2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

River Valley Regional Commission
The 2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the River Valley Region of West-Central Georgia
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In the effort to provide a complete picture of the Region’s economy, a CEDS is a five-year plan that outlines a strategy to diversify and strengthen its economic core. The CEDS provides an opportunity for the public and private sector to collaborate to identify potential areas of growth and develop goals and objectives to address these areas. This CEDS draws information from local governments in the 16 county River Valley, local economic development practitioners, local economic development plans, and residents of the region. A CEDS Strategy Committee has been created to help guide the process.

The Federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) places particular requirements on the format of the CEDS. This includes Strength and Weaknesses of a region, Goals and Objectives, and a list of Vital Projects that rise to the top as regional priorities. While all these technical requirements are important, this document is primarily designed to be an easily accessible and comprehensible planning guide for the region for the next 5 years. This document will make extensive use of hyperlinks and references to data and other sources for background information.

This report aims to provide a complete picture of the Region’s economy giving context to potential areas of growth. Through research, analysis and stakeholder participation this document will help the region grow by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The goal of this report is to guide regional economic development efforts and to help meet its goals in order to grow prosperous communities.
Local Economic Development Plans

In developing a comprehensive strategy, we integrate plans that are developed locally throughout our region. There is a noticeable difference from when our last CEDS was developed five years ago. At that time, we had two ground-breaking local plans being developed that strategized a pathway to economic growth. Since we lack new economic development plans on a grand scale as described below, we have an opportunity for our governmental community partners to begin thinking about the development of new plans. As also identified in our 2018 CEDS, we have communities that have taken an action-based approach to improving and retaining economic development, which are described below.

Columbus has a mission to make the area a better place to live, learn, work, visit and do business. The Columbus 2025 Economic Development Plan for the Columbus area has cultivated local participation, leadership, and ownership in working groups dedicated to the following priorities: 1- Talented, Educated People, 2- Targeted Economic Growth, 3- An Enterprising Culture, 4- Vibrant and Connected Places, and 5- A Cohesive Image and Identity, and 6- Equity and Economic Mobility. The work of these groups will serve as a model for other counties to learn best practices.

Sumter County, a county of just 32,000 residents, has raised more than $1 million for their One Sumter Initiative. One Sumter leverages the investment of its donors to build community collaboratives to tackle systematic challenges related to growth. This initiative includes a new branding campaign for Sumter County, as well as the communities of Americus (including its historic downtown), Plains, Leslie, Andersonville, and DeSoto – a remarkable example of communities working together and investing in their home. Their marketing campaign has been heard state-wide on Georgia Public Broadcasting, and it is working. Their visitor numbers are up.

The first important commonality in all these local plans is that communities are developing ongoing initiatives to continue progress by evaluation and adaptation to changing needs. The second important commonality is that the local plans are achievable and realistic. These plans serve as models for self-reliance and economic resiliency, and their findings underpin this Regional CEDS.
About the Region

The River Valley region is home to the second largest city in Georgia, as well as some of the poorest and smallest rural counties in the southeastern United States. The region is home to a former U.S. president and a world-class whitewater course. Columbus is a major metropolitan city, with headquarters for 3 Fortune 1000 companies (TSYS, AFLAC, and Synovus). Ft. Benning is a major employer with more than a quarter of the regional workforce employed on post. The rest of the region is classified as rural, but Americus and Cordele have become important centers of secondary education, healthcare, and retail. Other counties in the region have important businesses but are often reliant on these centers of gravity for services, shopping, and jobs.

Please see HERE for data to support this CEDS and for more information on each county and the aggregate region.

Regional Strengths

The region was surveyed in the summer of 2022 to get an understanding of the perceptions of economic strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities. One hundred and seventy-nine (179) regional citizens completed the survey for the River Valley Region. A thorough analysis of the survey and individual written responses are available HERE.

The region overall identified the following as its top three strengths:

• Community leadership
• Tourism assets
• Place-based economic development incentives
Columbus identified the following as top three strengths:

- Infrastructure (water, sewer, roads, etc.)
- Tourism Assets
- Strong Existing Businesses

Sumter and Crisp Counties (Americus and Cordele) are analyzed separately because of their roles as centers of rural activity. Their strengths were identified as:

- Local Healthcare Facilities
- Tourism Assets
- Strong existing business

Other counties in the region identified rural top three strengths as:

- Transportation
- Community Leadership
- Tourism Assets

The survey was also distributed 5 years ago. The notable changes from the previous survey were:

- Increase in community leadership in our more rural areas
- Decrease in local health care facilities
- Increase in Tourism Assets
Top regional weaknesses were identified. Most interesting among the identified weaknesses was a change in perceptions from a similar survey taken in 2017. New results show that the region has greater faith in its schools and healthcare facilities, indicating that work done recently to address these issues is paying off.

Top Regional Weaknesses identified through the survey were concerns over:

- Housing Options
- Transportation Network
- A well-trained workforce

Columbus identified their top three weaknesses as:

- Transportation Network
- Renewable Energy Potential
- A well-trained workforce

Sumter and Crisp Counties (Americus and Cordele) are analyzed separately because of their roles as centers of rural activity. Their perceived weaknesses were identified as:

- Housing Options
- Strong Community Leadership
- Well-Trained Workforce

Other counties in the region identified the following as the rural top three weaknesses:

- Housing options
- Transportation Network
- Well-Trained Workforce

Notable changes from the previous 2017 survey were:

- Increase in weak housing options
- Increase in weak existing businesses
- Increase in weak well-trained workforce
- Increase in the lack of a strong transportation network
Regional Infrastructure

Infrastructure is an important component of Economic Development. Without land and resources to build businesses, nothing can happen. The region is rich in natural resources, and companies are able to extract those resources from solar energy, hydro-electric power, mining, forestry, farming and even recreation resources. The region is well served by rail with mainline tracks used by CSX and Norfolk Southern as well as two major railyards and shortline track owned by GDOT and operated by Genesse and Wyoming.

There are excellent north-south connections in the region by both road (I-75, US Hwy 27, State Hwy 520 or Corridor ‘Z’) and rail (CSX and Norfolk Southern). East-west connections are more limited (State Hwy 96 is four lanes, but US Hwy 280 and 82 are both two lanes through much of the region and can become congested with farm equipment and truck traffic). Passed in May, the Regional Transportation Investment Act provides funding for improvements to US Hwy 280. The Heart of Georgia short line rail also needs substantial investment both within and to the east of the region.

Natural gas is available in many communities as well as sufficient capacity for water and sewer. Fiber connectivity is becoming more available in the region. This map outlines what resources are available by each county in the region. In order to get strong businesses to expand or locate to a county, sufficient land resources are needed. This also means sufficient infrastructure to support these businesses. These are the known industrial parks in the region owned by local or regional development authorities. Getting several of these sites Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) certified or turn-key ready for development is one of the listed vital projects for this plan.

Source: Georgia Power Economic Development
July 2011
Problems and Opportunities

This image highlights how problems and challenges in the region can become exciting opportunities for economic growth. These areas are interconnected, so our analysis combined these responses. Since the 2017 survey, which was distributed 5 years ago, we have experienced major change on a regional and national level. Recovering from the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, our region’s economy has unique opportunities for growth. We have to be strategic in taking advantage of our issues. Today’s vacant main streets, for example, have the potential to be tomorrow’s opportunities.

Twenty twenty-two (2022) survey results of perceived threats and opportunities are listed below. Most notable was an increase in regional concern over affordable housing, lack of labor force, flight of the younger generation and vacant mainstreets and town centers.

The top opportunities were:
- Access to Transportation (Air, Highway, and Rail)
- Available Land
- Attractive Communities and Quality of Life
- Availability of Water Resources

Columbus’ top regional opportunities were identified as:
- Vital Mainstreet or Downtown
- Specific demographic groups
- Availability of water resources

Sumter and Crisp included the top regional opportunities as:
- Main Street/Downtown
- Tourism attractions, including agritourism
- Access to transportation (air, highway and rail)

Other counties included the top opportunities plus:
- Access to Transportation (Air, Highway, and Rail)
- Natural Resource Base
- Availability of water resources
Regional Resiliency

Regional resiliency is the ability of a community to absorb disturbance, adapting to changing circumstances and still retaining basic function and structure. The economic and social contexts vary throughout our region, therefore building regional resiliency should be viewed as a multi-pronged approach. With that in mind, we have identified six foundations of building and maintaining a resilient region which are:

- **People.** The power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with community members.
- **Diversified Economy.** Not being dependent on one or a few areas of industry gives us an essential tool to be able to adapt through foreseeable and unforeseen circumstances.
- **Systems thinking.** Systems thinking is essential for understanding the complex, interrelated crises now unfolding and what they mean for our similarly complex communities.
- **Adaptability.** A community that adapts to change is resilient. But because communities and the challenges we face are dynamic, adaptation is an ongoing process.
- **Transformability.** Some challenges are so big that it’s not possible for the community to simply adapt; fundamental, transformative changes may be necessary.
- **Sustainability.** Community resilience is not sustainable if it serves only us, and only now; it needs to work for other communities, future generations, and the ecosystems on which we all depend.
- **Courage.** As individuals and as a community, we need courage to confront challenging issues and take responsibility for our collective future.

Resiliency is something that the River Valley Region has had to rely on for both economic and environmental disasters. This map shows both in various parts of the region.

The most recent example of our region having to adapt to a disaster can be seen through the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic effects that our region experienced were unprecedented and those effects are still prevalent, especially in our rural communities. We were forced to rely on those foundations of resiliency to retain and build back our economy through initiatives established with the responsible use of financial assistance provided to us through federal and state programs. Here are four other well-known examples of natural and economic disasters that have struck the region, and what communities have done to recover.

In Americus, the 2005 tornado that destroyed the local hospital was a disaster that required local resiliency and quick action to rebuild a new, better hospital for the community and region. Pheobe Sumter hospital was reborn as a state-of-the art facility to serve both Sumter County and the surrounding region.

In Montezuma, flooding on the Flint River was considered one of the deadliest and most destructive floods in history. The community rallied and are continuing to rebuild their downtown area.

The community of Cuthbert was nearly destroyed by a tornado in 1909 that toppled several buildings in their downtown area. This was a disaster that severely stunted the community’s economic and population growth for decades. Mill closings in Columbus and throughout the region pose a different type of disaster that a community must be resilient to recover from. The closure of mills in Columbus and elsewhere resulted in a loss of 53% of all manufacturing jobs in the region from 2000 to 2017. This has been a difficult transition, but new and retrained workers are filling jobs in IT, Call Centers and other employers in Columbus and the region.
CEDS Goals and Objectives

There are two basic goals for this CEDS. These goals focus on maximizing the potential for people and place in the River Valley region.

- Develop the People Resources of the Region
- Sustain and Improve the Land Assets of the Region

All objectives of the CEDS can be broken into these two goals. Helping people achieve their potential and having the land assets that can match the needs of the region to maximize utilization and gain economic growth.

The objectives of the region are:

- Provide quality, genuine places and experiences for visitors
- Assist the Workforce of the region gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for regional jobs in the 21st Century
- Support the Recruitment, Retention and Expansion of Businesses in the region
- Assist the region in sustaining and improving Quality of Life
- Foster Community Leadership
- Support Agriculture
- Improve Infrastructure
- Support Downtown Improvements
- Improve Housing Stock
- Assist the Region in improving Access to Broadband and High-Speed Internet
Regional Action Plan

At the heart of the CEDS is the proposed Action Plan. Below are some of the highlighted actions in this CEDS. The full Action Plan is HERE.

Provide quality, genuine places and experiences for visitors

• Encourage participation in regional tourism entities (Presidential Pathways, Plantation Trace and associated tourism associations)
• Encourage, support and advertise regional festivals and events that attract local residents and Atlanta Metro residents
• Encourage and expand existing cultural arts in the region
• Train frontline workers about the assets of the region

Assist the Region’s Workforce in Gaining the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Necessary for Regional Jobs in the 21st Century

• Establish connections with local employers to ensure that skills needed are addressed in workforce training initiatives
• Facilitate and encourage programs within the local school systems – Dual Enrollment/Move On When Ready
• Support the transition from military to civilian jobs
• Encourage apprenticeships and internships for businesses to teach high school and college aged students; develop region-wide mentoring programs to include internships and apprenticeships

Support the Recruitment, Retention and Expansion of Businesses in the Region

• Support local and regional development authorities by providing technical assistance, information on tax credits, low interest loans and other incentives as requested
• Explore and support local economic development plans; provide technical assistance where needed.
• Support mission and continued work of Fort Benning
• Identify and utilize existing Revolving Loan Funds available in the region to partner with traditional financing sources to encourage local investment

Assist the Region in Sustaining and improving Quality of Life

• Look for ways to improve practices of addressing quality of life issues
• Implement Code Enforcement in the community
• Create and enhance spaces that are high in quality and that are people-oriented attractions

Foster Community Leadership

• Provide information and resources on best practices online and through newsletters and other communication tools
• Provide lunch and learn opportunities to learn best community leadership practices
• Support statewide, Region 8, and local entities leadership programs
• Develop stronger communication system to get information distributed

Support Agriculture

• Support the development of value added agricultural products
• Support local grown and farm to market economy
• Improve agricultural land usage and support the increased utilization of land resources and programs in the region

Improve Infrastructure

• Identify and promote industrial parks in the region, including virtual parks/virtual buildings and viable development authorities to support business retention and expansion
• Improve East-West connections for road and rail
• Get three industrial parks listed as GRAD certified sites
Regional Action Plan

Support Downtown Improvements

- Use and support Main Street program and model throughout the region
- Encourage infill development in our downtowns
- Allow pop-up stores in empty storefronts

Improve Housing Stock

- Support code enforcement, nuisance ordinances and zoning laws throughout the region
- Encourage increased usage of Land Banks education
- Eliminate substandard housing

Maintain Environmental Integrity in the Region

- Support regional representation in tristate water issues along ACF waterways
- Encourage Brownfield redevelopment

Assist the Region in improving Access to Broadband and High-Speed Internet

- Expand broadband readiness
- Incorporate broadband initiatives in local & regional plans
- Educate communities on the importance of aligning infrastructure investments for broadband expansion
Performance and Evaluation Matrix

Statistical measures and projected outcomes can be found with the Action Items, but it must be noted that the statistical measures in particular are reliant on outside economic forces that the region has no control over. We will continue to update economic statistics for the region, but a 5 year CEDS will not appreciably change the macro-economic forces that impact our region.

One measure though that we can take is of our own capacity. First is of our ability to communicate throughout the region. Our ability to train community leadership and set the stage for manufacturing and industrial growth through infrastructure investment, and the number of times we work as a region to spread news and best practices.

It is also imperative that a region includes an analysis of the resources available for future growth, such as available industrial sites or buildings. Business support services can be another beneficial measure of economic growth, shown by either public or private investors investing locally. Most commonly, the ability to take these investments varies greatly from one community to another, but nonetheless, the most important factor is the willingness and the commitment to investing locally is a precursor to nearly all large-scale economic development projects.

The measures mentioned are all helpful tools for EDA having a positive impact on the River Valley region. As noted, the region is behind the curve in comparison to the state of Georgia and the rest of the country on many measures regarding the standard measures of a growing economic force. On the other hand, the region is showing positive trends towards a continuing lower unemployment rate. The goals of the region are to develop people resources in the region, and sustain and improve the land assets of the region. If continued growth towards these goals and objectives laid out in the CEDS occurs, the River Valley region will be developing a stronger case for progress.

About the Development of This CEDS

As alluded to throughout the document, the RVRC used three different groups and existing economic development plans to develop this CEDS. The first base group was the general public through a survey instrument that was distributed in the summer of 2022. The CEDS Steering Committee is the second group that has guided this process for several years. A list of the steering committee members and minutes from these meetings can be found HERE.

Also critical to the development of the CEDS was the input from Economic Development professionals from around the region. All were kept up to date with the CEDS process, especially with the goals, objectives, and action items for the region. A list of the region’s economic development professionals are included HERE.