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## Decatur, Ala., Pre-Evaluated Landing Areas Project

Dec 1, 2009 12:00 PM

Winner of a 2009 America's Crown Communities excellence award



### **A helicopter coming in to land at a pre-evaluated landing area in Decatur, Ala.**

Minutes can mean the difference between life and death in many medical emergencies, which makes the use of air ambulances to transport critically injured patients an important tool for first responders. However, much time is often expended finding and clearing an impromptu landing zone for the helicopter as close to the emergency as possible.

In a first-of-its-kind effort to improve response times, the [Decatur, Ala., Fire & Rescue Department](#) has designated more than 170 "pre-evaluated landing areas" (PELA). Beginning in March 2007, Decatur firefighters began mapping a 120-square-mile area encompassing the entire city and parts of surrounding Morgan County that would be included in the PELA grid, a process that was completed in June 2009.

Using global positioning system (GPS) technology, the fire department identified the PELA sites and entered each one into the Morgan County 911 CAD system and the city's geographic information system (GIS) to create a Master PELA Grid. The grid is accessible to medical flight organizations and emergency responders throughout the region.

Previously, air ambulance pilots had to navigate using visible landmarks to find emergency landing

sites, a process that is slowed and rendered dangerous in low-visibility conditions. "[Using the PELA grid,] the time necessary to airlift trauma patients to the appropriate facility has been reduced up to 20 percent in some cases," says PELA Project Developer/Coordinator Lt. Douglass Davies.

In November, the Alabama Department of Transportation's Aeronautics Bureau contacted the city to discuss using the PELA project as a model for other jurisdictions throughout the state. First, the bureau must review the details of the Decatur plan to make sure the sites designated in it meet the bureau's standards and to determine who will be responsible for evaluating new sites as they are created in other jurisdictions, says Aeronautics Bureau Chief John Eagerton. "We just need to develop a formal type of a requirement that we can give any other city in Alabama and say 'If you want to develop these sites, this is the handbook, this is the best practices-type guide to go by to develop these sites,'" Eagerton says.

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**Population:** 55,000

**Project:** The Pre-Evaluated Landing Areas (PELA) Project

**Cost:** NA

**Date completed:** June 2009

**Agencies/contractors:** Decatur Fire & Rescue; Morgan County 911; Decatur City Information Systems; Adventure GPS

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