Digital Economy Plan

River Valley Region — Georgia
Columbus and 16-county region

Executive Summary

The Digital Economy in the River Valley region spans S&P 500 companies to small rural farmers. All have been impacted by a digital transformation of the tools and resources and how we do work. This plan analyzes how the region has responded thus far and what changes need to occur in the future.

What is the Digital Economy?

The Digital Economy consists of business conducted through computers and computer networks. The Digital Economy is not a replacement of our economy but an evolution of using technology to adapt business to global innovation.

Businesses throughout the River Valley region are in various stages of transition using the Internet to sell products, conduct research and improve productivity. It is difficult to find a business or institution in Georgia that does not rely on the Internet and digital technology to improve service, lower cost, automate work, or expand into new markets.

About the Planning Process

The River Valley Regional Commission was asked by Georgia Technology Authority to conduct a study of the 16 counties in southwest Georgia to determine their use and preparation for a Digital Economy.

Because of its diversity, we broke the region into three groups to evaluate how well they are staying abreast of current trends and capabilities in the Digital Economy. These groups were Columbus as the Urban Core, the larger rural cities of Cordele and Americus, and the remaining rural and sparsely populated areas of the region.

Key Findings

Overall, the River Valley region's outlook for a Digital Economy is strong. People are moving to the region, the infrastructure is largely in place, and there is clear understanding of the importance of continuing to transition to a Digital Economy.

- The presence of S&P 500 companies in Columbus provide a strong foundation for business development across the River Valley region.

- Although infrastructure is largely in place, ongoing investments will be needed across the region.

- Training at all levels is needed throughout the region.

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Areas of Strategic Focus

In this plan, we define specific suggestions, goals, action plans, cost estimates and responsible parties as a part of the planning process to transition to a Digital Economy. Each of these were divided by location in the region, with suggestions targeted to the needs in the local community. Some of the key areas of strategic focus include:

- Increase the wireless capabilities and improve the digital infrastructure throughout the region. Make Columbus a Gigabit city and improve the reliability and access throughout the region.

- Develop and build the local small business and government capacity for the effective use of websites.

- Support small businesses in their efforts to use digital resources.

- Encourage an export economy to use Digital Economy tools to reach customers to produce and sell goods throughout the state and beyond.

- Improve communication throughout the region to help new residents and visitors find resources, events and places that will enhance their visit or ease their move to the area.

- Make changes in Columbus to focus on the recruitment and retention of top engineering talent. Focus on livability and what is needed in Columbus to make it a more attractive destination for talented workers the employers in Columbus need to attract.

- Continue the education efforts to train residents on basic computer skills as well as higher level programing skills throughout the region.

- Develop a Makerspace in Columbus to encourage entrepreneurial activity and serve as a gathering place for people to develop new ideas.

- Expand capital sources throughout the region. Work to create a source of venture capital in Columbus.

Survey Results

In two online surveys, we asked respondents to identify how they accessed the Internet, and what types of activities they engaged in online.

Over 200 responses were collected from throughout the region, and a full analysis of the responses can be found as a part of the Digital Economy plan.

In addition, respondents were asked what additional training they needed. Specific training was requested in the following categories: Website Development, Microsoft Office, Social Media, Smartphone / Mobile Devices, and Networking

For more information on the Digital Economy, contact Jim Livingston at:

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Urban Strategic Focus Areas					
Urban Workforce - Strategy	**Key Implementation Activities**	**Target Year to Complete**	**Responsible Parties**	**Cost Estimate**	**Possible Funding Sources**
Recruiting and Retaining Talent	Data Study, including decision on Quality of Life metrics to collect regularly	2014	River Valley Regional Commission (RVRC), Chamber	$15,000	EDA
	Livability study of Columbus. Create list of livability awards to target and measurements for progress	2015	RVRC, Chamber, Development Authority	$50,000	Private sector
	Local promotion campaign, including advertising outside market	2016	Chamber, City, Tourism Authority, Presidential Pathways, GDEcD	$150,000	Convention and Visitors Bureau
	Separate talent attraction initiative for targeted in-demand individuals	2015	Major city employers	$100,000	AFLAC, TSYS, CSU, Synovus, Carmike, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Pratt Whitney, hospitals
Promote Local Innovation	Support City Village initiative to create Design and Technology district	2015-2016	City	$150,000	CDBG funding to ensure infrastructure is adequate for coming plans for the community.
	Create Makerspace for Columbus. Also explore entrepreneurial flex space for new start-up businesses	2015	RVRC, Chamber, Makerspace Initiative	$100,000	GTA, Crowdfunding Campaign, Community Foundation, CSU
Continue Education Efforts	Adult training continued for basic computer skills as well as advanced programing.	2014-2018	Library, Technical College, CSU, WIA	$10,000	Columbus Tech, CSU Continuing Education, Chattahoochee Library system, private universities, WIA Board
	Market study to see where training holes are for technical college and university computer training	2015	Library, Technical College, CSU	$10,000	EDA, Columbus Tech, CSU
	Advertising campaign to get word out about availability of digital skills training	2016	Library, Technical College, CSU	$10,000	Columbus Tech, CSU, Chamber
	School district digital training effort continued	2014-2018	Muscogee County School District (MCSD)	$10,000	MCSD, Columbus Tech, Major Employers
	Investment in faculty training to enhance digital learning skills for students	2014-2016	MCSD	$10,000	MCSD, Columbus Tech, Major Employers
	Use programing efforts such as MIT Scratch Pad to allow students to learn basic programing skills	2014-2018	MCSD	$1,000	MCSD, Columbus Tech, Major Employers
	Make it easier for newcomers to integrate into the community by encouraging a welcoming and inclusive environment. Civic groups reach out on a regular basis to bring newcomers into the fold. Use Meetup, Facebook or other online tools to establish links	2015	Chamber, City, Tourism Authority, civic group in Columbus	$0	Civic organizations
	Improve mid-level communication between companies. Encourage more events and activities like Technology Association of Georgia (TAG), the Dragon Boat races or local sports league. Use local live-work amenities like whitewater, zip line, or high ropes course at Callaway Gardens.	2016	Chamber, City, Parks and Rec.	$0	Uptown Columbus, CVB, Major employers, TAG, civic organizations

Urban Strategic Focus Areas		Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
	Improve Communication	Create a curated community information Kiosk downtown that lists not only organizational community events, but has space for community groups to add their information. Make this a center point for residents and visitors alike. Make it well designed, centrally located and provide the image of a successful and technologically sound city.	2015	Uptown Columbus	$65,000	GDEcD tourism grant, Special Purpose taxing district
		Organize joint events/opportunities for new residents and employees	2015-2019	Chamber, City, Parks and Rec.	$50,000	Chamber, local civic organizations
		Develop clearer online and printed events calendar - and ensure advertised adequately	2014	Ledger Inquirer, All Over the Valley, monthly local periodicals	$50,000	GDEcD, Advertising dollars to support
	Support Small Businesses	Discussions about website design and implementation. Demystify websites and social media.	2014-2019	SBDC, Chamber, Creative South	$5,000	GDEcD
		Identify resources to help improve functionality of websites and reach to desired market	2015	SBDC, DCA, State Tourism office	$5,000	GDEcD
		Discuss design as important component of overall marketing. Use Creative South event to help promote importance of good design. (see plan for more information on Creative South)	2015	Creative South, Chamber	$5,000	GDEcD

Urban Infrastructure	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Build further network capabilities	Become a Gigabit city - note public relations and marketing value in doing so	2016	City, Service Providers	$10,000	Service Providers, new customers for the service.
	Become a wireless downtown to promote usage of and availability of high speed data	2017	Uptown Columbus, service providers	$200,000	GDEcD, Downtown businesses
	Discuss business needs for uploading and downloading files and business case for data.	2015	Chamber	$0	Local businesses, Columbus Tech, CSU
Make infrastructure improvements	Light east/west line to create fiber redundancy to Macon and Montgomery (existing north/south line is primary long mile connection)	2017	Windstream	$10,000	State and Federal funds, Service providers, major businesses
	Create mayoral committee on Digital Infrastructure with service providers, political leaders and business leaders to identify and create city center to create timeline and responses to changing technology and community needs	2017	City	$5,000	City funds
	Create ordinance to 'Dig Once'. That will ensure that road improvements or utilities that redo street surfaces provide opportunity for installation or maintenance of broadband networks	2016	City	$10,000	City staff time
	Ensure development process for wireless infrastructure (both new and upgraded infrastructure) is clear and predictable.	2016	City	$10,000	City staff time, service providers

Urban Capital	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties		Possible Funding Sources
Venture Capital source developed	Work with Chattahoochee Valley Foundation to establish venture capital fund for local community	2015	Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley, RVRC, Chamber, Private entity	$750,000	Individuals, Business community
	Develop capacity locally to assist long-term with start-up ventures, extending their burn rates for capital and assisting with the hurdles they face as necessary	2016	State, SBDC, Cunningham Center	$100,000	State

	Action	Year	Partners	Cost	Funding Source
	Hold fundraiser to raise seed funding	2016	Chattahoochee Foundation, RVRC, Chamber	$35,000	Knight Foundation
Build capital source	Local businesses, especially publicly traded companies, support expansion initiatives	2017	Local publicly traded companies	$10,000	
	Use RVRC business loan capacity to fund one digital company	2017	RVRC	$150,000	EDA loan fund
	Discuss expansion efforts with city, community foundation	2016	RVRC, City, businesses, Chattahoochee Foundation	$10,000	RVRC local funds
Expand capital sources	Establish links to Atlanta, Silicon Valley, New York	2015	Chamber, local businesses	$50,000	Chamber, local civic organizations
	Establish standing presence in the capital centers to help identify business recruitment candidates and outside investment sources for existing businesses.	2017	City, chamber, local businesses	$150,000	
	Develop recruiting effort for capital	2016	Chamber, Valley Partnership, Development Authority	$150,000	
	Offer locations and incentives for business relocation - especially targeting second generation back office companies	2016-2017	Chamber, Development Authority	$200,000	Development Authority incentives

TOTAL   **$2,641,000**

Rural Center Workforce - Strategy	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Continue Education Efforts	Adult training continued for basic computer skills as well as advanced programing.	ongoing	Library, Technical College, GSW, Dalton College	$10,000	Service Providers, new customers for the service.
	Advertising campaign to get word out about availability of digital skills training	2016	Library, Technical College, GSW, Dalton College	$5,000	USDA
	School district digital training effort continued	2018	School Districts	$5,000	School Districts
	Investment in faculty training to enhance digital learning skills for students	ongoing	School Districts	$5,000	
	Use programing efforts such as MIT Scratch Pad to allow students to learn basic programing skills	ongoing	School Districts	$1,000	
Small business support	Discussions about website design and implementation. Demystify websites and social media.	ongoing	RVRC	$15,000	GDEcD, USDA
	Identify resources to help improve functionality of websites and reach to promote an export market - to get goods and services outside of the region	2015	SBDC, DCA, State Tourism office	$10,000	GDEcD
	Discuss design as important component of overall marketing. Use Creative South event to help promote importance of good design. (see plan for more information on Creative South)	2015	Creative South, Chambers	$15,000	GDEcD, USDA

Rural Center Infrastructure	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Build better network capabilities	Get high speed internet in all town and city limits. Promote usage	2016	City, Service Providers	$150,000	Service Providers, new customers for the service.
	Promote downtown networks to show usage of and availability of high speed data	2017	cities/towns, service providers	$120,000	
	Discuss business needs for uploading and downloading files and business case for increasing data speeds.	2015	Chamber	$10,000	
Make infrastructure improvements	Continue to upgrade systems to improve speed and reliability of network	2017	City, Service Providers	$50,000	
	Create ordinance to 'Dig Once'. That will ensure that road improvements or utilities that redo street surfaces provide opportunity for installation or maintenance of broadband networks	2016	City	$5,000	City staff time
	Ensure development process for wireless infrastructure (both new and upgraded infrastructure) is clear and predictable.	2016	City	$5,000	City staff time

Rural Center Capital	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Identify capital source	Work with local businesses support expansion initiatives	2017	Chambers	$5,000	
	Use RVRC business loan capacity to fund one digital company	2017	RVRC	$150,000	
	Discuss expansion efforts with city, chamber	2016	City, businesses	$5,000	
Expand capital sources	Establish closer links to Atlanta, Columbus, Macon	2015	Chamber, local businesses	$15,000	
	Work to identify import/export related uses to expand usage of Cordele Inland Port	2017	City, chamber, local businesses	$20,000	
	Develop tourism capacity	2016-2017	Chamber, local businesses, Tourism Development Authority	$10,000	

TOTAL   **$602,000**

Rural Center Strategic Focus Areas

Rural Strategic Focus Areas	Rural Workforce - Strategy	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
	Continue Education Efforts	Adult training continued for basic computer skills as well as advanced programing.	ongoing	Library, Technical College, GSW, Dalton College	$10,000	
		Advertising campaign to get word out about availability of digital skills training	2016	Library, Technical College, GSW, Dalton College	$30,000	
		School district digital training effort continued	2018	School Districts	$5,000	
		Investment in faculty training to enhance digital learning skills for students	ongoing	School Districts	$5,000	
		Use programing efforts such as MIT Scratch Pad to allow students to learn basic programing skills	ongoing	School Districts	$1,000	
	Small business support	Discussions about website design and implementation. Demystify websites and social media.	ongoing	RVRC, Chambers	$15,000	GDEcD
		Identify resources to help improve functionality of websites and reach to desired market	2015	SBDC, DCA, State Tourism office	$10,000	GDEcD
		Discuss design as important component of overall marketing. Use Creative South event to help promote importance of good design. (see plan for more information on Creative South)	2015	Creative South, Chambers	$15,000	GDEcD

Rural Infrastructure	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Increase Wireless Capacity	Fill gaps in wireless service in region. Study capacity and network analysis to determine steps.	ongoing	Communities, Service Providers	$50,000	
	Encourage wireless broadband service	ongoing	Communities, Service Providers	$15,000	
Build better network capabilities	Advertise fiber availability to existing and new businesses	2016	Cities, Service Providers	$10,000	Service Providers, new customers for the service.
	Make sure system is upgraded for reliability. Understand and outline steps to be taken if there is a system problem	2017	Cities, Service Providers	$50,000	
	Discuss business needs for uploading and downloading files and business case for increasing data speeds.	2015	Chamber	$10,000	
Make infrastructure improvements	Continue to upgrade systems to improve speed and reliability of network	2017	City	$5,000	
	Create ordinance to 'Dig Once'. That will ensure that road improvements or utilities that redo street surfaces provide opportunity for installation or maintenance of broadband networks	2016	City	$10,000	City staff time
	Ensure development process for wireless infrastructure (both new and upgraded infrastructure) is clear and predictable.	2016	City	$10,000	City staff time

Rural Capital	Key Implementation Activities	Target Year to Complete	Responsible Parties	Cost Estimate	Possible Funding Sources
Expand capital sources	Establish closer links to Atlanta, Columbus, Macon	2015	Chamber, local businesses	$15,000	
	Work to identify import/export related uses to expand usage of Cordele Inland Port	2017	Communities, chamber, local businesses	$20,000	
	Encourage export economies	2017	Communities, chamber, local businesses	$20,000	
	Develop tourism capacity	2016-2017	Chamber, local businesses, Tourism Development Authority	$20,000	
Encourage government usage	Build better and more functional e-government websites for better communication	2017	local governments	$100,000	

TOTAL   **$426,000**