the Early Warning Program in partnership with local schools, community corrections, drug court, and the Domestic Violence Program. He retired from the bench in 2013 and returned to the practice of law as Of Counsel to Hill, Gossett, Kemp, Barrentine & Seay, P.C., which represents the cities of Moody, Springville, Ashville, and Ragland and serves as county attorney for St. Clair County.

In 2014, Hill was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives, representing House District 50 in St. Clair County. In 2017, he was elected Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

Hill has also been active in civic and community organizations, serving as Past President of the Greater Leeds Area Chamber of Commerce, a past board member of the Moody Business Association, and a past member of the Pell City Rotary Club Board of Directors. He is a member of Springville First Baptist Church, where he has served as a deacon, Sunday school teacher, and held numerous leadership roles within the St. Clair County Gideons Association. He is married to Susan M. Hill, and together they have two children, Elizabeth H. Cheney and James E. Hill, III.



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Lauren Hodge As a member of ACCA's Executive Team, Lauren provides support, direction, and guidance to all of the Association's services and programs, in particular those pertaining to statewide policy, communication, outreach, and education.

In her policy role, Lauren is responsible for the development, sponsorship, and passage of legislation beneficial to county government. As an experienced and well-respected resource to the members of the Alabama Legislature, she continues to strengthen the working relationships among county officials and their representatives on Goat Hill. Her involvement in statewide policy efforts and in the Association's various membership services also allows her to effectively and efficiently represent the needs of county governments before state and federal agencies.

Additionally, Lauren provides oversight to the Association's various print and digital media, educational courses, and annual events, and she serves as the chief staff liaison to the Association's five affiliate organizations, a role that allows her to maintain a comprehensive and multilayered understanding of county employee needs and, consequently, develop new public policy, education and program opportunities for the benefit of the full membership.



Patrick Johnson was raised in Birmingham and brings more than 30 years of experience in the technology industry. His studies in Computer Science at UAB launched a career focused on technology and client solutions across multiple industries. Over the years, his specialization in communications and remote workforce solutions expanded his reach throughout the Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi healthcare markets.

In May 2015, Patrick was hired to establish and lead the Information Technology Department for the City of Alabaster. In addition to overseeing core IT operations and infrastructure, he has worked alongside his staff to develop innovative solutions that better serve the citizens of Alabaster, most notably the TrainFo notification system.

Patrick is a graduate of the Leadership Shelby County Class of 2024 and serves on the Board of Directors for the Birmingham Jr. Bulls Hockey Association. He is married to Trisha Johnson, and together they have two sons, Cooper (11) and Collin (9).



Brian Muenger brings nearly two decades of municipal leadership experience to





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the City of Hoover. He joined the City after serving more than 10 years as City Manager of Pell City, where he led one of Alabama's fastest-growing municipalities through sustained growth, major capital investment, and operational modernization.

During his tenure in Pell City, Mr. Muenger oversaw more than 230 employees and managed a \$40 million operating budget. He guided more than \$30 million in capital improvements without issuing long-term debt, while strengthening the city's overall financial position. His professional background also includes senior municipal leadership roles with the City of Talladega, as well as experience in comprehensive planning, organizational leadership, commercial development, grant administration, and long-range financial planning.

Mr. Muenger has been recognized for his commitment to excellence in public service, including receiving the Vocational Excellence Award from the Alabama City/County Management Association in 2022. He previously served as President of the Alabama City/County Management Association and is an active member of the International City/County Management Association.

As City Administrator, Mr. Muenger oversees all aspects of City of Hoover operations, working closely with elected officials, City departments, and the community to support effective governance, responsible growth, and the delivery of high-quality services to Hoover residents.



Justin Smith is the Assistant City Manager for the City of Pelham, Alabama. He has served for 20 years in state and local government in various capacities – including 13 years as Assistant to the County Manager for Jefferson County, Alabama. A former President of the Alabama City/County Management Association, he currently serves on the International City/County Management Association executive board as a Southeast Region Vice President, where he is assigned to the Committee for Professional Conduct and is Board Liaison to the ICMA's Governmental Affairs and Policy Committee. Justin is a proud graduate of Auburn University and holds a Juris Doctor from the Birmingham School of Law. He was admitted to the Alabama Bar in 2013 and has maintained a current occupational license in the time since. Justin has been a member of the Civil Air Patrol, United States Air Force Auxiliary, since 1998 and is a former Director of Cadet Programs for the Alabama Wing. He holds the rank of Major.

Justin and his partner, Amanda, have a 5-year-old son, John William. He enjoys travel, museums, food, and craft beer and has a lifelong fascination and love of motorsports – particularly IndyCar and the Memorial Day tradition of the Indianapolis 500 – “The Greatest Spectacle in Racing”.

