



# 2023-2027 CEDS Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments

A Comprehensive Economic  
Development Strategy for  
Lauderdale, Colbert, Franklin, Marion, and Winston Counties





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## Vision:

Northwest Alabama is a prosperous, family-friendly region defined by its strong, nationally and globally competitive economy, and high quality of life.



# INTRODUCTION

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is a five-year strategy for economic development in northwest Alabama. It brings together private and public interests to create a guide to economic development for the five-county region of northwest Alabama including Lauderdale, Colbert, Franklin, Marion, and Winston Counties. The CEDS is a regional comprehensive plan which involves development district partners, including local government representatives, workforce training providers, non-profit Chambers of Commerce, local economic development authorities and others. It encompasses a broad range of important initiatives that define the economic development landscape of northwest Alabama and direct the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (NACOLG), the regional Planning Organization designated by the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

With analysis of the region's unique characteristics, the CEDS provides an opportunity to assess and build upon the human and physical capital of the region, and establish priorities for investment and funding leading to positive economic outcomes in the region. The CEDS is the product of an on-going, diverse, and inclusive planning process involving both private and public partners. This process allows the formation of a strategy representing the widest possible constituency and presenting the viewpoints of laypeople and professionals as to the direction and character of economic growth in the region. This

understanding of economic development priorities allows for targeted investment into economic development initiatives with the broadest support and greatest likelihood of success.



In addition to the broad-based planning components of the CEDS, the document is required to qualify for federal investments under the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965. EDA investments are intended to promote and complement private sector investment in economic development in areas suffering from economic dislocation due to changes in global competitiveness, acute historic economic hardship, or sudden and severe job loss.

The document is prepared by a Planning Organization, which is responsible for appointing a Strategy Committee, submitting a compliant CEDS document (see 13 CFR 303.7), updating or revising the CEDS, and reporting the CEDS to other entities. The Planning Organization charged with managing the CEDS process for Region I in Alabama is the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments. NACOLG's CEDS follows the guidelines established by the EDA for developing a strategy-driven plan that includes the following four sections:

1. Summary and Background that reviews the economic conditions of the region.

2. SWOT Analysis identifying the region's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

3. Action plan which presents broad goals and strategies to be implemented by NACOLG and regional partners as a means of improving the regional economy.

4. Evaluation framework that identifies the measures to be used to quantify and benchmark progress in the region and toward implementing the CEDS.



*Joe Wheeler State Park, Rogersville, AL*



# SUMMARY BACKGROUND

Our region includes Lauderdale, Colbert, Franklin, Marion and Winston Counties, which are located in the far north-western corner of the State of Alabama. The Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (NACOLG) represents this district as the regional planning and development commission, originally organized in 1967 to serve a broad mandate for regional planning and development. The current district boundaries are the result of a 1975 expansion which created the current five-county and 32 municipality configuration of the planning area.

In 2002, NACOLG was designated by the Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration to be the Economic Development District for Northwest Alabama and these five counties. This designation strengthened NACOLG's mandated role in regional planning and development by creating a mechanism for continuous planning and engagement with regional partners for the purpose of improving prosperity in the region. This

planning effort is embodied in the Northwest Alabama Comprehensible Economic Development Strategy, an ongoing strategic planning effort for the region.

Although the region's economic climate has shifted numerous times in the past two decades as a result of national and international economic trends in economic development, today's regional economy shows signs of improvement. The direction of employment and earnings since the end of the "Great Recession" of 2008 has been positive. However, sustaining these improvements will require continued, diligent effort on from partners across the region who engage in various aspects of business recruitment, retention and expansion programs, workforce development, and community capacity building, planning, and leadership development.

## POPULATION

The 2020 United States Census count of the region's population was 235,785. These residents form the constituency of the Economic Development District, which works primarily through local governments

and regional partnerships to identify needs, gather resources, and enact solutions to challenges facing individuals and communities in the region.

The region's population has grown slowly over the past 30 years, increasing by only 9.4 percent from 1990 to 2020 according to the U.S. Census. Future projections for the region's population in 2040, taking into account factors such as current age distribution, birth rates, and mortality, predict an overall decline of 3 percent in the next two decades.

Examining current demographics using the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Communities Survey data, the population is estimated to be 51 percent female and 49 percent male. Approximately 22 percent are under the age of 18 years, 61 percent are between 18 and 64 years, and 18 percent are over 65 years of age. Median age in the region is around 40 years old, with slightly older populations in more rural Marion and Winston counties and the youngest median in Franklin County, which also has the highest birth rate in the

region. Franklin County was also the only county in the region where births exceeded deaths as a contributor to population change.

Age and demographic shifts in the next several decades represent one of the most significant factors for economic and community development planning in northwest Alabama. In 20 years, about one in 4 four residents of northwest Alabama will be aged 65 or older, according to estimates from the University of Alabama. The impact of this shift on workforce dynamics, community service demand, general demand for goods and services, and the healthcare sector in northwest Alabama is *impossible to over state*.

This demographic shift will lead to changes in the number and availability of workers as more and more individuals move into retirement. In addition, active retirees will demand active places in their communities, such as vibrant neighborhoods and downtowns. Less active individuals will generate additional healthcare and social service demands in the community—demands to be supported by a very different sized and skilled workforce. The overall shifts are difficult to predict— but change is coming with them and communities will be required to plan for, and adapt to, it.

Minorities are about 10 percent of the region's population across all five

counties, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicities are the largest non-white ethnic group with about percent overall. Spanish is the largest non-English language spoken in the region. The number of Hispanic and Latino residents varies from county-to-county, with Franklin County having the highest concentration at approximately 16 percent.

Regional migration patterns indicate net migration into Lauderdale and Colbert counties, and net outmigration in Franklin, Marion and Winston counties. Domestic and international in-migration was positive in both Colbert and Lauderdale counties, while Marion and Winston counties experienced population loss (outmigration) from international and domestic population. Franklin County, however, experienced net positive international in-migration and outmigration among domestic residents.

As a result, population stability and growth has been recognized as a considerable challenge facing northwest Alabama. Population loss is a serious threat to economic stability in the region, as individuals seeking economic opportunity are unable to find it locally and relocate their economic capacity to other places. Although net population growth is generally desirable, it is also recognized that population growth can be detrimental due to increased demand for public services and scarcity in the local economy. Balanced growth and rising

prosperity, therefore, are the primary demographic and economic related concerns in northwest Alabama. Increased individual prosperity, leading to improved overall economic condition, is the primary growth model, rather than pursuit of growth by any means.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT**

The history, culture, and economy of Northwest Alabama strongly reflects the influence of its geography and environment. The Appalachian foothills and the rivers, lakes, and streams of these five counties provided a fertile landscape for agriculture and forestry, as well as mining and industry. The natural shallows of the Muscle Shoals region along the Tennessee River and the hilly slopes of the terrain throughout the region were significant challenges to transportation access, but with determination and technological advancement, these were overcome with locks and dams and highway construction.

Some of the greatest challenges of the region continue to relate to geography and climate. The foothills terrain makes highway expansion difficult and costly. Despite uneven accessibility in the region, these highways and blue-ways opened the up to economic expansion throughout its history. In addition, the threat of severe weather is present throughout much of the year in the region, with tragic and disastrous effects.

By the same token, however, the abundant natural resources, recreational amenities, and legacy of small town lifestyles found in this unique environment are sustainable resources ripe for future development. Our past relationship with geography and landscape have simultaneously gifted and limited present opportunities. This duality of past influence on the present underwrites the search for meaningful progress in the region, with every attempt made to preserve beneficial legacies while concurrently working to persevere beyond challenges and limitations of geography and environment.

## CULTURE

Terms like “Southern”, “Constant”, “Rural”, “Small Town” and “Traditional” are frequently used to describe the culture of Northwest Alabama. For large segments of the population, community values are synonymous with family, religious affiliation, outdoor activities like hunting and fishing, and simplicity of lifestyle. Many still pay bills in person and avoid Online activities. Manufacturing, health care, and retail trade are residents’ largest employers. Home ownership is high and is a point of pride for a large percent of residents. Conservative political culture is dominant.

Naturally these descriptions are not universal. Pockets of cultural difference dot

the region and add diversity, variety, and interest throughout the region. Growing influence from largely Hispanic immigration, college town influences, and variations in age characteristics of residents color each locality in unique ways. In turn, these affect economic opportunities for retail goods and services, business startups, new industries, and even the character of the built environment as these all change over time to accommodate cultural influences.

## ECONOMY

Economic prosperity is related to complex social and economic characteristics. These include adequate community infrastructure for development, workforce availability, and the complex social and technological skills required by various businesses and industries for success. Historically, the local economy of the region has been based on low skill and agricultural occupations, sustained by minimal infrastructure and local climate and geography.

Recent decades, however, have seen shifts in the bases of economic prosperity as the region has emerged as part of a global economy. These developments have pushed and pulled the region in complex ways. Lower skill jobs have been pushed out by automation and off-shoring to lower wage competitors. At the same time foreign

investments were pulled toward the state to fill the vacuum and to take advantage of competitive wages and a trainable workforce. Several major new industries in the region were drawn because of these dynamics. Many individuals, however, have been disaffected by these transitions and continue to struggle with the social and financial fallout of a changing regional economy.

The region’s economic health has been far from stable in the past. Repeatedly, economic crisis of national and even global proportions seemed to wipe out gains of the past, leaving a regional economy which suffers through the downward periods of business cycles without much improvement over time.

The ebb and flow of employment and unemployment in the region largely tracks with national and global trends. The region seems to lag behind the shocks which overtake other parts of the nation to an extent, owing to its dependence on basic industries; however, when the shocks do hit, they are deeper and longer than those experienced by other some other areas.

In terms of wealth and prosperity, measures of income and wealth place the region in the lower tier of locations in the nation. Per capita income and average wages for jobs in various industries track well behind national averages.

# Employment Centers in Northwest Alabama

2020	Count	Share
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123,346</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	1,376	1.11%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	196	0.15%
Utilities	869	0.7%
Construction	8,633	6.99%
Manufacturing	19,398	15.72%
Wholesale Trade	2,866	2.32%
Retail Trade	15,930	12.9%
Transportation and Warehousing	7,656	6.2%
Information	1,613	1.3%
Finance and Insurance	5,076	4.1%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing		
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	8,105	6.5%
Management of Companies and Enterprises		
Administration & Support, Waste Management and Remediation	5,282	4.2%
Educational Services	24,978	20.25%
Health Care and Social Assistance	6,638	5.38%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	9,586	7.7%
Accommodation and Food Services		
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)	5,282	4.2%
Public Administration	5,662	4.6%

## Largest Employers in the Region

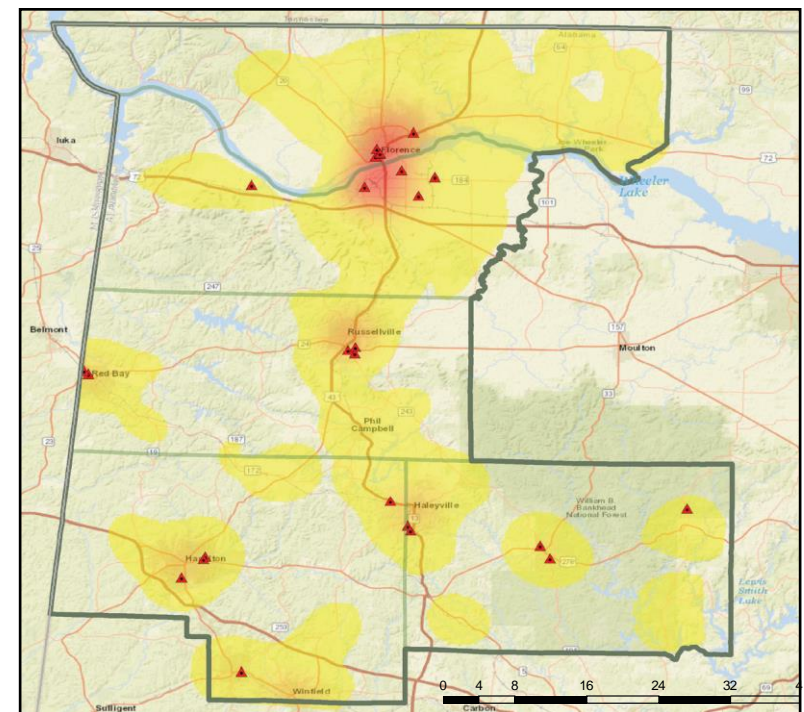
North American Lighting: 1,437

NAMC Hospital: 1,222

Pilgrim's Pride: 1,140

Constellium: 1,135

THOR Recreational Vehicles: 1,108



## WORKFORCE

Northwest Alabama's workforce reflects the demographics, education, and training of its populace. It is stratified in terms of several, often cross-cutting, characteristics: workplace availability and readiness, education and training, experience and training potential for higher wage jobs, and age demographics.

Workforce availability and preparedness is a significant challenge for employers. Employers consistently cite a problem finding enough workers with sufficient skills, or capacity for training, as well as the soft skills necessary for employment success as major factors limiting growth and expansion. Drug use eliminates far too many potential employees from the workforce in the region.

In terms of education, the region has fewer high school and college graduates than the statewide or national average, which is often cited as a significant challenge. In contrast with some of the region's past industries, most employers today are not willing to hire employees without basic high school or equivalent education for even low skill positions. Most are interested in some type of technical training or evidence of employability. Programs to boost graduation rates through work-based education have been introduced to assist with the problem, but these are not as uniform

or widespread in the region as needed. In addition, the region struggles to recruit (or retain) professionals in various service fields, most notably engineering and health care. Competition from other regions continuously pulls new graduates and experienced potential recruits from the region and to other location nearby, or nationwide.

Throughout the region, skills gaps are apparent between employer needs in technical and professional fields and the availability of trained or trainable workers. The largest employment sectors in the region are retail, manufacturing, and health care and so the expertise and capabilities of the current workforce largely reflects the skill sets derived from experience in these sectors. However, many workers entering the workforce or who have desire to transition to better employment opportunities have challenges acquiring the skills demanded by employers.

Meantime, a disproportionate number of older workers who are nearing retirement age is another challenge. Many employers struggle to recruit, train, and retain employees that fill critical positions in management and highly technical operations.

Given the various difficulties in the region, the purpose of the CEDS is to help to find a pathway forward toward economic resilience, a regional economy able to

withstand shocks and to prosper, and to move decades-long trend lines that indicate a struggling regional economy.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

As a tool for planning and assessment, the region conducted an analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) related to economic conditions. The SWOT analysis included input from a variety of sources, including public meetings, discussions with EDD staff and elected officials, and a survey of regional partners from across the region. This information allowed EDD staff to complete a composite SWOT for the region as a whole.

EDD staff also evaluated employment information from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) from 2016 to 2020 for the U.S. as whole and for each county to flag the sectors with an above average concentration of employment locally compared to nationally, which had also experienced growth locally and had grown at a faster rate than the national rate of growth from 2016-2020.

The businesses and industries meeting these criteria were classified as STRENGTHS and OPPORTUNITIES in the SWOT assessment, regardless of relative employment size or wages, because their growth rate in the region has shown promise in recent years.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

As part of the CEDS, the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments conducted an analysis of the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats- also known as a SWOT analysis. The analysis identifies what local governmental officials, community leaders, regional stakeholders and partners, and members of the regional community believe to be the most significant competitive advantages and disadvantages for economic development in the region.

### STRENGTHS

- Quality of life
- Affordability
- Leadership
- Cultural resources
- Natural resources
- Cooperation
- Civic engagement
- Downtowns
- Historic places
- Schools, Colleges, and University of North Alabama
- Public safety
- Recreational opportunities
- Industrial sites
- Partnerships
- Geographic location (access to markets)
- Business/Industry

### WEAKNESSES

- Transportation infrastructure
- Rural broadband infrastructure & partnerships with providers
- Job opportunities
- Labor force participation
- Drug abuse
- Multimodal port facility
- International presence
- Public financial capacity for infrastructure/community service improvement

### OPPORTUNITIES

- Low cost of living/affordability
- Recreational resources
- Tourism assets
- Workforce development
- Industrial sites
- Schools, Colleges, and UNA
- Geographic location
- Business support services
- Demographic and economic trends: Active aging population, stable "middle" generation, "millennial" paradigm shifts
- Internet/digital technology
- Business/Industry

### THREATS

- Population loss
- Worker training
- Natural resource impacts
- Low wage jobs
- Crumbling infrastructure
- Inadequate broadband access
- Lack of amenities and pay for professionals
- Fragmentation
- Civic engagement
- Financial capabilities
- Drug/crime problems
- Disability rates/labor force participation
- Access to health care
- Growing demand for social services
- Changing work attitudes

INDUSTRY SECTOR	CATEGORY	COUNTY
<b>NATURAL RESOURCES AND MINING</b>		
NAICS 111 Crop production	Opportunity	Colbert
NAICS 113 Forestry and logging	Strength	Marion, Lauderdale
NAICS 212 Mining, except oil and gas	Strength	Franklin
<b>CONSTRUCTION</b>		
NAICS 236 Construction of buildings	Opportunity	Marion
NAICS 237 Heavy and civil engineering construction	Opportunity	Winston
<b>MANUFACTURING</b>		
NAICS 321 Wood product manufacturing	Strength	Marion, Lauderdale
NAICS 325 Chemical manufacturing	Opportunity	Lauderdale
NAICS 326 Plastics and rubber products manufacturing	Strength	Marion, Lauderdale, Colbert
NAICS 327 Nonmetallic mineral product manufacturing	Opportunity	Colbert, Marion
NAICS 331 Primary metal manufacturing	Strength	Lauderdale
NAICS 332 Fabricated metal product manufacturing	Strength/Opportunity	Lauderdale, Winston, Franklin
NAICS 333 Machinery manufacturing	Strength	Colbert
NAICS 336 Transportation equipment manufacturing	Strength	Colbert
NAICS 337 Furniture and related product manufacturing	Strength	Marion, Franklin
NAICS 339 Miscellaneous manufacturing	Opportunity	Colbert
<b>WHOLESALE TRADE</b>		
NAICS 423 Merchant wholesalers, durable goods	Strength/Opportunity	Colbert, Marion, Winston
NAICS 424 Merchant wholesalers, nondurable goods	Opportunity	Winston
NAICS 425 Electronic markets and agents and brokers	Opportunity	Lauderdale, Marion
NAICS 441 Motor vehicle and parts dealers	Opportunity	Winston
NAICS 442 Furniture and home furnishings stores	Opportunity	Colbert, Winston
NAICS 443 Electronics and appliance stores	Strength	Colbert
NAICS 445 Food and beverage stores	Opportunity	Colbert, Marion
NAICS 446 Health and personal care stores	Strength	Lauderdale
NAICS 447 Gasoline stations	Strength/Opportunity	Winston, Marion
NAICS 448 Clothing and clothing accessories stores	Opportunity	Colbert, Franklin
NAICS 451 Sports, hobby, music instrument, book stores	Opportunity	Marion, Winston
NAICS 452 General merchandise stores	Strength/Opportunity	Winston, Marion, Lauderdale
NAICS 453 Miscellaneous store retailers	Opportunity	Franklin

<b>TRANSPORTATION AND WAREHOUSING</b>		
NAICS 484 Truck transportation	EMERGING	COLBERT
NAICS 485 Transit and ground passenger transportation	EMERGING	LAUDERDALE
NAICS 488 Support activities for transportation	EMERGING	LAUDERDALE
<b>INFORMATION</b>		
NAICS 517 Telecommunications	EMERGING	LAUDERDALE
<b>FINANCE AND INSURANCE</b>		
NAICS 522 Credit intermediation and related activities	STRENGTH	MARION, LAUDERDALE, FRANKLIN, COLBERT
<b>PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, AND TECHNICAL SERVICES</b>		
NAICS 541 Professional and technical services	EMERGING	COLBERT
NAICS 551 Management of companies and enterprises	EMERGING	COLBERT, LAUDERDALE
NAICS 561 Administrative and support services	EMERGING	WINSTON
NAICS 562 Waste management and remediation services	EMERGING	WINSTON
<b>EDUCATIONAL SERVICES</b>		
NAICS 611 Educational services	EMERGING	COLBERT, LAUDERDALE
<b>HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE</b>		
NAICS 621 Ambulatory health care services	STRENGTH/EMERGING	WINSTON, LAUDERDALE
NAICS 623 Nursing and residential care facilities	STRENGTH/RETENTION	MARION
<b>ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, RECREATION</b>		
NAICS 713 Amusements, gambling, and recreation	EMERGING	LAUDERDALE
<b>ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICES</b>		
NAICS 721 Accommodation	STRENGTH	LAUDERDALE
NAICS 722 Food services and drinking places	RETENTION	
<b>OTHER SERVICES (EXCEPT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION)</b>		
NAICS 811 Repair and maintenance	STRENGTH/RETENTION	MARION
NAICS 814 Private households	EMERGING	MARION



# Regional Profile

## POPULATION



2020 Census  
235,785

2016 Estimate  
231,965  
(1.65%)

2040 Projection  
227,920  
(-3.33%)

## HOUSING



Median Home Value  
\$110,480

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
1.16%/9.52%

Occupied Units  
22,756



## EDUCATION

	Percent
Less than 9th Grade	6.28%
9th to 12th No Diploma	11.50%
High School Graduate	43.90%
Some College	20.72%
Associate's Degree	8.02%
Bachelor's Degree	11.46%
Graduate or professional	6.12%

Percent  
Age 25+

## Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Northwest Shoals Community College  
Bevill State Community College  
Wallace State Community College

## ECONOMIC

Median Household Income  
\$43,906

Per Capita Income  
\$24,321

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$10.75

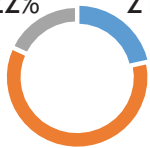
% Individuals Below Poverty  
15.94%

Food Insecurity Rate  
17.12%

Female 51% Male 49%



Age 65+ 20.22% Under 18 21.5%



18 to 64  
70.96%


Median Age  
42

Minority 10.56% Hispanic 6.3%

Largest Employment Sectors	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Manufacturing	20,307	19,945	\$34,238
Retail trade	13,602	15,930	\$26,573
State and local	13,252	13,252	\$39,581
Accommodation and food service	5,558	9,586	\$13,868
Construction	6,469	8,633	\$36,086
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	5,558	5,131	\$35,371
Finance and insurance	4,402	5,282	\$52,696
Real estate and rental and leasing	3,640	14,983	\$36,086

# Lauderdale Profile

**POPULATION**




2020 Census  
93,564

2016 Estimate  
92,318  
(1.34%)

2040 Projection  
94,385  
(2.2%)


**HOUSING**



Median Home Value  
\$149,000

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
1.5%/5.5%

Occupied Units  
44,720

 **EDUCATION**

	Percent Age 25+
Less than 9th Grade	4.2%
9th to 12th No Diploma	8.4%
High School Graduate	36%
Some College	21%
Associate's Degree	6.9%
Bachelor's Degree	14.9%
Graduate or professional	8.6%

**ECONOMIC**


Median Household Income  
\$48,428


Per Capita Income  
28,540

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$11.00

% Individuals Below Poverty  
13.9%

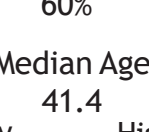
Food Insecurity Rate  
15.5%

Female 52%  Male 48%

Age 65+ 20%  Under 18 20%

18 to 64 60%

Median Age  
41.4

Minority 13.3%  Hispanic 3.1%

Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Northwest Shoals Community College

Largest Employment Sectors	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Retail Trade	6,386	6,049	\$24,933
State and local	4,750	4,750	\$38,523
Accommodation and food service	4,240	4,013	\$13,963
Manufacturing	3,173	5,668	\$41,618
Construction	2,488	2,881	\$40,538
Real estate rental and leasing	2,337	2,337	\$24,933
Finance and insurance	4,402	6,976	\$52,696
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	1,999	1,905	\$27,879

# Colbert County Profile

## POPULATION



2020 Census  
57,227

2016 Estimate  
54,216  
(5.5%)

2040 Projection  
52,890  
(7.9%)

## HOUSING



Median Home  
Value  
\$125,400

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
0.9%/9.9%

Occupied Units  
27,888



## EDUCATION

	Percent Age 25+
Less than 9th Grade	4.1%
9th to 12th No Diploma	10.2%
High School Graduate	37%
Some College	23.1%
Associate's Degree	8.3%
Bachelor's Degree	10.9%
Graduate or professional	6.5%

Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Northwest Shoals Community College

## ECONOMIC

Median Household Income  
\$47,962

Per Capita Income  
\$25,807

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$11.00

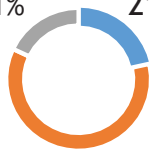
% Individuals Below Poverty  
14.4%

Food Insecurity Rate  
16.5%

Female 52% Male 48%



Age 65+ 18.1% Under 18 21.8%



18 to 64  
60.1%

Median Age  
42.5

Minority 20% Hispanic 3.4%

## Largest Employees Sectors

	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Retail Trade	6,655	6,049	\$21,263
State and local	4,119	4,119	\$33,672
Accommodation and food service	3,439	4,013	\$14,809
Manufacturing	2,237	5,668	\$31,178
Construction	2,235	2,881	\$34,599
Real estate rental and leasing	1,950	1,950	\$21,263
Finance and insurance	1,928	1,690	\$55,634
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	1,844	1,905	\$25,525

# Franklin County Profile

## POPULATION



2020 Census  
32,113

2016 Estimate  
31,628  
(1.5%)

2040 Projection  
31,636  
(1.5%)

## HOUSING



Median Home Value  
\$103,000

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
3%/11.3%

Occupied Units  
13,953



## EDUCATION

	Percent Age 25+
Less than 9th Grade	9.2%
9th to 12th No Diploma	12.2%
High School Graduate	73.3%
Some College	17.2%
Associate's Degree	7.4%
Bachelor's Degree	10.3%
Graduate or professional	4.8%

## Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Northwest Shoals Community College

## ECONOMIC

Median Household Income  
\$41,174

Per Capita Income  
\$21,503

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$10.72

% Individuals Below Poverty  
17.2%

Food Insecurity Rate  
16.3%

Female 51% Male 49%



Age 65+ 17% Under 18 24%



18 to 64  
59%

Median Age  
39.2

Minority 8.7% Hispanic 19%

Largest Employees Sectors	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Retail Trade	4,253	1,175	\$33,992
State and local	1,819	1,819	\$43,428
Accommodation and food service	1,300	688	\$12,344
Manufacturing	957	4,007	\$33,014
Construction	736	1,168	\$35,641
Real estate rental and leasing	727	727	\$33,992
Finance and insurance	547	407	\$61,232
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	527	594	\$34,876

# Marion County Profile

## POPULATION



2020 Census  
29,341

2016 Estimate  
29,998  
(-2.21%)

2040 Projection  
27,122  
(7.86%)

## HOUSING



Median Home  
Value  
\$87,700

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
0.4%/17.7%

Occupied Units  
14,137



## EDUCATION

	Percent Age 25+
Less than 9th Grade	6.9%
9th to 12th No Diploma	12.1%
High School Graduate	34.5%
Some College	22.5%
Associate's Degree	10.8%
Bachelor's Degree	13.3%
Graduate or professional	5.4%

## ECONOMIC

Median Household Income  
\$40,978

Per Capita Income  
\$23,269

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$10.52

% Individuals Below Poverty  
17.4%

Food Insecurity Rate  
18.7%

## Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Bevill State Community College

Female 51% Male 49%



Age 65+ 17% Under 18 24%



18 to 64  
59%

Median Age  
44.5

Minority 6.7% Hispanic 2.7%

Largest Employment Sectors	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Retail Trade	3,235	3,235	\$31,414
State and local	1,476	1,476	\$41,435
Accommodation and food service	1,400	1,400	\$16,470
Manufacturing	861	861	\$34,204
Construction	695	695	\$35,055
Real estate rental and leasing	582	582	\$31,414
Finance and insurance	528	528	\$54,856
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	489	489	\$32,640

# Winston County Profile

## POPULATION



2020 Census  
23,540

2016 Estimate  
23,806  
(-1.12%)

2040 Projection  
21,887  
(7.27%)

## HOUSING



Median Home Value  
\$87,300

Vacancy Rate  
Homeowner/Rental  
1.6%/3.2%

Occupied Units  
13,086



## EDUCATION

	Percent Age 25+
Less than 9th Grade	7%
9th to 12th No Diploma	14.6%
High School Graduate	38.7%
Some College	19.8%
Associate's Degree	6.7%
Bachelor's Degree	7.9%
Graduate or professional	5.3%

## Higher Education



University of North Alabama  
Northwest Shoals Community College  
Wallace State Community College

## ECONOMIC

Median Household Income  
\$40,991

Per Capita Income  
\$23,269

1 Adult Living Wage  
\$10.52

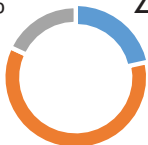
% Individuals Below Poverty  
17.4%

Food Insecurity Rate  
18.7%

Female 51% Male 49.2%



Age 65+ 17.0% Under 18 24.0%



18 to 64  
59%

Median Age  
46.1

Minority 4.1% Hispanic 3.3%

Largest Employment Sectors	2015	2020	Earnings per Worker
Retail Trade	2,991	1461	\$21,263
State and local	1,088	1,088	\$40,847
Accommodation and food service	1,077	420	\$11,756
Manufacturing	489	1951	\$31,178
Construction	412	852	\$34,599
Real estate rental and leasing	389	1461	\$21,263
Finance and insurance	315	388	\$54,091
Administrative, support, waste mgmt	224	445	\$55,937

## Goal I: Economic Resilience- lead community preparedness, planning and risk assessment actions in the region; support economic diversification, business services, and workforce development initiatives that prepare the region's economy to withstand natural and man-made disasters.

Northwest Alabama prioritizes economic resilience as a paramount and overarching goal of economic development. Economic resilience is defined as the capacity of a region, its people, and its communities to withstand shocks to health and well-being, including physical and financial security, as a result of externalities such as national and global economic crisis and natural disasters. The region, which has experience with both, is dedicated to solutions that protect its residents against such events. Examples include:

- Economic downturns: The “Great Recession” is only the latest of national and global economic events to strike northwest Alabama. Shortly after the financial meltdown triggered by multiple converging financial irregularities, local industry entered a critical downturn. Unemployment spiked as rampant financial insecurity struck consumer confidence and capacity, leaving industry imperiled in the region.

A weakened business climate combined with changes in productivity and profitability of key manufacturing sectors resulted in record-high unemployment, especially in rural, less diversified counties. Industries such as paper products manufacturing, furniture manufacturing, and food processing industries with aging facilities and wage and productivity challenges closed, leading to over 1,900 layoffs in 2013-2014. Steady recruitment and retention efforts throughout past decades, however, created opportunities to cushion the impact. While the impacts were harsh and recovery was all too slow, as the recession ended, the region began this slow process. Economic development efforts, therefore, became the limited salvation in the aftermath of the downturn.

- Coal sector job losses: From 2013 to the present, the Tennessee Valley Authority has significantly restructured its power generation, business practices, and operations in northwest Alabama. First, the TVA Muscle Shoals Reservation (MSR), which has traditionally served as a maintenance and administrative center for TVA's operations in north Alabama, was slated for closure, with the loss of 600 to 700 jobs associated with TVA's administration and maintenance. About 500 of these were skilled trades and craftspeople working at the Power Service Shops, which housed the electrical,

mechanical, and fabrication services for the utility. The remainder were administrative and managerial positions. Second, TVA announced the closure of Colbert Steam Plant, a coal-fired power plant located in eastern Colbert County, with an employment base of 154 jobs. These shifts resulted from changes in TVA's evaluation of its business and operational needs, environmental footprint, and challenges under the Clean Air Act.

Given these experiences, the CEDS incorporates the following approaches to economic resilience, as summarized by EDA: "In building economic resilience, it is critical that economic development organizations consider their role in the pre- and post-incident environment to include **steady-state** and **responsive** initiatives.

Steady-state initiatives tend to be long-term efforts that seek to bolster the community or region's ability to withstand or avoid a shock. Responsive initiatives can include establishing capabilities for the economic development organization to be responsive to the region's recovery needs following an incident.

Examples of **steady-state** economic resilience initiatives include:

**Strategy 1.1:** Engaging in comprehensive planning efforts that involve extensive involvement from the community to define and implement a collective vision for resilience that includes the integration and/or alignment of other planning efforts (e.g., hazard mitigation plans) and funding sources;

**Strategy 1.2:** Undertaking efforts to broaden the industrial base with diversification initiatives, such as targeting the development of emerging clusters or industries that (a) build on the region's unique assets and competitive strengths; and (b) provide stability during downturns that disproportionately impact any single cluster or industry;

**Strategy 1.3:** Adapting business retention and expansion programs (e.g., economic gardening or other enterprise supports) to assist firms with economic recovery post-disruption;

**Strategy 1.4:** Building a resilient workforce that can better shift between jobs or industries when their core employment is threatened through job-driven skills strategies and support organizations;

**Strategy 1.5:** Maintaining geographic information systems (GIS) that link with municipal business licenses, tax information, and other business establishment

data bases to track local and regional "churn" and available development sites. GIS can also be integrated with hazard information to make rapid post-incident impact assessments;

**Strategy 1.6:** Ensuring redundancy in telecommunications and broadband networks to protect commerce and public safety in the event of natural or man-made disasters;

**Strategy 1.7:** Promoting business continuity and preparedness (i.e., ensuring businesses understand their vulnerabilities—including supply chains—in the face of disruptions and are prepared to take actions to resume operations after an event); and

**Strategy 1.8:** Employing safe development practices in business districts and surrounding communities. Strategies may include locating structures outside of floodplains, preserving natural lands that act as buffers from storms, and protecting downtowns and other existing development from the impacts of extreme weather.

Some examples of **responsive** economic resilience initiatives include:

**Strategy 1.9:** Conducting pre-disaster recovery planning to define key stake-



holders, roles, responsibilities, and key actions;

**Strategy 1.10:** Establishing a process for regular communication, monitoring, and updating of business community needs and issues (which can then be used after an incident) ;

**Strategy 1.11:** Establishing/using a capability to rapidly contact key local, regional, state, and federal officials to communicate business sector needs and coordinate impact assessment efforts; and

**Strategy 1.12:** Establishing/using coordination mechanisms and leadership succession plans for short, intermediate, and long-term recovery needs.”<sup>1</sup>

The Northwest Alabama Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy provides a planning and implementation foundation for this vital regional effort.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.eda.gov/ceds/content/economic-resilience.htm>

## Goal II: Business and Industry Support and Recruitment- provide resources to support new and existing businesses and industries.

The northwest Alabama region provides an incredible location for businesses to succeed. The region is known for its inviting business climate, affordability and low cost of living, low tax burdens, and numerous support systems for existing industry and businesses, as well as new startups. Nurturing and expanding new businesses by continuing to develop and leverage these resources is a critical component of the economic development strategy for the region.

Examples of business and industry supports include active economic development agencies in each county, several regional agencies and cooperative efforts that leverage resources across political boundaries, and small business development resources for entrepreneurs housed within economic development authorities, non-profits, and the University of North Alabama.

Specific examples of these type programs include:

- Grant-writing services provided by

the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments to access critical funding for economic development projects.

- NACOLG's revolving loan fund.
- Existing industry and industry recruitment programs of the Shoals Economic Development Authority, Franklin County EDA, C3 of Northwest Alabama EDA, and Winston County Economic Development Authority.
- The Shoals Economic Development Fund, administered by SEDA and derived from a ½ percent sales tax in Colbert County and Lauderdale County.
- Alabama Entrepreneurial Resource Network (AERN) support housed at the C3 of Northwest Alabama EDA office in Marion County.
- The Shoals Entrepreneurial Center (SEC), with incubator and business support locations in Lauderdale and Colbert County.

- The University of North Alabama and SEC's "Shoals Shift" program, which leverages EDA and Appalachian Regional Commission POWER funds to create new opportunities for business development in north Alabama.
- NACOLG's planning and GIS services, which provide critical market data and strategic planning to communities.

Given the numerous resources provided by wide-ranging stakeholders and partners in northwest Alabama, the region proposes the following strategies as means to expand and grow business and industry support services:

***Strategy 2.1:*** Support planning efforts that identify gaps in resources and new opportunities for business and industry expansion, including retail, and that identify target sectors that build on existing and emerging competitive advantages and market potential.

**Strategy 2.2:** Provide access to capital through programs such as the NACOLG Revolving Loan Fund.

**Strategy 2.3:** Provide services that expand access to grant opportunities for economic development, including EDA, ARC, CDBG, USDA, and others that provide support for economic and community development.

**Strategy 2.4:** Support activities that expand entrepreneurship in the region.

**Strategy 2.5:** Support programs and partnerships that expand understanding of and adaptation to technological resources for business and industrial development including existing and emerging technologies and practices.

**Strategy 2.6:** Support business planning opportunities such as the UNA Small Business Development Center and “Shoals Shift” through networking, referrals, and technical assistance projects.

**Strategy 2.7:** Provide a forum for networking and information exchange among stakeholders including local economic development agencies, local governments,

businesses and industries, and the general public.

**Strategy 2.8:** Assist in marketing the region as a location for new and expanding business and industry.

The Northwest Alabama Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy provides a regional approach to developing the shared goal of business and industry expansion in order to promote economic prosperity for residents of the region.

## Goal III: Infrastructure and Community Services- support the development and redevelopment of sustainable infrastructure and investments in community services to create attractive, safe communities that sustain and support local and regional economies.

Northwest Alabama is the proud home of affordable, attractive small towns, rural communities and landscapes, working agricultural lands, industrial locations, and one metropolitan area. However, each of these locations struggles to meet the needs of their residents and the needs of new businesses and industries in terms of infrastructure and community services. Revenues and resources vary greatly from town to town and county to county in the region, with each reliant on local tax structures to derive revenues for infrastructure and services. Local governments have little means of increasing these revenues without recourse to the Alabama Legislature, a slow and often controversial process, which leaves only increased economic activity as a means of generating funds necessary for these investments.

The state of infrastructure in the region varies widely in the region. Most state roads, for example, are well-maintained in the region, but the State struggles to find the resources for maintenance outside of

the region, particularly along the interstate highways and has been forced to decrease investment in capacity improvements that would increase access to rural areas.

Meanwhile, the challenge of maintaining city streets and rural roads strains the financial capacity of local governments. Community service infrastructure such as water and sewer poses another set of challenges, as aging infrastructure deteriorates and imposes high costs to maintain. In terms of other services, cities and counties are forced to make difficult decisions regarding personnel and equipment costs and frequent trade-offs between investments in essential services like police and fire, physical infrastructure investments, whether maintenance or expansion, and investments in economic development, tourism, and amenities like libraries, parks and recreation.

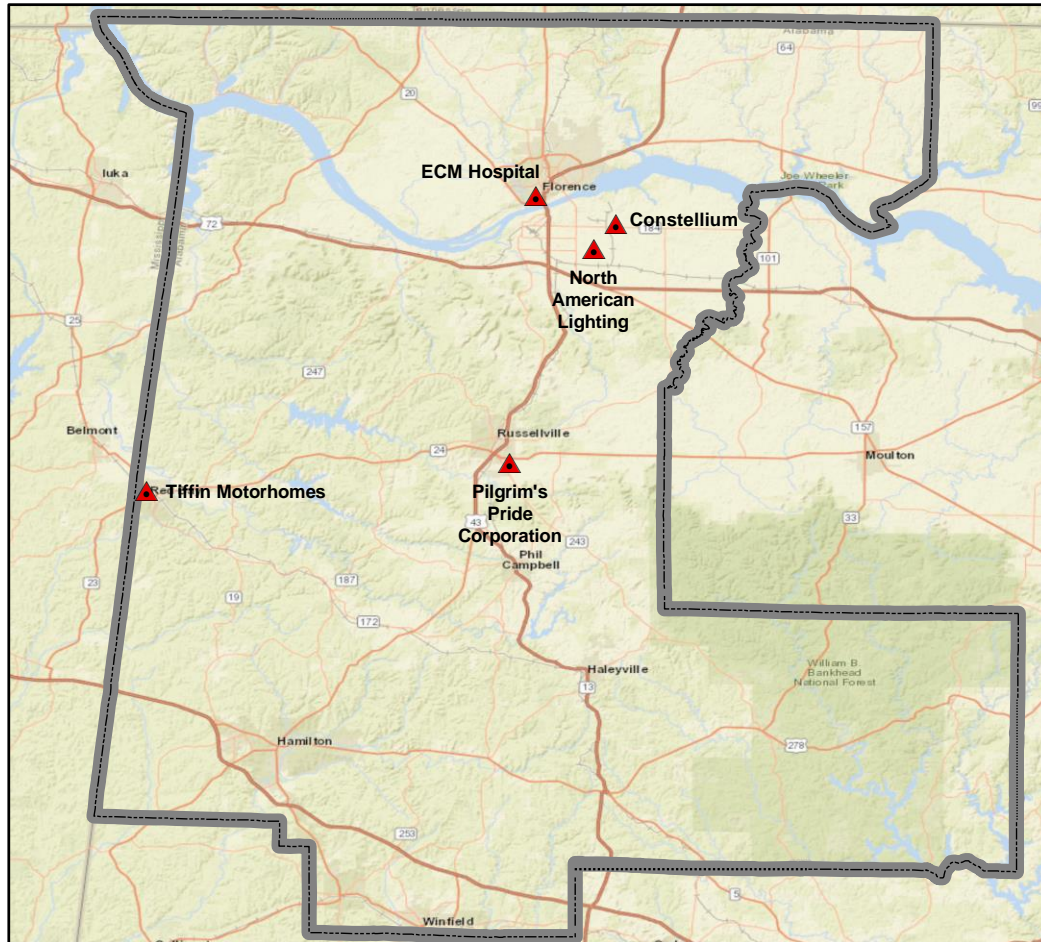
In every community, there are trade-offs between new growth and development, on the one hand, and the cost and quality of life impacts of new developments. For example, new roads mean new opportu-

nities for land development, but they also mean long term maintenance liabilities. In cities of the Shoals, regional and national economic growth means increased opportunity, but also increased frustration at rail crossings. The cumulative impacts of these trade-offs are legitimate questions for local decision makers determined to promote long term, sustainable growth and development.

City and county investments, unaided by grants or outside assistance, make up the vast majority of infrastructure and community service projects in the region. In addition to these, the following are examples of recent ways in which NACOLG, acting in its role as an EDD, has assisted with infrastructure and community services projects in northwest Alabama:

- Industrial Access Road and Bridge Fund improvements to a local industry in Bear Creek, supporting 40 new jobs and 80 retained jobs in conjunction with a \$3.5 million private expansion.
- Community Development Block

# Northwest Alabama's Largest Employers



Employer	County	Employees
North American Lighting	Colbert	1,437
ECM Hospital	Lauderdale	1,222
Pilgrim's	Franklin	1,140
Constellium	Colbert	1,135
Thor Industries	Franklin	1,108

Grant (CDBG) funding for public infrastructure to serve assisted living facilities in Hamilton and Winfield, creating 38 new jobs and providing a vital facility for health and welfare of older residents in these communities.

- EDA support for water and sewer infrastructure to serve Regional Care Hospital in Florence.
- ARC funding for broadband extension for a trucking company in Double Springs facing closure under electronic logbook requirements and requiring broadband access to remain compliant and continue in business.
- Land and Water Conservation Fund grants to improve facilities at the Haleyville Sports Complex, Lauderdale County's Brush Creek Park, and Phil Campbell's splash pad.
- Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding for improvements in downtown Sheffield and downtown Russellville.
- Alabama Transportation Improvements Program (ATRIP) funds for Avalon Avenue in Sheffield and Tuscumbia.

Given the importance of local in-

frastructure and community services to economic development, access to goods and services and markets inside and outside of the region, the need to provide support for activities that lead to greater capacity to invest in these is consistently identified as the region's highest priority, particularly by local elected officials. Therefore, in its role as an Economic Development District, NACOLG proposes the following strategies to promote infrastructure and community service improvements in the region:

***Strategy 3.1:*** Continue to provide planning and technical assistance for local comprehensive planning, area development plans including downtown redevelopment plans, and strategic plans, particularly those plans with an emphasis on improving investment capacity through capital budgeting, growth in local tax revenues, and plans that build support for partnering investments from state, federal, and private sources.

***Strategy 3.2:*** Provide professional assistance to prepare grants and other applications leading to increased investment in the region's infrastructure and community services.

***Strategy 3.3:*** Administer transportation planning programs including the Shoals Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Northwest

Alabama Rural Planning Organization (RPO) which provide a forum for coordinating transportation improvements in the region.

***Strategy 3.4:*** Foster sharing of resources to improve multimodal transportation, including public transit, and shipping infrastructure in the region and to leverage individual community's development efforts in a manner that most effectively generates new resources for infrastructure and community services.

***Strategy 3.4:*** Provide assistance to communities- including planning, networking, project planning and resource development, to increase access to broadband service, particularly in rural northwest Alabama and to improve the investment opportunities of broadband providers in the region.

***Strategy 3.6:*** Assist with land use and development planning and local codes and ordinances that seek to improve the long term value returned to local governments by new development and redevelopment.

The Northwest Alabama Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy will provide access to resources necessary to improve infrastructure and community services in the region.

## Goal IV: Education and Workforce Development- support local and regional efforts to improve the quality of education and workforce development necessary to economic development success throughout the region.

Education and workforce development are necessary for sustained economic development success in northwest Alabama. Long-term economic vitality rests in large part on the region's capacity to supply the talent and skills necessary to businesses and industries engaged in diverse activities in the region. The needs of these businesses and industries vary greatly across the region, however, a common barrier to expansion and success is often the availability of quality workers to fill production, technical, and professional positions.

The causes of worker shortages vary across the region, however, several common difficulties have been expressed by business and industry leaders. Often, these limitations arise from a potential employee's lack of resources or capacity to perform in terms of productivity in the workplace, timeliness and workplace behaviors, failed drug tests, and other factors that are not directly related to the technical or other skills necessary to performance. Employers frequently express a need for 'trainable' employees,

those who have the soft skills and requisite behaviors to perform once instructed in the specific processes and procedures of the business or industry. In other words, a lack of 'soft skills' among potential employees is often cited as a cause of concern among potential employers.

In addition, industrial employers frequently express a need for technically trained employees, with capacities in industrial maintenance, hydraulic systems, electronics, and process controls, who perform a variety of production and maintenance tasks in their facilities. Skill needs vary from place to place, but in general employers are seeking workers who understand the basics of the equipment they will be operating, have the capacity to troubleshoot and resolve problems, and in some cases have the skills necessary to perform routine maintenance and repairs. In addition, industrial employers have difficulty recruiting professional managers and engineers to guide production design, management, and quality control.

Several ongoing activities show promise resolving some of these issues. For example:

- Work based education in high schools in the region is growing. These include expanded technical programs, dual enrollment opportunities, and work-study opportunities that link career technical programs to employers in the region.
- The Four For Life program at Florence High School and the Pathfinder Alabama program at Muscle Shoals High School are working models of work based education that place promising students with appropriate skills into local industries as a means of developing an adequate talent pipeline.
- Alabama Works is a network of regional workforce councils across the state led by business and industry to promote awareness of educational opportunities, job opportunities, and skills development and to provide

direction, guidance, and incentives to local educational and workforce development institutions that guide these toward improving the alignment of student success factors with the needs of employers.

- The University of North Alabama's Shoals Shift program, which seeks to expand engagement and planning throughout the region, expand collaboration and innovation, develop support systems for entrepreneurship and small business, particularly in fields related to digital technology.

Accordingly, the region proposes several strategies designed to assist in coordination of information and resources related to education and workforce development in northwest Alabama.

**Strategy 4.1:** Build on existing education and workforce development resources to expand and strengthen existing and emerging business and industry clusters and target sectors throughout the region.

**Strategy 4.2:** Provide resources, through grants and technical assistance, to assess education and workforce needs throughout the region and to develop alignment strategies that meet the existing and emerging needs of regional economic develop-

ment in northwest Alabama.

**Strategy 4.3:** Support collaboration and cooperative efforts between existing business and industry, economic developers, and education and workforce institutions at all levels of education and across all public and private providers of workforce training and education.

**Strategy 4.4:** Promote strategies and partnerships that coordinate business and industry involvement into education and workforce development at the local and regional level, including support for realignment of Workforce Investment Boards to allow greater involvement and decision making about critical workforce development funds.

**Strategy 4.5:** Support efforts to expand the base of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills in the region.

**Strategy 4.6:** Support efforts to promote and expand the available human capital resources of the region.

**Strategy 4.7:** Support efforts to improve basic skills education, employability, general literacy, and math and science education in the region.

**Strategy 4.8:** Support programs that

expand the availability of professional employees in management, engineering, healthcare, and other professional fields in the region, including diversified education and talent pipelines, distance education, and quality of life improvements related to these activities.

**Strategy 4.9:** Facilitate opportunities that allow marginalized workers including elderly, disabled, and parents to return to the workforce, including expanded access to education, child care, and drug abuse awareness and treatment programs.

Through these effort, northwest Alabama will continue to align worker skills with industry needs and to expand the pool of available, productive, workers to support the needs of business and industry.



## Goal V: Community Capacity Building and Planning- provide support for local and regional coordination, planning, and capacity building including leadership development, capital and land use planning, and hazard mitigation plans.

A central role that the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (NACOLG) plays as the Economic Development District for the region is to promote regional economic development through planning and technical assistance to local governments and regional partners pursuing plans and strategies to create resilient, vibrant, and sustainable communities. Planning processes that promote sound public policy leading to stronger partnerships among community leaders, economic development organizations, and action plans that enact strategies leading to growth, prosperity, and the development of new resources are essential for the economic development of the region. These activities take many forms, from comprehensive and area development planning to technical assistance with local development codes and ordinances and the development of specialized plans for development in specific districts, like downtowns, to assistance with economic development and retail market strategies and plans that reduce risk to communities from natural and man-made hazards.

NACOLG's planning focus has generated numerous examples leading to local and regional success. Examples include:

- Regional Hazard Mitigation Plans that assess safety and risk and propose strategies to create more resilient communities that are more resistant to natural disasters.
- Post-disaster community recovery plans in locations suffering from devastating natural disasters.
- Community master plans and comprehensive plans that establish long-term vision for community development and guide local decision making with respect to new development and redevelopment.
- Downtown redevelopment plans that assist communities with the process of strengthening and revitalizing the cultural and historic commercial centers of cities and towns throughout the region.
- Brownfields redevelopment planning and technical assistance leading to assessments and redevelopment plans for sites suffering from real or perceived history of contamination.
- Economic development strategic planning to identify existing and emergent industry trends, target sectors, and opportunities to strengthen connections between business and industry and workforce development.
- Natural resource and recreational plans that preserve and promote vital resources for continued, prosperous use in local economic development.
- Infrastructure and community facilities plans and capital budgeting assistance to assess the need for and financial requirements of future investments in public infrastructure and facilities.
- Transportation plans and studies that provide for safer, more efficient

movement of people and goods into and out of the region.

- Leadership development and community capacity building activities in local communities leading to better capacity to assess and resolve critical challenges facing the region.
- Participation in regional planning workshops hosted by regional partners such as the University of North Alabama's Strategic Doing initiative and the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area's asset mapping and planning activities and the strategic planning processes of public and nonprofit agencies including economic development authorities and social service organizations.

Each of these examples illustrate the important role that the Economic Development District plays in promoting various plans and providing technical assistance to cities, counties, and regional partners to expand the region's ability to assess problems, identify resources, and craft long-term strategies to create better opportunities throughout the region. As such, the region proposes the following strategies to continue planning and community capacity building in the region:

**Strategy 5.1:** Develop and update community plans including com-

prehensive plans, land use plans, area development plans, parks and recreation planning, capital improvements plans, and other local planning efforts that assist localities with building stronger communities.

**Strategy 5.2:** Maintain an active economic development planning and technical assistance program to assist with assessments, surveys, and studies that lead to better strategic plans and decision making.

**Strategy 5.3:** Promote plans and practices that build stronger communities by providing healthy neighborhoods, economic opportunities for residents by expanding retail, commercial, and industrial activities.

**Strategy 5.4:** Promote plans and development practices that mitigate impacts from natural disasters.

**Strategy 5.5:** Facilitate meetings and sharing of information across the region to provide access to information about economic and community development opportunities.

**Strategy 5.6:** Provide technical assistance and professional grant writing, project development, and implementation guidance to the region.

**Strategy 5.7:** Provide mapping and data assessments to assist decision makers to identify resources, assets and opportunities and to enable better decisions about economic development activities.

**Strategy 5.8:** Support efforts of partners throughout the region to promote and attract visitors and economic activity to the region based on the natural, cultural, and historic resources and tourism opportunities of northwest Alabama.

**Strategy 5.9:** Support various strategic planning actions of regional partners throughout the region, including participation in strategic planning processes and implementation efforts of public and nonprofit agencies in the region.

These strategies will provide assistance to local and regional partners throughout the region to promote planning and capacity building leading to stronger communities in northwest Alabama.

## Goal VI: Disaster Recovery and Resiliency- Provide local and regional support to increase capacity building geared towards post pandemic resiliency, health-risk mitigation, and economic and business sustainment.

The State of Alabama faced the daunting task of navigating the social and economic impact of COVID-19. The pandemic shifted the landscape of the region, resulting in changes to employment, transportation services, and health facility operations, while potentially long-lasting implication to other sectors. The fragilities exposed by the pandemic acted as a conduit to establish a sustainable long-term recovery plan for local communities.

Surveys conducted during the height of COVID- 19 revealed the following areas as a priority and/or concern for the region:

- **Childcare:** According to the Harvard Business Review (2021), a national panel survey of 2,500 working parents discovered nearly 20% of working parents had to leave work or reduce their work hours solely due to a lack of childcare. Only 30% of all working parents had

any form of back-up childcare, and there were significant disparities between low and high-income households. Additionally, 26% of women who became unemployed said it was due to a lack of childcare.

- **Transportation:** Changes in transportation service during the COVID-19 pandemic showed broad and potentially long-lasting implications for transportation dependency. Access to reliable transportation was shown as a necessity for not only everyday mobility, but healthcare access. Impact numbers are unavailable to the extent of how transportation affected various sectors; however, it was clear transportation-health partnerships were critical during the pandemic. Redesigning services, reallocating resources and redistributing passenger flows should be considered

a part of strategies in tailoring public transport.

- **E-commerce:** The COVID-19 crisis accelerated an expansion of e-commerce towards new firms, customers and types of products. Despite the efforts of some governments to foster e-commerce during the COVID-19 crisis, persistent digital divides suggested not everyone was able to participate. According to research and media organization, DigitalCommerce360, U.S. e-commerce sales grew more than in the previous two decades thanks to the pandemic. Additionally, per the strategic and finance company McKinsey and Co. (2021), at the height of the pandemic, a whopping 10 years' worth of e-commerce penetration happened over a 90-days' time span.

As the Economic Development District (EDD) for the northwest Alabama region,

NACOLG is charged with promoting regional efforts aimed at sustainable growth. Providing the region with varying methods to prevent, reduce, and prepare for any future pandemics, minimizes the long-term impacts and impedes the severity of future risks. Mitigation strategies are as follows:

**Strategy 6.1**

Create policies and incentives to encourage the private sector to remain in the area, enhancing economic strength. Economic incentives can come in the form of increased capital support, tax breaks or preferential treatment on government bids.

**Strategy 6.2**

Undertaking efforts to broaden the industrial base with diversification initiatives, such as targeting the development of emerging clusters or industries which (a) build on the region's unique assets and competitive strengths, and (b) provide stability during downturns which disproportionately impact any single cluster or industry.

**Strategy 6.3**

Examine opportunities for childcare subsidies as part of employee benefits.

**Strategy 6.4**

Support the development of shared service alliances and family childcare networks

**Strategy 6.5**

Examine opportunities for local government facilitated childcare centers. Meetings and the sharing of information across the region may provide access to community and development opportunities.

**Strategy 6.6**

Promoting business continuity and preparedness (i.e., ensuring businesses understand their vulnerabilities, including supply chains, in the face of disruptions and are prepared to take actions to resume operations after an event.)

**Strategy 6.7**

Strengthen or build communication channels. To work together, governments and businesses must reassess, then build or strengthen channels. Roundtables, liaison offices, and other solutions should be considered and widely implemented to ensure open, active dialogue.

**Strategy 6.8**

Closing digital divides among groups and encouraging participation of the vulnerable. (ex: introduce community-based delivery programs for elderly and reserved delivery slots.)

**Strategy 6.9**

Ensure SMEs (small and mid-size enterprises) can participate in e-commerce, such as, providing policy, regulatory or financial incentives for sales diversification, and establishing a level playing field for SMEs relying on the services of online platforms.

**Strategy 6.10**

Municipalities working closely with hospitals and/or local medical facilities to help connect people to resources, services and opportunities.

**Strategy 6.11**

Incorporating level of planning to manage public transport during pandemics including 1. Strategic planning - focusing on public transport network such as stations and route determination. 2. Tactical planning - focusing on dimensioning of service capacity such as vehicle schedules, service variants and service frequencies. 3. Operational planning - deploy strategies to mitigate crowding, crowd management at stations, boarding limits, real-time vehicle control and crowding information.

**Strategy 6.12**

Work with local transit agencies to determine route needs (i.e., bus staging, bus modifications.), and coordinating with volunteer agencies to assist in various capacities.

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES

### GOAL 1: ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

- Industry diversification across sectors and clusters- lower concentration of employment in dominant industry sectors; increased strength of employment between linked employment clusters.
- Mitigation strategies incorporated into comprehensive planning- 100% of all comprehensive plans have a mitigation and recovery element.
- Economic recovery post-disruption- businesses and industries assisted with technical advisement, small business loans, and public infrastructure grants post-disaster.
- Workforce resilience- Workers successfully transitions following economic downturns in key industries as measured by long-term unemployment and labor force participation.
- GIS solutions-establish a GIS database with mapping data for post-disaster recovery activities, assessments, and evaluations.
- Technical assistance given to local communities for broadband projects, planning, and grant-writing.
- Assistance given to businesses to develop resiliency plans to evaluate risks and potential disruption to critical operations and processes.
- Maintenance of informal and formal networks for communicating business needs and to coordinate among leaders before, during, and after a crisis.

### GOAL II: BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY SUPPORT AND RECRUITMENT

- Technical assistance given and community economic development plans completed, including retail and workforce assessments.
- Revolving Loan Fund activity to support small business development.
- Economic and community development grants in support of business expansion and retention efforts.
- Assistance to entrepreneurial, technological, and marketing development programs in the region.
- Maintenance of informal and formal networks for communications between local businesses, industries and elected officials and other regional leaders.

### GOAL III: INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

- Infrastructure studies and community facilities plans completed in conjunction or standing apart from comprehensive planning efforts, including capital budgeting assistance.
- Grants developed and administered to facilitate expansion or improvement of local infrastructure and community facilities and services.
- Continued operation of the Shoals Area MPO and the Northwest Alabama RPO, including the project activities, road and bridge improvements, and critical leadership networks that these facilitate.

- Technical assistance provided to, and units of service provided by, multimodal facilities in the region.
- Technical assistance provided for broadband projects. Businesses and residents served with new or improved Internet speeds or pricing.
- Land use plans and ordinances produced to help guide infrastructure investment and growth.

### GOAL IV: EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Graduation rates for high school and career technical programs; post-secondary training units including associates degrees; uptake of credentialed students into local business and industry. Positive appraisals of education and workforce providers by business and industry.
- Workforce and economic development studies and strategies completed.
- Local and regional resources available for workforce development under realigned WIBs.
- Unemployment rates and labor force participation rates, average wage per job, and other objective measures of workforce utilization and compensation.

### GOAL V: COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING AND PLANNING

- Plans and technical reports completed; technical assistance given; maps, studies and other reports generated.
- Grants written and administered in furtherance of plan implementation.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

GOAL	PERFORMANCE MEASURES	RESPONSIBLE ENTITY	TIME-FRAME
<b>ECONOMIC RESILIENCE</b>			
	Percent shifts in sectors and clusters	Local EDAs	LONG (5+ Years)
	Mitigation strategies	NACOLG, Local Governments	ONGOING
	Businesses assisted	NACOLG, Local Governments	ONGOING
	Worker transitions	Local EDAs; Career Centers	ONGOING
	GIS database	NACOLG	SHORT (1-3 Years)
	Business resiliency plans	NACOLG, Local EDAs/Chambers	ONGOING
	Networking	NACOLG, regional partners	ONGOING
<b>BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY SUPPORT AND RECRUITMENT</b>			
	Business planning assistance	NACOLG	ONGOING
	RLF Loans	NACOLG	ONGOING
	Grants for business and industry assistance	NACOLG	ONGOING
	Assistance for entrepreneurship, technical skills, and marketing	NACOLG	ONGOING
	Networking	NACOLG, regional partners	ONGOING
<b>INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES</b>			
	Infrastructure plans and studies	NACOLG, Local governments	ONGOING
	Grants for infrastructure	NACOLG, Local governments	ONGOING
	MPO and RPO administration	NACOLG, local governments	ONGOING
	Multi-modal assistance	NACOLG, ALDOT, ports, airports	ONGOING
	Broadband development	NACOLG, regional partners	ONGOING
	Land use plans	NACOLG, Local governments	ONGOING
<b>EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT</b>			
	Graduates and hiring of skilled workers	Education and workforce providers	ONGOING
	Workforce and economic development studies	NACOLG, regional partners	ONGOING
	WIB realignment	ADECA, AL Works	SHORT (1-3 Years)
	Unemployment and wage rate improvement	Regional partners	LONG (5+ Years)
<b>COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING AND PLANNING</b>			
	Plans and technical reports, studies	NACOLG	ONGOING
	Grants written/administered	NACOLG	ONGOING