



LEE-RUSSELL
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

**Lee and Russell Counties
2021-2026**

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LEE-RUSSELL
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RESOLUTION NO. 23-01

**AUTHORIZING RESOLUTION FOR THE ADOPTION OF THE UPDATED COMPREHENSIVE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR LEE AND RUSSELL COUNTIES**

WHEREAS, the Lee-Russell Council of Governments developed a 5-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Lee and Russell Counties and;

WHEREAS, the approval and adoption of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Lee and Russell Counties by the Lee-Russell Council Board of Directors is required by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) and will be utilized to strengthen efforts to secure Federal funding for projects in the two-county Region that have a particular focus and impact on economic development, particularly projects that will benefit economically distressed areas and;

WHEREAS, following the adoption of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Lee and Russell Counties, the Lee-Russell Council of Governments will request designation of the Lee-Russell region as an Economic Development District by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development District and;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Directors of the Lee-Russell Council of Governments hereby approves and adopts the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Lee and Russell Counties for the period of 2021-2026.

ADOPTED AND APPROVED by the Lee-Russell Council of Governments Board of Directors, this 3rd day of November 2022.

CERTIFICATION

The undersigned duly qualified and acting Executive Director of the Lee-Russell Council of Governments certifies that the foregoing is a true and correct copy of a resolution, adopted at a legally convened meeting of the Board of Directors held on November 3, 2022.

Signature:

Lisa Sandt
Executive Director
Lee-Russell Council of Governments

Attest:

Donna R. Rowell
Finance Clerk
Lee-Russell Council of Governments

Executive Summary

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the Lee and Russell County region focuses on identifying the region's strengths and weaknesses to set strategies focused on sustainable economic development. Our strategy committee identified key concerns that impact our local and regional economies such as: recessions, pandemics, lack of infrastructure in rural areas, "brain drain," natural disasters, internal competition for workforce, a lack of variety of housing options and low wages. The strategy committee worked together to craft strategies to mitigate these weaknesses and foster sustainable growth in the economy.

The CEDS is a regional document that will focus on economic development strategies to benefit the seven jurisdictions in Lee and Russell counties. The plan examines four key areas in a summary background: infrastructure and transportation, economic and workforce development, healthy communities, cultural, recreation & environmental resources. The CEDS will identify the region's top economic priorities while promoting regional collaboration.

The CEDS Strategy Committee is comprised of individuals from the region representing economic development, tourism, chambers of commerce, workforce development, education, and other key stakeholders. The role of the committee was to craft strategies based on the input received from the public and other stakeholders. In January 2021, the committee met to create a SWOT analysis, which is used to identify the internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats of the region. These elements were used to research the effect on the region from each of the four summary background sections identified previously – infrastructure and transportation, economic development and workforce development, healthy communities, and cultural, recreation & environmental resources.

Our vision for the CEDS is to provide the region with a roadmap that offers specific strategies to tackle weaknesses, combat threats, seize opportunities and support strengths. Each strategy provides recommendations that support the goal as well as address the evaluation of each strategy once complete.

The CEDS will be updated on an annual basis by LRCOG staff and the CEDS Strategy Committee, to review performance measures and include changes in the economic status of the region.

Lee-Russell Region Summary Background

The purpose of this section is to provide a background summary of the Lee and Russell County region, located in East Alabama. Information pertaining to the region’s demographic and economic profiles can be found in this background. The information in this section will form the basis for the SWOT analysis, Strategic Direction/Action Plan, Evaluation Framework, and Economic Resilience sections in the following pages.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics

The Lee-Russell Region includes Lee and Russell Counties in Alabama. The region is home to the Auburn-Opelika Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and the Columbus, GA-AL MSA which includes Phenix City. The urbanized areas of Auburn, Opelika, Phenix City, and Smiths Station are home to more than 134,000 residents, while the rural areas have around 86,620 residents. Lee and Russell counties are semi-rural, predominantly composed of evergreen forest, deciduous forest, pasture, and urban areas. Lee County has a larger urban footprint than Russell County due to the size of Auburn and Opelika. Russell County is completely rural except for Phenix City. The largest urban area in the Lee-Russell Region is Auburn with a population of 65,508, which continues to be a fast-growing metropolitan area in the East Central portion of Alabama. Based on data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau the area grew by 16% from 2010 to 2020 which outpaced the State’s 4% growth. Our region’s largest growth during that same period occurred in Auburn (22%), Opelika (15%), and Phenix City (13%), which means that these areas continued to expand their urban footprint.

Population Trends				
	2010	2015	2020	2010-2020 Percent Change
Lee County	135,010	150,982	163,461	17%
City of Auburn	51,057	58,693	65,508	22%
City of Opelika	25,867	28,544	30,589	15%
Russell County	51,663	58,302	57,938	11%
City of Phenix City	31,704	36,639	36,461	13%
Total Region Population	186,673	209,284	221,399	16%
Alabama Population	4,712,651	4,830,620	4,893,186	4%
<i>ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles</i>				

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the working age population is defined as those between the ages of 15 and 64. Both Lee and Russell County have a higher percentage of the population between those ages compared to Alabama. The highest population percentage for both Lee and Russell County is between the ages of 15 and 39, 41.7% and 33.4% respectively. This means that the largest portion of our region's potential workforce is younger; giving our region a competitive advantage against other areas that may have an older workforce.

2020 Population by Age						
	Lee County		Russell County		Alabama	
	Total Population	Percent of Population	Total Population	Percent of Population	Total Population	Percent of Population
Under 15	28,842	17.6%	11,845	20.4%	903,912	18.5%
15 to 39	68,189	41.7%	19,337	33.4%	1,588,539	32.5%
40 to 64	46,720	28.6%	18,475	31.9%	1,573,301	32.2%
65 and Older	19,710	12.1%	8,281	14.3%	827,434	16.9%

ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles

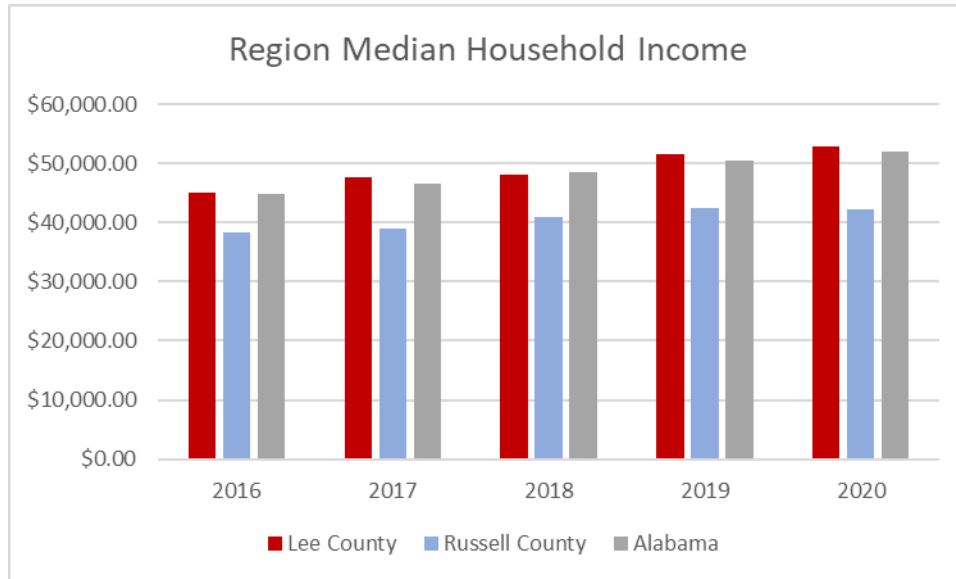
Poverty

The region's poverty rate has been stable since 2012. Most jurisdictions in the region have poverty rates that hover between 20% and 31%. Of the major jurisdictions, the City of Auburn has the largest population living in poverty, which might be attributed to the higher cost of living. It is important to note that prior to 2020, students were not typically included in the data collected by the Census or ACS. Smiths Station has the lowest poverty rate in the region.

Median Income

The region's total median household income has continued to increase from \$83,456 in 2016 to \$95,138 in 2020. Lee County's median household income has increased by 14.9% since 2016, rising to \$52,930. This outpaces the State of Alabama's 13.9% change from 2016 to 2020. Russell County, on the other hand, has remained behind the State's median household income over the past 5 years. In 2020, Russell County's median household income was \$42,208, which

was a 9% change from the County's 2016 median household income of \$38,400. Russell County's largest annual increase in median household income was in 2018, a 4.9% increase from 2017, while Lee County's largest increase was in 2019 with a 6.6% increase from 2018. Russell County's median household income declined by 0.6% between 2019 and 2020, likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Regional Unemployment and Underemployment

Unemployment trends for Lee and Russell counties have mirrored each other since the 1990's, but Russell County's unemployment rate typically stays 1-2% higher than Lee County. A healthy unemployment rate is 4%- 5%, anything below that number is dangerous because it suggests the economy is reaching capacity. Since 1990, the .com bubble and the Great Recession of 2009 were the causes of the largest unemployment percentages, during which unemployment for Lee County reached 9.5% and Russell County 12.5%. Since the peak in 2009, unemployment has been trending downwards, but all recovery was lost due to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

Underemployment represents the number of individuals who are in the workforce but are overqualified for the job they hold. These people do not use their skills or education to the fullest ability. According to the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama, "underemployment occurs when (i) productivity growth, (ii) spousal employment and income, and (iii) family constraints or personal preferences" are found in an area (State of the Workforce Report XIII: Central Alabama Works, 2019). The presence of underemployment gives the regional economy a unique opportunity for more

advanced job creation and economic growth. When underemployed individuals seek out employment opportunities that align with their education, skills, or experience, those entry level jobs open to new workers. Lee County has an underemployment rate of 23.7% (17,733), while Russell County's is 37.5% (6,481). Based on the explanation of underemployment from the University of Alabama, it is believed that the presence of Auburn University and Fort Benning are two large factors that impact the underemployment rates in Lee and Russell counties.

Lee County has an available civilian labor force of 76,566 with 1,743 individuals unemployed. This gives the county an unemployment rate of 2.3%. The potential available labor pool for the county, which is calculated as the sum of unemployed and underemployed individuals, is 19,476. Russell County has an available civilian labor force of 17,818 with 551 individuals unemployed. This gives the county an unemployment rate of 3.1 (Source: LAUS data, County Unemployment Rates, Unemployment Data for Labor Force, Employment, Unemployment, and Unemployment Rate Data. Underemployment in Alabama WIA Areas 2018, Published January 2022, CBER @ UA, Underemployment and Available Labor Pool Data.)

Educational Attainment & Workforce Development

2019 Regional Workforce Characteristics		Lee County		Russell County	
	Count	Share	Count	Share	
Jobs by Worker Age					
Age 29 or younger	16,396	30.4%	3,127	24.8%	
Age 30 to 54	27,032	50.0%	6,729	53.5%	
Age 55 or older	10,591	19.6%	2,733	21.7%	
Jobs by Worker Educational Attainment					
Less than high school	5,022	9.3%	1,513	12.0%	
High school or equivalent, no college	10,956	20.3%	3,076	24.4%	
Some college or Associate degree	11,836	21.9%	3,144	25.0%	
Bachelor's degree or advanced degree	9,809	18.2%	1,729	13.7%	
Educational attainment not available	16,396	30.4%	3,127	24.8%	
Jobs by Worker Sex					
Male	26,415	48.9%	6,561	52.1%	
Female	27,604	51.1%	6,028	47.9%	
Jobs by Earnings					
\$1,250 per month or less	13,765	25.5%	2,755	21.9%	
\$1,251 to \$3,333 per month	19,310	35.7%	5,434	43.2%	
More than \$3,333 per month	20,944	38.8%	4,400	35.0%	
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics in Partnership with Alabama Department of Labor, Labor Market Information Division.</i>					

The level of education attained for the population of 25 years or older varies across the region. The City of Auburn has the largest population with a bachelors or a graduate degree (26.5%), which can be attributed to the proximity to Auburn University (2019 5-year Estimates American Community Survey). The City of Opelika (29.7%), followed by Phenix City (28.5%), has the largest portion of the population with only a high school diploma. The Town of Hurtsboro (7.5%), followed by Smiths Station (6.6%), has the largest portion of the population that has less than a 9th grade education. Overall, all jurisdictions have more than 50% of the population with some level of college education.

The labor markets in Lee and Russell County are different due to the variety of employers found in the region. Russell County has around 4,000 available workers in the labor pool, and Lee County has about 17,000. The available labor pool, in combination with a healthy or low unemployment, and a substantial underemployment rate helps keeps wages down due to the constant availability of workers. A large labor pool in a region creates little incentives to increase wages for workers, which can create issues when the cost of living is higher than the national average.

Workforce Development

Workforce development begins in the region's various school systems. Currently, every public high school in Lee and Russell County offers some form of career-technical training. After high school, those seeking to further their education in a trade can attend Southern Union Community College, Chattahoochee Valley Community College, or Troy University's Phenix City campus. In addition to these colleges, the region's educational system is anchored by Auburn University, which is ranked as the number one university in Alabama by the U.S. News and World Report. Auburn University also offers a number of continuing education programs to include the following:

- AUBURN TRAINING CONNECTION (ATC): Assists the training needs of area industry. ATC offers programs including Career Technical Education at Auburn High School, Dual Enrollment, and Industrial Maintenance Technology at Southern Union State Community College. The non-profit has been recognized nationally and internationally with awards in workforce development. ATC is managed is managed by the City's Economic Development Workforce division.
- AUBURN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER (ATAC): Assists businesses, industry, not-for-profits and government agencies learn how to improve

and enhance their competitiveness and efficiency through a variety of educational, training, consulting/outreach services. ATAC is Auburn University's affiliate of the Alabama Technology Network (ATN), Economic Development Administration University Center and the College of Business.

- ALABAMA INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING (AIDT): A division Alabama's Department of Commerce, AIDT encourages economic development through job-specific training. Services are offered at no cost to new and expanding businesses throughout the State. AIDT is the first state workforce training organization in the U.S. to earn international certification for its quality management system.

The City of Opelika's Economic Development Department places a high priority on workforce development utilizing several initiatives that help to educate and train current and future workers to support the labor needs of our companies. Whether it's through the new Opelika Career Path Internships (CPI) program that works with transitioning military members, veterans, and military spouses to identify internships and career opportunities or partnering with programs at Opelika City Schools and Southern Union State Community College, Opelika is in a great position to cultivate the talent needed in today's demanding job market. Some of those partnership programs include Ready to Work and We Build It Better at Opelika City Schools and Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education (F.A.M.E) on the Plains and Ascend at Southern Union.

The East Alabama Chamber of Commerce organizes a workforce development targeted action group (TAG) that meets throughout the year. This group is composed of local officials from the County and Phenix City as well as staff from the school systems and local businesses.

Infrastructure Assets

Transportation

The I-85 Corridor is a major interstate connecting five states in the Southeastern United States and is a connective thread in our region. I-85 begins in Montgomery, AL and terminates in Petersburg, VA, connecting cities such as Atlanta, GA, Greenville, SC, and Charlotte, NC. This major corridor acts as the main transportation path between the Port of Mobile and the East Coast. 17 miles of I-85 runs northwest in Lee County, through the City of Auburn and the City of Opelika, offering eight exits. Major highways located in the region are U.S. Highway 80, 280, and 431, which act as major avenues of transportation for both passenger cars and freight moving through the Southeast.

Unfortunately, the Lee-Russell region does not have its own commercial airport, forcing residents and visitors to travel in order to obtain this service. The cities of Columbus, GA and Montgomery, AL have the closest regional airports, but offer limited flight options. International air travel is provided by Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport (2:30 hours away) or by Hartfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (1:30 hours away). The Auburn University Regional Airport provides services to pilot students, university business, and private jets.

CSX is a major rail-based freight transportation company operating in the United States. The main transportation route for CSX runs from Montgomery, AL to the Atlantic coast in Wilmington, NC. The route follows I-85's path closely in Lee County, bisecting the City of Auburn, the City of Opelika, and the Town of Loachapoka. The Norfolk Southern Company transportation route connects Birmingham, AL to Savannah, GA by way of the City of Opelika and Phenix City, AL.

The Lee-Russell Region offers limited public transportation options for residents. There are providers in the region that offer demand-based public transportation for eligible clients, which is comprised of public and private entities. The options for public transportation are taxis, shuttles, or buses. Please refer to the Lee-Russell Council of Governments Human Services Coordinated Transportation Plan and the Long-Range Transportation Plan for more details.

Much of the region's transportation infrastructure is geared towards cars. There are some bicycle and pedestrian facilities, mostly in the downtown areas of Auburn, Opelika, and Phenix City. Improvements to the local public transit system and multimodal transportation infrastructure must continue to be improved to strengthen the region's resiliency.

Utilities

Electrical service in the Lee and Russell County region is provided by Alabama Power, Tallapoosa River Electric Cooperative, Opelika Power and Light, and Dixie Electric Cooperative. Natural Gas service is provided by Spire. Water service is provided by a mixture of municipal and county utility authorities. The cities of Auburn, Opelika, Smiths Station, and Phenix City offer public water and sewer service to their residents; however, the unincorporated areas rely on septic systems for sewer disposal. The lack of sewer can hinder economic development in rural areas because sewer is a service deemed necessary for business operations.

The City of Auburn, City of Opelika, City of Phenix City, City of Smiths Station, and the Town of Hurtsboro all provide sewer services to most of their residents. Typically, the rural areas of the counties and the fringes of some jurisdictions, do not provide sewer services to their residents. The region has continued to experience growth over the last 20 years, and the access to sewer directly impacts future development patterns. As jurisdictions expand their boundaries and services like sewer, future growth will continue to support suburban style development along the fringes of the jurisdictions.

Broadband

Access to reliable high-speed internet is necessary for day-to-day activities rather than a luxury commodity. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, people's lives, routines, or shopping habits changed because normal day-to-day activities such as school, working, grocery shopping, or doctor visits were moved online. People with limited or no access to broadband have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 because they did not have the opportunity to conduct daily life virtually. The urban areas such as Auburn, Opelika, Smiths Station and Phenix City have access to broadband, but this is not true for the persons living in the unincorporated rural areas of Lee and Russell counties. As of February 2020, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) requires internet speed of at least 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for upload speed. The lack of broadband hinders a region's ability to attract new employers since this service is required to conduct business today.

Industrial Parks

The cities of Auburn, Opelika, and Phenix City all have industrial parks with property available for future development. Lee and Russell counties do not have industrial parks, but, due to the lack of zoning in the unincorporated areas, these types of land uses are permitted anywhere. The region's only research park is located in the City of Auburn and focuses on "growing the research enterprise through new contracts and partnerships, translating applied research into commercialized opportunities and new business ventures, and providing an entrepreneurial business environment for them to prosper" (The Park at Auburn, 2021).

Economic Clusters

An economic base analysis was conducted to determine what industries produced a surplus of goods that were exported outside of the region. These industries help bring money into the region's economy. The analysis is completed by taking the ratio of a giving sector's local employment and

comparing that to the State's ratio. If the resulting location quotient is larger than 1, that industry is contributing to the growth of the local economy. The large number of industries contributing to the region's economic growth contributes to the region's economic resiliency. If an economic shock caused the decline of one industry, our region's economy would not fail due to our large economic base. To further ensure resiliency, regional leaders should promote growth within those industries that are not yet contributing to the region's economic growth.

What industries contribute to the region's economic growth?		
Industry (NAICS)	Lee County	Russell County
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	X	
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	X	
Utilities		
Construction	X	X
Manufacturing		X
Wholesale Trade		
Retail Trade	X	
Transportation and Warehousing	X	X
Information	X	
Finance and Insurance		X
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	X	X
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services		
Management of Companies and Enterprises		
Administration & Support, Waste Management and Remediation		
Educational Services	X	X
Health Care and Social Assistance		
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	X	
Accommodation and Food Services	X	X
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)		
Public Administration		

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (Beginning of Quarter Employment, 2nd Quarter of 2002-2018)

A shift-share analysis was conducted to determine what industries were growing or declining within the region. Those industries that are growing and already contributing to the region's economic growth will further strengthen our economic resilience.

Regional Industries That Have Grown Since 2002		
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	Construction	Manufacturing
Wholesale Trade	Retail Trade	Transportation and Warehousing
Information	Finance and Insurance	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	Management of Companies and Enterprises	Educational Services
Health Care and Social Assistance	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	Accommodation and Food Services
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)	Public Administration	
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (Beginning of Quarter Employment, 2nd Quarter of 2002-2018)		

Regional Industries That Have Declined Since 2002		
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	Utilities	Administration and Support, Waste Management and Remediation
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (Beginning of Quarter Employment, 2nd Quarter of 2002-2018)		

Opportunity Zones

The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act created Opportunity Zones—identified as low-income census tracts—that allows groups or individuals to receive tax incentives for investing in Opportunity Zone-related assets or property. In Alabama, the

Governor's Office ensured that all 67 counties had at least one Opportunity Zone. In Russell County, an Opportunity Zone is located in Phenix City, covering an area of 377 acres along the Chattahoochee River. Russell County's only Opportunity Zones is home to 176 businesses. Lee County's Opportunity Zones are located along Interstate 85, beginning in Opelika, and continuing to the County's border. The Opportunity Zone is composed of roughly 22,000 acres and includes approximately 2,000 businesses. Our region should promote the benefits of Opportunity Zone investing to foster economic development in these locations.

Geographic Environment

Lee County and the northern portion of Russell County are a part of the Piedmont Plateau, largely characterized by a hilly topography with gentle to steep slopes. The terrain in the southern portion of Russell County is largely level to gently rolling, characteristic of the Coastal Plain in which this portion is located in the Black Belt. The Chattahoochee River borders Lee and Russell counties on the east, forming the border between the State of Alabama and the State of Georgia. The climate and topography of the area provides a desirable quality of life for residents and attracts visitors to the region.

Our region is affected by a wide range of natural and human-caused hazards that negatively impact life and property. Lee and Russell counties have been included in Federal Disaster Declarations six times since 2010. The declared disasters have been related to the impacts from flooding, severe storms, hurricanes, and tornadoes. The region is highly susceptible to tornadoes, floods, severe thunderstorms, and drought.

The USDA filed a declaration for a drought incident in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2019. According to NOAA, a drought "is a deficiency in precipitation over an extended period, usually a season or more, resulting in a water shortage causing adverse impacts on vegetation, animals, and/or people." Droughts are dangerous when they impact economic prosperity, agricultural productivity, and human health and welfare. "Human factors, such as water demand and water management, can exacerbate the impact that drought has on a region," according to NOAA. Lee and Russell counties are susceptible to long periods without any perception which results in drought conditions.

Tornadoes are the costliest hazard that impact Lee or Russell counties because tornadoes can affect any location in the region, due to occurrences being randomly located and the impossibility of predicting specific area of tornado strikes. The most violent tornadoes are capable of tremendous destruction with

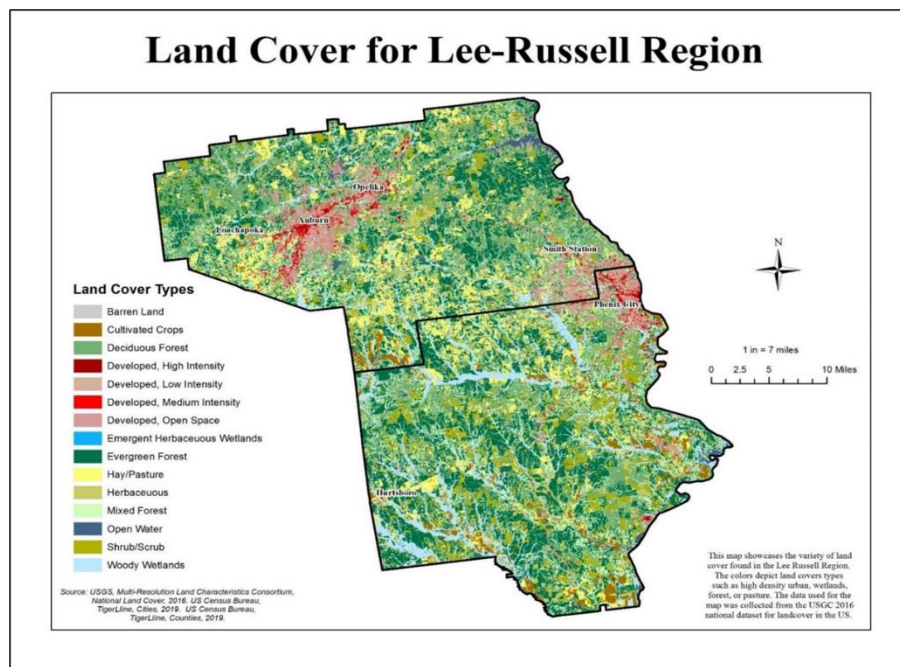
wind speeds of 250 mph or more. The damage from a tornado is a result of the high wind velocity and wind-blown debris. Damage paths can be more than 1 mile wide and 50 miles long. Tornadoes are the most unpredictable weather event. According to NOAA, 13 minutes is the average amount of time a person must find a safe place from a tornado. Tornadoes are most prevalent in the United States and occur mostly in the Midwest, Southwest, and Southeast. Alabama ranks 4th nationally for the number of killer tornadoes experienced, and 5th for the number of tornado-related fatalities. Since 2010, there have been 32 tornadoes documented in the Lee and Russell counties, which resulted in 23 deaths, 106 injuries, and over \$13 million in damages.

Flooding is considered one of the most frequent and costly natural hazards that occurs in the United States. Most communities in the United States have experienced some kind of flooding, including those in the Lee and Russell counties. Flooding normally occurs due to excessive precipitation, but many factors can have an impact on flooding such as drainage basin characteristics, antecedent soil moisture conditions, weather patterns, and land cover. There are two primary types of flooding that affect this planning area: riverine flooding and flash flooding. Lee and Russell counties experience both types of flood events. Flash floods are generally more prevalent in the urbanized areas with abundant impervious surfaces and other areas of obstructions to water runoff. The Chattahoochee River, which forms the eastern boundary of Lee and Russell counties, is a primary factor in riverine flooding in the region.

For more information and details on the impact of natural hazard in Lee and Russell counties please refer to the East Alabama Regional Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan: Phase One.

Land-Use Patterns

The map below shows the land use in Lee and Russell Counties. All the growth in Lee County is near I-85 in Auburn and Opelika, along Highway 280, and I-185 in Phenix City. This development pattern is depicted by the dark and light pink areas. The map showcases that the counties have experienced limited development, and mainly consist of forest, hay/pasture lands, cultivated crops, and wetlands. Over the last 30 years, municipalities have traditionally continued to expand their boundaries out into the counties fostering suburban style development. Currently, every jurisdiction treats annexing available lands into the city limits differently, whether the city is aggressive or hesitant.



The current land development patterns vary across the region. The Town of Hurtsboro and Town of Loachapoka have little development activity due to the rural location and size of the towns. These towns do not formally participate in planning, and do not have any plans to guide future development.

The cities of Auburn, Opelika, Phenix City, Smiths Station, Lee County, and Russell County have comprehensive and/or master plans. The purpose of these plans is to determine the community's goals and aspirations for the future. These documents act as guides for new development and redevelopment of assets such as: road improvements; creation of park/trail space; infill development; and residential development. The following gives a brief overview of each jurisdiction's current development patterns.

As of May 2021, Russell County did not have land use regulation in the unincorporated County but did have subdivision regulations and a comprehensive plan. Overall, the plan recommends that the County consider incorporating land use, focus on commercial development along main transportation corridors, promote projects that improve quality of life such as parks/trails, improve access to sewer and broadband.

In 2014, Phenix City adopted a comprehensive plan to promote a vision and framework for future development and redevelopment. Emphasis on creating a sense of place in neighborhoods and downtowns; promoting multiple modes of transportation; creating fun and safe parks and recreation spaces; and

supporting development along main corridors. The city promotes infill development by offering incentives to businesses that relocate in the city limits rather than fringes. Phenix City is focused on redevelopment infill rather than annexing new lands. Projects to improve quality of life such as riverwalk, disk golf, sidewalk improvement, and park improvements have been a key focus over the last ten years. Development along the Chattahoochee River has picked up with the construction of Troy University and a hotel, but the City hopes for and supports further development along the river. Brownfield redevelopment is also something the city is interested in; fostering new growth in the city limits.

As of May 2021, Lee County did not have land use regulations in the unincorporated county, but the County did have subdivision regulation and a comprehensive plan. The County has seen growth in the areas that are close to the cities of Opelika and Auburn. This type of growth is considered suburban style development. Overall, the comprehensive plan recommends that the County consider the following: implementing land use, preserving of agricultural lands; maintaining an all-weather local roads network; establishing parks & recreations; promoting projects that improve quality of life; and improving access to sewer and broadband.

Since 1970, the City of Auburn has grown from 19 sq. miles to 59 sq. miles by 2016. The City has a wide variety of plans such as a future land use plan, downtown master plan, greenway plan, parks & recreation master plan, student housing analysis, neighborhood plans, and comprehensive plans. Each plan acts as a guide for various types of development such as greenways, parks & recreation, downtown development, and bike & pedestrians in the city limits. Auburn has experienced a massive growth of single-family housing. According to the 2030 comprehensive plan, Auburn issued 1,547 permits for new residential lots and permitted 3,832 single-family homes from 2011 to 2016. 42 building permits were issued for duplex, triplex, or quadplex between 2007 and 2016. The city did see an uptick in apartment permits, which has contributed to student housing development near Auburn University. Downtown and the areas near Auburn University have seen significant mixed-use development in recent years. Improving quality of life for residents through projects that focus on roads, sidewalk, and bike lane improvements; implantation of infill development, redevelopment along corridors; and enhancement at neighborhood nodes has been the main focus for many plans. The city is experiencing continuous residents and commercial growth but has slowed down annexation of lands. In 2020, Auburn launched the campaign Auburn2040 to update the comprehensives plan currently in use.

Based on interviews with Smiths Station City staff, the City has seen a steady increase in single-family construction. During the last four years, 350 homes were built with 141 being built in 2020. The homes being constructed range from \$250,000 to \$300,000. COVID-19 halted commercial development in the City in 2020, but the Mayor and local officials are hopeful to create a downtown in the future. Smiths Station's comprehensive plan addresses topics such as: sustainable growth; mixed uses development; variety of housing types; update codes, subdivision regulations, and zoning; conserve natural lands; adopt a long-range utility plan; develop active transportation; and encourage development where infrastructure exists.

In the spring of 2021, the City of Opelika started to update the City's comprehensive plan. The previous plan was completed in 2009 by the Opelika Planning Department. The old plan focused on enhancements for parks & recreation; updating future land use maps; reviewing zoning ordinances; and improving streets & sidewalks. The City has focused on downtown improvement projects; infill development; fill in city limit doughnut holes; review of zoned industrial properties.

Other Economic Factors

Child Care

Infant care in the region costs, on average, between \$6,656 and \$7,696 per year, which amounts to at least 60% of the current yearly in-state tuition for major state universities, Auburn University or University of Alabama (Childcare costs in the United States, 2020). Pre-school care, which includes children between the ages of 36 months to 5 years old, costs the caregivers in the region, on average, \$6,240 to \$7,384 yearly. A household with two children in day-care will spend around \$14,000 a year on care, which amounts to 26% of median income in Lee County and 32% in Russell County. The reality of high costs forces skilled women out of the workforce because child-care is simply not financially viable.

61% of Alabamians live in a child-care desert. A child-care desert is defined as "any census tract with more than 50 children under age 5 that contains either no childcare providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed childcare slots" (Center for American Progress, 2020). The rural and suburban areas in the region are more likely to be in a child-care desert due to poverty rates or development patterns. Every jurisdiction in the region has multiple census tracts classified as a child-care desert. The census tracts that do offer adequate child-care face added pressure on current

facilities and more competition among parents looking for childcare. Safe, accessible, and high-quality childcare is not a luxury, or commodity, but a necessity for many households in the region.

Senior Adults

Over a third of Alabamians are at least 50 years old or older. Over the past decade, Alabama's median age has outpaced that of the U.S., increasing by 4% to a median age of 39.3 (Centerfield Media Company). Experts expect this increase to continue to 2030, with Alabama's median age climbing by 6.1% during that time. Life expectancy for Alabama residents is 75.4 years, lower than the 78.7 year national average and ranking 49th in the nation. While Alabama ranks 50th for population 55 and older in the labor force, coming in at 27.3%, the State's median household income for senior adults 65 and older is \$38,450, earning the State a ranking of 45th in the nation. For seniors in the State, the average home healthcare cost is \$3,213 a month; while assisted living is \$3,057 or \$6,083 to \$6,464 for 24/7 nursing home care. Alzheimer care in the State ranges from \$2,000 to \$10,000 a month; a range that is lower than the national average.

These figures should be kept in mind by regional officials and policy makers when planning to care for the 34,231 residents in Lee County and the 15,028 residents in Russell County age 55 years and over. One regional asset for senior citizens is The Springs of Mill Lakes senior apartments in Opelika, but this development is luxury senior living and is not accessible to everyone. Reimagining development patterns in the region can help seniors age in place rather than having to leave home. The City of Opelika itself has been recognized as one of the 25 Best Places to Retire by Forbes Magazine.

Housing

The region's growing industry sectors and educational systems recruit talented individuals to live and work in Lee and Russell County. In order to retain these workers, regional leaders must ensure the ability of diverse and affordable housing options. U.S. Census data shows that at least 20% of the region's population is spending more than 30% of their annual income on housing. About 23% of Lee County residents and 31.6% of Russell County residents are paying more than 30% on mortgage payments. Thus, taking away from dollars spent in the local economies. The data suggests that there is a need for more affordable housing options for residents who are making less than the median income. A person who works 40 hours a week making \$7.25 an hour, which is the minimum wage in Alabama, will have a gross income of \$15,080. The average housing

cost in the region varies between \$800 and \$1,600. A person or a household living in Lee County with an annual income of \$53,712, which is the median income, should spend no more than \$1,342 annually on housing. A person or a household living in Russell County with an annual income of \$42,443, which is the median income, should spend no more than \$1,061 annually on housing. A more diverse housing stock would lead to more affordable options to residents, allowing them to contribute more dollars to the region's economy.

Recreation

The City of Auburn has 2,255.7 acres of park and recreation spaces, the City of Opelika has 155 acres of parks and recreation with 27 acres of neighborhood parks space, and Lee County has 230 acres of park spaces. Each city offers a wide variety of recreation facilities providing amenities such as: Aquatic Center, Pickleball Court, Disc Golf Course, Splash Parks, Indoor Walking Tracks, Playgrounds, Ball Fields, and Racquetball Courts. Chewacla State Park, which is located south of Auburn, offers 696 acres of recreation space for biking, fishing, canoes, kayaks, and hiking. The Grand National Resort is home to a 54-hole golf course located north of Opelika. The City of Opelika and the Creekline are working in tandem to create a greenway trail network throughout the City.

The Chattahoochee River provides the region with an abundance of recreation activities such as whitewater rafting, kayaking, fishing, swimming, and boating. Hydraulics were built after Army Corp of Engineering blew the dams along the Chattahoochee River between Phenix City, AL and Columbus, GA. The new rapids created a two-mile whitewater course offering rapids from a level II to IV (being the most difficult). Due to the climate, difficult rapids, and a perfect storm of events, Phenix City is now the wintering grounds for the world's elite freestyling kayakers. People from all over the world come to the region between the months of October to April.

The access to parks and recreation facilities and its amenities improves the quality of life as well as invites visitors and events to the region.

SWOT ANALYSIS SUMMARY

The purpose of the SWOT analysis is to identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. This process requires that an entity engage with stakeholders, research current events, and utilize quantitative and qualitative data. The information was provided to the Strategy Committee to identify the most pressing economic issues facing the region. These issues were then used as launch points for research to determine their effects on the Region. This method was used in each of the summary background sections of our CEDS – infrastructure and transportation, economic and workforce development, healthy communities, and cultural, recreation, and environmental resources.

STRENGTHS

- Access to Interstate for Business
- Access to Electricity
- Proximity to Airports and Hospitals
- Quality Public and Private Schools (K-12)
- Higher Education & Trade Schools
- Research & Industrial Parks
- Affordable Cost of Living
- Geographic Location
- Access to Outdoor Recreation Opportunities and Parks
- Community Development Activities
- Natural Environment

WEAKNESSES

- Water, Sewer, and Broadband Accessibility
- Workforce/Talent Retention
- Public Transportation Accessibility
- Maintenance of Older Infrastructure
- Low Income and Poverty
- Lack of Regional Strategies and Communication

- Competition for Workforce
- Lack of and equal access to cultural and recreation amenities
- Blighted areas in the region

OPPORTUNITIES

- Recruiting and Expanding New Industry
- Support Existing Small Business through education programs and other services
- Regional Collaboration
- Support Initiatives for Workforce Retention
- Public/Private Partnerships
- Improve Public Transportation
- Beautification Efforts of Public Spaces and Entry Points
- Expand youth workforce education and programs
- Increase recreational and cultural resources
- Infill development

THREATS

- Broadband Access
- Administrative Changes
- Natural & Economic Disasters
- Funding For Infrastructure Improvements
- Housing Affordability
- Growing Aging Population
- Lack of Consistent Funding
- Lack of adult and childcare programs and facilities
- Competition for economic development projects
- Retention of workforce/talent with other states, counties, and municipalities

Strategic Direction/Action Plan/Evaluation Framework

Our vision for the CEDS is to provide the region with a roadmap that offers specific strategies to tackle weaknesses, combat threats, seize opportunities and support strengths. Each priority goal provides objectives and strategies that support the goal as well as address the evaluation measures of each strategy once complete. The CEDS will be updated on an annual basis in consultation with key stakeholders to include but not limited to LRCOG, local officials, the CEDS Strategy Committee, business leaders, school representatives, health care officials and residents to review performance measures and include changes in the economic status of the region.

Vision: The CEDS will serve as the fundamental document by which regional strategies are made to promote sustainable economic development, mold healthy communities, and reinvest in infrastructure.

Priority Goals:

Goal 1: Infrastructure and Transportation

Goal 2: Economic and Workforce Development

Goal 3: Healthy Communities

Goal 4: Cultural, Recreation and Environmental Resources

Goal 5: Regional Resilience

Priority Goal 1: Infrastructure and Transportation	
Objective 1: Invest in critical infrastructure in rural areas.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
1.1 Conduct a sewer study of/for the unincorporated counties to identify the status of septic tanks.	Amount of grants submitted/awarded for infrastructure improvements
1.2 Use the sewer study to create a list of communities, prioritized by septic tank status.	Increase in public sector investment
1.3 Invest in sewer system installation to serve all residents in the region, especially rural areas.	Increase in the number of new infrastructure projects
	Service area changes in broadband
	Track/increase sewer/water capacity

1.4 Invest in broadband to serve all residents in the region.	
1.5 Invest in infrastructure services for rural businesses that choose to locate outside of city limits.	
Objective 2: Implement a multimodal network(s) that support(s) sustainable communities.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
2.1 Conduct regional transit study to identify areas lacking transit access.	Increase in the number of riders and routes.
2.2 Establish a fixed route regional transit system.	Increase in the construction of bike lanes, sidewalks, and roads
2.3 Build safe bike lanes by building lanes that are separated from roadways by physical barriers.	New transit routes and services
Objective 3: Reinvest in existing assets and infrastructure to support established neighborhoods.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
3.1 Keep an inventory and “shovel ready” plans to be accessed quickly when grants become available	Number of new projects funded and completed

Priority Goal 2: Economic and Workforce Development	
Objective 1: Construct a regional network for entrepreneurs to stimulate support the small business sector.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
1.1 Develop regional incubator network to provide a safety-net for overflow of small businesses.	Creation of the Small Business Advisory Committee
1.2 Look for industry talent gaps in the region for workforce development planning and programs.	Amount and type of assistance provided through incubators and advisory committee
1.3 Create a small business advisory committee to help small businesses	Track number of jobs created/retained by businesses within business incubators
	Track annual entrepreneurial start-ups

develop knowledge and skills to be successful.	
Objective 2: Introduce policies and infrastructure to allow development of small businesses that foster continued growth.	
Strategy	Performance Measures
2.1 Work with the newly formed Small Business Advisory Board in planning future growth and development across the region.	Number of new projects and assistance provided to small businesses
Objective 3: Implement strategies and prioritize practice to support thriving regional economic cluster.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
3.1 Streamline local government regulations to assist existing and new businesses. 3.2 Create programs and develop facilities to support and to promote small businesses in the food and cottage industries and other economic clusters. 3.3 Encourage eligible communities to work with Opportunity Alabama to encourage the location of businesses in opportunity zones. 3.4 Create a page on the LRCOG website for regional plans, projects, and available grant opportunities.	Number of new businesses Number of new businesses in opportunity zones Number of hits for regional LRCOG website
Objective 4: Establish an education program that sustains the demand of the trade industry which will provide a greater pool of essential workers.	
Strategy	Performance Measures
4.1 Work with Chambers of Commerce to create or maintain a regional small business advisory board (composed of local business owners from various sectors) to address knowledge, skills, and abilities in the region. 4.2 Use the regional Small Business Advisory Board recommendations to	Number of new programs established Amount of new funding for education programs Number of students and others enrolled in the new programs

work with state and local agencies to shape high school education programs.	Increase in local technical school enrollment
4.3 Develop and expand opportunities for apprenticeships, on the job training, and work-based learning.	
Objective 5: Establish a workforce development program that sustains the demand of the trade industry.	
Strategy	Performance Measures
5.1 Conduct wage analysis to implement policies to ensure all regional workers receive competitive compensation for their work based on experience and education.	Development and completion of the plan Increase of new jobs that meet the qualifications of underemployed
5.2 Create an action plan to move underemployed employees into jobs to better meet the qualifications of those individuals.	

Priority Goal 3: Healthy Communities	
Objective 1: Review proposed changes to current regulations to support future growth.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
1.1 Review and update zoning regulations to support future growth.	Number of jurisdictions who updated zoning regulations
1.2 Implementing policies that ensure equitable park space, access to affordable housing, and shopping for all residents.	Amount of funding to maintain and repair manufactured housing Number of storm shelters
1.3 Review and update local building codes to include minimizing manufactured housing; maintaining manufactured housing and update or repair as needed; and requiring tornado shelters in new mobile home parks and apartment complexes.	Updated zoning regulations

1.4 Enforce updated zoning regulations, building codes, and ordinances.	
Objective 2: Accommodate residents during every stage of life.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
2.1 Conduct a child-care & adult-care analysis to identify areas where care is deficient to ensure affordable care throughout the region.	Completion of the analysis and identification of deficiencies of adult-care and child-care programs and facilities.
2.2 Provide and expand adequate childcare facilities.	Number of new child-care and adult-care facilities
2.3 Provide and expand adequate adult-care and activity centers.	
Objective 3: Promote adequate number of housing options that are affordable.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
3.1 Conduct a regional housing analysis.	Number of new programs
3.2 Develop additional programs that will assist seniors living and aging in place.	Amount of funding secured for these programs
3.3 Implement a 15-minute community goal that all future development will allow a resident to walk to necessary/vital/important location in 15 minutes.	Increase in the number of affordable housing stock Completion of studies and reports. Number of affordable housing units constructed in the region
3.4 Research and implement strategies to increase the supply of "Missing Middle Housing".	Amount of funding invested in rehabilitating the housing stock
Objective 4: Redevelopment existing neighborhoods to be vibrant & viable communities for residents	
Strategies	Performance Measures
4.1 Implement policies that prioritize infill development over developing new areas outside of a town/city's limit to include offering incentives for infill development	Number of redevelopment projects Incentives utilized for infill development Establishment of land bank.

<p>4.2 Participate in brownfield redevelopment programs.</p> <p>4.3 Investigate the possibility of a vacancy tax on commercial units that are left vacant after a specific amount of time.</p> <p>4.4 Establish a land bank.</p>	
<p>Objective 5: Analyze current growth pattern and policies to curb unsustainable development.</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures</p>
<p>5.1 Create a regional land use map.</p>	<p>New regional land use map</p>
<p>5.2 Organize regional meetings to discuss land use matters.</p>	<p>Number of regional meetings</p>
<p>Objective 6: Partner with organizations to provide support for future community development</p>	
<p>Strategies</p>	<p>Performance Measures</p>
<p>6.1 Encourage eligible communities to join the Alabama Communities of Excellence Program (ACE).</p>	<p>Number of new programs to promote community development</p>
<p>6.2 Encourage eligible communities to join the Main Street Program.</p>	<p>Number of jurisdictions that utilize these community development programs</p>
<p>6.3 Encourage eligible communities to join the Design Alabama Program.</p>	<p>Number of brownfields that are redeveloped</p>
<p>6.4 Encourage eligible communities to join the Your Town Program.</p>	
<p>6.5 Encourage eligible communities to work with Community Planning and/or Public Administration at Auburn University or other universities with similar programs.</p>	
<p>6.6 Encourage eligible communities to partner with ADEM to work toward redeveloping brownfields.</p>	

6.7 Encourage eligible communities to partner with organizations to work toward rehabilitating housing stock.	
Objective 7: Actively collaborate with marginalized residents when planning for future development in the region.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
7.1 Keep a list of traditional, conventional, and new technological ways to reach citizens. 7.2 Build a tool kit of policies to Encourage infill development.	Number and types of outreach activities Track the use of the tool kit

Priority Goal 4: Cultural, Recreation, and Environmental Resources	
Objective 1: Embrace and promote local history and culture.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
1.1 Establish walking tours in urban and rural areas. 1.2 Create interactive media that portrays local history. 1.3 Build ADA sidewalks throughout the more urbanized areas of the region.	Number and types of marketing strategies Amount of funding secured for promoting tourism Number of new projects promoting tourism Number of new ADA sidewalks constructed
Objective 2: Establish and present policies to restore natural habitats, protect healthy ecosystems, and reconnect communities with nature	
Strategies	Performance Measures
2.1 Seek funding to develop a regional greenway and blue way plan. 2.2 Implement and promote policies and incentivize green and sustainable infrastructure in project development.	Amount of funding secured for a regional plan Number of new projects that utilize green and sustainable infrastructure

2.3 Create and enforce a tree/urban canopy ordinance in selected areas of urban areas

Objective 3: Create regional campaigns to showcase, educate, and attract visitors to regional cultural, recreation, and environmental assets.

Strategies	Performance Measures
<p>3.1 Conduct a regional marketing analysis</p> <p>3.2 Encourage development of a regional tourism website.</p> <p>3.3 Work with area tourism and visitors bureaus to showcase the region.</p> <p>3.4 Establish a regional brand to highlight and support local goods to include “Made in Lee-Russell Region”.</p> <p>3.5 Educate the public about local goods produced and available in the region.</p> <p>3.6 Connect local shoppers with local businesses, specialty shops, local restaurants via websites and online markets.</p> <p>3.7 Encourage businesses to promote local goods via partnerships.</p>	<p>Number of website hits</p> <p>Amount of funding invested in new tourism facilities and projects</p> <p>Amount of funding secured in promoting tourism</p> <p>Increased revenue of the local businesses in the region</p> <p>Number of new jobs created.</p> <p>Capital investment in the region</p> <p>Increase in agricultural partnerships (i.e., farmers market, farm-to-table)</p>

Objective 4: Establish community initiatives to emphasize and actively support beautification projects.

Strategies	Performance Measures
<p>4.1 Investigate the Keep America Beautiful organization and expand the program to new urban and rural areas.</p> <p>4.2 Establish a adopt a road program in communities where it is not in place.</p>	<p>Amount of grants received for beautification projects</p> <p>Number of new beautification projects</p>

4.3 Establish a adopt a stream program in communities where it is not currently in place.	
Objective 5: Create and invest in recreational parks and facilities.	
Strategies	Performance Measures
<p>5.1 Invest in recreation spaces to serve all residents regardless of age and abilities in the region.</p> <p>5.2 Ensure all communities have at least one recreational space that residents can easily access.</p> <p>5.3 Work with regional groups to develop trails for recreational hiking, biking, running, and walking between jurisdictions</p>	<p>Increased number of grants submitted for funding</p> <p>Increase in recreational trails, park and other facilities developed</p> <p>Increase in regional recreation facilities</p>

Priority Goal 5: Regional Resilience	
Objective 1: Implement Strategies and best practices to create and improve regional economic resiliency.	
Strategy	Performance Measures
<p>1.1 Create and update a business retention and expansion strategic plan for each jurisdiction.</p> <p>1.2 Work with member governments to ensure resilience is built into approved projects and plans.</p> <p>1.3 Perform an annual review to update the East Alabama Regional (Division D Phase 2) Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan for the region.</p>	<p>Amount of funding received for mitigation efforts</p> <p>Number of jurisdictions with an updated business retention and strategic plan</p> <p>Completion of the annual update</p> <p>Inclusion of resilience practices and strategies in local plans.</p>

Economic Resilience

According to the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), Economic Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid a shock altogether. Business closures, utility disruptions, floods, and tornadoes are examples of challenges that may affect the economic health of our region. The Lee-Russell Council of Governments (LRCOG) works closely with jurisdictions and stakeholders to address resiliency through both steady-state and responsive initiatives.

Steady-state initiatives encompass long-term plans. Both Lee and Russell County, with the assistance of LRCOG, maintain a current Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan to identify natural disaster risks and develop mitigation techniques to reduce risk. LRCOG works with area economic developers to comprehend industry needs, issues, and trends to prepare for business changes in the region.

Steady-state resilience efforts utilized in the region include:

1. Comprehensive Planning
2. Hazard Mitigation Planning
3. Grant writing and administration of hazard mitigation projects, such as storm sirens, safe rooms, and storm water reduction
4. Developing business and retention programs to assist firms with economic recover post-disruption
5. Building a resilient workforce that can switch between jobs or industries when employment opportunities change
6. Promoting new industry with a focus on economic diversity
7. Employing safe development practices, such as locating projects and structures outside of floodplains

Responsive economic resilience includes reactive plans establishing capabilities to recover from an incident.

Initiatives utilized in the region include:

1. Conducting post-disaster recovery planning
2. Establishing a process for regular communication, monitoring, and updating business community needs and issues

3. Establishing a plan to rapidly contact key local, regional, state, and federal officials to communicate business sector needs and coordinate impact assessment efforts
4. Establishing coordination mechanisms and leadership succession plans for recovery needs
5. Assisting Lee and Russell County EMAs obtain funding to ensure each county has a safe and fully equipped Emergency Operation Center

Stakeholder Engagement Summary

The CEDS Strategy Committee was established by Lee-Russell Council of Governments in December of 2020. The CEDS Strategy Committee is comprised of people from the region representing economic development, tourism, chambers of commerce, workforce development, education, and other key stakeholders. The role of the committee was to craft strategies based on the input received from the public and other stakeholders. These strategies will help guide the region's economic development in a direction that fosters sustainable growth.

The Planning and Economic Development Department at LRCOG collaborated with local officials and the Board of Directors to set up a diverse Strategy Committee for the CEDS. The following is a list of the CEDS Strategy Committee members and the agency/organization that they represent:

- Dr. Lakami Baker, Auburn University, Government and Economic Development Institute
- Amy Brabham, City of Auburn Workforce Development
- Mark Baker, Jack Hughston Memorial Hospital
- Robyn Bridges, Auburn-Opelika Tourism
- Dennis Beason, East Alabama Chamber of Commerce
- Victor Cross, Russell County Economic Development
- Shawn Culligan, Phenix City Economic Development
- Phillip Dunlap, Auburn Economic Development
- Laura Grill, East Alabama Community College
- Lori Huguley, Opelika Economic Development
- Jennifer Lowman, Phenix City Economic Development
- Gindi Prutzman, Central Alabama Workforce Development
- Ali Rauch, Opelika Chamber of Commerce
- Dr. Dionne Rosser-Mims, Troy University, Phenix City Campus
- Jackie Screws, Chattahoochee Valley Community College
- Todd Shackett, Southern Union State Community College

- Lolly Steiner, Auburn Chamber of Commerce
- John Wild, Auburn-Opelika Tourism

The CEDS Strategy Committee held a meeting on January 14, 2021, by Zoom and on March 29, 2021, in-person and by Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of these meetings, the strategy committee identified key concerns that impacted the local and regional economies such as: recessions, pandemics, lack of infrastructure in rural areas, brain drain, natural disasters, internal competition for workforce, a lack of variety of housing options, or low wages. The strategy committee worked together to craft strategies to mitigate these weaknesses and foster sustainable growth in the economy.

The January meeting focused on completing the SWOT analysis to identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats in the region. This process involved engaging stakeholders, researching current events, and utilizing quantitative and qualitative data to determine their effects on the region. Additionally, LRCOG staff conducted focus groups and one-to-one interviews to increase input from additional stakeholders to include but not limited to local elected officials, realtors, utility company staff, community organizations, transportation providers, business owners, and environmental groups.

The information collected from the strategy committee and other stakeholders was compiled into the SWOT analysis and was used to create summary backgrounds, strategies, and actions for the region in the areas of infrastructure and transportation, healthy communities, economic and workforce development, and cultural, recreation & environmental resources. At the March meeting, the SWOT analysis, Summary Background, and Strategies and Actions were presented to the Strategy Committee for their review and comment. Based on the input from the CEDS Strategy Committee, focus groups, interviews, and community/business surveys, the draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy was developed and open for public comment. The final draft was approved by the LRCOG Board of Directors on November 3, 2022 and submitted to EDA for approval.