RPCGB Mission:

“To serve as a catalyst for regional leadership, cooperation, and sustainability for Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker Counties.”
THE REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION OF
GREATER BIRMINGHAM

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
STRATEGY UPDATE
2019

This document is posted at:
https://www.rpcgb.org/comprehensive-economic-development-strategy

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I. THE CENTRAL ALABAMA REGION: A YEAR IN REVIEW

The Economic Development District (EDD) staff at the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB) continues to work towards the goals outlined in the 2017 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). This annual update summarizes the progress our region, which includes Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker Counties in Central Alabama, has made towards combatting area challenges and fulfilling regional needs. The entire CEDS document can be found on the RPCGB website at:


EMPLOYMENT & GROWTH TRENDS: 2018-2019

Alabama’s unemployment rate was at a record low in September 2019 with a rate of 3.0 percent, down from 3.8 percent in September. ¹ Similarly, the unemployment rate in the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan Area has also continued to decrease, from 3.5 percent in September 2018 to 2.6 percent in September 2019.² The region’s civilian labor force participation has been a major factor in this unemployment reduction, which has increased by over 13,000 people since September 2019. The total labor force is up to nearly 560,000, a record-breaking indicator for the area.³ The main employment sectors laid out in the CEDS, including manufacturing, healthcare, and technology, have all experienced growth in the last year. The largest area of growth sector was in Construction, which increased by 5.6 percent since September 2018.

Regarding the EDD six-county service area, all counties within the region have experienced lower unemployment rates since September 2018. Most notably is Walker County, which had a 2.7 percent unemployment rate in September 2019 compared to 4.0 percent a year before⁴. However, the weekly wage rate continues to widen among the counties in the region. Jefferson and Shelby counties have the highest average weekly wages, averaging $1,150 in Jefferson and $1,47 in Shelby respectively, while Blount, Chilton, St. Clair, and Walker counties all averaged $770 or less.⁵ Though the gap exists, all counties in the region experienced growth in the weekly wage rate over the past year.

¹ https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/lauhsthl.htm
² https://www.bls.gov/lau/metrossa.htm
³ https://www.birminghambusinessalliance.com/regional-news-jobsnumbers
⁵ https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/summary/blssummary_birmingham.pdf
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: 2018-2019

During the last year, several new developments have occurred in the Birmingham-Hoover Metropolitan area. Nearly 60 companies across the Birmingham region announced over 4,500 jobs and attracted over $1 billion in capital investment. Existing business are expensing to new locations throughout the region, and new companies are locating to the greater Birmingham area at impressive rates. However, manufacturing has continued to serve as a foundational piece of the Birmingham region’s economy.

One of the most notable developments is new office/warehouse and delivery center building that is expected to be owned and operated by Amazon in a site outside the northern portion of the City of Birmingham. Reports suggest that the facility will create at least 100 jobs, and though it has not been officially confirmed, records suggest that the project “represents one of the biggest economic development projects for a city of Birmingham neighborhood...in recent memory”.

The results of recent economic measures have caused many leaders within the region to remain optimistic about the regional economy in the future. The addition of over 10,000 individuals to the region’s labor force is indicator that proves that the region is attracting skilled laborers. However, the biggest workforce development challenge facing many companies within the Birmingham area is the low amount of available talent. Competition between businesses for qualified workers is at a highpoint, and the talent pipeline is drying up for some industries. This could affect expansion opportunities for companies throughout the region, as well as other projects such as relocation or recruitment. To compound the issue, the labor participation rate of current residents is still relatively low despite record low unemployment rates. Many agencies, including the regional workforce council and local chambers of commerce, are partnering together to combat the workforce dilemma in the region.

In addition to workforce challenges, the conclusion and impacts the national trade agreements will have on the region are still uncertain. For a state heavily dependent on sales tax for revenue, the outcomes of these agreements will be a matter of interest to businesses throughout the area.

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FEDERAL FUNDING AWARDS & ALLOCATIONS: 2018-2019

During the last year, the six-county region has sought funding for development grants from several federal funding sources. Below is a list of each funding application with a description of the project it is being used to fund:

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These grants were funded in fiscal year 2018; fiscal year 2019 grants have not been announced yet.

- St. Clair County Hospital Demolition and Clearance Project, City of Pell City: $200,000
- Full STEAM Ahead for Blount County Students, Blount County Education Foundation, Inc: $95,000
- Oakman Sewer System Improvements Project, Town of Oakman: $200,000
- Albertville Aviation College Powerplant Implementation, Snead State Community College: $199,621
- Implementing Apple's App Development Pilot Program for Community Colleges, Snead State Community College: $26,838.47
- Strengthening the Biomedical Equipment Technology Program, Jefferson State Community College: $220,817

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANTS

- LARGE CITY APPLICATIONS:
  - City of Oneonta, Blount County: $450,000 for Sewer Improvement Project- Awarded
  - City of Pell City, St. Clair County: $450,000 for Sewer Improvement Project- Awarded
  - City of Clanton, Chilton County: 239,400 for Demolition-Awarded

- COUNTY APPLICATIONS:
  - Chilton County: $350,000 for Street Improvements Project- Not Awarded
  - Blount County: $350,000 for Street Improvements Project- Awarded
II. GROWTH STRATEGY UPDATES

The vision of this strategy is for a well-marketed region that fosters partnerships that promote growth and stability, while retaining an ample employment-ready workforce, heavily invested leadership, and an infrastructure network that is both highly connective and visible. The growth strategies outlined in the plan of action reflect goals and projects the region has undertaken that contribute to attaining the vision. Growth strategies are listed below, along with the projects occurring within the region that relate to each goal.

EMPOWERMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

This strategy focuses on empowering local communities through increasing community education, leadership development, access and education regarding federal funding sources and regional collaboration. The RPCGB, as the designated EDD by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), has continued to work towards this initiative with the following tasks:

- Began implementing the strategies identified and created in RPCGB’s 5-year strategic plan
- Conducted a Feasibility Study for a potential incubator project for the City of Center Point
- Met with several municipalities and nonprofits to discuss grant opportunities for their projects
- Conducted a housing and market analysis for the City of Jasper to assist city leadership in economic development initiatives and business recruiting strategies
- Partnered with other Councils of Government around the state to assist with the development of Regional Hazard Mitigation Plans for various Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) divisions
- Met with several local governments throughout our region to discuss how their cities could participate in the Brownfields Program we are developing

INFRASTRUCTURE

The focus on improving infrastructure involves pursuing projects that expand upon finding ways to make existing infrastructure work better. In addition, the region is striving to rethink the way service delivery operates, as well as ways to strategically invest to maximize resources and
mitigate issues such as congestion. The following projects have been undertaken to work towards this strategy:

- Developing a Brownfield Redevelopment Program Initiative with the assistance of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management; the agency plans on applying for EPA funding to assist local communities in assessing potential brownfield sites in November.
- Held Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) committee meetings (Citizens, Technical, Advisory, and Policy) to discuss transportation projects that are ongoing or potentially going to begin within our region.
- The following documents were adopted by the Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO):
  - The 2045 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), a long-range transportation plan that guides the region’s federal transportation investments in the transportation system to reduce congestion, build new sidewalks and bicycle facilities, improve transit service and access to transit and maintain freight access over a period of several decades.
  - The Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which provides a four-year work program that lists all regionally significant and federally funded transportation projects, programs, and transportation services to be carried out within the metropolitan planning area.
  - The Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), the document that guides the MPO in fulfilling its planning responsibilities for the upcoming year.

**IMPROVING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES**

This goal focuses on improving access to opportunities by cultivating competitive economic assets within the six-county area. This includes attracting a diverse array of businesses and increasing the livability of communities, thereby enhancing the quality of life for their residents. The RPCGB is currently working on or is about to undertake several projects that implement the walkability, sustainability, and convenience of local communities:

- Collaborated with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to apply for a Technical Assistance Grant through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The
grant was funded, and funding is being used to conduct visioning and educational workshops for two brownfields sites within the City of Pell City.

- The City of Birmingham Framework Plans: These plans focus on the City’s overall vision and expectations for future growth and development and provides a framework for guiding public and private investments. There are nine framework plans for the city of Birmingham; five have been adopted, two are nearing completion, and the last two will begin within the next two years.
- The City of Center Point Zoning Update was adopted in Fall 2018.
- The City of Homewood Central Business District Master Plan was developed to help guide the development of Homewood’s business area and is expected to be adopted in October 2018.
- The City of Chelsea Highway 280 Overlay District Master Plan, adopted in September 2018, was developed to establish land development standards that are placed over the current zoning district for the corridor.
- Shape Birmingham is an ongoing initiative that merges city planning and public health professionals to develop a uniform health assessment tool to measure the quality of life in Birmingham neighborhoods. The RPCGB is collaborating with the City of Birmingham and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Schools of Health and Sociology and UAB’s Edge of Chaos.

In addition to planning, the RPCGB also worked on the following initiatives:

- Collaborating with local co-founder firms such as Innovation Depot and Create Birmingham to partner in initiatives to attract small businesses and startups to the Birmingham Metro Area.
- Loaned 50 loans over the past year, totaling over $1.8 million invested in start-up businesses throughout the region.